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A Call to Repentance: Anne Steele's Hymns in Response to War

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Abstract: Long before William Tecumseh Sherman brought “war is hell” into everyday vocabulary at the time of the American Civil War, the confusion, pain, agony, and death of warfare were felt by ordinary people. At the time of war, citizens of one country are brought into deadly conflict with the citizens of another country, folks who have never met and, often, have nothing against one another. For those with faith to believe it, all this occurs under the superintendence of the one true living God.

How is the most accomplished hymn-writer in the Particular Baptist tradition, writing during the golden age of the English hymn—how is she to respond to war in her own midst? Well, she writes. She writes her war hymns. Following the lead of her hymn-writing model, Isaac Watts, Anne Steele wrote hymns on matters of national importance. Seven of these hymns were written during, or just after, the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) between England and France in response to special days of prayer and fasting, as proclaimed by the king as he received news from the battlefield.

Steele wrote her hymns before, during, and after the war, processing the evils of war through the lens of Holy Scripture, her pastor and father's Particular Baptist theological tradition, and her experience as the daughter of one who sold timber to the Royal Navy for ships. How does she make sense of war in verses of song? In a time of social decay and the declension of religion, the evangelical revival notwithstanding, Steele wrote hymns declaring the glory of God, the plight of sinful man before Him, and the only hope of her beloved Britain in such a situation: faith and repentance in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on behalf of His people.

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Introduction

The prospect of war has long animated clans and communities. It has created allies and enemies, as well as heroes and villains. History books, novels, and even tactical textbooks have been produced in response to wars. War has also generated folklore and songs. For Anne Steele (1717-1778), the most accomplished female hymn-writer of the eighteenth century, it became the opportunity to write her war hymns. Drawing on the convictions of her English Particular Baptist faith, Steele produced poetic verse in response to the circumstances surrounding the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). In doing so, she offered encouragement to her own church family, but also offered a sustained biblical and theological critique of the culture, people, government, and religious institutions of her day. These hymns remain instructive and compelling for twenty-first century citizens. Before considering the hymns, an introduction to their author is needed.

Anne Steele and the English Hymn

If Isaac Watts is rightfully known as the “father” of the English hymn, then Anne Steele could be referred to as the English hymn’s “mother.”¹ Composing her hymns in the midst of the evangelical revival in England at the same time as such famous hymn-writers as Charles Wesley (1707–1788), William Cowper (1731–1800), and John Newton (1725–1807), she and this group followed their exemplar Isaac Watts (1674–1748) into the “Golden Age of Hymnody.”² Steele

¹See J. R. Watson, ed., *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 121. Also, Erik Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (London, John Murray, 1952), 206.

²See *Christian History* 10, no. 3 (1991), which is dedicated to the topic of the hymns of the eighteenth century. The title of the issue is “The Golden Age of Hymns.”

was in fact once celebrated as “the female ‘Poet of the Sanctuary.’”³ Writing along with other Dissenters and Nonconformists in her hymn-writing endeavors, Steele’s pen additionally placed her at the head of a group of Particular Baptist pastor hymn-writers whose evangelical and theologically compelling hymns—once warmly received—have been mostly forgotten.⁴ The daughter of a minister, Steele initially wrote her hymns not only for personal devotional purposes but also to supplement the collection of Watts’ hymns sung in her father’s congregation. Steele finally allowed them to be published in 1760, though under a pseudonym, Theodosia. Hymnologist Louis F. Benson says that the publication of Steele’s volumes launched Baptist hymnody into its own golden age.⁵ History has shown that Steele, who has been called the “all-time champion Baptist hymn-writer of either sex,” is “in fact the only woman of that period whose hymns have stood the test of time.”⁶

Steele, who chose to remain unmarried, was the daughter of Particular Baptist pastor William Steele (1689–1769).⁷ A successful timber merchant, William had taken over the

³Edwin F. Hatfield, *Poets of the Church*, 570, quoted in Henry S. Burrage, *Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns* (Portland, Maine: Brown Thurston and Co., 1888), 46.

