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John S. Tanner

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Title Two Hymns Based on Nephi's Psalm: Texts and Commentary

Author(s) John S. Tanner

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Abstract The first line of Nephi's Psalm (found in 2 Nephi 4:16-35) matches perfectly the iambic pentameter of Jean Sibelius's "Finlandia," more commonly known among Latter-day Saints as the hymn "Be Still, My Soul." Because of this coincidence, John S. Tanner decided to write lyrics based on Nephi's Psalm, called "I Love the Lord," after which he solicited the help of Ronald J. Staheli in composing a musical arrangement based on "Finlandia." Tanner later wrote another adaptation of Nephi's Psalm, called "Sometimes My Soul," using the tune of an American folk song. He explains the process of writing these two songs and the accompanying challenges.





TWO HYMNS BASED ON

Nephi's Psalm

TEXTS AND COMMENTARY



NEPHI'S PSALM (2 Nephi 4:16–35) constitutes one of the great lyric outbursts in the Book of Mormon. Like the psalms of David, it is replete with vivid figurative language, dramatically rising and falling emotions, and parallelism (the principal formal feature of Hebrew poetry). It also contains themes that figure prominently in the Psalter—praise, thanksgiving, love of scripture, anger with enemies, and the conviction of sin. Like biblical psalms, Nephi's psalm articulates universal feelings of self-reproach and rejoicing, of pleading and praising. At the same time, it is enriched by the particular narrative context in which it is embedded, seeming to emerge naturally from the predicament Nephi confronted as he assumed the lonely mantle of leadership following the death of his father (2 Nephi 4:12) to face the fratricidal wrath of his brothers and the imminent dissolution of his extended family.¹

The Psalms have given rise to a long tradition of metrical paraphrases suitable for congregational singing. Nephi's psalm also begs to be adapted to verse and set to music. Having long felt the need for a metrical version of Nephi's psalm, I decided to try my hand at it in the summer of 1999. At the time, I was composing a talk on the hymns to be given at the Church Music Workshop and completing an encyclopedia article on Nephi. The long-delayed project of converting Nephi's psalm into song thus came naturally to mind.

I eventually wrote two poetic adaptations, each for a different tune. "I Love the Lord" was written to Jean Sibelius's "Finlandia," which is also the tune of the moving hymn "Be Still, My Soul."² "Sometimes My Soul" was composed to the plaintive American folk tune "Poor Wayfaring Stranger." Let me briefly comment on each piece.

JOHN S. TANNER



“I Love the Lord”

“I Love the Lord” was built upon a single climactic line in Nephi’s psalm: “Awake my soul! No longer droop in sin!” (2 Nephi 4:28). I chose “Finlandia” chiefly because its meter fit Nephi’s poignant outburst. Hymn texts are categorized by the number of syllables per line and the number of lines per verse. “Finlandia” has six lines with 10 beats per line; it is thus described as 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10. Nephi’s cry also has 10 syllables. In fact, it constitutes a perfect iambic pentameter line, meaning that its 10 syllables are arranged in five iambic “feet” in which the stress falls on every second beat. The effect resembles the beating of a heart: dah-dum, dah-dum, dah-dum, dah-dum, dah-dum. This familiar pattern is also the rhythm of blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse, significantly, constitutes the poetic form most associated with the high style in English. It is the language of much Renaissance drama, introduced to the stage in Marlowe’s “mighty line” and perfected by Shakespeare. It is the medium of epic poetry as developed by Milton and Wordsworth. It is a cadence used to eloquent effect by Tennyson, Frost, and many others. Metrically, Nephi’s great cry of self-reproach, “Awake my soul! No longer droop in sin!” belongs within this grand tradition of blank verse. I knew from the start that I wanted to build a paraphrase around the metrics of this line and that I therefore needed a tune that would preserve its natural eloquence.

But a suitable tune was hard to come by, as 10-syllable lines are somewhat ungainly when translated into hymn texts and hence not as common for hymns as are many other poetic meters. Moreover, Nephi’s exclamation has another problematic metrical feature. Nephi’s great cry is interrupted by a medial pause, called a caesura, between the second and third foot. Ideally, the tune needed to account for the caesura as well as accommodate blank verse. Sibelius’s tune worked on both counts. It fit an iambic pentameter text, and it incorporated the musical equivalent of a caesura after the fourth syllable of each line. It also worked melodically with the mood of Nephi’s lament. My next challenge was to build a pause into each line of my text at exactly the same place. This presented a difficult technical problem for me as a lyricist, but ultimately the text is stronger for the medial pauses, which modulate the rhythm of what are otherwise rather long lines musically.

