

The Sweet Singer of Israel – Isaac Watts and the  
Developing Hermeneutic of Nonconformist Psalmody

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### Abstract

This thesis assesses the contribution made by Isaac Watts to the developing hermeneutic of Nonconformist psalmody. Prior to Watts, Nonconformist psalmody was dominated by the enduring influence of John Calvin. Chapter One traces the history of Nonconformist psalmody from Calvin to Watts, as well as briefly summarising the hermeneutic of the Psalms when preached in the later seventeenth century. Chapter Two discusses Watts' *Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody*, where he outlines his methodology for converting the Psalms into hymns for the Christian church. Chapter Three looks at the way Watts uses Scripture in his Psalter, before considering his Christology. Chapter Four examines Watts' view of the reign of Christ within the Psalms, and its relationship to the Church, Israel and Britain.

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## Introduction

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was a dissenting minister, theologian and hymn writer in the first half of the eighteenth century. Within his lifetime and beyond, he was a hugely significant figure in the history of English Dissent:

Few names in the annals of English nonconformity are more widely known or more deservedly honoured – the instructor of our early years, the guide of our youth, the sweet singer of modern Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this present study is the theology of Isaac Watts' publication in 1719 of *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State and Worship*,<sup>2</sup> which was his contribution to Nonconformist psalmody. Watts made the most significant contribution to the theology of Nonconformist psalmody since John Calvin. The key reason for the necessity of this study is that this work has not been sufficiently analysed as a theological text, and therefore it is yet to be appropriately understood, in its context as a contribution to the development of Nonconformist worship and within the wider corpus of Watts' work and the exegesis of the period.

There are several important biographies covering the life of Isaac Watts. The most scholarly is by Arthur P. Davis,<sup>3</sup> in which he significantly analyses the various spheres of Watts' work. Subsequent biographies, by David Fountain<sup>4</sup> and Graham Beynon<sup>5</sup> both aim to bring Watts to a new generation of readers, and as such rely heavily on Davis' work.<sup>6</sup> Concerning Watts' Psalter, Davis locates Watts in the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* [London, Thomas Richardson and Son, 1845] Preface

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State and Worship*, [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org), [https://archive.org/stream/psalmsdavidimit00dwiqgoog/psalmsdavidimit00dwiqgoog\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/psalmsdavidimit00dwiqgoog/psalmsdavidimit00dwiqgoog_djvu.txt) (all online sources are accurate as of September 13<sup>th</sup> 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Davis, *Isaac Watts* [London, Independent Press, 1943]

<sup>4</sup> David Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered* [Gospel Standard Trust, 1977]

<sup>5</sup> Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Thought* [Christian Focus, 2013]

<sup>6</sup> Beynon's study also draws upon his own research into Watts. See Graham Beynon, "Isaac Watts: Reason, Passion and the Revival of Religion [PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2013]

broader tradition of Puritan and Nonconformist psalmody, before elaborating on the pertinent biographical details.

There have been several works that analyse Watts' Psalms. These studies concentrate predominantly on the poetry, rather than the theology of Watts' hymns, comparing his technique to the psalters of his predecessors rather than focusing on their theological differences. Bernard Manning<sup>7</sup> gives more attention to Watts' hymns than the psalms. He sets Watts' poetic style in its historical context, in particular demonstrating the influence that John Milton had on Watts' use of language. The most significant treatment of Watts' hymns is Harry Escott's *Hymnographer*,<sup>8</sup> which not only covers the preceding and immediate context of Watts, but also assesses his influences and work, including a chapter devoted to Watts' *Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody*. He traces the development of Watts' work on the Psalms from *Horae Lyricae* through to the *Psalms of David*. Escott studies Watts' uses of rhyme and metre,<sup>9</sup> before contributing his own liturgical structure to Watts' Psalter, proposing a thematic categorisation rather than following the order of the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> He finishes his chapter by stating what he perceives to be the strengths and weaknesses of the *Psalms of David*.<sup>11</sup> His praise concentrates on the broad range of Watts' psalms, and the scope of praise that they offer for a Christian congregation. The perceived deficiencies are that there are no psalms that would suitably accompany the ordinances of Communion or Baptism. Other studies of Watts' hymns include chapters by J.R. Watson in *Dissenting Praise*<sup>12</sup> and *The English Hymn*.<sup>13</sup> Watson relates Watts' psalms to his *Essay*<sup>14</sup> and the *Preface* to the *Psalms of David*. However, Watson appears at times to lack sympathy with Watts' intentions. Rochelle Stackhouse has undertaken significant work on the reception of Watts' Psalms,

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* [London, Epworth Press, 1942]

<sup>8</sup> Harry Escott, *Hymnographer* [London, Independent Press, 1962]

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 147-150

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 155-159

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 159-162

<sup>12</sup> J.R. Watson, "Isaac Watts" in *Dissenting Praise*, ed. Isabel Rivers, & David Wykes [Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011]

<sup>13</sup> J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn* [Oxford Scholarship Online, 1999]

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Watts, "A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody" in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in Nine Volumes, Vol. 4* [London, 1813] 1-38

especially his political psalms and their use in America throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> She also contributes to *Wonderful Words of Life*,<sup>16</sup> which studies the developing role of hymns in American Protestantism. Both of these works are a helpful starting point in understanding the influence Watts' hymns had in the centuries that followed him.

There have been several studies on Watts' view of the affections in his wider body of writings. Isabel Rivers, in *Reason, Grace and Sentiment*,<sup>17</sup> investigates Watts' philosophical writings along with those of Philip Doddridge. Her study shows the way Watts blends Reformed theology with the emerging rationalism of philosophers such as John Locke. More recently, Graham Beynon has written a PhD thesis outlining Watts' view of Reason and Passion, including discussion of the relationship between Reason and Passion in Watts' wider writing and his hymns.<sup>18</sup> Beynon's study helps to advance a more detailed understanding of Watts' thought, and further understanding is contributed by Louise Joy, who relates Watts' view of the affections to his view of death, wherein the Christian looks ahead to the afterlife and as such their passions and affections are deepened.<sup>19</sup> This avenue of scholarship focuses primarily on the other strand of Watts' writings, namely the philosophical and religious prose that he produced in the second half of his career. It is evident, however, that there is very little scholarship devoted to Watts' biblical theology.<sup>20</sup> While it is to be applauded that the key strands of Watts' thought are being investigated, this misses the core of Watts' life and work: his hymns, psalms and sermons are yet to be systematised and understood as theological texts.

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<sup>15</sup> Rochelle Stackhouse, *The Language of the Psalms in Worship* [London, Scarecrow, 1997]

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Mouw. & Mark Noll (ed.) *Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology* [W.B. Eerdmans, 2004]

<sup>17</sup> Isabel Rivers, "Affectionate Religion" in *Reason, Grace and Sentiment, Volume 1* [Cambridge University Press, 1991]

<sup>18</sup> Graham Beynon, "Isaac Watts"

<sup>19</sup> Louise Joy, "Morbid Pathos in Isaac Watts' Philosophy of Affectionate Religion," *Literature & Theology*, 27.3 (2013) 297-312

<sup>20</sup> Note, however, R.W. Wilkinson, "Peculiar Ground: the theology of Isaac Watts [Masters thesis, University of Durham] 1981



This study is an attempt to redress the balance, and to help navigate a previously unexplored area within Watts' work. Building upon the work of Escott and Watson, several key points will be developed here in order to understand Watts' Psalter. Firstly, for all of his innovations as a hymn-writer, he is a figure looking backwards as much as he is forwards.<sup>21</sup> He is rooted in the Puritan, Nonconformist theological tradition, owing much to those who preceded him. He claimed that he consulted around twenty Psalters as he prepared his own,<sup>22</sup> and in doing so demonstrates that he believes himself to be a contributor to this ecclesiastical heritage. While it will become clear that Watts rejects much of the theology that preceded him, specifically in relation to the established patterns of congregational psalmody, Watts is not doing away with the traditions he has inherited, but instead seeks to enhance them. Horton Davies' study, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, traces the course of Puritan worship from the Reformation through to Watts and explains much of what preceded him. For more modern studies, Elizabeth Clarke's chapter, "Hymns, Psalms and Controversy in the Seventeenth Century" and the first six chapters of J.R. Watson's *The English Hymn* cover the history of psalmody and hymn writing from Luther and Calvin through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, Watts is a pastor, and therefore by extension a theologian, and, when combined with his skill as a poet, he is a hymn-writer. His father was a deacon at Above Bar Church, a Nonconformist congregation in Southampton, and was imprisoned on more than one occasion for his nonconformity, violating the 1662 Act of Uniformity. Watts continued as a Nonconformist, preferring to study at Thomas Rowe's Academy in Stoke Newington rather than concede to Anglicanism and study at a university. Following his studies, and a brief spell back in Southampton, Watts was appointed in 1698 as assistant to Dr. Chauncy at Mark Lane, a 'respectable'

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<sup>21</sup> Watts has been described elsewhere as, "one of those pivotal writers whose work looks forwards but also back, gathering into itself and transforming a tradition – in this case the tradition of metrical psalmody since the Reformation." (Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* [Oxford University Press, 1997] 152)

<sup>22</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 27

<sup>23</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* [Westminster, Dacre, 1948] Elizabeth Clarke, "Hymns, Psalms and Controversy in the Seventeenth Century" in *Dissenting Praise*, Watson, *The English Hymn*

church in London, whose pulpit had once been occupied by John Owen. Upon Chauncy's retirement in 1701, Watts was selected to succeed him as Minister. Watts was to occupy this position until his death. Despite these easily accessible biographical details, discussion regarding Isaac Watts as a hymn writer often fails to link his hymns to his pastoral ministry and therefore overlooks the influence his pastorate had upon his works.<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, this study is concerned with the theology of Watts's work. The most significant scholarship on Watts as a hymnwriter has concentrated on his role as a poet rather than as a proponent of Christian theology and it could be said that this is to study the casket at the expense of the jewel. Poetry is the means, and not the end, of a hymn. As such, comments on Watts' theology are often unsympathetic or insufficient in their scope. Therefore, the need for this present study is clear. In particular, Watts' own intentions for his Psalter have not been sufficiently considered,<sup>25</sup> with his stated aim being to allow the Psalmists to speak in the "language of a Christian."<sup>26</sup> Understanding Watts' theology and his role in Nonconformist psalmody is essential to understanding his legacy and his place in a tradition that had its origins with Calvin.

In this thesis, I will be arguing that Watts makes the most significant contribution to Nonconformist psalmody since John Calvin, and that Watts unifies a point of discord between the preaching of the psalms and the practice of psalmody in the Reformed tradition. In this respect, the practice of psalmody within this tradition was established by Calvin, through his more literalistic interpretation of the Psalms. Meanwhile, a Christological hermeneutic of the Psalms developed throughout the sermons and commentaries of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but this failed to

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<sup>24</sup> This oversight is perhaps not entirely unexpected, however, given that he rarely visited his church, choosing instead to live with Sir Thomas Abney in Stoke Newington due to his frequent battles with ill health.

<sup>25</sup> To demonstrate the primacy of theology over poetry in Watts' own ambitions, he once stated that, "I had rather be the author of Mr. Baxter's "Call to the unconverted" than the author of Milton's Paradise Lost." (Thomas Gibbons, *Memoirs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* [London, 1780] 157)

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Watts, *Preface to the Psalms of David Imitated into the Language of a Christian* ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)) <https://www.ccel.org/cceh/archives/eee/wattspre.html>

have an impact on their psalmody.<sup>27</sup> The situation in the Nonconformist church was like a house divided against itself, where the Christocentric prayers and sermons stood in stark contrast to their psalmody. The point is well made by Escott;

The result was a dichotomy in reformed worship. In preaching and prayer Christ and His Cross were at the centre of the worshipper's thought, but when he sang his praises, it was as if Christ had never been born, had never died and rose again from the dead.<sup>28</sup>

This conflicting view of the Psalms is resolved in Watts' Psalter. By making Christ the central focus of the Psalms, Watts is not adding anything new to the Christian understanding of the Psalms. However, he is unifying the way the Psalms are treated within his own tradition, and in this regard makes the most important contribution to Puritan psalmody since John Calvin.

### Summary of Contents

The scope of this present study therefore is to understand the way Watts rebuilt the psalmody of the Nonconformist Church, and locate his work in the theological context of his tradition. The first chapter will give an overview of Watts' life and place him in the context of the tradition to which he belongs, which derived from Calvin.<sup>29</sup> Consideration will be given to the preceding Psalters which had a direct influence upon Watts, as well as a summary of his theological influences. The aim of this chapter is to understand the inheritance Watts has received and the ways he engages and develops this inheritance.

Chapter Two will give consideration to *A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody*. The *Essay* functions as a blueprint for his subsequent Psalter, and therefore it is essential it is understood prior to his psalms being considered. The

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<sup>27</sup> This will be dealt with more thoroughly in Chapter 1.

<sup>28</sup> Escott, *Hymnographer*, 254

<sup>29</sup> "Whether men like it or not, Watts was really the child of Calvinistic Puritanism." (Ibid. 252) However, Watts was a moderate Calvinist, finding a balance between High Calvinism and Arminianism (cf. Alan Clifford, *The Good Doctor: Philip Doddridge of Northampton – A Tercentenary Tribute* [Charenton Reformed, 2002] 55)

*Essay* is Watts' theological rationale for his work, demonstrating the thought that lies behind it, explaining his intentions, as well as engaging with the criticisms he anticipates. The *Essay* shows the way Watts handles Scripture, and provides a justification for the Christological way he approaches the psalms.

In Chapters Three and Four analysis of Watts' psalms takes place. Chapter Three will look at Watts' use of Scripture in his psalter, followed by a study of several psalms that directly refer to Christ's incarnation, atonement and resurrection. Chapter Four examines the reign of Christ, firstly as the Judge of all and secondly as the sovereign over God's people. The chapter goes on to assess who Watts believes are the People of God, and so discusses the relationships between Israel and the Church and Israel and Britain within Watts' psalms.<sup>30</sup>

Not all of Watts' Psalms are discussed in this study. Also, attention is not given to differences in subsequent editions of his Psalter; such comparison is beyond the scope of this present study. The decision to select only certain psalms was taken to highlight examples where Watts' own agenda is clearest. This study is concerned with the ways Watts develops Nonconformist psalmody, and as such there are examples of Psalms where he does not further their interpretation beyond where his predecessors had taken them.<sup>31</sup> The specific chapter subjects were chosen by allowing Watts' priorities to determine my agenda. Escott has categorised Watts' Psalter into ten areas,<sup>32</sup> and while the categorisations are helpful in understanding the Psalter as a whole, not every category is of significance to this study, which is concentrated on Watts' Christological hermeneutic. It is the aim of this study to let Watts' agenda determine our agenda here. Watts' own intention, as stated in the *Preface* to his Psalter, was as follows:

Where the Original runs in the Form of Prophecy concerning Christ and his Salvation, I have given an historical Turn to the Sense... Where the Writers of

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<sup>30</sup> The work of John Hull is especially significant to this chapter

<sup>31</sup> For example, having read Watts' theological ambitions in his preface, the reader may be surprised to find that Psalm 23 makes no mention of the imagery of John 10, where Christ describes himself as the Good Shepherd.

<sup>32</sup> Escott, *Hymnographer*, 155-159

the New Testament have cited or alluded to any part of the Psalms, I have often indulged the Liberty of Paraphrase according to the Words of Christ or his Apostles. And surely this may be esteemed the Word of God still, though borrowed from several Parts of the Holy Scripture. Where the Psalmist describes Religion by the Fear of God, I have often joined Faith and Love to it. Where he speaks of the Pardon of Sin through the Mercies of God, I have added the Merits of a Saviour. Where he talks of sacrificing Goats or Bullocks, I rather chuse to mention the Sacrifice of Christ the Lamb of God. When he attends the Ark with Shouting into Zion, I sing the Ascension of my Saviour into Heaven, or his Presence in his Church on Earth.<sup>33</sup>

Watts' ultimate intention was to enhance the understanding and experience of the worshipper, and in doing so to enable the worshipper to offer richer praise and worship to God. He believed that more honour was given to Christ when the doctrines of his atoning death and resurrection are plainly sung by Christian worshippers, and it was to this end that he wrote *The Psalms of David*.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, in this study, attention will be given to the way Watts incorporates these doctrines into his Psalter.

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<sup>33</sup> Watts, *Preface to the Psalms of David* ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org))

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 1: The Context of Isaac Watts

The story is told of Isaac Watts, returning home from church with his father, complaining about the poor quality of the psalm-singing he regularly experienced during Sunday worship. Rather than rebuking him for his attitude, his father advised him to write something better.<sup>1</sup> This proved to be a watershed moment in his life. Watts had always possessed a poetic gift,<sup>2</sup> but after this conversation, his talents were given a new impetus.

This chapter will consider the context of Watts' life and writing, looking briefly at his biography before tracing the history of Nonconformist psalmody and the developing exegesis of the Psalms from the Reformation through to Watts' day. Once his background is understood, then his work can be properly assessed. Watts is a pivotal figure within Nonconformist history. He is both rooted in the traditions of Dissent and Puritanism, and a dawning light of 18th Century Evangelicalism and elder statesman to the next generation of hymn writers, theologians and revivalists; Jonathan Edwards,<sup>3</sup> Phillip Doddridge,<sup>4</sup> George Whitefield,<sup>5</sup> John and Charles Wesley<sup>6</sup> all owe a direct debt to Watts' personal influence upon them. In light of this, emphasis will be given throughout this thesis to the theological and exegetical trends at the end of the seventeenth century; though Watts' Psalms were not published until 1719, they draw heavily from the preceding generations.<sup>7</sup>

Possibly the most significant theological influence on Watts was his time at Thomas Rowe's Academy in Stoke Newington, where he studied from the age of 16

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<sup>1</sup> The story is recounted in all biographies of Watts, e.g., Arthur Davis, *Isaac Watts*, [London, Independent Press, 1943] 19

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 7-9

<sup>3</sup> Watts published Edwards' *Narrative of Surprising Conversations* in London in 1737.

<sup>4</sup> Doddridge was encouraged to write *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Watts, to whom the book was dedicated (cf. Alan Clifford, *The Good Doctor: Philip Doddridge of Northampton – A Tercentenary Tribute* [Charenton Reformed Publishing, 2002] 189).

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Watts*, 45-50

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 43

<sup>7</sup> This view is held among other scholars. For instance, Gillingham includes Watts' treatment of the Psalms in her chapter, "Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries", even though his work was published in 1719 (Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries, Volume One* [Blackwell, 2008]).

to 20.<sup>8</sup> William Stephenson has noted that, at Thomas Rowe's, Watts studied works by Richard Baxter, Thomas Goodwin, John Flavel and John Owen, as well as works by Anglicans such as Bishop Gilbert Burnet.<sup>9</sup> Watts also engaged extensively with Calvin's work, calling his *Institutions*, "a most excellent, Scriptural, argumentative and elegant system of Divinity."<sup>10</sup> The Academy had a profound impact on Watts, allowing him to sharpen his theological convictions while at the same time shaping his future work as a pastor, philosopher and hymn-writer. After studying at the academy, Isaac Watts returned home to his parents' home in Southampton. It was here that he voiced his frustrations over the dreary metrical psalms that were sung every week at Above Bar Church. Following this sojourn, Watts moved to London to serve as assistant and subsequently as minister at Mark Lane, a position he was to hold for the rest of his life.

Watts is remembered predominantly for his influence as a hymn-writer. This study will focus on his 1719 publication, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to Christian Worship*. It shall be argued in this chapter that before Watts, there were very few theological developments as the lineage of metrical psalmody is traced from Calvin onwards. Calvin is the dominating influence within Nonconformist psalmody in Britain, determining not only that metric Psalms should be the main form of congregational singing, but *how* these metrical adaptations should be undertaken. The Psalters that were published between Calvin and Watts had two main aims; either to be faithful to the original Hebrew text, or to express the Psalms in eloquent, metrical poetry. Watts does not merely add to this catalogue of Psalters; rather, Watts makes the most significant contribution to the theology and hermeneutics of psalmody since Calvin. In doing so Watts is, according to Escott, more of a reactionary than a reformer.<sup>11</sup> Watts shall be presented in this study as someone who is augmenting the theology and practice that has gone before him. Watts' Psalter can only be rightly understood within his ecclesiastical context

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<sup>8</sup> Academies were the alternative to Universities, as Nonconformists were prohibited from attending university.

<sup>9</sup> William Stephenson, "Isaac Watts's Education for the Dissenting Ministry: A New Document," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 61 (2) 1968, 263–81

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 270

<sup>11</sup> Harry Escott, *Hymnographer*, [London, Independent Press, 1962] 125

and heritage; the preceding developments within the practice of psalmody reveal how significant Watts' contribution is. Watts does not merely develop Puritan worship, but rather he transforms it. Bernard Manning put it well when he stated, "in his Christian interpretation of the Psalms, he had predecessors, but no one had so thoroughly carried out the plan before."<sup>12</sup> This chapter will describe the body of English psalmody that Watts inherits, so that his Psalter can be understood as the most important contribution to the metrical psalmody of Nonconformist worship since John Calvin.

### 1.1 The Development of Nonconformist Psalmody from Calvin to Watts in Britain

The Psalms have been part of Christian worship since the Early Church.<sup>13</sup> During the Reformation, the role of the Psalms in worship was debated, leading to differing conclusions, manifest in the respective traditions that descended from Martin Luther and John Calvin. It was Calvin's doctrine and practice in the matter which proved to be most significant to Watts and his Puritan predecessors.<sup>14</sup> Luther believed that any practice not condemned by Scripture was therefore permissible, and the Anglican Church subsequently adopted Luther's position in regard to the influence of Scripture over both doctrine and practice. Calvin, by contrast believed that only that which is ordained by God in Scripture is fit for congregational worship.

Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs no more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard Manning. *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts: Five Informal Papers* [Epworth Press, 1942] 81

<sup>13</sup> See James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* [Cambridge University Press, 1987] for a detailed history of psalmody within the Early Church.

