

Anne Steele
and Her Spiritual Vision

Anne Steele and Her Spiritual Vision:

Seeing God in the Peaks, Valleys,
and Plateaus of Life

Priscilla Wong



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Foreword

Even though Anne Steele was the most significant Baptist hymn writer and poetess of the “long” eighteenth century, by the close of the twentieth century her memory was buried under decades of near total oblivion. Thankfully, this has begun to change. In the past few years two major studies of Steele have appeared: John R. Broome’s biography of Anne Steele, the first complete life of the poetess, came out in 2007; and then a year later Cynthia Aalders’s *To Express the Ineffable*, a study of the theology and artistry of Steele’s hymnody, was published. In addition, Julia Griffin has quite recently provided scholars with an erudite and critical edition of the entire Steele corpus, included in the eight-volume series *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720–1840* (2011), edited by Timothy Whelan. Now, three studies—nay, four if we count this monograph of Priscilla Wong—do not a scholarly trend make. But these studies reveal a serious lacuna in many studies of the eighteenth-century Particular Baptist community: namely, the failure to appreciate certain key roles played by female Baptists such as Steele or her contemporary Anne Dutton, for example, in this era.

Through the medium of the main hymnal of the transatlantic Baptist community, namely, that of John Rippon, Steele’s hymns played an especially significant role in shaping the prayers and thoughts of the numerous Baptists who sang them. These hymns were also a factor in the profound renewal and expansion that came to Baptist circles in this period. And so Priscilla Wong’s new study of spiritual themes in Anne Steele’s hymns is indeed welcome. May

it be a means of deepening our appreciation and understanding of Baptist piety in the late eighteenth century, one of the most important eras in the history of God's people.

— Michael A. G. Haykin

Acknowledgments

Anne Steele's hymns and poems would not have been published had it not been for those who facilitated the process of their publication. Devout and gifted pastors and writers encouraged and gave advice to Anne Steele, and her family, having the financial means to do so, bore the cost of publication. Anne Steele's abilities as a writer were thus nurtured by the faith that her friends and family had in her work and her success by their bold and loving insistence that it ought to be surrendered to the public eye. In the same vein, I am deeply indebted to many for the materialization of this book.

This study began as a dissertation that was submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the master of theological studies degree at Toronto Baptist Seminary (TBS). This book would not have been possible without the help of Dr. Michael Haykin of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. When I consulted him for topics for my paper, he suggested the piety of Anne Steele as reflected in her hymnody. Furthermore, I would like to express my deep appreciation for his lectures in church history and spirituality, which I had the privilege of listening to during my study at TBS, for they truly opened my eyes to the vast and rich treasures of my Christian heritage and sparked a genuine interest to find out more. It was these lectures that provided me with the necessary background to do further independent research, which ultimately brought this dissertation to fruition.

I am also thankful to Dr. Dennis Ngien of Tyndale Seminary for his continual encouragement over the past several years. It was the recognition received from his Centre for Mentorship and Theological

Reflection that instigated my studies in seminary. I have come to see the value of having a spiritual advisor holding me accountable for what I have been given and directing me toward how to use it.

I would also like to thank Dr. Glendon G. Thompson of Toronto Baptist Seminary for calling me into his office after class one day and advising me to keep on writing. Encounters such as these certainly help to strengthen the resolve of the aspiring writer.

Much thanks, of course, goes to Reformation Heritage Books for agreeing to publish this book and to the RHB staff for all their hard work in preparing this book for publication.

I express grateful appreciation for the extensive work done on Anne Steele by J. R. Broome, Cynthia Y. Aalders, and Sharon James. Their research provided the resources that made it possible for me to focus on key areas of Anne Steele's life and works. Just as they were motivated to contribute to this topic that has received little attention until recent years, I felt compelled to make the life of Anne Steele and her hymns more accessible to today's audience.

Thanks to Jon Oakley for graciously providing me with beautiful photos of Broughton (Steele's hometown), one of which has been used for this book cover.

Thanks to my sister Grace, mother of four, who managed to squeeze in time in her busy schedule to come up with a cover design for this book.

