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THE  
EVOLUTION OF A GREAT  
HYMN.

BY  
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# THE EVOLUTION OF A GREAT HYMN.

By LOUIS F. BENSON, D. D.

The special purpose of this article is to study the origin and textual development of the hymn, "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne." But in attempting to follow accurately the single thread of its history, it has been found expedient to include somewhat wider breadths of the hymnody into which it enters, and of which it becomes a part; especially in the case of the obscure first edition of Dr. Watts's *Horae Lyricae*.

Although Watts's verses are based upon, and somewhat closely follow, the 100th Psalm, the designation "hymn," rather than "psalm," seems proper. On the one hand they fill out so well the definition of what a hymn should be, while on the other, neither by their author's intention nor by their literal fidelity, can they claim to be a metrical psalm-version in the stricter sense.

## I. THE ORIGINAL TEXT.

It is a curious fact that the earliest appearance of this hymn, and the original text of it, should have escaped the notice of those who have written upon the subject hitherto. In Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, the notice of the hymn is by Dr. Julian himself. He states\* that it was "1st pub. in [Watts's] *Psalms of David, &c.*, 1719, p. 256, in 6 st. of 4 l." The same date and source are given by Miller in his *Singers and Songs of the Church*, by Nutter in his careful *Hymn Studies*, by Duffield in his *English Hymns*, and by all other annotators whom the present writer has consulted.

In spite, however, of this unanimity, Dr. Watts originally published the hymn in the first edition of his *Horae Lyricae*,

\* P. 1059.

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about thirteen years before the date of his *Imitations of the Psalms*. There has been some confusion about the precise date of this first edition of the *Horae*. In the earlier pages of Julian's *Dictionary* it is frequently referred to as 1705, but in the list of Dr. Watts's works later on, it is given as 1706. The imprint of the book itself (at least in the writer's copy, in one advertised by Pickering and Chatto in 1894, and in Henry D. Sewall's copy sold in New York, January 18, 1897) is "London, 1706." But in Dr. Watts's MS. entitled "Memorable Affairs of my Life," \* occurs the following entry:

"Published my Poems, Dec. 1705"

and in his *Life, etc., of Dr. Watts* (London, 1834), Mr. Milner enters the *Horae* in his Chronological List of Dr. Watts's works as of 1705. It may be that Dr. Watts's entry anticipates a little the actual publication, or that the publisher issued some or all of the copies before the date printed on the title page. The fact remains that the copies at hand of the first edition bear the date of 1706; and in any event that date cannot be many days apart from the actual publication.

The confusion in regard to the first edition of the *Horae* has not been confined to its date, but extends to its contents also. Hymnologists seem to have assumed that this first edition had no particular differences from those that followed it, and they write concerning it in such a way as to imply that they had not seen it, or at least had not examined it. †

\* See his *Life*, by Hood, p. 342.

† Even in the case of the *Dictionary of Hymnology*, the evidence of this seems clear. In annotating "Eternal Power, Whose High Abode" (p. 356), Dr. Julian begins by saying: "This hymn supplies what the author called 'The Conclusion' to his *Horae Lyricae*, 1705." It is so called in the second edition of 1709, but not so in the first edition. It "is entitled," Dr. Julian goes on to say, "'God exalted above all Praise.'" This again is the title of 1709, but in 1706 the title reads, "The GLORIES of GOD Exceed all Worship." Dr. Julian refers also to an alteration being made by Wesley at a point where Wesley's text does in fact agree with that of the first edition. The evidence accumulates in the annotation of Watts's "Father, how Wide Thy Glory Shines" (p. 367), as "1st pub. in his *Horae Lyricae*, 1705, and headed 'God glorious and Sinners saved.'" Now it was so headed in the

As a matter of fact the first edition of the *Horae* is a very different book from the second and later editions, and from the American reprints, which were made from these later editions. Indeed, ample notice of this fact was given by the author. The title page of 1709 described the book as "Altered and much Enlarged." The preface speaks of "The Multitude of Alterations in this Edition," adding:

"There is so large a Difference between this and the former in the Change of Titles, Lines, and whole Poems, as well as in the various Transpositions, that 'twould be useless and Endless, and all Confusion for any Reader to compare them throughout."

