

Joy to the World

Overview

A central theme of Matthew's gospel is that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus of Nazareth, the son of David, has come as the promised king, and calls all people to submit to him now. Yet the full realization of the kingdom awaits a future date.

This notion of the kingdom as both present and future lies behind one of our best-loved carols, Isaac Watts' "Joy to the World," which is based on Psalms 96 and 98.

Though these Psalms come late in the Psalter and are not attributed, at least Psalm 96 goes back to the time of David, and they are so similar that we should probably assign Psalm 98 a similar date. 1 Chronicles 16 records the occasion, about 990 BC, when David brought the ark from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem (1 Chr 16:1), and appointed Asaph and his brethren to sing praises to the Lord.

1Ch 16:1 So they brought the ark of God, and set it in the midst of the tent that David had pitched for it: 7 Then on that day David delivered first this psalm to thank the LORD into the hand of Asaph and his brethren.

It cites several psalms that they used, all from the fourth book of Psalms (Table 1, charts), including Psalm 96. The ark is God's throne in the midst of his people, which is why he is often described as dwelling (literally "sitting," "enthroned") between the cherubim,

1 Sam. 4:4 So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, **which dwelleth between the cherubims**: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

2 Sam. 6:2 And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the LORD of hosts **that dwelleth between the cherubims**. ~ 1 Chr 13:6

2 Ki. 19:15 And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD, and said, O LORD God of Israel, **which dwellest between the cherubims**, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth. ~ Isa 37:16

Ps. 80:1 <A Psalm of Asaph.> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou **that dwellest between the cherubims**, shine forth.

Ps. 99:1 The LORD reigneth; let the people tremble: **he sitteth between the cherubims**; let the earth be moved.

| 1 Chr 16 | Psalm |
|----------|--------------|
| 8-22 | 105:1-15 |
| 23-33 | 96:2-13 |
| 34-36 | 106:1, 47-48 |

Table 1: Psalms for the Dedication of the Jerusalem

Joy to the World, Psalm 96, Psalm 98, and Isaiah 55

David brings the ark to Jerusalem because he recognizes that God is the real king of Israel, and Jerusalem can only be the nation's capital if God is enthroned there. When these Psalms say that "the Lord has come" (96:13; 98:10), the reference is to the ark entering Jerusalem.

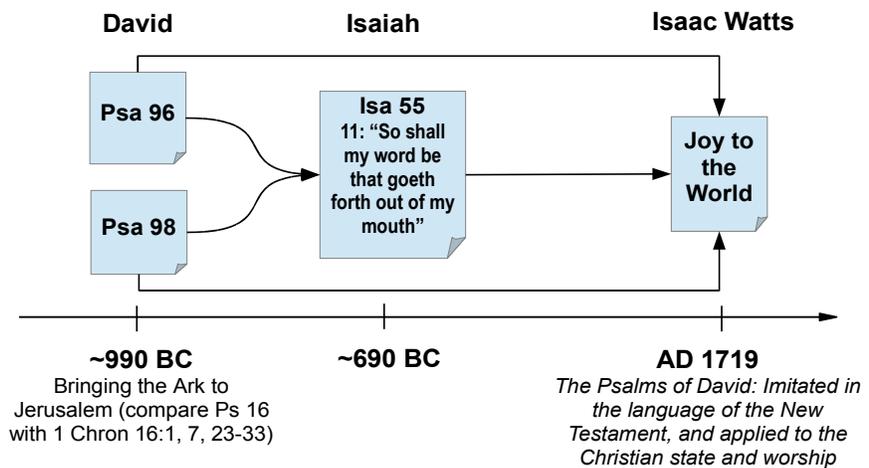
The prophets foresaw the desolation of Jerusalem, but also its restoration as capital. Isaiah in particular anticipated the day,

Isa 24:23 Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.

So we are not surprised that Isaiah often alludes to these psalms. In particular, consider this promise, in which v. 12 takes us back to these psalms:

Isa 55:10 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: 11 **So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.** 12 **For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.** 13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

When the Lord says, "So shall my word be" (v. 11), he may have in mind the word that he gave through David in the Psalms. Isaiah forms his prophetic poem on these psalms, already three centuries old in his day, and Isaac Watts, nearly 2500 years after Isaiah, draws on Isaiah and the Psalms to give us this carol (Figure 1, charts).