⁴Other notable Particular Baptist hymn-writers of the era include Joseph Stennett I (1663–1713), Benjamin Wallin (1711–1782), Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795), Samuel Stennett (1727–1795), Benjamin Francis (1734–1799), John Fawcett (1739–1817), and John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825). W. R. Stevenson regards Steele as “by far the most gifted Baptist hymn-writer of this period.” Stevenson, “Baptist Hymnody, English,” 1:111–112. Baptist authors collectively wrote 263 of the 588 hymns in John Rippon’s *A Selection of Hymns, from the Best Authors, including a Great Number of Originals; Intended to be an Appendix to Dr. Watts’s Psalms and Hymns of 1787* and have a substantial number of hymns in *The Baptist Hymnal* of 1883, but have much fewer hymns in *The Baptist Hymnal* published in 1991. Anne Steele has none in this last-named hymnal.

⁵Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1915), 213.

⁶Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (New York, 1942), II: 111 quoted in Richard Arnold, ed., *English Hymns of the Eighteenth Century: An Anthology*, with introductions by Richard Arnold, American University Studies, Series IV, vol. 137 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 318; J. R. Broome, *A Bruised Reed: The Life and Times of Anne Steele, Together with Anne Steele’s Hymns, Psalms, and a Selection of Her Prose Works* (Harpندن: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2007), 151.

⁷Broome discusses at least one suitor of Steele and her conscious decision to remain unmarried for life. See Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 110–14.

pastorate of the Baptist chapel at Broughton from his uncle, Henry Steele (1655–1739), who died in 1739 after serving that church for forty years. From an early age, Anne was involved in the life of this Baptist congregation. J. R. Broome says of her father to whom Anne was very close all his life: “Doctrinally, in his preaching he followed the 1689 Confession of Faith,” which has been called “the classic expression of Calvinistic Baptist doctrine.”⁸ Interestingly, the framers of the *Second London Confession* made a subtle but significant change to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Regarding the religious worship of God, the *Second London Confession* adds that not only “Psalms,” but also “Hymns and Spiritual Songs” are appropriate in the religious worship of God.⁹ The composition of theologically robust and experientially rich hymns, endorsed by this reissued confession of faith, became a treasured resource for expressions of “the doctrines of our faith and practice,” just as the framers declared of the confession.¹⁰

Writing her hymns self-consciously as a Particular Baptist, Steele also sought to pattern her compositions after Isaac Watts. She both valued his example and longed to write like him.¹¹ However, in considering the lyrical content, the theology, and the experiential elements in Anne Steele’s hymns, one must acknowledge that Steele’s own physical and emotional suffering, as well as sober concern for her family, community, and nation, was the context within which she composed many of her hymns. While the popularizing of “hymn stories” over time has caused a

⁸Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 194. Broome lists excerpts from one of his sermons, showing it to be Evangelical, Calvinistic, and gospel-driven. See pages 194-198; Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach—Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage* (Leeds, Eng.: Reformation Trust Today, 1996), 62.

⁹*Second London Confession* (1677, 1688/89) XXII:5 in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 281.

¹⁰Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 239.

¹¹Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 163.

certain sentimentalizing and inaccurate reporting of the range of Steele’s sufferings, there is no doubt that she lived through much physical and emotional pain in her life.¹² From her childhood she endured high fever and fits caused by malaria (eventually leading to a nervous disorder), as well as severe toothaches, stomachaches, and other bodily afflictions.¹³ She wrote hymns from the experience of faith in God as it was tested through the difficult providences of life. Broome posits, “Her ill-health over many years had been sanctified to her and out of it she had learnt that faith in the Son of God was the only source of help, happiness and hope.”¹⁴ Cynthia Aalders finds in Steele’s writings a “persisting sensitivity to God’s response to the suffering she witnessed and experienced in the world.”¹⁵ Further, as it was for many in her day, “death was a very near threat which claimed [many of] those nearest and dearest” to Anne throughout her life.¹⁶ Additionally, Steele lived through decades of British involvement in war and its harsh conditions within a family who sold timber to the Navy for the making of warships. Such “a lived experience” led to Steele’s writing about these historic events, which the following pages highlight.

Steele’s War Hymns

Following the lead of her hymn-writing model, Isaac Watts, “Anne wrote hymns on

¹²For example, surviving letters regarding the story of the drowning incident of her fiancé before their wedding show this story to be of questionable veracity. In fact, not only did her potential suitor not drown the day of or before a scheduled wedding, it does not appear the couple was even engaged. See especially J. R. Watson and Nancy Cho, “Anne Steele’s Drowned Fiancé,” *British Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32 (2005): 117–121.

