

Preface to Isaac Watts' Psalms and Hymns

In order to accommodate the Book of Psalms to Christian worship, it is necessary to divest David and Asaph, &c., of every other character but that of a psalmist and a saint and to make them always speak the common sense and language of a Christian.

Attempting the work with this view, I have entirely omitted several whole psalms, and large pieces of many others; and have chosen out of all of them such parts only as might easily and naturally be accommodated to the various occasions of the Christian life, or at least might afford us some beautiful allusion to Christian affairs. These I have copied and explained in the general style of the gospel. Nor have I confined my expressions to any particular party or opinion; that in words prepared for public worship, and for the lips of multitudes, there might not be a syllable offensive to sincere Christians whose judgements may differ in the lesser matters of religion.

Where the Psalmist uses sharp invectives against his personal enemies, I have endeavoured to turn the edge of them against our spiritual adversaries, sin, Satan, and temptation. Where the flights of his faith and love are sublime, I have often sunk the expressions within the reach of an ordinary Christian. Where the words imply some peculiar wants or distresses, joys or blessings, I have used words of greater latitude and comprehension, suited to the general circumstances of men.

Where the original runs in the form of prophecy concerning Christ and his salvation, I have given an historical turn to the sense. There is no necessity that we should always sing in the obscure and doubtful style of prediction, when the things foretold are brought into open light by a full accomplishment. Where the writers of 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 choose 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. Where he promises abundance of wealth, honour, and long life, I have changed some of these typical blessings for grace, glory, and life eternal, which are brought to light by the gospel, and promised in the New Testament, and I am fully satisfied that more honour is done to our blessed Saviour by speaking his name, his graces, and actions, in his own language, according to the brighter discoveries he hath now made, than by going back again to the Jewish forms of worship, and the language of types and figures.

Few can pretend so great a value for the Book of Psalms as myself, it is the most devotional, and divine collection of poesy; and nothing can be supposed more proper to raise a pious soul to heaven than some parts of that book; never was a piece of experimental divinity so nobly written, and so justly revered and admired; but it must be acknowledged still that there are a thousand lines in it which were not made for a church in our days to assume as its own; there are also many deficiencies of light and glory, which our Lord Jesus and his apostles have supplied in the writings of the New Testament; and with this advantage I have composed the Spiritual Songs which are now presented to the world. Nor is the attempt vain-glorious, or presuming; for in respect of clear evangelical knowledge, “The least in the kingdom of heaven greater than all the Jewish prophets.” (Matthew 11:11)

The greatest part of these Hymns are suited to the general state of the gospel, and the most common affairs of Christians. I hope there will be very few found but what may properly be used in a religious assembly, and not one of them but may well be adapted to some seasons either of private or public worship. The most frequent tempers and changes of our spirits and conditions of our life are here copied, and the breathings of our piety expressed according to the variety of our passions, our love, our fear, our hope, our desire, our sorrow, our wonder, and our joy, as they are refined into devotion, and act under

the influence and conduct of the blessed Spirit; all conversing with God the Father by the new and living way of access to the throne, even the person and the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ. To him also, even to “the Lamb that was slain, and now lives,” I have addressed many a song; for thus doth the holy scripture instruct and teach us to worship, in the various short patterns of Christian psalmody described in the Revelation, I have avoided the more obscure and controverted points of Christianity, that we might all obey the direction of the word of God, and “sing his praises with understanding.” (Psalm 47:7) The contentions and distinguishing words of sects and parties are secluded, that whole assemblies might assist at the harmony, and different churches join in the same worship, without offence.

I have aimed at ease of numbers and smoothness of sound, and endeavoured to make the sense plain and obvious. If the verse appears so gentle and flowing as to incur the censure of feebleness, I may honestly affirm, that sometimes it cost me labour to make it so.

The whole is divided into three books. In the first I have borrowed the sense and much of the form of the song from some particular portions of scripture, and have paraphrased most of the doxologies in the New Testament that contain anything in them peculiarly evangelical, and many parts of the Old Testament, also, that have a reference to the times of the Messiah. As my whole design was to aid the devotion of Christians, so more especially in this part; and I am satisfied I shall hereby attain two ends,—viz., assist the worship of all serious minds, to whom the expressions of scripture are ever dear and delightful, and gratify the taste and inclination of those who think nothing must be sung unto God but the translations of his own word. Yet you will always find in this paraphrase dark expressions enlightened, and the Levitical ceremonies and Hebrew forms of speech changed into the worship of the gospel, and explained in the language of our time and nation; and what would not bear such an alteration is omitted and laid aside,

The second part consists of hymns whose form is of mere human composure but I hope the sense and materials will always appear divine. I might have brought some text or other, and applied it to the margin of every verse, if the method has been as useful as it was

easy. If there be any poems in the book that are capable of giving delight to persons of a more refined taste and polite education, perhaps they may be found in this part, but except they lay aside the humour of criticism, and enter into a devout frame, every ode here already despairs of pleasing. I confess myself to have been too often tempted away from the more spiritual design I proposed by some gay and flowery expressions that gratified the fancy; the bright images too often prevailed above the divine affection, and the light exceeded the heat. Yet, I hope, in many of them, the reader will find that devotion dictated the song, and the head and hand were nothing but interpreters and secretaries to the heart, nor is the magnificence or boldness of the figures comparable to that divine licence which is found in the eighteenth and sixty-eighth Psalms, several chapters of Job, and other poetical parts of scripture; and in this respect I may hope to escape the reproof of those who pay a sacred reverence to the Holy Bible.

I have prepared the third part only for the celebration of the Lord's supper, that, in imitation of our blessed Saviour, we might sing a hymn after we have partaken of the bread and wine. Here you will find some paraphrases of scripture, and some other compositions. There are above a hundred hymns in the two former parts that may very properly be used in this ordinance, and sometimes, perhaps, appear more suitable than any of these last; but there are expressions generally used in those which confine them only to the table of the Lord, and therefore I have distinguished and set them by themselves.