

# “Lead On, O Cloud of Presence”: A Way of Reading Hymn Texts

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**W**e live in interesting times for those who love hymns. There is a flourish of hymnwriting and an interest in what hymn texts are actually saying. This study begins with the development of a methodology of multidimensional reading for hymn texts and then applies that methodology to a text by Ruth Duck, “Lead on, O cloud of Presence.”

Good hymns are like scripture, opening us up to new understandings upon subsequent singing and hearing. By studying this hymn text, we will attempt to deepen our understanding of it along with our understanding of the Exodus story and our own journeys of faith.

## One Way To Analyze Hymn Texts

Close reading is a method for analyzing texts. Here we will weave close reading with other methodologies from such disciplines as rhetorical criticism, literary criticism, linguistic analysis, and biblical exegesis. Thus our reading will be a multidimensional analysis, focused on the text itself. The methodologies will be interwoven so that multiplicity of meanings within the text might be uncovered. Re-reading and fresh examinations of the text after periods of rest also play a part. Since multidimensional reading is centered in the text, we begin by reading the text carefully, to see what it has to say.

## The First Component: A Preliminary View

To begin looking at the background of the text and considering its meaning, we focus on the question words:

- Who is the author?
  - Why was it written?
  - What did she or he intend to communicate through the text?
  - Where was it first sung? When?
  - How did it change in subsequent publications?
- These questions help us establish a context for the text.

We look at the poetic shape of the text, its meter (what poetic foot is used), and the length of lines and stanzas. In *The Anatomy of Hymnody*,<sup>1</sup> Austin C. Lovelace pointed out that certain meters and poetic lines express different meanings; for ex-

ample, some lend themselves to stately treatment and others to teaching. Here we consider how form follows or fights against the thoughts expressed.

During this preliminary view, we look at the pattern of rhyme and repetition of sounds or words. We also look at sentences and clauses, or segmentation. In hymn texts, segmentation is determined by meter, the shape of the stanza, and ultimately by the tune associated with the text.

Style moves this first component of reading into the second component. Style is important in communicating the ideas of the author to the intended receiver. Two of the four virtues of style named by classical rhetoric are considered at this point: correctness, i.e., the grammar used, and propriety, i.e., an appropriate level of style. In English, style considers the use of shorter, more concrete words like “thought,” called Anglo-Saxon diction, and longer, more abstract words like “contemplation,” called Latinate diction.

Lastly, we will pay close attention to the words used for humanity and for God, looking at the gender which is stated or implied.

## The Second Component: Analysis

The second component of our multidimensional reading moves into the way words and thoughts are organized and meaning is made. Here we consider the meanings of words, their lexical meanings, the scriptures to which they allude, and the meaning tradition has ascribed to them. We will look at the ways a particular text is unified by considering the metaphors and salient points of the text and the progression of thought.

Metaphor is integral to poetry and to religious language. Metaphor happens when words and phrases are used to suggest a likeness or analogy between two objects or ideas. Without metaphor we would have no way to speak of God. God is unique. We can only describe God by beginning with ideas and things that we do know. Language about God requires metaphor.

Poetry also depends on metaphor to open up new meanings. The combination of poetry and religious language in hymn texts means a strong reliance on metaphor both for talking about God and for opening up new meanings and understandings. Because of the importance of metaphor in

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Another way Duck develops the journey motif is to divide each stanza into more than one sentence. Shurtleff's text marches through eight lines for each sentence, with phrases but no real stopping places. Duck's text contains two sentences in the first and third stanzas, and three sentences in the second stanza. Thus she models for us the stopping and starting of the Hebrew people as the cloud of Presence stopped and started. This is a point of iconicity in the text.

Shurtleff's text builds to a climax, from acknowledging that the day to march has come (suggesting a previous time of preparation) through consideration of how the kingdom comes, to the awaiting future, certain, and final victory—the crown awaits the conquest. Duck's text tells of the journey in its opening two stanzas, giving validation to the journey at the close of the second stanza. The third stanza opens with the clearest definition of God in this text: "O God of freedom." This is an important contrast to Shurtleff's text with his reiterations of "O King eternal" (four times) and ending with "O God of might." Duck has given us images for God—"cloud of Presence" and "fiery pillar"—but this singular use of God in the address which begins the third stanza gives the phrase "God of freedom" added weight. The text has already shown God's presence with us; now as we struggle toward the promise of justice, mercy, and love, the God who has freed us goes with us. Like the Hebrew people in the Exodus story, in Duck's text we too are freed from bondage and set on our way toward a better land.