¹³Sharon James, *In Trouble and in Joy: Four Women Who Lived for God* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2003), 140.

¹⁴Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 165.

¹⁵Cynthia Y. Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable: The Hymns and Spirituality of Anne Steele*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, vol. 40 (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 112.

¹⁶Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 111.

matters of national importance.”¹⁷ Seven of these hymns were written just before, during, or immediately after the Seven Years’ War between England and France. Steele wrote them in response to special days of prayer and fasting as proclaimed by the king as he received news from the battlefield.¹⁸ This global conflict between the colonial empires of England and France included the battle for “supremacy of the seas” and also concerned “the jealousy between Prussia and Austria regarding the control of Germany.”¹⁹ Prussia eventually allied itself with England while Austria joined forces with France. Steele’s stepmother’s journals indicate a steady stream of news of the war making its way to Broughton through both newspapers and the business travels of the Steele men. Steele’s war hymns offer a direct illustration of how a skilled and thoughtful Particular Baptist poet and hymn-writer reflected upon this war for the purpose of prayerful congregational singing. In so doing, Steele exemplifies the robust strain of evangelical Calvinistic belief and practice found in her theological tradition.²⁰

Hymns in Preparation for War

On November 28, 1755, shocking news came to Broughton. There had been a large earthquake in Portugal to go along with news of impending war with France. Therefore, on

¹⁷Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 173. Steele in fact wrote nine hymns concerning national days of fasting and prayer as well as days of thanksgiving for national deliverance and the peace that followed war. She wrote a hymn commemorating the coronation of George III in 1760.

¹⁸See Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 131–175.

¹⁹Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 133.

²⁰John Rippon (1751-1836) included three of Steele’s war hymns in his wildly successful *A Selection of Hymns, from the Best Authors, including a Great Number of Originals; Intended to be an Appendix to Dr. Watts’s Psalms and Hymns*, first published in 1787. Through his *Selection of Hymns* John Rippon disseminated the sung theology and piety of the golden age of Baptist and evangelical hymnody. Rippon’s hymnal, a central vehicle of sung piety in the Baptist context, especially within the revival and expansion of Particular Baptist faith and piety from the 1780s to the 1830s, met specific theological, pastoral, and devotional needs among the Baptist community. Steele’s hymns concerning the Seven Years’ War appeared in Rippon’s hymnal in the section entitled “Times and Seasons.”

December 11 of that year, the Broughton Baptists, as was their custom, set apart a day for prayer for the nation. Anne would often write hymns to be sung on these occasions.²¹ Less than two months later, prior to making the official declaration of war, which would come in May, King George II set apart February 6 “for a day of public fasting, humiliation and prayer to God on account of the dangers we are in from our encroaching enemies, the French, and the judgments that are abroad in the earth.”²² Though Steele’s health did not allow her to attend the meeting, she composed a hymn to be sung at the service.²³ She called the hymn “On the Public Fast.”²⁴ Notice both the rhetorical structure and the prayerful flow of the hymn’s text:

- 1 See, gracious God! before thy throne
Thy mourning people bend!
‘Tis on thy sovereign grace alone,
Our humble hopes depend.
- 2 Tremendous judgments²⁵ from thy hand
Thy dreadful power display,
Yet mercy spares this guilty land,
And still we live to pray.
- 3 Great God! and why is Britain spar’d,
Ungrateful as we are?
O make thy awful warnings heard,
While mercy cries, *Forbear!*
- 4 What num’rous crimes increasing rise

²¹Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 131–132.

²²Cited in Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 132.

²³Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 132.

²⁴Anne Steele, “For a Public Fast,” hymn number 525 quoted in John Rippon, ed., *Selection of Hymns* (London, 1830), 678–679. Steele typically named her hymns and often included a date or a biblical reference. Rippon sometimes modified her chosen title as well making minor changes in the lyrics and punctuation for his own purposes. For this paper, Steele’s original hymns are listed without edits.

²⁵Though not noted in the *Selection of Hymns*, Steele notes that these “judgments” are referring in particular to the earthquake at Lisbon, not to mention the battles at hand around the globe.

O'er all this wretched isle!²⁶
What land so favour'd of the skies,
And yet what land so vile!

