

# “Seas Of Crimson”: A Biblical Analysis of Elemental Imagery in Bethel Music’s Lyrics

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## **Abstract**

Bethel Church, a Charismatic Pentecostal megachurch in California, houses one of the world’s most influential worship music artists. In January 2021, the church’s label, Bethel Music Publishing, accounted for over 20% of the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) Top 100 list. Because of Bethel’s considerable influence, it is important to examine the lyrics of their songs. Contemporary worship songs, especially those emerging from the Charismatic Pentecostal movement, are well-known for including elemental imagery (e.g., fire and water) within their lyrics. This research examines Bethel Music’s English lyrics over the past decade for elemental imagery. While there is a potential dichotomy between biblical connections and poetic expression, this research demonstrates how Bethel Music’s use of elemental imagery—specifically fire and water—does not fall to one side of the dichotomy but balances these aspects. Instead, it uses biblical concepts, as well as narratives and quotations, to describe the worshippers’ life of faith.

Keywords: Bethel Music; Contemporary Worship; Elemental Imagery; Pentecostal; Lyric Analysis

## **Introduction: Background of Bethel Music**

Bethel Church was founded in Redding, California, in 1954. In 1995, Bill Johnson became the lead pastor with a vision of revival, which he acquired while attending the Toronto Blessing in Canada (Shuttleworth, 2015, p. 101-102). Under his leadership, Bethel Church grew into a megachurch with a congregation of over 11,000 persons (Joiner, 2021, p. 16). Since then, Bethel has “planted five Bethel churches in the past

15 years” (Bethel, n.d.) and started its broadcast ministry Bethel.TV. (Bethel.TV, n.d.). Undoubtedly, however, one of the most influential aspects of Bethel Church is its music ministry—Bethel Music.

In recent times, Bethel Church has garnered controversy due to Bill Johnson’s theology that emphasizes the Spirit’s power and weakens other theological areas such as Christology (Shuttleworth, 2015 p.114) and his emphasis on spiritual practices and manifestations. When Johnson began at Bethel, his new direction for the church caused “almost half of the church’s members to leave” (Joiner, 2021, p. 44). However, the church has since recovered from these departures. Arising from his emphasis on revival and spiritual vision, Johnson created the School of Supernatural Ministry, which provides a 3-year training course, which “teaches students how to live a supernatural lifestyle by healing the sick, prophesying, casting out demons and much more” (Joiner, 2021, p. 16). At its launch in 1998, the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry only taught 37 students; now, it has around 2500 (Joiner, 2021 p.16). While the church and school have grown significantly, the movement’s greatest influence globally has undoubtedly been through Bethel Music. Even though other churches’ use of these songs for worship has been controversial in some quarters (cf. Tan, 2018), Bethel Music remains one of the most influential voices in contemporary worship music. Since 2010, Bethel created its music label and signed multiple artists that now create the Bethel Artist Collective. Their music label, Bethel Music Publishing, is a notable outlier, because most other worship artists, such as Passion, are signed to record labels, such as sixstepsrecords, that are affiliated with Capitol CMG (Christian Music Group), but Bethel rely on their own label. Bethel’s Artist Collective includes sixteen songwriters from around the country (Bethel Music, n.d.) In addition, Bethel Music artists have successfully co-written with other popular worship artists such as Kari Jobe and Ben Fielding. Andrews recognized the prominence of Bethel in her research, citing the CCLI top list from December 2019, which had 16 songwriter credits from Bethel Music and Jesus Culture labels (Andrews, 2019 p. 92-93). In 2020, the number of songs attributed to Bethel Music Publishing and Jesus Culture Publishing in the US list had increased to 22 (CCLI Top 100, 2021). The CCLI Top 100 lists are unique because they reflect churches’ use of these songs. Therefore, Bethel Music’s current popularity across the global church identifies it as an important corpus of songs to study.

## Scholarship in Lyric Analysis

Many scholars have analysed the CCLI top lists. These analyses often use one of two primary lenses, such as trinitarian or eschatological theologies. Lester Ruth's study (2007) analysed the lists to investigate trinitarian theology in popular songs, focussing primarily on mentions of each person of the Godhead and their relations with one another. Similarly, Michael A. Tapper (2017) obtained the top lists from a specific denomination in Canada, which contained many of the same songs as the U.S. lists. His examination drew upon the work of Colin Gunton to offer a trinitarian analysis.

Another theological area that has been analysed is eschatology. For example, Matthew Westerholm's dissertation (2016) focused on the inaugurated eschatological leanings of the collection of the top contemporary worship songs compiled from the CCLI top lists. He focused on the tension within the songs of the "already" in Christ's triumph and the "not yet" of current sufferings.

