

# ISAAC WATTS AND ARTISTIC KENOSIS

## THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE WORK OF BRITAIN'S PIONEER HYMNWRITER

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To many people, Isaac Watts is remembered as the author of several famous Christian hymns. What few realise is that these well-known hymns were not written in a vacuum, but conceived in an era of deep controversy with regard to the praise of the Protestant churches. For Watts not only possessed the poetic ability to write meaningful hymns, but also the argumentative skills to present successfully the biblical case for their introduction into public worship, and he also had the good fortune to see the praise of the majority of the nation's churches transformed within his lifetime. However, as is the case during many such times of change, there remained denominational and geographical areas unaffected by the insights of the movement. So, two and a half centuries later, the words and convictions of Watts can perhaps be heard and applied once more, as we address the issues in a manner which is biblical, scholarly and expedient and adding several forgotten dimensions to the continuing debate.

### **The Concept of his Mission: Artistic Kenosis**

In the field of hymnography, no one held such a pioneering or chronologically decisive position as Watts. Before him attempts were tentative, and whatever may have moulded the development of later hymnographers, none of them can be said to be totally unaffected by his example, even if they did not imitate him stylistically. Born in Southampton in 1674, he was of Puritan stock and had the privilege of a non-conformist education in Newington Green Academy for dissenters. Widely read in Greek, Latin, French and the Classics, his Puritanism is evident from the strong scriptural base of much of his writings. He spent much time in meditation, revelling especially in the Psalms and also familiarising himself with the works of Milton, Bunyan and Baxter. Like Milton, his literary output included various contributions to the religious controversy of the period as well as poetic offerings, the main difference being that, whereas Milton was for much of his life prevent-

ed from completing his *magnum opus Paradise Lost* by endless disputes, Watts' hymnwritng was finished by the age of 45, leaving him the rest of his days to tackle the various theological debates.

It was a compelling desire to institute a reform in the worship of the church and the sacrifice of the personal satisfaction attainable from more secular poetry, which provided the key to Watts' purpose in writing. On every occasion he chose effective communication rather than originality, immediate application rather than the acclaim of posterity. It is, however, his preference for comprehensibility over poetic virtuosity which marks much of his output: 'I would neither indulge any bold metaphors, nor admit of hard words, nor tempt an ignorant worshipper to sing without his understanding.'<sup>1</sup> Always open to criticism, he was careful to omit from the second edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* all those that did not have 'a general and extensive sense, and may be ... sung by most persons in a worshipping congregation.'<sup>2</sup> Perhaps he was over-careful in this respect and underestimated the aesthetic capacity of his readership, but nevertheless his stipulation that local congregations should feel free to substitute a phrase of their own 'where any displeasing word is found'<sup>3</sup> is evidence of the depth of his desire not to 'exalt myself to the rank and glory of poets, but . . . to be a servant to the churches, and a helper to the joy of the meanest Christian'<sup>4</sup>

Of course his hymns were widely accepted in public worship, not a few are preserved for posterity and his work does show much originality and personal characteristics as well as a high degree of poetic achievement, in which he masterfully harnessed the vast topics with which he was dealing within the limited framework of metre and rhyme. This, however, was a result of the artistic kenosis, the voluntary redirection of artistic ability so that all his knowledge might be channelled into the instruction of the people. In his first collection of published material, *Horae Lyricae* (1705), his poetic ability is clear for all to see. He shows a mastery of various complicated metres and forms, and provides the modern reader with a glimpse of what might have been, had he not decided to attend to another more pressing demand.

### **The Defence of his Mission: the Need for Reform**

Having shown his competence as a poet of some considerable ability in various styles and genres, Watts was to apply that ability to his main purpose, a reformation of the system of praise used in the church of his day. The Psalmody debate was a long-standing one, dividing the Protes-

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1. *Isaac Watts, the Poetical Works*, in 7 vols.; Edinburgh, 1782, vol. I, p. xlii.