5 How chang'd, alas! are truths divine
For error, guilt, and shame!
What impious numbers, bold in sin,
Disgrace the Christian name!²⁷

6 O bid us turn, almighty Lord!
By thy resistless grace;
Then shall our hearts obey thy word,
And humbly seek thy face.

7 Then should insulting foes invade,
We shall not sink in fear;
Secure of never-failing aid,
If God, our God, is near.²⁸

This hymn introduces all the major themes that will be revisited from different angles and with varying poetic devices in each of Steele's war hymns. The first stanza begins from a posture of humility. From the human perspective nations are corporately dependent upon God and His providence. Composing and singing such verses also demonstrates Nonconformist piety as they follow their confessional forbears' instructions: "We ought to make supplications and prayers for Kings, and all that are in Authority, that under them we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and honesty."²⁹ Having humbly approached her heavenly King in the opening lines, the second verse turns to God's power, especially as displayed in His judgments, yet acknowledging

²⁶Rippon edited this line to read: "Thro' this apostate isle!"

²⁷Rippon includes a further stanza (his own?) between Steele's fifth and sixth verses: "Regardless of thy smile or frown, / Their pleasures they require; / And sink with gay indiff'rence down / To everlasting fire." He also begins the next line: "O turn us, turn us."

²⁸Steele, "For a Public Fast," hymn number 525 quoted in John Rippon, ed., *Selection of Hymns* (London, 1830), 678–679.

²⁹Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 284. Each of Steele's "war hymns" affirms this.

His mercy. An evangelical trait was the belief that “judgment was expected on nations as well as individuals if they persisted in corporate sins.”³⁰ The next three verses build the case for the sinfulness of the nation from the collective aspect down to individual sinners committing individual sins. She asks, “Why is Britain spared?” admitting herself as among the citizens of a land in need of God’s mercy. In the sixth verse, Steele’s theologically informed spirituality emerges as she calls on God’s “resistless grace” to move their hearts to “obey thy word” and seek God’s face. Evoking the images from David Bebbington’s quadrilateral, she calls on the Lord to bring her fellow citizens to repentance, conversion, and thus obedience to the Word of God.³¹ Finally, she closes with an expression of confidence in the face of invaders because of God’s being near to aid Britain in their desperate time of need.

“On the Public Fast” is characterized by an acknowledgment of the character of God as holy and gracious alongside an honest realism regarding the standing of sinful humanity, and indeed the nation of Britain, before Him. Here is a land that has been blessed with the gospel now filled with “error, guilt, and shame.” It appears that both Steele and King George II view the earthquake in Lisbon as a judgment from God. Is the war itself a judgment against Britain, or will the results of the war be that judgment or reprieve? The answer to such questions remains to be seen. Thus, the hymn ends with a supplication made in faith. Steele expresses the optimism, even on the eve of war, of the evangelical doctrine of God’s providence: “[God] is in active control of the world.”³²

³⁰Bebbington, David W., *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 61.

³¹Bebbington’s well-known fourfold description of Evangelicalism includes conversionism, biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism. Steele’s hymns reveal these qualities. For a detailed explanation of these characteristics, see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-17.

³²Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 61.

Hymns in the Midst of War

A fruitful harvest, and also the continued sale of timber, enabled the Steele family to help feed needy families in Broughton during a time of high prices and a shortage of food due to the war in late 1756 and early 1757.³³ During this time, the king appointed February 11, 1757, as “a day of humiliation and fasting.”³⁴ Steele wrote two hymns for the occasion: “National Judgments Deprecated” and “Pleading for Mercy.”³⁵ Though she continues to use the rhetorical devices of acknowledging the justice and mercy of God’s confronting the sinfulness and lack of Christian piety of the citizens of Great Britain, she raises the stakes in these two hymns in certain ways. In the first of these, “National Judgments Deprecated,” Steele mines the resources of her Particular Baptist belief in a sovereign God, both powerful and merciful, as she cries out to Him verse-by-verse as the only hope for her sinful nation. Notably, Steele begins this hymn with contrasting images as she prays. She begins in the first verse worshiping God “with fear and trembling” and continues in verse two spiritually in heaven praying, “Our only refuge is thy seat; . . . where potent mercy pleads.”³⁶ Stanzas four, six, and eight of this nine-stanza hymn illustrate new themes she considers:

4 Pale famine now, and wasting war,
 With threat’ning frown thy wrath declare;
 But war and famine are thy slaves,
 Nor can destroy when mercy saves.

