

# “Trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.” Assessing the legacy of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”

NGTT DEEL 55, NR 3 & 4, 2014

Claassens, L Juliana  
Stellenbosch University

## ABSTRACT

“The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” written in 1861 by Julia Howe in the context of the American Civil War, indeed has a rich reception history in American public discourse and popular culture. So this hymn was cited by Martin Luther King in his last speech before being assassinated in 1968; it was sung at the memorial service for 9/11 at the National Cathedral in Washington DC and most recently at Barack Obama’s inauguration service in January 2013. This hymn moreover has served as inspiration for John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* as well as John Updike’s novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.

And yet, this hymn is steeped in violence as it draws on biblical imagery that imagines God as a violent warrior who will deal decisively with God’s enemies. The first stanza in particular utilizes imagery of God trampling the wine press in Isaiah 63 in which the blood of the enemies are staining God’s robes red, which in turn is picked up by the author of the book of Revelation. This violence at the heart of the “Battle Hymn” is problematic indeed. As Dominic Tierney writes in an article in *The Atlantic*, “the ‘Battle Hymn’ is a warrior’s cry and a call to arms. Its vivid portrait of sacred violence captures how Americans fight wars, from the minié balls of the Civil War to the shock and awe of Iraq” (Nov 4, 2010).

In this paper, I will investigate the complex reception history of this popular hymn in (American) public discourse as well as its biblical origins in the portrayal of God and violence in prophetic literature of the Old Testament. I will ask whether the violent origins of the divine metaphor hamper its applicability to just causes such as the fight for gender and racial justice.

This question is particularly important to consider as we are faced globally with the question of how God is invoked in public discourse – most recently



in my South African context by President Jacob Zuma, who famously has said that the ANC would rule until Jesus will come again. In an address to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Presbyterian Synod in Giyani, Limpopo in October 2013, Pres Zuma is reported to have invoked the wrath of God upon those individuals who do not respect his leadership, raising disconcerting questions regarding the link between divine violence and violence in political discourse.

**CONTACT DETAILS**

Prof Julie Claassens

Professor of Old Testament, Department of Old and New Testament

Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University

Privaatsak X1, Matieland, Suid-Afrika, 7602

[jclaassens@sun.ac.za](mailto:jclaassens@sun.ac.za)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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.  
 Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!  
 Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

In a striking music video that employs images from the Second World War as background for the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,”<sup>1</sup> one moment in the very interesting history of reception of this popular hymn is captured thanks to the wonders of YouTube. This hymn that had its origin in the Civil War in the United States and initially had the purpose to inspire people who were fighting for the abolishment of slavery now has transcended its original context and has been applied to another (just) cause.

My interest in this hymn and its reception was first sparked by the vivid imagery in stanza 1 that employs the image of God as a Divine Warrior who is treading the “grapes of wrath” in the wine press. In this image that first appears in Isaiah 63:1-6 and is picked up again by the book of Revelations (14:19-20), we read how the “blood” of the grapes is staining God’s robe red. In a moment of recognition, the reader realizes with shock that the “grapes” that the Divine Warrior is treading, are actually the heads of the enemy soldiers.

This exceedingly violent image that has found its way into the “Battle Hymn” is troubling indeed. Particularly if one considers the many violent contexts in which this hymn with its utterly catchy melody has resounded. As part of a larger project that deals with the violence in the biblical prophets,<sup>2</sup> I have been contemplating the link between such violent God-language that has found its way into the popular “Battle Hymn” and its violent hearers.

In my search to understand the “wirkungsgeschichte” of this song, I have found a fascinating book that outlines the biography of this famous hymn. In their book, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song that Marches On*, John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis show how the intriguing history of reception of this hymn is indeed multifaceted. In compelling fashion, the book narrates not only how the

1 Available at <http://youtu.be/kR7HPQM0Jgg> Accessed April 7, 20014.

2 “Violence in the Prophetic Rhetoric,” in *Oxford Handbook to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

“Battle Hymn” came into being, but also the various contexts in which this hymn, and its offshoots, has become significant.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I will introduce some of the highlights of this journey of a hymn that raises all sorts of questions regarding the link between God and violence that is assumed in both the Old Testament text of Isaiah 63 as well as the subsequent text of Revelations 14. I will ask whether the violent origins of the divine metaphor hamper its applicability to other just causes such as the fight for gender and racial justice.

## 2. THE ROOTS OF THE BATTLE HYMN

The “Battle Hymn” actually had its origin in a popular song remembering the freedom fighter John Brown, who in 1859 staged a massive slave insurrection, and ultimately was captured, trialled and hanged.<sup>4</sup> After his death, all around the country the following words resounded on the melody that later would become the “Battle Hymn:”

John Brown’s body lies mouldering in the grave  
His soul’s marching on.

*Chorus:*

Glory, Hally, Hallelujah

Glory, Hally, Hallelujah

His soul’s marching on.

