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Isaac Watts's *Psalms of David Imitated* at 300

David W. Music[1]

The history of Christian song is replete with landmark publications that signaled the beginning of a new era or a new direction in the church's music. One thinks, for instance, of the issuing of the first Lutheran hymnals in 1524, the complete Genevan and English psalters in 1562, the Bay Psalm Book in 1640, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861, the *English Hymnal* of 1906, and—for Baptists—the *Broadman Hymnal* in 1940. Each of these books marked a new beginning and/or a culmination of a particular stream of Christian song. Each became widely used and set a pattern for the next generation or two—and sometimes for many generations to follow.

One such publication was Isaac Watts's *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament,* first published 300 years ago this year. Printed in London in 1719, this was the fourth of Watts's books to include congregational songs. The first, *Horae Lyricae* (dated 1706 on the title page but in print by December 1705), was principally a collection of poems for reading but included several metrical psalms and hymns. The second, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707), was a landmark book in its own right, containing numerous paraphrases of Scripture and freely written hymns, among which are such classics as "Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed," "Come, We that Love the Lord," and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The third volume, *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715), is generally acknowledged to have been the first significant book of song written specifically for children; among its contents is the still fresh and often sung "I Sing th'Almighty Power of God." Each of these books went through nu-

[1] David W. Music is professor of church music at Baylor University.

merous editions and spread their author's fame throughout the English-speaking world.[2]

The Psalms of David Imitated was Watts's last major contribution to what Louis F. Benson called a complete "System of Praise," and in some respects it was his most important one.[3] Before and during Watts's lifetime, the English-speaking churches mostly limited themselves to singing metrical psalms, the book of Psalms versified into English rhyme and hymnic meter. Following the tenets of John Calvin, Englishmen—particularly Dissenters—believed that the only material that was worthy to be sung to a holy God was what God himself had given them to sing, that is, the book of Psalms. The psalms had been written in Hebrew for the Hebrews, so by analogy they should be translated into English for English speakers. Since God had "hidden" the melodies to which the psalms were originally sung, the country that sought to sing them should use the music and musical style that best fit their own language, which generally meant that the tune—and therefore the text as well—would be strophic in nature.

The first important step in providing a metrical psalter for England was taken by Thomas Sternhold about 1547, when he published *Certayne Psalmes Chosen Out of the Psalter of David,* which included nineteen texts. Additional versifications by Sternhold, as well as psalms by John Hopkins, were issued in 1549, and these were later combined with new psalm versions and alterations of Sternhold and Hopkins's works by English exiles living on the European continent to create *The Whole Book of Psalmes,* all 150 psalms

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[2] The most significant published analyses of Watts's contributions to congregational song are Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1915; reprint, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962); Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (New York: Dryden Press, 1943); and Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts, Hymnographer: A Study of the Beginnings, Development, and Philosophy of the English Hymn* (London: Independent Press, 1962). An important source on *The Psalms of David Imitated* is Donald Rodgers Fletcher, "English Psalmody and Isaac Watts" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1945).

[3] Benson, *The English Hymn,* 108, 120. The "System of Praise" idea is derived from Colossians 3:16, which mentions "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs," the phrase from which Watts derived the titles of his 1707 and 1719 volumes. Watts also published a number of hymns to accompany specific sermons after 1719 but it was the two collections mentioned in this note that formed the backbone of his work.

put into English metrical forms (1562). The resulting collection, often known as the "Old Version," was far and away the most popular English-language metrical psalter ever published, achieving more than 600 editions and remaining in print for 300 years. Many subsequent authors tried their hand at psalm versification, and some of these saw moderate amounts of use among various groups, though none came near to replacing the Old Version; the one that came closest was Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady's *New Version of the Psalms* (1696).

It was into this milieu that Watts introduced his *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament.* What set Watts's work apart from previous efforts at metrical psalmody was that—in addition to the superior quality of his work—he paraphrased ("imitated") the biblical text rather than versifying it. In a versification, the author attempts to maintain the specific message and as much of the original wording of the psalm as possible, while putting the text into English poetic form. In contrast, Watts's paraphrasing technique involved giving the general sense of the psalm text but interpreting it in light of the gospel message as found in the New Testament. In essence, rather than writing new versions of the psalms, Watts was providing new *hymns* that had a background in the psalms. As he put it in the preface to *The Psalms of David Imitated*, his goal was *not* to make "an exact Translation of the *Psalms of David*" but to have the psalmists "*speak the common Sense and Language of a Christian.*"[4] Rather than asking Christians to speak the language of David, he made David speak the language of Christians.

