

# In the Presence of Whose Enemies?: A Discourse Analysis of a Popular Christian Song in the Context of a “Worship Protest”

**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary Christian worship music is culturally powerful and theologically formative. The most successful songs achieve international, inter-denominational recognition and are sung and used in a wide variety of (typically explicitly religious) contexts. What they mean, then – and especially, how they mediate scripture – has scope to influence the understanding and beliefs of many individuals and communities within (and outside) the church. However, the malleable nature of lyrics as texts designed for creative performance and re-appropriation is such that they potentially derive much of their meaning from their use-contexts. This study applies the tools of Discourse Analysis to the popular Bethel Music song ‘Raise a Hallelujah,’ taking into account the context of production, the linguistic features of the text, and song’s performance as part of the Washington DC #LetUsWorship “worship protest” concert – an event held within (and with reference to) the wider contexts of the pending 2020 US Presidential Election and the global Covid-19 pandemic. By centering my analysis around the particular phrase “my enemies,” I demonstrate the song’s potential to draw on and reinforce an oppositional, triumphalist “culture-war” stance towards group outsiders.

**KEYWORDS:** discourse analysis, theolinguistics, worship music, Psalms, culture wars, Covid-19.

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Whitnall, Carolyn. “In the Presence of Whose Enemies?: a discourse analysis of a popular Christian song in the context of a ‘worship protest.’” *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence* 1 (2022): 6-42.  
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## Introduction

Music, and especially communal singing, can be highly effective in transmitting and reinforcing belief and group identity.<sup>1</sup> Hymns evolved partly as a teaching tool, especially useful in times and places of low literacy, and hymns and songs remain strongly formative of biblical interpretation for many worshippers. Meanwhile, contemporary worship music (an industry with its origins in the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s<sup>2</sup>) is ‘big business,’ with large numbers of Christians globally singing the same popular songs by a small number of celebrity worship artists and collectives.<sup>3</sup> These songs are therefore powerful, and warrant careful scrutiny.

The ‘plain’ words on the page (or rather, projector screen) only tell part of the story. Lionel Adey’s remark that “More than any other kind of poem, a hymn can change its meaning according to how it is edited and by whom it is sung” certainly extends beyond the traditional styles he primarily investigates.<sup>4</sup> No text exists in a vacuum, but *especially* not one purposed for use in multiple communal contexts<sup>5</sup> – even less so when that text, aided by modern technology and social media, has achieved global, cross-denominational popularity. Whatever the ‘intended’ meaning of the words, their *signification* to worshippers and onlookers will be influenced by the immediate context in which the song

<sup>1</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, “Songs of Persuasion: A Sociological Analysis of Urban Propaganda Songs,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 79, no. 314 (1966): 581–589.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Eskridge, “Jesus People” in Erwin Fahlbusch et al., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan : Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The Christian music industry operates within a wider popular Christian culture that is marketed to an “immense congregation of consumers” beyond its conservative evangelical-dominated base of production. “Denominational boundaries are easily breached by the flow of religious merchandising” and “[t]he products Christians consume shape the faith they inhabit.” (Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, (NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), pp8-9).

<sup>4</sup> Lionel Adey, *Hymns and the Christian Myth*, (Vancouver: UBC Press), p11. See also p112: “This flexibility, the amazing variety of situations to which, for example, “Our God, our help in ages past” could be adapted [...] made the hymn, still more the hymn book, open to use in furtherance of idolatry or class interest between the time of Watts and the First World War.”

<sup>5</sup> As didactic resources, the internalisation, memorisation, and personal reproduction of hymns could also be considered part of their ‘purpose.’

is played, as well as by the broader and/or intersecting social contexts that the individuals experience.

As such, in appraising the theological and pastoral implications of a worship song, it is not enough to look at the surface meaning – nor even to analyse it at the tropic level for intended metaphors and allusions, nor even to extend this analysis to *inadvertent* significations (though these remain necessary and important considerations).

It requires taking account of its (potentially varying) function within different social contexts of use – the task of Discourse Analysis (DA). Valerie Hobbs explains “little d” discourse as “language in stretches of text above the sentence level” and “big D” Discourse as “a combination of the text as an instance of language and the world(s) around that language, the context.”<sup>6</sup> In the case of Christian worship, Discourses of interest might proceed from a particular event, an individual church community, a church governing organisation, a national political climate (current and/or historical), and/or a global situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic – with attention to the ways that these examples nest and intersect.

Hobbs presents a strategy for applying DA to religious language. Defining religion broadly and functionally as “sacred-making,” and religious language as language which functions to “do religion” (i.e. to “make sacred”) she identifies three ways that it operates:<sup>7</sup>

- **Axiomatically:** To articulate or reinforce a worldview or an ideology (e.g. through formal or informal creeds and doctrines).
- **Social cohesively:** To promote community formation around “common sacred ideals,” including boundary and conformity maintenance, conflict resolution, and protection of group insiders. Identity-forming entails exclusion as well as inclusion, with an oppositional aspect that can be actively hostile/harmful to outsiders.
- **Emotively:** To help community members process wonder and mystery as well as hardship, stress and grief; to provide resources for “coping existentially.”

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<sup>6</sup> Valerie Hobbs, *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp10–18, pp32–36.

These categories readily describe key (theo)linguistic aspects of “overtly religious” songs,<sup>8</sup> and while their musical aspects are outside the scope of this study, the well-established links between communal singing and (among other benefits) information retention, social inclusion and mental well-being suggest that all three sacred-making functions might be supplemented thereby.<sup>9</sup>

Also relevant to this study is Adey’s distinction between objective, subjective and reflexive hymns.<sup>10</sup> These descriptions are sufficiently co-applicable that (in my view) they are better understood as aspects than classes:

- **Objective hymns** state universally applicable truths and offer communal praise. They can be “celebratory, narrative or didactic.”
- **Subjective hymns** internalise objective truth claims and express individual devotion.
- **Reflexive hymns** are *about* the act of worship itself. In Adey’s view, this type “most lends itself to idolatry,” by which he means “the treatment as an end of what God has intended as a means of life: the Church, the nation, the family, or [...] nature.”<sup>11</sup>

While not corresponding directly with Hobbs’ categories, I suggest that objective aspects naturally contribute towards axiomatic functions, subjective towards emotive functions, and reflexive towards socially cohesive functions through sacralisation of the gathered act.

In the following I will use Hobbs’ framework to explore the religious function of a popular recent song that, I propose, is especially open to multiple interpretations. I will first explain the linguistic variables featured in my analysis. After that, I will introduce the song, Bethel Music’s 2019 ‘Raise a Hallelujah,’ and overview its context of production, noting that such details may inform interpretation to the extent that they are known to the interpreter. I will then present my analysis, which comprises a close reading of the lyrics and an

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp46–9.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Launay and Eiluned Pearce, “Choir singing improves health, happiness – and is the perfect icebreaker,” *The Conversation*, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/choir-singing-improves-health-happinessand-is-the-perfect-icebreaker-47619>.

<sup>10</sup> Adey, *Hymns*, pp7-11.

<sup>11</sup> Adey, *Hymns*, p9, p11.

examination of its use in the Washington DC #LetUsWorship rally of 25th October 2020 (a full-length film of which is viewable on YouTube). In order to narrow my inquiry to a feasible and interesting scope I will focus on the song's reference to "my enemies": what this appears to signify within the song, and its contribution towards the sacred-making functions of #LetUsWorship. I will argue that, in this context at least, "my enemies" draws on and reinforces an oppositional, triumphalist 'culture-war' stance towards group outsiders. I will close with a reflection on the psalmic origins of the phrase and a discussion of how faithfully the song and context mediate the biblical material alluded to.

## Linguistic Variables

My application of Hobbs' framework for analysing religious (sacred-making) language invokes a number of linguistic concepts that I here define:

### Religious Vocabulary

Some words or word combinations serve an explicit and technical religious function and are seldom used outside a particular religious setting; Hobbs distinguishes these from semi-technical religious vocabulary, familiar in wider contexts, and core religious vocabulary having broad general use but able to serve (explicit or implicit) religious functions.<sup>12</sup> Word lists compiled from large corpora, such as the USAS S9 'Religion and the Supernatural' Lexicon, aid identification of explicit religious vocabulary.<sup>13</sup> Close attention to words in context, and with reference to related texts (in this instance, for example, the lyrics of other Bethel Music songs) can illuminate the religious function of core vocabulary.

### Parallelism

Parallelism, the "repetition of sounds, images, words, concepts, grammatical structures, phrases or sentences," is a common feature of poetic compositions generally, and especially unsurprising in texts (like the song in question) that draw on biblical Hebrew poetry.<sup>14</sup> Important to this analysis is the form of

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<sup>12</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p83.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Rayson, *Wmatrix: a web-based corpus processing environment*. (Computing Department, Lancaster University, 2009). <https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>.

