

A CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY ON THE NATIONAL ANTHEM: PART II  
THE POETRY OF THE NATIONAL ANTHEM

I. The poetry of the Spangled Banner reflects a contrast between the chaos of history and the clarity of the American vision, symbolized by the flag.

A. The line structure reflects varying aspects of history, but the conclusion with solid truth.

1. The lines revolve around 12 syllables, varying from 10 to 14. Twelve syllables per line is more than usual. The iambic pentameter of Shakespeare was based upon 10 per line. *Amazing grace* and *America the Beautiful* alternate between 8 and 6. The *Battle Hymn* alternates between 6, 8 and 9 syllables.
2. There is the Alexandrine style that does use 6 iambic groups, that is stressed and unstressed syllables. But that is not what this poem does.
3. The number 12 is a classic Judeo-Christian symbol of the tribes of Israel and then The Apostles. And in fact, in the early American republic there was a sense of a divine calling to set forth a certain faith in a free nation. William J. Bennett wrote in his 1997 book, *Our Sacred Honor*, “What made this country different from all others was a prevalent belief that God played a direct and active hand in founding a people. Like the Jerusalem of old, America’s ‘New Jerusalem’ was to become God’s promised land to the oppressed—an example to all humankind” (p. 366). John Winthrop delivered his City upon a hill speech to the Puritans on their way to America, and he compared the community to Israel about to enter the Promised Land and quoted from Moses’ last speech, “There is now set before us life and good, death and evil” from Deuteronomy 30. Likewise, Cotton Mather gave a speech about John Winthrop entitled the American Nehemiah. Even Benjamin Franklin proposed that the National Seal have an image of Moses leading the Chosen People to the Promised Land. Thomas Jefferson also argued for an image on the great seal of the Israelites in the desert led by the fire and cloud. The stars of the Great Seal are also in the form of the star of David, according to one tradition, at George Washington’s request.
4. In the anthem in particular, the final line is always “O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.” The line forms four sets of three syllables, with a preposition, the word “the” and the great themes land, free, home brave. One is reminded of the celestial Jerusalem described in the Book of Revelation with 12 gates, three on each side, and twelve foundations, with each one of them having the name of an Apostle. See Rev. 12:15-21.

5. The image is of history rotating too and fro, but always coming back to the solid vision of the flag and the land it represents. When there are 12 syllable lines, with two six syllable parts, they are meant to be seen in union with each other.
- B. The dominating image is of the flag flying in battle and then over the land of the free and the home of the brave.
1. The penultimate line describes the flag as waving over the land. That notion combines solidness, but also motion, neither chaos nor dullness but continual freshness.
  2. There use of the term “wave” also suggests the wave offerings of the Old Testament. On Passover, Pentecost and other occasions, the priests would wave a portion of the offerings as a sign of sacredness. See, e.g., Lev. 23:11-12, 20.
  3. The American flag combines the red, white and blue of the British flag, but with horizontal stripes, rather than cross stripes, and also stars. The British flag was a combination of the crosses of St. George, St. Andrew and St. Patrick, reflecting England, Scotland and Ireland.
  4. The symbolism of the American flag reflects a religious background, but one that more generally relies on God rather than based upon a specific tradition, although there is Christian background. In particular, in his explanation of the Great Seal, Charles Thompson, the secretary to the Second Continental Congress said, “The colours of the pales are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness & valor, and Blue, the colour of the Chief signifies vigilance, perseverance & justice.”. The red and white are also liturgical symbols from the Catholic and Anglican tradition, along similar lines. Stars have likewise historically been a symbol of witnessing to the light in the midst of a dark world. Thus, for example, First Corinthians 15:41 compares the saints to stars with differing glory. Phillipians 2:15 compares the witness of the faithful to lights shining on in the world. In Book 13, chapter 19 of the Confessions, St. Augustine likewise compares the stars of the sky to the witness of the Christian faithful.
  5. In 1977, the House published a book about the flag which also said, "The star is a symbol of the heavens and the divine goal to which man has aspired from time immemorial; the stripe is symbolic of the rays of light emanating from the sun." At the time, there was one stripe and one star for every state, for 15 each.