“I LOVE THE LORD”

I love the Lord. In him my soul delights.
Upon his word, I ponder day and night.
He’s heard my cry, brought visions to my sleep,
And kept me safe o’er deserts and the deep.
He’s filled my heart with his consuming love,
And borne me high on wings of his great dove.

Yet oft I groan, “O wretched man am I!”
My flesh is weak and I’m encompassed by
A world of sin, which holds me in its thrall,
If I give in and to temptations fall.
Then strength grows slack, I waste in sorrow’s vale.
My peace destroyed, my enemies prevail.

Awake, my soul! No longer droop in sin.
Rejoice, my heart! And let me praise again
The Lord my God, who is my rock and stay
To keep me strict upon his straight, plain way.
O let me shake at the first sight of sin
And thus escape my foes without and in.

I Love the Lord

for Mixed Chorus (S.S.A.A.T.T.B.B.), a cappella

Poetic paraphrase of 2 Nephi 4
by JOHN YANNER

Music by
JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)
Arr. RONALD STAHELI

Warm, unhurried $\frac{4}{4}$ = ca. 74

① S. *mf*
A. I love the Lord, In Him my soul de-lights.

Up-on His word, I pon-der day and night.

② He's heard my cry, brought vis-ions to my sleep,....

PERFORMANCE TIME: approx. 4:00

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13 And kept me safe O'er des - serts and the deep.

17 He's filled my heart with His con - sum - ing love.

21 And bore me high on wings of His great dove.

25 **TENORS and BARITONES**
p
 Yet oft I groan, 'O wretch-ed man am I'... My flesh is

29 **ALTO** *mp*
 weak and I'm en - cum - passed by A world of

33 *B. mp* a world of sin, A world of

37 sin, which holds me in its thall... If I give in and

41 to temp - ta - tions fall. Then strength grows slack, I

45 *T. & B. mp*
 waste in sor - row's vale. My peace des - troyed, my

47 *Bright, rich, brilliant*
 A - wake, my soul No

51 long - er droop in sin... Re - joice, my heart! And

55 let me praise a - gain... The Lord my God, who
 a - gain, O Let me praise
 gain.

59 is my rock and stay... To keep me strict up - on His straight, plain

63 way. O let me shake at the first sight of

67 sin and thus es - cape my foes with - out and in.

71 sin... and thus es - cape my foes with - out and in.

75 **Slow, free**
A. pp
 I love the Lord. In him my soul de - lights.

79 *T. pp*
B.B.

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Just as I sought for a tune that reflected a metrical pattern in the source text, so I also tried to find a pattern in the flow of Nephi's ideas that would unify the structure of my paraphrase. I ultimately decided to impose a simplified structure on the emo-

tional vacillations in Nephi's text—yet one that would still correspond to the basic movement of his thought. Nephi's emotions ebb and flow in a series of rising and falling feelings of remorse and resolve. I simplified this pattern into a single three-part

movement of emotions: from rejoicing in stanza 1, to remorse in stanza 2, to resolution in stanza 3. I wanted my adaptation, like Nephi's psalm, to move circularly from soaring heights, down to anguished depths, back up to the heights.

Ronald J. Staheli's arrangement beautifully brings out the emotional pattern I was aiming at through the musical contrasts it develops from verse to verse. Staheli, division coordinator for choral music and conducting in BYU's School of Music, uses warm textures appropriate to the expression of testimony for the first verse. In the second verse, which gives voice to deep anguish, Staheli dramatically darkens the tone by changing the key and leading with men's voices. He also makes the phrase *a world of sin* roll across the music in successive waves. For the third verse, which marks the climactic upward turn, Staheli appropriately pulls out all the stops. The key changes again as the full choir sings, forte, "Awake my soul!" Finally, the piece returns full circle to the first line—only now in more subdued tones. I was thrilled to hear how well Staheli's arrangement worked when he led the combined men of the Tabernacle Choir and BYU Men's Chorus in the premier performance of our piece at the priesthood session of general conference in the fall of 1999. Subsequently, the piece was recorded by the BYU University Singers as well as published in sheet music for choirs.³

"Sometimes My Soul"