<sup>14</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p80.

parallelism known as anaphora, whereby successive clauses begin with the same word or phrase.

## Metaphor

A metaphor is a figurative representation – usually of something that is difficult to understand or explain (this is known as the *target* of the metaphor), by means of something more familiar or readily grasped (the *vehicle*). The overlap between target and vehicle is not complete, nor is it supposed to be, though increasing familiarity erodes the tension that keeps the gap salient (leading eventually to ‘dead’ metaphors – figures of speech so typical that they pass as literal). Metaphors can be identified and confirmed by tracking thematically-related vehicles throughout a text and (where appropriate) in related texts.<sup>15</sup>

## Intertextuality

Intertextuality describes the fact that texts are inescapably situated within a wider literary corpus such that they derive their meaning(s) in relation to one another. Julia Kristeva introduced the term to encompass *all* the ways, whether or not intended by the author or conscious to the reader, that the meaning of a text depends on other texts existing synchronically with it (including those written after).<sup>16</sup> However, various forms of intertextuality can be deployed as intentional literary devices; these include allusion, quotation and translation, all three of which feature in the analysis to follow. Hobbs notes that *religious* intertextuality, such as biblical allusion, equates to “the invocation of a sacred legitimating authority;”<sup>17</sup> it is instructive to keep in mind that a perceived allusion need not be intended in order to have this effect on an interpreter.

## Raise a Hallelujah

‘Raise a Hallelujah’ is the second single from Bethel Music’s 2019 album, *Victory*.<sup>18</sup> It reached number 2 in the US Hot Christian Songs chart, number 1 in the Christian Airplay chart, and was nominated for ‘Top Christian Song’ in the 2020 Billboard Music Awards and ‘Worship Recorded Song of the Year’ in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp88-95.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” In: Moi (eds.) *The Kristeva Reader*, 1986, New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p96.

<sup>18</sup> Jake Stevens et al., *Raise a Hallelujah*, from ‘Victory’ by Bethel Music, 2019.

the 2019 GMA Dove Awards.<sup>19</sup> Between June and December 2020 it was the 6th (20th) most-used song as reported by CCLI-licensed churches in the US (UK).<sup>20</sup> At the time of writing, the combined views of the official video and a live version as shared on the Bethel Music YouTube channel total 67 million.<sup>21</sup> The popularity of the song implies that its message(s) find acceptance among large numbers of Christians, and (in turn) ensures the (global, via the internet) propagation and reinforcement of those messages. This makes it an apt subject for focused study, and lends consequence to concerns that arise from its potentially hostile or harmful invocation of “my enemies.”

Whilst I am ultimately interested in *plausible interpretations*, rather than the song’s ‘intended meaning,’ the context of production remains relevant as it may inform those interpreters who are aware of it. A full description of Bethel Music, and its wider theological and ecclesial associations, is out of scope here; instead I summarise some selected aspects that (it will later appear) are relevant to the analysis of “my enemies.”

## Bethel Music

Bethel Music is an artist collective that has been recording worship music since 2001. It originated as a ministry within Bethel Church, Redding (described below), but now has a global reach, aided by effective use of social media (the Bethel Music YouTube channel has 3.59 million subscribers at the time of writing, and many songs achieve view counts in the tens of millions). It operates as a non-profit, and reported a revenue of \$12,779,515 for fiscal year ending 2019.<sup>22</sup>

The Bethel Music website lists 544 songs, spread over 44 albums, 2 EPs (of 5 songs or fewer) and 14 singles. I have compiled a corpus of the 378 (distinct)

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<sup>19</sup> Billboard, *Chart History: Bethel Music*,

<https://www.billboard.com/music/Bethel-Music/chart-history/ICO>, 2020. | Jim Asker, Bethel Music, *Jonathan David Helser and Melissa Helser Top Christian Airplay Chart With*

*‘Raise a Hallelujah’*, Billboard: <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chartbeat/8528074/bethel-music-jonathan-david-helser-melissa-helser-top-christian-airplay>, 2019 | GMA Dove Awards, *2019 Nominees*, <https://doveawards.com/awards/2019-nominees/>.

<sup>20</sup> WorshipFuel, *CCLI Top 100*, <https://www.worshipfuel.com/ccli-top-100/>, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Bethel Music YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/bethelmusic/videos>, accessed 02/08/21.

<sup>22</sup> ProPublica, *Nonprofit Explorer: Bethel Music*.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/474005681>, accessed 08/08/21.

sets of available lyrics (there are 409 distinct songs, some of which are instrumental, some spontaneous, and some recorded multiple times), and will refer to this, where relevant, throughout my analysis.<sup>23</sup>

### **Bethel Church, Redding**

Bethel is a megachurch in Redding, California, frequently associated with a neo-charismatic movement described as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR).<sup>24</sup> NAR churches are non-denominational but connected in complex and far-reaching networks under the governance of apostles and prophets – titles that, in NAR theology, denote recognised *offices* (in contrast, for example, with their use within traditional Pentecostalism to describe ministries or giftings). Space does not permit to unpack the distinctive ecclesiology and teaching of Bethel Church and the wider NAR movement in detail, but it is important to note that some aspects appear especially pertinent to the questions raised by the song:

- Bethel senior pastor Bill Johnson (often named an apostle<sup>25</sup>) is a leading proponent of the Seven Mountain Mandate – a form of post-millennial dominionism that urges Christians to “invade” the mountains of influence (business, government, media, arts and entertainment, education, the family, and religion) in order to secure “mountain top” positions and thus establish God’s Kingdom.<sup>26</sup>
- Bethel, like many NAR churches, encourages the continuing exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and places a strong emphasis on miraculous healing, prophecy, and signs and wonders.

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<sup>23</sup> Bethel Music, *Chord and Lyric Charts*, <https://bethelmusic.com/chords-and-lyrics/>, accessed 20/07/21. I used Google Sheets’ IMPORTXML() command to scrape the lyrics, and SUBSTITUTE() and SEARCH() to clean the titles prior to counting and identifying duplicates. For the purposes of analysis I treat Spanish translations as duplicates, under the assumption that the English originals remain the best representation of the intended meaning of the songs in the recipient language.

<sup>24</sup> Since the NAR is an observed phenomenon more than it is a formal movement (indeed, informal networking is considered a characterising feature), it is not possible to make firm statements about membership, and churches may dispute their supposed association with it. Some scholars use the alternative description ‘Independent Network Charismatic’ Christianity to keep non-self-identifying cases in scope. See, e.g.: Brad Christerson and Flory, Richard W., *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders are Changing the Religious Landscape*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p10.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Geivett and Holly Pivec. *A New Apostolic Reformation? A Biblical Response to a Worldwide Movement*, Kindle edition, (Washington: Lexham Press, 2018), p29.

<sup>26</sup> Lance Wallnau and Bill Johnson, *Invading Babylon: The Seven Mountain Mandate*, Kindle edition, (Massachusetts: Destiny Image, 2013), pp23-4, p28.

- NAR theology also emphasises spiritual warfare, and routinely attributes negative and undesirable situations, as well as opposition, to demonic activity (often via human agents under demonic influence).<sup>27</sup> Some NAR leaders have even taught that Christians outside the movement (and especially those critical of it) are under the demonic control of the “spirit of religion.”<sup>28</sup>
- Johnson and his wife (senior pastor Beni Johnson) spoke out in support of Donald Trump before and during his presidency, and were among those who expressed hopes for the 2020 election result to be overturned as fraud.<sup>29</sup> Many within the broader NAR movement similarly aligned with Trump, some describing him as a modern-day King Cyrus: a secular political leader who would serve as God’s “vessel” to restore America and American Christians.<sup>30</sup>
- Bethel, like other NAR churches, encourage the (highly polished) use of media and social media to gain influence and credibility far beyond their explicit network. The success of Bethel TV (a subscription channel with over 500 thousand members<sup>31</sup>) as well as Bethel Music ensure that their songs and ideas impact individual Christians around the world and are reproduced in churches that may not be aware (still less accepting) of the specifics of NAR theology.

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<sup>27</sup> Wallnau and Johnson, *Invading Babylon*, chapter 3. Regarding the “dethroning” of demons that operate via individual human agents, Alan Vincent writes: “Either the demons leave the person and the person gets saved; or if the person won’t let them go, then the person and the demons in them must leave together.” (Ibid., p95)

<sup>28</sup> Geivett and Pivec, *A New Apostolic Reformation?*, p19.