He’s gone to be a solider in the army of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

During the time of the Civil War, John Brown and his song increasingly served as the anthem in the struggle for emancipation.<sup>6</sup> “The song’s power to fuel and sustain defiance” is captured by one commentator’s characterization of the words of “John Brown’s Body” being “the verbal equivalent of rifle-bullets and cannon-balls.”<sup>7</sup>

---

3 John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song that Marches On* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 Stauffer and Soskis note that John Brown became one of America’s most contentious figures. Some would consider him to be the “freedom fighter” per excellence, for others, he was “a dangerous fanatic,” *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 28.

5 Cited in Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 294.

6 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 63.

7 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 67.

After a visit to a Union Camp on the banks of the Potomac River near Washington DC in 1861, Julia Howe wrote more dignified<sup>8</sup> words to John Brown's song, drawing heavily on the apocalyptic imagery found in the book of Revelations as well as in prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Daniel. Stauffer and Soskis note that most Americans at this time would have recognized these images – many who harboured strong millennialist sentiments, i.e., the conviction that Jesus will come very soon.<sup>9</sup>

Even though Howe in all likelihood had the text from Rev 14:19-20 in mind, the metaphor of God as the mighty warrior being victorious over the enemies as evident in the image of God “trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored” first appears in the context of Isaiah. Much has been written as to how to deal with the violent imagery that is used for God in both the Old and New Testament.<sup>10</sup> One way of making sense of the violent imagery used in Isaiah which reappears in the book of Revelations, is that it emerged from a context of extreme trauma. The experience of war, or at least the threat of war, had a marked effect on the imagery used – the violent imagery likely being a response to the violence effected by the Empire (in the case of Isaiah for the most part the Babylonian Empire, and in the case of Revelations, the Roman Empire).<sup>11</sup> It may well be that the violent context(s) presumed in the biblical tradition and in particular the image of a mighty Deliverer

---

8 Dominic Tierney writes in his article, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic': America's Song of Itself,” how the lyrics of “John Brown's hymn” were considered rather unbecoming. Apparently the popularized version of one of the lines changed the published version: “We'll hang old Jeff Davis from a sour apple tree,” to “We'll feed Jeff Davis sour apples 'til he gets the diarrhea.” The Reverend James Clarke liked the melody but asked Julia Howe to write less crude lyrics, *The Atlantic*, Nov 4 (2010). Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/11/the-battle-hymn-of-the-republic-americas-song-of-itself/66070/2/> Accessed April 5, 2014.

9 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 86-88.

10 Cf the excellent collection of essays *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Chris Franke and Julia M O'Brien; Sheffield: T&T Clark, 2010); Eric Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). Other works include: David A Bernat and Jonathan Klawans, eds. *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007); Jeremy Young, *The Violence of God and the War on Terror* (New York: Seabury, 2007).

11 Cf the pioneering work done in this regard by Daniel L Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), Kathleen O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011). Cf also the newly constituted “Biblical Literature and the Hermeneutics of Trauma” section of the Society of Biblical Literature.

God who will save Israel from her enemies,<sup>12</sup> offered a natural point of connection to later generations' hope for deliverance from whatever the real or perceived enemy would be at the time.

It remains a question though whether the divine violence depicted in these texts actually does lead to human violence?<sup>13</sup> One suggestion has been that to imagine a strong and mighty God who will definitively remove the enemy constitutes a type of wish fulfilment, which actually may *prevent* humans from engaging in violence themselves.<sup>14</sup> In the rest of this paper, this suggestion will be tested in light of the various applications of this hymn as outlined by Stauffer and Soskis in their fascinating description of the journey of the "Battle Hymn."

---

12 Cf Corrine Carvalho's article, "The Beauty of the Bloody God: The Divine Warrior in Prophetic Literature," [in *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets* (ed. Chris Franke and Julia M. O'Brien; Sheffield: T&T Clark, 2010), 135] in which she argues that "Christian theologians seem to want a pacifist messiah, a non-bloody kingdom, an effortless victory. And yet the success of contemporary films reveals the deficiency of this view of non-violent salvation for many believers. American audiences, at least, like our messiahs to have rippling muscles, sweat-dripped arms, and a well-stocked arsenal." Cf for example the image of Neo from *The Matrix* which is in line with the American cowboys to recent futuristic "sci-fi" warriors.

13 This topic will be dealt with more extensively in my article on Violence in the Prophets in the *Oxford Handbook of Prophets*. In this regard, Eric Seibert point out that the designation "violent texts" is not "entirely satisfactory since texts themselves are not violent. They are mere words on a page, not autonomous agents. Although violent texts, like violent movies, have the power to portray violence, they do not, in and of themselves, have the power to perpetrate it. Violent texts do not kill people any more than violent movies do. Although both might be a source of 'inspiration' for such diabolical deeds, neither a text nor a film can actually kill." And yet, Seibert who goes on to speak about the violent legacy of the biblical text also argue that one should "not underestimate the enormous influence these texts can have on readers, one that frequently results in rather accommodating views toward violence." *The Violence of Scripture*, 10.