## Analysis of Duck's Text

**Stanza One.** "Lead on, O cloud of Presence" draws its imagery directly from scripture. The cloud and fire appear as early as Exodus 13:21, described as pillars which enable the Hebrew children to travel by day and by night. Cloud and fire are traditional ways of expressing God's presence and guidance, appearing throughout scripture. Moses speaks to God in the cloud (Exod. 34:5, Num. 11:25a). A cloud overshadows Jesus and the disciples at the transfiguration, and God speaks to them from the cloud (Luke 9:34-35). The Letter to the Hebrews describes the great cloud of witnesses (12:1).

The cloud is also a hidden feminine image, as it is the description of the *Shekinah*. *Shekinah* comes from the Hebrew word for dwelling and was used to describe God's dwelling among humanity. *Shekinah* is an important concept in Jewish mysticism, as she represents the true soul of God, the glory of God, associated with the cloud in the sanctuary of the Temple as well as in the Exodus. In Jewish mysticism, *Shekinah* is associated with Sophia (from the Greek *sophos*) and Wisdom, often described as feminine aspects of God.

The Exodus of the Hebrew people from bondage in slavery through the Red Sea to the Promised Land is one of the basic stories of Judaism and thus Christianity. Black theologies and other liberation

theologies claim the Exodus as clearly showing that God is on the side of the oppressed. It is appropriate that, as women struggled for ordination, they also claimed the Exodus story, and frequently used Duck's text at their ordinations.

Jesus embodied "journey" through his own travels around Galilee and Samaria accompanied by men and women (Luke 8:1-3) and by sending out his followers (Luke 10:1-20). The early church linked Jesus' resurrection and the Exodus, seen in the hymns of John of Damascus, "Come, ye faithful, raise the strain" and "The day of resurrection!"

The phrase "milk and honey" not only refers to the abundance of the promised land, but in the last 10 years has been claimed by some as a sign of the fullness of God's grace. In one of the earliest accounts of the Eucharist, Hippolytus describes the three cups offered to the newly baptized: water as a sign of inner washing, wine as a sign of the new covenant, and milk mixed with honey offered "to the children of God for the healing of the bitterness of the human heart with the sweetness of His word."<sup>5</sup> At the Re-Imagining Conference in Minneapolis in 1993, a ritual using milk and honey became extremely controversial, condemned as replacing Eucharist with a pagan ritual. This is a sign of how we have forgotten and lost our history, lost the wonderful imagery of Hippolytus's cup of milk mixed with honey. Thus Duck's text can provide an *anamnesis*, a remembering of both the milk and honey of the land of promise and the promise of God's healing and sweetness given at Eucharist with milk and honey.

"Tribe" describes the social organization of Judaism (the 12 tribes of Israel descended from Jacob, Genesis 29-30) and suggests here the specific group constituted for worship, with the sense that the entire church, denomination, and Christendom are the tribes to which this tribe also belongs.

Throughout this text, journey metaphors are prominent, with verbs suggesting movement: lead and come (each three times), left, grow, seek, follow, guide, and journey. Making our home in wilderness and desert is reminiscent of the pioneers in this country, as well as other migrants. Leaving bondage behind suggests the emancipation of slaves or prisoners, who then travel to new places physically as well as emotionally.

**Stanza Two.** The pillar of cloud and pillar of fire enabled the journey of the Hebrews and signified God's presence and guidance. The fire of God's presence is seen again when Elijah calls down fire from heaven against the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:24). On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God descends as tongues of fire, resting on the heads of the gathered followers of Jesus (Acts 2:3).

This stanza embodies human experience. Following God does not always make our fears disappear, yet we follow with faith and hope. "We shall come rejoicing" echoes the refrain of the gospel song "Bringing in the sheaves," based on Psalm 126:5-6. The mixture of rejoicing, joy, and tears in intense experiences is very human.

<sup>5</sup> Bard Thompson, compiler, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), p. 22.