<sup>14</sup> John Spurr discusses the transition between Puritanism and Nonconformity in "Later Stuart Puritanism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul Lim [Cambridge University Press, 2008] 89-90

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *The Preface to the Genevan Psalter*, 1543



Elsewhere, in the preface to the Genevan Service, Calvin wrote,

There are no songes more meete than the Psalmes of the Prophete David, which the holy Ghost hath framed to the same use and commended to the Church as containing the effect of the whole Scriptures, that our heartes might be more lively touched.<sup>16</sup>

Calvin's convictions here shaped Puritan worship for two centuries.<sup>17</sup> In reality, the divergent theological convictions of Luther and Calvin may be the result of their differing personalities. Luther was a great lover of music, and so devoted time and energy to writing hymns, whereas Calvin did not approve of non-scriptural hymns. For Calvin, there was another issue at hand, one which he inherited from Augustine: Calvin believed that such was the strength of music's influence on the emotions that it ought to be handled with care.<sup>18</sup>

The English Reformers quickly divided based on their differing ambitions. One group sought to use the Church of England for political means, in order to justify their separation from Rome. Others sought to continually reform the Church, seeking to see it move beyond some practices which were considered to be remnants of Roman Catholicism. For this group, who were to become known as Puritans, they sought to derive all authority within the Church from Scripture, rather than an ecclesial hierarchy. "Human inventions could not be tolerated in worship because they were creaturely self-assertions against God's will."<sup>19</sup>

So for the Puritans, congregational worship was synonymous with singing the Psalms. The reasoning for the commitment to metrical psalmody was both biblical and practical. It was biblical, in that the two references to congregational singing in the

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<sup>16</sup> *The forme of prayers and ministration of the Sacramentes, &c. vsed in the Englishe congregation at Geneua.* 1561, 8

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed discussion of how Calvin shaped the theology and worship of his church, see A. Heron, "Shaping the worship of the Reformed Church in Geneva: Calvin on prayer and praise", *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 68.1 (2012)

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Genevan Psalter*, 1543

<sup>19</sup> James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* [Westminster John Knox Press. 1989] 119

epistles of St. Paul (Colossians 3:15-16 and Ephesians 5:19-21) both speak of singing *psalms*. Calvin expressed his understanding of this in his 1537 Articles:

The other matter is the Psalms we wish to be sung in the church as we have it from the example of the ancient church and also the testimony of St. Paul, who says that it is good to sing in the congregation with mouth and heart. We are not able to estimate the benefit and edification which will derive from this until after having experienced it.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter 2 will consider how Watts handled these references to psalmody within Scripture, but broadly speaking he followed Calvin's approach, which was subsequently adopted by the fledgling Puritan movement.

The practical reason for an allegiance to singing the psalms was that it could be replicated. It has been suggested that Calvinism spread throughout Europe partly due to the way exiles strategically placed themselves, but primarily because of Calvin's teaching on worship: it was not the abstract doctrines of election or justification that caused Calvinism to spread most effectively, but rather it was largely due to Psalmody; it was practical, tangible and imitable.<sup>21</sup> Not only did the Psalms take root in the lives and hearts and songs of Calvinists, but the Calvinists saw themselves in the Psalms. "The Calvinists were convinced that they could legitimately appropriate the Psalms to themselves...the Psalms were their songs which they sang as the elect people of God in a covenant relationship with Him."<sup>22</sup> The point is made elsewhere by James Nichols, who writes, "In repentance and supplication as in joy and adoration, the songs of ancient Israel read Christologically were the chosen language of the Reformed Church."<sup>23</sup> The full potential of a Christological rendering of the Psalms would not be realised, however, until Isaac Watts. Graeme Murdock contends that Israel became a metaphor through which Reformed identity is constructed and

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Articles on the Organization of the Church and its Worship at Geneva*, 1537

<sup>21</sup> W. Stanford Reid, "The Battle Hymns of the Lord: Calvinist Psalmody of the Sixteenth Century" *Sixteenth Century Journal, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies*. 2 (1971): 37

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 47

<sup>23</sup> James Nichols, "The Intent of the Calvinist Liturgy" in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John Bratt. [William Eerdmans, 1973] 97

expressed.<sup>24</sup> This is the way that subsequent Calvinists, branching away from the Anglican church, would continue to define themselves, and so the singing of Psalms, grounded in Biblical precedent, also constructed the identity of the Reformed church.

The practical aspect of turning the prose of the Psalms into English poetry, with rhyme and metre, was not without complication.<sup>25</sup> Having wrestled church services out of the obscurities of Latin in favour of the languages of the people, the fear was now that the biblical text would be compromised as it passed through the filter of human intervention as it was subjected to both a vernacular translation and versification. But because Calvin approved of the compromise, the practice was adopted by both his contemporaries and subsequent generations.

The development of Puritan psalmody was a slow one. The earliest attempt to versify the Psalms during the English Reformation was that of Miles Coverdale, who paraphrased Luther's Psalter in 1539. Robert Crowley (1517-1588) published *The Psalter of David, translated into English Metre* in 1549, which was the first complete Psalter in English, though it did not prove to have any great influence. The Anglo-Genevan Psalter, as it was known, was brought to England by Protestants who had fled from England to Europe to escape the threat of persecution under the reign of Queen Mary due to her recapitulation to the Catholic Church. The exiles eventually settled in Geneva, home of John Calvin. Not only did this Psalter come with the authority of Calvin's blessing, but it contained several tunes bestowed with Calvin's approval.<sup>26</sup> However, the Genevan Psalter clashed with the increasingly popular Psalms adapted by Sternhold (1500-1549) and Hopkins (1520-1577), who took their melodic inspiration from the popular tunes of the day, whereas Calvin had expressly forbidden this in his preface to the Genevan Psalter.<sup>27</sup> This presented a conflict of allegiance to the exiled believers; they had a theological commitment to Calvin in the cause of the Protestant Reformation, but also had found a sense of national identity

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<sup>24</sup> Graeme Murdock, *Beyond Calvin* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2004] 102

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on the historical adaptations of metric psalmody, see Brandon Bellanti, "Sing to the Lord a New Song: John Calvin and the Spiritual Discipline of Metrical Psalmody," *Musical Offerings* 5.2.1 (2014)

<sup>26</sup> Due to the Psalms only being written in a limited number of metres, only a small selection of tunes were considered necessary.

<sup>27</sup> This is discussed in greater detail in Nicholas Temperley, "All Skillful Praises Sing" *Renaissance Studies*, 29 (2015) 531-533

while in exile through these Psalms. In order to repair this breach, William Whittingham adapted the work of Sternhold and Hopkins to fit French tunes, and included them in the Genevan service book in 1556. The next edition, published in 1561, includes tunes from William Kethe, whose attempt to combine tunes from the French Psalter with Sternhold's tunes proved to be somewhat of a clash of musical and literary styles. At the same time, Calvin's own Genevan Psalter was completed by Theodore Beza and published in 1562.

There were several more significant developments in psalmody over the next century. The Stationers' Company bought the rights in Britain to the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter in 1603, which created a publishing monopoly. George Wither's Psalter, completed in 1620, could therefore not be published until 1632, and he was only able to publish it in Holland. The rights to Sternhold and Hopkins were renewed in 1616 and 1634. *The Booke of Psalms: Englished in Prose and Meter* by Henry Ainsworth (1571-1622/23), was published in 1612 and later taken to the American Colonies.<sup>28</sup> Ainsworth's translation is a significant step in the development of psalmody, because he adopts the New Testament pattern of translating the Hebrew text, rather than maintaining fidelity to the original Hebrew as others had done. Ainsworth's psalter is a significant step towards Watts, as the words of Scripture are not only being translated from Hebrew into English or French, but they are being rearranged by an editing lyricist. As will be seen below, however, he is closer to Calvin's exegesis than the later Christological typology of David Dickson, Matthew Henry and Isaac Watts.<sup>29</sup>

In the American colonies, the *Bay Psalm Book*, published in 1640, was used alongside Ainsworth's Psalter. The latter was used by the Plymouth Brethren, and so the former was composed as an improvement by the Puritans who had reached America via Holland. Meanwhile back in England, Parliamentarians sought a new version of the Psalter to replace Sternhold and Hopkins' work, and so Francis Rous (1579-1659) published his Psalter in 1641. Though Sternhold and Hopkins' Psalter had been used almost exclusively within Nonconformist churches for close to a

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<sup>28</sup> For a discussion on Ainsworth's approach to translating the Psalms, see Richard Muller, *After Calvin* [Oxford University Press, 2003] 159-164

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 164-66

century, their version was not without its shortcomings. Most significantly, they did not translate from the original Hebrew. Richard Mather, who contributed to the *Bay Psalm Book*, criticised their work for being a paraphrase, rather than a translation, and cites 2 Chronicles 29:30 as his proof text, wherein King Hezekiah commanded that the words of David be used by the Levites in the praise of God. To some, the compromises made by Sternhold and Hopkins were too great, and so new editions sought to remedy this issue. Though *The Bay Psalm Book* was not widely used in England, it was only replaced in the common use of the New Colony churches by Watts' Psalter, largely due to the later patronage of Jonathan Edwards. To the Puritans of the mid-seventeenth century, fidelity to Scripture was more important than the literary qualities of the Psalter.

The singing of Psalms was put into legislation in the *Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God* in 1644; "It is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by singing of Psalms together in the congregation."<sup>30</sup> William Barton's Psalter, *The Book of Psalms in Metre Close and Proper to the Hebrew*, published in 1645, was the psalter favoured by the House of Lords, but their preference was overridden by the House of Commons, who gave their formal approval to Rous. Barton, with the blessing of Rous, composed a new Psalter, but this was rejected by the House of Commons for being too poetical.<sup>31</sup>

In 1696, Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady published *The New Version of the Psalms of David*. This Psalter was adopted quickly and widely. The *New Version* was seen as the Psalter that would finally replace the *Old Version*, the Sternhold and Hopkins monopoly, and was used throughout the Nonconformist church up until it was eventually replaced by Watts' Psalter. What unites the Psalters that preceded Watts is, in the words of John Hull, "a common defect."<sup>32</sup> According to Hull, "they present the meaning of the Hebrew psalms in an English which is as close as possible

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<sup>30</sup> *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, Edinburgh, 1644

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Clark, "Hymns, Psalms and Controversy in the Seventeenth Century," in *Dissenting Praise*, ed. Isabel Rivers and David Wykes [Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011]

<sup>32</sup> John Hull, "From Experiential Educator to Nationalist Theologian: the Hymns of Isaac Watts" in *Panorama: International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values*, 14.1 (2002) 91-106

to the original Hebrew, maintaining the imagery and outlook of the original psalm.”<sup>33</sup> This not only resulted in occasionally clumsy poetry, but excluded Christ from the songs of his people. Watts would seek to remedy this situation by writing Psalms that placed the essence of the Psalm into the broader story of Scripture, and thus making them directly applicable to the New Covenant people of God. Arthur Davis states that the “two divergent streams – the German hymn-singing and the English-Scotch Psalm-singing – went side by side. It was Watts who finally won the English over to the German side;”<sup>34</sup> that is to say, while there does not seem to be a direct intent in Watts to contradict Calvin in favour of Luther, but rather, as shall be seen, Watts draws different conclusions from the prevailing Scriptural interpretation within Nonconformity, and through the outworking of these convictions, he redirects psalmody towards a much more Christological approach.

### 1.2 The Developing Exegesis of the Psalms in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Alongside the development of psalmody, there was a progression from the Reformation to Watts’ day in the way the Psalms were understood and used within churches. As was noted in the introduction, there was a divergence between the way the Psalms were preached and the way they were sung. The role of the Psalm was a vital one in the dialogue of a Nonconformist worship service. Through the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the Word, God is seen to be speaking to the congregation. And through the prayer, the minister speaks back to God, on behalf of the people. The Psalm has a dual function: because it is Scripture, it is God’s Word to the congregation, but because it is sung by the congregation, it becomes their expression of devotion and worship to God.

Calvin set not only the practical agenda, but also the theological agenda for Puritan psalmody that remained largely unchallenged until Watts. The Psalms were

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Watts*, 188-189

deeply personal to Calvin: he saw a strong connection between himself and David.<sup>35</sup> Calvin's commentary preferred a literal interpretation and as such was not overtly Christological; he was more likely to refer either to the church in his application,<sup>36</sup> or steer the Psalm toward the private individual, and their place in God's covenant.<sup>37</sup> "It is notable in Calvin's interpretation of the Psalms that he is not intent on relating each and every Psalm to Jesus Christ."<sup>38</sup> There are rare instances where he adopts a Christological position. G. Sujin Pak, in *The Judaizing Calvin*,<sup>39</sup> notes that Calvin has three criteria for whether a Psalm can be viewed Christologically. Firstly, if a Psalm can be more properly applied to Christ, such as Psalm 31 or 32, or 110,<sup>40</sup> Secondly, if Christ quotes the Psalm, such as Psalm 22:1, which is spoken by Jesus in Matthew 27:46, or Psalm 118:26 which is used by Jesus in Matthew 23:39. Thirdly, Calvin will consider a Psalm to be about Christ if it retains the "simple and natural sense" of the Psalm, such as Psalm 2. The preface to the Genevan Service states that,

There are no songes more meete than the Psalmes of the Prophete David, which the holy Ghost hath framed to the same use and commended to the Church as containing the effect of the whole Scriptures, that our heartes might be more lively touched.<sup>41</sup>

Not only were Calvin's spiritual descendants going to sing Psalms, but they were going to approach their psalmody from Calvin's perspective.

In contrast to Calvin, Martin Luther's exegesis of the Psalms, and his subsequent psalmody, was far more Christocentric. In his Psalter, Luther reworks the

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<sup>35</sup> Howard Wallace "Calvin on the Psalms: Reading his Hermeneutic from the Preface to his Commentary," *Pacifica* 22:3 (2009): 301-307

<sup>36</sup> Alongside this, Calvin often referred to Israel as "the Church." See Wulfert de Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms" in *Calvin and the Bible* ed. Donald McKim [Cambridge University Press, 2006] 95

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Goswell, "Calvin's Commentary on the Psalter: Christian or Jewish?" *Pacifica* 22:3 (2009): 278-300

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 99

<sup>39</sup> G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* [Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009] 79

<sup>40</sup> Calvin described Psalm 110 as referring to the "perpetuity of Christ's reign and the eternity of His priesthood" (Goswell, "Calvin's Commentary", 12)

<sup>41</sup> *The forme of prayers and ministrations of the Sacramentes, &c. used in the English congregation at Geneua*, 1561, 8

Psalms in a Christocentric way. For example, the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of his most famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, based upon Psalm 46, reads,

No strength of ours can match his might  
 We would be lost, rejected  
 But now a champion comes to fight  
 Whom God himself perfected  
 You ask who this may be?  
 The Lord of hosts is he!  
 Christ Jesus, mighty Lord  
 God's only Son adored  
 He holds the field victorious

In the generations that followed the Reformation, the Psalms were treated by the Puritans in two parallel ways, with Calvin's exegesis being manifest in their Psalmody, and Luther's exegesis manifest in their preaching.<sup>42</sup> These twin strands would only eventually converge in Watts' Psalter.

What follows is a brief summary firstly of the defence of a Calvinistic psalmody, and secondly a representation of the progressively Christological interpretation of the Psalms between Calvin and Watts. George Wither (1588-1667) wrote in the preface to his Psalter that his Psalms were "prophecies of all things that pertain to Christ and His mystical body,"<sup>43</sup> citing David as a type of Christ.<sup>44</sup> Above each Psalm, he includes a brief statement concerning its scope and content. Above Psalm 2, for instance, he explains that it is a prophecy concerning Christ, but does not refer to this directly in the hymn that follows.

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<sup>42</sup> Gillingham makes clear that Luther's interpretation of the Psalms developed over time, with the focus of his early commentaries being far more Christocentric than his later works. See Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 137-141

<sup>43</sup> Wither, *The Psalmes of David translated into lyrick-verse, according to the scope, of the original. And illustrated, with a short argument, and a briefe prayer, or meditation; before, & after, every Psalme* [1632] 5

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 5



Nathaniel Holmes (1599-1678) wrote an impassioned defence of exclusive psalmody in 1644,<sup>45</sup> in which he asserts the need to sing Psalms based upon Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, as well as drawing upon the example of Christ in Matthew 26:30.<sup>46</sup> Later in the same volume, Holmes' preface to the Bay Psalter is included, in which he suggests that David and Asaph are types of Christ, which makes the words of the Psalms "typical" for all believers, giving them "universal and perpetual authority."<sup>47</sup>

In 1652, Thomas Ford (1598-1674) published a series of sermons on Ephesians 5:19, endorsing exclusive psalmody.<sup>48</sup> He was concerned that some were attempting to write non-Scriptural songs, and so published these sermons as a reply. His argument is cessationist, saying that to sing a new hymn is a spiritual gift, but such gifts ceased in the Apostolic age, along with tongues and prophecy.<sup>49</sup> Watts became familiar with these works while at Rowe's Academy, and of Thomas Ford he commented, "his arguments are so weak that they admit of a very easy solution."<sup>50</sup>

By Watts' day, attention had moved to two other areas. One was the issue of singing non-scriptural hymns: that is, Christian songs composed by a human author which, while faithful to the doctrines of Scripture, owe more to human creativity than to the Bible. Richard Baxter had written hymns and used them in his church. Benjamin Keach had composed hymns for his own congregation to sing following the Lord's Supper. Keach had to defend himself rigorously against Isaac Marlow, who published a pamphlet listing five serious objections to the singing of hymns.<sup>51</sup> Keach replied by writing "*A Breach Repair'd in God's Worship*", in which he argues that there are many aspects of Christian worship which are not given to us in set forms, such as preaching, and therefore the hymns that we sing can be inspired by, but need not necessarily be presented within, Scripture.

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<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel Holmes, *Gospel Music: Or the Singing of David's Psalms* [London, 1644]

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 1

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Ford, *The Singing of Psalms* [London, 1652]

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 36

<sup>50</sup> William Stephenson, "Isaac Watts's Education for the Dissenting Ministry: A New Document"

<sup>51</sup> Isaac Marlow, "*Prelimiting Forms of Praising God, Vocally sung by all the Church together, Proved to be no Gospel-Ordinance*" [1691]

A pivotal figure between Calvin and Watts is Richard Baxter (1615-1691). On the one hand, Baxter has the same view of the Psalms as Calvin, preferring to sing metrical Psalms that are as close as possible to the original Hebrew. And yet Baxter also wrote, and defended, non-Scriptural hymns. Concerning this apparent tension, he writes, “I durst not venture on the Paraphrastical great liberty of others; I durst make Hymns of my own, or explain the Apocryphal; but I feared adding to God’s Word, and making my own to pass for God’s.”<sup>52</sup> He admits that his hymns are not found in the words of Scripture, but are “commanded by the general Precepts of the Scriptures.”

This practice is not new to Baxter. Baxter represents a synthesis of Calvin and Luther here; simultaneously heeding the direct command of Scripture to sing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” while at the same time defending hymn-writing by deduction rather than prescription. Davies neatly summarises the views of Luther and Calvin when he writes, “Luther will have what is not specifically condemned by the Scriptures; whilst Calvin will have only what is ordained by God in the Scriptures.”<sup>53</sup> In using the New Testament as the key interpreter of the Old, Watts is not in any way new. Watts’ significance in the developing hermeneutic of psalmody comes from the fact that he bridged the gap between Luther and Calvin in allowing his Psalter to speak of Christ; Watts marks a substantial hermeneutical shift that would be the turning point for Nonconformist, and subsequently Evangelical, hymnody.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to this staunch defence of a literal view of the Psalms in their psalmody, Puritans and the Nonconformists who followed them developed a more Christological interpretation of the Psalms in their preaching. An increasing emphasis of Covenantal theology is evident, stressing the covenants of works and grace, under the respective headships of Adam and Christ. This allowed for a far more Christological interpretation of Scripture, with Christ being found on every page of the Scriptures. Typology became the primary means of understanding the Old

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Baxter, [www. quod.lib.umich.edu, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A27939.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A27939.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext)

<sup>53</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* [Westminster, Dacre, 1948] 16

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Rochelle Stackhouse, “Hymnody and Politics” in *Wonderful of Words of Life*, ed. Richard Mouw & Mark Noll [Eerdmans, 2004] 46

Testament, which was not considered to be an abandonment of Calvin's more literalist approach, but rather was considered to be a fulfilment of this approach.<sup>55</sup>

Regarding the Psalms, Christ was increasingly seen as the primary subject of the Psalms, and the hermeneutical key to their understanding. David Dickson (1583-1662), explaining the introductory role of Psalms 1 and 2, states that Psalm 1 divides all people into two camps, the blessed and the wicked. Their devotion or disobedience to the Law of God is revealed through their response to Christ, who is set forth in Psalm 2.<sup>56</sup> Dickson goes on to say that, "the rest of the Psalms hold forth examples of Christ."<sup>57</sup> In John Owen's commentary on Psalm 130, he locates the New Covenant of grace within the Psalm;

Thus, though there be, in the covenant of grace through Jesus Christ, provision made of abundant supplies for the soul's preservation from entangling sins, yet their administration hath respect unto our diligent attendance unto the means of receiving them appointed for us to walk in.<sup>58</sup>

Thomas Goodwin stated that the psalms lay open the heart of Christ, just as the gospels describe the events of Christ's life.<sup>59</sup> Samuel Mather, in his treatise on typology, commenting on Psalm 89, writes,

Hence they did so often make mention of *Abraham, Isaack, and Jacob*, (as being the Types of Christ) in their Prayers, and especially of *David, For thy servant David's sake*, Psal. 89. not as resting in *David* literally; but looking beyond the shadow, unto him that was the truth thereof; for by *David* they meant Christ: Christ is oft called by that name, because *David* was so eminent a Type of him.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* [Reformed Heritage Press, 2012] 34

<sup>56</sup> David Dickson, *A Brief Explication of the Psalms* [Glasgow, 1834] Preface

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> John Owen, *A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX* [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)  
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/psalm130.i.vii.iii.html>

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* [Edinburgh, 1863] 228

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Mather, *The Figures or Types of the Old Testament, By which Christ and the Heavenly Things of the Gospel were Preached and Shadowed to the People of God of old; Explained and improved in sundry Sermons*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/>,  
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A50253.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

Watts was an heir to this heritage. And so this was the view of the Psalms which he adopted as his own. However, unlike those who had preceded, Watts was not satisfied with Christ being invisible within Nonconformist psalmody, appearing only in infrequent passing references and allusions. Watts, as shall be seen in Chapter 2, does not seek to add to Scripture, but rather he intends to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture; the Old Testament is seen through the lens of the New. “Watts the logician argued that Old Testament Scripture viewed in New Covenant light both allowed and obligated him to Christianize the Psalms.”<sup>61</sup> The following chapter will explain Watts’ rationale for his Christological revisions to the Psalter.