<sup>29</sup> Carey Lodge, “Bethel Church’s Bill Johnson: Why I Voted for Trump.” *Christian Today*, 2016:

<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/bethel-churchs-bill-johnson-why-i-voted-for-trump/100306.htm>. Melissa Barnhart, “Nearly 200 evangelical leaders slam Christianity Today for questioning their Christian witness.” *The Christian Post*, 2019:

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/nearly-200-evangelical-leaders-slam-christianity-today-for-questioning-their-christian-witness.html>, <https://shastascout.org/bethels-bill-johnson-calls-bidens-election-100-fraud/>

<sup>30</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, “The biblical story the Christian right uses to defend Trump.” *Vox*, 2015: <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/3/5/16796892/trump-cyrus-christian-right-bible-cbn-evangelical-propaganda>. See also John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, ProQuest eBook Central (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), chapter 4.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Johnson, “Movement Impact.” *Arise & Build*, 2020: <https://ariseandbuild.net/impact/>, accessed 04/08/21.

## The Story Behind the Song

In addition to these broader contextual details, Bethel Music report a specific back-story for ‘Raise a Hallelujah’ on their website: the song was written in prayerful response to a serious health scare affecting a family close to the authors; it “became an anthem” for the family in the “battle” for their son’s life.<sup>32</sup> In a certain sense, then, ‘the’ meaning is known: the song is ‘about’ healing from sickness. However, as its use in context will confirm, this does not diminish its repurposeable nature as a worship song (recall Adey, quoted above) – especially considering that many hearers and singers will likely *not* be acquainted with the originating circumstances.

## A Close Reading

The (annotated) lyrics are in Table 1. Words that appear in the USAS S9 ‘Religion and the Supernatural’ Lexicon are underlined; potential candidates for “my enemies” within the song are in bold.<sup>33</sup> Also reported are the frequency of first person singular pronouns, and an example selection from among the many possible scriptural connections.

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<sup>32</sup> Bethel Music, *Videos: Raise a Hallelujah*, 2019: <https://bethelmusic.com/videos/raise-a-hallelujah/>.

<sup>33</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p182.

**Table 1:** Lyrics, first person singular pronouns (1SG), and possible biblical allusions. Underlined words appear in the USAS S9 ‘Religion and the Supernatural’ Lexicon. Words in bold are candidates for “my enemies” within the song.

	Lyrics	1SG	Example references
	RAISE A HALLELUJAH	0	“Raise” a shout: Jsh 6:20. “Hallelujah” (exhortation): Ps 104-6, 111-3, 115-7, 135, 146-50. “Alleluia” (exclamation): Rev 19:1, 3, 4, 6.
	VERSE 1		
v1.1	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , in the <u>presence</u> of <b>my enemies</b>	2	Direct quote: Ps 23:5. Biographical headings: Ps 3, 7, 18, 34, 52, 54, 56-7, 59, 60, 142.
v1.2	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , louder than the <b>unbelief</b>	1	Warning re. unbelievers: Ti 1:15. Warning <i>to</i> them: Jn 3:18. Personal doubt: Mk 9:24.
v1.3	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , my weapon is a melody	2	Jehoshaphat’s army choir: 2 Chr 20:18-23. Paul in jail: Acts 16:22-26.
v1.4	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , <u>Heaven</u> comes to fight for me	2	Defense of individual: Ps 138:7. Of Israel: Deut 3:22, 20:4. Of Christians: Rom 8:31.
	CHORUS		
c.1	I’m gonna sing, in the middle of the <b>storm</b>	1	Storms calmed: Ps 107:29, Mt 8:23-27. Righteous withstand: Pr 10:25. Paul: Acts 27.
c.2	Louder and louder, <b>you’re</b> gonna hear my praises roar	1	Lion-like: Pr 28:1. God’s army: Is 13:1-5. Throne-room worship: Rev 19:6-8.
c.3	Up from the <b>ashes</b> , hope will arise	0	(Reversed) mourning: Ps 30, Is 61:3, Job 2:8, 30:19, Es 4, Dan 9.
c.4	<b>Death</b> is defeated, the King is alive	0	Resurrection: Lk 24. Death defeated: 1 Cor 15:26. Jesus as King: Rev 17:14.
	VERSE 2		
v2.1	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , with everything inside of me	2	Whole-heartedness: Rom 12:1-2, Col 3:12-17. Inner life: 1 Tim 4:8, Phil 4:8-9.
v2.2	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , I will watch the <b>darkness</b> flee	2	Dark=evil: Eph 6:12. Rescue from: Col 1:13. Victory over: Jn 1:5.
v2.3	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , in the middle of the <b>mystery</b>	1	Mystery of gospel: Rom 16:25-26. Of “lawlessness”: 2 Thes 2:7. Of suffering: Ps 22:1.
v2.4	I raise a <u>hallelujah</u> , <b>fear you</b> lost <b>your</b> hold on me	2	Fearlessness stated: Ps 23:4. Exhorted: Is 41:10. Rescue from fear: Ps 34:4.
	BRIDGE		
b.1	Sing a little louder / In the <u>presence</u> of <b>my enemies</b>	0/1	(As above)
b.2	Sing a little louder / Louder than the <b>unbelief</b>	0/0	
b.3	Sing a little louder / My weapon is a melody	0/1	
b.4	Sing a little louder / <u>Heaven</u> comes to fight for me	0/1	

## Overall Remarks

The song is in the first person singular (1SG), making frequent use of 1SG pronouns (19 times within its 20 lines). It has no clear consistent addressee – though “fear” is explicitly engaged (in the second person) in *v*2.4, and the “you’re” of *c*.2 could have the same referent. The refrain in the bridge could be a second person imperative/exhortation (presumably with a different subject), or it could be a self-exhortation or statement of intent. The Hebrew phrase (from the Psalms) that “hallelujah” transliterates is a second person plural exhortation to praise YHWH;<sup>34</sup> however, even within the Bible it evolves from an exhortation to an exclamation of praise via its Greek transliteration in Revelation 19.<sup>35</sup> It seems unlikely that the communal sense of the Hebrew, and the embedded reference to God, are retained for most English language singers today. What *is* retained is the word’s explicitly religious connotation, which serves to position the song and the singers within an ancient sacred tradition, set apart from the secular commonplace.<sup>36</sup>

The song’s prevailing individualism means that, while social cohesion is (I will show) an important religious function of the song, it does not perform this by affirming inclusion (e.g. through reference to, or collective expression of, a community – though the *act of singing it together* may achieve something of this independently of the words), but by reinforcing exclusion. Its celebratory focus on worship itself qualifies it as reflexive by Adey’s terminology.

The language is simple and employs anaphorous parallelism, which Hobbs notes has an emphasising effect.<sup>37</sup> As already mentioned, it contains explicit religious vocabulary – along with “hallelujah,” “Heaven,” “presence” and “unbelief” are all listed in the USAS S9 ‘Religion and the Supernatural’ Lexicon<sup>38</sup> – and appears replete with religious metaphor and biblical allusion.

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<sup>34</sup> הַלְלוּ־יְהוָה, Psalms 104:35, 105:45, 106:1,48, 111:1, 112:1, 113:1, 113:9, 115:18, 116:19, 117:2, 135:1, 135:3, 135:21, 146:1, 146:10, 147:1, 147:20, 148:1, 148:14, 149:1, 149:9, 150:1, 150:6.

<sup>35</sup> Revelation 19:1, 3, 4, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Twenty-six Bethel Music songs contain ‘hallelujah’ and one the Greek-origin ‘alleluia,’ indicating a recurring psalmic influence.

<sup>37</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p81.

<sup>38</sup> Identified by specifying S9 as the preferred domain in the Wmatrix5 ‘domain tag wizard.’ No multi-word units were detected. (Rayson, *Wmatrix*).

The latter ranges across the breadth of the canon, implicitly invoking the full authority of scripture (see Table 1 for some examples), but the individual references are brief and leave much to personal(ised) interpretation. An in-depth treatment of the entire song is beyond scope here; I instead focus on *v1.1* and on how the following lines carry and develop its themes.