14 Cf Jonathan Klawans' comment that "violent fantasies may have served originally to deflect or channel the rage that could otherwise lead to real violence. But once these fantasies are canonized, they may find their way into the hands of groups who accept without question their own self-righteousness and their enemies' evil nature," "Religion, Violence and the Bible," in *Religion and Violence*, 14.

### 3. JOURNEY OF A HYMN

#### (a) Times of war

As was evident in the opening clip, the “Battle Hymn” is first and foremost a song of war. Stauffer and Soskis rightly point out that “rooted in the emancipatory imperatives of the Civil War, the hymn has allowed subsequent generations of Americans to perceive their own engagements – in Cuba, in the Philippines, in the fields of France, and in the jungles of Vietnam – as the most recent fulfilment of their millennial mission to make men free.”<sup>15</sup>

For instance, even though Woodrow Wilson at the time of the First World War famously would have said that “war isn’t declared in the name of God, it is a human affair entirely,” the “Battle Hymn” framed Wilson’s message announcement that the United States would join the war. Several newspapers distributed Wilson’s war message printed along the words of the Battle Hymn.<sup>16</sup> Wilson himself cited the “Battle Hymn” as a means of understanding American’s role in the Great War. At a Red Cross Fundraising event in 1918, he said that the “oppressed and helpless’ peoples of the world” should perceive of the “Battle Hymn” as a hymn of liberation that has the purpose of setting them and their children free.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Second World War would depict “the war against Nazism and fascism as a crusade the American people would take on ‘in their righteous might’ against the forces of ultimate evil.”<sup>18</sup> Once again the “Battle Hymn”

---

15 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 12. Dominic Tierney describes “the ‘Battle Hymn’ is a warrior’s cry and a call to arms. Its vivid portrait of sacred violence captures how Americans fight wars, from the minié balls of the Civil War to the shock and awe of Iraq,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Cf also Tierney’s book, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (Little, Brown and Company, 2010).

16 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 167. The fact that Wilson’s war resolution took place during Holy Week underscored the fact that America’s contribution to the First World War was seen as a Holy War. Cf also a sermon by Reverend Randolph McKim cited by Dominic Tierney: “It is God who has summoned us to this war. It is his war we are fighting ... This conflict is indeed a crusade. The greatest in history – the holiest.” Tierney rightly points out that there is no separation between church and state in this application of the hymn, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

17 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 168-169. And yet during World War 1, the “Battle Hymn” was also embraced by people around the world. Many Britons sang this hymn during their church services, 11.

18 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 274.



played a prominent role in rallying the American troops to fight what was considered to be a noble cause.<sup>19</sup>

This application of the “Battle Hymn” in times of war is open for abuse though. Stauffer and Soskis tell a chilling story that comes from America’s involvement in Vietnam. On March 29, 1971, Second Lieutenant William L Calley was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison for masterminding the My Lai massacre, which saw the premeditated murder of twenty-two Vietnamese.<sup>20</sup> All across the American South, radio stations played a parody of the “Battle Hymn” called the “Battle Hymn of Lt Calley” in which an aggrieved Lt Calley proclaimed, “he and his men simply had been doing their duty.” As one of the stanzas says:

When I reach my final campground  
in that land beyond the sun  
And the great commander asks me,  
“Did you fight or did you run?”  
I’ll stand both straight and tall  
stripped of medals, rank and gun  
and this is what I’ll say:  
Sir, I followed all my orders and I  
did the best I could  
It’s hard to judge the enemy and  
hard to tell the good  
Yet there’s not a man among us  
would not have understood  
We took the jungle village exactly  
like they said ...<sup>21</sup>

---

19 Cf the example of Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr (eldest son of former president Teddy Roosevelt) who started singing the “Battle Hymn” as he walked among the troops who were approaching the Normandy coast of what would become D-Day, urging them to sing along, Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 275. Cf also the role hymns like the “Battle Hymn” in addition to “America” and “The Star Spangled Banner” in “americanizing” immigrants. Stauffer and Soskis write how immigrant soldiers, many who could not speak English, were “made Americans through song,” 171.

20 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 279.

21 “Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley,” (From C Company featuring Terry Nelson with Julian Wilson, James M Smith, Plantation Records, 1971). Cited in Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 300-302. In another stanza, a contrast is drawn between the



Stauffer and Soskis note “Calley’s hope for redemption lies not in this world but in the next.” When Calley is said to enter the “final campground” and the “great commander” asks of him: “Did you fight or did you run?” Calley answers in the final stanza: “Count me only as a soldier who never left his gun.”<sup>22</sup>

### (b) The war against poverty and injustice

The “Battle Hymn” was also employed in a battle of another kind. Already in a famous parody of the “Battle Hymn” published in 1901, Mark Twain critiques the “callous economic interest” that lies behind the “lofty imperial rhetoric” in this hymn:

“Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword ...  
 greed was born in yonder ditch;  
 with a longing in his bosom –  
 for other’s goods an itch;  
 Christ died to make men holy  
 let men die to make us rich;  
 Our god is marching on.”<sup>23</sup>