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<sup>61</sup> Rothenbusch Crookshank, “We’re Marching to Zion”: Isaac Watts in Early America”, *Wonderful Words of Life*, 19

## Chapter 2: A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody

In 1707, Watts wrote *A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody*, outlining his rationale for interpreting the Psalms as he did, opening with his stated aim to enquire as to “how the Psalms of *David* ought to be translated into Christian songs.”<sup>1</sup> His Psalms would not be completed for another twelve years, but his views were firm and unchanging throughout this time. Harry Escott demonstrates that Watts had a single-minded approach to the practice of psalmody, which is seen in the consistency of his approach throughout his career.<sup>2</sup> The significance of Watts’ accomplishment does not lie in his originality, or in the finesse of his Psalter,<sup>3</sup> but rather in his willingness to challenge the established patterns of Nonconformist psalmody through the accomplishments of his Psalter and his underlying methodology.<sup>4</sup> In some ways, the *Essay* gives more of an insight into Watts’ mind than the hymns themselves, as it provides a window into the theological and practical convictions that motivated the work. That there is over a decade between the *Essay* and the publication of the hymnbook makes the consistency between the two all the more important. His Psalter is not something that was conceived lightly, or created in haste; rather it is the product of many years of unswerving focus. Bernard Manning put it well when he stated, “in his Christian interpretation of the Psalms, he had predecessors, but no one had so thoroughly carried out the plan before.”<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will explore the theological basis for Watts’ Psalter by engaging with his *Essay*. It will be argued that a full comprehension of this *Essay* is vital to the subsequent study of the Psalms themselves. The *Essay* can be compared with an

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Watts, “A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody” in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in Nine Volumes, Vol. 4* [London, 1813] 3

<sup>2</sup> Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer*, [London, Independent Press, 1962] 136-142

<sup>3</sup> Although Watson does say it is his “last and greatest poetical work.” (J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* [Oxford University Press, 1997] 152)

<sup>4</sup> Escott writes that, “Watts introduced his psalmodic reform gradually, inoculating his public with small doses of Christian psalmody for a long time, till by slow degrees they were induced to receive the reform in its completeness in 1719” (Escott, *Hymnographer*, 136).

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts: Five Informal Papers* [Epworth, 1942] 81

architect's plans, with the subsequent Psalter being the resultant building.<sup>6</sup> Without this *Essay*, Watts' Psalter will not be sufficiently understood for the theological text that it is. This *Essay* ensures that Watts' Psalter is not dismissed as merely being another contribution to Nonconformist psalmody, but rather is considered to be a revolutionary work and a landmark publication in the history of hymnody.

The chapter will begin by examining Watts' biblical justification for his practice. As was seen in the previous chapter, those who held to exclusive psalmody believed that they were being faithful to the commands of Scripture. In Watts' view, they were wrong and he is right, and in this opening section the reasons for this will be outlined. Following this, consideration will be given to Watts' method of imitation, and the way he moves from the biblical text to his own interpretation. Particular attention will be given to the work of Donald Davie, and his insights into Watts' method. Lastly, the chapter will explore the way Watts defends his methods, in particular the way he justifies a Christocentric Psalter.

## 2.1 Biblical Exegesis

Watts opens his *Essay* with a high view of congregational singing:

To speak the Glories of God in a religious Song, or to breath out the Joys of our own Spirits to God with the Melody of our Voice is an exalted Part of Divine Worship.<sup>7</sup>

He expresses not only the importance of praising God, but of expressing joy while doing so. Throughout the *Essay*, Watts speaks about the priority of the affections and emotions of those singing praise to God. Watts was critical of the way many churches sang, often using the practice of 'lining out' where a song leader would sing a line,

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<sup>6</sup> The most thorough assessment is Harry Escott's chapter, "Revolutionary Manifesto" (See Escott, *Hymnographer*, 121-134). In it, he compares the essay to a quarry, from which Watts mines the materials for his Psalter.

<sup>7</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 3

which the congregation repeated back. Watts wanted to raise both the doctrinal intelligence and passionate affections of Christian worshippers.

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 fervency of inward religion; and 'tis much to be feared that the minds of most of the worshippers are absent or unconcerned.<sup>8</sup>

The task of paraphrasing the Psalms through the influence of the New Testament is a pastoral duty for Watts, as he intended to influence the subjective passions of the singers with the objective truths of the gospel, and enable them to offer an appropriate response through song. Watts has been described as the “the first hymn-writer to give due place to the subjective aspect of worship-song, and to take into full consideration the psychology of the congregation in its praises.”<sup>9</sup> He strives to give the worshipper words that both shape and articulate their experience.

The first and chief intent of this part of Worship, is to express unto God what Sense and Apprehensions we have of his Essential Glories; and what notice we take of his Works of Wisdom and Power, Vengeance and Mercy; 'tis to vent the inward Devotion of our Spirits in Words of Melody, to speak our own Experience of divine Things, especially our religious Joy.<sup>10</sup>

Watts is determined that singing be experiential. Words such as “sense”, “apprehensions”, “experience” show that he intends the singer not just to articulate correct doctrine or fine poetry; instead, his aim is to lead the singing congregation into a more profound understanding, with the minds engaged and their emotions stirred. Watts’ Psalms express “the central tenets of the Christian faith in simple, direct, and

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<sup>8</sup> Watts, *Works* 4, 127

<sup>9</sup> Escott. *Hymnographer*, 77

<sup>10</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 15

often beautiful language which the ordinary believer could apply to his own experience.”<sup>11</sup>

Escott, in his otherwise excellent summary of this *Essay*, dismisses Watts’ introductory exegetical considerations as being “concerned mainly with linguistic matters and are of little value, except that they show the thoroughness of Watts’ scholarship and research.”<sup>12</sup> This is not only a contradiction, as it is the very thoroughness of his scholarship and research that make his *Essay*, not to mention his psalmody, so effective, but also misses the point of his opening statements. The statements that follow, explaining and defending both his methodology and Psalter, are only valid because of this thorough scholarship and research.

After presenting an overview of the “considerable texts”<sup>13</sup> within the New Testament where singing and Psalms are mentioned, Watts continues by defending his agenda from the New Testament. The three significant categories of congregational song are found in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19; psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Watts defines these words and traces the use of the corresponding Greek words, *psalmos*, *hymnos* and *ōde*, through the New Testament to confirm their usage. His definitions are as follows: ὁ

*Psallō* /*psalmos*: a song with instrumental accompaniment, not specifically an Old Testament Psalm.

*Humnoi*/*hymnos*: an expression of praise.

*Ode*: singing without accompaniment.<sup>14</sup>

He begins with the use of the verb *hymneō* in Matthew 26:30, where Christ and the disciples sing together at the last supper. Matthew Henry, in his commentary on the Bible, suggests that they sing one of the hallel Psalms, probably 113-118.<sup>15</sup> To Watts, the obvious word *psallō* is not used here, but rather *hymneō*, suggesting that the

<sup>11</sup> Michael Watts, *The Dissenters* [Oxford University Press, 1978] 312

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg. 122

<sup>13</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 3

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Henry. *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible, Volume 3*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.i.html>



words are interchangeable. Equally, in James 5:13, when the verb *psallō* is used, Watts is sure that the believers would not have used instruments. Watts is not saying that the wording is somehow flimsy or lacking precision, but rather that this interchangeability allows for a more Baxterian interpretation; that is, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are used in a way that allows the categories to be blurred, and as such makes room for all three to be used in congregational worship.

Watts moves on to the key New Testament texts, and argues that the reference to “spiritual songs” in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 is used by Paul to differentiate between the law and the gospel.

The Jews had *carnal Ordinances*, and *carnal Commandments*, and their State and Dispensation is often called *Flesh*, but the Church under the Gospel is a *spiritual House*, *blessed with spiritual Blessings*, *endow'd with spiritual Gifts*, *to worship God in Spirit and in Truth*, *to offer spiritual Sacrifices*, and *to sing spiritual songs*.<sup>16</sup>

Watts traces *pneumatikos* in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 to John 4:24 and 1 Peter 2:5 (*pneuma* and *pneumatikos* respectively) to demonstrate that New Testament worship, while related to the Old Testament Covenant and Psalms, is differentiated by being primarily a spiritual ordinance. This is a prime example of his exegetical method. While the verses do not directly command the kind of paraphrase of the Psalms that Watts published, they reveal to him the need for songs that are appropriate for the New Covenant believer.

Watts has a profoundly Christological interpretation of Scripture, which motivated his entire corpus of hymns. This is overlooked by Watson, who suggests that, “Watts uses the psalms: rather than following them, he makes them follow him.”<sup>17</sup> To Watts, there is no contradiction within the writings of Scripture, nor is there self-opposition within the Holy Spirit. Rather, he believes that the New Testament is the key to unlocking the Old. The carnal covenant is infused with the

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<sup>16</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 5

<sup>17</sup> Watson, *English Hymn*, 155

Spirit and amended to make a spiritual covenant, as the sacrifices of lambs by priests are superseded with the atoning death of Christ. Likewise, carnal songs, filled with the Spirit of the New Covenant, require amendment so that the newer and superior covenant is spoken of with clarity rather than assumption. Samuel Mather summarised this dispensational hermeneutic by saying,

We call it the Old Testament because it was the *first* Dispensation of the Gospel: And the Gospel we call the New Testament, because it is the *new* Dispensation of the same everlasting Gospel; therefore the reason is only in the way and manner of this Dispensation, and not in the Subjects themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Watts then continues his brief exposition of Colossians 3:16 by considering the phrase “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” He writes,

Now tho the Books of the Old Testament may in some Sense be called the *Word of Christ*, because the same Spirit which was afterwards given to *Christ* the Mediator did inspire them; yet this seems to have a peculiar reference to the Doctrine and Discoveries of *Christ* under the Gospel.<sup>19</sup>

The specific reference to Christ is seen by Watts as an indication that the Psalms cannot be sufficient for Christian worship in their current state. This point is clarified in his treatise, *A Short View of the Whole of Scripture*, written in 1746 shortly before his death, where Watts makes his view of the Christology of the Psalms plain.

David speaks often of Christ in his book of Psalms in many remarkable expressions, and describes his Incarnation, his Sufferings, his Exaltation and his various Offices of Prophet, Priest and King.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel Mather, *The Figures or Types of the Old Testament by which Christ and the Heavenly things of the Gospel were Preached and Shadowed to the People of God of Old: Explained and Improved in Sundry Sermons* [Dublin, 1683] 8

<sup>19</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 5-6

<sup>20</sup> Isaac Watts, *A Short View of the Whole of Scripture* [Buckland and Longman, 1767] 248

Watts continues his *Essay* by turning to the book of Revelation, in particular the reference to the Song of Moses and the Lamb in Rev. 15:3. He has stated earlier in the *Essay* that “Book of the *Revelations* describes the Worship of the Gospel-Church on Earth.”<sup>21</sup> Given this interpretation, Watts ascertains that the New Testament Church must utilise the Old Covenant, here represented by the Song of Moses, in order to then sing the Song of the Lamb. “And thus at least we are to suit part of our Psalmody to the Gospel-State as well as borrow part from the Old Testament.”<sup>22</sup> This argument is subtle but significant. He is saying that the Song of Moses is mentioned here not to dominate the landscape of New Testament worship, but rather to inform it. The Song of Moses precedes the Song of the Lamb. Watts finds it significant that there is no instruction or precedent to adopt the Song of Moses in isolation here, but instead it is used to demonstrate the scope of salvation, from the redemption of God’s people from Egypt to the redemption of God’s people through Christ, so that Old and New Testament believers are incorporated into the redeemed community of heaven.

And it must be noted here, that this Book of the *Revelations* describes the Worship of the Gospel-Church on Earth, as is agreed by all Interpreters, tho it borrows some of its Emblems from the Things of Heaven, and some from the Jewish State.<sup>23</sup>

Here Watts boldly claims that the pattern of New Testament worship is not the Psalms, but rather what we see in Revelation. He is arguing that while we look back to the text of the Scriptures for our teaching, we ought to model our current worship on how it will be, rather than how it was.

I might here remark also, that when a *new Song* is mention'd in the Old Testament, it refers to the Times of the *Messiah*, and is prophetical of the Kingdom of *Christ*, or at least it is a Song indited upon a new Occasion publick

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<sup>21</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 6

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 6

or personal, and the Words of it are accomodated to some new Tokens of Divine Mercy.<sup>24</sup>

Again, Watts is saying that the pattern of worship is always learned by looking ahead. The Psalms often refer to events of the past, such as the redemptive exile from Egypt, the covenant at Mount Sinai or the inauguration of the temple sacrifices; Watts, by seeing these events as types and shadows of Christ, contends that by looking back to these events, they are simultaneously looking ahead with prophetic faith to the appearance of Christ. To Watts, all worship looks ahead to what God has promised but is yet to fulfil. So just as Old Testament worship simultaneously looked back to historic acts of salvation while looking ahead to the promised coming of the Messiah, so too New Testament worship looks back to the death and resurrection of Christ while looking ahead to the day when God's people, from every dispensation, will be united in worship and praise around his throne. This shift of focus makes it clear that, compared to those who are committed to exclusive psalmody, Watts is not just amending what has gone on before, but offering a fresh perspective.

## 2.2 Method of Imitation

Watts then turns from defence into attack, deconstructing the arguments of his opponents. This is done by firstly suggesting that if the Psalms are to be translated from Hebrew into English, and arranged somehow into rhyme and metre then in a purist sense they cease to be Scripture. He has in view those who believe that to sing the *Old Version*, by Sternhold and Hopkins, is to sing the unadulterated Word of God. By the time a psalm has been translated into English from Hebrew, and the words have been subjected to the poetic conventions of rhyme and metre, it is no longer Scripture.

Those that have labour'd with utmost Toil to keep very close to the Hebrew  
have found it impossible; and when they have attain'd it most, have made but

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 6

very poor Music for a Christian Church. For it will often happen, that one of the most affectionate and most Spiritual Words in the Prose will not submit to its due Place in the Metre, or does not end with a proper Sound, and then it must be secluded, and another of less proper Sense be put in the Room of it.<sup>25</sup>

Watts employs a sarcastic jibe to conclude this point;

Those Persons therefore that will allow nothing to be sung but the words of inspiration or Scripture ought to learn the Hebrew Music, and sing in the Jewish Language; or at least I can find no Congregation with which they can heartily join according to their own Principles.<sup>26</sup>

Watts' cumulative logic is that if one is willing to alter the Psalms for the secondary sake of rhyme and metre, then surely one must be willing to concede to the higher ambition of altering the Psalms in order to crystallise the person and work of Christ, as portrayed in the Psalms. If the inferior concession is made, then to Watts, the greater need of obeying Paul in letting the word of Christ inform psalms, hymns and spiritual songs must also be accommodated. It has been argued that there are three stages within the history of Puritan worship. The first stage is the adaptation of the psalms in vernacular languages, allowing the whole congregation to sing them. The second stage is their versification, where rhyme, metre and melody transform them into English poetry. The third stage is the work of Watts, who bridges the gap between the Psalter and the hymnbook through his very distinctive rendering of the Psalms.<sup>27</sup>

Opinion is divided as to whether or not Watts' Psalms can rightly be called an imitation or a translation. Richard Arnold insists that Watts is an imitator.<sup>28</sup> However, Donald Davie takes issue with Watts here, suggesting that Watts ought to view his

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>27</sup> Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* [Westminster, Dacre, 1948] 162

<sup>28</sup> Though he admits that "even a cursory look at a few Psalms reveals that Watts is indeed an imitator rather than a translator" and his justification is only based his analysis of Psalm 150. See Richard Arnold, *A Trinity of Discord* [Peter Lang, 2012] 32

Psalms as a translation, rather than simply an ‘imitation.’<sup>29</sup> He goes on to compare Watts’ rendering of Psalm 74, where he chooses to omit the reference to the Leviathan in verse 14. Watts versifies the Psalm comprehensively across 17 quatrains, but chooses to completely ignore the Leviathan. To Davie, Watts is going further than he suggests he is, because instead of simply viewing the Psalms through a Christological lens, Watts is actually translating Scripture. However, to Davie this is not a problem, as translation is non-canonical, and therefore can exist alongside the original text.<sup>30</sup>

Davie then discusses George Steiner’s model of imaginative translation, which comprises of trust, aggression, incorporation and restitution.<sup>31</sup> “*Trust* means in the first place the translator’s trust that in the foreign text there is something valuable enough to deserve the pains he must take to release it.”<sup>32</sup> Trust here would also include a respect for the author of the text, in this case the Psalmist. Davie concludes that Watts has a huge reverence for both the text and its author. As shall be discussed later in the chapter, Watts believes that had David been born in the New Testament age, he would have written hymns that directly praised the person and work of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

Translation, according to Steiner, requires aggression, and so when Watts either chooses to refer directly to Christ even where he is not named in the Psalm, or make the pastoral and editorial decision to reject the Leviathan, he is subjecting the original text to necessary violence, which must be balanced by his trust in his methods.

Incorporation is the most difficult of the tasks, as this is where the two texts must marry with one another; the ancient text, along with the author’s intentions, must re-emerge in the translator’s new work. For Watts, this task is clear; he is making the psalmist speak like a Christian. Watts is bringing two worlds together, by infusing the Old Testament Psalms with New Testament revelation. However, Watts would consider this to be one world, whereby the Psalms are themselves reliant upon the New Testament for their fullest expression.

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<sup>29</sup> Donald Davie, “Psalmody as Translation,” *The Modern Language Review*, 85.4 (1990) 817

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 825-826

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 826

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 13

Restitution is the act of compensating for some deficiency seen by the translator in the original text. So, for example, when Watts reads in Psalm 72:1-2,

“Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king's son. He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment”,

he sees the role of the king as a type of Christ, and so he reinvents the verse to say:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journies run:  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.<sup>34</sup>

While Davie is not always favourable towards Watts,<sup>35</sup> his insights are helpful in regard to assessing precisely what Watts is doing in his Psalter. Watts is processing the Psalms through the dual filters of theology and form, expressing them in the language of the New Testament as well as subjecting them to the patterns of 18<sup>th</sup> Century English poetry.

### 2.3 A Defence of Watts' Imitation

Returning to the *Essay*, Watts adds his own nuance to the issue of translation and imitation<sup>36</sup> by suggesting that reading and singing have different designs, so that it is then justifiable to alter what is sung, without changing what is read. The purpose of reading, as he sees it, is to allow God to speak to us in His Word, and for us to be instructed through observing how God has dealt with humanity, “and how their Hearts have been exercis'd in their Wandrings from God, and Temptations, or in their Returns

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<sup>34</sup> Watts, Psalm 72:1.2

<sup>35</sup> The main weakness with Davie's analysis justifies the need for this chapter in the thesis, namely that he does not pass Watts' editorial decisions through the filter of Watts' theological intentions as stated in his *Essay*.

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion on the literary form of Imitation, see: Roger Lund. “Making an Almost Joyful Noise: Augustan Imitation and the Psalms of David”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 39 (2016) 121–139

and Breathings towards God again.”<sup>37</sup> However, singing has a very different function; singing is designed to “speak our own Hearts and our Words to God.”<sup>38</sup> Songs are

generally Expressions of our own Experiences, or of his Glories; we acquaint him what Sense we have of his Greatness and Goodness, and that chiefly in those Instances which have some Relation to us: We breath out our Souls towards him, and make Addresses of Praise and Acknowledgment to him.<sup>39</sup>

This significant distinction allows Watts to compose hymns that imitate the Psalms, without falling foul of the warning in Revelation 22:18; “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.” However, Watts offers a pastoral caveat at this point; the singer should not want to sing words that they have not experienced, and use language that they cannot call their own, “contrary to our Circumstances and the Frame of our Spirits.”<sup>40</sup> His concern for the authenticity of the singer is nuanced;

I own that 'tis not always necessary our Songs should be direct Addresses to God; some of them may be mere Meditations of the History of Divine Providences, or the Experiences of former Saints; but even then, if those Providences or Experiences cannot be assum'd by us as parallel to our own, nor spoken in our own Names; yet still there ought to be some Turns of Expression that may make it look at least like our own present Meditation, and that may represent it as a History which we ourselves are at that time recollecting.<sup>41</sup>

To prove this point, Watts cites Psalms 44 and 78. Psalm 44 refers to the Israelites arriving in Canaan. Watts renders his hymn based upon this Psalm in this way:

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<sup>37</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 8

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 8

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 8



1. Lord, we have heard thy works of old,  
Thy works of power and grace  
When to our ears our fathers told  
The wonders of their days:
  
2. How thou didst build thy churches here  
And make thy gospel known;  
Amongst them did thine arm appear,  
They light and glory shone.

In doing so, he allows the sentiment of hearing from previous generations what God has done for them, but he localises the experience. The words can then be legitimately be sung in line with the desires and experiences of every Christian believer, as they long for the “power and grace” of God to be known by subsequent generations. Watts is conscious that hymns have a catechetical function within congregational worship, and therefore not only must the content be instructional, but accessible too.<sup>42</sup>

In some instances, Watts is happy merely to alter a pronoun in order to make the psalm applicable to the Christian, for example changing “they” to “we” as he does in Psalms 1, 8 and 19, for example. He is concerned that the singer should not be disconnected from the events described in the psalm, and so he not only locates the singer into the hymn by using an inclusive pronoun, but he also amends details within the psalm so that they relate to the singer’s experience. He finds the biographical details that David includes to be more problematic:

There are other Divine Songs which cannot properly be accommodated to our Use, and much less be assum'd as our own without very great Alterations, (viz.) such as are filled with some very particular Troubles or Enemies of a Person, some Places of Journeying or Residence, some uncommon Circumstances of a

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Sherman, “The catechetical function of Reformed hymnody,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 55, (2002) 79-99

Society, to which there is scarce anything parallel in our Day or Case: Such are many of the Songs of David, whose Persecutions and Deliverances were very extraordinary.<sup>43</sup>

Watts goes on to address the warnings in Revelation 22:18-19, about adding to or removing from the words of the book of God. He differentiates between the book of Psalms “given to be read by us as God's Word for our Use and Instruction”<sup>44</sup> and the notion that the entire book of Psalms was given to the Christian church to be sung.