While many lyric analyses have focused on the CCLI top lists, other scholars focus on songs from one worship artist, such as Hillsong. Tanya Riches (2010) studied the theological evolution of Hillsong's music from 1996 to 2007. Like Ruth and Tapper, she included a section on Trinitarian Perceptions (p. 102). Riches did not provide specific theological categories but addressed the main themes, adding pentecostal categories such as "expected transformation" (p. 112) and their development through each Hillsong phase. Nelson Cowan (2017) continued from where Riches concluded chronologically and analysed Hillsong's lyrics from 2007 to 2015. Cowan specifically focused on the role of these lyrics in Hillsong's liturgical formation. His examination of doctrinal engagement revealed a variety of different theological themes, including the Trinity and eschatology (p.85-90). Mark Evans (2006) also identifies categories for use in theological analysis focused on "song-type" designated by intent. These categories, such as "confessional" and "evangelistic," can be helpful because they reduce biases created by denominations or doctrines (p. 114)

Pertinent to this article, scholars have also studied Bethel Church. Abigail Jayne Joiner (2021) researched Bethel Church ethnographically and provided a geographical picture of the "ordinary life" of Bethel. Her research focused on the affective geographies and embodied experiences of the spirit. Emily Snider Andrews (2019) also studied Bethel Church but through the lens of liturgical theology. While her research did not include an in-depth lyric study, she provided key insights into the role of music

as a sacrament in evangelical worship, especially at Bethel. Theology at Bethel Church was studied by Abigail Shuttleworth (2015), who analysed the teachings of Pastor Bill Johnson. She highlighted specific theological themes, including Christology, eschatology, and soteriology. Another scholar, Tatiana Kalveks (2021), researched Bethel Music specifically for the theological theme of hamartiology and the music's role in lessening the significance of sin. Kalveks' research is rare in analysing the lyrics from the Bethel movement. A final article written by myself and Monique Ingalls (forthcoming) focused on Bethel Music's lyrics specifically juxtaposed to those used at the Toronto Blessing. That study used the method of text data mining to analyse and compare the lyrics of these two worship experiences. The study revealed many commonalities between the two collections of songs including the prominence of element imagery. The songs used in the Toronto Blessing included frequent water references, which is here later examined in Bethel Music's lyrics.

While some of this previous work has focused on theological themes within the lyrics and the church, none have examined lyrics for specific biblical connections or quotations. Therefore, this paper intends to supplement the previous research on Bethel by providing data related to lyric analysis and biblical connections by researching one aspect of Bethel Music's lyrics, elemental imagery, for its biblical connections and quotations.

## **Elemental Imagery in Song Lyrics**

Song lyrics, in essence, are poetry. While a song is a combination of both music and text, the text is the component that has been studied for theological connections. Our human language is not expansive enough or adequate to describe the nature of God (Macky, 1990, p. 58), which is why imagery, including metaphor, can be so effective in spiritual discipleship. The literary techniques of imagery and metaphor are used frequently in the Bible by artists, poets, and prophets in various ways across both Testaments, and often to describe God and the life of faith. Like songwriters today, the psalmists used poetic techniques such as metaphors to describe their personal experiences. The presence of these is evident enough that Psalm scholar William Brown constructed his entire theology of the Psalter around metaphors. He states, "The effective metaphor ... stands on a common ground of understanding, and builds on it to elicit new references and associations" (2002, p. 6). Imagery such as the

elements of water or fire often helps connect a song's message with something familiar to the listener.

Classic hymns include lines such as "When peace like a river," "Come thou fount of every blessing," and similarly, contemporary worship songs draw on these images as seen in the lyric, "set a fire down in my soul" (Reagan, 2010). At the outset of the contemporary worship music movement, groups such as Scripture in Song and Maranatha! Singers set scripture to a contemporary melody (for more, see Ingalls et al., 2019). Since then, the Bible has continued to be a primary resource for song lyrics for many artists. Direct quotation of the Bible has been a common practice in songwriting. For example, Chris Tomlin's song, "Our God," paraphrases Romans 8:31, "And if our God is for us then who could ever stop us?" (Tomlin, 2010). While songs may not quote the Bible in its entirety (some do, like Scripture in Song), there is a continuing expectation that contemporary lyrics connect to the Bible for theological strength.

Megachurch songwriters often employ imagery in particularly evocative ways. For example, in 2013, Hillsong United released the song "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)" (Houston et al., 2012). This song rose in popularity and peaked at number three on the CCLI Top chart in April 2014. "Oceans" also set a record on Billboard's Hot Christian Songs chart, where it remained as number one for fifty-nine non-consecutive weeks (Asker, 2016). This incredibly popular song evokes the biblical story of Peter walking on water (Riches & Wagner, 2017, p. 7). Its vivid representation of water imagery invites the question of where water might appear in other popular worship songs with Pentecostal-Charismatic origins.