In the preface Dr. Watts also intimates that his poems had then attained their final form, "so that [his] Friends may be perfectly secure against this Impressions growing waste upon their Hands, and useless as the former has done." If his friends took him at his word and treated their own copies as "waste," and he destroyed such as remained unsold, it becomes less difficult to explain what otherwise seemed so curious, viz., that it has been left to the JOURNAL, nearly two centuries afterward, to discover the original publication of this, one of the most familiar of Dr. Watts's hymns, and for the first time to reprint the original text.

The feature of the first edition which particularly concerns us now is the appearance of a group of imitations of the Psalms, done in the manner afterward so familiar, and all of which were omitted from later editions. They made a part of "Book I. Songs and Hymns Sacred to DEVOTION," and are headed,

second edition, but in the first the heading was, "GOD Appears most Glorious in our Salvation by CHRIST." The annotator adds that the full original text is contained in modern editions of the *Horae*; which in fact seem to modify the original text in not less than three places.

Such errors in an authority so remarkably accurate indicate that the first edition was not at hand when these notices were penned, and this is to be explained by the scarcity of the book. In 1874 Sir W. Tite's copy brought £2. 11s. in London; the Pickering copy already referred to was priced at £2. 10s.; while the Sewall copy, catalogued as "badly stained," brought \$12 50. These prices indicate that the book is not of common occurrence.

"An Essay on a few of *DAVID'S PSALMS*  
Translated into Plain Verse, in Language  
more agreeable to the clearer Revela-  
tions of the Gospel." \*

In the Table of Contents eight pieces are grouped under this heading, but of these only the first four are from the Psalms. The first is Psalm I, afterwards altered into the third (L. M.) imitation of that Psalm in the *Imitations* of 1719. Next comes Psalm III, beginning here,

"Look, Gracious God, how numerous they,"

to be much altered in 1719. The last is Psalm cxxxiii, substantially the c. m. rendering of 1719, though (happily) with revision there of the lines:

"Down softly from his Reverend Head  
It trickled to his Toes."

The third of the four is the one particularly interesting us. Its title and text are as follows:

Praise to the LORD  
FROM  
ALL NATIONS.

*PSALM C.*

I.

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.

II.

With gladness bow before his Throne,  
And let his Presence raise your Joys,  
Know that the Lord is God alone,  
And form'd our Souls, and fram'd our Voice.

\* This is the group referred to in the June number of the *JOURNAL* as the nucleus of the now famous "Imitations."

## III.

Infinite Power without our aid  
 Figur'd our Clay to humane Mould;  
 And when our Wandring Feet had stray'd,  
 He brought us to his Sacred Fold.

## IV.

Enter his Gates with Thankful Songs,  
 Thro' his Wide Courts your Voices raise;  
 Almighty God, our Joyful Tongues  
 Shall fill thine house with sounding Praise.

## V.

Wide as the World is thy Command,  
 Vast as Eternity thy Love,  
 Firm as a Rock thy Truth must stand  
 When rolling Years shall cease to move.

This, then, is the original form of our hymn as it stands in the first edition of the *Horae*.

So completely has this little group of imitations faded out of sight that the only mention of it known to the present writer is by Thomas Milner in his *Life of Watts* already referred to. He says:

“The first edition [of the *Horae*] contained several pieces which were afterwards omitted, particularly metrical versions of the 1st, 3rd, 100th and 131st [133rd, it should be] Psalms, which now appear with some alterations in the imitations of the Psalms.” \*

But even he comes under the peculiar shadow which seems to obscure the subject. Referring to our hymn, he says:†

“The noble version of the 100th Psalm, in Watts's imitations, is also an equally felicitous improvement of some jingling rhymes which first appeared in the Lyrics. Two stanzas will exhibit his happy method of retouching his compositions.”

Milner goes on to quote, in illustration, two verses from a version of “Psalm C. In Trissyllable Feet,” which Watts printed in the *Horae*, but apart from the other imitations, probably as differing from them in purpose and manner. That version begins:

\* P. 252. † P. 253.