For if this were the Design of it, then every Psalm, and every Line of it might be at one time or another proper to be sung by Christians: But there are many hundred Verses in that Book which a Christian cannot properly assume in singing without a considerable Alteration of the Words, or at least without putting a very different Meaning upon them, from what *David* had when he wrote them.<sup>45</sup>

This is a significant distinction as it separates psalmody from the Psalms, and allows for different rules to govern the adaption of Psalms for Christian worship from those that govern Scripture itself. He follows this statement with an extensive paragraph listing examples of Psalms which contain places, events and practices which “can scarce ever be accommodated to Gospel-Worship.”<sup>46</sup>

Following this, Watts considers the following objection: “The Patrons of another Opinion will say we must sing the Words of *David*, and apply them in our Meditation to the things of the New Testament.”<sup>47</sup> Watts dismisses this notion instantly, likening it to speaking in tongues without interpretation.<sup>48</sup> He sees the inconsistency of this position too: “therefore to keep close to the Language of *David*, we must break the Commands of God by *David*, who requires that we *sing his Praises*

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<sup>43</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 9

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>48</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 14:15, 19

*with Understanding.*”<sup>49</sup> He acknowledges that the necessity of adapting the Psalms is not a fault of the Psalms themselves, but rather he considers it be both a requirement from Scripture, as well as an inevitable consequence of living in a different time and place. “Such Language was suited by Infinite Wisdom to raise the Affections of the Saints of that Day: But I fear they do but sink our Devotion, and hurt our Worship.”<sup>50</sup>

Watts proceeds to explain two further aspects of the methodology of his paraphrase. First, he boldly asserts that, “they ought to be translated in such a Manner as we have reason to believe *David* would have compos'd them if he had lived in our Day.”<sup>51</sup> Should anyone doubt Watts’ high view of the Psalms as written by David, he has this to say:

'Tis one of the Excellencies of Scripture-Songs, that they are exactly suited to the very Purpose and Design for which they were written, and that both in the Matter, in the Stile, and in all their Ornaments: This gives Life and Strength to the Expression, it presents Objects to the Ears and to the Eyes, and touches the Heart in the most affecting Manner.<sup>52</sup>

Watts suggests that David’s use of language is so particular, and so precise that should he be writing under the New Testament dispensation:

He would see frequent Occasion to insert the Cross of Christ in his Song, and often interline the Confessions of his Sins with the Blood of the Lamb; often would he describe the Glories and the Triumphs of our blessed Lord in long and flowing Verse.<sup>53</sup>

While this paragraph is by far the most presumptuous in the entire *Essay*, Watts concludes it by arguing that throughout Scripture, the songs therein contain a progression of revelation. He redeems such bold statements with a beautiful conclusion:

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<sup>49</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 12

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 13

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

All along the sacred History as the Revelations of God and his Grace were made plainer, so the Songs of the Saints express'd that Grace and those Revelations according to the Measure of their Clearness and Increase... Every Beam of new Light that broke into the World gave occasion of fresh joy to the Saints, and they were taught to sing of Salvation in all the Degrees of its advancing Glory.<sup>54</sup>

The second aspect to this methodology involves Watts reference to the New Testament itself. He cites Luke 19:38, where the disciples quote Psalm 118:26 at the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, hailing Christ as the Messianic King, before going into more detail discussing Acts 4:24-30, where the Apostles incorporate Psalm 2:1-2 into a prayer of praise and supplication for deliverance from the persecution they were facing. He comments:

the Song concludes with the breathing of their Desires towards God for Mercies most precisely suited to their Day and Duty; and you find when they had sung, they went to Prayer in the Assembly, and then they preached the Word of God by the holy Ghost, and with amazing Success. O may I live to see Psalmody perform'd in these evangelick Beauties of Holiness! May these Ears of mine be entertain'd with such Devotion in Publick, such Prayer, such Preaching, and such Praise! May these Eyes behold such returning Glory in the Churches!<sup>55</sup>

Watts believes he is following the pattern of the Early Church, by using the Psalms within his own situation and dispensation. Taken with his earlier comments about the progressive revelation of songs throughout Scripture, we can see that Watts has a clear grasp of an internal Biblical hermeneutic in his own theology and in this regard, Watts differs vastly from the hymn-writers who have gone before him. Watts possess a second layer to his theology of Scripture, which is that he does not simply take each passage according to its own meaning, but instead he will allow Scripture to

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 13-14

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 14

interpret Scripture, the “traditional Protestant way of interpretation.”<sup>56</sup> By prioritising the centrality of the gospel in Christian worship, he is not bending Scripture to suit his own means, but rather, he is able to take note of the intricacies of the text. To Watts, this is not a new way of adapting the Psalms for New Testament worship; it is an ancient way; it is, Watts writes, “the true Method of translating *Jewish Songs* for the Use of the *Christian Church*.”<sup>57</sup>

From this point, Watts moves on to discuss the merits of non-Scriptural hymns, the contribution to hymnody for which he is best remembered. Therefore the analysis of the *Essay* for the present subject shall be concluded with a few summarising remarks.

Watts’ intention is to be pastoral, and not revolutionary. It has been argued in the previous chapter that Watts is contending with the Reformed tradition of psalmody, and as such makes the most significant contribution to Nonconformist singing since Calvin. Even though Watts is writing to silence the criticism he anticipates, throughout the process of compiling and defending his psalter, his eyes are firmly fixed upon those who will be singing his imitations and the experience of the person in the pew. He is concerned that they will understand the breadth of Scripture more as Christ is woven into the Psalms and expressed in song. To that end, Watts has strived to find a balance between cognitive apprehension and emotional resonance. He is not content with people merely singing amended words, but rather he is convinced that as the truths of Christ are played out across the dramatic landscape of the Psalms, these fresh words will produce impassioned singing.

Watts’ exegetical ambition is, as he sees it, ancient and not modern.<sup>58</sup> Watts relies on the interplay already evident within Scripture to prove his point, rather than relying upon his skills as a logician or relaying the anecdotal evidence of his hymn’s

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<sup>56</sup> J.R. Watson, “Hymns, Psalms and Controversy in the Seventeenth Century” in *Dissenting Praise*. ed. Isabel Rivers and David Wykes [Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011]

<sup>57</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 14

<sup>58</sup> Towards the end of his essay, Watts draws upon examples of hymns and Christological Psalmody from the Early Church

initial success. He is allowing the wider canon of Scripture to inform how the Psalms are to be used in the New Covenant Church. Watts is not rejecting what has gone before, nor is he disassociating himself with his Nonconformist heritage. Rather, he is adding nuance and subtlety to what he sees as a rather brittle and inconsistent mode of exegesis. The fact that Watts does not name those with whom he is interacting implies that his intention is not to be polemical, but rather to be persuasive. His arguments are carefully designed to show that his method, rather than undermining Scripture and worship, allows for more interaction between the two. Watts is not negating the Reformed view of the supremacy of Scripture; rather, he is allowing worship and Scripture to become more conversant. His Psalms offer a window into the whole of Scripture, and are designed to function as a complement to the Bible rather than a supplement.

This *Essay* gives an insight into Watts' intentions with his Psalter. He has one eye to the past, and another focused on the present, where he desires to revive the worship of the Church. He has engaged rigorously with both Scripture and tradition to arrive at his conclusion. The architect's plans reveal how the building will look, and it is from Watts' theoretical designs to their outworking that we now turn.

### Chapter 3: The Work of Christ

Thus in the name of Christ, the Lord,  
 The holy David sung  
 And providence fulfils the word  
 Of his prophetic tongue<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1 Introduction

The following chapters will begin to examine Watts' *Psalms of David*, giving attention to the Christological theology within them, demonstrating the way they develop the hermeneutic of Nonconformist psalmody. His Christological rendering of the Psalms shall be seen to be consistent with the prevailing exegesis of Reformed theology in the later 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>2</sup> Watts' Psalms are so heavily influenced by his own overarching theological principles that they cannot be understood sufficiently in isolation. The intention of this study is to consider how Watts' interpretation of the Psalms sits within the broader context of his time. Therefore, the Psalms of Watts' Psalter will be compared to the King James Version of the Bible as well as several other significant and influential Psalters. Alongside this, Watts' interpretations will be compared to the exegesis of divines such as Matthew Henry,<sup>3</sup> John Owen, Richard Baxter and Thomas Goodwin. Attention will not be given to the linguistic aspects of Watts' psalmody, but rather the theology within them.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Watts' Psalms are a pool into which several streams flow. He has a deep concern for the knowledge and experience

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<sup>1</sup> Watts, Psalm 16:4.5

<sup>2</sup> Davis describes Watts' sermons as being continuations of seventeenth century Puritan divines (Arthur Davis, *Isaac Watts* [London, Independent Press, 1943] 127)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry was a friend of Watts (Davis, *Isaac Watts*, 1945). Watts spoke highly of his work (see Isaac Watts, *Works*, Vol. 3, 206) and edited some of Henry's sermons for publication (Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* [London, Thomas Richardson and Son, 1845] 422). Commenting on the burden of preaching multiple times a week, Watts suggested a solution: "I could wish all young ministers be allowed by their people to read a part of Mr. Henry's exposition of the Bible" (Thomas Gibbons, *Memoirs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* [London, 1780] 156.

of the singer, intending that they understand and feel the truths they are singing. He is therefore concerned that no opportunity be lost to dwell upon the gospel and that Scripture should interpret Scripture in the light of superior revelation;<sup>4</sup> that is, he sees shadows in the Old Testament fully revealed in the New, and so the latter should not only take priority but should be the key to retrospectively understanding the former.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, Watts argues that the Old Testament sheds light upon the New, stating that we “may obtain a more extensive and complete knowledge of Christianity” through familiarity with the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> This view permits Watts to present a dialogue between the Testaments, wherein he is able to bring together various strands through his insights both as a poet and a theologian. Watts considers Luke 24:44 as his mandate for seeing Christ in the Psalms; when Christ appeared to His disciples, He reassured them about His suffering and resurrection by telling them that “all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.”<sup>7</sup>

The way Watts uses the Bible in his Psalms unifies a discordant point of Puritan theology. As will be seen throughout the following chapters, the way the Psalms were being preached from pulpits was vastly different from the way they were sung in the pews. The Psalters of the day provided no additional hermeneutical lens through which the Psalms should be viewed, and yet when those same Psalms were preached, they were often Christological. In Escott’s words, “liturgically speaking, the

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<sup>4</sup> Watts subscribed to the Savoy Confession of Faith (1658), an amendment of the 1646 Westminster Confession composed by prominent theologians including John Owen and Thomas Goodwin to suit Congregational ecclesiology. The Confession states “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it must be searched and known by other places, that speak more clearly.” In 1727, when hosting a committee for Dissenting Ministers in London, Watts proposed that all who would be part of this group should subscribe to the Savoy Confession.

<sup>5</sup> In many ways, all of Watts’ concerns can be seen in his most famous hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, based upon Galatians 6:14. Within this hymn, he carefully harmonises doctrinal propositions with subjective responses, while also drawing upon Old Testament imagery.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Watts, *A Short View of the Whole of Scripture History* [Charles Ewer, No. 51, Cornhill, 1819] iv

<sup>7</sup> Watts makes this point directly when he argues for David to be included among the prophets: see Watts, *A Short View*, 83.



Church was a house divided against itself, praying and preaching from the Gospel, but singing its praises from the Psalm Book of the Old Dispensation.”<sup>8</sup>

Standing as he did in a long line of Dissenters, Watts’ doctrine of Scripture is part of the Reformed tradition. Carl Trueman argues that the 17<sup>th</sup> Century was a time of sophisticated and rigorous study of the Bible, with great attention given to both the original languages and the subsequent reception of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Richard Muller has commented that there is a “sad state of study” regarding seventeenth century biblical interpretation,<sup>10</sup> and the assumption that careful exegesis, literary context and linguistic analysis were ignored in this century is, in Trueman’s words, “simply untrue.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to contend that this century was more elaborate than the 16th century in its handling of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Watts was part of a heritage that combined reason and faith,<sup>13</sup> as well as being an heir of Puritan typology. As such, he saw Old Testament laws, figures and events as being prophetic foreshadowings of Christ. All of these factors combine in Watts’ Psalter.

### 3.2 Translating According to Divine Pattern

There are several examples within *The Psalms of David* where Watts incorporates other passages of Scripture into his Psalter. He often acknowledges when a psalm is cited elsewhere in Scripture, and allows this to contribute to his hymns. This not only allows his Psalms to make significant moves away from the Psalters that preceded him, but it allows his own view of Scripture to dictate his hymns.

Within Psalm 2, King David “boasts that his kingdom, though assailed by a vast multitude of powerful enemies, would, notwithstanding, be perpetual, because it was upheld by the hand and power of God.”<sup>14</sup> When faced with threats of war and

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<sup>8</sup> Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer* [Independent Press, 1962] 151

<sup>9</sup> Carl Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* [Ashgate, 2007] 37

<sup>10</sup> Richard Muller, *After Calvin* [Oxford University Press, 2003] 156

<sup>11</sup> Trueman, *John Owen*, 37

<sup>12</sup> For an example of the kind of opinion Trueman is refuting, consider, “The seventeenth century has often been considered a forgettable one for Christian theology” (Mark Elliot, “Christology in the Seventeenth Century” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* ed. Francesca Aran Murphy [Oxford University Press, 2015] 297)

<sup>13</sup> Babette May Levy, *Preaching in the First Half Century of New England History* [New York, Russell and Russell, 1945] 1

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)  
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08.html>

invasion from the surrounding nations, David takes confidence in God's covenant with him that his kingdom will not cease to rule over Israel.<sup>15</sup> The Psalm is then taken up in Acts 4, when the Early Church has their first recorded taste of persecution following the imprisonment of Peter and John. On this occasion, the Psalm is framed within a prayer in which the attacks by the heathen nations on God and His anointed one are taken to be the combined efforts of Herod, Pontius Pilate and the Gentile forces to crucify Christ.

Matthew Henry immediately takes this Psalm to be about "the kingdom of Christ" with "hell and heaven contesting it."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, John Owen takes Psalm 2 to be primarily a Messianic prophecy, going so far as to say that even the Jews considered it to be so.<sup>17</sup> And David Dickson begins his commentary on this Psalm by stating this Psalm "doth mainly, if not only, concern Christ."<sup>18</sup> However, this view is not reflected widely in the Psalters of the day. Ainsworth renders the Psalm,

Why doe the heathens rage tumultuously  
 And peoples, meditate on vanity  
 Kings of the earth, themselves presenting set  
 And Princes for to plot together get  
 Against Jehovah, 'gainst his Christ<sup>19</sup> allo  
 Break we, their bands, and their chords from us throw

While the Bay Psalm Book reads,

Why rage the heathens furiously?  
 Muse vain things people do  
 Kings of the earth do set themselves

<sup>15</sup> As described in 2 Samuel 7:5-17

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole of Scripture, Volume 3*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.iii.html>

<sup>17</sup> John Owen, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews; with Preliminary Exercitations* [Edinburgh, 1813]

<sup>18</sup> David Dickson, *A Brief Explication on the First 50 Psalms* [London, 1653] 7

<sup>19</sup> The KJV reads "anointed one" in Psalm 2:2 and "Christ" in Acts 4:26, so while this word has Messianic overtones, making a Christological rendering legitimate, it cannot be definitively taken to be about Jesus here in Ainsworth's translation

Princes consult also  
 With one consent against the Lord  
 And his anointed one  
 Let us asunder break their bands  
 Their cords be from us overthrown

Francis Rous, in *The Psalmes of David in English meeter* interprets the Psalm in both a Davidic and Christological way:

1. Why did the Gentiles madly rage  
 Against the world's great King?  
 Why did the people of the Jewes  
 Imagine a vain thing?
  
2. The Kings and Rulers of the earth  
 Together joynd were,  
 And counsell took against the Lord,  
 And Christ his Son most deare.<sup>20</sup>

These versions are cited to demonstrate how radical Watts' work is, as he brings his richer Christology directly into the Psalter in each of his three versions of Psalm 2. Watts uses the citation of the psalm in Acts 4:24-25 as his window to view it, and he states in the psalm's introduction that by translating the psalm in this way, they are "translated according to the divine pattern". Verses 1 and 2 function as a prologue, providing an editorial preface, setting the scene through a versification of Acts 4:24-25:

1. [Maker and sovereign Lord  
 Of heaven, and earth, and seas  
 Thy providence confirms thy word,

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<sup>20</sup> Francis Rous, *The Psalmes of David in English Meeter* [1643]

And answers thy decrees

2. The things so long foretold  
By David are fulfilled  
When Jews and Gentiles join to slay  
Jesus, thine holy child.]<sup>21</sup>

Here onwards Watts returns to Psalm 2, making it “explicitly Christian,”<sup>22</sup> so that the setting of the Psalm is moved forwards eleven centuries, from the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. to the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

3. Why did the Gentiles rage  
And Jews with one accord  
Bend all their counsels to destroy  
Th’anointed of the Lord?
  
4. Rulers and kings agree  
To form a vain design  
Against the Lord their powers unite  
Against His Christ they join.

Another example of Watts’ use of Scripture is in his second version of Psalm 8, where he ventures from the Psalm to incorporate other elements of Scripture into his work. He uses Hebrews 2:5-7 to build upon Psalm 2:5, where it is not just the human race that is made lower than the angels and yet crowned with the glory and honour of the inherent dignity that comes through being made in the image of God. Rather, as in Hebrews, Watts writes,

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<sup>21</sup> All quotations from *The Psalms of David* are taken from Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David...* [Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011] unless otherwise stated.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* [Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014] 214

1. That thine eternal Son should bear  
To take a mortal form  
Made lower than his angels are  
To save a dying worm

Given the use of the Psalm in the New Testament, Watts' interpretation here is firmly in keeping with the Christian tradition. Watts uses the introduction of the incarnate Christ into the psalm to expound verses 6-8. Here, the Psalmist is rehearsing the promises made in Genesis 1:27-31, where Adam and Eve are given dominion over all living creatures. To Watts, these verses become about the authority of Christ over creation.

2. [Yet while he liv'd on earth unknown,  
And men would not adore  
Th' obedient seas and fishes own  
His Godhead and his power
3. The waves lay spread beneath his feet  
And fish, at his command,  
Bring their large shoals to Peter's net,  
Bring tribute to his hand

Watts is able not only to see the link, between the psalm and Christ's rule over creation as demonstrated in his earthly ministry, but he is able to bring these things into the psalm. By using Peter's fishing net as an example of Christ's sovereignty in and over creation, he unifies both the pre-incarnate and incarnate Christ in the minds of those who are singing this psalm.

Watts' fourth version of Psalm 8 contrasts Adam with Christ, in line with 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5.

1. Lord, what was man, when made at first?

Adam the offspring of the dust,  
 That thou shouldst set him and his race  
 But just below and angel's place?

Through this perspective, Watts stretches the scope of the Psalm across both testaments; by making the references to Genesis more explicit, he then has a more effective counterpoint when introducing Christ in verse 2.

2. But O, what brighter glories wait  
 To crown the second Adam's state  
 What honours shall the Son adorn  
 Who condescended to be born.

This device allows Watts to step even further from the Psalm, but in doing so he is able to use Scripture to commentate on the text.

The final example to consider is the 5<sup>th</sup> version of Psalm 16. This particular hymn divides into two parts, the former being a close versification of the Psalm and the latter becoming a Christological hymn.

4. [Thus in the name of Christ, the Lord,  
 The holy David sung  
 And providence fulfils the word  
 Of his prophetic tongue

5. Jesus, whom every saint adores  
 Was crucified and slain;  
 Behold the tomb its prey restores  
 Behold, he lives again!

6. When shall my feet arise and stand  
 On heaven's eternal hills?

There sits the Son at God's right hand  
And there the Father smiles.]

Verse 4 brilliantly summarises Watts' own hermeneutics, and yet he daringly puts it in the mouth of David. Providence and prophecy combine to bring David's words to their ultimate fulfilment. To Watts, this pivotal verse allows the singer to move from the opening 4 verses which restate the Psalmists' experience to a new phase in which the Psalm becomes about Christ. And not only is he allowing Scripture to retrospectively interpret Scripture in the latter portion of the Psalm, but he is bringing David in as an active character in the realisation of the prophecy. This bold poetic device paves the way for the following verse which frames the death and resurrection of Christ as being the true meaning of Psalm 16:10. While death is implied in the conclusion of verse 9,<sup>23</sup> Watts cannot help but exploit the necessity of death prior to resurrection by clearly stating the crucifixion of Christ<sup>24</sup>, while the word "slain" is borrowed from Revelation 5, where Christ is hailed as the "Lamb that was slain."<sup>25</sup> So not only is the cause of death described in crucifixion, but the purpose of that death as a substitutionary atonement fulfilling the Old Testament sacrificial system is also within these lines.

The sample of Psalms that have been considered serve as practical examples of Watts' view of Scripture. The New Testament writers use the Psalms to develop their own theology, and this is the pattern adopted by Watts. The words of David become the words of Christ. Watts believed that the Psalms should be sung by Christians in the way that David would have written them were he living in the New Testament era<sup>26</sup> and so, just as some Psalms comment on events in the history of Israel before drawing out contemporary applications (such as Psalm 95), so Watts felt that he could

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<sup>23</sup> Psalm 16:9, "my flesh shall also rest in hope."

<sup>24</sup> When Thomas Goodwin referred to this Psalm in a sermon on Romans 8:34, he uses verses 8-11 as a proof text for the resurrection, but makes no comment on the purpose of Christ's death. See Thomas Goodwin, *Christ Set Forth*, [www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org) [https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/goodwin\\_thomas/christsetforth/christsetforth/csf\\_101.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/goodwin_thomas/christsetforth/christsetforth/csf_101.cfm)

<sup>25</sup> Revelation 5:12

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Watts, "A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody" in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in Nine Volumes, Vol. 4* [London, 1813] 13 (see section 2.3 of this thesis.)

apply the Psalms to the historical events of the New Testament. His use of the Psalms is consistent with the exegesis of divines such as Henry and Goodwin, and as such allows the Psalms to be sung as they were understood.

### 3.3 The Psalms and Christ

In the preface to his Psalms, Isaac Watts states that he is, “fully satisfied that more Honour is done to our blessed Saviour by speaking his Name, his Graces and Actions in his own Language.”<sup>27</sup> The issue of whether or not churches ought only to sing metrical Psalms should not be dictated by “education, custom or the authority of others”,<sup>28</sup> but by what method brings most glory to Christ. As has been seen in previous chapters, Watts has no intention of impoverishing the heritage of psalmody, but rather he is seeking to enrich it. And for Watts, the most certain way of accomplishing this is to focus on the person and work of Christ in the gospel. This chapter will concentrate on a selection of Psalms that Watts uses to illuminate Christ’s incarnation, atonement and resurrection, and they will be considered in the wider context of late Puritan thought. Particular attention will be given to Psalms 97, 98, 40, 32 and 69, before concluding with an overview of the Resurrection in Watts’ Psalter.

