

ISAAC WATTS, HYMNS, AND THE JEWS

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Isaac Watts is well known as the “Father of English Hymnody,” the person who broke the monopoly of metrical psalm singing and was largely responsible for the introduction of freely-composed hymns into Anglophone Christian worship. His two principal collections of congregational song, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) and *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (1719), are the sources for some of the most familiar hymns in the English language, including “Alas, and did my Saviour bleed,” “Jesus shall reign where’er the sun,” “Joy to the world,” and “When I survey the wondrous cross.” Watts’s life, his place in history, and his hymns have been explored in many books and articles since his death more than 250 years ago.¹

One feature of Watts’s hymns and hymn collections that has been little examined is his mentions in them of the Jews. This is somewhat surprising, since the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* were designed to supplement (or replace) the singing of the Hebrew psalms, and *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* were intended to “Christianize” them; furthermore, Watts often referred directly to the Jews in his hymn texts.

One of the few writings to explore this topic is Stephen Orchard’s 1998 article “The Hymns of Isaac Watts.” In a brief aside, Orchard observes that “Watts followed the Gospel writers, especially John, in referring to the Jews as the persecutors of Jesus,” and goes on to say that “This was not a conscious anti-semitism in the modern sense but it is still anti-semitic.” He then quotes stanzas from two of Watts’s versions of Ps 118 that speak of the “envy” of the Jews in rejecting Jesus and comments that, “In his enthusiasm for the new Israel, and for protestant Britain’s providential role, Watts lost sight of the Jews as a people. In this he was no different from most of his contemporaries who, if they thought about the different faiths to be found in the world at all, regarded them as unenlightened and at the mercy of God.”²

As Orchard notes, many Christians throughout the ages have expressed the view that the Jewish race was responsible for the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Furthermore, in the view of most Christians of Watts’s day—and, indeed, of many both before and since—God originally selected the Jews as his chosen people but their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah led to their own rejection, with the church now constituting the chosen people, a view that is known as “supersessionism.” These perspectives on the Jews (as well as

¹ The first full-length study of Watts’s life and work was published in 1780 by his friend and ministerial colleague Thomas Gibbons, *Memoirs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D. D.* (London: For James Buckland and Thomas Gibbons). Other important studies include Thomas Milner, *The Life, Times, and Correspondence of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1834); E. Paxton Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings, His Homes and Friends* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1875); and Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Works* (New York: Dryden Press, 1943). The most thorough published study of Watts’s hymns is Harry Escott, *Isaac Watts, Hymnographer: A Study of the Beginnings, Development, and Philosophy of the English Hymn* (London: Independent Press, 1962).

² Stephen Orchard, “The Hymns of Isaac Watts,” *Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society* 6, no. 3 (1998): 161. See also Sharon Achinstein, *Literature and Dissent in Milton’s England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), who claims that Watts’s hymns were “premised upon a rejection of ancient Israel, eschewing a superstitious, particularist ‘Jewishness’” (241).

others that lie outside the scope of this article) have sometimes led to deplorable persecutions that have been visited upon this people group throughout history.

Orchard's brief discussion of antisemitism in Watts's hymns is helpful but does not paint quite the whole picture and perhaps leaves an incorrect or at least unbalanced impression of Watts's references to the Jews. The purpose of this article is to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the mentions of the Jews in Watts's hymns and psalm versions.³ Why did he make these references? What are the biblical backgrounds for them? Are they really what they seem to be on the surface? The article does not intend to excuse, explain away, or mute any antisemitic elements in Watts's hymns. However, a study of the lyrics shows that it is vital that they be viewed in their scriptural context, not be taken out of the context of the hymn as a whole, and be related to what Watts was trying to accomplish in his work on congregational song. Seen in this manner, the references are often at least understandable, if not acceptable for modern use, because of the possibility of misunderstanding.

It should be stressed that this article is concerned exclusively with Watts's references to the Jews in his two congregational songbooks and not views that might have been expressed in others of his publications.⁴ There are two reasons for this restriction. Since *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and *The Psalms of David Imitated* both came toward the beginning of his career and were among his earliest publications, these two sources provide a perspective on his early views. More importantly, unlike many of his other religious writings, which were often designed primarily to be read by theologians, the two books of congregational song were very "public" volumes that put words into the mouths of parishioners and thus were an extraordinarily important voice on the subject, especially since the hymns were widely used in churches of many denominations throughout the eighteenth century and well beyond. For the same reason, though attention will be given to the preface and "Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody" in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and the preface and explanatory notes for the texts in *The Psalms of David Imitated*, the focus will be primarily on the hymn texts themselves, since these are the words that were actually sung by the congregation.⁵

One item that must be borne in mind when interpreting Watts's references to the Jews is his italicisation of the words "Jew" and "Jews." This practice might seem as though he is calling special attention to the terms, making them stand out in the context, and perhaps suggesting a negative implication. However, this orthographic feature does not have that purpose: it was his practice to italicise most proper nouns in the text. For example, the words "Christian," "Gentile," "Jesus," and "Adam" are also generally italicised. Thus, no special meaning should be read into this orthographic feature.

³ Throughout this article the word "hymn" will be used in a generic sense to include both the freely-written texts and the psalm versions. When a more specific meaning is intended it will be made obvious from the context.

⁴ Quotations from Watts's hymn texts in this article are from the second edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1709, hereafter *HSS*) and the first edition of *The Psalms of David Imitated* (1719, hereafter *PDI*) unless otherwise noted. The second edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* dropped several psalm paraphrases that had appeared in the first edition (and were subsequently incorporated into *The Psalms of David Imitated*), included a large number of new texts, and made revisions to the hymns. Poems by Watts that were subsequently adapted as hymns, as well as the hymns he wrote to accompany sermon volumes of the 1720s are not included in this study.