Importantly, the question about metaphor has been raised for other North American Pentecostal revival movements. For example, in *Main Street Mystics: The Toronto Blessing and Reviving Pentecostalism*, Margaret Poloma (2003) identifies the importance of metaphor more generally (rather than specific lyrics) in the music of Pentecostal-Charismatic movements. Specifically, her comments concern the worship at the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church (the site of the "Toronto Blessing"). Importantly, in chapter 2, she directly connects these metaphors to the Bible. In addition, she identifies the prominence of "elemental" references, stating,

The metaphors selected by P/C Christians to talk about their experience are usually biblical concepts or narrative. Common

metaphors used when referring to the renewal/revival are based on the basic earth elements that are used repeatedly in scriptures and in accounts of earlier revivals: rivers, rain, wind, and fire. (Poloma, 2003, p. 50)

Adapting Poloma's findings, this study condensed rivers and rain into one basic element, water, and also searched for "fire" references due to connections with the fire that fell at Pentecost.

While there is not enough space to fully trace the connections between the Toronto Blessing and Bethel Church (see: Baker & Ingalls, forthcoming), the Toronto movement gave Bethel's pastor Bill Johnson his vision of revival (Shuttleworth 2015, p.101). Through their Revival Alliance, Bethel Church maintained connections with the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church, now called Catch the Fire (Wilkinson, 2016 p. 33). In an interview, a Bethel artist highlighted the connections between water in the Bible and water in their lyrics. She stated, "There's so much imagery, I think, in scripture of water that I feel like our songs have just kind of gravitated towards that" (E. Rose, personal communication, March 26, 2021). The recognition of this connection by one of Bethel's artists and worship leaders provides further emphasis for water as a prominent image worthy of study.

Contemporary worship songwriters often use creative expressions to describe the life of faith. This paper details how Bethel Music's lyrics, specifically in the imagery and metaphors of water and fire, contain strong connections to the Bible through direct quotation and allusion to biblical concepts and narratives.

## Methodology

As stated, this paper will analyse the elemental imagery in Bethel Music's lyrics for biblical connections and quotations. It seeks to answer the question: When elemental imagery is used in Bethel Music's lyrics, is it connected to biblical concepts or narratives, or is it solely a creative poetic expression?

The Bible uses imagery in various places, and Bethel Music draws upon many of these narratives. However, as stated, this research focused on the two most frequent elements in Bethel Music's lyrics—water and fire. Before analysing these references, it is essential to establish a biblical understanding of the two elements via three sources

that provide some biblical background. First, *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* by James Rowe Adams (2005) was primarily used to provide a biblical understanding of “fire.” While this book does have a “water” entry, it solely refers the reader to “Baptism” entry and does not provide additional information about water as a metaphor in the Bible. Second, the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Ryken et al., 1998) provides background information about water and fire. Because Adams book does not address water directly, *Washing Away Sin: An Analysis of the Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and Its Influence* by Lesley R. DiFrancisco (2016) will supplement the biblical understanding of water as a cleansing agent. The meaning of the imagery will be discussed shortly.

The songs examined are drawn from ten Bethel Live Albums released during 2010-2019.<sup>39</sup> This represents a repertoire of 127 songs; after the removal of eleven spontaneous tracks and two duplicated acoustic tracks, the remaining total is 114.<sup>40</sup> Of these, fifty-two songs (45%) include elemental imagery in the lyrics. Through the process of text data mining, it was determined that the albums contained no trends regarding an increase or decrease in the use of this imagery over time but rather a relative consistency with a few outliers (see Appendix A). As Google hosts a number of open access Bible software platforms, such as BibleHub and Biblegateway with various translations, it was an appropriate search engine to determine whether the lyrics made direct reference to the Bible.<sup>41</sup> If there was evidence of some connection to the Bible either through a quote or reference to a narrative or biblical concept, it was coded as related to the Bible, but if there were no direct or indirect references to scripture or the biblical background, it was treated solely as imagery emerging from personal experience and cultural context.

The following analysis will demonstrate that while Bethel Music’s inclusion of poetic language, through metaphor and imagery, could be understood through cultural or daily experiences, the songwriter’s use of elemental imagery—specifically water and fire—in the lyrics connects to biblical concepts, narratives, and quotations.

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<sup>39</sup>. Bethel does have one album in Spanish titled, *Bethel Music in Español*. This research focused solely on the English albums.

<sup>40</sup>. The spontaneous tracks on the album are recorded spontaneous songs from the live worship events that were used for the recordings. These lyrics are not planned ahead of time nor are they the type of song that another church would attempt to replicate. The Bethel Music website also does not provide lyrics or chords for these songs.

<sup>41</sup>. The quotes in the biblical understanding sections are all from the ESV translation. When songs correlate with a direct quote, the translation will be indicated.

## A Biblical Understanding of Water

Like fire, water imagery connects to the Bible through direct quotations and allusions to biblical understanding. The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery explains that water is understood biblically in three main positive ways: “as a cosmic source that only God can control and govern, as a source of life, and as a cleansing agent” (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 929). In the Ancient Near East, the waters and seas were often understood as representing the forces of uncontrollable chaos. The God of Israel was distinctive, not least because of His ability to control the waters (Ryken et al., 1998, p.929). God’s power over the waters is seen in Genesis 7 in the flood narrative and the New Testament through stories of Jesus calming the stormy seas [Mt.8:23-27; Mk.4:35-41; Lk.8:22-25]. In the New Testament, the disciples are amazed and baffled by Jesus’ ability to calm the raging waters. Again, their amazement is because the power over the waters was reserved for God alone in their culture (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 931).