The seventeenth century was a time of impassioned debate concerning the nature of Christ in relation to the Father. Socinianism emerged in sixteenth century Poland, believing the trinity to be a logical contradiction and therefore teaching that Christ was not the eternal Son of the Father, which in turn led to the emergence of Unitarianism and a reappearance of Arianism. This subsequently threatened the Reformed doctrine of the Atonement. This is because, “Christology was positioned between the Doctrine of God and the soteriological question of what the Cross achieved and how.”<sup>29</sup> It was into this climate that the Savoy Confession declared,

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<sup>27</sup> Isaac Watts, *Preface to the Psalms of David Imitated into the Language of a Christian* ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)) <https://www.ccel.org/cceh/archives/eee/wattspre.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Elliot, *Oxford Handbook of Christology*, 299



In the unity of the God-head there be three Persons, of one substance, power and eternity...The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father...<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, when speaking about Christ the Mediator, the Savoy Confession asserts his divine nature, describing Christ as, “The Son of God, the second Person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father,”<sup>31</sup> before proceeding to state that, “two whole perfect and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one Person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; which Person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Christology in the seventeenth century was not just a debate concerning Christian orthodoxy and heresy, but the battleground quickly moved to the nature of salvation. For example, in Thomas Watson’s *Body of Divinity*, he describes Christ having two natures in one person, namely his divinity and his humanity.<sup>33</sup> Later in the same book, when talking about the Priestly Office of Christ, he explains that, in the atonement, “the human nature being united to the divine nature, the human nature suffered and divine satisfied.”<sup>34</sup> In Watts’ Psalms, attention is given predominantly to the work of Christ, rather than asserting his divine nature,<sup>35</sup> though this is surely due to a robust and orthodox view of Christ’s divinity; if Christ were not God, then the Psalms could never be attributed to him.

### 3.3.1 Psalms 97 and 98 – Let Earth Receive Her King

Watts devotes his versifications of these two Psalms to the first and second comings of Christ. Upon reading the Psalms themselves, it is not instantly apparent

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<sup>30</sup> Savoy Confession 2.3

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity* [London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1958] 113

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 120

<sup>35</sup> Escott groups Watts’ Psalms into 10 categories, each with multiple sub-groups, and none are designated as Psalms specifically concerning the nature of Christ. See Escott, *Hymnographer*, 155-159

how he is able to reach this conclusion. His second version of Psalm 97 is based upon verses 6-9. Watts' opening verse reads,

1. The Lord is come, the heavens proclaim  
His birth; the nations learn His name;  
An unknown star directs the road  
Of eastern sages to their God.

Watts appears to juxtapose the Psalmist's pronouncements concerning the revelation of God's glory with the surprising notion that God should appear as a baby. Watts "sees the birth of Christ not as the beginning of the Christian narrative but its culmination."<sup>36</sup> John 1:14, referring to the Incarnation, states that because the Word became flesh, "we beheld his glory," and so here Watts contrasts the dramatic descriptions of God's glory found within the Psalm (with its references to the earth trembling before him and the hills melting in his presence) with the equally dramatic but vastly different scenes at the Nativity. He takes the visiting Magi in Matthew 2 to be a prototype for "all the people," using their visit, having been led by the God to the infant Christ, to indicate that all people who behold God's glory have done so because God has enabled them to do so. Thomas Goodwin proposed that Christ possesses a three-fold glory; his essential glory, shared with the Father and Spirit in his divinity, his personal glory revealed in his incarnation and his mediatorial glory as the Saviour of the redeemed people of God.<sup>37</sup> Watts is contrasting the essential and personal glory of Christ here, highlighting the differing ways Christ is revealed, bringing out Christological dimensions that are not at first apparent in the Psalm, but that can be seen when it is read in relation to other passages of Scripture.

In the fourth version of the Psalm, Watts contrasts the birth of Christ with his final judgement in the fourth verse.

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<sup>36</sup> Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* [Cambridge University Press, 1993] 46

<sup>37</sup> Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology; Doctrine for Life* [Reformed Heritage Books, 2012] 356-357

4. Adoring angels at his birth  
 Make the Redeemer known;  
 Thus shall he come to judge the earth,  
 And angels guard his throne

To Watts, the same Christ that came to earth as a baby will return in judgement, when again the whole earth will tremble at his presence. Again, this contrast reveals Watts' skill as a poet and theologian, as he is able to unify several strands of thought together in a single verse.

Watts' second version of Psalm 98 is entitled, "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom." Most famous as a Christmas carol, "Joy to the World" celebrates the arrival of the promised King, sent by God to inaugurate the kingdom of which the prophets had spoken. It is therefore an eschatological hymn, which has since been used as an incarnational hymn.

1. Joy to the world; the Lord is come;  
 Let earth receive her King;  
 Let every heart prepare him room,  
 And heaven and nature sing.

In pronouncing joy to the world, Watts is inverting the sense of the Psalm, in which the earth is exhorted to make a joyful noise unto the Lord.<sup>38</sup> Here, because of his Messianic interpretation, Watts images the coming of Christ as a new dawn of joyful celebration throughout the earth. The Lord is described as the King in verse 6, while verse 2, in speaking of the victory wrought by God, alludes to a King. Verses 7 and 8 picture the earth responding to the victorious reign of Christ; in Watts' hands, these verses become,

2. Joy to the earth, the Saviour reigns  
 Let men their songs employ  
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains

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<sup>38</sup> Psalm 98:4

Repeat the sounding joy

Watts envisions a scenario where the whole earth and its inhabitants are united in songs of joyful praise to Christ. In his third verse, Watts sees that the curse of Eden is lifted, fulfilling Romans 8:22, where the whole of creation groans in pain awaiting the return of Christ to restore all things.

3. No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found

Watts' interpretations of these two Psalms present something of a problem to any would-be analyst, as his reworking of them seems to venture a long way from the text. Matthew Henry draws a link between Luke 1:44 and Psalm 98:9; the joy of the baby in Elizabeth's womb at the imminent birth of Christ is seen to be the same joy that the whole earth shall know when Christ comes.<sup>39</sup> However, this does not justify the certainty of Watts' interpretation. As isolated hymns, Watts' work is full of poetic richness as well as clear theology, wherein the incarnation and return of Christ are infused with drama, joy and celebration. There are many possible ways Watts could have rendered these Psalms, while remaining true to his ambition of Christianising them, such as contrasting the Old Testament victories of God as celebrated in Psalm 98:2 with the gospel victories of Christ. However, his editorial decisions result in two particular hymns that remain difficult to trace back to the Psalm that inspired them.

### 3.3.2 Psalm 40 – Christ the Sacrifice

Watts composed three versions of Psalm 40. The first is a fine rendering of the Psalm, staying close to the text. Entitled, "A song of deliverance from great distress," it serves to allow the singer to resonate with David's experience of being rescued by

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<sup>39</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc5.Luke.ii.html>

God. His second version is entitled, “The incarnation and sacrifice of Christ,” and he focuses on verse 6-9 of the Psalm. Watts casts his Psalm as a conversation between the Father and the Son, narrated by the singer.

1. “Thus saith the Lord, “Your work is vain,  
Give your burn offerings o’er,  
In dying goats and bullocks slain  
My soul delights no more.”
  
2. Then spake the Saviour, “Lo, I’m here,  
“My God, to do thy will;  
Whate’er thy sacred books declare  
Thy servant shall fulfil.”

According to the Savoy Confession of Faith, “it pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus his only begotten Son, according to a covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and man.”<sup>40</sup> Watts dramatizes the covenant between the Father and the Son in this Psalm, imagining the dialogue within the Godhead as Christ is appointed as the mediator between God and humanity. His psalm then proceeds to summarise the Incarnation and earthly ministry of Christ, in preparation for his death.

4. And see the bless’d Redeemer comes,  
Th’eternal Son appears,  
And at th’appointed time assumes  
The body God prepares

In a sermon on the doctrine of God’s election, Watts states that the Father “undertook also to furnish him with everything necessary for his appearance and his ministry here

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<sup>40</sup> Savoy Confession 8.1

on earth.”<sup>41</sup> Watts elaborates this promised provision by citing Hebrews 10:5, which is a quotation from Psalm 40:6, taken to mean that the Father will provide the Son with a body at his incarnation.<sup>42</sup>

6. His Father’s honour touch’d his heart

He pity’d sinners’ cries,  
And, to fulfil a Saviour’s part  
Was made a sacrifice

7. No blood of beasts on altars shed

Could wash the conscience clean,  
But the rich sacrifice he paid  
Atones for all our sin

Watts is clear in his *Preface* regarding the way Christ fulfils the Levitical sacrificial system.<sup>43</sup> Commentating on Leviticus 16, Matthew Henry writes that Christ is prefigured by the two goats; the goat which is killed signifies Christ dying for sin, while the scape-goat points to Christ rising again.<sup>44</sup>

There was a development in Puritan thought from the Reformation onwards that incorporated the Old Testament language of sacrifice into its vocabulary.<sup>45</sup> The distinction between propitiatory offerings and peace offerings was drawn out so that the atoning death of Christ was seen in the typology of the Old Testament, allowing the whole of Scripture to speak about Christ. Watts, by taking this interpretation, changes the direction of the psalm, from a psalm of obedient thankfulness to one that concentrates on the atonement. “The cloudy and typical Expressions of the legal Dispensation should be turned into Evangelical Language, according to the

<sup>41</sup> Isaac Watts, *God’s Election* [Sermon XLVI [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)]

<https://archive.org/stream/worksrevisaacwa01wattgoog#page/n56/mode/2up>

<sup>42</sup> Watts uses this Scriptural interconnection as an example of his methodological approach in his *Essay* (Watts, *Essay*, 10).

<sup>43</sup> Watts, *Preface to the Psalms of David*

<sup>44</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)  
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc1.Lev.xvii.html>

<sup>45</sup> S. Hardman Moore, “Sacrifice in Puritan Typology” in *Sacrifice and Redemption*, ed. S.W. Sykes [Cambridge University Press, 1991] 182

Explications of the New Testament.”<sup>46</sup> Again, the reference to Hebrews 10, in the context of Christ’s fulfilment of the Levitical system, provides the framework for his interpretation. Matthew Henry elaborates that the reason the sacrifice of animals is not required is due to its insufficiency to atone for sin,<sup>47</sup> and therefore when the psalmist says, “mine ears hast thou opened,” here God is explaining the way the death of animals foreshadows Christ.<sup>48</sup> Watts, elsewhere in the sermon on election, explains the death of Christ in this way:

He consented to take upon himself the sins of men, that is, by way of imputation, as a sacrifice, to bear our sins in his body, on the cursed tree, to be made a sin-offering for us, to expose himself to painful sufferings, and a bloody death on that account, that he might make a proper atonement for sin.<sup>49</sup>

The comparison between his psalm and his sermon shows the continuity in Watts’ thought, which stands in stark contrast to other psalters. For example, Henry Ainsworth, in his commentary on Psalm 40, states that “Christ was to cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease because it was impossible that they should purge sins,”<sup>50</sup> drawing out the link to Hebrews 10:5. However, in his metrical version of the Psalm, Ainsworth versifies verses 6-9 in the following way;

Thou would not gift and sacrifice:  
 Mine ears, thou op-ning doth prepare:  
 Burnt-offring and oblation  
 For sin, thou hast not asked it  
 Then did I say, loe I am come:  
 In the books rol it’s of me writ

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<sup>46</sup> Watts, *Essay*, 10

<sup>47</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xli.html>

<sup>48</sup> The phrase could also be referring to the custom in Exodus 21:6 of boring the ear of a servant to a doorpost to signify ownership.

<sup>49</sup> Isaac Watts, *God’s Election*, [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)  
<https://archive.org/stream/worksrevisaacwa01wattgoog#page/n56/mode/2up>

<sup>50</sup> Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations on The Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses; The Psalms of David; And the Song of Solomon, Vol. 2* [Blackie and Son, 1843] 494

I joy to doe thy wil my God:  
And thy Law, in my bowels is<sup>51</sup>

There is a striking absence of any Christology which is stated with such assurance in his commentary.<sup>52</sup> For Watts, it is virtually impossible not to consider the Psalm in the light of Hebrews 10, and as such this is brought to bear upon his hymn. In the words of Samuel Mathers, “this was the Mystery of all the Sacrifices wherein Blood was shed: they were Types and shadows of the Blood of Christ.”<sup>53</sup>

Watts’ 3<sup>rd</sup> version of the Psalm takes a new line again. Here, he takes Psalm 40:5 as the springboard for a significant revision. The emphasis on the wonderful works that God has done inspires Watts to use verses 5-10 of the Psalm to sing about the works of Christ. In his 2<sup>nd</sup> verse, Watts describes the death of Christ as an “all-sufficient sacrifice,” again in contrast to the offerings of animals under the Levitical Law. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse, it is Christ who “bows his ears” to the design of the Father, where Christ becomes the obedient slave of Exodus 21. The Psalm concludes with a verse in which Christ incorporates Pentecost into the fulfilment of God’s works being made known throughout the world:

7. “The Spirit shall descend, and show  
What thou has done, and what I do;  
The wond’ring world shall learn thy grace  
Thy wisdom and thy righteousness.”

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<sup>51</sup> Henry Ainsworth, *Psalm 40*, [www.eebo.chadwyck.com](http://www.eebo.chadwyck.com)  
[http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full\\_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=80921838&FILE=&SEARCHSCREEN=param\(SEARCHSCREEN\)&VID=191802&PAGENO=29&ZOOM=100&VIEWPORT=&SEARCHCONFIG=param\(SEARCHCONFIG\)&DISPLAY=param\(DISPLAY\)&HIGHLIGHT\\_KEYWORD=param\(HIGHLIGHT\\_KEYWORD\)](http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=80921838&FILE=&SEARCHSCREEN=param(SEARCHSCREEN)&VID=191802&PAGENO=29&ZOOM=100&VIEWPORT=&SEARCHCONFIG=param(SEARCHCONFIG)&DISPLAY=param(DISPLAY)&HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD=param(HIGHLIGHT_KEYWORD))

<sup>52</sup> Muller discusses Henry Ainsworth’s Exegetical approach to the Psalms, arguing that Ainsworth has more in common with Calvin’s literalist interpretation, in contrast to commentators such as Matthew Henry and David Dickson who are more typological (see Richard Muller, *After Calvin* [Oxford University Press, 2003] 164-169)

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Mathers, *The Figures or Types of the Old Testament by which Christ and the Heavenly things of the Gospel were Preached and Shadowed to the People of God of Old: Explained and Improved in Sundry Sermons* [Dublin, 1683] 6



By finishing the Psalm in this way, Watts makes Christ the evangelist heralding the good news of the gospel. The singer, rather than seeking to emulate David as he shares his testimony of God's grace to him, is now joining in the Great Commission, following Christ, having experienced the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

### 3.3.3 Psalm 32 – Justification by Faith

Watts composed four versions of Psalm 32. Three of these versions are written in the first person, where Watts assumes David's voice. Matthew Henry views the Psalm through Paul's citation of it in Romans 4:6, and so no attention is paid to the autobiographical details of David's life, or indeed the specific sin from whose guilt he is so glad to be liberated. According to Henry, the psalm, "though it speaks not of Christ...has yet a great deal of gospel in it."<sup>54</sup> Of Watts' four versions, the first and fourth stay closest to the original text of the Psalm. The second version begins,

1. Happy the man to whom his God  
No more imputes his sin,  
But wash'd in the Redeemer's blood,  
Hath made his garments clean!

While the third version begins,

1. Blest is the man, for ever blest,  
Whose guilt is pardon'd by his God,  
Whose sins with sorrow are confess'd  
And cover'd with his Saviour's blood.

This third version, corresponding with Matthew Henry, overlays Romans 4 onto the Psalm, so that the theme becomes more than just forgiveness, but justification by faith.

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<sup>54</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xxxiii.html>

He takes the second verse of the Psalm as a way into this doctrinal emphasis, firstly by using the Psalmist's words but then adding to them;

2. Blest is the man to whom the Lord  
Imputes not his iniquities  
He pleads not merit of reward  
And not on works, but grace relies.

The latter half of the verse draws out Paul's discussion in Romans 4:6 which reads, "Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works." Watts stresses what the Psalm does not fully disclose, namely that the forgiving and justifying grace of God is not received by works, merit or status. Watts' view on justification is summarised in a sermon entitled, *The Inward Witness of Christianity*, where he states, "the soul is made willing to be justified by the merits and righteousness of another, seeing itself unable, by all its own works, to attain to a justifying righteousness."<sup>55</sup> Watts's verse both affirms the need for God's pardoning grace, while simultaneously denying the idea that God's grace can be earned through works.

The full implications of justification by faith are fully realised in the fourth and final version of the hymn, where Watts writes,

4. How glorious is that righteousness  
That hides and cancels all his sins!  
While a bright evidence of grace  
Thro' his whole life appears and shines

In the latter half of the seventeenth century, there had been an ongoing debate over the nature of justification. To Richard Baxter, justification was linked to the moral law of God, wherein the believer, having had the righteousness of Christ imputed into them, then becomes righteous. To John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, justification was

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<sup>55</sup> Isaac Watts, *The Inward Witness of Christianity*, The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D, Vol. 1 [Leeds, 1812]

accomplished “not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous.”<sup>56</sup> To Baxter, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness did not seal the final verdict of God’s judgement, but rather that was only guaranteed through a progression in righteousness. Anything else would lead to antinomianism. For Owen and Goodwin, when a sinner is given the righteousness of Christ, they are entirely justified, and cannot add to their status. By Watts’ day, the Reformed doctrine of justification was not as widely held,<sup>57</sup> but in one of his early sermons, Watts makes it clear that he is in agreement with Owen and Goodwin.

The first act of our faith is acceptance of Christ to be our way to salvation, to reconcile us to God by his righteousness, and make us fit for his enjoyment by his sanctifying grace. Faith trusts Christ for holiness and glory, and immediately upon this act we are justified, though as Dr. Goodwin says, “Faith justifies peculiarly as it depends on Christ for his perfect righteousness to bring us into the favour of God.” But before this act we could not perform any good work, for we receive strength to do good works by this trusting.<sup>58</sup>

By distinguishing between saving and sanctifying grace, Watts not only affirms his position, but refutes the false dichotomy that suggests that justification leads to antinomianism.<sup>59</sup> By finishing his Psalm with the certainty that the justified believer

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<sup>56</sup> Savoy Confession 11.1

<sup>57</sup> In an article discussing the acceptance of Luther’s doctrine of justification in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England, Baker concludes, “Thus, by 1700 those who still held to sola fide, sola gratia were in a small minority; almost all of them were either high Calvinist or Antinomian, dissenting ministers. The influence of Luther and adherence to his meaning of justification sola fide and sola gratia slowly but surely had been eroded among the English clergy in the space of one century” (J. Wayne Baker, “Sola Fide, Sola Gratia: The Battle for Luther in Seventeenth-Century England,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16.1 (1985): 133).

<sup>58</sup> Isaac Watts, *Whether the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone tends to Licentiousness* (cited in Gibbons, *Isaac Watts*, 9)

<sup>59</sup> For a deeper analysis of this issue, see Robert Trail, “A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine concerning Justification and of its Preachers and Professors from the unjust charge of Antinomianism” in *The Works of Robert Trail Vol. 1* [Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1810] 252-296

will enjoy a lifetime of evidences of this grace, he is instructing the singer after his own views. Elsewhere, in Psalm 4:1.4, Watts writes,

When our obedient hands have done  
 A thousand works of righteousness  
 We put our trust in God alone  
 And glory in his pardoning grace.

### 3.3.4 Psalm 69 – The Eternal Covenant

There are five versions of Psalm 69 in Watts' Psalter, and in all five versions, he interprets the Psalm to be about Christ. Commenting on this Psalm, Thomas Goodwin stated that, "there is no one except the twenty-second, which can challenge more passages in so small a space, applied expressly unto Christ in the New Testament, than the sixty-ninth psalm."<sup>60</sup> The Psalm is cited in the New Testament, but is not used to expound upon matters of doctrine, as many of the previous examples in this study have been. Psalm 69:21, with its reference to drinking vinegar to quench thirst, is mirrored in Matthew 27:48 and John 19:29, where Jesus drinks wine vinegar on the cross to relieve his thirst. As shall be seen through analysis, Watts is unique in his contribution, offering a different view from many of his predecessors. In Matthew Henry's commentary, he argues that the Psalm is primarily about the experience of both David and the subsequent believers who will sing it. Henry sees David as a "type of Christ" in this Psalm, and counsels that, "in singing this Psalm we must have an eye to the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that followed."<sup>61</sup> However, most of his commentary is devoted to the experience of David and its application is directed to the Christian reader, and while he frequently refers to the experiences of Christ throughout this Psalm, he does so to provide an example, rather than to make Christ the ultimate fulfilment of the Psalm, as Watts does.<sup>62</sup> Henry Ainsworth suggests that

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, Vol. 5* [Edinburgh 1863] 183

<sup>61</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.lxx.html>

<sup>62</sup> In his comments on verses 30-35, Henry opens the paragraph by saying that, "The psalmist here, both as a type of Christ and as an example to Christians, concludes a psalm with holy joy and praise..." (Ibid.). This view is a more balanced interpretation of

David is a “figure of Christ,”<sup>63</sup> but this is predominantly due to the way the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion refer to this Psalm.

Watts’ five versions of the Psalm offer several different approaches. The first imagines the Psalm to be a prayer spoken by Christ to the Father. The second and fourth versions refer to God in the third person (though the second version becomes Christ’s prayer with the opening two verses functioning as a prologue) and the third and fifth versions put the singer in the first person as they address God directly, concerning the death of Christ for their sins. These various forms of expressing the same Psalm show how developed Watts as a hymn-writer compared to his predecessors. He is able to employ several perspectives within the single Psalm, all of which allow him to flourish as a poet.

With that said, it is difficult to see how Watts has reached his Christological conclusion with this particular Psalm. Psalm 69:5 reads, “O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from thee,” which makes it impossible for the whole Psalm to be ultimately about Christ.<sup>64</sup> There are however parallels between the Psalmist’s experience and Christ’s that Watts is able to exploit to full effect.

In the third and fourth verses of the first version, we can see clearly how Watts weaves Christ’s story into the Psalm. Watts’ Psalm reads,

1. “They hate my soul without a cause,  
And still their number grows  
More than the hairs around my head,  
And mighty are my foes.

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the Psalm, sympathetic with a Christological hermeneutic, but without negating more apparent aspects of the Psalm.

<sup>63</sup> Ainsworth, *Psalm 69*,

[http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full\\_rec?EeboId=11751675&ACTION=ByID&SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ID=11751675&FILE=&SEARCHSCREEN=param%28SEARCHSCREEN%29&VID=48590&PAGENO=143&ZOOM=150&VIEWPORT=&CENTREPOS=&RESULTCLICK=&GOTOPAGENO=&ZOOMLIST=150&ZOOMTEXTBOX=&SEARCHCONFIG=param%28SEARCHCONFIG%29&DISPLAY=param%28DISPLAY%29](http://eebo.chadwyck.com/search/full_rec?EeboId=11751675&ACTION=ByID&SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ID=11751675&FILE=&SEARCHSCREEN=param%28SEARCHSCREEN%29&VID=48590&PAGENO=143&ZOOM=150&VIEWPORT=&CENTREPOS=&RESULTCLICK=&GOTOPAGENO=&ZOOMLIST=150&ZOOMTEXTBOX=&SEARCHCONFIG=param%28SEARCHCONFIG%29&DISPLAY=param%28DISPLAY%29)

<sup>64</sup> Though Matthew Henry addresses this issue by using 2 Corinthians 5:21, suggesting that while Christ was not guilty for his own sins, he became sin on the cross (Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.lxx.html>).