I would also like to show my gratitude to all my family and friends for their continual support of my writing endeavors.

A hearty thanks also to my children—four-year-old Nathaniel and two-year-old Jenuine—for their long afternoon naps afforded me the hours I needed daily to do my writing.

Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my husband, Lee—for the many, many sacrifices he made so that I could spend my time studying, researching, and writing; for his relentless support of my writing ambitions; and for his words of encouragement during times when I needed to hear them most.

To God alone be the glory!



*Teach me to begin
the work of heaven below.*



CHAPTER ONE



Introduction: Seeing God in the Circumstances of Life

Only recently has substantial work been done on Anne Steele (1717–1778). Steele was an eighteenth-century British writer of hymns, psalms, poetry, and prose. She has been recognized as one of the leading female hymn writers of her time. In the first extensive biography on Steele, J. R. Broome writes that she “found herself among giants in hymnology and it is important to understand where she is to be placed in that hierarchy of gifted men, for she was in fact the only woman of that period whose hymns have stood the test of time.”¹ This is a telling statement of Steele’s aptitude for writing, for the “giants” of her time included Isaac Watts (1674–1748), often known as the father of the English hymn; Charles Wesley (1707–1788); Philip Doddridge (1702–1751); John Newton (1725–1807); and William Cowper (1731–1800).

While Steele originally wrote for personal devotional reflection, her father, William Steele, eventually used her hymns for worship services at the Broughton church where he pastored. Steele went on to produce hymns adapted for specific occasions for her church, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper.² In 1769 the first hymnbook to include her published hymns was John Ash’s and

1. J. R. Broome, *A Bruised Reed: The Life and Times of Anne Steele* (Harpenden, U.K.: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2007), 151.

2. “Anne Steele regularly composed hymns for services at the chapel, which must have been read, verse by verse, probably by her father from the pulpit, and led by a group of singers with their manuscript tunebooks.” Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 214.

Caleb Evans's *A Collection of Hymns Adapted to Public Worship* (known as the Bristol Collection), a book commonly used by Calvinistic Baptists (or Particular Baptists). Of the 412 hymns found in this collection, sixty-two belonged to Steele. A hymnbook that became even more popular was John Rippon's *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, published in 1787, which included hymns by authors of different denominations. Of its 588 hymns, fifty-three belonged to Steele.³ According to Rippon, in compiling the collection he sought to "walk abroad and gather up the Golden Ears which have long lain scattered in the Fields of Piety and Genius."⁴ The minister had sifted through ninety volumes of hymnbooks, hymns, and psalms in England and America, so it is amazing to consider that from thousands of hymns Steele's represent almost 10 percent of the collection.⁵

3. See Cynthia Y. Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable: The Hymns and Spirituality of Anne Steele*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2008), 40:60–65 for a background of these hymnbooks. See also Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 152.

Fifteen thousand copies of Rippon's hymnbook were sold in Britain within five years of its first publication, and by 1828, two hundred thousand copies had been sold in Britain and one hundred thousand in North America. Ken R. Manley, "'Sing Side by Side': John Rippon and Baptist Hymnody," in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White*, ed. William H. Brackney, Paul S. Fiddes, and John H. Y. Briggs (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1999), 149, 151.

4. John Rippon, *Selection* (1787), viii, quoted in Manley, "'Sing Side by Side,'" 131.

5. John Rippon (1751–1836), a leading English Baptist minister, felt a need for a collection of hymns (one reason the Bristol Collection became inadequate was that specific subjects and doctrines were not addressed). Theological accuracy was the minister's primary concern: the collection comprised a "distinctly orthodox Calvinist theology" and "a strong evangelistic spirit." Manley, "'Sing Side by Side,'" 130–32, 138, 154.