Second, another common Biblical concept is water as a source of life. Water is necessary for the survival of human life. The Gospel of John provides two examples of Jesus connecting living water to eternal life and the Holy Spirit. In John 4:7-15, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that He can give her living water. He states that the one who drinks the water he gives will never thirst again because “The water that [Jesus] will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” [John 4:14b]. This concept of living water leading to eternal life is emphasized by Revelation 22:1, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.” Later in John 7, Jesus connects living water with the Holy Spirit stating, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive” [John 7:38-39a] (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 931). Life through water is intimately connected to God.

Third, the most common positive understanding of water is as a cleansing agent. This language is frequently used outside of song lyrics in phrases such as “my sins have been washed away.” Lesley R. DiFransico (2016, p.17) explains how the concept of washing away sin is seen throughout the Bible, noting that the metaphors used for sin tie directly into the metaphors used for the solution: “If sin is understood as a stain, then the solution for sin that will be understood, and possibly enacted, will be washing or wiping” (DiFransico, 2016, p. 17). Water is also used in washing to cleanse oneself



from ritual impurity (DiFransico, 2016, p. 22). In both a metaphorical and literal sense, water can act as a cleansing agent. Specifically, of course, baptism is the sacrament in the Christian faith that “symbolizes cleansing and a passage from death to life.” (Ryken et al., 1998, p.931). The transition from death to life in baptism represents both the harmful and beneficial sides of water— “reversion to watery chaos (a form of dissolution) that precedes the new creation and new life (echoing the imagery of the creation story)” (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 931). The paradox in references to water in both beneficial and harmful ways is paralleled in the lyrics.

Though many of the above water examples are positive, water imagery can also appear negatively. The “water” entry in *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Rykan et al. 1998) concludes with references to other words, including “storm.” Here, “storm” is an adverse example, addressed as a paradox; “the storm is a danger and a necessity. It gives life through its water but death through its violence” (Rykan et al., 1998, p. 817). The headings organizing the entry, however, address the danger more than the necessity: Storm as “wind,” “deity,” “God’s attendant,” “God’s agent of judgment,” “God’s enemy,” “evil spirit,” “flood,” “suffering,” and “The Psalm of the Thunderstorm” (Rykan et al., 1998, pp. 817-819). While the metaphor of a storm extends beyond water to wind or air, the storm is included as “water-related.” Similarly, the Bible uses the storm in a metaphorical manner. Isaiah 54:11 describes an afflicted person as “storm-tossed.” Job also uses storm imagery in his closing conversation with God. He states: “You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm” [Job 30:22]. Both biblical references demonstrate how the storm denotes suffering. A storm did not physically throw about Job, but his life included immense struggle and suffering. Therefore, a storm is one of Job’s images to describe his suffering to God (and is a primary image for Bethel Music songwriters, as will be seen).

In addition to the biblical understanding of water, Bethel Music’s lyrics often allude to water-related narratives. Some examples of these narratives are found in the New Testament related to Jesus. Jesus walks on water [Mt.14:22-36; Mk.6:45-56; Jhn.6:16-24]. Jesus calms the storm when the disciples are frightened, and this specific narrative appears in all three synoptic Gospels [Mt.8:23-27; Mk.4:35-41; Lk.8:22-25]. These narratives and concepts connect to the water references in Bethel Music’s lyrics.

## **“Drenched in Love”: Water in Bethel Music’s Lyrics**

Water is the most used elemental imagery throughout Bethel Music. References to water (37.55%) are far more frequent than fire (6.3%) in Bethel’s lyrics. One would perhaps expect fire references because of fire’s connection to Pentecost or even the Toronto Blessing church’s new name, Catch the Fire. However, one Bethel artist stated, “water is [perceived as] more inviting,” which may be a possible explanation for the water references far outnumbering the fire references. Water appears in a variety of ways throughout Bethel Music’s lyrics. Some examples of different nouns are: “seas,” “ocean,” “river,” “waters,” “waves,” and “fountain.” Water imagery is also found through verbs such as: “flood,” “thirst,” “washed,” and “drench.” Every single album includes water imagery, and it is found in 37.55% of the songs (See Appendix B). The greatest concentration is on the album, *You Make Me Brave*, which includes water imagery in 77.78% of the songs. Due to the large volume of references, they will be organized in two specific ways: references to God and references to human experience. These references draw on biblical concepts and specific scripture passages, and direct quotations are clearly indicated.