³³Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 135.

³⁴Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 135.

³⁵Steele, “National Judgments Deprecated,” February 11, 1757, *The Works of Mrs. Anne Steele, Complete in Two Volumes, Comprehending Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse: Heretofore Published under the Title of Theodosia* (Boston: Munroe, Francis and Parker, 1808), 1:226–227; “On the Same. Pleading for Mercy,” *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 1:227–228.

³⁶See Eph. 1:3 KJV.

6 Encourag'd by thy sacred word,
 May we not plead the blest record,
 That when a humble nation mourns,
 Thy rising wrath to pity turns.

8 Our arms, O God of armies, bless,
 Thy hand alone can give success,
 And make our haughty neighbors own
 That heav'n protects the British throne.³⁷

In stanza four, rather than lashing out at God for such grim circumstances, Steele simply suggests with firm conviction that both so-called natural disasters as well as humanity's conflicts are nothing more than slaves doing service to God. She seems to be engaging the prophetic calls to disobedient Israel in the Old Testament in stanza six, pleading God's promises to restore the repentant, even entire nations, through His divine pity. Finally, in stanza eight, Steele's understanding of her nation's standing before God, as opposed to that of her enemies, comes into view. Steele sees Britain as having been entrusted with the gospel, and though it is failing to live up to its responsibilities in light of this, she still expects God to protect Protestant Britain against their "haughty" enemies who are under the sway of the Roman Catholic Church.³⁸

Steele's second hymn, "Pleading for Mercy," written on this occasion brings out another aspect of her Particular Baptist spirituality: an understanding of the kingly, prophetic, and priestly roles of Christ on behalf of His people.³⁹ In the following excerpts, observe the notes of prophetic judgment, priestly mediation, and kingly authority:

³⁷Steele, "National Judgments Deprecated," February 11, 1757, *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 1:226–227.

³⁸The *Second London Confession* does directly and bluntly contradict Roman Catholic teaching concerning the pope and the Mass in its chapters "Of the Church" and "Of the Lord's Supper." Cho concludes, "The interpretation reflects the contemporary view that God had graciously saved Britain from error and superstition." Nancy Jiwon Cho, "'The Ministry of Song': Unmarried British Women's Hymn Writing, 1760–1936" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2007), 81.

³⁹*Second London Confession* VIII:9 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 263.

- 1 Come, let our souls adore the Lord,
 Whose judgments yet delay,
 Who yet suspends the lifted sword,
 And gives us leave to pray.
- 4 Kind Intercessor, to thy love
 This blessed hope we owe;
 O let thy merits plead above,
 While we implore below.
- 6 Though justice near thy awful throne
 Attends thy dread command,
 Lord, hear thy servants, hear thy Son,
 And save a guilty land.⁴⁰

Here, Steele acknowledges that the judgment of the Son on behalf of the Father is imminent. So, she pleads for His continued intercessory work on behalf of those whom He calls His own. She knows God’s mercy in delaying final judgment is for the purpose of leading people to repentance.⁴¹ Steele appeals to Christ’s character and role as one who “ever liveth to make intercession for” God’s people.⁴² She closes with a flourish—a theologically informed prayer to her Priest-King, one with the power, mercy, and merit to save. Steele applies her theology, and in this case, Christology, in prayerful verse.

On November 24, 1757, news reached Broughton of a great Prussian victory over the French at Rossbach, a battle that Broome notes “marked a major turning point in the Seven Years’ War and in the future history of Europe.”⁴³ In response Steele wrote “National Judgment

⁴⁰Steele, “Pleading for Mercy,” *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 1:227–228.

⁴¹2 Pet. 3:9.

⁴²See Heb. 7:25.

⁴³Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 137. Broome notes that 1858 opened with the sad loss of Anne’s brother William Steele junior’s merchant ship, “The Willing Mind.” Broome suggests it was “almost certainly captured by the French.” Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 138.

and Mercies A Call to Repentance.”⁴⁴ In this hymn, like the psalmists before her, she addresses both her fellow citizens and the Lord. Two stanzas demonstrate this:

2 At length, ye Britons, lift your eyes,
Your crimes no more pursue;
Behold the gath’ring tempest rise,
And tremble at the view!