2. Quoted H. Escott, *Isaac Watts Hymnographer*; London, 1962, p. 175.

3. Vol. III, p.x.

4. Vol. I, p. xliv.

tant church from the Reformation. In England and especially in Scotland the Calvinistic principle of *quid non iubet, vetat* ('what [Scripture] does not command, it forbids') was dominant, and the Lutheran ideal of providing freely composed hymns in the vernacular of the people was dismissed as having been carried over from Rome. Watts' arguments in favour of reform were many, and although he was not the first to compose hymns in the English language he seems to be the undisputed champion of the cause, arguing clearly and logically for an extension of the existing canon of praise which would be more applicable to the New Testament church. As a minister of the Christian church he adopts the position of one who was forced into action by the poverty of praise available to the local congregation. He believed reform to be essential because the present situation was not only unedifying for believers but an unhealthy witness to outsiders.

Of all our religious solemnities, psalmody is the most unhappily managed, that every action which should elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations doth not only flat our devotion but too often awaken our regret.<sup>5</sup>

To see the dull indifference, the negligent and the thoughtless air that sits upon the faces of a whole assembly while the Psalm is on their lips might tempt even a charitable observer to suspect the ferocity of inward religion.<sup>6</sup>

He saw this as a result of adhering too closely to the words of the pre-gospel age: 'thus by keeping too close to David in the house of God the veil of Moses is thrown over our hearts'.<sup>7</sup> It is understandable that this was anathema to one who was to write:

The sorrows of the mind  
Be banished from the place.  
Religion never was designed  
To make our pleasures less.<sup>8</sup>

The curses, Hebraisms and Jewish intricacies he regarded as stopping the worshippers' hearts on their ascent to heaven, and many of the 'deficiencies of light and glory' which are remedied by Christ and the

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5. Vol. III, p. vi.

6. Vol. III, p. v.

7. Vol. III, pp. vi-vii.

8. Vol. IV, Book II, No. 30.

New Testament could be eradicated by giving the Psalms an evangelical turn and making David 'speak like a Christian'.<sup>9</sup>

What need is there that I should wrap up the shining honours of my Redeemer in the dark and shadowy language of a religion that is now for ever abolished, especially when Christians are so vehemently warned in the Epistles of St Paul against a Judaizing spirit in their worship as well as doctrine?<sup>10</sup>

It also promoted hypocrisy; 'why will ye confine yourselves to speak one thing and mean another?'.<sup>11</sup>

When the majority of Christians sing the Psalms, often in the first person singular, they are expressing 'nothing but the character, the concerns, and the religion of the Jewish King',<sup>12</sup> while their own circumstances are completely different.

Moses, Deborah ... David, Asaph and Habakkuk ... sung their own joys and victories, their own hopes and fears and deliverances ... and why must we under the gospel sing nothing else but the joys, hopes and fears, of Asaph and David? Why must Christians be forbid all other melody but what arises from the victories and deliverances of the Jews?<sup>13</sup>

The question of hypocrisy also applies to those passages referring to musical instruments:

Why then must all who will sing a Psalm at church use such words as if they were to play upon the harp and psaltery, when thousands never saw such an instrument and know nothing of the art?<sup>14</sup>

He realized that it was impossible to compile a book which would exactly suit the circumstances of every worshipper, but the principle of constant reform meant that the songs of praise written today are more likely to aid the modern worshippers in their application of doctrinal truths to the contemporary situation than those written thousands of years ago. If David was not restricted to Moses who was chronologically and theologically nearer to him than today's church, why should such restrictions fall on modern congregations?

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9. Vol. I, p. xxxvi.

10. Vol. I, p. xxxvi.

11. Vol. I, p. xxx.

12. Vol. I, p. xvix.

13. Vol. I, p. xxvii.

14. Vol. I, p. xxvii.

Watts tackled the psalm versus hymn question directly. Though many found his Christianised psalms a halfway stage to hymnody, Watts' psalms and hymns are organically related. In his most famous work on the subject, 'A short essay toward the improvement of psalmody', he answers many objections to departing from current practice and issues a straightforward attack on what he sees as the illogicality of the present position. He accused the Psalter of being a crippling convention, of putting the original Hebrew in a straitjacket and being as much 'the inventions of men' as a freely composed lyric which took Scripture as its base.<sup>15</sup> The Psalms also left untouched vast areas of Christian doctrine. Christ's name is never specifically mentioned. Communion is particularly badly represented and churches have had to 'confine all the glorious joy and melody of that ordinance to a few obscure lines'.<sup>16</sup> 'Where can you find a Psalm that speaks the miracles of wisdom and power as they are discovered in a crucified Christ?'<sup>17</sup>

