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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Isaac Watts's Hermeneutical Principles and the Decline of English Metrical Psalmody

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Isaac Watts issued his metrical version of the Psalms in 1719 and for more than a hundred years it was surrounded by controversy. For instance, in 1835 T. S. Grimshawe issued an edition of William Cowper's works and, in the introduction to the latter's hymns included in *Olney Hymns* (1779), he declared that 'no man has accomplished this important task [of rendering the psalter in singable verse] more successfully than Watts . . . and we hesitate not to assert, that if Watts had been a churchman [that is, a member of the established church rather than a dissenter], his version would have been in universal repute among us.'¹ This, however, represents a superficial understanding of the controversy.

A system of theology is also an hermeneutic, a particular interpretation of Scripture; and therefore hymns not only have to do with theology but also with hermeneutical principles, especially those hymns which are based on specific biblical passages. When Watts published his *Psalms* he also introduced a new hermeneutic which was to prove destructive of the concept and practice of Christians singing parts of the Old Testament.

Before Watts published his *Psalms* there were two metrical psalters in general use, the so-called *Old* and *New Versions*. The *Old Version* was *The whole booke of Psalmes collected into Englysh metre by T. Sternhold, J. Hopkins & others: conferred with the Hebrew*,² which made its first appearance (as a complete metrical psalter) in 1562. It was a self-conscious adaptation of the earlier *One and Fiftie Psalmes of David in Englishe metre, whereof .37. were made by Thomas Sterneholde: ād the rest by others. Cōferred with the hebrewe*, which had been issued by the English exiles in Geneva in 1556.³ Although there were differences between those who supported the newly-established order of the English Church and those who preferred the pattern of Geneva, both sides were united in their approach to metrical psalms. In June 1567 a number of men were brought before the Bishop of London, Edmund Grindal,⁴ to explain why they had neglected public worship in favour of private worship

according to the Anglo-Genevan order. For all their differences with regard to the conduct of public worship, both sides appear agreed on the matter of metrical psalms: although they were not the actual Word of God, they were, however, as close as possible to the vocabulary and meaning of Scripture.⁵ One of the participants summed up the situation with the comment: 'Every word and thing agreeing with the Word of God is the Word of God.'⁶ Underlying this understanding of metrical psalmody is the Reformers' view that 'The Scriptures are "the Word of God" . . . whatever truth is brought unto us contrary to the Word of God, it is not truth, but falsehood and error: whatsoever honour done unto God disagreeeth from the honour required by His Word, it is not honour unto God, but blasphemy.'⁷ Like their Continental counterparts, the English Reformers not only stressed the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures but also their essential unity: the Old Testament is no less the Word of God than the New Testament.⁸ Thus the metrical psalter was not simply regarded as a Christian songbook, but as the Word of God set in rhyme and music. Thomas Becon wrote: 'Let no filthy..songs..be sung..but rather songs of the Holy Scripture, and the psalms of David, set forth in metre in our English tongue, very apt for the purpose.'⁹

Over the years the rather pedestrian rhymes of the *Old Version* became wearisome to many and so there was issued in 1696 *A New Version of the Psalms of David, Fitted to the Tunes Used in Churches*, By N. Tate and N. Brady,¹⁰ but the basic hermeneutic remained the same: to reproduce as closely as possible in metre and rhyme the vocabulary and meaning of Scripture.

Isaac Watts's early versions of the psalms appeared in his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707), and in the preface to that collection the author makes it clear that he is introducing a new hermeneutic with regard to metrical psalmody:

While we sing the Praises of our God in his Church, we are empty'd in that part of Worship which of all others is nearest a-kin to Heaven; and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon Earth. . . . I have long been convinc'd, that one great Occasion of the Evil arises from the Matter and Words to which we confine our Songs. Some of 'em are almost opposite to the Spirit of the Gospel: Many of them foreign to the State of the New-Testament, and widely different from the present Circumstances of Christians. . . . When we are just entering into an Evangelic Frame by some of the Glories of the Gospel presented in the brightest Figures of *Judaism*, yet the very next line perhaps which the Clerk parcels out unto us, hath something in it so extremely *Jewish* and cloudy, that darkens our Sight of God the Saviour: Thus by keeping too close to *David* in the House of God, the vail of *Moses* is thrown over our Hearts. . . . Far be it from my Thoughts to lay aside the Book of Psalms in public worship. . . . But it must be acknowledged still, that there are a thousand lines in it which were not made for a Church in our Days, to assume as its own: There are also many Deficiencies of Light and Glory, which our Lord *Jesus* and his Apostles have supply'd in the Writings of the New Testament. . . . You will always find in this Paraphrase dark expressions enlighten'd, and the Levitical

Ceremonies and Hebrew Forms of Speech chang'd into the Worship of the Gospel, and explain'd in the Language of our Time and Nation. . . . After this manner should I rejoice to see a good part of the Book of Psalms fitted for the Use of our Churches, and *David* converted into a Christian: But because I cannot persuade others to attempt this glorious work, I have suffer'd my self to be persuaded to begin it, and have, thro' Divine Goodness, already proceeded half way through.¹¹

In the second edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1709) the metrical psalms were withdrawn in preparation for the complete psalter, which took a further ten years to complete: *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, And Applied to the Christian State and Worship* (1719). In 'The Preface or, An Enquiry into the right Way of fitting the Book of Psalms for Christian Worship' Watts repeated the criticisms he had earlier voiced in the preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, but went further in explaining his intention of seeing 'David converted into a Christian':

I have not been so curious and exact in striving every where to express the antient Sense and Meaning of David, but have rather exprest myself as I may suppose *David* would have done, had he lived in the Days of *Christianity*. And by this means perhaps I have sometimes hit upon the true Intent of the Spirit of God in those Verses farther and clearer than *David* himself could ever discover, as *St Peter* encourages me to hope. *1 Pet.* 1:11,12 . . . In all places I have kept my grand Design in view, and that is to teach my Author to speak like a *Christian*.¹²

It was Watts's dispensational theology¹³ which led him to reject whole psalms,¹⁴ or major parts of others, and substitute for them the teaching of the New Testament, giving the impression that somehow the revealed word in the Old Testament was inadequate. It was over this latter point that the controversy arose, which had to do with hermeneutics rather than hymnody (or psalmody) as such. Although Watts wrote some fine hymns on the distinction between law and gospel,¹⁵ it would appear that he equated law with the Old Testament and gospel with the New. However, the demands of law and the promise of grace are present in both Testaments. An anonymous writer accused Watts of altering the teaching of the psalms,¹⁶ and declared: 'The Spirit of God spoke by David . . . and so it would be very Rash to say they [the Psalms] are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel; for the self-same Holy Spirit can't oppose Himself.'¹⁷ So the two sides of the debate developed. In the older metrical psalters the concern had been with the doctrine of inspiration, and with the faithful reproduction in metrical form of the teaching of the psalms. In Watts's *Psalms* the concern was with the biblical doctrine of salvation, which in Old Testament terms was incomplete and therefore had to be completed in the hermeneutic of the psalm. On the one hand there was the concern for what Scripture says in a particular passage, and on the other with what the Scriptures as a whole mean. In the older metrical versions there was the concern for a re-presentation of the psalm, but in Watts the concern was for reinterpretation.

Whatever the fine points of the hermeneutical debate, Watts's version of the psalms became very popular and was in a large measure responsible for the decline in the use of the older metrical psalters. Before Watts's publications the only songbooks in the churches were the metrical psalters. After Watts many hymnbooks appeared, at first alongside the older metrical psalters, but soon they were replaced by collections, locally issued in towns and parishes and invariably entitled *Psalms and Hymns*, which included selections of metrical psalms from numerous sources: many were taken from Watts's psalter. Both the *Old* and *New Versions* continued to be used in some churches right into the nineteenth century, but were eventually swept aside by the flood of hymnbooks which was a prominent feature of the Victorian church. This Victorian legacy is to be seen in most contemporary English hymnbooks which include but few metrical psalms—even those of Watts.¹⁸

Watts is rightly regarded as the father of the English hymn, but he can also be seen as the assassin of the English metrical psalm.