“Sing aloud to the Lord : Let the two Frozen Poles  
Awake to the Song, and dissolve in the Praise.”

The two verses quoted (correcting some misquotations on Milner's part) are as follows:

III.

“’Twas he that gave Life to our Souls with a Breath,  
He fashion'd our Clay to the Figure of Men ;  
And when we had stray'd to the Regions of Death,  
He reduc'd his own Sheep to his Pastures again.

IV.

“We enter his Gates with *Hosannahs* and Songs,  
The Arches resound with the Notes that we raise ;  
Thus while our Devotions are paid with our Tongues,  
Thy Temple adores by repeating the Praise.”

Now Mr. Milner must have had before him a copy of the first edition of the *Horae*, and yet this poor stuff is only separated by five pages from the actual original of our hymn. And surely the fact that the one man who records this earliest group of imitations should make no better use of his discovery than to hide from himself and others the original he sought, is a very characteristic last scene in a little comedy of errors.

II. WATTS'S FINAL TEXT.

In order of publication the first edition of the *Hymns* next follows the *Horae*. To this work the four Psalms forming the group in the *Horae* were transferred, not appearing again in the second edition of the *Horae* in 1709 or its later issues. The one in question becomes Hymn XLIII of Book I. Excepting that in the third line *British-Isles* is hyphenated, and italicized throughout, and that the always eccentric capitalization slightly varies, there is no change in title or text. From the second edition of the *Hymns* this and all other psalm-versions disappear, owing to the author's purpose of covering the entire Psalter, as was explained in a former article in this JOURNAL.\*

Dr. Watts's "THE PSALMS OF DAVID IMITATED in the Language of the *New Testament*, And apply'd to the Christian State

\* Vol. I, p. 272.

and Worship” was published in London in 1719,\* in a style of elegance in marked contrast with the somewhat cheap appearance of the *Hymns*. The book is printed on fine paper, and decorated with head and tail pieces, and the writer’s copy is hand-ruled on every page with red lines, and bound in full red calf with rich toolings. It reflects probably not only a more assured confidence in his public on the author’s part, but also a greater ease in the circumstances of the dissenting public itself.

Of the two versions of Psalm C in the *Imitations*, the first, which is headed “*A Plain Translation. Praise to our Creator.*”, is overshadowed by the second, which is a revision of that in the *Horae*. Title and text are as follows:

PSALM C. Second Metre, a Paraphrase.

I.

SING to the Lord with joyfull Voice;  
Let every Land his Name adore;  
The *British* Isles shall send the Noise  
A-cross the Ocean to the Shore.

II.

Nations, attend before his Throne  
With solemn Fear, with sacred Joy;  
Know that the Lord is God alone;  
He can create, and he destroy.

III.

His sovereign Power without our Aid  
Made us of Clay, and form’d us Men:  
And when like wandring Sheep we stray’d,  
He brought us to his Fold again.

IV.

We are his people, we his Care,  
Our Souls and all our mortal Frame:  
What lasting Honours shall we rear  
Almighty Maker, to thy Name?

\* As Dr. Watts’s *Memorable Affairs* comes down only to 1710, we can have in this case no conflicting entry to try our faith in the accuracy of the date on the title page.

## v.

We'll croud thy Gates with thankfull Songs,  
 High as the Heavens our Voices raise;  
 And Earth with her ten thousand Tongues  
 Shall fill thy Courts with sounding Praise.

## vi.

Wide as the World is thy Command,  
 Vast as Eternity thy Love;  
 Firm as a Rock thy Truth must stand  
 When rolling Years shall cease to move.

In this revised text the first and last verses remain unchanged from the original; the fourth verse is new; and the remaining three, while not so much changed as to lose their identity, are considerably strengthened, not only in language and rhythm, but in thought. Of every alteration, perhaps, it may be said that the change is an improvement. This was the author's final text. He made no changes in successive editions of the *Imitations*.

