**Battle Hymn of the Republic – WBRS Civil War Era Music Series**

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*Battle Hymn of the Republic* by Julia Ward Howe.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:

His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;

They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;

I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.

His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:

“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;

Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,

Since God is marching on.”

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;

He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment-seat:

Oh! be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!

Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,

With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:

As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While God is marching on.

The *Battle Hymn of the Republic* is widely regarded as one the greatest nationalistic poems ever to flow from the American pen. Though easily recognizable and heard in churches and government capitals alike, few readers look beyond its eloquent words to seek its deeper message. Here we will examine its wordage, context, and history to discover precisely such a message. Indeed, Howe’s use of familiar allusions, tone, sound, and other devices greatly enhance the poem by giving it a profound literary meaning. In order to fully reveal such meaning, we’ll begin with a historical evaluation followed by a stanza-by-stanza analysis.

Howe’s *Battle Hymn* was written in a time of unprecedented crisis. Several states had declared the Union dissolved, and in response the newly-elected Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion. The War of the Rebellion, as the Federal government termed it, was initially viewed as a war for Union alone. By the point of the poem’s composition in November 1861, this Unionist conflict was well underway. Julia Ward Howe was wedded to a physician who served on the Army Sanitation Commission. She wrote her famed poem while in the camp of a Union army after hearing the men sing *John Brown’s Body*. Sometimes called *Glory, Hallelujah*, the song is often misinterpreted as a praising of militant abolitionist John Brown whose actions and execution hastened the coming of the war. Rather, the song originated as a cry for avenging the death of one Sergeant John Brown who fell by Confederate fire.

This misconception regarding *John Brown’s Body* represents the fallacy of interpreting history in hindsight. We today know that the war came to determine the fate of slavery, but one must remember that the average Union soldier had little quarrel with the institution in 1861. In fact, this is precisely the reason for the *Battle Hymn*’s existence. The Howes, known to be staunch abolitionists who had partaken in Bleeding Kansas in 1856, were among the few to realize that the war concerned something greater than Union. Julia Ward Howe’s new composition would weave together the cause of the Union with a divine call for emancipation in order to better instill the idea in average soldier’s mind.

It was quite a logical move. The 19th century United States was a fervently religious society, with many states go so far as to ban non-Christians from holding public office. The comparison of emancipation to God’s struggle therefore bolstered the cause’s strength considerably. It is also fitting, given that songs sung by slaves themselves were typically religious in nature. The melody to Howe’s poem when sung is, via *John Brown’s Body*, even indirectly derived from an antebellum jubilee spiritual called *Say, Brothers, Will You Meet Us on Canaan’s Happy Shore?*

Regarding the poem’s lyrics themselves, they are on the whole written in rhythmic stanza. That is, there’s a repetition of syllables. The poem is also generally written in an iambic meter, in which the lines are composed of iambs. An iamb is a metrical foot which has one unstressed and one stressed syllable. The poem also takes a rather percussive sound (assuming one holds it to the melody of *John Brown’s Body*), thus suiting it to military drums. Yet to demonstrate how the poem expresses such abolitionist sentiments, we must analyze it stanza-by-stanza:

**Stanza 1**

Lines 1-4

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:*

*He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;*

*He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:*

*His truth is marching on.*

The first stanza of the poem depicts a vengeful God whose might, though righteous, can be frightful. It is influenced partially by the commonplace 19th century belief that the Second Coming of Christ would soon occur. “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” alludes to this event which was originally foretold in Scripture. The stanza then continues to mention the, “grapes of wrath”. This alludes to Biblical descriptions of God’s trampling of sin, such as in Revelation 14:19, "the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God." In the context of the era, the sin which God is trampling is the peculiar institution of slavery. God’s, “terrible swift sword” of line 3 is a reference to the American Civil War: the Father’s fiery trial which has been sent as punishment for said institution. In this way, Howe’s poem preempts most other works in realizing that the war was for much more than Union. The wordage itself alludes to Isaiah 27:1, “In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, With His fierce and great and mighty sword."

**Stanza 2**

Lines 5-8

*I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;*

*They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;*

*I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.*

*His day is marching on.*

The second stanza contrasts the first by directly referencing the Union armies rather than employing Biblical allusions. Howe labors to paint a vivid picture of the hundred camps of the armies, such as the ones she visited with her husband. These camps are filled with lamp-lit Bible readings by the common soldier. In conjuring these images, she affirms that God is on the side of the Union. The nation’s soldiers are carrying out God’s will, fighting God’s fight – again, a fight not simply to preserve the Union but to trample the national sin of the American people. In seeing Him in the camps’ watch-fires, she holds that God travels in the hearts of all Unionists everywhere. In having those men builds altars or read Scripture, she holds that the indeed highly religious soldiers likewise devote themselves to God.

**Stanza 3**

Lines 9-12

*I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:*

*“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;*

*Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,*

*Since God is marching on.”*

The third stanza returns us to major Biblical allusions. In fact, this stanza alludes to man’s creation story. Upon Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit after being tempted by the snake, God decrees that all mankind will bear punishment for this original sin. Yet he also states that the snake will be punished in due time by saying, in Genesis 3:15, that one of Adam & Eve’s descendants will, "bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." Howe proposes that this event is preparing to take place. Jesus, a descendant of Adam because he was, “born of woman”, has returned as foretold and shall, “crush the serpent with his heel”. That is, he shall crush the Confederacy and its peculiar institution – the original sin of the United States.

**Stanza 4**

*Lines 13-16*

*He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;*

*He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment-seat:*

*Oh! be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet!*

*Our God is marching on.*

The fourth stanza has little basis in Christian texts. Trumpets are seldom mentioned in the Bible except in apocalyptic events. Instead, we see a pattern of alternation in the poem: one stanza alludes to the Bible, the next is religious but not derived from the Bible, and so forth (as the fifth stanza will later prove). This stanza serves to provide inspiration: God’s judgment and will are being enacted now, this very day, and we must heed his clarion call. It also hints in the first line that the Unionist cause cannot be defeated because it is God’s cause. She reminds us that, as God is now judging us, we must act swiftly to uphold and encourage his will.

**Stanza 5**

Lines 17-20

*In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,*

*With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:*

*As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,*

*While God is marching on.*

The fifth stanza offers what is perhaps the single greatest intertwining of God’s will and the Unionist cause. Howe clearly alludes to the Biblical crucifixion of Jesus in the 19th line, “As he died to make men holy…” According to Scripture, God permitted the execution of his own son in order to wash away the sins of mankind in blood. She then continues in the same line, “…let us die to make men free”. Howe firmly grounds the Union’s struggle in holy terms through this stanza. By alluding to Christ’s death to wash away sin, she says that contemporary Americans must be willing to sacrifice themselves just as Christ had. Indeed, their martyrdom would also be to wash away sin: the sin of human bondage.

Ultimately, the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* is one of the greatest and most complex pieces of poetry in American history. It innovatively strives to integrate the moral righteousness of a nation’s religion with the utmost moral cause of our nation’s cruelest war. Unlike other religious emancipationist pieces, i.e. *Kingdom Coming*, it tells more than simply the story of a slave yearning to be free. Rather it appeals to the hearts, minds, and souls of all men everywhere – slave and free.

*John Brown’s Body* remained considerably more popular among the armies themselves due to its less complex structure and wording, which made it a better marching song. Its melody also inspired a much lesser-known work: the *Marching Song of the First Arkansas.* The 1st Arkansas, under charge of Captain Lindley Miller, was later standardized as the 46th Regiment, United States Colored Troops.