### **Line *v1.1* and the Introduction of “My Enemies”**

Consonant with the album title, the opening line appears to celebrate an accomplished victory, or anticipate a pending one. The word-choice “raise” to describe the vocalising of an exclamation coincides with some translations of Israel’s God-given victory over Jericho (Joshua 6:20, NRSV); meanwhile, “in the presence of my enemies” directly borrows the confident words of the psalmist: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (Psalm 23:5, NRSV)

Whilst “*the* enemy” might describe Satan,<sup>39</sup> the plurality and psalmic resonance of “my enemies” leaves human opponents within scope.<sup>40</sup> The personal and plural nature of the phrase in an opening line (no concrete specifiers yet suggested) invites subjective (re-)interpretation. The meaning of *v1.1* depends much on who or what “my enemies” are – whom “I” consider to be opposing “me.” Given the human tendency to define ourselves oppositionally, and to ally with “the enemy of my enemy,” the presence of these malleable, ominous ‘others’ from the outset of the song makes the whole a potentially powerful tool of social-cohesion-by-exclusion, as well as a means of reinforcing axioms about what is good/bad, aspirational/undesirable in the

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<sup>39</sup> “The e/Enemy” enters English as a synonym for Satan via translation of the New Testament Greek designation εἰσθητός, as used in Luke 10:19. (Thomas J. Farrar and Guy J. Williams, “Diabolical Data: A Critical Inventory of New Testament Satanology,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39, no. 1 (2016): pp42-3).

<sup>40</sup> The identities of the psalmic enemies are debated but most scholars agree that they are literal and human. (For an overview of 20th century positions, see: Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 1988), pp95-9). Moreover, some of the Davidic and other circumstantial headings bring specific human opponents into view; though likely to be later additions, these inevitably – and presumably not accidentally – inform interpretation. (John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), pp25–30).

Christian life. Meanwhile, a range of emotive functions are possible, depending on the understood *nature* of that presence: if the victory described is still pending, then “my enemies” represent a current threat – suggesting a reassuring or bolstering function for the song; if victory is already accomplished (as is likely the scenario envisaged by Psalm 23)<sup>41</sup> then “my enemies” are present as the defeated and captive audience of a celebration – suggesting a triumphal or aggrandising function.<sup>42</sup> The wording leaves scope for the context to play a substantial determining role.

Eight other Bethel Music songs refer to “my enemies,” and one to “your [God’s] enemies,” all within scenarios of divine defeat, deliverance or protection. “The enemy” appears to be the preferred designation for the devil, occurring in 5 songs, while other options (Satan, the evil one, Lucifer, the accuser, the adversary) are absent, though “demons,” plural, are mentioned 3 times. “My enemy” – an unusual (self-aggrandising?) individualisation – appears once.<sup>43</sup> Strikingly, more than half of these combined instances (there are 17 total, accounting for overlap) feature the efficacy of *utterances* to defeat the opposition described. In 5 songs it is *God’s* command, laughter (twice), whisper, or “song of deliverance”<sup>44</sup> that defeats the enemy/enemies/demons; in another 5 (including ‘Raise a Hallelujah’) it is human praise or worship. Familiarity with Bethel Music’s broader output, then, refines and heightens the religious function of the first line: “my enemies” can be interpreted as a *current* threat, and the self-referencing act of worship doesn’t merely express the separation and inspire the victory-hope of the community, it purports to *effect* this desired reality.

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<sup>41</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Kidner Classic Commentaries (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2008), p129. See also: Goldingay, *Psalms*, p352; Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p305.

<sup>42</sup> That the triumphalist potential of the song may be traced to its biblical sources (other triumphalist notes in the Psalms include 54:7, 59:10, 92:11, 118:7) does not automatically license it for contemporary worshippers. As Richard Hays concludes, regarding the difficult task of evaluating “proposed metaphorical appropriations of the New Testament” (via a framework for synthesis that incorporates the full canon), “The community that seeks to be shaped by Scripture must in the end claim responsibility for adjudicating between good and bad readings.” (Richard B Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Kindle edition, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p303).

<sup>43</sup> Two further songs, in an interesting twist, use “enemy” and its synonym “foe” in self-reference to describe the singer’s pre-salvation relationship with God.

<sup>44</sup> Evoking some English translations of Psalm 32:7 (e.g. NASB/NIV).

Though not the only aspect of the song worth our due attention, “my enemies” opens up a more-than-ample field of inquiry. In the remainder of this section, I will consider how the rest of the song elaborates on their identity and “my” relationship to them. Following that, I will look at the religious function served by their “presence” in a use context.

### **The Remaining Lines as they Relate to “My Enemies”**

“The unbelief” of *v1.2* is definite but not specified – and could relate to “my enemies” in several ways.

- Unbelief itself – in Jesus, or in some particular outcome that Jesus will accomplish – could *be* one of “my enemies”:
  - My own unbelief that I want to overcome (cf. the father of the sick child in Mark 9:24). The particular back-story for the song’s composition would lend force to such an interpretation, as would the wider Bethel Music corpus.<sup>45</sup>
  - The abstract reality of unbelief in the world.
- Alternatively, unbelief could describe a shared (possibly identifying) *enemy characteristic*:
  - “My enemies” might be/include non-Christians – universally, or (with NAR beliefs about spiritual warfare in mind) some subset considered hostile and/or demonically influenced.
  - “My enemies” might be/include Christians who do not share some specific conviction of mine. NAR beliefs about the “spirit of religion” might encourage such a reading.

The latter senses of the phrase aid social cohesion, making unbelief a marker of exclusion; all senses operate emotively, instilling confidence that unbelief will not prevail. An axiomatic function is also possible, if the phrase reinforces

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<sup>45</sup> “Unbelief” appears in only one other song, where it is aligned with many of the same adversarial concepts and images: “Strong enough to calm the storms / Of fear and unbelief / Fierce enough to break the cords / Of death that clung to me.” Another song describes “wrestl[ing] belief in the valley,” implying a personal (and personified) struggle and reinforcing the idea of *unbelief* as an enemy. The related noun “doubt” appears in 13 songs, one of which also draws on the wrestling image, while in another it is an opponent in a “war.” In 7 of the cases first person possession of the doubt(s) is made explicit via the pronoun “my.”

a conviction that “I” need not or should not attend to opposing ideas and/or the people who hold them.

The idea of song as “my weapon” (*v1.3*) recalls Jehoshaphat’s military choir (2 Chronicles 20:18-23). The link between music/praise and weaponry is strengthened by familiarity with Bethel Music: of the 9 other songs containing “weapon(s),” one directly invokes praise as “a weapon that silences the enemy,” and another proclaims “love is my weapon” whilst also describing it as “a trumpet sound.” Five songs refer to the (futile) weapon(s) of an *opponent* – brought down, in 3 instances, with the aid of worship, praise, song and/or anthem.<sup>46</sup> The tension in the metaphor – does it peacefully subvert the violence associated with weaponry, or violently subvert the harmlessness of music? – could be resolved in either direction, depending on the use-context and one’s theological perspective on violence. For example, some NAR prophets envisage an active role for Christians in the unleashing of the deadly plagues described in Revelation,<sup>47</sup> making it entirely plausible that “a melody” might serve to inflict physical harm.

Line *v1.4* leaves little doubt about the outcome of the confrontation: in the world of the song, “my enemies” are also Heaven’s enemies. This is an example of what Theo van Leeuwen calls “spatialization” – a “form of objectivation in which social actors [here, God] are represented by means of reference to a place with which they are, in the given context, closely associated.”<sup>48</sup> Divine backing and intervention (assuring certain victory) are implied metonymically, perhaps to mitigate the perceived audacity of a direct such claim. An axiomatic function is thus performed – the articulation of a worldview in which Christians have got God on their side – and an emotive function, via the confidence this claim inspires. Moreover, the social cohesion already achieved by “my enemies” is

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<sup>46</sup> The remaining two songs both describe the act of laying weapons down: in one, by way of surrender to God; in the other, during the aftermath of a battle won.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g.: Mike Bickle, “Session 1: Introduction and Overview of the Book of Revelation,” *The Mike Bickle Library*, 2014, [https://backup.storage.sardius.media/file/akamaiBackup-ihopkc-103762/IHOP/344/803/20140207\\_Introduction\\_and\\_Overview\\_of\\_the\\_Book\\_of\\_Revelation\\_BOR01\\_study\\_notes.pdf](https://backup.storage.sardius.media/file/akamaiBackup-ihopkc-103762/IHOP/344/803/20140207_Introduction_and_Overview_of_the_Book_of_Revelation_BOR01_study_notes.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, ProQuest eBook Central (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p46.

reinforced: the boundary is *divinely* delineated, and “I” am on the right side of it (and would do well to stay there).<sup>49</sup>

The imagery in the chorus supplements the axiom-legitimizing authority of scripture with specific appeal to the authoritative person of Jesus.<sup>50</sup> The “storm,” a common idiomatic description of difficult circumstances<sup>51</sup> (associated with adversity in 11 other Bethel Music songs, and plausibly one of “my enemies”),<sup>52</sup> recalls the storm that Jesus miraculously stills in the gospels;<sup>53</sup> “roar,” in some Bible translations (including NIV), describes the throne-room praise in Revelation 19; “death” is the “last enemy to be defeated” in 1 Corinthians 15:26, referring to Jesus’ resurrection. This latter is a recurring Bethel Music theme; in 23 of the 41 songs mentioning death it is described as a vanquished (e.g. defeated, beaten, put to death, overcome) opponent.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, almost all of these (20 of the 23) make explicit reference to Jesus’ own death and/or resurrection in the surrounding context (i.e. to account for the defeat).