- C. At first sight, this replacing of crosses with more general symbols, although based upon the Christian tradition may seem like a departure from Christianity to a more general religion. And certainly the new republic did welcome all faiths, or no particular faith. But also the refusal to have official support for Christianity indicated a trust that Christianity could thrive on its own, without governmental support. Alexis de Touqueville in his 1932 classic *Democracy in America* certainly noted that , “America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men’s souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to man, since the country where it now has the widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest.”
- D. There was certainly a desire to have the law of God govern affairs of men In 1787, as the Constitution was being written, Benjamin Franklin called upon the framers to invoke God’s aid, saying, “God governs the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can with without His aid? We have been assured in the sacred writing that ‘Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that built it.’” As George Washington said in his Farewell Address, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who would labor to subvert these two great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens.” In 1789, the First Congress promulgated the Northwest Ordinance, which governed much of what is now the Midwest. That act said, among other things, “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, Schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

II. The first verse of the National Anthem emphasizes the need for vision in the midst of a chaotic battle and world.

- A. In this and all of the verses, the first four lines go together, then there is a couplet bringing those verses to a conclusion, followed by the couplet about the star spangled banner. In the first couplet, the first line always has two parts that rhyme with each other and with the second line of the couplet
- B. The first four lines go together, reflecting upon the sunset, the departure of a day, but the star spangled banner giving hope.
1. There is literally a reminder of the flag at dusk, but also figuratively a reminder of the vision of an era that is past. Can we still see the vision that our fathers saw.
  2. Pope John Paul II in his final book *Memory and Identity* quotes part of one of his poems, “Freedom – a continuing conquest. // It cannot be simply possessed!

// It comes as a gift, but keeping it is a struggle. // . . . How weak the people that accepts defeat, // that forgets its call to keep vigil.” The idea is that freedom must be continually renewed, the vision seen again. In 1 Samuel, reflecting upon the decline of Israel, chapter 3 begins, “Now Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.”

3. The first four verses are joined with the rhyming of light and fight, and gleaming and streaming. At the time of the rising light, the bombardment had stopped, and so there was a peace, but either one of victory or of loss, contrasting with the fight during the night. And the question was whether that peace was better or worse than the fight and struggle. Literally, that meant whether the fort had surrendered or been victorious. But also, when a nation is at peace, does that mean that virtue has triumphed, or people are at peace with sloth and decadence: Authurian court or Brave New World. And the question centers on whether the vision represented by the flag is still see or not. During the fight, it shines on with stars and stripes and gallantly streams as the light streams on. But does it continue to the next day. And the idea is the battle gives proof that the flag still has meaning. The struggles of the life of freedom prove that it is real; without them one would not know whether one is brave or not; freedom would be too cheap. See 1 Peter 1:6-7; Wis. 3:1-9.
4. The third and fifth lines have 12 syllables, with two 6 syllable parts to them, contrasting the flag in the fight and the rockets red glare, the bombs busting in air.
5. For there is always the passing of the days. We cannot simply stay in the same time or situation; one must continuously adjust to a new era. The faith does not call for sameness or a lack of innovation. Rather, it calls for continual renewal, the ancient faith producing new fruit in the new era. Contrasting with that real progress is either trying to stop all change on the one hand, or continuously throwing out everything old and starting fresh. The founding fathers did neither. They certainly thought of themselves as starting something new. The Great Seal reads *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. The New Order of Ages. But the Founding Fathers also said that they were upholding the ancient rights of the British, and scoured history for lessons about how to build the new republic. The new states in fact generally continued British Common law traditions.

6. This half verse is in the form of a question, whether the vision is still seen.

C. The next two lines continue the contrast between the battle and the flag.

1. The lines are joined together with the rhyme of air and there, the background of chaos and the stability of the flag.

2. Likewise, the scene pictured is of violence, rocket red glare and bombs bursting in air.

3. But then the next line emphasizes more stability; in the background of night, the our flag was still there. Light shining on in the dark and the darkness could not overcome it.

4. This quarter verse is in the form of a statement emphasizing the definitiveness of the former defense of the flag. Literally it refers to the night of the battle of Baltimore. Figuratively, it refers to the struggles of the past, which shine forth as examples for the current day.

D. But then we come to a question again, whether the flag still waves

1. The song calls for the listener to answer whether the flag still waves over the land.

2. Literally, it asked whether the flag still waves over the country, in that case over Fort McHenry.

3. But it also asks whether the country is still the land of the free and the home of the brave. The connection between bravery and freedom stands forth in the final line of every verse. Bravery is needed for the people of the land to be free. But also freedom leads to love and therefore to bravery. The concept of a banner is a matter of pageantry, reflecting something one loves. In the Song of Songs, there is the combination of love and martial imagery in banners. On the one hand, Song 2:4, the woman says of her beloved, "he brought me to his banqueting house, and his banner over me was love." On the other hand, in describing the fair queen, it says, "Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in battle array." Psalm 20 reflects the banner and a symbol of joy and of victory over enemies. In Psalm 60 it is the symbol that transitions from punishment to restoration.