2. "Twas then I paid that dreadful debt  
That men could never pay,  
And gave those honours to thy law  
Which sinners took away."

Given that his interpretation is so radical, he incorporates a great deal of the Psalm into his hymn. He is sympathetic to the text, while arguably bending it to suit his own aims here. He uses a similar technique in his seventh verse, which correlates to Psalm 69:11 which reads, "I made sackcloth also my garment; and I became a proverb to them." Watts wrote,

7. "Grief, like a garment, cloth'd me round,  
And sackcloth was my dress,  
While I procur'd for naked souls  
A robe of righteousness."

The experiences of David and his use of metaphor offer Watts a vast quarry to mine. Taking the image of sackcloth, he develops the imagery to explain the purpose of Christ's sufferings, namely the justification of the ungodly, portrayed here as poor beggars without clothing who receive robes of righteousness.

Where the Psalmist prays for a coming deliverance, Watts asserts that it has already happened to Christ. Where the Psalmist pleads for rescue, Watts celebrates safety. He therefore changes the whole tone of the verse, from desperation to victory.

The second version of this Psalm starts where the first version ends, at verse 14. The Psalm is predominantly spoken by Christ, but is prefaced with two verses which summarise the Psalm for the singer, which serve to direct the tone with which the Psalm is sung.

1. Now let our lips with holy fear  
And mournful pleasure sing  
The sufferings of our great High-Priest,

The sorrows of our King.

2. He sinks in floods of deep distress:  
How high the waters rise!  
While to his heavenly Father's ear  
He sends perpetual cries

The subsequent sufferings of Christ are best expressed in Watts' sixth verse;

6. "All my reproach is known to thee,  
The scandal and the shame;  
Reproach has broke my bleeding heart,  
And lies defiled my Name.

The third version of this Psalm is sung in the first person as a hymn of praise addressed to God the Father, entitled "God glorified and sinners saved." Watts' attention here is primarily given to the verses near the end of the Psalm.

1. Father, I sing thy wondrous grace  
I bless my Saviour's name,  
He bought salvation for the poor  
And bore the sinner's shame.
2. His distress has rais'd us high,  
His duty and his zeal  
Fulfill'd the law which mortals broke  
And finish'd all thy will.
3. His dying groans, his living songs  
Shall better please my God  
Than harp or trumpet's solemn sound,

Than goat's or bullock's blood

This third verse, returning to the theme of Christ as the fulfilment of the Levitical law, shows Watts' perception of Psalm 69:31. Here, the Psalmist believes thanksgiving to be greater than sacrifice, but Watts almost objects to that sentiment, asserting instead that the most pleasing sounds to God are the prayers and groans uttered by Christ on the cross. Matthew Henry takes a slightly different view on this, suggesting that Old Testament praises ultimately gloried in the grace received through the ceremonial law, but that praises offered through the mediation of Christ are "better than the most valuable of the legal sacrifices."<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, he considers that the Psalm is still to be understood as a believer addressing God. If, as the Psalmist is suggesting, obedience and thankfulness are the essential ingredients within genuine praise, then none can offer praise as pure as Christ, especially when his obedience to the Father is so clearly demonstrated on the cross.

The concluding verse of this hymn is rooted in Watts' Calvinism, speaking with certainty about what the blood of Christ has accomplished for his people.

6. Zion is thine, most holy God;  
 Thy Son shall bless her gates;  
 And glory purchas'd by his blood  
 For thine own Israel waits.

In his work, *The Ruin and Recovery of Mankind*, Watts summarises his views not only on the scope of the atonement, but on what it achieved for the elect:

There was such a superabundant value and merit in these undertakings, arising from the dignity of his person and character that these labours, and their sufferings, did...procure absolute and certain salvation for the elect, according to the will and appointment of the Father.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.lxx.html>

<sup>66</sup> Watts, *The Ruin and Recovery of Mankind* [London, 1742] 245



For Watts, the atonement procured the eternal salvation of the elect. The Savoy Confession makes it clear that the “virtue, efficacy and benefits” of the atonement are given to the elect people of God from all ages, before and after the incarnation of Christ, even though it was only at the point of his death that such salvation was accomplished.<sup>67</sup> So within Psalm 69, the sufferings of the people of God are incorporated into the sufferings of Christ, their federal and covenant head. Watts offers comfort, not by joining in the expressions of suffering uttered by the Psalmist, but rather by meditating upon Christ’s sufferings and subsequently being encouraged by him.

In his fourth version of this Psalm, Watts perceives a cosmic battle, in which God and Satan wage war over Christ as he is crucified. Watts sees the attacks on the Psalmist in 69:4 to be like the attack on Christ. In John 15:25, Christ applies these words to himself, and so Watts is able to use this connection to peer behind the curtain, as it were, to the spiritual battle raging.

2. In long complaints he spends his breath  
 While hosts of hell, and power of death,  
 And all the sons of malice join  
 To execute their curst design.

3. Yet, gracious God, thy power and love  
 Has made the curse a blessing prove  
 Those dreadful sufferings of thy Son  
 Aton’d for sins which we had done.

The Psalmist speaks of restoring that which his enemies took away, but Watts turns this around, portraying Christ as restoring the honours of the law of God. “God’s glory, in some instances of it, was taken away by the sin of man; man’s honour, and

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<sup>67</sup> Savoy Confession 8.6

peace, and happiness, were taken away; it was not that he took them away, and yet by the merit of his death he restored them.”<sup>68</sup>

4. The pangs of our expiring Lord  
 The honours of thy law restor’d;  
 His sorrows made thy justice known,  
 And paid for follies not his own.

Watts concludes the hymn by rooting the salvation of sinners firmly in the merits of Christ. To Watts, sinners are redeemed by the Father accepting the atoning sacrifice of the Son. In Reformed covenant theology, the *pactum salutis*, the covenant between the Father and the Son, is the foundation of all of their thinking relating to the believer’s union with Christ.<sup>69</sup>

5. O for his sake our guilt forgive  
 And let the mourning sinner live;  
 The Lord will hear us in his Name,  
 Nor shall our hope be turn’d to shame

In conclusion, Watts’ work on Psalm 69 is not lacking in scriptural validation. As has been seen, Christ uses the Psalm to speak about himself, and the prophecy of wine vinegar allows for the Psalm at least to be used by Christ as a prayer in his own sufferings. In this way, the Psalm is related to Psalm 22, which Christ adopts it for himself during his Passion. Where Watts becomes more challenging to justify is the way he extrapolates the atonement from the Psalm, moving on from describing the physical sufferings of Christ to its spiritual significance. Clearly, the two are

<sup>68</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.lxx.html>

<sup>69</sup> “The *proximate* source of the believer’s redemption is union with Christ with its dual benefits of justification and sanctification. Justification has priority, however, over sanctification because at its core is the perfect and complete imputed righteousness of Christ, the *ultimate* cause of which is Christ’s voluntary acceptance and promise to be covenant surety for the elect in the *pactum* between the Father and the Son” (J.V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology 91517-1700*) [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012] 298).

theologically connected, but it seems that Watts has an intention to defend and include the particular doctrines which he holds dear. As was seen with his inclusion of the Incarnation in Psalm 97, it is not the case that Watts simply sees what it is not there, but rather that he takes what is present and either juxtaposes it with something else (such as contrasting the awesome majesty of God with his glory revealed in the incarnate Christ) or instead, he uses what is present in the Psalm to explore areas that the Psalm does not ordinarily reach.

### 3.4 The Resurrection

Throughout his Psalter, Watts makes frequent references to the resurrection of Christ. The only hymns in his Psalter which deal directly with the resurrection are 16.5 and 118.4. In the Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, the apostle Peter uses Psalm 16:10 as a proof text that the resurrection was promised by God through David and therefore proving that it was “not possible that he should be holden” of death.<sup>70</sup> The Savoy Confession of Faith alludes to this verse also, stating that Christ,

was crucified, and died; was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption. On the third day he arose from the dead with the same body in which he suffered.<sup>71</sup>

Strangely, Watts gives no direct attention to this verse, or the prophecy within it concerning the preservation from God even when the soul is plunged into death. Instead, he concentrates on contrasting the death of Christ with his resurrection.

5. Jesus, whom every saint adores,  
Was crucified and slain;  
Behold the tomb its prey restores,  
Behold, he lives again!

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<sup>70</sup> Acts 2:24

<sup>71</sup> Savoy Confession 8.4

Watts appears to state that the tomb is giving Christ up, rather than the more positive notion that Christ was raised up by God (as per Acts 2:24). This poetic device, in which he portrays the tomb as a predator relinquishing its prey, is striking, and not without Scriptural validation,<sup>72</sup> but it inadvertently weakens Watts' doctrinal point, implying that the resurrection is a victory given *to* God rather than won *by* God. Watts is clearer in other verses throughout the Psalter, where he makes it apparent that he believes in an orthodox resurrection, in which Christ is raised by the power of God.

He lives (and blessed be my rock!)  
 The God of my salvation lives  
 The dark designs of hell are broke;  
 Sweet is the peace my Father gives.<sup>73</sup>

But God, His Father, heard his cry:  
 Raised from the dead he reigns on high.  
 The nations learn his righteousness,  
 And humble sinners taste his grace.<sup>74</sup>

In Psalm 118.4, Watts writes about the resurrection based on Psalm 118:24-26. Of these verses, Watts writes,

2. To-day he rose and left the dead,  
 And Satan's empire fell:  
 To-day the saints his triumphs spread,  
 And all his wonders tell

Matthew Henry, speaking of the Christian interpretation of these verses writes, "it may very fitly be understood of the Christian Sabbath, which we sanctify in

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<sup>72</sup> In Psalm 3.1:7, Watts draws upon Genesis 3, describing death as a serpent.

<sup>73</sup> Watts, Psalm 18.3:3

<sup>74</sup> Watts, Psalm 22.3:6

remembrance of Christ's resurrection."<sup>75</sup> Psalm 118:2 is quoted frequently in the New Testament,<sup>76</sup> wherein Christ is seen as the rejected stone which has become the cornerstone of the temple of God. It is no surprise therefore that Watts uses the verses that follow it to celebrate the resurrection. Watts' verse not only states the resurrection of Christ, but also its implications, both as a final victory over Satan and as the gospel message that Christians share.

### 3.5 Conclusion

A problem that emerges when considering Watts' Psalter is his habit of writing multiple versions of the same psalm. If he is staying as true to his intentions, as stated in his *Essay*, then multiple versions are redundant, especially when they vary in their theology; one definitive version of each psalm ought to be sufficient where he desires to bring his Christology to the forefront of his psalter. However, the simplest explanation lies within Watts himself; he is either unable or unwilling to restrain his fertile imagination, and having held the psalm up like a diamond, is able to see more than one facet to it.

Watts' Christology was to come under scrutiny later in his career. His aversion to controversy and conflict lead him to devise explanations for the Trinity that accommodated Calvinists, Arians and Socinians.<sup>77</sup> That there is seemingly a drift in Watts' theology, or perhaps more rightly a shift in his focus throughout his career (from edifying believers through an improved hymnody to cultivating Christian unity across warring factions of the Church) causes problems when attempting to systematise Watts' thought. But when his psalms are compared with his later works, a sense of cohesion becomes apparent. Watts' Christology, as seen in this chapter, appears unified and consistent with his Reformed heritage. It has been demonstrated that the Christology within Watts' Psalter is robust and clear, covering the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. The examples cited are the clearest examples of such works, and their analysis creates a framework with which the entire Psalter can be considered.

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<sup>75</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.cxix.html>

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10, 11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:4, 7

<sup>77</sup> For further discussion, see the chapter "Controversies" in Davis, *Isaac Watts*.



## Chapter 4: The Reign of Christ

He, the true David, Israel's king,  
 Blest and belov'd of God,  
 To save us rebels dead in sin,  
 Paid his own dearest blood.<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the way Watts describes the reign of Christ in the Psalms. In doing so, he makes it possible for worshippers to see their own struggles and persecutions within Old Testament history and allows them to swear allegiance to the throne of Christ through these Psalms; prior to Watts' revision of the Psalter, the direct application of the rule of Christ over their lives was absent from their psalmody. Watts is ultimately striving to make the Psalms relevant to his congregation.

Seventeenth-century Christology emphasised the three offices of Christ, as Prophet, Priest and King. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 23, asks, "What offices doth Christ execute as our Redeemer?" and the answer affirms that, "Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation."<sup>2</sup> Question 26 answers the question of "how doth Christ execute the office of a king?" by stating that, "Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies."<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, the Savoy Confession of Faith affirms that the offices of Christ are ordained by God according to the *pactum salutis*, and that the office of King constitutes headship of the Church and the responsibility to judge the world.<sup>4</sup> In the tradition that Watts was to inherit, the office of Christ as king was seen as an outworking of the eternal covenant between the

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<sup>1</sup> Watts, Psalm 35:6.2

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Savoy Confession of Faith, 8.1

Father and the Son, and the kingdom of Christ is therefore the natural and necessary fulfilment of this covenant. Watts, in bringing this emphasis into his Psalter, enables the singer to see the scope of Christ's reign, prophesied in the Psalms, inaugurated in his resurrection and ascension and realised in part in the life of the Church.

Within Watts' lifetime, the fortunes of Dissenters were tethered to the monarchy. The 1689 Act of Toleration, following on quickly from the Glorious Revolution and ascension to the British throne by William of Orange provided greater freedoms for Nonconformists, including permission to build their own churches and worship according to their own ecclesiological convictions. This led Dissenters to believe that the Church of England would eventually experience the reform for which they had longed since the Reformation, which would in turn be a vehicle for a moral and spiritual renewal throughout Britain.<sup>5</sup> Their enthusiasm was short-lived, as by 1714 the Schism Act had been signed, curbing the educational freedoms of Dissenters, subsequently overturned by George I in 1719.

Isaac Watts, a monarchist, sees the monarchy as operating within the will of God. In the fifth version of Psalm 18, Watts writes,

6. Oh kings that reign as David did,  
 He pours his blessings down  
 Secures their honours to their seed,  
 And well supports the crown

In his sermon, "To Encourage the Reformation of Manners,"<sup>6</sup> Watts identifies Queen Anne with Moses, and blesses God for her. Similarly, when George I died, Watts quoted Psalm 72:8 in his eulogy, stating that his dominion had stretched from "sea to sea."<sup>7</sup> It is of little coincidence that one of Watts' most famous and influential compositions, "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun" is based upon this Psalm. This hymn functions as a microcosm of Watts' theology of the monarchy. He takes a psalm

<sup>5</sup> John Spurr, "Later Stuart Puritanism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul Lim (Cambridge University Press, 2008) 93

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Watts, "A Sermon to Encourage the Reformation of Manners," in *The Works of Isaac Watts, Vol. 2* [London, 1812] 165

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 776



written about Solomon, according to the understanding at the time, and reinvents it to speak about the reign of Christ. And later, the Psalm is appropriated to thank God for the reign of George I. Three kingdoms all converge within one verse. Watts is concerned that the Psalms continue to live, even if that means unmooring them from their original context. So this example not only demonstrates how Watts operates as both an exegete and a pastor, but also gives an insight into his own devotional relationship with God. The God of Solomon is the God of Christ, and remains the God of his life and nation.

The relationship between the monarchy and Christ in Watts' theology is the backdrop against which Watts' use of the reign of Christ within the Psalms shall be considered. The purpose of this chapter is to understand Watts' view of the reign of Christ, as prophesied in the Psalms. Within this, attention will also be given to psalms that describe Christ as King. Attention will be given to the places where Watts describes Christ as the Judge of the wicked, especially in places where the prophecy is not apparent within Scripture. From here, Watts' view of the relationship between Israel, the Church, and Britain will be examined in detail.

## 4.2 Christ the King

### 4.2.1 Psalm 35 – the Loving King

The Psalms frequently refer to the sovereignty of God, but in Watts' psalter this rule is attributed to Christ. Watts' second version of Psalm 35 concentrates on verses 12-14 of the chapter. King David is faced with threats, slanders and persecutions, and instead of seeking retribution or revenge, responds with generosity and compassion. Matthew Henry comments that David responds to his enemies "tenderly" and with "cordial affection."<sup>8</sup> David is, according to Henry, both in his experience of facing false accusations and responding with mercy, "a type of Christ."<sup>9</sup> Watts has given the psalm the subtitle, "Love to enemies; or, The love of Christ to sinners typified in David." Because his typology is stated from the outset, Watts uses the psalm to

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<sup>8</sup> Henry, *Commentary* Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole of Scripture, Volume 3*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xxxvi.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

describe David's experience rather than versify the psalm, as he does in his first version of Psalm 35. So this second version begins,

1. Behold the love, the generous love  
That holy David shows;  
Hark, how his sounding bowels move  
To his afflicted foes!

Watts' psalm, in the concluding fifth and sixth verses, moves from David to Christ.

5. O glorious type of heavenly grace!  
Thus Christ the Lord appears;  
While sinners curse, the Saviour prays,  
And pities them with tears.
  
6. He, the true David, Israel's king,  
Blest and belov'd of God,  
To save us rebels dead in sin,  
Paid his own dearest blood.

Watts has moved a long way from the text of the psalm in this verse, not only by seeing David as a type of Christ, but by taking David's response to his enemies as a prophecy of Christ's atoning death. This method of using the hymn as a commentary on the psalm is a common feature in Watts' work,<sup>10</sup> and this technique allows him to express his theology while teaching those who sing his psalm. While Watts is in no way unique in stating that David is a type and foreshadow of Christ, or by inversion saying that Christ is the true David, previously versified versions of this psalm do not bring out this emphasis.<sup>11</sup> To Watts, in the same way that David's reign as king looks

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<sup>10</sup> As was seen in Chapter 3, on Watts' use of Scripture.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sternhold and Hopkins, "Psalm XXXV" *The Whole Book of Psalms, Collected into English Metre* [London, Stationers Company, 1705]

forward in anticipation to Christ's kingdom, so too David's actions and experiences are a foretelling of the life of Christ.

#### 4.2.2 Psalm 72 – Jesus Shall Reign

The second version of this psalm is arguably one of the three most famous hymns within Watts' Psalter,<sup>12</sup> wherein Watts celebrates the reign of Christ throughout the world.

1. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run,  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more

The psalm, according to Matthew Henry, was written by David for Solomon,<sup>13</sup> and within it lies a prophecy of Christ's kingdom, "prophesied of under the type and figure of Solomon."<sup>14</sup> The scope of the psalm covers both young and old from every corner of the globe, from Adam through to the present day, joining in with the songs of praise being sung by angels, celebrating the "expansion of Christian dominion."<sup>15</sup> This vast host of characters, all under the reign of Christ, are united in the worship they bring and the blessings they receive. The worship includes "tribute" and "homage" from every nation,<sup>16</sup> "sweetest songs,"<sup>17</sup> and "peculiar honours."<sup>18</sup> The blessings include liberation, rest and prosperity,<sup>19</sup> as well as the extinction of death and the

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<sup>12</sup> Alongside Psalm 90, version 2 ("O God our Help in Ages Past") and Psalm 98, version 2 ("Joy to the World")

<sup>13</sup> See Psalm 72:20

<sup>14</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.lxxiii.html>

<sup>15</sup> John Hull, "From Experiential Educator to Nationalist Theologian: the Hymns of Isaac Watts," *Panorama: International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values* 14.1 (2002)

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 72:2.2

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 72:5.2

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 72:8.2

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 72:6.2

curse, and a restoration and improvement of all that had been lost through Adam's fall.<sup>20</sup>

John Hull notes that Watts' replaces the prayers to prolong the king's life found in Psalm 72:5 with a latitudinal prayer, to see the kingdom of Christ extend throughout the ends of the earth.<sup>21</sup> The eternal Christ shall live and reign forever, and so the prayer moves out from the epicentre of Christ's throne to an empire under his rule.<sup>22</sup> This is an example of Watts manipulating Scripture. Within the bounds of a Christological Psalter, Psalm 72 can legitimately be interpreted to speak about Christ at least in part. But by shifting the emphasis from time to space, and from a long life to an expanded kingdom, Watts is letting his agenda interpret Scripture, rather than abiding by his intended hermeneutic of letting Scripture interpret Scripture.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Psalm 110- The Priest King

This Psalm, in the words of Matthew Henry, is David's creed.<sup>24</sup> Henry argues that it is "pure gospel," and is "only and wholly about Christ."<sup>25</sup> In his commentary on Ephesians, Thomas Goodwin interprets the psalm in the same way, saying that the psalmist is speaking about Christ.<sup>26</sup> Edward Reynolds (1599-1676) uses Psalm 110 to argue that there are two distinct aspects to the reign of Christ as king. The first aspect is the natural kingdom, wherein Christ has all of the essential dominion and majesty due to his inherent divinity. This is shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Alongside this, there is the dispensatory kingdom, which is given "by donation and

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<sup>20</sup> Psalm 72:7.2

<sup>21</sup> Hull, *Experiential Educator*

<sup>22</sup> Hull also notes that Watts' references to Persia and India in verse three allude to the increased trade deals that were developing between Britain and India, whereby the revenue generated by these relationships allowed the British Empire to expand. Within the paradigms of Watts' nationalist theology, the British Empire directly corresponded to the reign of Christ, and so the "barbarous nations" that Watts refers to are, in his view, fulfilling the prophecy of this psalm (see Hull, *Experiential Educator*).

<sup>23</sup> As an epilogue to the hymn, it is noted that this hymn had a sustained popularity, and was the second most widely printed missionary hymn in the nineteenth century. See Robert Schneider, "Jesus Shall Reign: Hymns and Foreign Missions" in *Wonderful of Words of Life*, ed. Richard Mouw & Mark Noll [Eerdmans, 2004] 85

<sup>24</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.cxi.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, Vol. 1; Containing an Exposition on the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians* [Oregon, Wipf & Stock, 1861] 115

unction from His Father, that he might be the Head of his church.”<sup>27</sup> The Psalm is used by Christ in Matthew 22:43-44 of himself. Isaac Watts’ first version of this psalm bears the subtitle, “Christ exalted, and multitudes converted; or, The success of the gospel.” He opens with the words,

1. Thus the eternal Father spake  
To Christ the Son, “Ascend and sit  
“At my right, till I shall make  
Thy foes submissive at thy feet.
  
2. “From Zion shall thy word proceed  
Thy word, the sceptre in thy hand,  
Shall make the hearts of rebels bleed,  
And bow their wills to thy command.”