Let's trace the allusions of *Figure 1: Poets Quoting Poets*

the carol to David and

Isaiah. Then we'll consider these Psalms in their historical context, and finally their relevance to our Lord's first advent.

Poets Quoting Poets

The hymn is full of allusions to the two psalms, and also to Isaiah 55. Note also (in red) things

Joy to the World, Psalm 96, Psalm 98, and Isaiah 55

that Watts adds that are not explicit in his texts.

First Stanza

| Isaac Watts | Pss 96-98 | Isa 55 |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Joy to the World,</p> <p>the Lord is come!</p> <p>Let earth receive her King</p> <p>Let every heart prepare Him room,</p> <p>And Heaven and nature sing.</p> | <p>Psa 98:4 Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth:</p> <p>Psa 98:9 ...before the Lord, for he cometh (96:13)</p> <p>Psa 98:6 make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King. → 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1</p> <p>Psa 96:11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;</p> | <p>Isa 55:12 For ye shall go out with joy,</p> |

Watts intends the hymn to correspond to “Psalm XCVIII, Second Part,” and he takes his leading line from v. 4.

The idea of the Lord’s coming is in v. 9, but also in 96:13.

The Lord as king is in v. 6, but pervasive throughout this portion of Psalms.

The closest parallel to “heaven and nature sing” is not in Ps 98, but 96:11.

Isa 55:12 picks up the note of joy.

Second Stanza

| Isaac Watts | Pss 96-98 | Isa 55 |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!</p> <p>Let men their songs employ;</p> <p>While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains</p> | <p>Psa 96:10 Say among the heathen <i>that</i> the LORD reigneth → 93:1; 97:1; 99:1</p> <p>Psa 98:5 Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm.</p> <p>Psa 96:1 O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day.</p> <p>Psa 98:7 Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. 8 Let the floods clap <i>their</i> hands: let the hills be joyful together</p> | <p>Isa 55:12 ... the mountains and the hills shall break forth</p> |

Joy to the World, Psalm 96, Psalm 98, and Isaiah 55

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Repeat the sounding joy. | Psa 96:11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. 12 Let the field be joyful, and all that <i>is</i> therein: then shall let all the trees of the wood rejoice | before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap <i>their</i> hands. |
|--------------------------|--|--|

In the second stanza, Psa 96 comes more to the fore, with the verb “reigns,” common in this block of Psalms but not in Psa 98.

Both psalms emphasize the use of singing to praise the Lord.

The voice of nature is a distinctive feature of both Psalms, and the strongest link to Isa 55:12.

Third Stanza

| Isaac Watts | Isa 55 | Gen 3 |
|---|--|--|
| No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow Far as the curse is found. | Isa 55:13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign <i>that</i> shall not be cut off. | Gen 3:17 cursed <i>is</i> the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat <i>of</i> it all the days of thy life; 18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; |

Watts’ third stanza has no counterpart in the psalms. It’s here that we see the link to Isa 55:13 most clearly, with its recollection of the role of thorns and briars as part of the curse of Gen 3.

Isaiah’s fir and myrtle, beautiful and valuable trees, instantiate the blessings of the hymn.

Fourth Stanza

| Isaac Watts | Pss 96-98 |
|--|--|
| He rules the world with truth and grace , | Psa 96:13 for he cometh to judge the earth : he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people(s) with his truth . |
| And makes the nations prove The glories ... | Psa 96:3 Declare his glory among the heathen , his wonders among all people(s) . |
| ...of His righteousness, And wonders of His love . | Psa 98:9 for he cometh to judge the earth : with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people(s) with equity. |

As the third stanza does not mention the psalms, so the fourth stanza does not echo Isa 55. Instead, it draws our attention to the emphasis in the psalms on the universal extent of the Lord's kingdom, anticipating the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Psalms 96 and 98

Psa 90-106 form the fourth book of Psalms, and several of these emphasize the kingship of the Lord (chart):

Psa 93:1 **The LORD reigneth**, he is clothed with majesty;

Psa 95:3 For **the LORD** is a great God, and a great **King** above all gods.

Psa 96:10 Say among the heathen *that* **the LORD reigneth**: the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved: he shall judge the people righteously.

Psa 97:1 **The LORD reigneth**; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad *thereof*.

Psa 98:6 With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before **the LORD, the King**.

Psa 99:1 **The LORD reigneth**; let the people tremble: he sitteth *between* the cherubims; let the earth be moved.