Watts's Paraphrase Techniques

Some of the techniques that Watts used can be seen in the first lines of two of his most familiar imitations, "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need" and "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun." The author penned three versions of the Twenty-Third Psalm. In the second of these, the initial line of the text, "My shepherd will supply my need," is based as much on Philippians 4:19 ("But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Je-

[4] Isaac Watts, preface to *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (1719), iv, xvi.

sus") as it is on the first verse of the psalm. The eighteenth-century singer who knew his or her New Testament would have quickly recognized that here was something new—the psalm being interpreted in the light of the New Dispensation.

Even more startling for an eighteenth-century congregant who was accustomed to versified psalmody would have been the opening of part two in Watts's version of Psalm 72, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun," in which the very first word substitutes the name of Jesus for the unspecified "king" of the Old Testament passage. A few incipient steps had been taken by some of Watts's predecessors in metrical psalmody—as he himself acknowledged in the preface to his book—but there had never before been "Christianizing" of the psalms on anything like this scale or in as thoroughgoing a manner.[5]

In addition to importing New Testament concepts into the psalms, Watts omitted twelve entire psalms and portions of others.[6] Some of the psalms or verses were deleted simply because their contents could be found in other psalms; others were discarded because they contained imprecations on the psalmist's enemies, place names and situations that would be unfamiliar to contemporary British men and women, or references to Jewish practices that had been discarded in Christian worship. For instance, the author declined to paraphrase Psalm 137, with its references to dashing children against stones.

Watts also sometimes reordered the verses of a psalm to group like subjects together or for other reasons, or combined verses from different parts of the psalm into a single unit. In "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun," for example, the author joined references to the sun and moon from verses five, seven, and seventeen into a single strophe (stanza one). He also did not hesitate to transfer a verse or an allusion from one psalm to another. In his paraphrase of Psalm 48 (part one), the sixth stanza reads "Oft have our fathers told, / Our eyes have often seen, / How well our God secures the fold / Where his own sheep have been." The stanza corresponds to the opening of verse eight of the psalm: "As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts." However, it also seems to

[5] See below for more information about some of these earlier versifiers.

[6] The deleted psalms were nos. 28, 43, 52, 54, 59, 64, 70, 79, 88, 108, 137, and 140.

allude to Psalm 44:1, "We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old."

In some cases, only a few key words—or even a single word—are all that is left of the actual psalm verse. An example can be seen in the opening stanza of part one in Psalm 46, which reads "God is the refuge of his saints, / When storms of sharp distress invade / Ere we can offer our complaints, / Behold him present with his aid." This is an expansion of verse one of the psalm, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble," from which Watts repeats only four of the original words ("God," "is," "refuge," and "present") and adds the phrase about God being our refuge before "we can offer our complaints," an idea that is not found in the psalm.

Even more extreme in this regard is the second stanza of his Short Meter version of Psalm 36, which comes as part of a description of "the wicked."

> He walks awhile concealed
> In a self-flattering dream,
> Till his dark crimes at once revealed
> Expose his hateful name.

The stanza is a paraphrase of verse two of the psalm, "For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful." The only direct links between the psalm verse and the stanza are the words "flatter" and "hateful." In contrast, the rendering of this psalm published in 1648 by Zachary Boyd—chosen more-or-less at random from many possibilities—is a typical versification that contains most of the words of the original psalm, though the result is rather awkward: "For that even in his own eyes / himself still flattereth he, / Until that his iniquity / be hateful found to be."[7]

Watts also sometimes inserts a stanza that is freely written or paraphrased from the New Testament and has little or no direct connection with the psalm itself. Thus, in his Common Meter version of Psalm 8, "O Lord, Our Lord, How Wondrous Great," Watts paraphrases verses one through five and the first part of verse eight

[7] Zachary Boyd, *The Psalmes of David in Meeter* (1648).

in the opening five stanzas. He then combines three different New Testament stories about Jesus—walking on the water, commanding the draught of fishes, and telling Peter to catch a fish in which he will find money to pay a tax (Matt 14:25–27, 17:27; Luke 5:4–6)—to apply the psalm to Christ.

