

# ISAAC WATTS

A SHORT ESSAY  
TOWARD THE  
IMPROVEMENT OF  
PSALMODY

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**Watts I.**

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# Isaac Watts

## A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody / Or, An Enquiry How the Psalms of David Ought to Be Translated into Christian Songs, and How Lawful and Necessary It Is to Compose Other Hymns According to the Clearer Revelations of the Gospel, for the Use of the Christian Church

A Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody: Or, An Enquiry how the Psalms of *David* ought to be translated into Christian Songs, and how lawful and necessary it is to compose other Hymns according to the clearer Revelations of the Gospel, for the Use of the Christian Church.

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. But so many are the Imperfections in the Practice of this Duty, that the greatest Part of Christians find but little Edification or Comfort in it. There are some Churches that utterly disallow Singing; and I'm perswaded, that the poor Performance of it in the best Societies, with the mistaken Rules to which it is confined is one great Reason of their intire Neglect; for we are left at a loss (say they) what is the Matter and Manner of this Duty; and therefore they utterly refuse: Whereas if this glorious Piece of Worship were but seen in its Original Beauty, and one that *believes* not this Ordinance, or is *unlearned* in this Part of Christianity should *come into such an Assembly, he would be convinced of all; he would be judged of all, he would fall down on his Face, and report that God was in the Midst of it of a Truth;* 1 Cor. 14. 24, 25.

In order to trace out the Matter or Subject of religious Singing, let us collect into one View the chief Texts of the New Testament where this Worship is mention'd, and afterwards see what Arguments may be deduced from thence, to prove, that 'tis proper to use Spiritual Songs of humane Composure, as well as the Psalms of *David* or the Words of other Songs recorded in Scripture.

The most considerable Texts are these; *Mat.* 26. 30. & *Mark* 14. 26. relate, that our blessed Lord and his Disciples *sung an Hymn.* *Acts* 16. 25. *Paul and Silas prayed and sung Praises unto God.* 1 Cor. 14. 15. *I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the Understanding also.* *Ver.* 26. *Every one of you hath a Psalm.* *Eph.* 5. 19, 20. *Speaking to your selves in Psalms and Hymns, and Spiritual Songs; singing and making Melody in your Hearts to the Lord, giving Thanks always for all things to God and the Father, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* *Col* 3. 16, 17. *Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all Wisdom teaching and admonishing one another in Psalms and Hymns, and Spiritual Songs; singing with Grace in your Hearts to the Lord: And whatsoever ye do in Word or in Deed, do all in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving Thanks to God and the Father by him.* *Jam.* 5. 13. *Is any among you afflicted, let him pray: Is any merry, let him sing Psalms.* *Rev.* 5. 9. *And they sing a new Song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the Book and to open the Seals thereof, for thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God by thy Blood.* *Rev.* 14. 3. *And they sung as it were a new Song before the Throne.* *Rev.* 15. 3. *And they sing the Song of Moses, the Servant of God, and the Song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy Works, &c.* To all these I might add *Acts* 4. 24, &c. Where it is suppos'd the Disciples met together and sung; for \_they lift up their Voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord! thou art our God, which hast made Heaven and Earth, and the Sea, and

all that in them is: Who by the Mouth of thy Servant David hast said, Why did the Heathen rage, and the People imagine a vain thing. The Kings of the Earth stood up, and the Rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a Truth, against thy holy Child Jesus whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the People of Israel, were gathered together for to do whatsoever thy Hand and thy Counsel determined before to be done, &c.

If we turn over the New Testament, and search out all the Songs that are there written, we shall find the Matter or Subject of them as various as the Occasions upon which they were sung or spoken: Such are the Song of the Virgin *Mary*, Luke 1. 46, &c. The Song of *Zecharias*, ver. 67. The Song of the Angels, *Luke* 2. 13. And of *Simeon*, ver. 29. Besides many others in the Book of the *Revelations*. The three chief Words used to express the Matter of Singing, are *Psalmoi*, *Humnoi kai Odai*: *Psalms*, *Hymns and Songs*, as the three Verbs from which these are derived are generally used to express the Act of Singing, *psallo*, *humneo*, *i ado*. Now if it were lawful after so many learned Contentions about these Words, I would give my Sense of them thus:

1. I think no Man hath better explain'd the original Meaning of these Words than *Zanchy*. A Psalm, *Psalms*, is such a Song as usually is sung with other Instruments besides the Tongue. Hymns, *Humnoi*, such as are made only to express the Praises, and set out the Excellencies of God. Songs, *O dai*, such as contain not only Praises, but Exhortations, Prophecies, Thanksgivings; and these only sung with the Voice.