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NOTES

This paper was prepared as a contribution to the Congress of the Internationale Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Hymnologie, on the theme The Old Testament and the Church Hymn, held in Erfurt, August 1977, and appeared in *Internationale Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Hymnologie Bulletin* Vol. 4 (April 1977), pp 54-59.

- 1 T. S. Grimshawe, ed., *The Works of William Cowper: His Life, Letters, and Poems* 4th edition, (W. Tegg : Kibdib 1854) p 654.
- 2 See M. Frost, *English & Scottish Psalm & Hymn Tunes c. 1544-1677* (OUP & SPCK : London 1953) pp 13 ff.
- 3 Frost, *op.cit.* p 3.
- 4 Grindal's translation of Capito's *Gib Fried zu unser Zeit, O Herr* was included in the early Elizabethan English metrical psalters; see R. A. Leaver, *The Liturgy and Music: A Study of the Use of the Hymn in Two Liturgical Traditions* (Grove Books : Bramcote 1976) pp 27 f.
- 5 The titlepages of both the Genevan and English psalters stress that the metrical versions are faithful to the meaning of the original Hebrew.
- 6 *The Examination of Certain Londoners before the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, June 20, 1567*, in *Remains of Edmund Grindal* ed. by W. Nicholson (Parker Society : Cambridge 1843) p 215.
- 7 *The Works of John Jewel* ed. by J. Ayre Vol. 4 (Parker Society : Cambridge 1850) pp 1163 ff.
- 8 See Articles 6 and 7 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (1563), which were an expansion of articles 5 and 6 of the *Forty-Two Articles* (1553): *Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation*; and *Of the Old Testament* (*The Old Testament is not to be rejected* [1553]); see W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Longmans, Green & Co : London 1930) pp 103 ff, and 134 ff.

CHURCHMAN

- 9 *The Catechism of Thomas Becon*, ed. by J. Ayre (Parker Society : Cambridge 1884) p 361.
- 10 See J. Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* rev. edition, (J. Murray : London 1915) pp 919 ff and 799 ff.
- 11 S. L. Bishop, *Isaac Watts Hymns and Spiritual Songs 1707-1748: A Study in Early Eighteenth Century Language Changes* (Faith Press : London 1962) pp li-lv.
- 12 I. Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, And apply'd to the Christian State and Worship* (J. Clark, et al : London 1719) pp xix f.
- 13 See, for example, I. Watts, *A Short View of the Whole Scripture History* 8th edition (J. Buckland, et al : London 1767) pp 18, 60, etc.
- 14 Watts omitted Psalms 28, 43, 52, 54, 59, 64, 70, 79, 88, 108, 137, 140, 141.
- 15 Bishop, *op.cit.* pp 112, 294.
- 16 *A Vindication of David's Psalms, From Mr I. Watts's Erroneous Notions and Hard speeches of Them* (A. Jacob : London 1727) p 36.
- 17 *Ibid.* p 11. 'My concern is to see christian congregations shut out divinely inspired psalms, and take Dr Watts's flights of fancy; as if the words of a poet were better than the words of a prophet, or as if the wit of a man was to be preferred to the wisdom of God. . . . Why should Dr Watts, or any hymn maker not only take precedence of the holy Ghost, but also thrust him entirely out of the Church?'; W. Romaine, *An Essay on Psalmody*, (London [no publisher given], 1775) p 106.
- 18 The one notable exception is Watts's version of Psalm 90, *Our God our help in ages past*, which has become an English national hymn, appearing in practically every hymnbook. A new awareness of the need for English metrical psalmody can perhaps be seen in the publication of *Psalm Praise* (Falcon : London 1973) and in the translations of Erik Routley and others in *Cantate Domino*, new edition (Kassel, etc. : Barenreiter 1974).