Watts therefore had no doubts about the unsuitability of the contemporary system of praise as confined entirely to psalms, he regarded the few New Testament hymns, rather than completing the canon, as showing the insufficiency of the Psalter and an example of how New Testament Christians expressed their joy in the light of the cross. His treatises on Psalmody and his Prefaces have in them an aggressive, perhaps bitter streak, in marked contrast to his usual moderation, which shows the urgency and seriousness with which he viewed the whole subject. To him reform was not just desirable, it was necessary; nor was it a question of modification but complete revision:

If the brightest genius on earth, or an angel from heaven, should translate David, and keep close to the sense and style of the inspired author, we should only obtain thereby a bright or heavenly copy of the devotions of the Jewish king, but it could never make the fittest psalmbook for a Christian people.<sup>18</sup>

A closer look is needed, however, at his two collections, the *Psalms of David Imitated and Hymns and Spiritual Songs* to see the practical result of this theoretic debate. For although only a few actively read his arguments, thousands make his hymns their own and it was the high standard of the hymns, without which all such arguments would have remained academic debates, which eventually decided the outcome of the centuries-old controversy.

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15. 'A short essay toward the improvement of Psalmody', pp. 241-2; quoted Escott, p. 122.

16. Vol. I, p. xxiii.

17. 'A short essay' p. 258; quoted Escott, p. 125.

18. Vol. I, p. xlv.

**The Completion of his Mission: the Works**

Although his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* were published and written first, the *Psalms of David Imitated* will be examined first in order to complete this discussion concerning the influence of psalmody. Watts was, from the beginning, committed to a total revision of the system of praise and the introduction of freely composed hymns 'upon divine subjects'. However, by more or less terminating his hymnic output in 1719 with the publication of the *Psalms*, he was providing a bridge by which the transition from psalm to hymn could be made more easily. These 'imitations' had three characteristics. They were evangelical, expressing the truths brought to light by the gospel which the Psalmist saw 'but through a glass darkly'; 'There is no necessity that we should always sing in the obscure and doubtful style of prediction when the things foretold are brought into open light by a full accomplishment.'<sup>19</sup> They should be freely composed and not fall into the trap of the old Psalter which put adherence to the letter of Scripture above effective communication, and they should also express the thoughts and feelings of the singer, not simply of David or Asaph:

Where the Psalmist uses sharp invectives against his personal enemies I have endeavoured to turn the edge of them against our Spiritual adversaries, sin, Satan and temptation ... Where the words imply some peculiar wants or distresses, joys or blessings, I have used words of greater latitude and comprehension, suited to the general circumstances of men.<sup>20</sup>

This is seen in practice throughout his *Psalms*. Animal sacrifice becomes Christ, the Lamb of God; the ark brought with shouting into Zion becomes the Ascension of Christ; the mercy of God is supplemented with reference to the dying Saviour. In the words of Manning, they are 'baptised'.<sup>21</sup>

The psalms themselves are imitated in a workmanlike manner. Escott reminds us that in order fully to appreciate Watts' style, one must take a look at the existing 'anarchic versification' of Sternhold and Hopkins which was familiar to the congregation, and realize that it was because of his prosodic knowledge that the metrical stanza to which he limited himself was transformed from banality to versatility and craftsmanship.<sup>22</sup> The single theme and progression of thought inherent

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19. Vol I, p. xxxiii.

20. Vol. I, pp. xxii-xxiii.

21. B. L. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, London, 1942, p. 80.

22. Escott, p. 18.

in the Psalms are retained in Watts' imitations. Characteristics such as repeated lines or couplets, and accumulation of nouns, which were the hallmarks of many of his hymns, can be seen retained here. Often the psalms are annotated by Watts as he explains his reasons for a certain rendering; Psalm 1, for example:

In this work I have often borrowed a line or two from the New Testament, that the excellent and inspired composures of the Jewish Psalmist may be brightened by the clearer discoveries of the Gospel.<sup>23</sup>

These *Psalms Imitated* aroused intense hostility in a minority but generally found a double welcome from those wishing to use psalms and hymns jointly, and those prepared as yet for psalms only. Thousands were sold within the first year of publication. This was probably in no small way due to the fact that *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, by this stage in its seventh edition, had considerably enhanced Watts' reputation.