This prophetic critique underlying Mark Twain’s parody of the “Battle Hymn” is continued in the critical voice regarding the effects of economic depression and environmental disaster that is at work in John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (a reference drawn from the first stanza of the “Battle Hymn”).<sup>24</sup> In this novel, John Steinbeck outlines the ill-fated story of the Joad family who, after experienced the devastating effects of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, sought their fortune in California. As Stauffer and Soskis write, “for Steinbeck, the reference to the ‘Battle Hymn’ suggested the nation’s ‘own revolutionary tradition’ which he believed an indigenous

---

soldiers who were “fighting in the jungles” and “dying in the rice fields” while the anti-war protesters “were marching in the street” and thus actually “were helping our defeat,” and in an ironic twist on the original hymn, “sounding a retreat, as we go marching on...”

22 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 280.

23 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 134-135.

24 In a sermon that cites John Steinbeck’s reference to the “Battle Hymn,” Joyce Parry Moore states that “when crops are destroyed to keep prices high, while people are starving,” John Steinbeck writes that “in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people ‘the grapes of wrath’ are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage,” “Trampling the Grapes of Wrath” [August 18, 2013] ~ Proper 15, 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, [http://www.saintbartsilvermore.com/sermon\\_081813.php](http://www.saintbartsilvermore.com/sermon_081813.php) Accessed April 5, 2014.

movement of small farmers and workers had honoured as they battled against their moneyed oppressors during the Depression.”<sup>25</sup>

It was quite important for Steinbeck to include the entire “Battle Hymn” in the beginning of his novel in order to avert the critique that he and his book was communist. For Steinbeck, the explicit reference to the “Battle Hymn” in the title of his book, as well as the hymn that was printed together with its song sheet, is testimony of the fact that his book is truly American, “speaking to the nation’s hopes and fears.”<sup>26</sup>

Another interesting parody on the “Battle Hymn” that features in the war against poverty and injustice was inspired by a “Hunger March” organized January 17, 1915 by the League of the Unemployed in Chicago. This public protest sought to highlight the extreme poverty facing America during which almost half of the nation’s population subsisted on a “near-starvation level.”<sup>27</sup> In the hymn, “Solidarity Forever” that employs the melody and the sentiment of the “Battle Hymn,” a member of the International Workers of the World Union, Ralph Chapman, wrote the following words that would become quite popular among those fighting against injustice:<sup>28</sup>

Is their aught we hold in common with  
 the greedy parasite,  
 Who would lash us into serfdom and  
 would crush us with his might?  
 Is there anything left for us but to organize and fight?  
 For the Union makes us strong.

In our hands is placed a power greater  
 than their hoarded gold;  
 Greater than the might of armies  
 magnified a thousand fold.  
 We can bring to birth the new world  
 from the ashes of the old  
 For the Union makes us strong.<sup>29</sup>

---

25 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 174.

26 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 175.

27 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 175.

28 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 176, 179.

29 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 180-181.

Stauffer and Soskis note that the new lyrics to the old hymn had the intention of inspiring “people to fight and die in this new civil war for a new transcendent union.”<sup>30</sup> In changing the lyrics, Chaplin recovered the “Battle Hymn’s” original radicalism in terms of its abolitionist past.<sup>31</sup>

### (c) The fight for civil rights

The “Battle Hymn” has become the anthem of many different groups fighting for justice. Dominic Tierney writes how already in 1890, “women’s rights campaigners” adopted their own version: “Battle Hymn of the Suffragists” with the following lyrics: “They come from every nation, women fair and strong and brave.”<sup>32</sup>

The “Battle Hymn” also played a central role in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. Stauffer and Soskis narrate how Civil Rights activists sang this hymn when they marched, when they were jailed as a means of bolstering their spirits during those most difficult times that marked the fight for civil rights.<sup>33</sup>

No more is this evident than in the speeches of Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King often cited the “Battle Hymn” invoking the hymn’s familiar imagery – a great example of this the following clip that outlines a speech he gave after the third march to Montgomery which grew to 25 000 protestors.<sup>34</sup> In his speech, he used the image of the “march,” telling the audience that they need to continue to march against segregation, poverty and for the right to vote. Using the characteristic call-and-response technique, King asked the audience “How long?” with the audience calling back, “Not long.” By invoking the first stanza of the “Battle Hymn,” King reminded his audience that the power of God’s truth is marching on.<sup>35</sup> As Stauffer and Soskis describe King’s use of this hymn:

---

30 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 180. It is significant that “Solidarity Forever” never directly invokes God, attesting to the fact that “the millennialist fervor of the original” had thoroughly been secularized, p 181. On the other hand, for Liberal Protestants at this time, who would also invoke the “Battle Hymn,” God’s kingdom were thought to come through an “ongoing, continuous process of social and moral improvement, revealed in safe and productive factories ... in a fairer distribution of wealth, and in the discovery of vaccines,” 156.

31 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 188.

32 Tierney, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

33 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 240.

34 Available at <http://youtu.be/TAYITODNvIM> Accessed April 7, 2014.

35 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 257-258.