In the preface to the *Imitations*, Dr. Watts confessed his obligations to his predecessors, especially singling out Sir John Denham, Luke Milbourne, and Tate and Brady, as authors from whom he had "not refused in some few Psalms to borrow a single line or two," but particularizing Dr. Patrick as the one with whom he had taken the greatest freedom. In this particular Psalm there seem to be no observable traces of the first three authors mentioned; but no less than three lines can be distinctly traced to their originals in Dr. Patrick's version.\*

These three lines are as follows: †

*Patrick*: Know that our Lord is God alone.

*Watts*: Know that the Lord is God alone.

*Patrick*: We are the people of his Care.

*Watts*: We are his people, we his care.

*Patrick*: Enter his Gates with thankfull hearts.

*Watts*: We'll croud thy Gates with thankfull Songs.

\* Dr. John Patrick in 1679 published "*A Century of Select Psalms, and portions of the Psalms of David, in verse, for the use of the Charter-House,*" of which he was chaplain. Enlarged subsequently into a complete version, they were frequently reprinted and won wide approval.

† The Hamburg edition of 1692 is used.

Of these lines two were in Watts's earlier text. And it would seem to follow that from the beginning of his work upon the Psalms he had put Dr. Patrick's version before him as something of a model for psalm-versions intended to be understood and sung by the people.

### III. JOHN WESLEY'S REVISION.

While a "missioner in Georgia," John Wesley published a little *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, interesting as being the first hymn book published within the bounds of the Church of England. The question of its date exactly parallels that of Watts's *Horae*. The imprint is "Charles-Town, 1737," but in an account of his life drawn up by Wesley in 1740 he mentions publishing a *Collection of Psalms and Hymns* in 1736. The book was completely lost sight of until a single copy with the above imprint recently turned up in London, which appears to be the missing hymn book.

In making this collection Wesley drew freely from the Hymns and Imitations of Dr. Watts, and he did not hesitate, then or ever, to make such alterations in the text of the hymns as commended themselves to his editorial judgment. In this matter of hymn-tinkering, Wesley's views and practice are often referred to as inconsistent, but the charge can hardly be sustained. The protest in his famous preface, dated October 20, 1779, to *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*, does not deal with hymn-tinkering as a general proposition, but only with the alteration of his own and his brother's hymns by other hands. "I desire," he says, "they would not attempt to mend them; for they really are not able. None of them is able to mend either the sense or the verse." But along with this total lack of confidence in the ability of other hands, he sincerely felt himself perfectly competent to revise the hymns of other people (including Dr. Watts and his brother Charles) to the great advantage of the hymns. There is nothing inconsistent in the two positions.

If anything is needed to justify Wesley's confident faith in himself, his treatment of Watts's 100th Psalm, it may freely be admitted, goes a good way in that direction. It stands as No.

4 in the little collection, altered by Wesley's hands into the following form:\*

Psalm C.

- 1 BEfore *Jehovah's* awful Throne,  
Ye Nations, bow with sacred joy.  
Know that the Lord is God alone;  
He can create, and he destroy.
- 2 His sovereign Power without our aid  
Made us of clay and form'd us Men;  
And when like wandring Sheep we stray'd  
He brought us to his Fold again.
- 3 We'll crowd thy Gates with thankful Songs,  
High as the Heavens our Voices raise;  
And Earth with her Ten Thousand Tongues  
Shall fill thy Courts with sounding Praise.
- 4 Wide as the World is thy Command.  
Vast as Eternity thy Love:  
Firm as a Rock thy Truth must stand  
When rolling Years shall cease to move.

We see the extent of Wesley's dealings with Watts's text. He omits altogether the first verse, and one line and a half of the second, prefixing to the remainder of the second verse, these words of his own:

“Before *Jehovah's* awful Throne,  
Ye nations, bow”

thus making an opening verse. He takes Watts's third verse unaltered as the new second, drops out Watts's fourth, and closes the hymn with what were Watts's fifth and sixth verses.