I composed my other adaptation of Nephi's psalm, "Sometimes My Soul," to an American folk tune that derives from a tradition of so-called "white spirituals."⁴ The tune is very old. Its roots in this country go back at least to 1829⁵—that is, to the very year when Joseph Smith was translating Nephi's words. This pleased me. I was drawn to the tune for its mournful, longing, yearning quality. The melody recalled Nephi's lament and connected it, unexpectedly, to the soulful laments of American spirituals. As a folk melody, this tune invites a relatively simple arrangement, which K. Newell Dayley, dean of BYU's College of Fine Arts and Communications and a professor in the School of Music, deliberately aimed to achieve in his lovely setting. It also invites a setting suitable for a single voice. Its only public performance to date was as a solo by Eric Glissmeyer, who sang it at the end of my plenary address to the

"SOMETIMES MY SOUL"

Sometimes my soul, in deep affliction,
Cries out, "O wretched man am I!"
When I'm encompassed by temptation,
When flesh is weak and I comply.
Yet still I know in whom I've trusted,
He's heard my cries by day and night.
He's filled my heart with love consuming,
He's borne my soul to mountain height.

Then why in sorrow should I linger,
My strength grow slack and my heart groan?
I'll not give way to grief or anger,
For God's great mercy I have known.
Awake my soul! And cease from drooping.
Rejoice, my heart! And praise thy God,
Who is the rock of my salvation.
I'll strictly walk grasping his rod.

Awake my soul! And cease from drooping.
Rejoice, my heart! And praise thy God.

Church Music Workshop. His rich baritone voice brought out the peculiar blend of dejection and hope, vulnerability and strength, that is so conspicuous in Nephi's introspective lament.

In wedding text to tune, I was conscious of the rising and falling modulations of emotion that distinguish Nephi's psalm and sought to preserve this pattern. Each 8-line stanza begins in anguish and then rises toward affirmation in lines 5 and 6. This corresponds to what happens musically at the C juncture in the tune's traditional ABCB form. At this juncture, the tune takes an upward turn. I exploited the lift in the melodic line by placing in the C position lines of verse that signal a turn from despondency to hope: "Yet still I know in whom I've trusted / He's heard my cries by day and night" and "Awake my soul! And cease from drooping! / Rejoice my heart! And praise thy God!" The last phrase is repeated in a coda, where a different melody reconfigures the emotional force of the line to signal a now quieter and more settled determination to trust in God.

To reach this final resolution and overcome dejection, however, requires repeated efforts. It is not a single, smooth, upward ascent toward hope, but a stumbling climb out of a dark pit, threatened by

repeated bouts of discouragement and requiring repeated efforts to lay hold on hope. Finding these spiritual realities expressed in the falling and rising motions of both my source text and tune, I tried to map onto my verse the vicissitudes of a journey out of despair. Hence, unlike “I Love the Lord,” “Sometimes My Soul” begins in anguish, rises toward hope, and then slips again into anguished self-recrimination in the second verse, thereby enacting a double movement of self-reproach and celebration, followed by renewed discouragement and renewed hope. The two verses are intended to reflect the twofold rhythm of the source text, in which Nephi rises from self-condemnation (“O wretched man that I am!” v. 17) toward hope (“nevertheless, I know . . .” v. 19), only to slide back into self-condemnation (“why should my heart weep . . .?” v. 26)—requiring that he again rouse himself from the depths of despondency (“Awake, my soul! . . .” v. 28).

In its vacillating but upward struggle toward hope, Nephi’s psalm articulates a psychological process familiar in the drama of salvation.⁶ We are reminded that it takes repeated effort to overcome the downward gravity of grief for those caught in a slough of despond.⁷ Beyond this, the way out of despair requires more than our own effort; it requires enabling grace from Christ, as Nephi’s psalm and “Sometimes My Soul” both acknowledge. Nephi is finally able to rise above despair only by remembering the rock of his Redeemer (v. 30), on whom all hope rests. Likewise, both verses of “Sometimes My Soul” conclude by pointing to hope in Christ as the only way out of the darkness.