Water imagery is often used in worship songs in the context of God’s love. For example, in the Bethel song “*You Make Me Brave*,” the lyric used repetitively in the chorus: “As your love in wave after wave crashes over me crashes over me” (Cook, 2013) is clearly a reference to the ocean shore but also likely a reference to the Message translation of Luke 1:50, which states, “His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.” God’s love is displayed most fully on the cross. Bethel’s lyrics use water imagery to describe God’s actions through the cross. For example, the lyric “You drown our sins in seas of crimson” (Strand et al., 2014) combines two water ideas within eight words—“drown” and “seas.” Though there is no specific Scripture reference for this verse, it draws on the Biblical concept of being washed clean, as mentioned above. It also connects water and blood through the phrase “seas of crimson,” which is a metaphor for the blood of Jesus. The phrase “crimson sea” is used again in a later album in “*Drenched in Love*” (Bashta et al., 2015). Another example of a metaphor connecting water and the cross is the lyric: “The nails in His hands and thorns on His brow / Rivers of mercy endlessly flowing down” (Johnson et al., 2015). “Rivers of mercy” is a direct quote from the King James Version of Lamentations 3:22 [KJV], which states, “These rivers of mercy run fully and

constantly, but never run dry.” This lyric could also be an allusion to the River of Life from Revelation 22 mentioned above. God’s act of giving us life is an act of mercy.

Bethel’s lyrics often also use water imagery about God’s actions. Sometimes this relates to specific biblical events. Most prominently, for example, in the song “No Longer Slaves” (Johnson et al., 2014), the lyrics directly reference Exodus 14, where God splits the sea so the Israelites can get to the other side by walking on dry land. The lyrics put the worshipper in the position of the Israelites with the lyric: “You split the sea so I could walk right through it.” The water metaphor continues to parallel “my fears” with the Egyptians who were drowned in the sea through the subsequent line: “You drowned my fears in perfect love.” These lyrics are an example of how songwriters use biblical narratives to form elemental imagery.

God’s actions also include ones that simultaneously state our condition. For example, when the song uses common washing imagery in phrases such as, “I am washed” (Bashta et al., 2015) or “my every stain is washed away” (Johnson, Riddle, et al., 2012), God is the initiator of the washing. Therefore, these water metaphors are not specifically about human experience but what God has done. In these instances, the lyrics merely state the fact of washing instead of the listener’s response to experiencing God’s love; the focus is primarily on the “why” and “how” the washing occurs—God’s love and Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Water metaphors can also be used directly in relation to human experience. Even when discussing human experience with water imagery, the lyrics continue to draw biblical connections. Such imagery can appear as either harmful or beneficial. First, water can be understood positively, as found in the song “In Over My Head (Crash Over Me)” (Johnson & Gentile, 2014). These lyrics use a variety of water-related images related to the concept of being “in [the water] over my head.” This can be taken as a direct reference to God leading Ezekiel deeper and deeper into the water flowing from the temple. The Ezekiel 47 passage states explicitly that at one point, the water was “knee-deep.” The phrase in this song is, “I’m standing knee deep but I’m out where I’ve never been.” The lyrics present the concept of being submerged (while having connotation to drowning) is usually linked to surrender, which causes the worshipper to rely on God. Typically, the lyrics describe something negative, such as “fears” or “doubts” being drowned by God. In the song “In Over My Head (Crash Over Me)” (Johnson & Gentile, 2014), the lyrics describe the worshipper as drowning in

relation to surrendering to Christ's "love" or "seas of crimson." Drowning metaphorically in love requires a release of control, which in "In Over My Head" is seen as a beautiful thing. When describing the use of water in worship lyrics, one Bethel artist linked it to the concept of being submerged in baptism and how the act of "surrendering to the water in a sense feels kind of symbolic of how we come into the presence of God" (E. Rose, personal communication, March 26, 2021). The lyrics in this song, then, have further connections through the biblical concept of baptism.

However, drowning is also understood in its physical connotation as harmful. While not frequently mentioned in the Bible, this language does appear in the Good News Translation (GNT) of Psalm 38:4 "I am drowning in the flood of my sins." It also appears in Psalm 69:1 [CEV], "Save me, God! I am about to drown." Lyrics referencing drowning from the harmful perspective include, "the wind and waves surround me / And I'm tossed, feel like I'm drowning" (MacKenzie et al., 2013) and "And when I was drowning in my doubt / Your mighty right hand lifted me out" (Cook, 2013 "I Belong"). Though the second reference has a positive outcome, drowning itself is still understood as harmful. Here, the worshiper is drowning in doubt as opposed to the positive drowning in God's love, as mentioned above.

This second reference could also be considered an allusion to the Biblical narrative of Peter walking on water (Matt. 14:28). The complete lyric is: "And when I was drowning in my doubt / Your mighty right hand lifted me out / And now we are walking on the water" (Cook 2013 "I Belong"). When Peter begins to sink, Jesus asks him, "Why did you doubt?" The "I Belong" lyrics refer to this passage, placing the worshiper in Peter's position. The song "Shepherd" also alludes to this narrative stating, "walking on water is just the beginning," implying that God can do even greater things (Cook, 2013). "Waves," like drowning, are utilized both positively and negatively. The negative references include being surrounded or tossed by the waves. The harmful tossing of the waves contrasts with the positive idea presented earlier, with God's love being the waves that crash over the worshiper.