7 Almighty God, thy powerful grace
Can change us, and forgive;
Can save a guilty rebel race,
And say, Repent, and live.⁴⁵

The title along with every stanza of this hymn summarizes Steele’s purpose in these compositions: to acknowledge God’s just judgment and Britain’s guilt and to call its citizens to sincere biblical repentance.

“On a Day of Prayer for Success in War” was written to commemorate the day appointed by King George II as “a day to be kept for thanksgiving for great mercies of our God.”⁴⁶ These mercies included at least the British victories at Lagos and then at Quiberon Bay in 1759, following the loss of some battles to the French in previous months. Broome calls 1759 “a momentous year for Britain and her Allies in the Seven Years’ War.”⁴⁷ Having been just recently weak and ill during the midst of an outbreak of smallpox in Broughton, and fearful of catching it, Steele penned this war hymn. The first two stanzas review earlier material as they reflect Steele’s

⁴⁴Steele, “National Judgments and Mercies A Call to Repentance,” Nov. 1757, *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 1:229–230.

⁴⁵ Steele, “National Judgments and Mercies A Call to Repentance,” Nov. 1757, *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 1:229–230.

⁴⁶Steele, “On A Day of Prayer for Success in War,” hymn number 527 quoted in Rippon, ed., *Selection of Hymns*, 680–681; Cited in Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 145.

⁴⁷Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 143.

humble view of “wretched sinners” before the “bright terrors” and “dazzling glories” where there is yet “mercy” calling at the “throne of grace.” In the third verse she again cries out to her Prophet, Priest, and King: “O may our souls thy grace adore, / May Jesus plead our humble claim, / While thy protection we implore, / In his prevailing glorious name.”⁴⁸ With the fourth stanza, Steele calls upon “the Lord” as the one upon whose “arm” Britain depends. Steele’s ability to apply her theology and piety to the craft of poetry in the midst of national need continues to mature and develop in this hymn. Having followed her basic outline through the first four stanzas, the final four break new ground:

- 5 Let past experience of thy care
Support our hope, our trust invite!
Again attend our humble prayer!
Again be mercy thy delight!
- 6 Our arms succeed, our councils guide,
Let thy right hand our cause maintain;
Till war’s destructive rage subside,
And peace resume her gentle reign.
- 7 O when shall time the period bring
When raging war shall waste no more:
When peace shall stretch her balmy wing
From Europe’s coast to India’s shore?
- 8 When shall the Gospel’s healing ray
(Kind source of amity divine)
Spread o’re the world celestial day?
When shall the nations, Lord! be thine?⁴⁹

To begin the second half of this hymn, she pleads God’s gracious heart, imploring Him to

⁴⁸See Second London Confession, Chapter VIII, “Of Christ the Mediator” in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 263.

⁴⁹Steele, “On A Day of Prayer for Success in War,” hymn number 527 quoted in Rippon, ed., *Selection of Hymns*, 680–681.

remember His care of Britain in the past. Then she alludes to the everyday realities of war and says that its “destructive rage” can only be transformed into a reign of peace through the work of God’s “right hand”—“from Europe’s coast to India’s shore.” She finishes with an evangelistic tone reminiscent of Psalms 67 and 117, asking when the gospel will transform the nations, so making them the Lord’s.

Hymns Reflecting on the War at Its Conclusion

Following the Seven Years’ War, in which England and Prussia defeated France, Austria, Russia, Sweden, and Saxony, Steele wrote two further hymns of thanksgiving for peace. The first was “Praise for National Peace, Psalm xlv.9.”⁵⁰

- 1 Great Ruler of the earth and skies,
A word of thy Almighty breath
Can sink the world, or bid it rise;
Thy smile is life, thy frown is death.
- 2 When angry nations rush to arms,
And rage, and noise, and tumult reigns,
And war resounds its dire alarms,
And slaughter spreads the hostile plains;
- 3 Thy sov’ reign eye looks calmly down,
And marks their course, and bounds their pow’r;
Thy words the angry nations own,
And noise and war are heard no more;
- 4 Then peace returns with balmy wing,
(Sweet peace, with her what blessings fled!)
Glad plenty laughs, the valleys sing,
Reviving commerce lifts her head.
- 5 Thou good, and wise, and righteous Lord!
All move subservient to thy will;
And peace and war await thy word,

⁵⁰*Random House College Dictionary*, rev. ed., s.v. “Seven Years’ War,” (1988), 1205; Steele, “Praise for National Peace, Psalm xlv. 9,” hymn number 531 quoted in Rippon, ed., *Selection of Hymns*, 684, 686.