In the Montgomery speech's final lines King reaches for the 'Battle Hymn' to cultivate urgency and to combat passivity in the face of the challenges ahead. The hymn's millennial framework helped to put the movement's frustrations into an eschatological context ... the millennium of racial justice was at hand; God was coming.<sup>36</sup>

Martin Luther King's use of this hymn is marked by two main themes: First, by using the "Battle Hymn," he is drawing on the original intention of the hymn, i.e. the fight to free the African American slaves. Hundred years later, the civil rights activists were engaged in a new battle, i.e., a battle for freedom and equality. However, throughout his life, Martin Luther King was overtly committed to non-violence, which raises some questions about the violent imagery of the "Battle Hymn" that so often marked King's rhetoric. King himself discussed this use of violent imagery in the battle for civil rights when he says: "We did not hesitate to call our movement an army ... but it was a special army ... that would sing but not slay."<sup>37</sup>

Second, in the final months and weeks of his life, King is said to have suffered from a growing sense of despair – a result of experiencing a lot of adversity. He increasingly saw his own role in terms of the suffering Christ – in a speech to an SCLC gather in 1967 he says that his own work may get him crucified; that he actually may die. However citing the "Battle Hymn," he says: "... even if I die in the struggle that 'He died to make men free.'"<sup>38</sup> This is no more evident than in King's chilling last speech in which he admits that he would have liked to live a long life. However, like Moses, God had allowed him to go up the mountain and to see the Promised Land, which the people are about to enter, even though King himself may not actually get there. He ends his final speech before being assassinated the following day once more with a reference from the "Battle Hymn." After saying that he fears nothing and no person, he concludes: For "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the King." In his speech, King thus merges the "Battle Hymn's" belief in the imminence of the coming of God's kingdom with his own "act of Christ-like sacrifice."<sup>39</sup>

---

36 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 258.

37 Cited in Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 259.

38 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 252.

39 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 267. In a speech to psychologists in September 1967, King admitted to being very tired now, saying that he had been fighting this battle for thirteen years. Stauffer and Soskis note the ominous note that started to mark King's speeches and sermons as he increasingly focused on the judgment of God that would fall upon America, 262.

Finally, it is ironic indeed that after Martin Luther King's death, violent protests erupted all throughout America with 39 individuals being killed and 3 500 wounded. One protester is said to have shouted: "He died for us, and we're going to die for him" in what Stauffer and Soskis call a "grim echo of the concluding lines of the 'Battle Hymn.'" And in Minneapolis, a black man vowed to shoot the first white person he saw. Violently killing his neighbour, he cried: "My King is dead."<sup>40</sup>

#### (d) Right-wing battles

Stauffer and Soskis outline how the "Battle Hymn" became a favourite of Evangelicals, embraced by the evangelist Billy Sunday, whose epic revivals in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered the inspiration for the later Billy Graham.<sup>41</sup> Stauffer and Soskis note that while the Progressive Party embraced the "Battle Hymn" as an anthem for social reform, it was utilized by Evangelicals such as Sunday and Graham to communicate the importance of "battling sin and accepting Christ as one's personal Saviour."<sup>42</sup> They continue to say that "the hymn's lyrical, symbolic, and allusive language had freed it from its abolitionist context during the Civil War, permitting it to be adapted and constantly updated" by Evangelicals such as Sunday "in fighting new conflicts and vanquishing new evils in yet another impending Armageddon."<sup>43</sup> Interestingly enough, while Sunday's primary enemies to be eradicated were liquor and the trafficking of liquor, Graham's battle was against communism and the USSR "which threatened the United States both morally and militarily."<sup>44</sup>

One interesting story that encapsulates the "Battle Hymn's" prominent role in the war against communism regards the Dayton, Ohio disk jockey who during the visit of the Russian president Nikita Khrushchev in September 1959, played the "Battle Hymn" non-stop "so that the Soviet leader might hear 'the sound of freedom.'"<sup>45</sup> And when the "Battle Hymn" was in 2008 especially selected for Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the White House, conservative radio talk-show host Russ Limbaugh was so excited about this "God's music" that he played the hymn for weeks afterwards on his radio show. According to Stauffer and Soskis, Limbaugh informed his listeners,

40 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 268.

41 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 207-211.

42 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 218.

43 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 222.