A similar concept to submersion is being "drenched in love." The song, "Drenched in Love" (Bashta et al., 2015), combines original lyrics with the lyrics from the hymn "Nothing But the Blood." Words such as "washed" and "drenched" are used to describe what God has done and the felt result of being free. Many people would

usually view being drenched negatively; however, it becomes desirable when covered with God’s love.

Lastly, the word “thirst” is used neutrally, indicating a sense of longing for water. These references often draw upon Psalm 42:1-2, which states, “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” This directly addresses the idea of thirsting for God. A few Bethel lyrics examples include: “I’m thirsty my soul cannot be quenched” (Johnson & Gentile, 2014), “Awaken my soul, come awake / To hunger, to seek, to thirst” (Riddle, 2011), “I will thirst for Him and Him alone” (Gifford and Matthews, 2010), and “We have gathered together with one thirst and hunger” (Riddle, 2010). Such lyrics all connect to the concept of longing for God, as found in Psalm 42.

### “Storms of Life”: Mixed Water-Related Metaphors

In summary, as mentioned above, while there continues to be a paradox in the approaches to elemental imagery between both positive and negative, it is more common to find water imagery shaped negatively than positively. Some of the negative elemental imagery expands beyond water, specifically in its references to “storms” This section addresses the “mixed” water-related metaphors.

The word “storm” is only ever used in the lyrics negatively, usually to describe the state of chaos in life. The Bible does use storm language about God in an encouraging sense showing God’s power and sovereignty (see: Psalm 29:3). However, in Bethel Music’s lyrics, the primary biblical allusion is to the harmful concepts related to storms. One of the songs uses the phrase “storms of life” (Johnson et al., 2009) to describe the struggles of life. In each of these songs, though, the word “storm” is not far from an encouraging word acknowledging God’s presence with the worshipper during times of turmoil. The following two tables demonstrate how the negative perspective of a storm is placed closely near a positive element that is usually related to God. This encouraging word can come before the storm, as seen in Table 1.1, or the adverse “storm” situation could also be named first, as seen in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.1**

Positive	Negative
When you laugh /	The storm around me ceases (Cook & Strand, 2014)

a peace	in the storm (Johnson et al., 2013)
the victory is Yours /	You're riding on the storm (Fielding, Johnson, et al., 2017)

**Table 1.2**

<b>Negative</b>	<b>Positive</b>
In the chaos of the storm / I have drifted far, far away	But I call out Your name / Cause You are just a breath, a breath away (MacKenzie et al., 2013)
For every storm,	You're the calm, (Strand et al., 2014)
Though the storm it rages...	I am anchored in You / I can feel You, Jesus all around (MacKenzie et al., 2013)

Storms are used metaphorically, but the Bible also includes stories of Jesus calming the storm. The lyrics, then, draw the listener from Jesus calming the physical storms in the Bible to Jesus calming the metaphoric storms of life. When asked about water imagery in the lyrics, one Bethel artist connected water with "peace." She specifically described the importance of God's peace at Bethel and connected this idea to the narrative of Jesus sleeping in the boat during one of the storm narratives (E. Rose, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

A final water-related metaphor is "pouring." God's love is often described as being "poured out," as seen in three Bethel songs, "For the Cross," "Thank You," and "Son of God." God's love being poured out can be understood in two ways. One is more symbolically connected to liquid with God's love being poured out with the blood of Jesus on the cross (e.g., John 19:34). However, this pouring could also be understood more literally as in communion or the Eucharist, which is often accompanied with the passage in Matthew 26, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." In this instance, the liquid used in the sacrament is usually wine or grape juice that is meant to represent the blood of Jesus.

## **A Biblical Understanding of Fire**

Fire appears in the Bible in a variety of contexts. It can be understood functionally through its use for cooking food or as a place where people can commune. However, while fire does physically appear in the text, its symbolic or metaphoric understanding

is more common. Three themes will be explored here: fire as purification, fire as anger, and fire as God's presence.

Fire appears in Old Testament rituals in consuming temple offerings. Some examples of this are 2 Chronicles 7:1, "As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple." Also, in 1 Kings 18:38, after Elijah had dosed the altar and sacrifice with water: "Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the trench." Therefore, it also has developed associated meanings, including "God's desire to destroy sin and to purify people" (Ryken, 1998, p. 287).

Fire is also used to describe the transformation of the human condition through purification and testing. Examples of this include Zechariah 13:9, "And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested." In this passage, refining leads to the declaration of God claiming the people as His own and the people in response claiming the Lord as their God. Another example even connects fire with water in Luke 3:16. John the Baptist explains what the Messiah will do when He comes and states: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Baptism is related to water, cleansing, and purification. When fire connects with baptism, it demonstrates that fire will connect to purification (Adams, 2005, p. 111).