Though Watts's fourth verse is open to some criticism, its omission seems to the present writer to be no gain but rather a distinct loss to the continuity of thought, as it certainly is to the integrity of the piece as a paraphrase of the Psalm. But as for the new opening of the hymn it may be questioned if the whole history of English hymnody records an emendation so

\* This text is taken from the (so-called) facsimile reprint of the 1737 book, issued without date by T. Woolmer, London.

successful. Wesley had both the poetical and critical gifts; and his alteration here reveals sound criticism, while his poetic touch transfigures the hymn. He laid his finger on the exact border of the weaker part of the hymn; the "solemn fear" he discarded being as weak as the "sacred joy" he retained is happy. And the new opening line in place of Watts's line is hardly other than a stroke of genius. "Before Jehovah's awful Throne:"—that great object makes an unailing appeal to the imagination; makes it seem inevitable that the nations should gather *there*; becomes at once a centre of the hymn's action, securing its unity; and, as the hymn closes, is felt to be still standing, august and immovable, "when rolling years shall cease to move."

As revised by Wesley, Watts's hymn has taken its place among the great hymns of the language. And while the body of the hymn remains as Watts wrote it, it can hardly be denied that its successful career must be ascribed to Wesley's hand. It would, no doubt, have continued to be sung in its original form, along with pretty much everything else of Watts, so long as his supremacy lasted. But it can safely be affirmed that it would have dropped out, along with the great bulk of his productions, when the day of his supremacy waned, simply because of the dullness (to say nothing of the questionable taste) of the opening of the hymn. For a hymn must make a quick appeal, and against this a dull opening presents an effective barrier.

#### IV. THE LATER HISTORY.

The printing of John Wesley's recast in the American missionary hymnal gave it of course no publicity in England. But his English adherents so increased that suitable provision was demanded for their Sunday services as well as week-day meetings; and in 1741 Wesley published in London a larger book of 165 hymns. It bore the same title as the Charles-Town book, being indeed his third collection under that name. It became a very popular book, often reprinted and continued in use among Methodists for the better part of a century, generally known as "The Morning Hymn Book."

In this book Wesley reprinted "Before Jehovah's Awful

Throne" with the 1737 text, and the hymn became in this way widely known, not only among Methodists but throughout the Church of England. The editors of the earliest group of hymnals in that church knew it; and it is included in Martin Madan's collection (1760), in that of the Rev. R. Conyers (1767), as well as in the more famous collection of Augustus Toplady (1776). In all these hymnals the text is that of Wesley.

In the later years of his life Wesley was induced to prepare the large hymn book, to cover all the needs of Methodism, whose preface has already been quoted from. This he printed in 1780, living to issue a seventh edition in 1791. He revised the book more than once, and had hardly passed away before it fell into the hands of other revisers, where it may be said to have remained ever since. Oddly enough, "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne" was omitted by Wesley from this, his final hymn book. It came in afterwards, among the supplementary hymns. The repudiated edition of 1797 is the first in which the writer happens to have found it. It stands there with Wesley's text, except that the third line of the last verse reads: "Firm as a rock Thy truth shall stand," instead of "must stand," as Watts wrote it and Wesley left it. One may say with some confidence that Wesley never approved that change. He would not have impaired the roll of the last line by anticipating its "shall" so closely before. Yet the line still stands in that way in the English Wesleyan hymn book, and in the American *Hymnal of the Methodist Episcopal Church* [North], as indeed it does in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and other Anglican hymnals. The Southern Methodists have restored the line to its proper form.

Watts's 100th Psalm had come to this country even before the date of Wesley's Charles-Town book, simply as a constituent part of the *Imitations*,\* and continued to be printed and sung here for many years in the text of 1719, literally fulfilling the prophecy of its first verse:

\* A complete reprint of the *Imitations* was issued in Philadelphia by Franklin and Meredith in 1729.

“The *British Isles* shall send the Noise  
A-cross the Ocean to the Shore.”

But these words themselves will suggest that this was one of the imitations especially calling for revision when in the course of time the American colonies threw off the British yoke. The earliest example of such emendation in the writer's possession occurs in a Boston reprint of the *Imitations* dated 1761. Some one (“Wensley Hobbys” is inscribed on the title page) has drawn his pen through every allusion of Dr. Watts to Great Britain, and substituted in now faded ink a more patriotic text. In the third line of the 100th Psalm “The *British Isles*” has been cancelled, and “America” written in the margin. Both the cancelling line and the interlineation were afterwards erased, as if to restore the text. It is likely that the MS. changes in this copy were made to conform it to an American revision of Watts printed by John Mycall, Newbury-Port, 1781, described in the title as “The Fortieth Edition, corrected, and accommodated to the use of the Church of Christ, in America;” in the text of which Mycall had the assistance of some neighboring ministers.\* In this revision the substitution of “America” for “The *British Isles*” is the only change in the text of the 100th Psalm.