In *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) we have Watts' most important contribution to the hymn genre. Apart from a few short sermonic offerings and songs for children later in life, all of Watts' best-loved hymns are contained within this volume. As John Patrick was his predecessor in psalmody revision, a few notable names preceded him in hymnwriting, 'watering the ground' and preparing the public mind for the acceptance of hymns. Watts himself acknowledged their influence and, in a sense, repaid them, since it is largely due to his triumph in this field that earlier works of Mason, Ken, Crossman and Baxter are still sung. In almost every zone of hymnwriting into which he ventured and which he set about perfecting, he had predecessors. Boyse was writing sacramental hymns; Keach, homiletic hymns for the Baptists; Barton, free paraphrases in the style of exegesis. This practice of allowing one verse of Scripture to illuminate and interpret another, was the basic principle of Watts' hymnwriting and was later perfected by Wesley: 'I might have brought some text or other and applied it to the margin of every verse.'<sup>24</sup> A glance at *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* will reveal that its structure is in keeping with his lifelong principle of *festina lente*. Sandwiched between the two generally accepted sections of 'Collected from the Scriptures', and 'Prepared for the Lord's Supper', there is the innovatory 'Composed on Divine Subjects'. However, to emphasise how small a step the transition really is, Nos. 146-150 at the end of Book I are freer paraphrases and Nos. 142-3 have no biblical text affixed. Part I pre-empt the method of his *Psalms of David Imitated* with Old Tes-

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23. Vol. I, p. 52.

24. Vol. III, p. xiii.

tament passages translated in New Testament light and almost the entire volume written in the three 'Psalm tune' metres (Common, Long and Short). The kenosis is clear in his statement that even in his syntax he is accommodating himself to the restrictions of the present system:

I have seldom permitted a stop in the middle of a line, and seldom left the end of a line without one, to comport a little with the unhappy mixture of reading and singing which cannot presently be reformed.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of this, Watts' vocabulary, syntax, imagery and literary characteristics are stamped on all of his hymns.

In theme and outlook Watts is cosmic; the cross is central, not only to him but to the world. He makes much of the planets, globe, stars, in an almost Miltonic obsession with the vastness, eternity and spaciousness of the universe with the Passion scene as the backcloth. This is seen particularly in two of his great Communion hymns. The first positions the crucifixion in the context of the cosmic whole, while the second's choice of initial verb and its final response give the hymn a beauty and breadth communicated through many generations.

Nature with open volume stands  
To spread her Maker's praise abroad . . . .

Here on the cross 'tis fairest drawn  
In precious blood and crimson lines.<sup>26</sup>

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of Glory died . . . .

Were the whole realm of nature mine  
That were a present far too small. . . .<sup>27</sup>

In style, parallelism and accumulation permeate his work, the former being perhaps an unconscious result of so much work in the Hebrew Psalter with its parallelism. The latter results in a compilation of nouns and phrases which, although in danger of becoming ridiculously repetitive and sometimes employed badly, usually result in a deepening of the verse's effect and an illumination of its message. Look at some of his most famous lines:

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25. Vol. III, p. x.

26. Vol. IV, Bk. III, No. 10.

27. Vol. IV, Bk. III, No. 10.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet . . . .

Demands my soul, my life, my all.<sup>28</sup>

Here his whole name appears complete  
Nor wit can guess, nor reason prove  
Which of the letters best is writ;  
The power, the wisdom, or the love.<sup>29</sup>

While life and thought and being last,  
Or immortality endures.<sup>30</sup>

The gradual build-up of statement leading to a response is another popular device. Occasionally, as in 'When I survey', the statement and response are alternated, but generally the latter is reserved for the end. Book II No. 30 is a ten-stanza piece about heaven, with the final stanza beginning: 'Then let our songs abound ...'. Book III No. 1 is a seven-stanza hymn on the Lord's Supper, six stanzas of statement followed by:

Jesus, thy feast we celebrate,  
We show thy death, we sing thy name  
Till thou return, and we shall eat  
The marriage supper of the Lamb.