Nephi’s psalm speaks not only to his individual experience but to our common experience with anxiety, discouragement, and temptation.⁸ No doubt it enjoys such immense appeal among Latter-day Saints because it reveals vulnerabilities heretofore hidden in Nephi and because it articulates our own often hidden spiritual struggles. Both my adaptations aim at making Nephi’s very personal psalm universally accessible, while at the same time remaining strictly faithful to my scriptural source. Neither text is an exact paraphrase. Nor, however, is either merely loosely inspired by Nephi’s psalm. Rather, I made a conscious decision to compose texts based exclusively on Nephi’s own images. Every image derives from

Nephi’s words, and all but one come from his psalm. (“Grasping his rod” is drawn from Nephi’s vision of the tree of life.) I hoped that my adaptations would at once lead readers and singers back to the Book of Mormon and resonate with their own lives. I wanted them to recall Nephi’s experiences of traveling through the desert and the deep, of praying by day and night, of receiving heavenly visions, of contending with his enemies, and so forth. At the same time, I wanted to speak to their own experiences with sin and sorrow, anger and anxiety, prayer and peril, God’s mercies and miracles—as well as with their own “foes without and in.”

I am persuaded that such musical adaptations of scripture can greatly enrich our understanding of sacred texts as well as implant them more deeply in our souls. I know that hymns based on the Bible have done so for me. For example, through song I have often made the disciples’ entreaty at Emmaus my own Sabbath prayer: “O Savior, stay this night with me; behold ’tis eventide” (“Abide with Me; ’Tis Eventide,” *Hymns*, no. 165; compare Luke 24:29). Likewise, I have unwittingly echoed Isaiah’s consoling oracle as I’ve sung “How Firm a Foundation”: “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Isaiah 41:10; compare “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, no. 85). The church has been greatly blessed by Book of Mormon–based music such as Leroy Robertson’s *Oratorio from the Book of Mormon* and Marvin K. Gardner and Vanja Y. Watkins’s marvelous anthem “Press Forward, Saints” (*Hymns*, no. 81). But we need more sacred songs drawn from the Book of Mormon. Too few hymns derive from our unique scriptural tradition. As a result, restoration scripture has not been borne by song into the sinews of our speech, the wells of our memory, and the affections of our hearts. I hope that these two adaptations of Nephi’s psalm begin to remedy this deficiency with respect to one of the most extraordinary texts in the Book of Mormon—and, perhaps, thereby to inspire other Latter-day Saints to mine the resources of this sacred text for the substance of new songs to sing to God (compare Psalm 98:1; Revelation 5:9). ■

Sometimes My Soul

John S. Turner

K. Newell Dayley

$\text{♩} = 60$

A

Some - times my soul in deep af -
sor row should I

p

ff *ff* *mf*

1

flic - tion, Cries out, "O wretch - ed man am I!" When I'm an - com -
lin - ger, My strength grow slack and my heart grown? I'll not give way

mp

7

- passed by temp - ta - tion, When flesh is weak and I com - ply, Yet still I
to grief or an - ger, For God's great mer - cy have I known, A - wake my

14

B

know in whom I've trust - ed, He's heard my cries by day and
soul! And cease from droop - ing, Re - joice, my heart! And praise thy

mf

21

37 *mp*

night. He's filled my heart with love con - sum - ing. He's borne my soul
 God. Who is the rock of my sal - va - tion. I'll strict - ly walk

39 I. *p* II. *p*

to moun-tain height. Then why in grasp - ing his rod.

41 **C** *mf* *mp*

A - wake my soul! And cease from droog - ing. Re - joice my

43 *rit.* *tempo* *rit.*

heart! And praise thy God.

mp *rit.* *tempo* *rit.*

Music setting based on the traditional American folk ballad, *Free Willing Stronger*.

**Two Hymns Based on Nephi's Psalm: Texts
and Commentary**
John S. Tanner

1. I have discussed Lehi's death as a context for Nephi's psalm in "Jacob and His Descendants as Authors," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 54–55.
2. *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), no. 124; hereafter cited in this article as *Hymns*.
3. It is the lead piece in the CD *Songs of the Soul: Brigham Young University Singers* (Provo, Utah: Tantara, 2000). It is also published by Jackman Music (Orem, Utah: Jackman, 2000).
4. George Pullen Jackson adopts this term to distinguish this genre from Negro spirituals. See his *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).
5. George Pullen Jackson, *Spiritual Folk-Songs of Early America* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1937), 71.
6. Consider the cyclical character of grief in such works as Milton's "Lycidas," Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*; or the repetitious nature of regret in Shakespeare's Sonnet 30.
7. The metaphor "slough of despond," of course, derives from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.
8. In a recent FARMS newsletter, John A. Tvedtnes explores the connections between Nephi's psalm and personal life history (see "Reflections of Nephi's Vision in His Psalm," *Insights*, February 2000, 2). Although Nephi's psalm is surely congruent with his biography, it also has universal appeal.