> 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.

These lines are followed by a freely written stanza that serves as a commentary comparing these stories to the even greater glories of Jesus in heaven.

> These lesser glories of the Son
> Shone through the fleshly cloud;
> Now we behold him on his throne,
> And men confess him God.

It should be noted that Watts placed stanzas five through seven in brackets, indicating that they could be omitted without doing violence to the sense of the text. Thus his additions to the psalm could be sung or not, depending upon whether the leader wanted only the original text (albeit in a modified version) or Watts's commentary on and expansion of it.

As an example of the distinctiveness of Watts's work on the psalms, two stanzas of one of his imitations of Psalm 47 may be compared to the more "literalist" version by John Hopkins from the Old Version. Verses one and five through six of the psalm in the King James Version read as follows.[8]

1. O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.
5. God is gone up with a shout; the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

[8] The King James Version is used throughout this article because it was the one that Watts primarily used in creating his psalm "imitations."

6. Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises.

Watts	Hopkins
1. O for a shout of sacred joy To God the sovereign King! Let every land their tongues employ, And hymns of triumph sing.	1. Ye people all with one accord Clap hands and much rejoice: Be glad and sing unto the Lord, With sweet and pleasant voice. . . .
2. Jesus our God ascends on high, His heavenly guards around Attend him rising through the sky, With trumpets' joyful sound.	3. Our God ascended up on high, With joy and pleasant noise, The Lord goes up above the sky With trumpet's royal voice.

Several features should be noticed about this comparison. In stanza one, Watts ignores the part about the people clapping hands and changes the order of the thoughts so that lines one and two deal with the second clause of verse one, line three with the first clause, and line four returns to the second clause ("triumph"). Note also Watts's characterization of God as the "sovereign King" and that the "voice of triumph" is now a "hymn of triumph." On the other hand, Watts has kept the idea of "shouting" to the Lord, for which Hopkins has substituted singing "with sweet and pleasant voice." Watts also omits verses two through four of the psalm, moving directly from verse one to verse five.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the comparison is that, unlike Hopkins, in his second stanza Watts applies verse five directly to the Ascension of Jesus. In Watts's imagination, Jesus is accompanied by "heavenly guards"—a feature that is found neither in Psalm 47 nor in the Ascension story (Acts 1), though it might reflect the "two men . . . in white apparel" who spoke to the disciples at the latter event (Acts 1:10). Jesus is identified as "our God," a significant statement in view of some of Watts's later struggles with trying to understand the Trinity. But the really important point is that the psalm has been "Christianized," applied directly to the New Testament dispensation.

A special case is presented by Watts's "Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come," the second part of his paraphrase of Psalm 98.

Though now widely sung as one of the best-known Christmas hymns, there is very little in the text that speaks directly to the Christmas season, apart from the phrase "the Lord is come." There is also very little in it that can be matched up with the psalm on which it is based. Watts partly explained his approach to this psalm by appending a note saying that he had attempted to express "what I esteem to be the first and chief Sense of the holy Scriptures"; that is, he took the central idea of the psalm and used that as the basis for the text, making little direct reference to the actual wording of the Bible. He also pointed out that Psalms 96 and 98 end in a very similar manner, which led him to incorporate words and ideas from the earlier psalm into the later one.[9] In essence, it could be said that rather than writing a metrical psalm, Watts created a new hymn using a psalm proof text.

Importance of *The Psalms of David Imitated*

The above discussion briefly describes some of the distinctive features of *The Psalms of David Imitated,* but what was it about the book that allows it to be called a "landmark publication" in the story of congregational song? Chiefly, the importance of the book comes in two areas.