The second verse provides further candidates for “my enemies.” Line *v*2.2 invokes an (evil/enemy) “darkness” versus (good) “light” dualism that further inculcates the maintenance of social cohesion through categories of

<sup>49</sup> While the idea of God operating on behalf of faithful people is not without scriptural support, particularly in the Psalms, a broader view quickly complicates the picture. Consider, for example, Joshua’s encounter with the commander of the army of the Lord: “Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” “Neither,” he replied...” (Joshua 5:13-14a, NIV).

<sup>50</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p57.

<sup>51</sup> Christine Ammer, “weather the storm,” in *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms, 2nd ed.* (Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> In two of the 14 Bethel Music songs featuring storms they are presented positively: as a bearer of God’s presence (“You’re riding on the storm, Your name is unfailing”), and as an example of desirable complementarity (“What is a storm without the sea?”). In the remaining 12 they are associated with situations of adversity through which, with God’s help, the singer is able to stand firm (e.g., “For every sickness, You’re the healer / For every storm, You’re the calm”; “I feel clouded and confused, I need You here with me ... In the chaos of the storm, I have drifted far, far away.”)

<sup>53</sup> See Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25.

<sup>54</sup> In a further 10 it is presented as powerless to end life or to separate a person from God, while the remaining 8 anticipate facing personal death with hope or resolution (including two in which it is a “door(way)” to God or to “resurrection life”).

opposition.<sup>55</sup> This, again, recurs within Bethel Music: 43 songs contain the nouns “dark” and/or “darkness,” and 21 use “dark”/”darkest” as an adjective, with consistently negative connotations.<sup>56</sup> Line *v2.4* builds on earlier intertextuality with Psalm 23 (“I will fear no evil”) and could simply describe a change in stance towards “my enemies.” However, the absence of a determiner (indicating the concept of fear itself rather than a particular object or experience of fear), combined with the personifying effect of its address in the second person, suggests it as an enemy in its own right – an interpretation supported by the wider Bethel Music corpus.<sup>57</sup>

The wording of *v2.3* relative to *a.1* leaves open the possibility of taking “mystery” for another enemy, in contexts where certainty and clarity are highly valued. However, the Bethel Music corpus leans away from a wholly negative interpretation of “mystery”: in 5 songs it is positively associated with the work of God (e.g. “Oh what a mystery / The sacred gift to break the curse”) or an experience of God (e.g. “The majesty / The mystery / Your gravity / Pulls me close to You”). In the 6 other songs that use it, it is associated with uncertainty or struggle, but always with the prospect of divine encounter (“When you’ve got questions more than answers / You will find me right here in the mystery”).

The bridge reiterates the reassurances of verse 1 and repeatedly (thus emphatically) expresses either a personal intention to “sing a little louder” or

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<sup>55</sup> The Bible has certainly played a role in producing this binary, but the overall biblical representation of darkness is nuanced – and, in fact, Christian scholars have called for greater recognition of that nuance given the racist logic that the dualism has helped perpetuate. (See, e.g.: Wil Gafney, *Holy Blackness: The Matrix of Creation (sermon)*, available at: <http://www.wilgafney.com/2019/12/01/holy-blackness-the-matrix-of-creation/>, 2019. [Accessed 29/12/2020]).

<sup>56</sup> In around 13 cases dark/darkness is unelaborated, merely serving as a foil to the love/light/presence of God or God’s people; in the majority of cases it is more explicitly aligned (often via lists of binary oppositions) with forms of adversity: death/the grave/the tomb (24), fear/anxiety/hopelessness/despair (14), doubt/questions/blindness/unbelief (10), pain/hurt/sorrow (7), sin/shame/wrong (13), imprisonment/captivity/chains (12).

<sup>57</sup> Fear appears as a noun in 56 Bethel Music songs (13 times in the plural), while 5 songs contain the verb. Only once is a positive form envisaged (a “holy fear” of God). Fear is directly addressed in one other instance, and described in the third person in another (where “he” is a “liar” and a “tyrant”), but I identified 22 further instances of quasi-personification through attribution of human-like volition, action or characteristics. (E.g.: “I will not let fear [...] steal the song I was born to sing”; “my fear wants to define it all”; “it’s painful to be brave / To look fear in the face”).

an exhortation to others to do so. Taken in this latter sense, the refrain supplies the song's first and only hint of a positively- rather than merely oppositionally-defined community.

The range of potential significations inherent in the lyrics corroborates the need to attend to per-context 'meaning.' With this in mind, I next examine a particular use-case: the final show of Sean Feucht's 2020 #LetUsWorship tour.

## #LetUsWorship Washington DC

### Background Information

Sean Feucht describes himself as “a missionary, artist, speaker, author, activist, and the founder of multiple worldwide movements.”<sup>58</sup> He is part of Bethel Church, where he serves as a worship leader, and has written and recorded a number of worship albums, including one under the Bethel Music label (though he has since left the collective). Along with Brian and Jenn Johnson of Bethel Music, he attended the December 2019 White House “faith briefing,” during which around 50 worship leaders sang and prayed for President Trump as he prepared for the first impeachment trials.<sup>59</sup>

In 2020 Feucht ran as a Republican candidate for California's 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district on an anti-abortion platform that also opposed high taxation and the problem of homelessness. He placed third in the March primaries, with 14% of the vote.<sup>60</sup> Shortly after this defeat, he began touring US cities with a series of concerts that pointedly resisted public health restrictions on religious gatherings and sought to combat the “extreme turmoil

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<sup>58</sup> Sean Feucht, *Movements: Music*, <https://www.seanfeucht.com/music>

<sup>59</sup> Caleb Parke, “Pastors, worship leaders pray for Trump in Oval Office amid impeachment fight.” *Fox News*, 2019: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/pastors-worship-leaders-pray-for-trump-in-oval-office-amid-impeachment-fight>

<sup>60</sup> Caleb Parke, “Worship leader runs for Congress in California: 'Morals are low, taxes are high'.” *Fox News*, 2019: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/california-congress-worship-leader-sean-feucht>. Nick Sestanovich, “Sean Feucht sees self as ‘outsider’ in congressional race.” *The Reporter*, 2020: <https://www.thereporter.com/2020/02/21/sean-feucht-sees-self-as-outsider-in-congressional-race/>

and despair and brokenness”<sup>61</sup> that he associated with the widespread protest movement set in motion by the killing of George Floyd.<sup>62</sup>

‘Let Us Worship’ began in Texas on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020 and culminated in Washington DC with a show that attracted an estimated 35,000 to the National Mall on 25<sup>th</sup> October – the evening before the vote to confirm Amy Coney Barrett’s Supreme Court nomination. The three-hour video was uploaded to YouTube on 2nd November (the day before the US Presidential Election) and has since been viewed 170K times, attracting 6.4K ‘likes’ and 91 ‘dislikes.’<sup>63</sup>

### Description of the Video

A logo and hashtag precede a captioned sequence of location shots (“45 CITIES”) and footage of crowds jumping, cheering and hugging. The soundtrack layers brief audio clips (“there’s only one way that America will be changed...”) over dynamically intensifying music. The event begins with Feucht on stage, welcoming attendees to the “party” and reading Hebrews 10:23-25 (“let us not give up meeting together”), stating that the event “is not political, this is biblical.” The crowd raise hands and banners (one reads “Jesus Matters” in white on a black background) as Feucht repeatedly shouts “King Jesus.” The first song of the opening set is a self-described “song of victory” featuring the word “Hallelujah.”<sup>64</sup> An instrumental string piece is described as a “Davidic sound”; Feucht recites from Isaiah 22:22 and prays: “remove the heaviness, remove the oppression, break off the fear.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Marisa Iati and Sarah Pulliam Bailey “Christian worship leader brings controversial prayer rallies to cities roiled by protests.” *Washington Post*, 2020:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/09/16/sean-feucht-prayer-rallies-kenosha-chicago/>.

<sup>62</sup> On 25 May 2020, a 46 year old African American man named George Floyd was killed during arrest by a white Minneapolis police officer, sparking an international wave of peaceful demonstration against police brutality and racial injustice, loosely affiliating around the pre-existing phrase and hashtag “Black Lives Matter.” Rioting and looting also occurred in some locations, and some protests attracted violent counter-protest and / or violent police response. (Harmeet Kaur, *About 93% of racial justice protests in the US have been peaceful, a new report finds*, CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/04/us/blm-protests-peaceful-report-trnd/index.html>, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Sean Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP – Washington, DC – Full Film Release, YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3p8oPrn-Cg>, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> ‘On the Shores of My Soul.’ (Ibid., 0:05:50).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 0:00:01, 0:02:50, 0:03:55, 0:05:15, 0:19:21.