⁵ The "Short Essay" was deleted from *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* after the first edition, and the preface to *The Psalms of David Imitated* was truncated and the notes to the hymns omitted in the second and some subsequent editions of that book.

WATTS'S PURPOSES IN HIS HYMNS

From the beginning of Christianity, adherents of the new religion held the Old Testament to be the word of God, but very early in its history, the church rejected many of the ceremonies and customs it portrayed as being outward and “fleshly” in orientation, in contrast to the inward and “spiritual” nature of the New Testament and its worship.⁶ Elements of the Old Testament such as animal sacrifice and the use of musical instruments in worship were rejected as now abrogated or were reinterpreted in allegorical or symbolic terms. Such views were particularly characteristic of the churches that stemmed from the Genevan Reformation under John Calvin, including the English Congregationalists, among whom Isaac Watts was a prominent minister.

However, one Old Testament book held a special place among the Reformed churches, and that was the book of Psalms. Calvin believed that “no one can sing things worthy of God, except what he may have received from him” and that “we shall find no better nor more proper songs to do this than the Psalms of David.”⁷ Thus the Reformed churches used the psalms almost exclusively for their congregational singing, to which they added a few other passages from the Old Testament (e.g., the Ten Commandments), the New Testament (the Nativity Canticles), and post-biblical traditional song (the Te Deum). This was the tradition in which Isaac Watts was raised but one he sought to expand and modify.

In the prefaces of both *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and *The Psalms of David Imitated*, Watts set out his purpose for the two books: to replace or at least to supplement the singing of the Old Testament psalms in Christian worship. The prefaces and “Short Essay” contain a number of comments that can be read as critical of the Jews. The most negative of these statements is found in the preface to *The Psalms of David Imitated*.

What need is there that I should wrap up the shining Honours of my Redeemer in the dark and shadowy Language of a Religion that is now for ever abolished; especially when Christians are so vehemently warned in the Epistles of St. *Paul* against a Judaizing Spirit in their Worship as well as Doctrine? And what Fault can there be in enlarging a little on the more usefull Subjects in the Style of the Gospel, where the Psalm gives any Occasion, since the Whole Religion of the Jews is censur'd often in the New Testament as a defective and imperfect Thing? (xx-xxi).

This is Watts's clearest statement of supersessionism in the prose sections of either book: the religion of the Jews is often reproached in the New Testament as “defective and imperfect,” it has been superseded by the coming of Christ, and Christians are to beware of attempts to require Gentiles to become Jews as a part of

⁶ This is particularly evident in a survey of the references to music found in the writings of the early church fathers. These have been usefully gathered and translated in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ John Calvin, “Epistle to the Reader” from *Cinquante Pseaumes en françois par Clem. Marot* (1543), quoted in David W. Music, *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 67.

coming to Christ. In Watts's view, strict adherence to the singing of versified psalms is a prime example of this "Judaizing Spirit."⁸

While Watts's language in this instance may be unduly harsh according to modern sensibilities, it is important to remember that his intent was to show that the unrevised psalms were not suitable for singing by eighteenth-century English-speaking Christians. He was also attempting to explain why and how his work differed from and was superior to previous psalm versifiers and the current practices of the churches. A more typical comment is in the preface to the first edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, where he observes that in singing the psalms as they were usually given in earlier English psalters,

When we are just entring [*sic*] into an Evangelic [i.e., New Testament] Frame by some of the Glories of the Gospel presented in the brightest Figures of *Judaism*, yet the very next Line perhaps which the Clerk parcels out unto us, hath something in it so extremely *Jewish* and cloudy, that darkens our Sight of God the Saviour: Thus by keeping too close to *David* in the House of God, the Vail [*sic*] of *Moses* is thrown over our Hearts. (1707, v)

Watts acknowledges that the Hebrew psalms contain "some of the Glories of the Gospel" but that they also include things that are "*Jewish* and cloudy, that darkens our Sight of God the Saviour." The references to Jewishness, cloudiness, and darkening of sight indicate that these references are to Old Testament practices that cannot be fully understood by contemporary Christians. Watts had in mind here psalmodic references to "Burnt-Offerings or Hyssop, with New-Moons, and Trumpets and Timbrels" and similar features that would have little or no meaning for eighteenth-century English-speaking Christians (*PDI*, xv). His complaint was not so much about the Jewish elements in the psalms, which, as he put it, were "suited to their [i.e., the Jews'] Dispensation" (*HSS*, 1707, 268), but about the continued use of the psalms in unaltered form by contemporary Anglophone Christians, for whom the Jewish elements in the texts could hold little or no relevance. Thus, he says, when Christians sing only versifications of the psalms, "we express nothing but the Character, the Concerns, and the Religion of the *Jewish King* [David], while our own Circumstances and our own Religion (which are so widely different from his) have little to do in the sacred Song" (*PDI*, iv).

Indeed, Watts even found it difficult to believe that all of "David's" psalms were "appointed by God for the ordinary and constant Worship of the *Jewish Sanctuary or the Synagogues*" since several of them "seem improper for any Person besides himself." And if they were not entirely appropriate for the Jews themselves, "much less are they all proper for a *Christian Church*," giving him leave, he felt, to omit, add to, or alter them at will (*PDI*, viii-ix).

THE HYMN TEXTS

Watts's mentions of the Jews in his hymns can be divided into seven categories according to their general approach and subject matter: the insufficiency of Old Testament ritual for Christians, the ancient Hebrews as an example for Christians, the role of the Jews in the crucifixion, Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah,

⁸ It should be pointed out that Watts's reference is to the Jewish religion, not to the Jewish race. While the distinction might be a fine one, in that criticizing a person's religion can be construed as criticizing a person, religions are fair game for critique in the same way as political, economic, or social views.

the combination of Jews and Gentiles or Greeks as representatives of all humanity, the debt owed by Christians to the Jews, and the equal access of Jews and Christians to God. Some of these categories, at least on the surface, seem to reflect critical views of the Jews, while others appear to provide positive, or at least balanced, images. As will be seen, the references do not always fall neatly into the seven categories: there is sometimes overlap between them and some might easily be listed under other headings. Hopefully, however, the present organization will be helpful in assessing Watts's references.