Given the background of Psalm 96 in the dedication of Jerusalem in 1 Chron 16, this emphasis is not surprising.

Their form is the same: two imperative calls to praise, each followed by an indicative cause for praise (the reason that we should praise him). Let's consider the sections in parallel.

First Call to Praise

96:1 O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. 3 Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people[s].

98:1a O sing unto the LORD a new song;

In both cases we are commanded to sing *to the Lord*. But Psalm 96, from the middle of v. 2, tells us that we should also be talking *to others* about him, and not just in Israel. We are to show forth his salvation to the heathen, and declare his glory among all peoples.

Psalm 96 also is the first to introduce what will be a prominent theme of both psalms, the Lord's authority not only over Israel, but also over all nations. "People" in 96:3, and everywhere in these two psalms, is actually plural. Together with "nations," "heathen," and "all the earth," this expression anticipates the spread of the gospel beyond Israel under the new covenant.

It also introduces the theme of “his salvation.” Those who are worshiping him have experienced his deliverance, and should be eager to share it with others.

First Cause for Praise

96:4 For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods. 5 For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens. 6 Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

98:1b for he hath done marvellous things: his right hand, and his holy arm, hath gotten him the victory. 2 The LORD hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen. 3 He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

The cause for praise is marked by the conjunction “for,” giving the reason for the commands. Here and in the second cause section, this conjunction is doubled in Psalm 96.

Now Psalm 98 picks up the two themes that Psalm 96 introduced in the first call—the focus on God’s salvation, and the attention to the heathen.

The content of the cause for praise differs in the two psalms.

In Psalm 96, the focus is on the Lord’s superiority to other gods. We are led to contemplate his majesty in his sanctuary.

In Psalm 98, we are reminded of his special relation toward Israel. The reference to his strong arm recalls the song of Moses at the Red Sea:

Exo 15:6 Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.

God’s salvation here is thus focused on the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

We praise God for many things in our lives, and it is right that we should praise him when he blesses us. But even when all our circumstances are going sour, we can always praise him for his majesty and the salvation he has graciously given us in making us his people.

Second Call to Praise

96:7 Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people[s], give unto the LORD glory and strength. 8 Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come into his courts. 9 O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth. 10 Say among the heathen that the LORD reigneth: the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved: he shall judge the people righteously. 11 Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. 12 Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: ~~then shall~~ let all the trees of the wood rejoice 13 Before the LORD:

98:4 Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. 5 Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm. 6 With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King. 7 Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. 8 Let the floods clap *their* hands: let the hills be joyful together 9 Before the LORD;

As in the first call to praise, the direction of the praise is different. Again, in Ps 98 it is addressed only to the Lord, but in Ps 96, it overflows to the heathen. In fact, v. 10 gives us the message that we are to proclaim among the heathen, focused on submission, faith, and repentance:

- The Lord reigneth. He is king. We should *submit* to his rule.
- Under his authority, the world shall be established. He will settle the disruptions and upset that mark the world. We should *trust* him to care for us.
- He will judge. The word יָד is different from that used in 96:13 and 98:9 (שָׁפַט), and refers to adjudicating a charge against somebody.¹ He will hold people accountable to obey his law. We should *repent* of our sin against him.

Note the shift from past tense to future.² He reigns now, but the world is not yet established, and the time of judgment has not yet arrived. Psalm 96 reflects the same “already—not yet” contrast that we have seen in the gospels.

In 96:11 and 98:7, the poet changes audience. At first, as in the first call to praise, he addressed the peoples. Now he speaks to nature. The prophets anticipate the renewal of fallen nature during the coming kingdom (Isa 35:1 the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose), but even during our Lord’s first advent, he showed power over creation, in calming the sea. And recall his words when the Pharisees expressed displeasure with the enthusiasm of the crowds on Palm Sunday:

Luk 19:39 And some of the Pharisees from among the multitude said unto him, Master, rebuke thy disciples. 40 And he answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.

Second Cause for Praise

96:13b for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people[s] with his truth.

98:9b for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people[s] with equity.

We have the same “already—not yet” contrast here that we saw in 96:10. He has come, but he will judge.

The judgment in this case is not deciding charges against people, but a different verb indicating

1 See note, with citation from Girdlestone.

2 This observation must be tentative—see notes.

his administration over the earth. It is the verb that describes the work of the “judges” in the sixth book of our OT, and Watts is correct in rendering it by “rule.”