Additionally, fire can also speak of anger and retribution - both from God and humans. In Hosea 8:5, anger is used with the fire metaphor of burning: "my anger burns" [ESV, NIV, NASB]. Ryken further states, God's anger "is hot, and he pours it out like fire" (Ryken, 1998, 288). This also relates to punishment; in Genesis 19:24, God rains fire down on the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and throws the devil into "the lake of fire and sulphur" in Revelation 20:10 (Adams, 2005, pp. 109-111). Jesus specifically calls hell the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22; 18:9) and the fiery furnace (13:42).

Historically preachers have used these connections of fire and hell as an evangelistic tool to convince sinners to respond and accept the gospel. James Rowe Adams states:

Fire as a description of torment in an existence after death may have had a positive effect on some people's conduct, but over the centuries all too few Christians have been frightened sufficiently by the prospect of eternal fire to mold their lives according to the teachings of Jesus. (Adams, 2005, p. 112)

Adams acknowledges that the fire passages in the Bible “may have more power when fire is recognized as a metaphor for an experience of the divine presence.” (Adams, 2005, p. 112). This metaphor has, therefore, had mixed impacts upon Christian discipleship. For this reason, evangelistic references to fire in contemporary worship contexts more often connect to God’s presence more than his wrath.

Not only does fire represent God’s presence in the Old Testament, but it continues to represent God’s presence in the New Testament extending into today through the Holy Spirit, God’s active presence in the world. Though the Holy Spirit is usually not visible like at Pentecost, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is often likened to an internal fire. In Acts 2:3-4, “divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Significantly, Adams believes that the biblical “fire” passages “may have more [evangelistic] power when fire is recognized as a metaphor for an experience of the divine presence or for the present-life result of destructive behavior” (Adams, 2005, p. 112). This approach is particularly prominent within Bethel Music’s lyrics because of its relation to the Charismatic Pentecostal movement and its emphasis on God’s presence and the Holy Spirit. Throughout the lyrics surveyed, fire is used in largely comforting terms rather than wrath or anger.

### **“Burn Like a Fire in Me”: Fire in Bethel Music’s Lyrics**

With Bethel’s Pentecostal roots and practices, one might expect fire references to outnumber water references. Fire references are used less frequently than water; however, imagery of fire still appears in all the Bethel albums reviewed except one, *You Make Me Brave*. In fact, the word “fire” is used nineteen times in fourteen songs. The word “flame” is also used four times. This elemental imagery is significant and biblically rooted.

Fire or flame is typically used in the discussion of God. For example, the imagery is used to address God, “you’re the all-consuming fire” (Aaronson et al., 2010). This lyric directly references Hebrews 12:29, “For our God is a consuming fire.” Another lyrical example, “true love’s fire” (Thompson, 2013), likens God’s love to fire of love as seen in Song of Songs 8:6 “for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.” Poloma notes that Song of Songs is relatively common for songwriters to use as a biblical connection because it



describes personal intimacy with God. Therefore, while Song of Songs “only infrequently finds its way into a typical Sunday sermon,” various Christians from mystics to Pentecostal-Charismatic songwriters have applied “the love story to the soul and the divine” (Poloma, 2003, p. 52). Bethel’s song lyrics also directly reference biblical narratives. For example, the second verse of the song, “Every Crown” (Davenport et al., 2018), references Exodus 13 with these words: “I have watched how You led through the wild / A cloud by day and fire by night / Guiding me to Your promised land.” In the Exodus story, the pillar of fire represented God’s presence with the people of Israel. At the same time, the person singing is analogized with Israel, and therefore this lyric becomes a present call to feel the presence of God in the “wild.” The Exodus in the wilderness for Israel was a period of testing and waiting. Testing and waiting is something experienced in the life of faith today.

Similarly, Bethel’s lyrics correlate personal testing with the desired outcome of being purified. The correlation is accomplished through alluding to “refiner’s fire” via passages such as Psalm 66:10, “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.” Another possible allusion is the direct connection in the Bible between fire and trials as seen in 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” When the lyrics include these concepts, the worshipper reflects on when God “led me through the fire” (Fielding et al., 2018) or contemplates the future when he will “walk with me through the fire” (Guglielmucci, 2007). Fire here does not represent God’s presence but rather trials through which a person walks. God is still present, though, as the one leading and walking with the person emphasizing the close relationship between the worshipper and God.

Another phrase that references biblical narratives is when the lyrics ask God to have fire fall. For example, in “There’s No Other Name” (Johnson et al., 2016), the lyrics include: “Your whisper makes Your fire fall down.” This example also relates to the biblical concept of fire representing God’s presence. Fire falling appears in the Old Testament, as noted in the earlier section, when God would send fire to consume an offering. This fire-falling narrative extends from the Old Testament into the New Testament through Pentecost.