The only authors in these hymnbooks appearing more than Steele are Watts and Doddridge. Rippon included 101 of Doddridge's hymns and thirty-nine of Watts's (since *Selection* was intended to supplement Watts's own collection, *Hymns and Psalms*). One reason Watts was the Baptists' favorite was because his hymns were "doctrinally orthodox, objective in tone, and

Steele wrote 144 hymns, set thirty-four psalms to verse, and composed numerous poems and prose meditations. The first publication was in 1760, when two volumes of her hymns and poems were published under the title *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional* (her works were published under the pseudonym “Theodosia”). In 1780 a new edition was published under the title *Miscellaneous Pieces in Verse and Prose*, adding a volume of poems and prose reflections. This latter edition opened with a preface on Steele’s life by Caleb Evans (1737–1791), a leading London Baptist minister who was also a family friend. It was clear he had deep respect for Steele in the way he wrote of her Christian character:

The duties of friendship and religion occupied her time, and the pleasures of both constituted her delight. Her heart was “apt to feel” too often to a degree too painful for her own felicity, but always with the most tender and generous sympathies for her friends.... Her life was a life of unaffected humility, warm benevolence, sincere friendship and genuine devotion. A life, which it is not easy truly to describe, or faithfully to imitate.⁶

In 1808, Steele’s three volumes of writings were released as a two-volume set in North America under the title *The Works of Miss Anne Steele*. In 1863, another edition was published in London under the title *Hymns, Psalms, and Poems* and included a memoir by John Sheppard in which he expressed his appreciation for Steele:

Her usefulness has far distanced her fame: she exerts an influence where her history is unknown; she ministers by many a sick bed; she furnishes the song in many a night of affliction. Every Sunday hears her hymns in many churches.... Men use her hymns who never heard her name, and many a one has

free from frivolities.” Aalders notes that Wesley’s perceptible absence from this list was “a matter of theological fidelity”: Wesley’s theology was Arminian while the Baptists were Calvinistic. Manley, “Sing Side by Side,” 130, 132–33; Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 60.

6. As quoted in preface to *Bruised Reed*, by Broome, n.p.

uttered his penitence and desires, in language whose author he never knew.⁷

The most recent edition is a compilation of all of Steele's hymns, published in 1967, which includes a biographical sketch of Steele's life and family history by J. R. Broome.

Steele's life demonstrates remarkable piety and a profound understanding of the workings of God. Her medium of expression was writing, from which the modern reader can draw inspiration and valuable lessons for godly living. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, writing on the value of recovering church history for the purpose of renewing the spirituality of Christians today, says of Steele's hymns, "[Her] religious verse poignantly expresses trust in Christ in the midst of all life's hardships. Her verse is a treasure from the evangelical attic well worth bringing back downstairs."⁸ Broome remarks, "While no written record survives of her spiritual experience, yet in her open frank way she reveals much of it indirectly in her hymns, which gives to them a peculiar relevance to succeeding generations of Christians who walk in the same spiritual paths as she did."⁹

Recent Works on Anne Steele

J. R. Broome's biography, *A Bruised Reed: The Life and Times of Anne Steele*, is an exhaustive work, complete with family trees, illustrations of the local landscape, extracts from prefaces appearing in her published works, a thorough account of the historical context (particularly the situation in which Steele's family found themselves as Dissenters of the Calvinistic Baptist denomination, which will be discussed in chapter 3), and an in-depth description of Steele's personal, family, and church life. Broome also examines Steele's

7. As quoted in preface to *Bruised Reed*, by Broome, n.p.

8. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "Retrieval and Renewal: A Model for Evangelical Spiritual Vitality," in *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 111.

9. Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 173.

writings and, at times, gives the context in which they were written, allowing the reader to see how she responded to particular events and circumstances in her life in light of her Christian faith.¹⁰ Steele's hymns, psalms set to verse, and prose are also included in the book.

Sharon James's book *In Trouble and in Joy: Four Women Who Lived for God* offers a thematic approach to Steele's life and writings, chronicling her life as it reveals how an individual was able to find contentment and joy even in the midst of suffering.¹¹ James's book is a practical resource for the mainstream reader desiring to become familiar with Steele. The book sheds light on the difficult circumstances Steele faced—as a child of Dissenters, as a woman in the eighteenth century who was not only a writer but willfully single and whose ill health caused her severe pain and discomfort in an age with no anesthetics or benefits of advanced medicine. Although James does not offer a close analysis of Steele's hymns, she provides samples of her work that fall under particular themes.¹² James's book is a good starting point for Broome's considerable one.