The Insufficiency of Old Testament Ritual

Like most Independents and other Calvinists of his day, Watts maintained that "ceremonial worship," the use of rites and formulas in the worship of God, was not acceptable, at least not unless the heart and spirit were also engaged. This critical view of "formal worship" was expressed in the first stanza of his hymn "Not all the outward forms on earth" (A95).⁹

Not all the outward Forms on Earth,
Nor Rites that God has giv'n,
Nor Will of Man, nor Blood, nor Birth,
Can raise a Soul to Heav'n.

While this stanza does not directly mention Old Testament ritual, the reference to "Rites that God has giv'n" certainly implies it: God originally commanded the laws of animal sacrifice and ritual observance but since the coming of Christ they have been done away with. The first two stanzas of part 2 in Ps 51 LM, "Lord, I am vile, conceiv'd in sin," are more specific in their rejection of the "ceremonial worship" of the Old Testament as a basis for salvation.

No bleeding Bird, nor bleeding Beast,
Nor Hissop-Branch, nor sprinkling Priest,
Nor running Brook, nor Flood, nor Sea,
Can wash the dismal Stain away.

Jesus, my God, thy Blood alone
Hath Power sufficient to atone;
Thy Blood can make me white as Snow;
No *Jewish* Types could cleanse me so. (sts. 5–6)

⁹ Watts divided *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* into three "books." Throughout this article texts from this source will be identified by a capital letter representing the book (A=book 1, B=book 2, C=book 3), followed by the hymn number in that book; thus, A95 indicates hymn no. 95 in book 1. In *The Psalms of David Imitated*, Watts often made more than one version of a psalm (usually to provide for metrical variety) and sometimes divided a psalm into several parts. Pieces from this collection are listed here by the number of the psalm and, where relevant, the hymnic meter (determined by the number of syllables per line) and part number: LM=Long Meter (8888), SM=Short Meter (6686), CM=Common Meter (8686), 10.10.10.10.10 (six lines of 10 syllables each), and 10.10.10.10.11.11 (four lines of 10 syllables and two of 11 syllables). Individual lines are described by the number of the stanza followed by a colon, then the line number (e.g., 2:3=stanza 2, line 3). All Scripture quotations are from the KJV since that was the version followed by Watts in writing his hymns.

Here the Jewish Old Testament rituals are called “Types” that foreshadow the fuller salvation provided by God through Jesus Christ. That, of course, is not a reflection on the Jewish people, who simply worked with the revelation they were given in the Old Testament and who, since the resurrection, have the same opportunity of belief or nonbelief in Jesus as anyone else. In a sense, the stanzas of these two hymns can be read as parallel to Watts’s opinions regarding the congregational song of the church: though the rituals of the Old Testament were commanded by God they are no longer adequate as expressions of worship for New Testament Christians; in like manner, the psalms, though a part of Holy Writ, are insufficient as the sole expression of praise for Christians.

Another, more general, reference that can be understood as critical of Old Testament ceremonial worship is found in “The voice of my beloved sounds” (A69), based on Cant 2:8–13, which includes the lines “*The Jewish wintry State is gone / The mists are fled, the Spring comes on*” (4:1–2) derived from verse 11, “For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.” The implication is that the dark, cold, “*wintry*” Hebrew religion of animal sacrifice and ceremonial worship has been supplanted by the sunny, warm “*Spring*” of Christianity’s more inward and spiritual worship. This is about as close as Watts ever comes to a direct statement of supersessionism in his hymn texts.

The Old Testament Jews as an Example for Christians

Even if the Old Testament rituals are no longer efficacious, Watts views the experiences of the ancient Hebrews as useful for providing examples for Christians either to emulate or to be warned by. In this he follows Paul’s opinion in 1 Cor 10:11 that “all these things happened unto them [the people of Israel] for examples: and they are written for our admonition.” Many of the Jewish references occur in the context of a recounting of Old Testament events, in which Watts simply retells one of its stories or ideas and relates it to Christian experience. For example, in his hymn about heaven, “There Is a Land of Pure Delight” (B66), he compares a glimpse of the celestial country across the sea of death to the Hebrews’ view of the Promised Land across the river Jordan.

[Sweet Fields beyond the swelling Flood
Stand drest in living Green:
So to the *Jews* Old *Canaan* stood,
While *Jordan* roll’d between.]¹⁰ (st. 3)

In another text from *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, “Let Us Adore th’Eternal Word” (C5), Watts compares the Communion bread with the manna that God sent to the Israelites in the wilderness, remarking that “The *Jews* the Fathers dy’d at last / Who eat [*sic*] that Heavenly Bread; / But these Provisions if we tast[e], / We live, tho we were dead” (st. 3). The stanza is based on John 6:33 and 49, “For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.... Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.” That the ancient Jews “dy’d at last” though they ate the manna is a mere statement of fact,

¹⁰ Watts added brackets in some hymns to indicate that the specified stanzas could be omitted without adversely affecting the message of the text.

and though the claim is made that through Communion “We live, tho we were dead,” this is obviously meant in a spiritual sense, not as a critique of the ancient Hebrews, since Christians themselves will ultimately die physically (which Watts points out) even if they partake of the Lord’s Supper.

In some cases, however, the allusion to an Old Testament text as a lesson for Christians casts the Jews in negative terms. In most of these instances, Watts is referring to Jews of the former dispensation who proved to be faithless to their God, not to the Jews as a race. Indeed, these references usually paraphrase critical references in the Old Testament itself.