First, and perhaps most significant, it was a key component in breaking down the stranglehold of exclusive metrical psalmody on the church's song. While freely composed hymns had certainly been written and sung before Watts, and there were a few incipient efforts to "Christianize" the psalms prior to his work,[10] it was *The*

[9] The lines "Joy to the world" and "And heaven and nature sing" seem to be as closely related to Psalm 96:11a ("Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad") as to any portion of Psalm 98; the reference to "fields" in stanza two was also likely drawn from Psalm 96:12. For further discussion of this psalm, see the author's forthcoming book *"Come Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs": Reflections on Hymns by Isaac Watts* (Mercer University Press).

[10] In his preface to *The Psalms of David Imitated* (p. vi), Watts mentions "Mr. [Luke] *Milbourn[e]* and Mr. [Charles] *Darby*" as predecessors who "now and then" gave "an Evangelic Turn to the *Hebrew* Sense" of the psalms, as well as "Dr. [John] *Patrick,*" who went "much beyond them in this Respect." Patrick's *A Century of Select Psalms* was published in 1679, Milbourne's *The Psalms of David in English Metre* in 1698, and Darby's *The Book of Psalms in English Metre* in 1704.

Psalms of David Imitated, along with Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs,* that proved decisive in the transition from singing the psalms only to a combination of psalmody and hymnody—and ultimately, for most denominations, a nearly exclusive reliance upon hymnody. *The Psalms of David Imitated* provided eighteenth-century churches with texts that were both (1) based upon the psalms and (2) evangelical (i.e., expressing New Testament ideas). Congregations that were not ready to abandon metrical psalms could continue to sing them through Watts but in the process also address or sing about Christ directly, something that was not possible with versified psalmody.

This, indeed, is how the transition from versified psalm to hymn often seems to have occurred. A good example is the First Baptist Church of Swansea, Massachusetts, founded in 1663. In 1759, the Swansea church assisted several residents of Stanford, New York, in founding a new Baptist church. No further reports of the fledgling congregation are available until 1771, when they reported that they had heard "with much grief" that "the mother church at Swansea sung by rule [i.e., without lining out], and in Watts' Psalms."[11] The Stanford gathering withdrew fellowship from Swansea over these issues, but in 1778 some members returned to fellowship with the mother church and formed a second—presumably Watts singing—Stanford congregation. In 1771, the Swansea group was evidently not quite ready for hymnody but felt comfortable using Watts's "Christianized" psalms.

Over the course of time, congregations that adopted Watts's psalms would discover that there was really very little difference between this material and freely written hymns; thus there could be scant reason any longer to avoid the latter. Though specific information is not available, it is likely that sometime after 1771 the Swansea church added Watts's hymns to their singing of his psalms. In essence, *The Psalms of David Imitated* served as a sort of halfway house between psalmody and hymnody, and many congregations adopted both Watts's psalms and hymns as their basic song material.[12]

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[11] David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby and Company, 1848), 548.

[12] For the names of early Baptist churches in America and the dates they adopted Watts, see David W. Music and Paul A. Richardson, *"I Will Sing the*

As can be seen by the reaction of the original Stanford church, it should not be thought that these attitudes changed overnight or that there was no opposition to the approach taken to the psalms by Watts. One of Watts's fellow pastors, Thomas Bradbury, was an outspoken critic of the way Watts handled the psalms, and he and others decried Watts's reasoning that the psalms themselves were inadequate or even inappropriate for Christian worship.

In a letter to Watts, written some seven years after *The Psalms of David Imitated* was published, Bradbury claimed that the hymn writer's "notions about psalmody, and your satyrical [*sic*] flourishes in which you have expressed them, are fitter for one who pays no regard to inspiration, than for a gospel minister." He further indicated that he had been glad to hear that Watts was working on a version of the psalms (Watts had asked for Bradbury's advice about some of the hymnic meters he should use) but was disappointed—to say the least—with the result, which he called "your mangling, garbling, transforming, &c. so many of your songs of Sion."[13] The opinions of some of Watts's other critics are evident from the titles of books they published anonymously in opposition to his work: *A Vindication of David's Psalms, From Mr. J. Watts's Erroneous Notions and Hard Speeches of Them* (London, 1727); *Reasons Wherefore Christians Ought to Worship God in Singing His Praises; Not with the Matter and Sense of Dr. Watts's Psalms and Hymns; But with the Matter and Sense of David's Psalms: Because God Has Commanded the Latter, But Not the Former* (London, 1759); *Plain Reasons, Why Neither Dr. Watts' Imitations of the Psalms, Nor His Other Poems . . . Ought to Be Used in the Praises of the Great God Our Saviour* (Albany, NY, 1783).[14]

Wondrous Story": A History of Baptist Hymnody in North America (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 81–85.