44 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 228. Cf also the commonly used term of "Graham's crusades" according to which the "Battle Hymn" inspired Americans in their apocalyptic battle against international communism." (p229)

45 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 276.

that this hymn constitutes “a vigorous effort to reinstall God in the public sphere and an unembarrassed articulation of American exceptionalism.”<sup>46</sup>

### (e) Funeral hymn

Finally, the “Battle Hymn” is the funeral hymn par excellence. It has been played at the funerals of many great statesmen including the funeral of the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1965.<sup>47</sup> Dominique Tierney argues that in crisis moments, Americans would instinctively grasp hold of the “Battle Hymn” – the hymn playing in the tumultuous 1960s a central role in the nation’s coming to terms with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy.<sup>48</sup> Especially, in the case of the slain president John F Kennedy, the “Battle Hymn” served as a means to pay honour to the slain president, as well as being a source of comfort for his bereaved followers. Stauffer and Soskis describe the function of this application of the “Battle Hymn” as follow: “Kennedy’s memory breathed life into the hymn as an expression of national unity in the face of tragedy.”<sup>49</sup>

It is thus no wonder that when officials had to choose a hymn to comfort and fortify the American people after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, they chose the “Battle Hymn” to end the service in the National Cathedral, so doing justice to its designation as “funeral hymn.” Yet, one could not help but notice the subtext, i.e., the implicit message of a call to war,<sup>50</sup> which less than eighteen months would be realized in an actual war on terror.<sup>51</sup>

---

46 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 290. Stauffer and Soskis continue that the prominent position of the “Battle Hymn” appeared to be “a vindication of the Bush administration’s military engagements and of America’s millennial mission more generally,” *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 291.

47 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 11.

48 Tierney, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

49 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 284.

50 Stauffer and Soskis propose that “when the ‘Battle Hymn’ was played at the 9/11 memorial service, those familiar with the hymn’s lineage noted it mingled uneasily with the righteous retribution emanating from the pulpit,” *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 14.

51 Several scholars describe how George W Bush after 9/11 increasingly viewed his presidency in terms of a divine calling, i.e. “to rid the world of evil.” For instance, in his State of the Union address in 2003, President Bush states the following: “Freedom is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity.” And in the final presidential debate in 2004 President Bush claims that a significant part of his foreign policy has been based upon the conviction that “God wants everybody to be free,” cited in Gary Scott, *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W Bush*. (Oxford



So Michael Gerson, the president's chief speechwriter is quoted in saying that when he heard the hymn, "he suddenly understood that the United States was at war."<sup>52</sup> The transformation of the "Battle Hymn" in becoming a song of war probably is due to the fact that President Bush right before the final hymn gave a speech in which he "sought God's blessing for coming battles, which the nation would wage in order to fulfil 'its responsibility to history' and to 'rid the world of evil.'" As Stauffer and Soskis powerfully sum it up: "And so, from the pulpit of Washington National Cathedral, the president declared war."<sup>53</sup>

#### 4. THE HYMN THAT KEEPS ON MARCHING ON?

This page from the fascinating reception history of the "Battle Hymn" demonstrates how the biblical imagery in the hymn could transcend its original Civil War context and its struggle against slavery, and how "the hymn's battle could become whichever one Americans happened to be fighting at the time."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, as Stauffer and Soskis illustrate well, "the 'Battle Hymn' has been embraced as an anthem for nearly every single reform movement in American history, from temperance to civil rights and to the pro-life movement."<sup>55</sup>

This paper started with a question what to do with biblical texts steeped in violence that through a song like the "Battle Hymn" becomes part of people's consciousness? The violent imagery associated with the "Battle Hymn" has actually made a few people uncomfortable. For instance, the United Methodist Church wanted to throw out this hymn together with the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers," and rather find less militaristic hymns that also would include female imagery for God.<sup>56</sup> This

---

University Press, 2006), 394; Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. (New York: Harper San Fransisco. 2005), 138-139. Cf also my essay that investigates the way in which the book Isaiah is used in American politics, "To the Captives Come Out and to Those in Darkness be Free ...:" Using the Book of Isaiah in (American) Politics?" *Old Testament Essays* 21/3 (2008): 618-634.

52 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 5.

53 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 4.

54 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 119.

55 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 15.

56 In my book, *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God's Liberating Presence* that seeks to draw on alternative female images for the Liberator God that are found in the biblical traditions, in the finale chapter, I refer to some of these hymns that could be considered alternatives to the very militaristic images found in the hymns that made the United Methodists uncomfortable. Cf e.g. the hymn "Mothering God, You Gave Us Birth" that is based on Julian of Norwich's visions as well as Brian Wren's hymn



decision though was met with a huge public outcry, which led the committee to retract their decision.<sup>57</sup>

So if we are not going to throw out the hymn, how can we raise awareness of a responsible use of this hymn? From this overview of the reception history of the “Battle Hymn” it is quite evident that we may prefer some of this hymn’s applications to others. For instance, on a personal level, I can celebrate Martin Luther King’s use of the hymn,<sup>58</sup> or the way in which it had been used in the suffrage movement, but its role in the context of the Vietnam War or the War in Iraq makes me quite uncomfortable – especially in contexts where innocent civilians are killed.

As we are faced globally with the question of how God is invoked in public discourse, the questions regarding responsible God-talk are all the more important. Most recently in my South African context, President Jacob Zuma, who famously has said that the ANC would rule until Jesus come again, in an address to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Presbyterian Synod in Giyani, Limpopo in October 2013, reportedly is said to have invoked the wrath of God upon those individuals who do not respect his leadership, raising disconcerting questions regarding the link between divine violence and violence in political discourse.<sup>59</sup>

---

“Bring Many Names” that uses the image of a “strong mother God, working night and day” in conjunction with a “warm father God, hugging every child” (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 96.