2. The Scripture doth not always confine it self to the original Meaning of all these Words; for *Psalms* a Psalm, and the Word *psallo*, are used, 1 Cor. 14. and in other Places of the New Testament, where we can never suppose the primitive Church in those Days had Instruments of Music. And the Word *Ode* a Song, is used several times in the Book of *Revelations*, where Harps are join'd with Voices in the Emblematical Prophecy.

3. The Sense therefore of these Words in the New Testament seems to be thus distinguish'd. A Psalm is a general Name for any thing that is sung in Divine Worship, whatsoever be the particular Theme or Matter; and the Verb *psallo* is design'd to express the Melody it self rather than to distinguish the Matter of the Song, or Manner whereby the Melody or Music is performed; and therefore in Eph. 5. 19. our Translators have well rendred *adontes kai psallontes*, *Singing and making Melody*; and it should be thus rendred, Jam. 5. 13. *Is any merry, let him make Melody*. I confess in the New Testament the Noun *Psalms* refers generally to the Book of Psalms, and without Doubt there are many of the Palms of *David* and *Asaph*, and other Songs among the Books of the Old Testament which may be prudently chosen and sung by Christians, and may be well accomodated to the Lips and Hearts of the Church under the Gospel. Yet this Word is once used in another Sense, as I shall show afterwards.

An Hymn, whether imply'd in the Verb *humneo*, or exprest in the Noun *Humnos*, doth always retain its original Signification, and intend a Song whose Matter or Design is Praise: Nor is there any thing in the Nature or Use of the Word either in Scripture or other Authors, that determines it to signify an immediate Inspiration, or humane Composure.

A Song, *Ode*, denotes any Theme or Subject compos'd into a Form fit for Singing, and seems to intend somewhat suited to the Gospel-State, rather than any Jewish Psalms or Songs in all the five Verses in the New Testament where it is used.

Eph. 5. 19. & Col. 3. 16. 'Tis join'd with the word *Spiritual*; and that seems to be used by the Apostle in all his Epistles, as a very distinguishing Word between the Law and Gospel, the Jewish and the Christian Worship. 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*.

Col. 3. 16. Confirms this Sense, for *the Word of Christ* must *dwell richly in us in Psalms and Hymns, and spiritual Songs*. 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, which might be compos'd into spiritual Songs for the greater Ease of Memory in learning, teaching and admonishing one another.

Rev. 5. 9. & 14. 3. There is mention of a *New Song*, and that is pure Evangelical Language, suited to the *New Testament*, the *New Covenant*, the *new and living Way*. of Access to God, and to the *new Commandment* of him who sits upon the *Throne*, and *behold, he makes all things new*. The words of this Song are, *Worthy is the Lamb, for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy Blood, &c. and none could learn it but those who follow the Lamb, who were redeemed from among Men, &c.* 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. 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 prophetic of the Kingdom of *Christ*, or at least it is a Song indited upon a new Occasion publick or personal, and the Words of it are accomodated to some new Tokens of Divine Mercy.