Thus, the second part of Watts’s version of Ps 78 points out that “*Jacob’s* antient Race” was “a stiff rebellious House” that was “False to their own most solemn Vows, / And to their Maker’s Grace” (st. 1). This theme continues in the fourth part of the same psalm: “Great God, how oft did *Israel* prove / By turns thine Anger and thy Love?” (1:1–2) These verses parallel rather accurately the psalm on which they are based, which calls the Hebrew “fathers” “a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not steadfast with God” (v. 8), who “lied unto him with their tongues” (v. 36b). Watts’s past-tense verbs “was” and “did,” and the adjective “antient” show that Watts had in mind the Jews of the Old Testament—in fact, the very people about whom the psalm was written, and not all Jews at all times or places. The principal critique that should be applied here is his use of “Race,” which might easily be read as a broader critique than Watts probably intended. Watts’s point in his paraphrase of this catalogue of failures is found in the last two lines of part 4, stanza 1: “There in a Glass [i.e., mirror] our Hearts may see / How fickle and how false they [our hearts] be.” The message is clear: learn from the experience of the Old Testament Hebrews because Christians are just as likely to be “stubborn,” “rebellious,” “fickle,” and “false” as were they.

Watts goes on to exclaim, “How soon the faithless *Jews* forgot / The dreadfull [*sic*] Wonders God had wrought!” (2:1–2). This too reflects the biblical record of alternating faithfulness and unfaithfulness on the part of the Old Testament Jews, but, following his source Scripture, which he lists as “*v. 32. &c.*,” the hymn writer further points out the fact of God’s forgiveness and continued love for his chosen people even in the midst of their backsliding.

Yet did his Sovereign Grace forgive
The Men who not deserv’d to live;
His Anger oft away he turn’d,
Or else with gentle Flame it burn’d.

He saw their Flesh was weak and frail,
He saw Temptations still prevail;
The God of *Abraham* lov’d them still,
And led them to his holy Hill. (sts. 6–7)

A similar approach characterizes two of Watts's versions of Ps 95. The Short Meter paraphrase, "Come sound his praise abroad," ends with two stanzas that, on the face of it, seem to consign the Jews to perdition because of their "stubbornness" and their being an "unbelieving Race."

But if your Ears refuse
The Language of his Grace,
And Hearts grow hard like stubborn *Jews*,
That unbelieving Race.

The Lord in Vengeance drest
Will lift his Hand and swear,
"You that despise my promis'd Rest,
"Shall have no Portion there. (sts. 5–6)

This language is troublesome, but it must be read in the context of the Scripture passage the poet is paraphrasing. Watts's stanza 5 parallels verses 8–9 of the psalm, "Harden not your heart [i.e., do not be stubborn], as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work," while stanza 6 is based on verse 11: "Unto whom I sware in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest." As in Watts's hymn based on Ps 78, his reference to the stubbornness of the Jews is in regard to those of the Old Testament who are mentioned in the psalm. It will be noted that stanza 5 is not a complete sentence, despite the period; its continuation (st. 6, the last strophe of the hymn) applies the judgment to all unbelievers. The problem with the hymn again lies principally in Watts's use of the term "Race," which can readily be misinterpreted as referring to all Jews of every time and place. Since his approach to the passage was as a warning to Christians to learn a lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, that was surely not his intent, but his use of a term that might suggest the entire ethnic group is unfortunate. Ultimately, the point of these stanzas for Watts is found in the first two lines of stanza 5: do not refuse "the Language of [God's] Grace" or your fate will be the same as those who were forbidden to enter the Promised Land.

The Long Meter version of the same psalm, "Come, let our voices join to raise," carries a similar message, but in language that is probably less open to misunderstanding. Here the Jews are called "A faithless unbelieving Brood / That tir'd the Patience of their God" (4:3–4), but the reference is more obviously to the Old Testament people who were the subject of the original psalm ("*Israel*, that saw his Works of Grace," 4:1). As in the Short Meter version, the important point is for Christians to learn from the experience of the early Hebrews.

[Look back, my Soul, with holy Dread,
And view those antient Rebels dead;
Attend the offer'd Grace to Day,
Nor lose the Blessing by Delay.

Seize the Kind Promise while it waits,
And march to *Zion's* heavenly Gates;
Believe, and take the promis'd Rest;
Obey, and be for ever blest.] (sts. 6–7)

The Jews and the Crucifixion

One of Watts's hymns and several of his psalm versions make reference to the Jews in relation to the crucifixion of Jesus. However, these mentions need careful attention to their contexts in order to understand exactly what Watts is saying.

Certainly, the hymn "Infinite grief! amazing woe!" (B95) begins with a stanza that sounds like a straightforward blaming of the Jews and Romans for the crucifixion: "Hell and the *Jews* conspir'd his Death, / And us'd the *Roman* Sword" (1:3–4). Though he did not mention it as a scriptural source for the text, Watts's lines draw from Luke 22:2–3, "And the chief priests and scribes sought how they might kill him" and "Then entered Satan into Judas." In Watts's hands, "the chief priests and scribes" become "the *Jews*," and Judas (who has been taken over by Satan, the chief of hell) has become the epitome of "Hell." Thus, Watts, following Luke, blames Judas (or Satan) and the Jewish religious leaders, not the Jewish people, for conspiring the death of Jesus. Without knowledge of this scriptural background, which would probably be the case in most congregational singings of this text, misunderstanding would almost surely occur, and Watts's use of the generic term "Jews" here is unwise. And, while "Hell" and "the *Jews*" are obviously two different things, their linkage could be misconstrued by less attentive readers or singers as meaning that the Jews were in league with hell.

Also regrettable by twenty-first century standards is his later mention of "the more spiteful *Jews*" (3:4), though to whom this refers is not certain: does he mean the Jews who were more spiteful than other Jews or the Jews who were more spiteful than the Romans? Here again, though we cannot be certain, the reference is probably a continuation of the earlier mention of the gospel writer's "chief priests and scribes," who in other places in the gospels are said to have delivered Jesus to Pilate out of "envy" (see below). However, the average parishioner who might not have been familiar with the scriptural background would probably misunderstand the intent. In any event, the rest of the hymn points out that it was *not* the "*Roman* Bands" or the "spiteful *Jews*" who were responsible for the death of Jesus, but the sins of the hymn writer—and by extension, of the singer(s) themselves.