10. Many spiritual themes found in Steele's hymnody have been addressed by the authors discussed in this chapter. The hymns mentioned in Broome's book, for instance, deal with national matters, scriptural truths, and beliefs pertaining to the Reformed, Calvinistic tradition. According to Broome, among the subjects that emerge from Steele's hymns include the need to have faith in Jesus as the only source of help, happiness, and hope; the vanity and transience of life compared to the life to come; the longing for divine assurance when facing trials of faith; the yearning for complete submission to the will of God; the hope that comes from heaven in times of suffering; the appreciation of God's creation, and above all, His salvation; the sorrows and sufferings of Christ; the reality of sin in humanity; the Holy Spirit as Comforter; and the power of the preached word in the ministry of the gospel. Doctrinally, her hymns cover the Trinity, incarnation, redemption, and the sufferings and resurrection of Christ.

11. Sharon James, *In Trouble and in Joy: Four Women Who Lived for God* (Darlinton, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2003). James's book looks at the lives and writings of Margaret Baxter (1639–1681), Sarah Edwards (1710–1758), Anne Steele, and Frances Ridley Havergal (1836–1879).

12. James's sampling shows that Steele wrote about topics such as the sense of God's presence in the beauties of nature, gratitude for the goodness of God, the temporary nature of earthly things (and the need for preparing for

Cynthia Y. Aalders's book, *To Express the Ineffable: The Hymns and Spirituality of Anne Steele*, presents another dimension to Steele's life and works. While Broome's book largely focuses on the historical and James's book on the thematic, Aalders's book is wider in scope as she examines Steele's life and writings from a historical, theological, and literary perspective. The biographical sketch of Steele is presented to facilitate the study of the spiritual themes emerging from her hymns. Aalders performs a close analysis of Steele's hymns and looks specifically at the themes of ineffability (the seeming impossibility of using human language to express meaningful truths about God), suffering and the silence of God, and resignation and longing. Moreover, Steele's writing is presented not in isolation but with respect to the context in which she wrote—for instance, eighteenth-century Baptist Calvinism, the start of evangelicalism, early Romanticism, and the Age of Sensibility.

Prior to Broome, James, and Aalders, biographical information on Steele was relatively incomplete and even distorted. Dictionaries and biographical entries, however brief and dated, generally highlight Steele's gifted poetic abilities; her piety (one entry identifies Steele as the "female Poet of the Sanctuary");¹³ her physical ailments; an alleged drowning incident involving the man she had been courting;¹⁴ her father, William Steele, Baptist minister

eternity), the sovereignty of God and the acceptance of suffering, calm resignation to the providence of God, contemplation of heavenly realities in times of pain and sorrow, and devotion to Christ.

13. Henry S. Burrage, *Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns* (Portland, Maine: Brown Thurston and Company, 1888), 46.

14. Many of these earlier entries describe James Elcombe as being her fiancé who drowned while bathing in the river the day before their wedding. However, the Steele family papers provide no explicit indication that Steele was ever engaged to Elcombe. The inaccurate accounts surrounding Elcombe's drowning "have been made that Steele subsequently led a romantically unfulfilled life and that she had no choice but to accept the lonely and disappointed life of a spinster.... This manipulation of her life by her biographers suggests an outmoded and inaccurate cultural construction of gendered identity. The hidden history reveals that Anne Steele was gregarious and socially popular,

of a church in Broughton, whose death in 1769 was devastating to her; and the solemnity of her final words before her own death in 1778, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” These particular scenes taken from her life have, unfortunately, played a part in forming an impression of Steele as merely a victim of tragedy.¹⁵ Assessing this earlier body of information in light of the Steele family archive, which only recently was made available at the Angus Library at Regent’s Park College at Oxford University, J. R. Watson and Nancy Cho write:

The picture of Anne Steele’s life and character handed down to us is in fact a collage constructed from selected fragments of her life. The most heart-rending aspects of her life history, her physical suffering and emotional hardships, have been privileged, cut out, and reshaped into a new, reconstituted whole, a mythologised version of Steele’s life moulded for the cultural and ontological needs of her biographers and the audiences they were writing for. At the same time, other aspects of her life have been obscured and forgotten from literary history.¹⁶

With the more recent publications, then, there is the hope of securing a solid grasp of the context in which Steele wrote so that a more accurate picture can be formed of Anne Steele the person—a faithful woman who committed her life and talents to the purpose of glorifying her Creator.