Watts’ uses the poetic device of a speech from the Father to the Son here, developing on from the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the psalm, in which the writer describes a conversation;

The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. (Psalm 110:1)

By writing the Psalm in this way, Watts is able to root the reign of Christ in the eternal covenant within the Godhead. As was stated earlier in the chapter, this is the dispensatory kingdom of Christ, which was set into divine covenant before it was granted. The word of Christ, as the anointed king ruling over a kingdom granted to him by the Father, is portrayed as the sceptre of his authority. Watts goes on to take the reference in Psalm 110:3 to God’s people being “willing in the day of power” as a prophecy of a large conversion, with sinners crowding the temple gates to gaze upon the holiness of their reigning Christ.

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<sup>27</sup> Reynolds, *An Explication of the Hundred and Tenth Psalme* [London, 1642] 7

The second version of this psalm, according to the subtitle, concentrates on the “kingdom and priesthood of Christ.” Here, the priesthood of Christ is compared to Melchizedek, the priest-king of Genesis 14, according to Psalm 110:4; “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” According to Thomas Goodwin, the oath sworn by the Father to Christ in these verses is the foundation of his priesthood,<sup>28</sup> which is expressed in Dr. Patrick’s fourth verse of this Psalm.

4. The Lord hath all his Truth engag’d,  
By Oath, which he can never break,  
To make thee an eternal Priest  
Of th’ Order of Melchizedek.”<sup>29</sup>

Watts demonstrates his agreement with Goodwin in his first verse.

1. Thus the great Lord of earth and sea  
Spake to his Son, and thus he swore;  
“Eternal shall thy priesthood be,  
And change from hand to hand no more.”

Melchizedek had a unique role, as both the king of Salem and a priest before God, through whom God was able to bless Abram. So the office of Christ’s priesthood, foreshadowed by Melchizedek according to Hebrews 7:21-24, is tethered to the office of his kingship. Watts brings all of these aspects together in his third and fourth verses.

3. “By me Melchizedek was made,  
On earth a king and priest at once

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *Christ Set Forth* [London, 1651] accessed from: [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/goodwin\\_thomas/ChristSetForth/ChristSetForth/CSF\\_505.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/goodwin_thomas/ChristSetForth/ChristSetForth/CSF_505.cfm)

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Patrick, *A Century of Select Psalms and Portions of the Psalms of David* [London, 1679]

And thou, my heavenly priest, shalt plead  
 And thou, my king, shalt rule my sons.”

4. Jesus, the priest ascends his throne  
 While counsels of eternal peace  
 Between the Father and the Son  
 Proceed with honour and success

In these psalms, Watts is rehearsing the threefold offices of Christ. The psalms are operating as a proof text for Watts’ Christology, wherein he applies his system of theology to them. This synthesis of systematic and biblical theology allows Watts not only to honour the theological tradition within which he operates, but to operate as a commentator on the Scriptures too, teaching those who would sing his psalms the doctrines to which he and his predecessors hold. The reign of Christ, for Watts, is clearly prophesied in the Psalms and therefore is a necessary part of his psalter. By using the reigns of David and Solomon as a starting point for his imitation, he remains consistent to his own agenda and hermeneutic.

In conclusion, throughout the Psalms, Watts sees the kings, such as David and Solomon, pointing ahead to the kingdom of Christ. As such, the sovereignty of God is mediated through the sceptre which Christ holds.

#### 4.3 Christ the Judge

A common theme that emerges through Watts’ Psalter is the role of Christ as Judge. He believed that heaven or hell lie ahead of all, and are more clearly taught in the New Testament than the Old. He argues that there is sufficient precedent to bring these doctrines into the psalms;

Can we think he restrains us only to the Psalms of *David*, which speak very little of all these Glories or Terrors, and that in very obscure Terms and dark Hints of Prophecy?<sup>30</sup>

The Savoy Confession affirms that there is a day appointed by God when he will judge the world in righteousness through Christ.<sup>31</sup> John Owen, Thomas Goodwin and Thomas Manton all sought to understand the double justification of a believer, namely that a person can be justified by faith, and thus receive the imputed righteousness of Christ, while simultaneously facing a judgement according to works.<sup>32</sup> Watts brings this theology into his Psalter, and rather than ascribing judgement to God, as the Psalms do, he is quick to affirm that it is Christ who is to judge all. This is an example of Watts reading the New Testament back into the Old, where he infuses the magisterial role of Christ into the Psalms. To Watts, the reign of Christ leads to the moment when Christ will judge all, righteous and unrighteous, and welcome them into the joys of heaven or sentence them to the torments of hell.<sup>33</sup> Within Watts' theological system, the reign of Christ incorporates two responsibilities of judgement; to provide salvation for God's elect and to condemn the guilty. Christ's magisterial judgement therefore encompasses all people everywhere, the righteous and unrighteous, the elect and the reprobate.

#### 4.3.1 Psalm 1 – The Righteous and the Wicked

The first appearance of Christ in Watts' Psalter is in the sixth verse of Psalm 1. The Psalm contrasts the righteous man with the sinner, with the former experiencing the blessing of spiritual prosperity as they meditate on the Scriptures, whereas the sinner is likened to chaff, destined for judgement. The Psalm, according to Calvin,

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<sup>30</sup> Isaac Watts, "A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody" in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in Nine Volumes, Vol. 4* [London, 1813] 16

<sup>31</sup> Savoy Confession of Faith, 32.1

<sup>32</sup> For an overview of this discussion, see Joel Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* [Reformed Heritage, 2012] 315-18, 789-801.

<sup>33</sup> Savoy Confession of Faith. 32.2



functions as a preface to the entire Psalter,<sup>34</sup> setting the course for the book as a whole. Blessings are seen to come from obedience to and meditation upon God's law, whereas judgement comes to those who despise his ways. The promised judgement reconciles a recurring motif throughout the Psalms, where the wicked appear to prosper and the godly are persecuted. So to Watts, Christ is the ultimate end to which both the righteous and wicked are destined; to the righteous, he is their means of salvation, and as such they will be welcomed into his presence, and for the wicked, it is Christ they are rejecting and therefore Christ with whom they must subsequently reckon.

An initial reading of these hymns would suggest that Watts sees Christ as spectator, watching as the righteous and wicked make their own way to their respective and inevitable destinies. However, the third version clarifies the role of Christ.

5. In vain the rebel seeks to stand  
     In judgement with the pious race  
     The dreadful Judge with stern command  
     Divides him to a different place
  
6. "Straight is the way my saints have trod,  
     I blest the path and drew it plain;  
     But you would choose the crooked road,  
     And down it leads to endless pain."

Christ is seen as the guide of the righteous, making their path to heaven both straight and plain. And equally, Christ is seen as the one who separates off the sinner and sends them to hell. Watts places divine judgement and human responsibility side by side, portraying Christ as the one who decides the eternal fate of all, while at the same

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<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08.vii.html>

time, the sinner has chosen the crooked path, and the responsibility must lie with them.

#### 4.3.2 Psalm 50 – The Final Judgement

This psalm, in Matthew Henry's assessment, is a psalm of admonition and reproof.<sup>35</sup> It is a psalm in which God directly addresses and rebukes his people for negating the responsibilities of covenantal obedience (Ps. 50:7-8, 16-20) and summons them to show their repentance in worship (Ps. 50:23). However, Watts redirects the psalm to the final judgement, as wrought by Christ at his second coming. The Last Judgement, as it is called in the Savoy Confession of Faith, sees three Reformed doctrines converge into a single occasion. These doctrines are the justice of God, the depravity of humanity and limited atonement.<sup>36</sup> The justice of God demands a judgement upon the sinful rebellion of humanity, but the elect are spared this judgement through the atoning death of Christ, and are as such judged according to their works, even though their salvation has already been secured. Watts brings these distinctions out in his multiple versions of this psalm.

Watts' third version begins,

1. When Christ to judgement shall descend  
And saints surround their Lord,  
He calls the nations to attend,  
And hear his awful word.

And the second verse of his fifth version reads,

2. Behold the Judge descends, his guards are nigh;  
Tempest and fire attend him down the sky:

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<sup>35</sup> Henry, *Commentary* <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.li.html>

<sup>36</sup> Donald McKim, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2001] 102

Heaven, earth and hell draw near; let all things come  
 To hear his justice and the sinners doom:  
 But gather first my saints (the Judge commands)  
 Bring them, ye angels, from their distant lands.

There are six versions of this psalm in Watts' psalter, and by collating their contents, a picture emerges of his view of the coming judgement. The nature of this judgement is, in Watts' view, eschatological. The third verse of his first version describes the return of Christ,

3. Thron'd on a cloud our God shall come,  
 Bright flames prepare his way,  
 Thunder and darkness, fire and storm  
 Lead on the dreadful day

These verses allow the picture to emerge of Christ's return, at which his self-vindication shall be accomplished. Watts' view of judgement in this psalm is far more to do with avenging the dishonour done to the name of God through sin than it is the tirade of a vengeful warrior

2. Vile wretches dare rehearse his name  
 With lips of falsehood and deceit;  
 A friend or brother they defame,  
 And soothe and flatter those they hate.

3. They watch to do their neighbours wrong,  
 Yet dare to seek their Maker's face;  
 They take his cov'nant on their tongue,  
 But break his laws, abuse his grace.

4. To heav'n they lift their hands unclean,

Defiled with lust, defiled with blood;  
 By night they practice ev'ry sin  
 By day their mouths draw near to God.

5. And while his judgments long delay,  
 They grow secure and sin the more;  
 They think he sleeps as well as they,  
 And put far off the dreadful hour.

These verses have hypocrisy and complacency in view. To Watts, the accusation that Christ will not return to judge the world, allowing sinners to continue in their ungodly ways without reproach is one that he cannot allow to stand.

The results of this judgement are seen in several places. In the first version of the psalm, Watts concentrates on the judgement of salvation which is granted to the righteous.

4. "But gather all my saints," he cries,  
 "That made their peace with God,  
 By the Redeemer's sacrifice  
 And seal'd it with his blood.
5. "Their faith and works brought forth to light  
 Shall make the world confess  
 My sentence of reward is right,  
 And heaven adore my grace."

The first line of verse six harmonises the doctrine of double judgement, where the faith that results in procuring the justifying righteousness of Christ is considered alongside the works accomplished by the believer. Alongside this, there are the warnings pronounced to the unrighteous. Psalm 50:6.4 reads,

6. O dreadful hour! when God draws near  
 And sets their crimes before their eyes

His wrath their guilty souls shall tear  
 And no deliverer dare to rise

And 50:5.3 reads,

5. Consider, ye that slight the Lord  
 Before his wrath appear  
 If once you fall beneath his sword,  
 There's no deliverer there.

The stark warning that Watts wishes to convey is that judgement is the final verdict, and beyond it there is no hope of salvation or a changed verdict. To that end, Watts pleads with them to repent before the gavel falls. The ninth verse of the fifth version reads,

9. Sinners, awake betimes; ye fools, be wise,  
 Awake, before this dreadful morning rise;  
 Change your vain thoughts, your crooked works amend,  
 Fly to the Saviour, make the Judge your friend;  
 Lest like a lion his last vengeance tear  
 Your trembling souls, and no deliverer near.

The fifteenth verse of the sixth version is almost identical, apart from the final two lines;

Then join the saints: wake every cheerful passion;  
 When Christ returns, he comes for your salvation.

The two stanzas form a counterpoint through which we can see Watts' intention clearly. He holds to two doctrines simultaneously; in one hand, the offer of salvation and in the other, the prospect of coming judgement.

#### 4.4 The People of God

“It is hard not to see Watts's purpose in writing the whole book as a stout defence of his own recently persecuted church.”<sup>37</sup> According to J.R. Watson, this is the reason for Watts’ Psalter. Having been raised during an era of acute persecution for Dissenters, including experiencing his own father’s imprisonment while he was still a child, Watts was deliberate and intentional about his Dissenting ecclesiology,<sup>38</sup> but a defence of Independency does not appear to be the primary intention of his Psalter. Watts sets his out agenda in clear terms in both the *Preface to The Psalms of David* as well as his *Short Essay*, and so he must be taken at his word; Watson is implying that Watts is defending the persecuted Dissenting church in his Psalter, hiding this agenda behind a veil of Christological hermeneutic. In his *Essay*, Watts refers to the church over fifty times, but never once in the context of defending his own Dissenting tradition.<sup>39</sup> His most repeated phrase in the *Essay* is “the Christian Church,” referring to the universal, historical church. There are examples, which shall be considered in this chapter, which can be understood to have the Dissenting Church in view, though that point is not explicitly made. “Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past” is a strong example of a Psalm which would fit into Watson’s framework, written after Parliament signed the Schism Act in 1714, prohibiting Independent churches to run schools and academies.<sup>40</sup> However, these make up a small proportion of Watts’ Psalter, and so do not justify Watson’s sweeping statement; it fails to take Watts and his rationale at face value.<sup>41</sup> While Watts remained a Dissenter, he was not a

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<sup>37</sup> J.R. Watson in *Dissenting Praise*. ed. Isabel Rivers and David Wykes [Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011] 51

<sup>38</sup> This is evident in his decision not to study at Oxford University and subsequently pursue ordination in the Church of England, but rather to attend the Nonconformist Academy at Stoke Newington.

<sup>39</sup> The only references to his contemporary church are either to do with the discussion among Dissenting churches regarding exclusive psalmody, or where he favourably refers to the Church of England for having adopted non-Scriptural hymns. Were he that antagonistic towards the established church, he would not use their practice to buttress his argument.

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough analysis of this hymn, see Stackhouse’s assessment in *Wonderful Words of Life*, 47-52.

<sup>41</sup> Escott offers a more balanced opinion, suggesting that due to Watts’ Independent ecclesiology, while he has the whole Church in mind, his emphasis is on the gathered church, and as such it struggled in gaining broad acceptance in the Anglican and Presbyterian Church, but this is due to the focus on Christian intimacy and fellowship,

controversialist, preferring instead to preserve Christian unity. In the year before he died, Watts published a book, *The Rational Foundation of a Christian Church*, where he states in the preface that if his work serves “to lead the Several Parties of Christians to more moderate and charitable Sentiments concerning each other, I shall have abundant Reason to rejoice in my Attempt, and give Glory to the God of Truth and Peace.”<sup>42</sup> By taking such statements alongside the emphasis within his *Essay*, Watts’ ecclesiological emphasis, especially in his Psalter, is on the universal church rather than the local church.<sup>43</sup> While Watts’ Psalms will have been sung in family worship, he writes his *Essay* imagining their use in the weekly gathering of a congregation each Sunday. Escott writes that Watts’ Psalter is full of the “spirit of fellowship” and the “personal intimacy of the *gathered* church.”<sup>44</sup> While the lyrical emphasis within this Psalter is predominantly on the universal church, its expression is realised in the local church. While Watts believed in an Independent ecclesiology, his emphasis throughout his Psalms is not on the doctrinal particulars of church governance or reforms, but rather on the centrality of the Church in God’s plan of salvation as the elect, covenant people of God, living between the first and second comings of Christ. In order to substantiate this hypothesis, attention shall turn to Watts’ view of the Church as expressed in his Psalms, and the way he often uses Israel and the Church interchangeably. Alongside this, we shall look at how Watts’ nationalism comes through, where he directly applies the promises of God’s covenants with Israel to Great Britain.

#### 4.4.1 Israel and the Church

Through the Reformation, Protestantism recast the relationship between Israel and the Church. The Roman Catholic Church, centred on a priest offering a sacrifice

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rather than any overt hostility towards the Established Church (Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer* [Independent Press, 1962] 154).

<sup>42</sup> Isaac Watts, *The Rational Foundation of a Christian Church, and the Terms of Christian Communion* (London, 1748) Preface

<sup>43</sup> Manning states, “There is nothing denominational about [Watts]. We find rather less reflexion of the intense fellowship of classic Congregationalism than we should have expected. Watts deals with the great common themes of catholic Christianity” (Bernard Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* [London, Epworth, 1942] 101).

<sup>44</sup> Escott, *Hymnographer*, 154

during Mass, was seen to have adopted many of her practices from Jewish worship. And as such, when the Reformers rejected these practices, they sought a new way of relating to the Old Testament. The first way was to prioritise the New Testament teaching in relation to the sacrificial system within the Mosaic Law, which was made obsolete when it was fulfilled by Christ. Secondly, the Reformers sought to see themselves as the Covenant people of God, embracing Jewish history as their own and comparing the true, Reformed Church with Israel, battling against the temptations of apostasy and idolatry, struggling against persecution and oppression.<sup>45</sup> This view of Scripture and Protestant identity continued on in the subsequent Puritan and Dissenting traditions. However, over time there was a subtle shift in emphasis, as shall be seen in Watts' Psalms. Initially, the Reformers located themselves within the story of Israel, but Watts places Israel within the story of the Church.

From several of Watts' psalms, a picture can be created of how he viewed the relationship between Israel and the Church. His perspective hinges on his Christological view of the covenants within Scripture. In Watts' own writings, he describes his view of the Covenant of Grace, explained in the Savoy Confession as the covenant wherein God offers salvation through the merits of Christ,<sup>46</sup> as opposed to the Covenant of Works which "was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience."<sup>47</sup> Watts saw the Covenant of Grace as being progressively revealed throughout the Old Testament, and even though each stage of revelation had its own distinguishing features, they contain common elements and culminate in the works of Christ.<sup>48</sup> However, Watts argues that prior to Christ, righteousness is attained by perfection and obedience, rather than the justification by faith as offered by Christ, and in doing so distinguishes between the types and shadows found within the Old Testament and the Christological foundations of the Covenant of Grace.<sup>49</sup> Watts occupies a unique historical role, having not only

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<sup>45</sup> Achsah Guibbory, *Christian Identity, Jews, and Israel in Seventeenth Century England* [Oxford University Press, 2010] 2

<sup>46</sup> Savoy Confession 7.3

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 7.2

<sup>48</sup> Isaac Watts, "The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed; Containing a Brief Survey of the Several Public Dispensations of God toward Man" in *The Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, D.D., Vol. 4* [London, 1810] 5

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 12



inherited the Covenant Theology of Owen and Goodwin, but also as a forerunner to the Dispensational Theology of J.N. Darby and C.I. Scofield.<sup>50</sup> His proto-dispensationalism is revealed in the way he sees the Covenant of Works as still being ultimately rooted in grace and Israel as being within the Church. This means that his view has some inconsistencies, which shall be explored in the subsequent analysis. As is often the case with Watts, he is learning from the past, and through his own internalisation of what he learns, comes out with something different, without necessarily intending to reinvent a theological system, such as Dispensational Theology in this instance. In Psalm 106, Watts portrays Israel and the Church as being two parties who are united in praise of their common God.

“Let Israel bless the Lord,  
Who lov’d their ancient race;  
And Christians join the solemn word  
Amen to all the praise.”<sup>51</sup>

As the Christians join Israel’s songs of praise, Watts is showing no partiality, nor is he pitting Israel and the Church against one another in the story of salvation, but rather he is allowing them to worship together.

In order to undertake a deeper analysis of Watts’ view of the relationship between God’s covenants and his people, concentration will turn to Psalm 89. It is a prime example of Watts’ theology of Israel and the Church, and will be used to facilitate a more detailed study of Watts’ broader thought. Matthew Henry writes,

The covenant is made with David; the covenant of royalty is made with him, as the father of his family, and with his seed through him and for his sake, representing the covenant of grace made with Christ as head of the church and with all believers as his spiritual seed.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Huebner, *Elements of Dispensational Truth* [Present Truth Publishers, 1998] 10-11

<sup>51</sup> Watts, Psalm 106.2:6

<sup>52</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xc.html>

Elsewhere, Thomas Boston explains that this Psalm contains a “type of the covenant of grace, namely the covenant of royalty made unto David.”<sup>53</sup> Watts’s first of eight versions of this psalm reveals how he weaves these strands of theology together.

2. Thus to his Son he swore, and said,  
     “With thee my covenant first is made;  
     In thee shall dying sinners live,  
     Glory and grace are thine to give.
  
3. “Be thou my prophet, thou my priest;  
     Thy children shall be ever blest;  
     Thou art my chosen king; thy throne  
     Shall stand eternal like my own
  
5. “David, my servant, whom I chose  
     To guard my flock, to crush my foes  
     And rais’d him to the Jewish throne  
     Was but a shadow of my Son.”
  
6. Now let the church rejoice and sing  
     Jesus her Saviour and her King  
     Angels his heavenly wonders show,  
     And saints declare his works below.

Watts sees that those under the Covenant of Grace are the church, and that the Davidic Covenant is a shadow pointing to the kingdom of Christ. As has been seen through this study, Watts succeeds in honouring the text in its original state, placing God’s covenant with David in the context of Scripture, where it is seen to have its fulfilment

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Boston, *A View of the Covenant of Grace from the Sacred Records* [Glasgow, 1797] 2

in the reign of Christ. Therefore, in Watts' theology, the promises of God made to Israel are seen as shadows of God's relationship with the church.

To develop our understanding of Watts' view of this relationship, attention now turns to Watts' description of the Israelite exodus from Egypt in Psalm 66.1;

4. He made the ebbing channel dry.  
 While Israel pass'd the flood;  
 There did the church begin their joy  
 And triumph in their God.

It was not uncommon at the time to describe Israel as a church, as is seen in Thomas Goodwin's statement in his treatise on Church Order,<sup>54</sup> and Matthew Henry's introduction to Psalm 67.<sup>55</sup> However, unlike supercessionism, which sees the church replacing Israel as the covenant people of God, Watts' theology is moving in the opposite direction, where he incorporates Old Testament believers into the covenant of the church. While Watts distinguishes between Christianity and Judaism,<sup>56</sup> suggesting that the clearest way of understanding the stages of dispensation is as "different religions, or, at least, as differing forms of religion, appointed for men in the several successive ages of the world,"<sup>57</sup> by using church synonymously with Israel, he is incorporating Israel into the blessings and promises of the Church. Elsewhere, in his second version of Psalm 99, Watts writes,

2. When Israel was his church,  
 When Aaron was his priest,  
 When Moses cry'd, when Samuel pray'd,  
 He gave his people rest.

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Goodwin, "Church Order Explained" in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, Volume 11* [Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2000] 520

<sup>55</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.lxxviii.html>

<sup>56</sup> Watts, *Harmony of all the Religions*, 6

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 7

From these two verses, the lines between Israel and the Church in Watts' work appear indistinct, whereby Israel's covenants are shadows of Christ's covenant, and as such inferior to the church, while simultaneously incorporating Israel into the blessings and status of the church.

