

# **The Truth About "Battle Hymn of the Republic"**

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## **Julia Ward Howe**

"Battle Hymn of the Republic" was written by Julia Ward Howe and is included in many hymnals used by Bible-believing churches. Christian congregations sing this song, feeling very patriotic, without knowing what the song means, why it was written, or anything about Julia Howe.

The fact is that this song was not written to praise God or Jesus. It was not even written within the framework of historical Christianity. Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian and as such did not believe in the Trinity or the deity of Christ. She even preached occasionally in Unitarian pulpits.

## **Why "Battle Hymn of the Republic" Was Written**

Julia Howe was a social activist and an ardent Abolitionist. Together with her husband, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, they edited the *Boston Commonwealth*, a prominent anti-slavery paper, to which she also contributed articles, essays, and poems.

In November of 1861, Samuel and Julia Howe were invited to Washington by President Lincoln, where they toured a number of Union Army camps along the Potomac. While visiting these camps, they heard the soldiers singing a song well-known in both the North and the South, "John Brown's Body Lies a' Mouldering in His Grave." The tune, written by a Southerner named John W. Staffe in 1855, had had many different lyrics set to it even before "John Brown's Body," but those were the words heard by Mrs. Howe on the tour. John Brown, of course, was a radical Abolitionist whom Mrs. Howe admired and who had been hung for his raid on the Harper's Ferry arsenal in 1859 to secure weapons to arm slaves in Virginia for revolt.

Reverend James Freeman Clarke, a Unitarian minister and fellow Abolitionist, was another member of the tour. Being familiar with Mrs. Howe's poems, he urged her to write a new song fitting that tune for the War effort to replace "John Brown's Body." She did so that very night. Staying at the Willard Hotel in Washington on the night of November 18, 1861, Howe awoke with the words of the song in her mind and in near darkness wrote down the verses. She called the result "Battle Hymn of the Republic." It was first published in February, 1862, in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Therefore, the purpose of this song was not to praise God or to give testimony to his great works or the blessings he bestows on Christians. It was written to stir the emotions of the Union troops and support the War Against the Southern Confederacy. In this regard, the song was quite successful and immediately became popular with the soldiers.

## **The Meaning of "Battle Hymn of the Republic"**

Suppose we examine the verses of the song and determine what Julia Ward Howe was really

saying.

### Verse 1

*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.*

Mrs. Howe's eyes saw nothing of "the coming of the Lord" because the Lord had not come. As a Unitarian in Boston in 1861, she probably did not even believe in the physical, bodily return of Christ to this earth. This was her "interpretation" of the second advent: the Union army pouring out divine grapes of wrath on the Confederacy.

### Verse 2

*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 "hundred circling camps" were the Union Army camps that Mrs. Howe toured at President Lincoln's invitation. She actually imagined the watch-fires of the camps to be altars built to God! "By the dim and flaring lamps" in the camps, she was able to read God's "righteous sentence" on the South.

### Verse 3

*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."*

This is the verse conveniently left out of every hymnal that prints "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

According to Mrs. Howe, the "fiery gospel" is written and spread by "burnished rows of steel"--by rifles and bayonets. What "gospel" is it to which she refers? Not the New Testament Gospel.

The word "contemner" is not often used today. It means one who commits contempt. The verb "contemn" means to view or regard with disdain, scorn, or contempt; to despise. The Southern Confederacy is here viewed as having contempt for God. Therefore, to the extent that the Union Army deals with God's contemners in the South, to that same extent, according Mrs. Howe, God will shed his grace on the Northern soldiers. What astonishing audacity!

But Mrs. Howe is still not through. Here the Southern Confederacy is actually cast in the roll of Satan himself. The prediction of Christ crushing Satan in Genesis 3:15 thus finds its

fulfillment in the North crushing the South!

#### Verse 4

*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.*

Here Mrs. Howe depicts the choice made by her contemporaries between the cause of the North and the cause of the South as God "sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment-seat." Of course, God was not then, and is not now, sitting on his judgment seat "sifting" anyone. The judgment seat of God, like the bodily return of Christ to this earth, is an eschatological event. But even apart from that, the fact is that the Southern Army, not the Northern Army, had devout and Godly men such as Lee and Jackson as its leaders. They did not allow their soldiers to curse, they held Sunday services, and they held prayer meetings in their camps. Compare their lives with the likes of Grant and Sherman.

#### Verse 5

*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.*

Here we see the true purpose of this song: "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was written to inspire the Union soldiers who were facing death in their effort to prosecute Lincoln's war of aggression against the Southern Confederacy.

Abolitionism, of course, comes out in the phrase, "make men free." That is the way Mrs. Howe, as an Abolitionist, wanted to portray the goal of the War--to end slavery. However, if anyone thinks the North waged war on the South in order to end slavery and that the South was fighting to preserve slavery, then he knows nothing of the real issues that caused the Southern states to secede from the Union.

Many modern hymnals change this line to, "Let us live to make men free." Apparently, this was first done by Fred Waring, who used this song on his network radio show during World War II. The song was such a hit for the Pennsylvanians that Waring featured it as the closing number in his live concerts for the next 32 years.

But why have hymn-book editors followed Waring in this change? Do they think that perhaps the original intent of Mrs. Howe is better captured by the word "live"? After all, so the reasoning might go, men have to be alive to serve as missionaries to the unsaved who need to be "freed" from sin. How utterly foolish to imagine that this is what Mrs. Howe meant! Her original intent is quite clear, and she used exactly the right word.

So God is "marching on" with the Union troops? I see nothing of God in General Sherman's despicable "march to the sea," destroying crops, farms, burning civilian houses, and

deliberately executing a scorched-earth policy of destruction across Georgia.

What a travesty that the words of this woman have found such loving acceptance in Bible-believing churches! What a travesty that they stir emotions of patriotic fervor to unparalleled heights of ecstasy in the congregations that sing this "hymn"! It should never be sung by any Christian in any church anywhere, North or South.