III. The second verse then goes from the uncertainty of the dawn to the clarity of the flag.

A. Once again, the first four lines form a question, about what the new dawn will bring.

1. There is the images of the mists and the deep, the uncertainty of what is next. That is ever the challenge of the future. Every generation must answer anew whether it will be brave and free.
  2. But mists and deep also have a sense of opportunity, going into the unknown.
  3. The next line refers to the foe's haughty hosts in dread silence reposing. Literally, it refers to the British ships that were silent. Figuratively, it refers to any enemy, whether external or internal. If there is not fighting, it could mean that the enemy is conquered or is the conquerer. Aristotle said that there are three levels of goodness and evil: the disciplines and undisciplined, who are struggling for goodness, with the former usually successful and the latter not; there is the virtuous and the vicious, with the former doing what is right more easily and the latter at peace with his sins – this group has peace, but of a real or false variety. The third level of evil is the brutish, the evil beyond ordinary evil, and also “the heroic, indeed divine.” This group is striving away from the ordinary world, but whether in a good or bad direction depends on which one it is.
  4. Then the breeze comes “over the towering steep.” A steep in this case is some great cliff; here it presumably means the walls of the fort, which were not high, but seemed like great cliffs holding the sea at bay
  5. Rounding out the question is an image of the flag just barely seen, and not clear whether it is the battle flag or the surrender flag.
- B. But then the next two lines answer the doubt with the morning's first gleam and the banner's glory shining in the stream.
1. One then has the vision of the flag in the “gleam of the morning' first gleam. The image of the sun shining once again after a dangerous night is a continual symbol of victory. One thinks of the new dawn theme, above all of the Easter morn. See 1 Peter 1:19 about the prophetic word being as a light in the darkness until the dawn arises.
  2. There is here the sense of triumph after battle, of the struggle succeeding. In the previous verse the night proved that the flag was still there; here the joy of the morning does the same. Perseverance proves the faith, as does the handing on of the faith from one generation to the next

C. Then we come once again to the final couplet.

1. The first verse as usual has the 12 syllables, but in a pattern of seven then five syllables. Unlike the first verse, the star spangled banner is at the beginning and then a reflection. Here the reflection is looking forward to the future, a prayer that it will wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave.
2. There is now confidence that the new day, the present, does see the star spangled banner waving, that the principles of purity, courage, freedom, righteousness are shining now. The question is whether they will do so in the future.
3. The challenge for each generation is to answer whether they are in fact fulfilling the prayer now sung for two centuries, being the land of the free and the home of the brave.

IV. The third verse then looks back upon the enemies of the country and how they have been conquered and draws the lesson that the star spangled banner and the goodness it represents does wave over the country.

A. The first four lines again form a group, but no longer one sentence. There are rather two sentences, one of three lines and one of one line. There are also no lines in the first four that have an even distribution of the two sides, with the same number of syllables each.

1. The first three lines take what should be a question, as with the earlier verses, but it ends with an exclamation point. The idea is that there is no more uncertainty, only complete defeat.
2. Literally, these lines refer to the ships that tried to get past Fort McHenry, but were driven back under fire. The rest of the British navy did not actually take much damage, except the loss of ammunition.
3. The first three lines refers to their ill intention. The enemy host is arrogant (“vaunting”) and uses oaths for conquest. It relies upon havoc of war and battle’s confusion as the means. And the goal is to take away the home and the country. The patriots are not out for conquest, but to defend their homes
4. There is the gory image of footsteps creating foul pollution, a pollution that their blood washes out. There is here a dramatic contrast with the cleansing power of the blood of the Christ. See, e.g., Eph. 1:7, 2:13; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:13.

5. The last words are intentionally ugly, their footsteps foul pollution.

B. The next two lines are more eloquent, but it is the eloquence of death.

1. There is a lack of any refuge because they are away from home, and thus it is either conquest or defeat. There is also the reference to the hireling and the slave. The reference to slaves is rather unfortunate, for the British had abolished slavery at this point and were in fact using American slaves in their navy. The point here is about people who fight for pay, rather than the cause. But that line probably could be reworked, perhaps along the lines of the captain or his slave. Or perhaps the hireling and the knave.

2. The next line is stable, but it is the stability of death. There are two equal sides the line, "From the terror of the night, or the gloom of the grave." This gloomy rest contrasts to the dramatic fight of the other balanced 12 syllable verses, describing the struggle, but the flag flying through it into the morning, and the final line of each verse.

C. The final two lines here are connected with the prior couplet, both by the rhyming and also by the fact that they form one sentence together.

1. The idea is that there is a dramatic contrast between the inescapable terror and grave on the one hand and the banner which unites the American people on the other.