[13] Letter from Thomas Bradbury to Isaac Watts (January 17, 1725–6), in *The Posthumous Works of the Late Learned and Reverend Isaac Watts, D.D. in Two Volumes. Compiled from Papers in Possession of His Immediate Successors: Adjusted and Published by a Gentleman of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 2 (London: For T. Becket and J. Bew, 1779), 189. The double dating of the year arises from the fact that England was in transition from beginning the year on April 1 to starting on January 1. Thus, in the modern calendar, the date of the letter is 1726. Note that Bradbury referred to Watts's work as "*your* songs of Sion," suggesting they were not quite scripturally authentic.

[14] Certainly, Watts also had his defenders. In 1763, "a minister of the Church of Scotland" (Robert Findlay) published *A Persuasive to the Enlargement of Psalmody: Or, Attempt to Shew the Reasonableness, and Obligation of Joining with the Psalms of*

The chief complaint of Bradbury and others was that Watts attempted to substitute his personal inspiration for that of the Scriptures by replacing the biblical psalms with his own paraphrases. In reality, of course, Watts was doing no such thing, nor did he disguise the fact that he was not translating but "imitating" the psalms. His goal was not to compete with David—an idea that led him to exclaim "I abhor the thought"[15]—but to adapt his work and that of the other psalmists for practical use by Christians in the eighteenth century and succeeding ages. Watts's desire and method of work was to put the psalms into a form that would express the truths of the gospel—the New Dispensation—rather than only those of the Old Dispensation.

Despite the critics, of course, the hymn writer had the final word. During Watts's lifetime, fifteen editions of *The Psalms of David Imitated* were published (approximately one every other year), suggesting that they were finding widespread usage. After his death, the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and *Psalms of David Imitated* were often issued together under a single cover as "Watts's Psalms and Hymns." Watts's works became so common that for many congregations in Great Britain and the United States the monopoly of metrical psalmody was replaced by a near-monopoly of Isaac Watts, a situation that he could not have foreseen and probably would not have encouraged.

The predominance of Watts in some denominations lasted through the end of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century. Symbolic of this situation was the publication of hymn collections that were designed to be supplements to Watts or to organize his works topically, such as John Rippon's *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors, Intended to Be an Appendix to Dr. Watts's Psalms and Hymns* (1787) in England and James M. Winchell's *An Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts* (1820) in the United States, to name only items intended for

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David, other Scriptural Songs, Especially Out of the New Testament, in which the author noted and commended the widespread use of the paraphrased psalms of "the pious and ingenious Dr. Isaac Watts of London" (42). In the title of *A Vindication of David's Psalms,* it will be noted that Watts's first initial was given as "J"; "I" and "J" were often used interchangeably in both Latin and early English.

[15] Letter from Isaac Watts to Thomas Bradbury (January 24, 1726), in *The Posthumous Works*, 182.

Baptists. Another indication of Watts's popularity among Baptists can be found in one of the most popular hymnals of the denomination in the nineteenth century, Baron Stow and Samuel F. Smith's *The Psalmist* (1843). This book included no fewer than seventy-seven Watts lyrics among its first 200 texts, more than thirty percent of the total in that section of the book.[16]

Of course, with changes in theological and textual emphasis, the introduction of new types of congregational song, the need for greater variety, and the desire to broaden the church's repertory, "Watts entire" ultimately gave way to more eclectic collections, and the number of Watts psalms that are sung today has been drastically reduced from what it was in the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the impact of *The Psalms of David Imitated* on the development of congregational song in the English-speaking churches is evident.