The music quietens and Feucht describes “this journey that the Lord’s brought us on” – not something he expected “in the middle of a pandemic, definitely not in the middle of a shutdown.” He describes “a certain elected official” saying that “the church can no longer sing anymore,” and explains that it “flipped something” in him. “This is America [...] Not only do we have the US Constitution and the First Amendment, but we’re believers, [...] we worship through the storm, we worship through the shutdown, we worship through the pandemic.” Convinced that “now more than ever we should be worshipping,” he and his team invited people to meet on the Golden Gate Bridge with “your banners and your shofars and your guitars.” He speaks positively about the church “leav[ing] the building” and being “a peculiar people,” comparing the movement to King David dancing “in his underwear.”<sup>66</sup>

The remainder of the concert alternates between participative musical performances and sections of prayer, testimony, and teaching, compèred by Feucht. ‘Raise a Hallelujah’ appears near the mid-point (1:38:40 to 1:44:29), directly after a section of prayer and prophecy for a “Davidic generation.”<sup>67</sup> Feucht leads on vocals and acoustic guitar, accompanied by guitars, strings, keyboards, drums and two female vocalists.<sup>68</sup> He follows with an almost-sung declaration that “we’re never going to allow our circumstances to steal our song” and proceeds to describe the unprecedented “resistance” he has faced during the campaign: “friends turning their back on me, hate articles written, lies, slandering, smears. The Enemy hates our worship; [raised volume] he wants us to shut up, he wants us to go home, he wants us to stay in our rooms. [...] You talk about resistance – even doing this, oh my gosh. But I got one

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<sup>66</sup> Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 0:21:30, 0:22:34, 0:23:17.

<sup>67</sup> “The Lord has shown me that he’s getting ready to release the Davids into the body of Christ. And girls, don’t feel bad, because the Holy Spirit has no gender, so that’s you too.” ... “We release David songs. What do you think he’s been doing in heaven all these years? He’s been writing songs [...] for such a time as this.” (Ibid., 1:32:20, 1:37:38).

<sup>68</sup> The precise configuration of the song is as follows: verse 1 (Feucht), chorus (backing singer), spoken words “come on, let us shout over DC tonight” (Feucht), verse 2 (full harmonies from here on), chorus, spoken words “come on, here we go tonight, come on every voice” (Feucht), “Sing a little louder” × 8, bridge × 2, chorus × 2, “I raise a hallelujah” × 8.

word for you: we're not going to stop praising." The crowd cheers and applauds.<sup>69</sup>

Space does not permit a detailed description of the event either side of the song. Instead, I here provide a brief summary (organised by theme) of the content that I judge to have most bearing on the religious function of "my enemies."

**Racial "division"** Feucht describes his ministry partnership with guest speaker Dr. Charles Karuku, "a black dude and a white dude together" taking "revivals" to the locations of "riots." "We worshipped on that street corner where George Floyd died. We saw God break out in the middle of riots. [...] Charles began to preach this message of racial reconciliation. Every city we went to, walls began coming down." Karuku describes the situation "nine days before the election" as a "Nehemiah moment" and urges Christian racial unity, because "only a united church can heal a divided nation".<sup>70</sup>

**Abortion** Feucht introduces Lou Engle as "a spiritual father" who has influenced his own pro-life activism. Engle opens with prayer for healing and forgiveness for "women that have had abortions, the men that paid for them, the men that watch pornography because it's feeding the same beast." He describes the forthcoming election as a "referendum," not on the "character" of the candidates, but "on where the church will stand on the foundational biblical standard of 'Thou shalt not kill.'" The government is "part of the Psalm 2 rebellion" when they neglect "the foundations of moral law," and the voters themselves are implicated: "America is a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Therefore *you* are the government and when you vote for the shedding of innocent blood you're a part of the rebellion."<sup>71</sup>

**Occult** Engle counterposes an account of witchcraft with a dream he has had about a women's movement. "The witches rose up to curse the president. [...] Witches were rising up all over the world." ... "And I knew the Lord was saying,

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<sup>69</sup> Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 1:44:37, 1:44:44.

<sup>70</sup> Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 0:27:27, 0:27:57, 0:28:14, 0:30:47, 0:33:33.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 0:38:04, 0:38:32, 0:41:45, 0:43:29.

I am raising up a women’s movement – to shake witchcraft!”<sup>72</sup> Later, Jentezen Franklin refers to demonic forces: “Demons like dry places [...] dry services, and dry worship, and dry preachers, and dead dry religion.” He contrasts this with the concert: “the devil hates this kind of worship” because “suddenly, out of your belly will flow rivers of living water, and demons can’t swim. America needs a washing, America needs a river, America needs rain [...] so send up the worship...”<sup>73</sup>

**Politics** The non-political nature of the event is asserted: “We’re not here for blue or red, we’re here for purple: we’re here for royalty; we’re here for the King of kings and the Lord of lords.”<sup>74</sup> Jesus is associated with political categories throughout: a new song written for the occasion begins with the words “The government is on Your shoulders,”<sup>75</sup> while an interpretation of John 6:15 describes the attempt to enthrone Jesus by force as “one of the greatest awakenings that happened in the Bible,” because “a nation turned to Jesus.”<sup>76</sup> Prayers are said for more Christians in government<sup>77</sup> and celebration made of Barrett’s nomination, described by Republican Senator Josh Hawley as an “historic moment” because of her open faith and her anti-abortion stance.<sup>78</sup> The approaching election is also referenced, by Engle and Karuku (as

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<sup>72</sup> In 2017 a movement organised under the name #MagicResistance to cast a “binding spell” so that President Trump may “do no harm.” (Tara Isabella Burton, *Each month, thousands of witches cast a spell against Donald Trump*, Vox:

<https://www.vox.com/2017/6/20/15830312/magicresistancerestance-witches-magic-spell-to-bind-donald-trump-mememagic>, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 0:57:28, 0:57:26, 0:59:12, 1:22:45, 1:23:06.

<sup>74</sup> Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 0:04:43.

<sup>75</sup> ‘High and Lifted Up (King Jesus).’ (Ibid., 2:28:46).

<sup>76</sup> Seth Dahl: “One of the greatest awakenings that happened in the Bible was John 6:15: it says they wanted to take

Jesus by force and make him king. Why is it the greatest awakening? [...] Because a nation turned to Jesus. [...] They’d just seen one of the most amazing miracles they’d ever seen: the feeding of the five thousand. [...] There was a little boy with five loaves and two fish [...] And when Jesus got a-hold of what the child brought to the meeting, not only did it feed the multitude, it flipped the country.” ... “Come on, I want you to say it kids. Say “Jesus, you can have what I brought. [...] Take my life and flip the country. Take my life and flip our nation, Jesus.”” (Ibid., 2:40:00, 2:41:17).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 1:06:28.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 1:03:38.

above) and by Feucht as he closes the event: “Lord, tonight we lift you high, high, high above this nation, high above this election, high above our concerns, our worries, our anxieties and our cares. Tonight, Lord, we say you are seated on the throne [...] and we leave with expectation and hope that the greatest days for our nation are right in front of us.”<sup>79</sup>

## Analysis

As an overtly religious context,<sup>80</sup> the entire concert, and its constituent parts, inherently function to ‘do religion.’ It also qualifies as a crisis and a high-stakes scenario, due to the pandemic,<sup>81</sup> the resulting “shutdown,” the racial justice demonstrations, and the pending election. At such times, “notions of the sacred are called into question, requiring a reaffirmation of sacred borders.”<sup>82</sup> Much could be said about the religious function of the event as a crisis response – gathering under lockdown is itself an act of communal defiance that articulates axioms (meeting is sacred, lockdown is wrong), promotes social cohesion (heightened by contrast with those social distancing), and stirs emotions (of pride and mutual reassurance, for example). However, a comprehensive analysis of the concert itself is outside the scope of this study; I will hereafter restrict attention to the identity of “my enemies” according to the context, and the function of the song as it pertains to them.

Candidates for “my enemies” include people, entities, groups, movements, abstract concepts, and circumstances that are opposed to or opposed by the “I” of the song (the performers, attendees, and remote viewers). It is not possible to confirm whether any given enemy designation is *intended* (outside the song, the word is explicitly used only in reference to Satan); my more modest goal is to understand what the song lyrics *plausibly signify* to a participant or onlooker given the oppositions that emerge from the surrounding discourse.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 3:03:41.

