

Chapter Six: Isaac Watts

Isaac Watts' texts appear more often in the LDS hymnals than any other hymnist.¹ Perhaps it would be good for LDS hymn singers to pause and learn a little about this man.

When Christian churches first began singing as part of their worship services, church leaders insisted that only the Psalms could be chanted or sung as they were the only hymns given us by the Divine Being. The Psalms were literally lifted from the Old Testament and music written to fit them. This had two drawbacks: One, it required new tunes for each language as the number of syllables per line would of course vary from language to language. Two, it limited the number of hymns to a mere 150 selections.

Within the English-speaking church it was reasoned that paraphrasing the Psalms to fit standard metering and rhyming schemes made sense as the task of composing music would be greatly reduced - and being able to vary the tunes would help give each Psalm a different feel for different occasions - when you only have 150 hymn texts to work with, you've got to do something! Not everyone was convinced, however, and it was a difference of opinion that often split congregations.

Added into this debate were those who saw nothing wrong in writing entirely new hymn texts - original works that celebrated the Gospel without having to be a retelling of a biblical Psalm.

Into this world was born a young man named Isaac Watts. Utilizing his natural-born talent for poetry and rhyme, he became one of the English-speaking world's preeminent psalmists and hymnists. So widely have his works been used that it is virtually impossible to find a hymnal without him represented. When Emma Smith compiled the first LDS hymnal, sixteen of the ninety texts were by Isaac Watts. The current LDS hymnal only contains nine of his works, three of which were in Emma's 1835 hymnal.

Isaac Watts was born on July 27, 1674 at Southampton, England - the eldest of nine children. His father, a Nonconformist (a dissenter from the Anglican Church), he had been jailed twice for refusing to follow the Church of England. Even as a small boy Watts had a natural ability at versifying. At the age of seven young Isaac wrote the following, showing the religious training he'd received so far:

I am a vile polluted lump of earth
So I've continued ever since my birth;
Although Jehovah grace does give me,
As sure this monster Satan will deceive me.
Come therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me.

Although most modern Christians would frown at such negative thoughts in such a young mind, there is no doubt that the genius for his future works was firmly in place.

Isaac learned Greek, Latin, and Hebrew from the rector of All Saints, who was also headmaster of a Nonconformist Grammar School in Southampton. Because he followed in his father's faith he was denied entrance to the universities in Cambridge or Oxford. Instead he attended a Nonconformist Academy at Stoke Newington in 1690, under the care of Thomas Rowe, pastor of the Independent

1 - See chapter 13, Author Index

congregation at Girdlers' Hall. Isaac joined this congregation in 1693.

After completing his formal schooling at the age of twenty, Watts spent two years at home. Early in this time he complained to his father about the poor writing in the metered Psalms that were then sung in the churches. His father challenged him to do better, and he did just that - he sat down to write, and that evening the congregation sang the first of Isaac's 600 hymns. With a fervor unknown to him until this point he spent the next two years writing text after text after text. Most of his best hymns were written during these two years.

One of the truly revolutionary things about Watts' psalms is that they are not a mere repetition of the biblical psalms, changing words only in an attempt to fit them into English meter and rhyme; this was what those before him had done. Instead, he took psalmody a step further by writing texts that commented and celebrated the theme and meaning of the psalm. Additionally, he felt the most important thing for him to do was to incorporate the fulfillment of the psalmic words as seen through Christian eyes.

At the end of these two years Isaac left home and spent five years as a tutor to the son of eminent Puritan. He preached his first sermon at age 24, while still employed as a tutor. In the next three years he preached frequently, and in 1702 was ordained as pastor of the Independent congregation in Mark Lane. His health began to fail within two years of his ordination, and Samuel Price was appointed as his assistant. In 1712 a fever destroyed his health, and Price became co-pastor to help carry the load.

It was at the time of this illness that Isaac became the house guest of Sir Thomas Abney - he lived with Abney and with other members of the family the rest of his life. Given his own quarters and all the free time he needed, he continued to write hymns as well as books of philosophy and logic.

In 1728 the University of Edinburgh awarded Watts a Doctorate of Divinity. He died on November 25, 1748, at Stoke Newington, England, and he is buried in Bunhill Fields Cemetery, London, near the grave of great Christian writer John Bunyan.

The three hymnal works Isaac Watts is best remembered for are:

Hymns and Spiritual Songs (three volumes), 1707-1709

The Divine and Moral Songs for the Use of Children, 1715

The Psalms of David, 1719²

Benjamin Franklin published Watts' *Psalms of David* in Philadelphia in 1729; the first American printing of Watt's work. It was published again ten years later in Boston, and they became some of the most-beloved texts for congregational worship by the time of the Revolutionary War. There would have been plenty of copies available to find their way into Emma Smith's hands while compiling the 1835 LDS Hymnal.

Besides the Isaac Watts hymns in our current hymnal, Watts also wrote the immortal "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", included in previous LDS hymnals and sung many times by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

2 - Two of these books are currently reprinted as: *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts* (Morgan PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997). All three of his works can be found on the internet at

<http://www.ccel.org/w/watts/psalmshymns/TOC.htm> and <http://www.ccel.org/w/watts/divsongs/htm/TOC.htm>