'Twere you, my Sins, my cruel Sins,
His chief Tormentors were;
Each of my Crimes became a Nail,
And Unbelief the Spear. (st. 4)

Watts's other texts that mention the role of the Jews in the crucifixion are found in his versions of the messianic Pss 2, 22, and 69. "Why did the Jews proclaim their rage" (Ps 2 LM) was published in the first (1707) edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* but was dropped in the second edition in anticipation of including

it in *The Psalms of David Imitated*, where it was ultimately printed as one of three versions of the psalm. This Long Meter version and his later Short Meter arrangement, “Maker and sovereign Lord,” are similar in that both draw not only on the Old Testament psalm but also on Acts 4:24–30, the words spoken or sung by the disciples after the release of Peter and John by the chief priests and elders; embedded in the passage is a quotation of the first two verses of Ps 2.¹¹ Watts’s use of the surrounding material in Acts in a version of Ps 2 is particularly clear in “Maker and sovereign Lord,” which begins with two stanzas enclosed in brackets that embrace the non-psalmic parts of the disciples’ words; the second stanza reads as follows.

[The Things so long foretold
By *David* are fulfill’d,
When *Jews* and *Gentiles* joyn’d to slay
Jesus, THINE Holy Child.]

The strophe is derived from Acts 4:27–28, which comes immediately after the quotation from the psalm: “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.” It will be recognized that Watts’s stanza is a more-or-less straightforward rendering of this passage, with “Jews” merely substituted for “the people of Israel.” The next stanza begins the paraphrase of the psalm itself, with Watts extending the Acts reference to Gentiles and Jews into his paraphrase of the psalm’s first two verses (“Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed”).

Why did the *Gentiles* rage,
And *Jews* with one accord
Bend all their Counsels to destroy
Th’ Anointed of the Lord?

It is obvious, of course, that this paraphrase, based as it is on the Acts passage, merely follows the scriptural account from the New Testament and does not hold the Jews as a people as any more responsible than the “Gentiles” for the death of Jesus.

The references to the Jews and Romans in Watts’s earlier paraphrase of Ps 2, “Why did the Jews proclaim their rage,” though less explicit than “Maker and sovereign Lord,” also seem to have been inspired by the Acts passage.

Why did the *Jews* proclaim their Rage?
The *Romans* why their Swords employ?
Against the Lord their Powers engage

¹¹ Acts 4:24 (KJV) says that the disciples “lifted up their voice to God with accord, and said, . . .,” and the following words are lyric poetry, suggesting that the words might have been sung rather than spoken. If spoken, there is the possibility that at least the quoted psalm verses were sung.

His dear Anointed to destroy.

The wording of this stanza is so similar to that in the third stanza of the later “Maker and sovereign Lord” that it is tempting to see the latter as a mere rewriting of this one. It should be pointed out that in these two hymns Watts has used Jews and Gentiles (or Romans) as a gloss on the “nations” of the original psalm verse, meaning that he is using the terms in an inclusive manner to suggest humanity, a feature that will be discussed further below.

Watts’s Long Meter version of Ps 22, “Now let our mournful songs record,” notes that at the crucifixion “The *Jews* behold him thus forlorn, / And shake their heads and laugh in Scorn; / ‘He rescu’d others from the Grave; / ‘Now let him try himself to save[.]’” (st. 8). This and the two following stanzas are an insertion from Matt 27:39–43, which tells of the insults hurled at the crucified Jesus by “they that passed by” and “the chief priests . . . with the scribes and elders.” In the tenth stanza, Watts refers to them as “Barbarous People! Cruel Priests!” The parallelism between stanza 10 and the reference in Matthew suggests that Watts is making the following equation: “they that passed by” = “Barbarous People” and “chief priests” (etc.) = “Cruel Priests.” So far so good, but in stanza 8 Watts uses the single term “Jews”; does he mean by this both “they that passed by” and the priests? If so, that would suggest (in his mind, at least) that all those who “passed by” were also Jews. However, in the gospel account the words he quoted the “Jews” as saying are attributed only to the religious leaders, implying that here again the generic term “Jews” was intended to apply specifically to them.

On the surface, two of Watts’s versions of Ps 69 also seem to blame the Jews for the crucifixion. In both cases, Watts is paraphrasing verse 8, “I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother’s children.” Watts turns this into “‘Amongst my Brethren and the *Jews* / ‘I like a Stranger stood’” and “The *Jews*, his Brethren and his Kin, / Abus’d the Man that checkt their Sin.”¹² Gentiles could hardly be said to have been Jesus’ “kin,” and here again the reference is probably to Jesus’ countrymen who called for his crucifixion rather than the Jews as a whole.

Rejection of Jesus as the Messiah

Several of Watts’s hymns make note of the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah. In some of these cases, Watts uses past tense, indicating that the reference is principally to the Jews of the first century who did not acknowledge his messiahship. One of these hymns is “Behold What Wondrous Grace” (A64).

‘Tis no surprizing [*sic*] thing
That we should be unknown;
The *Jewish* World knew not their King,
God’s everlasting Son.

The stanza is derived from the last clause of 1 John 3:1, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: *therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew*

¹² “Save me, O God, the swelling floods” (Ps. 69 CM pt. 1, 8:1–2); “‘Twas for thy sake, eternal God” (Ps. 69 LM pt. 2, 2:1–2).

him not” (emphasis added). In the hymn, Watts substitutes “The *Jewish* World” for the simple “the world” of the epistle. While the statement is true in a sense, both “the world” of the Scripture and the majority of Jews (Watts’s “*Jewish* World”) having rejected Jesus, some Jews *did* recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and the generic use of “Jewish” seems to be ill advised by modern standards.