<sup>80</sup> Hobbs, *Religious Language*, p46.

<sup>81</sup> For Hobbs, “an obvious example of a recent, even as I am writing, current crisis involving high stakes, when what was considered stable rapidly destabilized, when cultural standards and norms of standard operation are right now being constantly negotiated and renegotiated.” (Ibid., p51).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p49.

As a starting point, it is interesting to notice how the oppositions that the song itself associates with “my enemies” are reinforced and given greater specification during the concert:

- “Fear,” associated especially with the pandemic and racial division, is mentioned in several places.<sup>83</sup> By implication of the opening prayer, fear is countered by the “Davidic sound.”<sup>84</sup>
- “Darkness” features in three other songs;<sup>85</sup> Isaiah 60 is read and the phrase “arise and shine” applied to the church.<sup>86</sup>
- “Death” (and its defeat) also appears in other songs;<sup>87</sup> meanwhile, Feucht describes legalised abortion as a “death decree,” so the word may connote the specific “death” of abortion as well as “death” in the abstract.<sup>88</sup>
- The “storm” metaphor is used in Feucht’s description of the current circumstances: “we worship through the storm, we worship through the shutdown.” Conversely, “rain” is associated with worship and with the Holy Spirit.<sup>89</sup>
- “Unbelief” is not explicitly addressed, but “doubt” is mentioned in an altar call appeal,<sup>90</sup> and a song refers to “speaking truth where lies have reigned.”<sup>91</sup>

Among the candidates for “my enemies” suggested by the wider content, most prominent are the shutdown itself and (by extension) those enforcing it. Feucht

<sup>83</sup> “We forgot that we were in the middle of a pandemic, we forgot that we’re supposed to be fearful, we forgot that we’re supposed to hate each other from a different race...” (Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 0:25:51).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 0:19:21.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Way Maker’, ‘Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble,’ and ‘High and Lifted Up (King Jesus).’ (Ibid., 0:12:12, 2:20:00, 2:28:46).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 2:02:12.

<sup>87</sup> “The dead” are said to “arise” in ‘High and Lifted Up (King Jesus).’ In ‘When We Praise,’ Jesus is “the One and Only who can change the story from death to life.” (Ibid., 2:28:46, 2:09:30).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 0:38:54.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 0:21:30, 1:23:06.

<sup>90</sup> “As He burns on your heart, the hopelessness disappears, the discouragement, the doubt, the pain...” (Ibid., 1:59:31).

<sup>91</sup> ‘High and Lifted Up (King Jesus).’ (Ibid., 2:28:46).

makes explicit that the event is part of an ongoing campaign against perceived opposition to Christian worship. Indeed, the “presence” of this enemy can be detected in the title alone: “Let Us Worship” is a play on the first person plural self-exhortation of Psalm 95:6 and 132:7, turned around to address a second person in the imperative – a move that replaces a worshipful intention towards God with a (sacralised) confrontational intention towards an apparently hostile ‘other.’ The audience is told that the protest tour itself has attracted further opposition, targeted against Feucht – from friends and the media, whose criticisms he connects (by collocation) with “the Enemy.”<sup>92</sup> That his account of the backlash immediately follows his performance of ‘Raise a Hallelujah’ strongly reinforces the association of “my enemies” with Feucht’s personal opponents.

Racial “division” is opposed, without mention of racial *injustice*, or acknowledgement of (majority) peaceful protests – only of “riots.” Passive accounts of “when George Floyd died”<sup>93</sup> obscure the role of a perpetrator (a form of “agent deletion” that has the effect of suppressing culpability<sup>94</sup>), while the “Jesus Matters” banner appears to retort “Black Lives Matter.” It is possible, then, to interpret the opposition with reference to the anti-racist movement itself, perceived as an obstacle to racial “unity” and “reconciliation,” rather than with reference to the police brutality and systemic racism that prompted the movement. Pro-abortion governments and voters are positioned as enemies of God via reference to Psalm 2,<sup>95</sup> with inevitable implications for US party politics and the pending election, notwithstanding the stated “non-political” nature of the event. A two-way confrontation with witchcraft/witches is apparent, and the operation of “the Enemy” and demons is a recurring theme, resonant with the emphasis on spiritual warfare within the song’s originating context. There is a general degree of slippage between supernatural and/or abstract forces, and the human agents of those forces

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<sup>92</sup> Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 1:44:44.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 0:27:57, 0:28:48.

<sup>94</sup> van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, pp28–9.

<sup>95</sup> Feucht, #LetUsWorship, 0:43:29.

(again recalling NAR teachings about – and stance towards – demonically-influenced individuals).<sup>96</sup>

With these associations in mind we now examine the religious functionality of the song within the concert.

### **Axiomatic function**

The inherent appeal to Psalm 23 reinforces and sacralises Feucht’s explicit identifications of himself and his audience with King David. As well as being royalty, David is renowned in the Bible as a songwriter and worshipper. He was also persecuted, as the psalms connected with him testify, and consistently vindicated by God. This identification plays a multifaceted sacred-making role:

- It valorises and anticipates the appointment of Christians to positions of leadership, potentially promoting a form of Christian dominionism like the Seven Mountain Mandate strongly influential in the song’s originating context.<sup>97</sup>
- It emphasises musical worship as a high biblical calling, legitimating defiance of the law and risks to public health.
- It communicates that Christians should expect opposition, and should interpret it as evidence that they are serving God’s purposes.<sup>98</sup> This axiom effectively positions believers beyond criticism: disagreement may be construed as divine affirmation, and the content of it dismissed.
- It teaches that Christians (especially those who, like David, persevere in worship under opposition) can, like David, expect God’s intervention on their behalf against their enemies. This sacralises, and claims the power and authority of “Heaven” for, the social and political agenda of the event.

Moreover, the use of “my enemies” to draw special attention to Feucht’s *personal* David-like experiences of opposition – from a platform on which he *exemplifies* perseverance in leading worship – serves to apply the latter three

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<sup>96</sup> Wallnau and Johnson, *Invading Babylon*, p98.

<sup>97</sup> John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, ProQuest eBook Central (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), pp70-3.

<sup>98</sup> See also Franklin: “the devil hates this kind of worship”. (Feucht, #LETUSWORSHIP, 1:23:06).

axioms to Feucht in particular. He is following a high biblical calling, affirmed by the backlash, expectant of divine vindication.

### **Social cohesive function**

Although the song is in the first-person singular, there are (at least) two interrelated ways in which “my enemies” promotes social cohesion within the context. On the one hand, Feucht’s individualist appropriation of the song positions him as a worthy leader and example, attracting a community of solidarity and imitation with himself at the centre. (Note that mass allegiance to high-profile personalities is a characterising feature of the NAR movement).<sup>99</sup>

On the other hand, the broader array of antagonists featured during the event as a whole nurture a sense of shared opposition that gives negative definition to, and impetus for, sacred community formation. The perceived hostility towards the movement fosters a yearning for the protection of the group, while the benefits of having the power of God on side – and the terror of facing the judgement of God – motivate conformity to the group’s ideals (including regarding the coming election; recall Engle’s warning to voters).

Note that identity-defining boundaries are drawn, not only between the church and the world, but between different groups of Christians: while the ‘in group’ continues to gather for sung worship, outsiders include those who participate in the “dead dry religion” deemed conducive to demons (consonant with the NAR teaching that Christians outside the movement are controlled by a “spirit of religion”).<sup>100</sup>

### **Emotive function**

Not only does the song sacralise and nurture boldness in the face of opposition, as an exercise in loud corporate singing it *enacts* that boldness in specific defiance of shutdown rules and the reproaches of the movement’s critics. Meanwhile, comparison with David and the implied assurance of vindication instils pride and perhaps triumphalism, and the belonging engendered by identifying common enemies brings comfort and reassurance.

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<sup>99</sup> Christerson and Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity*, pp42-47.

<sup>100</sup> Geivett and Pivec, *A New Apostolic Reformation?*, p19.

It is instructive to note that, by invoking “my enemies” to begin with, the song is involved in (re-)producing the fears that it functions to soothe.

## The Art of ‘Biblical’ Worship?

Analysis of the song’s lyrics suggested plausible interpretations that foster (aggressively) oppositional group definition and/or self-vindicating triumphalism. Its function in #LetUsWorship would seem to confirm this potential.