In the sixth line of this stanza, the image of the pillar of fire appears again: "by your light we come," giving a picture of torches or flashlights lighting the way in the dark or at night. With God's light we are not lost, though we may still wander (cf. "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it" in "Come, thou Fount of every blessing" by Robert Robinson, 1758). The penultimate line of this stanza claims our heritage as God's people, echoing 1 Peter 1:9: "But you are... God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (NRSV)

"The journey is our home" was inspired by a quotation from Joseph Pintauro, "Nowadays to be on your way is to be home."<sup>6</sup> For Duck, this reflects the sense that life is in the process, not in achievement or in a settled life, but more particularly as one is faithful to the unpredictable leading of God's Spirit.

"The journey is our home" is a fresh metaphor because the common understanding is that journey is *to* home; home is the goal of travels at Thanksgiving and Christmas, our usually joyful destination after school or work. The understanding of the Hebrew people about the Exodus was equally freedom from Pharaoh and the promise of a home in an abundant land. Yet, for 40 years, their home was in their wandering. So Duck changes our thinking with five words... "the journey is our home." Our home is where we are, where God is, and God is right here, right now, with us on this journey of life. If we claim the promise and tradition of Numbers 9:15-23 and recognize that it is God who leads us, if we submit ourselves to go and come as God wills, then we are at home.<sup>7</sup>

**Stanza Three.** While the first two stanzas of this text told the story of the Exodus and our own journey, the third stanza is one of prayer, with imperative verbs asking the God of freedom to lead, guide, and help us. We pray that our children may journey to that land where justice dwells with mercy and love is the law.

"Lead" and "guide" in the opening two lines echo Ps. 31:3b, "for your name's sake lead me and guide me." Psalm 119 speaks of the promises of God 15 times, promises made to those who treasure God's word and laws, promises of salvation. God's mercy and justice are praised and prayed for in Ps. 119:156: "Great is your mercy, O LORD; give me life according to your justice."

The final two lines echo the last two lines of the first stanza as they describe the land of promise. Here, however, the qualities of the promised land are embodied, attributing living qualities to inanimate concepts: justice dwells with mercy and love is the demand of law. This description of the promised land is in line with the vision of the Hebrew prophets, as humanity is called "to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Mic. 6:8, KJV). These lines also affirm the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor given by Jesus (Mark 12:28-31).

This text presents the realities of human life,

with its tears, fears, rejoicing, and wandering. In this text, those on the margins of society leave their bondage behind and find new hopes. Sons and daughters are both mentioned. Thus the language about humanity is inclusive and truthful.

God is represented by three images—cloud, fire, and freedom—a diversity in unity. Imaginative construction has been used, creatively drawing upon scripture, Shurtleff's text, and current revelation to produce a fresh text which remembers the Exodus story and brings it alive for us. The promises of God are recounted and offered afresh to those whose would make the journey their home.

## Conclusion

In the process of research on this and five other recent hymn texts, I shared this hymn text with several groups of church folks, totaling 113 persons, and with 14 pastors and worship leaders.

In all their comments there was a sense that stories are an important part of life and faith, and the retelling of the Exodus story in this hymn resonated with people. They also appreciated its affirmation that life is a journey, that when we wander, God goes with us.

One group suggested that sometimes when we accept Christ we think that's all there is; this text reminds us that we're on our way; God always engages us. Some felt a similarity between this text and "Lift every voice and sing"<sup>8</sup> with the themes of Exodus, journey, and tears in the middle stanza. The themes of journey and home, of being "strangers in a strange land," were given voice in this hymn in a way that gave several persons a sense of comfort when they felt they didn't fit in.

One person told how she and her husband (both Christians) had been looking for a text as they had been invited to speak at their Jewish grandson's Bar Mitzvah. She was delighted to find this text and felt it would be very appropriate for that occasion, reflecting both traditions. Thus this text also bridges the Jewish-Christian gap.

Worship leaders suggested that there are many times to use this hymn, ranging from general use, especially as closing hymn of dedication, to peace and justice, renewal of baptism, confirmation, Human Relations emphasis, national holidays such as July 4, Memorial Day, and Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, graduate recognition, Eastertide to Pentecost, "anytime the Exodus scriptures are used," to consecration of mission trip groups or elders and deacons. Other comments included: "This is it! beyond sexist/nonsexist language, arriving in the promised land of rich biblical imagery!" "This would be useful in older, more traditional congregations to introduce them to new images." "I like the recognition that though not always knowing (never knowing) where we're going, we can still celebrate the moment of change and journey, life itself." ■

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Pintauro and Sister Corita Kent, *To Believe in God*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> The profoundness of this truth caused Nelle Morton to claim this phrase as the title of her book, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, 1921; found in many recent hymnals.