In “Who has believ’d thy word” (A141), Watts twice mentions the Jews directly. Stanza 2 opens with the lines “The *Jews* esteem’d him [Jesus] here / Too mean for their Belief,” while stanza 4 claims that God was “pleas’d to bruise / His best-beloved Son” “for the stubborn *Jews* / And *Gentiles* then unknown.” The scriptural background Watts indicated for the text comes from Isa 53, but Watts also probably had in mind Acts 13:43–46, in which Luke indicates that “many of the Jews and religious proselytes [in Antioch of Pisidia] followed Paul and Barnabas” but that “when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming,” upon which Paul declared that the missionaries would “turn to the Gentiles.” “Stubbornness” could certainly characterize the “envious” Jews of Antioch of Pisidia, but Watts’s use of the term here seems out of place, as does the substitution of “Jews” and “Gentiles” for the more generic “our” in Isa 53.

Psalm 118:22, “The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner,” was quoted often in the New Testament, particularly by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, who applied it to his rejection by the Jewish leaders; as Matt 21:45 put it, “when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables [and his quotation from the psalm], they perceived that he spake of them.” Thus, it was natural for Watts to make the same application in two of his versions of Ps 118.

See what a living Stone	Lo what a glorious Corner-stone
The Builders did refuse;	The <i>Jewish</i> Builders did refuse;
Yet God hath built his Church thereon	But God hath built his Church thereon
In Spight of envious <i>Jews</i> . (SM, st. 1)	In Spight of Envy and the <i>Jews</i> . (LM, st. 1)

These examples illustrate a common approach of Watts in which he rewrites a text to provide it in a different hymnic meter, while leaving its basic structure and much of its wording intact; which of these stanzas might have been the original cannot be determined. These are the stanzas that were quoted by Orchard, and they seem particularly harsh in calling the Jews “envious.” However, there are two mitigating factors at work. First, the second stanza of “See what a living stone” goes on to point out that it was “The Scribe and angry Priest” who rejected Jesus, a feature that is also present in the Common Meter version (not quoted here), which calls them “The foolish Builders, Scribe and Priest.” Second, in calling the Jews “envious,” Watts is reflecting Mark 15:10, “For he [Pilate] knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy” (also Matt 27:18), which indicates further that Watts had in mind the religious leaders.

One of Watts’s versions of Ps 8, “Almighty ruler of the skies” (LM), should be mentioned here because of the similarity of some of its language to that in the versions from Ps 118. Watts paraphrases verse 2 of the psalm, “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightiest still the enemy and the avenger,” in his second and third stanzas, then in

stanzas 4–5 he inserts a paraphrase of Matt 21:15–16, which tells of the Triumphal Entry and in which Jesus quotes from the psalm verse.

The frowning Scribes and angry Priests
In vain their impious Cavils bring;
Revenge sits silent in their Breasts,
While *Jewish* Babes proclaim their King. (st. 5)

In contrast to the imitations of Ps 118, here it is the children rather than the scribes and priests who are given the generic label “Jewish,” and they are viewed positively because of their recognition of Jesus as the Messiah.

Watts’s Communion hymn “How rich are thy provisions, Lord” (C12) is based on the parable in Luke 14 of the man who gave a supper to which the invited guests refused to come, upon which the host told his servant to “Go out into the highways and hedges” and find others to share in the festivity. Jesus told the story at a Sabbath meal in “the house of one of the chief Pharisees,” and the other guests were apparently also “lawyers and Pharisees” (vv. 1, 3), so the parable was aimed primarily at those in attendance at the meal. In the second stanza of his hymn, which Watts enclosed in brackets, he notes that God’s “ancient Family the *Jews* / Were first invited to the Feast, / We humbly take what they refuse, / And *Gentiles* thy Salvation taste.” Like all parables, the analogy in this one should not be extended too far, and it might be thought that this is what Watts has done, since the salvation of the Gentiles did not depend upon the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, and, of course, not all the Jews rejected Jesus.

Without specifically identifying it, however, Watts also seems to be referencing Rom 11:11, where Paul says, “I say then, Have they [the Jews] stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles.” Like Paul, Watts’s stanza does not say that the Jewish refusal led God to abandon them, but that Christianity had broken out of its originally Jewish identity to encompass also the Gentiles. The main point in the hymn is that “We” must take the feast “humbly” because the “*Gentiles*” were not the first to be invited to it.

Jews and Gentiles/Greeks as Representatives of Humanity

References to the Jews also come in passages where they are linked with another people group in a negative, positive, or sometimes an ambivalent sense. In these cases, Watts seems to have intended the combination to be a synonym for all of humanity. For example, “Vain are the hopes the sons of men” (A94), based on Rom 3:19–22, begins with the following stanzas.

Vain are the Hopes the Sons of Men
On their own Works have built;
Their Hearts by Nature all unclean,
And all their Actions Guilt.

Let *Jew* and *Gentile* stop their Mouths
Without a murm'ring Word,
And the whole Race of *Adam* stand
Guilty before the Lord.

Here Watts “translates” the phrase “all the world” (v. 19) as “*Jew* and *Gentile*” (representative of “the whole Race of *Adam*”) to show that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Similarly, the fourth stanza of “So did the Hebrew prophet raise” (A112) paraphrases the “whosoever” of John 3:15, “That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life,” as “The *Jew* beholds the glorious Hope, / Th’ expiring *Gentile* lives” to show that salvation is offered freely to all, regardless of one’s ethnic or former religious heritage.

A scriptural background that recurs several times in Watts’s hymns is 1 Cor 1:22–23, “For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock and unto the Greeks foolishness,” as can be seen in the following stanzas from various texts.