In Galatians 6:15-16, Paul refers to the "Israel of God." On these verses, Watts comments, in a treatise on the nature of Christ as the Son of God, that "the word *Israel* at first was a Name given to *Jacob*, thence as it was derived to signify *all the Jewish Family or Nation*, and afterwards it came to signify the *Character* of that Family, viz. *the Church of God*."<sup>58</sup> Therefore, to Watts, Israel as a distinctive name for the nation elected by God, descended from Abraham, had become subsumed into a title for the Church. If this view is compared to Calvin's, a progression of thought can be seen. Calvin distinguishes between the Israel of the flesh and the Israel of faith; the former Calvin believes are being ridiculed by this verse, while the latter are part of the Israel of God, which "includes all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, who were united into one church."<sup>59</sup> This distinction between the Israelites, who were people of faith, and the Jews, who rejected Christ, allowed a duality of thought within English Protestantism, which could simultaneously adopt the history of Israel as their own history, while looking down on the Jews who had not come to faith in Christ as being anathema.<sup>60</sup> Matthew Henry says that the Israel of God are all sincere Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, who are the spiritual seed of Abraham, and are thus heirs with Abraham of the promise of faith.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Henry concludes, the true Israel of God walk according to the rule of the gospel, which is a justification by faith instead of works. Even though circumcision is the outward sign of God's covenant with Abraham, it was intended to signify that Abraham was justified by faith (according to Galatians 3:6-18). This view is supported by John Locke, who writes that he sees "those who walk by this rule," referring to the priority of being a new creature in

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<sup>58</sup> Isaac Watts, *Useful and Important Questions concerning the Jesus Son of God Freely Proposed* [London, 1746] 26

<sup>59</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians and Galatians*, [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org/http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41.iii.viii.iv.html)

<sup>60</sup> Guibbory, *Christian Identity*, 17

<sup>61</sup> Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.Gal.vii.html>

Christ, as opposed to being circumcised or uncircumcised, are the “Israel of God.”<sup>62</sup> So while the verse that was considered from Psalm 106:2.6 suggests that Israel and the Church stand side by side, echoing and endorsing one another’s praise of God, in actual fact Watts’ view is quite different in other places. The nation of Israel, as descendants of Abraham, were the covenant people of God, and yet that covenant was superseded by the New Covenant of Christ and his Kingdom. These verses shed light into the system of Covenant Theology to which Watts subscribed, and therefore allow us to see his understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Church.

In his first version of Psalm 45, entitled “The glory of Christ, the success of the gospel; and the Gentile church,”<sup>63</sup> Watts uses the word “gentile” again in verse 6 to refer to the Church.

6. Behold, at thy right hand

The Gentile church is seen  
Like a fair bride in rich attire,  
And princess guard the queen.

Watts is too deliberate a theologian and poet to use a word without fully intending to, especially twice in one psalm. Watts’ thought up until this point has aimed to include Israel within the Church, rather than exclude her. Following the translation of the King James Bible in 1611, the word “gentile” typically referred to non-Jews, whereas Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary defines a gentile as being, “One of an unconverted nation; one who knows not the true God.”<sup>64</sup> It cannot be concluded that Watts is in some way excluding Israel from the Church, or indeed foreseeing a scenario where Israel is devoid of national identity within the Church. It seems more reasonable to see “gentile” as a synonym for Christian, wherein the Church, including the Israel of faith, is distinct from the Jews who have rejected Christ.

<sup>62</sup> John Locke, *The Works of John Locke, Vol. 8* [London, 1823] 72

<sup>63</sup> “This Psalm is an illustrious prophecy of Messiah the Prince: it is all over gospel and points at him only” (Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xlvi.html>).

<sup>64</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: in which the Words are Deduced from their Originals, Explained in their Different Meanings and Authorized by the Names of the Writers in whose Works they are found*. [London, 1756]

Another to facet to Watts' exploration of the relationship between Israel and the Church is found in his version of Psalm 74, entitled, "The church pleading with God under sore persecutions." This Psalm would be a strong candidate for affirming the statement from J.R. Watson that Watts is primarily writing his Psalter as a defence of the Nonconformist Church, because it gives a voice to Christians who see themselves as the elect people of God, and yet attempts to harmonise this confidence with the oppression they experience on a daily basis. Watts' opening verse describes the church as "the people of his love, his little chosen flock." Despite Donald Davie describing these lines as being "namby-pamby,"<sup>65</sup> they are in fact designed to highlight the fragility of the church in the face of fierce persecution. The small, weak, little gathered flock are no match for their enemies, portrayed both in Psalm 74:4 and Watts' fourth verse as roaring lions. Watts' fifth and sixth verses describes the boastful violence to which Independent churches were being subjected.

5. How are the seats of worship broke

They tear the buildings down

And he that deals the heaviest stroke

Procures the chief renown

6. With flames they threaten to destroy

Thy children in their nest;

"Come let us burn at once (they cry)

The temple and the priest."

Within the portrayal of this persecution, Watts directly compares the Church and Israel through his use of "the temple and the priest" to describe churches and ministers.

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<sup>65</sup> Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* [Cambridge University Press, 1993] 76

Watts continues to implore God to defend the church, culminating in the sixteenth and seventeenth verses which call upon God to remember his covenant with them.

16. Think on the covenant thou hast made,  
 And all thy words of love;  
 Nor let the birds of prey invade  
 And vex thy mourning dove.

17. Our foes would triumph in our blood,  
 And make our hope their jest;  
 Plead thy own cause, Almighty God!  
 And give thy children rest.

The implication here is that the oppressed church at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century enjoys the same covenantal blessings and promises of divine security as Israel did. This broadens out Watts' view of the relationship between Israel and the Church to imply that the relationship between God and Israel has continued into the history of the Church. By adopting Psalm 74 as the song of lament for the persecuted church, Watts is uniting Israel and the Church.

From these Psalms, we can begin to see where Watts draws the boundaries for the people of God. The Psalms were the songs of covenant and faith in the Old Testament, and following the inauguration of the New Covenant in Christ, were carried forward into the worship of the New Testament church. To Watts, the Psalms are not only the songs of God's people through all ages and covenants, but are a vehicle for him to make his theology clear and he seeks to use the Psalms as a means for teaching congregations to understand their place within salvation history. The Covenant of Grace began with the Covenant of Works given to Israel, and so all who are the Israel of faith are continued into the Church.

#### 4.4.2 Israel and Britain

One of the most notable and controversial elements within Watts' Psalter is his frequent decision to substitute references to "Israel" with "Great Britain." This theology has its roots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the 'Fast Sermons' preached in Parliament on days of fasting in the 1640s, over three quarters of the sermons were based on Old Testament texts. Connections were drawn between Jewish history and the contemporary situation in Britain.<sup>66</sup> In the century since Calvin had encouraged Protestants to situate their experiences in the history of Israel, the focus of divine blessing had seemingly moved from Israel to Britain, as "godly England was God's chosen nation, repeating the history of biblical Israel."<sup>67</sup> Britain had become a Christian Israel. The history of the Jews was now a paradigm through which England could be understood. The English monarchy had a centuries-old conviction that they occupied the throne of David, ruling as ambassadors of Christ, who was himself the Son of David.<sup>68</sup> So Watts takes this ideology one step further, taking the songs largely attributed to David and bringing them to bear upon the British monarchy, within his framework of the doctrine of election. The Puritans had come to believe that "their land was nothing less than another and a better Israel."<sup>69</sup> Linda Colley sweepingly suggests that, when Watts came to understand the Psalms, he "thought nothing of replacing references to 'Israel' in the original text with the words 'Great Britain'."<sup>70</sup> In Watts' own words, according to his *Essay*, he says that, "*Judah and Israel may be called England and Scotland, and the Land of Canaan may be translated into Great Britain.*"<sup>71</sup> The context of Watts' argument is that he is suggesting the most appropriate ways of making the Psalms personal and applicable to those who will sing them, that "these be converted into Christian Songs in our Nation."<sup>72</sup> This shows that Watts' aim is for the Psalms to be appropriated not just into the language of New

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<sup>66</sup> Watts prefers to use "Britain" whereas other commentators refer to "England."

<sup>67</sup> Guibbory, *Christian Identity*, 90

<sup>68</sup> John Hull, "Isaac Watts and the Origins of British Imperial Theology" *International Congregational Journal*, 4.2 (2005) 59-79

<sup>69</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* [London, Yale University, 2009] 30

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 30

<sup>71</sup> Watts, *Essay*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



Testament believers, but British New Testament believers. The roots of Watts' own theological patriotism can possibly be traced back to his time at the Newington Green Academy. Situated in Stoke Newington, then a village outside of London, populated by the wealthy aristocracy of the Puritan era, Watts was exposed to an atmosphere of "arrogant patriotism"<sup>73</sup> through a society whose collective memory harked back to the Civil War.

John Hull argues that if we simply look at Watts's Psalms, we see "the concern of a gifted educator to draw those who sang his hymns into a richer experience of the meaning of faith in their own day,"<sup>74</sup> suggesting that Watts' main concern is not to establish Britain as the new Israel, but rather to educate his pastorate with a relevant faith for their own lives. He suggests that Watts' interpretation of the Psalms is predominantly typological, rather than nationalistic. However, as he surveys Watts' broader body of work, a more nationalistic picture emerges. When Watts preached on Isaiah 45:22, he argues that Britain would have been understood to be the "ends of the earth" and as such God's "voice of compassion is therefore eminently sent to us in England."<sup>75</sup>

The analysis of Watts' nationalist theology will not concentrate on specific psalms as other chapters have done, but rather an overview of the Psalter will be undertaken so that a comprehensive picture is created. As with other aspects of this study, the subject is multi-faceted and the subsequent analysis will function progressively, from instances where he redirects his attention from Israel towards Britain through to places where he replaces Israel with Britain as the recipient of God's covenant blessings.

Opinion is divided among scholars of Watts as to the merits of this line of interpretation. Manning writes that the hymns are full of "sound political doctrine,"<sup>76</sup> whereas Davis feels that "the pious reader was probably shocked."<sup>77</sup> Escott provides the most balanced view. Despite saying that the national hubris "spoils" the hymns,

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<sup>73</sup> Escott, *Hymnographer*, 20

<sup>74</sup> Hull, "Origins of British Imperial Theology"

<sup>75</sup> Isaac Watts, "Christ is the Saviour of the ends of the Earth," in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in Nine Volumes, Vol. 2* [London, 1812] 245

<sup>76</sup> Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, 99

<sup>77</sup> Arthur Davis, *Isaac Watts* [London, Independent Press, 1943] 199

Watts' use of Britain within the Psalms still fits into the psychological climate of the time, contributing to the growth of the idea of British Israel.<sup>78</sup>

In his first version of Psalm 19:4, Watts is describing the way God is revealed through the proclamations of creation as both night and day they “divinely teach his name.”

3. In every different land  
     Their general voice is known  
     They shew the wonders of his hand,  
     And orders of his throne.
  
4. Ye British lands, rejoice,  
     Here he reveals his word,  
     We are not left to nature's voice  
     To bid us know the Lord
  
5. His statutes and commands  
     Are set before our eyes  
     He puts the gospel in our hands  
     Where our salvation lies

Watts is placing Britain alongside all other Gentile nations and in doing so he is affirming that the revelation of God through creation and Scripture has been extended to Britain who has received both the law and gospel of God. A similar sentiment is expressed in Watts' second version of Psalm 96;

2. The heathens know thy glory, Lord;  
     The wondering nations read thy word,  
     In Britain is Jehovah known:  
     Our worship shall no more be paid

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<sup>78</sup> Escott, *Hymnographer*, 160

To gods which mortal hands have made;  
Our Maker is our God alone.

Watts also regularly implores Britain to praise the Lord, such as in Psalm 100, version 2.

1. Sing to the Lord with joyful voice;  
Let every land his name adore;  
The British isles shall send the noise  
Across the ocean to the shore.

And Psalm 145:1

4. Thy works with sovereign glory shine,  
And speak thy majesty divine  
Let Britain round her shores proclaim  
The sound and honour of thy Name.

Psalm 100 has a missional dimension as well, as post-Puritan Britain became increasingly “nationalistic, identifying the Protestant monarch with the empire of Jesus Christ and beginning the identification of global Christianisation as the legitimisation of world conquest.”<sup>79</sup> Britain had adopted the sense of divine protection which Israel had experienced, and the Protestant doctrine of election created a national consciousness, which in turn created a growing sense of missionary responsibility.<sup>80</sup>

This theme of calling Britain to praise is picked up again in his second version of Psalm 147, entitled “A song for Great Britain.” Watts’ version begins:

1. O Britain, praise thy mighty God,

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<sup>79</sup> John Hull, “Practical Theology in Context: The Case of Europe” in *Praktische Theologie und protestantische Kultur (PThK 9)* Gütersloh, Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloh Verlagshaus, (2002) 494-510

<sup>80</sup> Hull, “Origins of British Imperial Theology”

And make his honours known abroad,  
 He bid the ocean round thee flow;  
 Not bars of brass could guard thee so.

The Psalm is predominantly concentrated on the blessings of creation and providence ordained by God to Britain. Examples of a divine covenant with Britain will be subsequently considered, but here Watts does not quite venture into such territory, though the final verse directly applies the unique blessings that Israel had received to Britain. Rather, Watts focuses on the provision of peace and prosperity (verse 2), the changing seasons and weather patterns upon which the country depends (verses 3-5), concluding with verse 6, which is based on Psalm 147:19-20.

6. To all the Isle his laws are shown  
 His gospel thro' the nation known;  
 He hath not thus reveal'd his word  
 To every land: Praise ye the Lord.

By appropriating the blessings of salvation that God has bestowed upon Israel, Watts is drawing a direct comparison between Israel and Britain. Watts expands upon this in his sermon, "The Scale of Blessedness,"<sup>81</sup> wherein he describes Britain as being blessed by God having had the gospel planted within her by the apostles of Christ. This salvation is rooted in "divine choice and peculiar favour,"<sup>82</sup> and as such is a cause for praise to God. This sentiment is revealed much more dramatically in Psalms 47 and 67. Psalm 47 is entitled by Watts, "Christ ascending and reigning,"<sup>83</sup> and begins,

1. O for a shout of sacred joy

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<sup>81</sup> Isaac Watts, "The Scale of Blessedness," *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D. in Nine Volumes, Vol. 1* [Leeds, 1812] 173

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> This interpretation relates to that of Matthew Henry, who views the Psalm as simultaneously looking back to the Ark of the Covenant arriving at Mount Zion and looking ahead to the ascension of Christ (Henry, *Commentary*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.xlviii.html>).

To God the sovereign King!  
 Let every land their tongues employ,  
 And hymns of triumph sing.

Verses 5 and 6 concentrate explore the way Britain inherits the promises given to Israel.<sup>84</sup>

5. In Israel stood his ancient throne,  
 He lov'd that chosen race;  
 But now he calls the world his own,  
 And heathens taste his grace.

6. The British islands are the Lord's  
 There Abraham's God is known,  
 While powers and princes, shields and swords,  
 Submit before his throne.

Watts is drawing on the reference to “the people of the God of Abraham” in Psalm 47:9. Matthew Henry provides a Christological angle when he writes,

It may be applied to the calling of the Gentiles into the church of Christ, and taken as a prophecy that in the days of the Messiahs the kings of the earth and their people should join themselves to the church, and bring their glory and power into the New Jerusalem, that they should all become *the people of the God of Abraham*, to whom it was promised that he should be *the father of many nations*.<sup>85</sup>

Watts goes further than Henry here, by suggesting that Britain is “the Lord's” and therefore enjoys a unique relationship with God, as previously experienced by Israel.

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<sup>84</sup> Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries, Volume One* [Blackwell Publishing, 2008] 160

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

This is extended further in Psalm 67, which is a prayer that God would shine his blessing upon Israel in such a way as to include the Gentile nations in this salvation.

1. Shine, mighty God, on Britain shine  
With Beams of heavenly Grace;  
Reveal thy Power thro' all our Coasts,  
And shew thy smiling Face.
  
2. [Amidst our Isle exalted high  
Do thou our Glory stand,  
And like a Wall of Guardian-Fire  
Surround the Favourite-Land.]
  
3. When shall thy Name from Shore to Shore  
Sound all the Earth abroad,  
And distant Nations know and love  
Their Saviour and their God?
  
4. Sing to the Lord, ye distant Lands,  
Sing loud with solemn Voice;  
While British tongues exalt his Praise,  
And British Hearts rejoice.

Here Watts is locating Britain at the centre of God's global plan of salvation, a role occupied by Israel in the original context of the Psalm. This is expressed to an even greater degree in his sixth verse, which reads,

6. Earth shall obey her Maker's will  
And yield a full increase;  
Our God will crown his chosen isle  
With fruitfulness and peace.

Describing Britain as God's "chosen isle" shows that Watts is considering Britain to enjoy the same blessings that Israel experienced. In the following verse, Watts writes that God "scatters round his choicest favours here," suggesting that Britain is uniquely blessed by God's providence. John Hull writes that, "the internal response of the church to the grace of God, and the providence of God in securing the Protestant monarchy lead Watts to a sense of the international mission of the Christian faith, with British power as its principal agent."<sup>86</sup>

There are several instances where Watts uses the Psalms to commentate on events in recent British history. The second version of Psalm 115, with the subtitle "Popish idolatry reproved" is dedicated as a psalm for the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, to commemorate the foiling of the gunpowder plot of 1605. Psalm 124 is also dedicated in memory of the same event. Psalm 20 is written as a prayer to celebrate a victory in war.<sup>87</sup> Psalm 75, according to J.R. Watson is "vigorously taken over"<sup>88</sup> by Watts, and it is easy to sympathise with this view as, according to the notes above the psalm, it can be applied to either "the glorious Revolution by King William or the happy Ascension of King George to the Throne."<sup>89</sup> Watson comments elsewhere,

Watts's authoritative tone may be ascribed to his sense that Britain is the modern Israel, signalled out by God for special favour. In the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot, and the Revolution of 1688, the Puritans and their dissenting successors discerned the hand of a God who was clearly aware of the political consequences of his mighty acts. They called for his attention from time to time, in days of national fasting, which were much more important to them than the festivals of the church's year,

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<sup>86</sup> Hull, "Experiential Educator to Nationalist Theologian"

<sup>87</sup> Britain was frequently involved in European wars following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (See John Spurr, *The Post-Reformation: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain 1603-1714* [Pearson Longman, 2006] 193).

<sup>88</sup> J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn* [Oxford Scholarship Online, 1999] 155

<sup>89</sup> Watts, *Header to Psalm 75*

which had been created by a fallible human organization and had no foundation in Holy Scripture.<sup>90</sup>

If we compare Watts' view of the Church with Britain, it becomes difficult to define who Watts believes were the people of God. Watts is clear that, with the advent of Christ, the covenant with Israel has been replaced by the New Covenant, and so only those from Israel who believe in Christ are included. It is the Israel of faith, not flesh that is found within the Church. And yet, simultaneously, Watts believes that all of Britain has a unique, elect relationship with God, with Britain having seemingly replaced Israel. Side by side, these two convictions cannot be harmonised; they conflict with one another. On the one hand, Watts believes that God's covenantal relationships are now grounded in faith, rather than geography or ancestry, as seen in his view of Israel within the Church. But alongside this, he grants Britain privileges that he denies to Israel. In this, Watts' stated aims of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, as well as the importance of the psalms being relevant for those who sing them conflict with one another, and he chooses one priority at the expense of another. Had he chosen to prioritise the relationship between the Church and Israel, he would have remained more consistent with his intentions.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Watts places a high priority on the reign of Christ within his psalms; the many facets of Christ's reign are emphasised. Christ's reign is stretched back to incorporate the Old covenant, widened to include Britain, and will last until all have faced his judgement. Bringing this into his psalter demonstrates the scope of Watts' Christology, drawing out the relationship between the Father and the Son as the foundation for the reign and rule expressed within the Psalms. By using Christ as the focal point for the sovereignty of God allows Watts to make his psalms contemporary, incorporating both the Church and his nationalist theology.

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<sup>90</sup> Watson, *Dissenting Praise*, 63



## Conclusion

The study has examined the theological contribution Isaac Watts made to Nonconformist psalmody. Previous Psalters had striven for accuracy, seeking to preserve the minutiae of Scripture and prioritising an accurate translation from the Hebrew text. Watts' Psalter, rather than being informed by the precise details of the Psalms individual verses, is informed by the language and theology of the New Testament. In doing so, Watts brings together the distinctive views held by Luther and Calvin on the proper way to transliterate the Psalms; for Luther, the Psalms were about Christ, whereas to Calvin, the Psalms were for the most part theologically self-contained within the Old Testament. Watts' conviction is that congregational singing be simultaneously doxological and catechismal. Previous attempts to versify the Psalter, for example by Sternhold and Hopkins, were, to Watts, insufficient in both areas; God was not given the praise he deserved because the fullness of his saving work in Christ was not heralded, and as such the whole corpus of Scripture was not informing congregational worship. Watts' aim is that the singer, seeing the goodness of grace of God manifest in Christ and revealed in Scripture, gives praise and thanksgiving to God, and while doing so is able to grow in their understanding regarding the key doctrines of their faith. Significantly, Watts brings the Psalms of his Psalter in line with the interpretation given to them from the pulpit, so that there was no longer a theological divergence between song and sermon.

This study has shown that, for Watts, the reading of the Old Testament must be informed by the New Testament. Therefore, the primary function of the Old Testament is prophetic, pointing ahead to Christ; the laws, sacrifices and rulers within the Old Testament function as types and shadows, ultimately realised in the gospel. Consequently, his Psalter makes the person and work of Christ explicit; Christ is, as it were, the central character in the narrative of the Psalms. As has been seen throughout this study, scholars have often lacked sympathy with Watts' intentions, often concentrating on the strengths and weaknesses of his poetry, rather than locating his Psalter within his wider theology. For example, while Watts' nationalistic view of Britain as being an heir of the covenant given to Israel can jar with modern

sensibilities and theocratic fears, Watts is trying to apply Scripture faithfully to the immediate situation in which his congregation found themselves. By assessing Watts as a poet, his works are often divorced from his pastoral ministry, which in turn creates a false picture of him.

The method of this study provides scope for further study into Watts' hymnody. Not every Psalm has been discussed, and the Christological focus of the study means that not every theme within Watts' Psalter has been considered. For example, Watts' substantial treatments of Psalms 119 and 150 are ripe for further study, because of what they reveal about his methods of transliteration and imitation. Similarly, the Pneumatology of Watts' Psalter could be studied. In order for Watts' Psalter to be fully understood, a musicological study of the interaction between the melody and lyrics would be needed; a hymn is comprised of the words, the tune and the relationship between them. Alongside this, a study of the various editions that Watts published would give insight into his developing thought. It is my intention to follow this study with a PhD systematising the theology within Watts' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. The initial purpose of such research is that it gives further insight into the work and legacy of Watts, which can in turn be used to inform the current debates concerning the manner and content of congregational worship.

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