And thy sublime decrees fulfill.

6 To thee we pay our grateful songs,
Thy kind protection still implore;
O may our hearts, and lives, and tongues,
Confess thy goodness and adore.⁵¹

Of particular interest in this hymn are a sustained note of thanksgiving and joy and a lack of the petitions of the previous hymns. It simply consists of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving, using the prophetic images of nature singing and the Calvinistic emphasis of God's fulfilling His "sublime decrees." Further, as the evangelical believed in the divine judgment upon nations, "likewise mercies could be individual or national."⁵² So it displays the prophetic images of not only spiritual deliverance, but also national and physical deliverance, even to the point of buying and selling while laughing and singing. She longs for a whole redemption from the ravages of war.

Steele wrote a final hymn of thanksgiving that brings to a fitting conclusion her meditations from a Christian perspective on the Seven Years' War. In her "Hymn for a Day of Public Thanksgiving and Peace," Steele surveys the previous years of war and includes for the first time a refrain at the end of each of the seven stanzas. The refrain, with slight variations, is: "To God, ye favour'd Britons raise / Your sweetest notes of thankful praise."⁵³ Believing Britain was favored by God in this mercy and other deliverances, Steele displays that "evangelicals were sometimes more forward than their contemporaries in detecting the hand of God in particular events."⁵⁴ This refrain follows verses that testify not only to God's protection, but also to the

⁵¹Steele, "Praise for National Peace, Psalm xlvi. 9," hymn number 531 quoted in Rippon, ed., *Selection of Hymns*, 684, 686.

⁵²Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 61.

⁵³Steele, "Hymn for a Day of Public Thanksgiving for Peace," *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 2:219–221.

⁵⁴Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 61.

horrors of war and the personal loss it brings:

3 Abroad, protection and success
Proclaim'd that Britain's God was there;
At home, he bade fair plenty bless;
The fruitful fields confessed his care.

4 But yet beneath the hostile sword
Has many a worthy patriot bled,
And many a mourning heart deplor'd
A friend, a son, a brother dead!⁵⁵

She concludes her final war hymn with a prayer of petition: "Make Britain more entirely thine."

Steele has no hesitation in praying to God from a standpoint of His sovereign claim over Great Britain. She even notes the valor in serving one's country.

Conclusion

The war hymns of Anne Steele, the pre-eminent Particular Baptist hymn-writer of her own time (and perhaps of all time!), provide a case study in the theology and piety of her generation. Further, her hymns written in the midst of war offer at least a glimpse into the question, "How does one make sense of war in verses of song?" Processing the evil aspects of war through the lens of Holy Scripture, her father and pastor's Particular Baptist theological tradition, and her experience as the daughter of one who sold timber to the Navy for ships, Steele submits an answer. She does not blame God. If anything, she blames sinful humanity for such evils. Where is God in all this? Steele says He is on His throne. She knows that "our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased."⁵⁶ However, she also acknowledges that

⁵⁵Steele, "Hymn for a Day of Public Thanksgiving for Peace," *Works of Mrs. Anne Steele*, 2:219–221.

⁵⁶Ps. 115:3.

the LORD God is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty.”⁵⁷ And so, like her Savior when He confronted similar questions, she seems to be saying to her fellow citizens, “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”⁵⁸ Like the Apostle Peter, she exhorts in so many verses through song, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.”⁵⁹

In a time of social decay and the declension of religion, the evangelical revival notwithstanding, Steele wrote hymns declaring the glory of God, the plight of sinful man before Him, and the only hope of her beloved Britain in such a situation: faith and repentance in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on behalf of His people. These hymns have a profoundly prayerful tone. Like the psalmists before her, she builds her case based on the character of God as revealed in His Word—boldly asking Him to act mercifully toward a nation she views as entrusted with the gospel and yet falling short of its call upon her. Though Steele’s nationalistic tone might be uncomfortable for postmodern ears, she ardently pleads for, and then praises God for, Britain’s deliverance in the Seven Years’ War.

⁵⁷Exod. 34:6-7.

⁵⁸Luke 13:3.

⁵⁹Acts 3:19.

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