Rev. 15. 3. *They sing the Song of Moses, the Servant of God, and the Song of the Lamb*; that is, a Song for temporal and for spiritual Deliverances; or, a Song for all antient or all later Salvations of the Church. As Moses was a Redeemer from the House of Bondage, and a Teacher of Divine Worship with Harps and Ceremonies; so the Lamb is a Redeemer from *Babylon* and spiritual Slavery, and he is the great Prophet to teach his Church the spiritual Worship of the Gospel. The Church now, under the Salvations and Instructions of the Lamb, sings with the Voice to the Glory of the Vengeance and the Grace of God, as *Israel* under the Conduct of *Moses* sung with Harps; for we must observe, that these Visions of the Apostle *John* often represent Divine Things in a Gospel-Church, in Imitation of the Ranks and Orders of the *Jewish* Camp and Tribes, and by the Rites and Figures used in the time of *Moses*; and it would be as unreasonable to prove from this Text, that we must sing the very words of the *15th of Exodus* in a Christian Church, as to prove from this Book of the *Revelations* that we must use Harps and Altars, Censers, Fire and Incense. But 'tis plain that the *15th of Exodus* cannot be here intended, because the Words of the Song are mention'd just after, (*viz.*) *Great, and marvellous are thy Works, Lord God Almighty, just and true are thy Ways, thou King of Saints*. Yet after all, if it could be proved, that the very Song which *Moses* sung is here design'd, still it must be confest that the Song of the Lamb is also to be sung; and if the following Words in this Text are not to be esteem'd the Song of *Moses*, then neither are they to be esteem'd the Song of the Lamb; because there is not any express mention of the Lamb, or his Death, or Resurrection, or Redemption; nor is there any other Song in Scripture that bears that title and consequently it must signifie a Song compos'd to the praise of God for our deliverance by the Lamb, in imitation of the Joy composed for deliverance by the Hand of *Moses*: 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, which is the chief point I designed to prove.

The next Enquiry then proceeds thus: How must the Psalms of *David* and other Songs borrowed from Scripture, be translated in order to be sung in Christian Worship? Surely, it will be granted, that to prepare them for Psalmody under the Gospel, requires another sort of Management in the Translation, than to prepare them merely for Reading as the *Word of God* in our Language, and that upon these two accounts:

*First*, If it be the duty of the Churches to sing Psalms, they must necessarily be turned into such a sort of Verse and Metre as will best fit them for the whole Church to join in the Worship: Now this will be very different from a Translation of the original Language word for word; for the Lines must be confined to a certain number of Syllables, and the Stanza or Verse to a certain number of Lines, that so the Tune being short the people may be acquainted with it, and be ready to sing without much difficulty; whereas if the Words were merely translated out of the *Hebrew* as they are for reading, every Psalm must be set through to music, and every Syllable in it must have a particular musical Note belonging to itself, as in Anthems that are sung in Cathedrals: But this would be so

exceeding difficult to practise, that it would utterly exclude the greatest part of every Congregation from a Capacity of obeying God's Command to sing. Now, in reducing a *Hebrew* or a *Greek* Song to a Form tolerably fit to be sung by an *English* Congregation, here and there a Word of the Original must be omitted, now and then a Word or two superadded, and frequently a Sentence or an Expression a little alter'd and chang'd into another that is something a-kin to it: And yet greater Alterations must the Psalm suffer if we will have any thing to do with Rhime; 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 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: Hereby some of the chief Beauties and Excellencies of *David's* Poetry will be omitted and lost, which if not reviv'd again, or recompenc'd by some lively or pathetic Expression in the *English*, will necessarily debase the Divine Song into Dullness and Contempt: And hereby also it becomes so far different from the inspired Words in the Original Languages, that it is very hard for any Man to say, that the Version of *Hopkins* and *Sternhold*, the *New-England* or the *Scots* Psalms, are in a strict Sense the Word of God. 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, but the Congregation of *Choristers* in Cathedral Churches, who are the only *Levites* that *sing Praise unto the Lord with the Words of David and Asaph the Seer*, 2 Chron. 29. 30.

*Secondly*, Another Reason why the Psalms ought not to be translated for Singing just in the same manner as they are for Reading, is this, that the Design of these two Duties is very different: By Reading we learn what God speaks to us in his Word; but when we sing, especially unto God, our chief Design is, or should be, to speak our own Hearts and our Words to God. By Reading we are instructed what have been the Dealings of God with Men in all Ages, and how their Hearts have been exercis'd in their Wandrings from God, and Temptations, or in their Returns and Breathings towards God again; but 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. Tho I will not assert it unlawful to sing to God the Words of other Men which we have no Concern in, and which, are very contrary to our Circumstances and the Frame of our Spirits; yet it must be confest abundantly more proper, when we address God in a Song, to use such Words as we can for the most part assume as our own: 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 our selves are at that time recollecting. I know not one Instance in Scripture, of any later Saint singing any part of a Composure of former Ages, that is not proper for his own Time, without force Expressions that tend to accommodate or apply it. But there are a multitude of Examples amongst all the Scriptural Songs, that introduce the Affairs of preceding Ages in the Method I have described. Psal. 44. 1, &c. When *David*

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