57 Stouffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 286. As a compromise, the committee did decide to add a stanza to the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” which equated the enemy that had to be fought with Satan, so spiritualizing the battle.

58 Cf also its on-going application in contexts of fighting for justice and equality. Most recently, the hymn was sung by 300 members of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir at the inauguration of President Barack Obama – one spokesperson of the choir speaking about their choice for singing this particular hymn: “[the hymn] speaks of the truths of which this country’s been founded on, just the opportunities that this country, touched by the hand of God, has given so many people of all different backgrounds. So the theme of the song is very powerful and very appropriate.” Cited in Katherine Weber, “Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir Sings ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ at President’s Inauguration,” *Christian Post*, January 21, 2013 <http://www.christianpost.com/news/brooklyn-tabernacle-sings-battle-hymn-of-the-republic-at-presidents-inauguration-88622/> Accessed April 5, 2014.

59 Moloko Moloto, “Zuma Invokes Wrath of God,” *The Star*, October 7, 2013. Available at <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/zuma-invokes-wrath-of-god-1.1587841#.U0CKHvmSzHU> Accessed April 6, 2014; Cf also the response to Pres Zuma’s comments in which the leader of the African Christian Democratic Party, Reverend Kenneth Meshoe is reported to having said that “it is wrong for the President always to use scare tactics when he is desperate for votes. We want to remind the President that he and his party

And in the case of where abortion clinics are bombed, or when even the non-violent Martin Luther King's followers after his death turned violent, one may indeed wonder whether the violent imagery in this hymn and its biblical antecedents may not have an impact after all on its violent hearers.

So what to do with this hymn and the violent biblical imagery that is at the heart of it? I would say that at the very least one needs to be aware of the problem of divine violence – in the biblical text's original context as well as in future contexts where God's wrath may be invoked on whoever the real or perceived enemy may be at that time.<sup>60</sup> Granted, the main problem may not be the "Battle Hymn" in itself; it is the past and future wars that are problematic. As Umberto Eco says it well: "War cannot be justified, because in terms of the rights of the species – it is worse than a crime. It is a waste."<sup>61</sup>

For this reason, it is quite ironic that as early as 1872, the "Battle Hymn" whose original setting was a war anthem and would play a central role in America's future wars, took centre stage at the World's Peace Jubilee held in Boston. The Fisk Jubilee singers, a group of 150 African American singers, many of them former slaves, performed the "Battle Hymn" before the audience of 40,000 people. As Stauffer and Soskis write: "A song born of the nation's bloodiest conflict had become a peace anthem."<sup>62</sup>

Even more fascinating is how Julia Howe just nine years after she wrote the "Battle Hymn" became another kind of warrior: a Peace warrior – fighting for peace. The composer of the "Battle Hymn" now became an advocate for peace. In her poem

---

are the ones who will face God's wrath for promoting policies that undermine God's word," quoted in Yadhana Jadoo, "Holy Row over Zuma's God, Curse remarks," *The Citizen*, 8 October, 2013. Available at <http://citizen.co.za/63419/zuma-curse/> Accessed April 6, 2014.

60 Cf Tamar Kamionkowski who proposes that biblical scholars "seek neither to condone nor to condemn, but to understand and elucidate" divine violence in the Hebrew Bible, "The 'Problem' of Violence in Prophetic Literature: Definitions as the Real Problem," in *Religion and Violence*, 39.

61 Umberto Eco, "Reflections on War," 17. Cf also the oft-quoted phrase: "Texts don't kill people – people kill people!" Nevertheless, as Eric Seibert points out, the Bible is not free from blame. Citing some chilling examples from the violent legacy of the biblical texts, he advocates that "we pay attention to how we read. By reading non-violently, in ways that expose and critique violent ideologies embedded in the Old Testament, we refuse to endorse the violence of these texts and reject all attempts to use such texts to harm or oppress others," *The Violence of Scripture*, 26.

62 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 158.

“Appeal to Womanhood throughout the World,” she calls upon “Christian women’ to marshal their collective maternal instincts to promote peace.”<sup>63</sup>

What brought about this dramatic change? Stauffer and Soskis propose that it was the loss of Julia Howe’s three-year-old son Sammy that “tempered some of Howe’s millennial certainties.” As they write:

In the “Battle Hymn” she had written of warfare – and of the suffering it brought – from an abstracted, providential perspective. But now she had suffered a loss that linked her to those for whom the fallen were not nameless millennial agents but husbands, sons, and brothers. That shared grief pointed the way toward a campaign against warfare rooted in her status as a grieving mother rather than poetic visionary.<sup>64</sup>

This relates to what Eric Seibert has suggested as a means to overcome the legacy of the Old Testament’s violent texts. He argues that one way to challenge the impact of violent texts is to read with the victims in the text. As he formulates it, the ones “named or unnamed, seen or unseen – who are abused, oppressed, or killed.” Seibert further proposes that by “reading with those who have been marginalized, silenced and erased by the text,” one may “read with different questions in mind,” contemplating how differently the story would sound if it were to be told by the victims.<sup>65</sup>