Christ and his Cross is all our Theme;
The Mysteries that we speak
Are Scandal in the *Jews* Esteem,
And Folly to the *Greek*. (A119, st. 1)

Let *Jews* and *Greeks* blaspheme aloud,
And treat the holy Child with scorn;
Our Souls adore th’ Eternal God
Who condescended to be born.¹³

While *Jews* on their own Law rely,
And *Greeks* of Wisdom boast,
I love th’ Incarnate Mystery,
And there I fix my Trust. (“Dearest of all the names above,” B148, st. 4)

“Greeks” and “Jews” are also used to represent the whole human race in Watts’s paraphrase of 1 Cor 13, where his version of “Though I speak with tongues of men and of angels” (v. 1) becomes “Had I the Tongues of *Greeks* and *Jews*, / And nobler Speech that Angels use” (1:1–2).

Two important references to Jews and Gentiles (or Greeks) as representative of humanity are in Watts’s versions of Pss 87, “God in his earthly temple lays,” and 149, “All ye that love the Lord rejoice.”

¹³ “The king of glory sends his son” (B136, st. 4). See also the similar line in “Go preach my gospel, saith the Lord (A128), st. 3: “[Go heal the Sick, go raise the Dead, / Go cast out Devils in my Name; / Nor let my Prophets be afraid, / Tho *Greeks* reproach, & *Jews* blaspheme].”

Watts titled Ps 87 “*The Church the Birth-place of the Saints; or, Jews and Gentiles united in the Christian Church.*” In paraphrasing verse 4, “I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me: behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia; this man was born there,” the author stresses that the population of “Zion” (the church) will include “*Egypt and Tyre and Greek and Jew,*” who “Shall there begin their Lives anew.” “All ye that love the Lord rejoice” (Ps 149) calls on those who “love the Lord” to “let your songs be new” (1:1–2) and observes that “The *Jews*, the People of his Grace, / Shall their Redeemer sing; / And *Gentile* Nations join the Praise / While *Zion* owns her King” (st. 2). The Jews are here acknowledged as the people through whom God’s grace was revealed, and, though they must accept Christ like anyone else, the “*Gentile Nations*” are to join with them in praise. There is certainly no hint of racial exclusion here.

The Debt Owed by Christians to the Jews

One of the most interesting features of Watts’s mentions of the Jews is his acknowledgement that Judaism is essentially the bedrock upon which the Christian church was founded. This is hinted at in “How Rich Are Thy Provisions, Lord” (discussed above), when he notes that “Thine ancient Family the *Jews* / Were first invited to the Feast,” but is more fully and clearly developed in “Gentiles by nature we belong” (A114).

Gentiles by Nature we belong
To the wild Olive-wood;
Grace took us from the Barren Tree
And graffs [*sic*] us in the Good.

With the same Blessings Grace endows
The *Gentile* and the *Jew*;
If pure and holy be the Root,
Such are the Branches too. (sts. 1–2)

Watts lists the scriptural source for the hymn as Rom 11:16–17: “And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakes of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.” The context of Paul’s writing is his “heart’s desire and prayer to God” that Israel “might be saved” (Rom. 10:1), his question of whether or not God has “cast away” the Jews (11:1), and his answer that there is still “a remnant according to the election of grace” (11:5). In this hymn for the dedication of children, Watts picks up Paul’s metaphor of grafting a wild olive branch into the trunk of a tree as a symbol of the fact that Christianity has been grafted onto the trunk of Judaism. It is particularly important to note that it is not the Jews who constitute the “Barren Tree” but the Gentiles, who have been rescued from barrenness by being grafted into the “pure and holy” “Root” of Judaism.

A similar thought occurs in the fifth stanza of Watts’s version of Ps 47, “O for a shout of sacred joy.” The stanza “translates” clauses from verses 4 and 7–8 of the psalm.

Watts	Psalm 47
In <i>Israel</i> stood his antient Throne, He lov'd that chosen Race, But now he calls the World his own, And <i>Heathens</i> taste his Grace.	He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom he loved. (4) God is the King of all the earth (7) God reigneth over the heathen (8)

The stanza could be read as a hint of supersessionism, especially since “lov’d” is in past tense; however, there is no reference to Israel or the Jews having been replaced or rejected, merely that God’s love has now expanded beyond that one people group to encompass the entire human race.

The Worship of Jews and Gentiles

Finally, we come to several texts in which Watts seems to suggest an equality in the efficacy of worship by both Jews and Gentiles. The hymn writer made several paraphrases of Ps 50, two of which are nearly identical except for their metrical arrangement, “The Lord, the sovereign sends his summons forth” (“To a New Tune,” 10.10.10.10.10.10) and “The God of glory sends his summons forth” (“To the old proper Tune,” 10.10.10.10.11.11). In both cases, Watts applies the psalm to “*The last Judgment*” (title). At the end of the “New Tune” paraphrase Watts attached the following note.

All the Saints have made a Covenant with God by Sacrifice, (as in the Text [of Ps 50]) and as it were set their Names to God’s Covenant of Grace, ratified by the Sacrifice of Christ of eternal virtue; Tho’ the Jews did it in the antient Forms of Worship, and the Gentiles in the New. (p. 137).

The sentence seems to be intended to explain stanza 3, which is a gloss on verse 5 of the psalm, “Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”

Behold my Covenant stands for ever good,
Seal’d by th’ Eternal Sacrifice in Blood,
And sign’d with all their Names; the *Greek*, the *Jew*,
That pay’d the antient Worship or the new,
There’s no Distinction here: Come, spread their Thrones,
And near me seat my Favorites and my Sons.

In this remarkable stanza, Watts acknowledges that though the worship practices of the Old Testament Hebrews may have been “ceremonial” and were abrogated by the coming of Christ, they were still the expressions of people who were being faithful to God and were thus acceptable to him. While Watts, together with most Christians, believed that since the resurrection acceptance of Christ is necessary for salvation, he nevertheless made it plain that, in his view, the faithful Jews of the Old Testament, as well as later Jews who believed in Jesus, were among the saved who could offer acceptable worship to God.

