

## A Word in Defense of Raising One's Eben-ezer

I have a question for you. Can you recite the second stanza of Robert Robinson's ageless hymn, "Come Thou Fount"? I will get you started, and you see if you can get through all eight lines of the poem. Here is your clue:

"Here I raise Ebenezer ...

I would argue that this hymn – and more precisely the sorry way this stanza has been manhandled by contemporary publishers of hymn books – is evidence of a disturbing truth with regard to the present state of Christianity. My argument is built on the fact that this stanza has been re-written – in what unhallowed outpost of misguided oversight, I don't know – and is sung in most churches today as follows:

Hitherto Thy love has blest me; Thou hast bro't me to this place,  
And I know Thy hand will bring me Safely home by Thy good grace.

Now I am scandalized by that rewrite on two counts. First, in the stead of the majestic and evocative poetry of Robinson has been substituted a sophomoric and prosaic (Yes, Virginia, poetry can be prosaic!) quatrain that demands nothing of the worshipper, and thus gives little back. (It is as if Ogden Nash's "The Lord in His wisdom made the fly, and then forgot to tell us why!" were supplanted by "Flies sometimes bother me – would you say that you agree?")

But secondly, and much more tellingly, I am disturbed by what this substitution suggests concerning the capacity of today's Christian public to deal with the Old Testament. I can only assume that this misguided emanation was undertaken because of the persuasion that the reference to Ebenezer was more than "Churched Harry and Mary" could handle – the fear, perhaps, that the word would inevitably and irretrievably re-direct their minds to Charles Dickens and a night of weird Christmas dreams, and what good could come of that!

But wait! That term, Ebenezer, is a poetic and theological stroke of genius. It takes the mind – the mind that has spent the time it should in the sacred pages of the Hebrew Scriptures – to the important and colorful narrative of 1 Samuel 4-7. This is the account of the most pivotal two decades in the narrative recorded in those Scriptures – the twenty years that rescued the covenant nation from the darkest days they ever knew – the period of the Judges (cf. specifically the nadir of Old Testament history, described in 1 Samuel 6:1), and set them on the road to the season of greatest glory they ever knew – the reigns of David and Solomon. It is a narrative that anyone who counts himself a student – and a steward – of God's Word ought to know well.

The nub of the account is this. Late in the days when Judges ruled in Israel, that nation was preparing for war against her nemesis, the Philistines. Israel was outmanned entirely, but she had a divine King whose Glory-Cloud dwelt majestically in the Holy of Holies above the sacred throne known as the Ark of the Covenant. That King had shown Himself powerful to deliver once and again. But Israel was unwilling to look to the God of the Ark for their deliverance; instead, she put her trust in the Ark of God. Somehow that most sacred of all ritual objects was spirited out of the temple and carried audaciously – in the same spirit you might carry a rabbit’s foot – into battle. The calumny is almost beyond thinking. The pagan peoples would never treat their man-made gods with such disdain (4:7). No wonder that the careless old priest presiding at the tabernacle at that time, the priest Eli, waited so anxiously for news of the battle. The report finally came, and it was so horrific that aged Eli pitched over dead in terror: “the battle was lost, your sons died in that battle, and the Ark of God has been captured by the Philistines!”

Of course, God could not abide such a state of affairs, and soon enough He rescued the Ark in dramatic and retributive fashion. But the nation was still far from Him. And then, for twenty years (1 Samuel 7:2) Samuel the prophet persevered in what must have begun as the loneliest and most disheartening ministry a man could pursue. He went up and down that country, village to village, preaching a simple but demanding sermon: Point 1 – “Put away your false gods – your Baalim and your Ashtaroth, your ear-tickling, lying religion conceived to make you comfortable in what you know to be sin!” And Point 2 – “Trust Yahweh, honor Him and He will deliver you!” In what must have begun as a trickle, but, in God’s time, became a torrent, the people responded in repentance and obedience. That movement of repentance led to a day when the nation gathered to beg God for forgiveness. The Philistines were chagrined and frightened to see the sons of Israel gathering with one heart for any reason, and so they decided to attack. As they approached, the covenant people, rather than trusting in the Ark of God, cried out to the God whose dwelling place was above the Ark. Yahweh “thundered with a mighty sound,” the Philistines recognized that Israel’s God had awakened to their help, and the uncircumcised tormentors of God’s people were routed. Thus was the 40-year Philistine oppression finally broken (Judges 13:1).

But the prophet was wise to realize that the painful lessons of those twenty years could and would be soon forgotten. So he took a deliberate step that would cause his generation and generations to come to be reminded. He set up a “stone of remembrance,” a standing stone, at the place where the Israelites had vanquished their enemies with the help that only Yahweh could give, and that He was ever anxious to give. He called that stone, of course, *Ebenezer* (1 Samuel 7:12) – “stone of help.” Thus, as the people of the covenant – and their children and their children after them – passed that way, they would ask the intended question, “What means this stone?” And the story would be told once again, God would be honored, and the nation would remember.

I wonder if the significance of that “stone of help” can be reduced to English poetry with more grace and meaning than it was by Robinson:

Here I raise my Ebenezer, Here by Thy great help I’ve come.  
And I hope, by thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home.

Thus it is that I am twice scandalized by the “replacement poetry” of modern hymnals. It is distressing that today’s Christian public is so ill-informed that references such as this have to be excised from their worship exercises. Worship ought to have an instructional dynamic. The answer is not to capitulate to the ignorance, but to challenge it, to motivate the worshipper to give the kind of thought to his worship that will assure that the expressions of worship he offers up to God are biblically accurate – yea, biblically framed.

But again, it is distressing that the element of “remembrance” has been made somewhat ancillary in the rewrite. That was the primary point in Robinson’s original, it is a lesson to be legitimately learned from the Old Testament narrative being evocatively referenced, and it is a spiritual principle that is desperately important because we have such an alarming and often crippling capacity to *forget*. God sent His Son to die our death, and one might suppose that for the person who has been made a “new creature” by the efficacy of that thrice-blessed Gospel story, there would never be a moment when that story would be absent from his conscious thoughts. But Jesus knew better. He gave us an Ebenezer, a quiet but bottomlessly significant act of shared worship celebrated regularly by Christians across the ages and the continents, and He commanded that that act of worship be celebrated “in remembrance” of His death.

It is no shame that throughout our earthly lives, our Heavenly Father continues to teach us. It is a shame if He continues to teach us the same lesson over and over because we so soon forget what we have learned. Growth means going on to the next lesson. For that reason, and given our tendency to forget, it’s important to punctuate our lives with reminders. Learn to raise up Ebenezers in your life and in the lives of those whose pilgrimage you share.

Here is an idea. Let’s mount a campaign to restore the words to the hymn as they were originally penned – a totally *ad hoc*, bottom up, un-orchestrated, unfunded, and gut-driven campaign. Use whatever platform you can find, get your church (family, youth group, Bible Study, whatever) to eschew the insipid and counterfeit rendition in favor of the original, and then see if we can bring the world of hymn publishers to its knees (in this one very narrow sense, to be sure!).