Worth noting in these earlier entries is the attention paid to the uniqueness of Steele’s hymns. While acknowledging her lesser technical skill when compared to the likes of Watts or Wesley, they praise her compositions for their emotional quality and honesty. Her hymns have been described as showing “depth and sincerity

but the myth of the suffering tragic spinster and hymn writer has been more potent than the reality.” J. R. Watson and Nancy Cho, “Anne Steele’s Drowned Fiancé,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28 (2005): 118, 120. See also discussion in Broome, 101–3; in James, *In Trouble and in Joy*, 127–28; and in Alders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 8–10.

15. Watson and Cho, “Anne Steele’s Drowned Fiancé,” 118.

16. Watson and Cho, “Anne Steele’s Drowned Fiancé,” 118.

of feeling,”¹⁷ “full of genuine Christian feeling,” displaying “more elegance than force,”¹⁸ giving us the “Hymn of Introspection and of intense devotion to Christ’s person, expressed in fervid terms of heightened emotion... [adding] to English Hymnody the plaintive, sentimental note.”¹⁹ Her psalms have been described as comparable to Watts’s “in literalness, smoothness, and evangelical power.”²⁰

Broome observes that Steele’s hymns possess a deep, personal dimension. Describing her spiritual state, he writes, “Anne had an educated mind, humbled by grace. Hers was not a natural religion, but a religion of the heart. Her hymns reflected things which she had ‘heard, seen with her eyes, looked upon, and her hands had handled of the Word of life’ [1 John 1:1].”²¹ The subjects Steele wrote on speak intimately to the hearts of Christians because she had a real experience of them. This is why modern readers are still able to connect with the subject matter of Steele’s writing—her “hymns contain truth, experience, and worship. They will never grow old while Christians continue to experience the grace of God.”²²

Spiritual Themes Explored in This Book

A perusal of Steele’s hymns reveals how plainly and genuinely she saw God, even in circumstances when it may have been difficult to do so. Furthermore, Steele’s vision did not merely consist of some vague impression or notion of God, but rather her vision involved

17. Louis Benson, *The English Hymn, Its Development and Use in Worship* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 214, quoted in “Anne Steele’s ‘Psalm 13’: A Hymn to Be Mined,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998): 127–28.

18. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 4th ed., s.v. “Steele, Anne.”

19. Benson, *The English Hymn*, 538.

20. *The Baptist Encyclopedia: A Dictionary of the Doctrines, Ordinances, Usages, Confessions of Faith, Sufferings, Labors, and Successes, and of the General History of the Baptist Denomination in All Lands*, rev. ed., s.v. “Steele, Miss Anna.”

21. Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 175.

22. Broome, *Bruised Reed*, 175.

seeing the dynamic and intricate workings of her Creator. By unpacking the spiritual themes of Steele's hymns, then, deep theological truths can be extracted.

This book will examine three themes found in Steele's hymnody, all of which relate to how she was able to see God in different circumstances of her life. First, it will examine the way Steele was able to see God in her everyday living, in the creation that surrounded her. Second, it will look at how Steele was able to see God in her suffering. Third, it will reflect on how Steele was able to maintain a strong vision of heaven even as she resided on earth. These three themes touch upon the various points that are encountered in the Christian journey—in life's seeming ordinariness, in life's inevitable adversity, and in life's perpetual quest for that which lies beyond.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will each address the above spiritual themes. Prior to hymn analysis, the chapters will begin with a general explanation of the theology behind the spiritual theme to be explored (set within the framework of John Gill's theological writings, since Steele was familiar with this Baptist theologian's work) and a proper historical context as it pertains to Steele's life.

The objective is that a close analysis of Steele's hymns in relation to specific themes will not only establish a more coherent and intimate picture of her life and spirituality, but also cultivate a more intense desire for Christians to grow in their faith and understanding of God.