One compelling example of such an approach is the deconstructive reading of Habakkuk by Chris Heard, in which he reads from the perspective of the children of Judah and Babylon affected by the divine violence that God bestows on these nations. As he writes:

A deconstructive reading cannot comfort, clothe, feed, or resurrect those children. But perhaps a deconstructive reading can perform an obligation to those children. Perhaps such a reading could commemorate them, and could thereby discourage cruelty to present and future generations of

---

63 In what would become the precursor to Mother’s Day, Howe in 1873 became the driving force behind the Mother’s Day of Peace that was to be celebrated annually. Stauffer and Soskis ask how one is to reconcile these two divergent sides of Julia Howe? At her funeral, a friend and colleague from the peace movement described Julia Howe’s dual identity as follow: “She sang the Battle Hymn that rings Down the long corridors of time; Her lifelong human service sings of Peace, an anthem more sublime,” *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 159.

64 Stauffer and Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, 159.

65 Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, 81.

children. A deconstructive reading cannot undo the disasters of Jerusalem 587 BCE or Babylon 539 BCE. But perhaps, just perhaps, by opening up the reading of Habakkuk so that the cries of Judahite and Babylonian children may be heard, deconstructive criticism can make some small contribution in resistance against another Jerusalem or Babylon ... or Dresden, or Hiroshima, or My Lai.<sup>66</sup>

Listing to the catchy melody of the “Battle Hymn” of the Republic with the cries of the children of the victims of war in mind, may well change the way the hymn and the implied message of God’s divine judgment is used in future contexts around the world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bernat, David A and Klawans, Jonathan (eds) 2007. *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix.

Carvalho, Corrine 2010. “The Beauty of the Bloody God: The Divine Warrior in Prophetic Literature.” In *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets*. Edited by Chris Franke and Julia M. O’Brien. Sheffield: T&T Clark. 131-152.

Claassens, L Juliana, forthcoming. “God and Violence in the Prophetic Rhetoric.” In *Oxford Handbook to the Prophets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

--- 2012. *Mourner, Mother, Midwife: Reimagining God’s Liberating Presence*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

--- 2008. “To the Captives Come Out and to Those in Darkness be Free ...:” Using the Book of Isaiah in (American) Politics?” *Old Testament Essays*, 21/3: 618-634.

Echo, Umberto 2001. “Reflections on War,” In *Five Moral Pieces*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. Harcourt Inc.

Franke, Chris and O’Brien, Julia M (eds), 2010. *Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets*. Sheffield: T&T Clark.

Heard, Chris, 1997. “Hearing the Children’s Cries: Commentary, Deconstruction, Ethics, and the Book of Habakkuk.” In *Bible and Ethics of Reading*. Edited by Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A Phillips, *Semeia*, 77: 75-89.

---

66 Chris Heard, “Hearing the Children’s Cries: Commentary, Deconstruction, Ethics, and the Book of Habakkuk,” in *Bible and Ethics of Reading*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, *Semeia*, 77 (1997): 88.

Jadoo, Yadhana 2013. "Holy Row over Zuma's God, Curse remarks." *The Citizen*, 8 October. Available at <http://citizen.co.za/63419/zuma-curseq/>

Kamionkowski, Tamar 2007. "The 'Problem' of Violence in Prophetic Literature: Definitions as the Real Problem." In *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*. Edited by David A Bernat and Jonathan Klawans. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix. 38-46.

Moloko Moloto, 2013. "Zuma Invokes Wrath of God," *The Star*, October 7. Available at <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/zuma-invokes-wrath-of-god-1.1587841#.U0CKHvmSzHU>

Moore, Joyce, Parry 2013. "Trampling the Grapes of Wrath" [August 18, 2013] ~ Proper 15, 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Available at [http://www.saintbartslivermore.com/sermon\\_081813.php](http://www.saintbartslivermore.com/sermon_081813.php).

O'Connor, Kathleen 2011. *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011.

Scott, Gary 2006. *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W Bush*. Oxford University Press.

Seibert, Eric 2012. *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Smith-Christopher, Daniel L 2001. *A Biblical Theology of Exile. Overtures to Biblical Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Stauffer, John and Soskis, Benjamin 2013. *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song that Marches On*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tierney, Dominic 2010. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic': America's Song of Itself." *The Atlantic*, Nov 4. Available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/11/the-battle-hymn-of-the-republic-americas-song-of-itself/66070/2/> .

Tierney, Dominique 2010. *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War*. Little, Brown and Company.

Wallis, Jim 2005. *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. New York: Harper San Francisco.

Weber, Katherine. "Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir Sings 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' at President's Inauguration." *Christian Post*, January 21, 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/brooklyn-tabernacle-sings-battle-hymn-of-the-republic-at-presidents-inauguration-88622/>

Young, Jeremy 2007. *The Violence of God and the War on Terror*. New York: Seabury.