This leads to the second major contribution of Watts's psalms to the church, and that is the provision of a small but important body of hymns that is still widely sung in English-speaking churches around the globe. "Joy to the World" (Ps 98) has become a staple of the Christmas season in worship services and has transcended all changes in musical and textual style and taste. "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" (Ps 90) is widely used at New Year's and memorial services of various types.[17] "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun" (Ps 72) is familiar as an opening or missionary hymn for worship. All three of these texts appear in the recent evangelical hymnals *Worship and Rejoice* (2001), *Baptist Hymnal* (2008), and *Celebrating Grace* (2010).[18]

Also found in various congregational song sources are "From All That Dwell Below the Skies" (Ps 117), "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath" (Ps 146), and "My Shepherd Will Supply

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[16] The Watts items in Stow and Smith include both hymns and psalm versions.

[17] The first line is given as Watts originally wrote it. Later in the eighteenth century, John Wesley changed the first word to "O," and this revision became widely accepted.

[18] *Worship & Rejoice* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 2001); *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Lifeway Worship, 2008); *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* (Macon, GA: Celebrating Grace, Inc., 2010).

My Need" (Ps 23).[19] More limited in use but still employed in various circumstances and parts of the church—and certainly worthy of continued singing—are "Come Sound His Praise Abroad" (Ps 95), "Show Pity, Lord, O Lord Forgive" (Ps 51), "Sweet Is the Work, My God, My King" (Ps 92), "The Heavens Declare Thy Glory, Lord" (Ps 19), and "This Is the Day the Lord Hath Made" (Ps 118).[20]

"O Sing to Lord a New Song"—Or Perhaps an Old Watts Psalm

Several other Watts psalm versions that are less well known are worthy of exploration for modern use, perhaps with a judicious selection of stanzas and/or appropriate modifications to place them into more contemporary English. In regard to the latter, Watts's psalms are often relatively easy to modernize. His basic simplicity of vocabulary means that there are few archaisms except for those involving pronouns, and these can sometimes be brought into modern usage simply by substituting "you" or "your" for "thou," "thy," or "thine." Following are the opening stanzas of five texts (along with "O For a Shout of Sacred Joy," quoted above) that would repay further investigation and singing or use in private devotion, together with an indication of themes or occasions for which they would be appropriate.

Psalm 84
Lord of the worlds above,
How pleasant and how fair
The dwellings of thy love,
Thy earthly temples are!
To thine abode
My heart aspires,
With warm desires

[19] All three of these hymns appear in *Celebrating Grace Hymnal.* "From All That Dwell Below the Skies" is also in *Baptist Hymnal* and "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath" in *Worship & Rejoice.*

[20] The only one of these texts that appears in one of the three hymnals mentioned in the previous notes is "This Is the Day the Lord Hath [Has] Made," which is in *Baptist Hymnal.*

To see my God.
[worship, church dedication]

Psalm 103
My soul, repeat his praise,
Whose mercies are so great,
Whose anger is so slow to rise,
So ready to abate.
[God's compassion for his children]

Psalm 116
What shall I render to my God
For all his kindness shown?
My feet shall visit thine abode,
My songs address thy throne.
[thankfulness for God's deliverance]

Psalm 136
Give thanks to God most high,
The universal Lord,
The sovereign King of kings;
And be his grace adored.
His power and grace
Are still the same;
And let his name
Have endless praise.
[God's work in creation and salvation]

Psalm 139
When I with pleasing wonder stand,
And all my frame survey,
Lord, 'tis thy work; I own thy hand
Thus built my humble clay.
[the marvel of God's work in creating the human body, sanctity of human life]

For other possibilities, the following texts should be explored: "Lord, in the morning thou shalt hear" (Ps 5), "Ye nations

round the earth, rejoice" (Ps 100), "Ye tribes of Adam join" (Ps 148), and "Let every creature join" (Ps 148).

While the passing of 300 years has naturally seen a reduction in the number of Watts texts that are commonly sung, it has not dimmed the luster of his contributions to the song of the church. Watts was an innovator who was instrumental in making possible the transition from exclusive metrical psalmody to hymnody, and in so doing he helped unleash the flood of hymn-writing that made the eighteenth century the "golden age of English hymnody." Furthermore, he provided a group of psalm paraphrases and freely composed hymns that have become some of the most familiar and widely sung such texts in the Christian church. It is fitting to remember and be grateful for Watts's work in this 300th anniversary of his most distinctive gift to Christian congregational song.