

Week 5: Common Meter

O God, Our Help In Ages Past

Text: Isaac Watts (1674–1748), 1719

- Son of committed Nonconformists in England (protestants who refused to join the Church of England)
- Began writing hymns at 17, being dissatisfied with the strict psalm translations in use at the time
- Watts aimed to recast the psalms in a modern light to make them more relevant and approachable
- As he wrote to the famous Boston preacher Cotton Mather in 1717:

'Tis not a translation of David that that I pretend, but an imitation of him, so nearly in Christian hymns that the Jewish Psalmist may plainly appear, and yet leave Judaism behind.

- In 1712, a prolonged illness forced him to retire from pastoral duties, though his church refused to discontinue his salary
- Watts moved into the estate of Sir Thomas Abney, a wealthy churchmember, and stayed until his death
- While there, Watts worked on paraphrasing most of the 150 psalms, and published them in 1719 as *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*
- This hymn is from that collection, based on Psalm 90:1-5

Tune: William Croft (1678–1727), 1708

- A prominent church musician in his time, Croft served as organist in a number of London churches, including the famed Westminster Abbey
- Also a composer of instrumental music, he wrote some for the funeral of Queen Anne and the coronation of her successor, King George I
- This tune, ST. ANNE, is believed to have been written during his time at St. Anne's Church from 1700–1711
- First published in *A Supplement to the New Version of Psalms*, paired with a setting of Psalm 42
- Later matched with "O God, Our Help" in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861

1. Compare the hymn text with the original scripture in Psalm 90:1-5. How well do you think Watts captured the overall "feeling" of this passage? Does he follow the psalm strictly, or are there additions or modifications you can find that make the text more poetic?
 - a. Although the later verses in Psalm 90 are a bit more depressing, Watts does a good job capturing the confidence of verses 1-5
 - i. Each stanza (except the last) is a matter-of-fact declaration, simply stating things how they are.
 - b. Overall, Watts mirrors the text closely but heavily rearranges the order and makes a few artistic modifications
 - i. Watts adds extra imagery to God as our "dwelling place" by placing us "under the shadow" of His throne
 - ii. Rather than the "years" being swept away by God as in the scripture, Watts turns it around into the years sweeping us away
 - c. The final stanza turns the hymn into a prayer to God, just as the psalm is addressed to God
2. In its original version, the opening line was "Our God, our help", which John Wesley changed to "O God, our help" when he republished it in 1738. Although "O God" is the more common of the two, both versions remain in use today. Which do you think is more effective stylistically? Are there theological implications from this small change?
 - a. Stylistically, "Our God, our help" has an obvious repetition of "our"
 - i. This could be a useful poetic technique to emphasize God as *our* God
 - ii. On the other hand, it doesn't seem to "flow" as well, and this kind of close repetition doesn't happen elsewhere in the hymn
 - b. Theologically, "Our God" implies He's not "their God"
 - i. This fits with the Old Testament pattern of "the Lord *our* God", the God of Israel who will save His chosen people
 - i. Given that the hymn is a paraphrase of Psalm 90, this may be an appropriate choice

- ii. This psalm specifically, scholars believe, was written after the death of King Josiah, urging the Hebrews to repentance and reminding them of God's steadfast help through dark times
- ii. Post-reformation, it sounds reminiscent of Calvin's concept of the "elect", which is likely why Wesley revised it
 - i. Wesley would rather emphasize the grace of God being open to everyone, not just "us"
- iii. At the time of Watts' writing, the impending death of Queen Anne without an heir meant great uncertainty about whether Britain would remain Protestant or have a Roman Catholic come to power (which, in the past, had meant persecution of the other group)
 - i. Watts was a part of the Puritan and Dissenter traditions in England who were ill-treated by both Anglicans and Catholics
 - ii. Language like "our God" was well-used in these circles, as they strongly viewed themselves as continuing in God's covenant with His chosen people in the face of persecution

God Moves in a Mysterious Way

Text: William Cowper (1731–1800), 1773

- Youngest child of an Anglican minister, his three older siblings and his mother all died before he was 7
- Although educated to be an attorney, Cowper suffered from severe depression and never practiced law
- Fear of examination for a clerkship in the House of Lords led to an unsuccessful suicide attempt in 1763
- Committed to an asylum run by a Christian doctor, he began to work out of his depression and renewed his personal commitment to Christ
- He lived with church friends following his discharge, moving with them to Olney where John Newton (author of "Amazing Grace") was serving as a pastor
- There, he functioned as assistant to Newton and collaborated on the collection of *Olney Hymns*, published in 1779 with 68 hymns by Cowper included
- This hymn was written just before Cowper was struck by another bout of depression
- He attempted suicide again later the same year, but through care of friends continued to survive to the age of 69

Tune: Thomas Ravenscroft, 1615

- First published in the 1615 *Scottish Psalter* as one of a dozen "common tunes", without any particular text
 - Thomas Ravenscroft later published a harmonized version in his *Whole Booke of Psalms* six years later
 - Ravenscroft is best known for collecting and publishing folk tunes (one of which has the earliest known version of "Three Blind Mice")
 - Named DUNDEE after the city in Scotland of the same name, a leading city in the Scottish Reformation
1. This hymn gets much of its power through the use of contrasts, which its original subtitle "Light shining out of darkness" alludes to. What examples of this do you see in the text? Which metaphors do you find most effective?
 - a. Contrasts:
 - i. Stanza 2: Deep mines vs. bright treasures
 - ii. Stanza 4: Frowning providence vs. smiling face
 - iii. Stanza 5: Bitter bud vs. sweet flower
 - b. Other metaphors:
 - i. Stanza 3: Life's fears are like a cloud that parts into sunshine of blessings
 - ii. Stanza 5: God's purposes ripen like a fruit
 - iii. Stanza 6: Unbelief is "literally" blind, unable to read God's promises correctly
 2. This hymn deals with the same topic as "O God, Our Help In Ages Past" – seeking God in times of trouble – but takes a slightly different approach. What differences and similarities do you see between the two hymns? In what situations would one be more appropriate than the other?
 - a. Stylistically, Cowper is reminiscent of Newton's "Amazing Grace":
 - i. The hymn texts use a fairly simple vocabulary

- ii. Both use contrasts to good effect (e.g. “once was lost but now am found / was blind but now I see”)
- b. Watts’ hymn has a far more majestic feeling
 - i. The imagery is grandiose and wide in scope, talking about “a thousand ages” and the “ever-rolling stream” of time
 - ii. The text has an air of finality about it, aided by the repetition in the “bookend” first and last stanzas
- c. Cowper is more extensive in his metaphors than Watts
 - i. Watts sticks to the “usual” Old Testament metaphors (appropriate for paraphrasing a psalm)
 - ii. Cowper uses more “modern” or unconventional choices to make his points
- d. The personal approach suggested in each hymn is different
 - i. Cowper suggests that we may not understand God’s plan *now*, but in the end we will
 - ii. Watts gives a far more unquestioning faith - simply remaining resolute and trusting God to save us in the end

Exercises

Stanzas in common meter follow the pattern 8.6.8.6, with iambic feet in groups of 4 and 3. For example:

× / × / × / × /
 O God, our help in ag - es past

 × / × / × /
 and hope for years to come

1. Complete a line of 8 syllables following the common meter pattern, that starts with the following:

× / × / × / × /
 At church to - day, _____

2. Continue on to a second line of 6 syllables (without worrying about rhyme):

× / × / × /

3. Now follow the same process to write two lines of common meter about one of the fruits of the spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control):