Of the authoritative American revisions of Watts's *Imitations*, the first was that committed to Joel Barlow, and published at Hartford in 1785. As regards the 100th Psalm, Barlow's revision was undoubtedly successful. He had the good taste to take Wesley's text, restoring to it the omitted fourth verse of Dr. Watts. The only variance in Barlow's text is “the heaven” for “the heavens” in the second line of Watts's fifth verse, and that very probably a mere slip. This restoration of the omitted verse was the only improvement that seems to have remained to be made in the hymn,† and completes, one may anticipate, what is likely to remain the accepted text.

\* See *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D. D., LL. D.*; 3 vols., 8vo, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1901, vol. ii, p. 571.

† It was first made, so far as the writer has observed, as early as 1769, in a well-known English Baptist hymn-book, edited by Drs. John Ash and Caleb

But while no further improvement of the text seemed called for, that fact did not prevent another effort in that direction. For reasons not necessary to discuss here, the General Association of Connecticut commissioned President Dwight to make a second revision of the *Imitations* "accommodated" to the state of the American Churches, which was published in 1801. He could have done no better than to follow Barlow in adopting Wesley's opening to the hymn. On the contrary, he retained Watts's first verse, altering it to read:

"Ye Sons of men in God rejoice,  
From land to land his name adore;  
Let earth, with one united voice,  
Resound his praise from every shore."

It may be said in behalf of Dr. Dwight that he was engaged to make his own revision of Watts, and not to adopt that of another, and that he did his work with propriety and care. Nor did his revision of the 100th Psalm exert any permanent influence, simply because Wesley's text was well on in its career before he made it. His example in retaining Watts's first verse was, however, followed by Dr. James M. Winchell, Dr. Samuel Worcester and Dr. Jedidiah Morse, in their respective editions of the "Psalms and Hymns."

Wesley's text, on the other hand, with the fourth verse of Watts as restored by Barlow, passed into the Dutch Reformed *Psalms and Hymns* (1814), the Presbyterian *Psalms and Hymns* (1830), the German Reformed *Psalms and Hymns* (1833), the Cumberland Presbyterian *Psalms and Hymns* (1845), and *Psalms and Hymns* of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (1866). And at the present day Wesley's text, with or without the fourth verse of Watts, and with the occasional change of "must" to "shall" in the last verse, is in use wherever the hymn is sung.

Evans; but unfortunately they spoiled the close of the hymn by reversing the order of Watts's fifth and sixth verses, and substituting "shall" for "must" in the line before the last.

THE DATE OF PUBLICATION OF WATTS'S *HORÆ LYRICÆ*.

This subject is discussed on page 328 of this number of the JOURNAL. Since printing the earlier sheets of the number, there has come to hand a copy of the catalogue of books and manuscripts sold by auction at London by Messrs. Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge, on July 28-30, 1902. Lot 638 is a copy of the first edition of the *Horæ*, bearing date 1706, but containing on the fly-leaf a letter written by Dr. Watts, which is reprinted in the catalogue as follows :

"To Mr. Sam<sup>l</sup> Say. Dear Sir, Accept of this first labor of the press, this ventrous Essay of Poesie in so Nice and censorious an Age: forgive as you read, peruse as a friend, design to be pleased and not to Judge. And if you can (without too much abuse of your Judgement) [recommend it to the world] *this has been erased.*\* You will help to free me from some obligations under w<sup>ch</sup> ye Bookseller has put ye

Dec<sup>r</sup> 28<sup>th</sup>, 1705.

"Timorous Author, Your friend,

"I. WATTS."

This letter would appear to settle the question of the date of publication of the first edition of the *Horæ*.

LOUIS F. BENSON.

\*The clause in italics is apparently an annotation by the cataloguer.