Combine this idea of response with the overall cosmic theme of Watts' work and we are left with two of his finest verses. Juxtaposed, they illustrate the bridge between the 17th and 18th centuries, contrasting grandeur and inward emotion, communicating both the condescension of the Almighty and the need for a human response and all within the framework of alliterative, symmetrical verse:

Well might the sun in darkness hide  
And shut his glories in,  
When God, the Mighty Maker, died  
For man, the creature's sin.

Thus might I hide my blushing face  
While his dear cross appears;

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28. *Ibid.*

29. Vol. IV, Bk. III, No. 10.

30. Vol. II, Ps. 146, 2nd version.

Dissolve, my heart, in thankfulness;  
And melt, my eyes, to tears.<sup>31</sup>

Structure and progression of thought were principles uppermost in Watts' mind. Sometimes verses are linked by a single word:

... nor hell shall fright my heart away  
Should hell with all its legions rise

Should worlds conspire to drive me thence  
Moveless and firm this heart should lie . . . .<sup>32</sup>

And just to prove that this is not coincidence, see how he binds together what is arguably his most inspired verse:

See, from his head, his hands, his feet  
*Sorrow and love* flow mingled down.  
Did e'er such *love and sorrow* meet  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?<sup>33</sup>

#### **An Assessment of his Mission**

It is difficult to assess the real value or importance of Watts' hymnographical work. Generally regarded as the father of modern hymnody it is, in the words of Gill, difficult to 'conceive of Watts ceasing to be ... a benefactor as long as men have spiritual needs and aspirations, and as long as the English language endures.'<sup>34</sup> Yet his true worth does not stem solely from his chronological position (all the genres in which he excelled were already in existence) nor from the quality of his hymns, good as they are, for Ken's 'Evening hymn' and Crossman's 'My song is love unknown'<sup>35</sup> are just as good. Rather it lay in a combination of the two at a time when the great majority of the people were ready to accept the advent of hymns, and although he invented no new measures but 'accommodated himself to the conditions of musical decadence surrounding him',<sup>36</sup> he once and for all determined the type of the hymn, making it impossible for any future exponent of the genre to be totally free from his influence. He worked within his personally constructed framework of gradual transition from metrical psalm through Chris-

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31. Vol. IV, Bk. II, No. 9.

32. Vol. IV, Bk. II, No. 4.

33. Vol. IV, Bk. III, No. 7.

34. Quoted A. P. Davis, *Isaac Watts*, London, 1948, p. 215.

35. *Church Hymnary*, 3rd edition, Nos. 641 & 224.

36. L. Benson, *The English Hymn, its Development and Use in Worship*, Richmond, Virginia, 1962, p. 207.

tianised psalm, to free paraphrases and hymns, and this philosophy of worship which undergirded all of his writing gave it a direction and a purpose and accounts for its ready acceptance by the people.

In spite of the winnowing of two centuries of hymn books, his best are still among the classics of devotion in all hymnals. In the words of Routley: 'many people have written large numbers of hymns, not a few are still doing so. But none of these has produced twenty immortals.'<sup>37</sup> It is true that Watts' hymns soon came to hold a tyranny which was as great as the metrical Psalter, but this was directly in conflict with the spirit of *semper reformanda* in which he was composing. Part of the reason for the tyranny was that, beside Watts, many later attempts seemed poor and lacking in originality, and many who could not write poetry attempted hymns. These were bound to fail since, in Watts, the church now had a completed songbook for every major occasion and all subsequent additions would have to prove worthy of inclusion in the canon.

Isaac Watts cannot be ignored. Motivated by neither material gain, literary fame, nor theological bias, but solely out of a love for his Saviour and a desire to use his artistic gifts to improve the medium of praise, while still retaining a firm biblical and doctrinally Reformed position, his skilful writing has demonstrated that innovation is not synonymous with anarchy; nor are Old Covenant psalmody and post-Christian hymnody mutually exclusive. For him, a church which allowed the reading of any part of the full canon of Scripture, which encouraged extemporaneous prayers of praise and adoration, and which prided itself in its exegetical exposition of the whole counsel of God in its public services, could not justifiably impose unnecessary restrictions on the *sung* worship of the assembly. Watts' call is as much a call for theological consistency and inward spiritual renewal as it is for ecclesiastical reform. It is the response to such a call which is the true test of any church's claim to purity of worship.

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37. Routley, E., *Isaac Watts*, London, 1961, p. 14.