The fire of passion for God’s presence is a key theme within the Bethel repertoire, too. Lyrics that ask God to “burn like a fire in me” (Johnson, Riddle, et al., 2012) or “like a

fire in the night...burn within my soul and mind” (Thompson, 2013). This example of fire is related to the connection previously made of fire and the Holy Spirit and, by extension, God’s presence. The worshippers ask God to make His presence known and allow them to feel His presence like a fire inside. Such a concept may also refer to Luke 24:32, where the disciples state how their hearts burned within them when Jesus walked with them on the Emmaus Road. This internal fire of passion is the most common theme in the lyrics using fire imagery. These phrases are often appealing to God for some kind of action. The lyrics are not merely referencing fire but asking God to make his presence known inside the worshipper using the image of a fire.

Overall, it is clear that the fire imagery and metaphors in the lyrics are drawn from biblical concepts, narratives, and quotations to express the life of faith instead of merely being a poetic expression. Fire and water imagery are used to describe the struggles of life. Fire imagery, however, mostly focuses on God’s presence, while water imagery is primarily used to describe God’s love and God’s actions related to his love for His people.

### **Conclusion: Biblical Language in Creative Expression**

As seen above, Bethel Music’s lyrics clearly integrate the Biblical text within their use of elemental imagery. The above analysis of elemental imagery in the lyrics has shown how Bethel’s songwriters draw on and represent biblical narratives, concepts, and quotations to convey their personal experiences. This combination provides a robust biblical vocabulary for worshippers to use in their everyday lives.

Within the repertoire, fire imagery is often used to denote God’s presence but also provides language for trials and testing. Similarly, water imagery is used to describe God’s actions and love while also providing language to describe the struggles in life. These two elements provide language for both the joyful and painful moments in the Christian’s life of faith. These lyrical references can be considered poetic expressions that draw upon our more contemporary understanding of fire and water; however, Bethel Music’s lyrics make connections to biblical narratives and concepts, often quoting many passages from scripture.

While this research has focused solely on one aspect of the lyrics, other poetic elements would benefit from further examination. If the songs selected for use in the church provide language for God’s people to sing and use in their daily lives, it is

crucial to continue to analyse them. Songs used in the church are poetic expressions for worshipping God, and often these poetic expressions have strong connections to the Bible.

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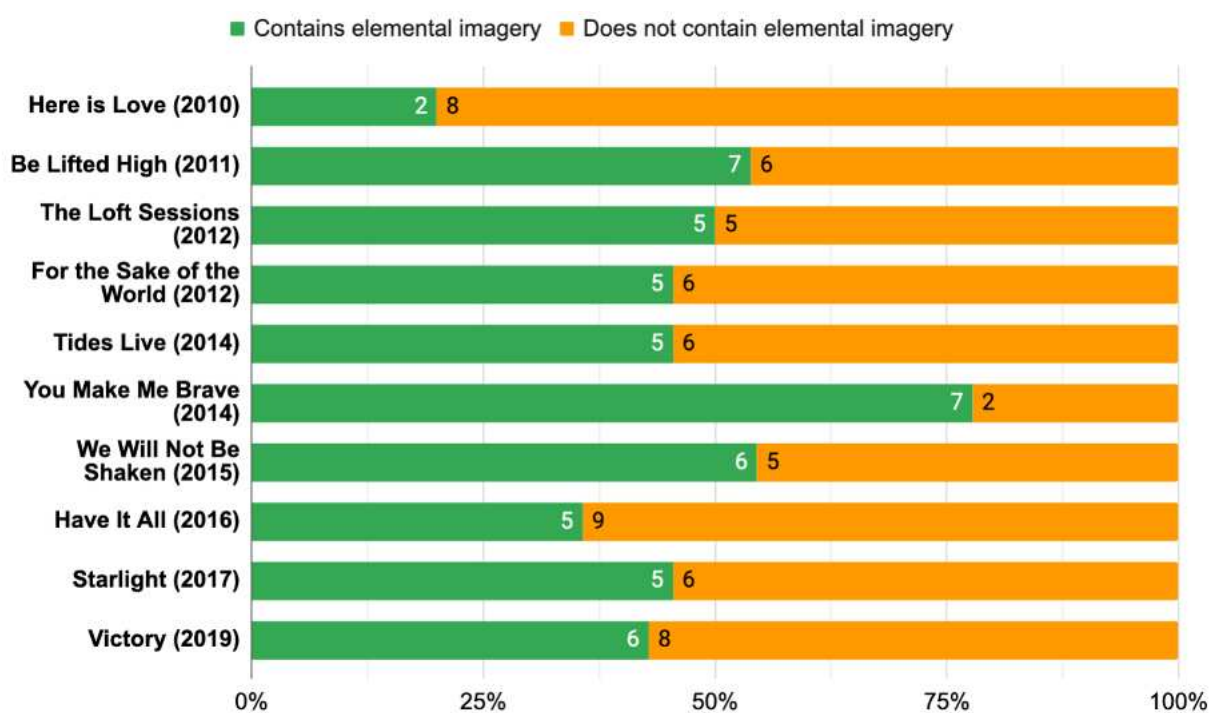
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Appendix A



Appendix B

# of Songs with Imagery Present