Feucht and his followers are not the first to draw identity and reassurance from the biblical message of divine support for those facing opposition. Though the song and concert reference diverse portions of scripture, I will focus here on the substantial contribution of the Psalms – which, after all, contain “by far the greatest amount of material on the subject of enemies”<sup>101</sup> and have been received in comparable ways within other traditions:

- Liberation theologian Elsa Támez singles out the Psalms as key evidence that “God is on the side of the subjugated”: “The oppressed can be certain that their situation runs counter to Yhwh’s will. The Psalms say as much in every verse.”<sup>102</sup>
- The Melodians’ song ‘Rivers of Babylon’ draws on a Rastafarian tradition that uses imprecatory psalms (including 137) to “chant down the enemy” of capitalist, colonising Western society (‘Babylon’).<sup>103</sup>
- Revolutionary Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal adapted psalms to situations of contemporary injustice in his 1964 poetry collection ‘Psalms of Liberation and Struggle’.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> John W. Rogerson, “The Enemy in the Old Testament,” in *Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. John W. Rogerson and Mark Daniel Carroll R., (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p114.

<sup>102</sup> Elsa Támez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), pp1-2, p38.

<sup>103</sup> Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton, *Rivers of Babylon*, Recorded by The Melodians, 1970.

<sup>104</sup> Jorge H. Valdés, “The Evolution of Cardenal’s Prophetic Poetry,” *Latin American Literary Review* 11, no. 23 (1983): pp26-8.

- The African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria use psalms and accompanying rituals in place of “traditional medicine, charms or amulets, and potent words” to gain protection, healing and success.<sup>105</sup>

Indeed, the malleability of psalms, and the “enemies” therein, to a diversity of individuals, groups and circumstances over time and space is likely an *intended effect*; it is an achievement of good poetry to transcend contextual particulars and ‘mean’ something to a reader via the shared experiences of being human.<sup>106</sup> They “stand independent of their original context and are designed for people to use as the vehicles for praise and prayer throughout the story of God’s people.”<sup>107</sup> The precise “enemies” are hard to pin down given the lack of contextualising information,<sup>108</sup> meanwhile, the Psalms’ vivid figurative language renders them “transcendentalized” so that, although human, the enemy becomes the “archetype” of “all that is evil”<sup>109</sup> – again, making it possible to insert any perceived obstacle, threat or opponent into the metaphor.

But does this ease of appropriation indeed mean that the Psalms’ (and the Bible’s) message of divine support under opposition applies to *all* who feel themselves opposed?

The examples above hint at a logical impasse: according to the rhetoric of #LetUsWorship, America is under threat; within Rastafarian belief America *is* (part of) the threat. Identifying oppression as a mark of special favour creates an incentive to be numbered among the oppressed; in a world of complex wants, finite resources and competing narratives, any opposition or disappointment may be framed as an injustice, and attributed to an enemy force or agent. Moreover, individual suggestibility can be harnessed strategically with potent effect.

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<sup>105</sup> David Tuesday Adamo, “Psalms,” in *Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Patte (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2004), p152.

<sup>106</sup> “One cannot tie down any aspect of some concrete situation that its author had in mind. Everything is imagery. The consequence is that readers can directly access the psalm through their own experience of (e.g.) lack, provision, darkness, fear, and trouble.” (Goldingay, *Psalms*, p43.).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p25.

<sup>108</sup> The headings, though part of the Hebrew text, are now widely presumed to be later additions; attempts to date them by other means have failed to produce a consensus, even with regard to their pre- or post-exilic status. (*Ibid.*, pp30-1).

<sup>109</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, p98.

To take a prominent example, recent studies attribute the outcome of the 2016 Presidential Election to a (historically rooted) sense of “embattlement” among white Evangelical Christians.<sup>110</sup> “[K]indling fear in the hearts of American Christians” was a “tried-and-true recipe” for the success of the Religious Right,<sup>111</sup> and the victory of Donald Trump – a fellow “embattled outsider”<sup>112</sup> – was “decided by dominant groups anxious about their future status.”<sup>113</sup> White American evangelicals have learned to perceive themselves among God’s favoured oppressed, but for onlookers outside of (and/or marginalised by) that community, the evidence – which includes considerable wealth and decisive influence in the political leadership of one of the most powerful nations on earth – tells a different story.

Thus, relating to the Psalms requires caution. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza criticises the tendency, among Christian theologians, to generalise “oppression” to the point of meaninglessness (thereby neutralising liberation efforts) by claiming that “we are all under sin and therefore all equally oppressed.”<sup>114</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of concrete referents in the Psalms, it is important to identify “the characteristic traits of oppressors,” since otherwise, Támez warns, “even the oppressor will be able to speak out against oppression.”<sup>115</sup> Her (Bible-wide) study distinguishes between international oppression (of one nation by another) and within-nation oppression (via “unjust structures”), three characteristics being common to both sets of perpetrators:<sup>116</sup>

- Wealth, increased by “despoliation and impoverishment of others.”
- Power, through alliance with or membership of the “governing class.”
- Idolatry (one form of which is wealth accumulation).

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<sup>110</sup> Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, p12.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p253.

<sup>112</sup> Fea, *Believe Me*, p26.

<sup>113</sup> Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, p267.

<sup>114</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp44-5.

<sup>115</sup> Támez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, p31.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp32-5.

Not all scholars would agree that this characterisation applies to the psalmic enemies. A full survey is beyond scope here, but one contrasting view is that the enemy depictions are propagandist stereotypes – produced by the powerful to police community boundaries, strengthen identity, and mobilise resources (not unlike the function of ‘Raise a Hallelujah’ within #LetUsWorship).<sup>117</sup> However, other dedicated studies come to broadly compatible conclusions. Steven Croft, for example, recognises both external and internal enemies (*contra* older influential proposals), power and wealth advantages, perversions of justice favouring the ruling classes, and blasphemous scoffing and sacrilege.<sup>118</sup>

In any case, to the extent that psalms communicate encouragement to oppressed people, they communicate a warning to their afflictors.<sup>119</sup> The imprecatory psalms in particular, as Goldingay notes, “have capacity to scare the pants off us as oppressors.”<sup>120</sup> Those of us who are wealthy (the average UK earner in 2015 had 1.6 times the purchasing power of the average earner globally, according to data from the ILO),<sup>121</sup> beneficiaries within exploitative economies, and/or citizens of globally powerful (historically colonising) nations, should be attuned to these warnings; for whom are *we* the enemies of which we like to sing? In the case of ‘Raise a Hallelujah’ and #LetUsWorship, Támez’ recognition of idolatry as an oppressor characteristic might also give us pause. Adey notes the idolatrous potentiality of songs *about* worship;<sup>122</sup> might

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<sup>117</sup> T. R. Hobbs and P. K. Jackson, “The Enemy in the Psalms,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21, no. 1, pp26-7.

<sup>118</sup> Steven J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms*, ed. Robert D. Haak, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, ProQuest eBook Central (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p22, p26, p28, p23, p34.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Croft on Psalm 36: “As in the other psalms in this section, one of the functions of the piece is to warn those present at the festival of the fate of the wicked and thus discourage them from taking the wrong path. Conversely, the psalm acts as a comfort to those oppressed by a אשׁר, affirming their doom and the steadfast love of Yahweh.” (Ibid., p26).

<sup>120</sup> John Goldingay, *Do We Need the New Testament? Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself*, Kindle edition. (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), loc1965.

<sup>121</sup> CNN, *Davos 2017 Global wage calculator*,

<https://money.cnn.com/interactive/news/economy/davos/global-wage-calculator/index.html>, 2017.

<sup>122</sup> Adey, *Hymns*, p9, p11.

this be compounded by its use in an event that holds communal singing sacred to the point of compromising public health and law abidance?

I began with the observation that songs constitute a key source of biblical interpretation for many Christians. Christian communities have a weighty responsibility to attend to the implicit teaching conveyed by their chosen music – and to prevent it becoming a ‘thin’ and selective substitute for canonically-integrated, ‘thick’ communal learning. In fact, the Psalms themselves embed a similar concern: Goldingay conjectures that the Davidic headings were intended as collocating devices to guide mutually “profitable” readings of narrative and poetry.<sup>123</sup> Either way, they serve as a reminder that the songs of ancient Israel pre-supposed a wider tradition familiar to worshippers, and were not meant to stand alone. Patterning contemporary worship and learning on this example would put a check on ideologies like Feucht’s, with its filtered centering of David – a hero in popular psalms, but thoroughly morally complex according to the finely-crafted prose of the biblical narrators.<sup>124</sup> Poignantly, one nuance that these prose accounts suggest is that he was as blinkered to his own capacity for injustice as many today with access to power. Confronted with the parable of the ewe lamb, David fails to recognise himself as the antagonist: he is the righteous, indignant defender of the vulnerable wronged party. Until Nathan’s blunt rebuke – in words that call for self-examination on the part of would-be Davids everywhere: “You are the man!”

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<sup>123</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, pp25–30.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, ProQuest eBook Central (New York: Basic Books, 2011), pp143-62.

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