Two other texts contain similar references. “Bless, O my soul, the living God,” part 1 of his Long Meter paraphrase of Ps 103, mentions that God showed his power and gave his commandments through

Moses, “But sent his Truth and Mercy down / To all the Nations by his Son” (st. 7), then ends with the following stanza, which links “The *Gentile* with the *Jew*” “In Work and Worship so divine.”

[Let the whole Earth his Power confess,
Let the whole Earth adore his Grace;
The *Gentile* with the *Jew* shall join
In Work and Worship so divine.] (st. 8)

The first five stanzas of “God of eternal love” (Ps 106 pt. 2) present a catalogue of ancient Israel’s failures and God’s faithfulness, ending with a sixth stanza that repeats nearly verbatim lines from his “O for a shout of sacred joy” quoted above.

Let *Israel* bless the Lord,
Who lov’d their antient Race;
And *Christians* join the solemn Word
Amen to all the Praise.

At the end of the hymn Watts included a note of explanation about its text, which reads in part, “*Tho’ the Jews now seem to be cast off, yet the Apostle Paul assures us that God hath not cast away his people whom he foreknew. Rom. 11. 2. Their unbelief and Absence from God is but for a Season, for they shall be recalled again. V. 25. 26*” (280). It is important to note in this stanza that the Jews (“Israel”) are not linked with another ethnic group (“Gentile” or “Greek”) as in the previous examples, but with “Christians.” This is another statement that faithful Jews of the Old Testament era and faithful Christians of the New Testament era (whether Gentiles or ethnic Jews) worship the same God and have the same access to him.

One final example that perhaps sums up Watts’s overall attitude about the Jews is in the third (last) stanza of “Not different food or different dress” (A126), titled “*Charity and Uncharitableness.*”

Let Pride and Wrath be banish’d hence,
Meekness and Love our Souls pursue:
Nor shall our Practice give Offence
To Saints, the *Gentile* or the *Jew*.

A stanza such as this certainly calls into question any statement that Watts was racially antisemitic in writing his hymns and indicates that his references to the Jews had no intention of causing “Offence.” His hope, like that of Paul, was that the Jews would ultimately accept Jesus of their own free will, and that Gentile and Jewish Christians would join together in worship of God.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Isaac Watts’s hymnic references to the Jews are not always what they appear to be on the surface. Many of the references have a negative connotation, but an examination of their scriptural backgrounds, their contexts as part of an entire hymn, Watts’s purposes in writing them, and other

information shows that in the vast majority of cases these allusions referred either to the unfaithful Jews of the Old Testament or to the Hebrew religious leaders or others of Jesus' time, and that Watts's intention was not a condemnation of the Jews as a whole or as a race. On the contrary, he readily admitted the debt owed by Christians to the Jews and held, with Paul, that God still had a plan for them. Of course, as with other Christians, he believed that Old Testament religion had been superseded by the New Testament, and that the Jewish leaders had a role in the crucifixion of Christ, but it appears that Watts did not harbor undue hostility toward the Jews as a race of people, and his hymns certainly demonstrate no encouragement whatever toward persecution or disadvantaging of them. Indeed, he went out of his way to say that "our Practice" should not "give Offense" to them.

This is not to say, however, that these hymns, which have mostly disappeared from common use anyway, should necessarily be sung by modern congregations: they are too susceptible of misunderstanding. In a post-Holocaust world, calling the Jews "envious" or "spiteful," or linking "hell and the Jews" is surely out of place, regardless of the author's original aim. The problem with many of Watts's references to the Jews is not so much in his probable intention as it is in how they might be (and have been) misconstrued by modern congregations and critics.

The perceived antisemitic elements in Watts's hymns result principally from two things: his tendency to use the word "Jews" in a manner that often disguises the original biblical context and is thus susceptible to misinterpretation, and his combining of verses from different parts of Scripture. While it has been shown that in his use of the terms "Jew" or "Jews" he usually had in mind specific groups of Jews, these terms are too broad not to be subject to misrepresentation. In these instances, we could wish that Watts had been more precise in his choice of words.

The hymn writer had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, and in both *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and *The Psalms of David Imitated* he brought the full range of that knowledge to bear on the song of the church. Thus, in Ps 22 he could have the "Jews" "shake their heads" and laugh in scorn at Jesus on the cross, or bring the words "envious" and "envy" from the New Testament into Ps 118. Most of the time, Watts's juxtapositions from different parts of the Bible are creative and enhance the message of the text.¹⁴ In the case of some references, however, the combinations result in paraphrases that to modern sensibilities can come across as derogatory or even hateful, and while that was probably not at all what Watts intended, it removes these hymns from potential use.

In his 2010 article "From Experiential Educator to Nationalist Theologian: The Hymns of Isaac Watts," John M. Hull described what he believed to be an "imperial theology" in Watts's familiar "Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun." In concluding his discussion of this hymn, Hull wrote that "Watts ... did not intend to create an imperial theology. He intended to make the psalms meaningful for Christian worshippers."¹⁵ In like manner, it can be said that Watts did not intend to express antisemitic viewpoints in

¹⁴ A good example is his allusion to Phil 4:19, "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus," in the first stanza of his CM version of Ps 23, "My shepherd will supply my need."

¹⁵ John M. Hull, "From Experiential Educator to Nationalist Theologian: The Hymns of Isaac Watts," *Bulletin of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 264, vol. 19, no. 9 (July 2010), 269.

his hymns. He intended to write hymns and psalm versions that would be meaningful for Christian worshippers. If in the process he sometimes made references that today are not viable, we must recognize that fact, learn from it, and be grateful for his other work, which has enriched Christian congregational singing for more than 300 years.