2. There is a confidence that the star spangled banner is triumphant and waves over a brave and free people.

3. The challenge is to make that statement true. The banner triumphant not only over foreign enemies, but over sloth, decadence, greed, and the like that would contradict what it symbolizes. And also the challenge again to be brave and defend freedom.

V. The final verse brings the song to its conclusion with a lesson and prayer for the future about justice and God's providence for the nation.

A. The first four lines again come together, albeit as two sentences of two lines each.

1. The first two lines emphasize the courage of the patriot defending his freedom and his home.

2. The vision is of freemen, defending the independence of the country. They are willing to fight, but wish for peace, and thus stand between their home and war's desolation.

3. Each of these lines is 11 syllables, indicating a certain incompleteness.
4. The next two lines emphasize how God's providence is what carries the people through the difficult times.

- They begin with describing the land as "blessed with victory and peace" after the struggles,

- The next line then refers to "the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation." They indicate the strong belief that the hand of God was at work.

- This notion was a common belief of the Founding Fathers. For example, in his first inaugural address, George Washington said, "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men more than the People of the United States." Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1784, "our human means were unequal to our undertaking . . . If it had not been for the justice of our cause, and the consequent interposition of Providence, in which we had faith, we must have been ruined." The very day after promulgating the First Amendment, Congress passed a resolution of thanksgiving, which said, among other things, that Americans "acknowledge with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peacefully to establish a constitutional government for their safety and happiness."

- The confidence here is that the hand of God is available and needed for the future of the nation.

5. These two lines are 14 syllables each, with two half lines of 7 syllables each. Seven is a common idea of completeness, as in the days of creation, now reflected in the days of the week, the seven main virtues, Jesus telling his disciples that they must forgive their neighbor seven times seventy times. See e.g., Matt. 18:21-22; Luke 17:4. The symbolism here is of the completeness of divine grace, fulfilling what is lacking in even good human efforts.

6. There is a notion of grace and our own efforts joining together. It is an idea summarized well by St. Paul when he said, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you." Phil. 2:12-13. The symbolism is also in the Mass when the priest mixes water and wine and says, "By the mingling of this water and wine, may we share in the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share in our humanity." Grace and our own cooperation work together.

B. The next two lines then draw the lesson from this understanding.

1. Once again, there are two related lines, each with 11 syllables, reflecting again an incompleteness of the faith that is still striving. The goodness is still subject to ups and downs.

2. There is a complete confidence that justice will prevail. If our cause is just we will conquer. The phrase, “when our cause it is just” adds the extra word “it” both to get to 11 syllables and to emphasize a certainty of the cause, even the midst of cloudiness. The next line then emphasizes the motto “In God is our trust.” Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase received Congressional approval for the addition of “In God we trust” on coins at the end of the Civil War. And President Eisenhower signed legislation in 1956 adopting it as the national motto, and then signed an executive order calling for it to be on all currency.

3. There is no one Scriptural basis for this motto. But the Psalms repeatedly call for trust in the Lord. See e.g., Ps. 4:5, 9:9-10, 118:8-9. There is a notion of independence from earthly powers by relying on God.

4. There may be a legitimate question of how we are confident that we will conquer if our cause is just. Many just people have been conquered, such as the Irish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Poles in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The idea here is that there is a confidence that, in the end the cause of justice will triumph, although we do not always see it now. The principles of freedom, purity, bravery and the free defense of the home will shine through. The 49<sup>th</sup> Psalm presents this theme.

C. The final two lines then conclude the poem with a confident projection for the future.

1. The first line answers the prayer of the second first by confidently predicting that the star spangled banner will wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave.

2. The punctuation is an exclamation. This final line has gone from a questions mark to a period to an exclamation point,, the same as the first sentence of the verse.

3. There is an interesting combination of the conditional favor of God, conditioned on the goodness of the nation with this certainty about the future. The Great Seal has a similar ambiguity in one of its emblems, “Annuet Coeptis” which could mean “He has favored our undertakings” or “Be favors our undertakings.”

4. Part of the idea may be that the current state of the country is variable, and thus the favor of Providence is variable. The country as it is now can be or not be the land of the free and the home of the brave. However, there is a timelessness to the American ideal that will always be there inspiring all people, as for example, Arthurian England or Greek philosophy and art does. The 87<sup>th</sup> Psalm refers to the nations, even some from the past, being gathered around Jerusalem. Likewise, the Book of Revelation ends with a vision of nations walking by the light of the Lamb. And Jesus says in His famous parable about doing good for others and therefore for Him that at the end of all things, the Son of Man will judge all nations. There is perhaps an idea that there is an eternal America in which all efforts are pure and brave and freedom is exercised creatively under the law of God.