Why at Christmas?

These psalms anticipate the return of our Lord to set up his millennial kingdom.³ Why, then, do we sing this carol at Christmas?

In both the message for the heathen in 96:10 and the conclusion in 96:13; 98:9, the poet describes the Lord’s reign and presence as already here, but his work in stabilizing the earth, adjudicating wrongdoing, and administering the world, as future. The situation is exactly that envisioned at our Lord’s advent and captured by the message that he, following John the Baptist, preached: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17).

³ Watts understood this in a covenant sense, that “the Christian State” (as he describes it in the title of his book) would implement the Lord’s “Gospel-Kingdom to judge or rule the Gentiles” (from his introduction to Ps 96).

Notes

Watts' Introductions to his Paraphrases

From his *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, And apply'd to the Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

Ps 96

“In this and the two following Psalms *The first coming of Christ* into the World is represented in a Prophetic Style, as tho' he were coming the second time to the last Judgment: But that *Christ's Incarnation, his setting up his Gospel-Kingdom* to judge or rule the *Gentiles*, and the *Judgment and Destruction of the Heathen Idols*, is the true Design of these three Psalms, is evident from several Expressions in them, and particularly because *the Earth, the Fields, the Ses, &c, are call'd to rejoice*; whereas the *final Judgment of the World* is represented dreadfull to all Nature, and to the Nations of the Earth. See *Rev. 17.* and *Rev. 20:11,* and *2 Pet. 3. 7, 10.* Yet since this last Coming has something in it Parallel to his *first*, I have in the different parts of the Psalms referr'd to Both.”

Ps 98

Watts entitles the hymn, “The Messiah’s Coming and Kingdom.” Though he labels it as a paraphrase of “Psalm 98: Second Part,” in a note he says, “In these two Hymns which I have formed out of the 98th Psalm I have fully exprest what I esteem to be the first and chief Sense of the holy Scriptures, both in this and the 96th Psalm, whose conclusions are both alike.” So he recognizes including Ps 96 in his thought. On Ps 97: “This Psalm foretells the Incarnation of Christ. For the words of the 7th verse Worship him all he Gods, are translated Heb 1:6. Let all the Angels of God worship him. By this Divine hint I was directed to compose this Hymn, and to introduce the Star that shone at his Birth as a part of the Proclamation of him in the Heavens v. 6. See more Notes on Ps. 95.”

The Lord’s Kingship in the Books of the Psalms

Verses that either call the Lord the king מֶלֶךְ, or say that he reigns מְלִיךְ

| Book | Verses / Psalm | References |
|-------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1-41 | 5/41 = 0.12 | 5/41: 10:16; 20:9; 24:8, 10; 29:10 |
| 42-72 (Elohistic) | 1/31 = 0.03 (but 6/31 = 0.19 including elohistic statements) | 1/31: 47:2 |

Joy to the World, Psalm 96, Psalm 98, and Isaiah 55

| | | |
|---------|-------------|--|
| 78-89 | 2/12 = 0.17 | 2/12: 84:3; 89:18 |
| 90-106 | 6/17 = 0.35 | 6/17: 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1 |
| 107-150 | 1/44 = 0.02 | 1/44: 146:10 |

References to אלהים as מלך : Ps. 5:2; 44:4; 47:6, 7, 8; 68:24; 74:12; 145:1; 146:10

Verb Forms in Parallel

I suggest that the shift from perfect to imperfect in 96:10, 13 and 98:9 indicates a temporal distinction. Alternatively, the prefix forms may be archaic preterites, without the distinctive waw-consecutive common in prose. This is not the only place this “tense-shifting”⁴ appears: compare Ps 44:2 and Buth’s article cited below. Buth maintains that the alternation can be “for purely poetic reasons,” e.g., to provide a marker for chiasmus. But Witt⁵ objects—though I haven’t studied his paper in detail.

So one cannot insist on the temporal distinction, but this may be a case like Paul’s citation of Gen 12:7 in Gal 3:16, where the singular of “seed,” used collectively, is seen to have a deeper meaning in the light of NT revelation.

“Judge” in 96:10, 13

The poet uses דן in the first case, and שפט in the second (and the parallel 98:9). Girdlestone has a very helpful note contrasting the two:

Din (דן, Ass. danu), to judge, whence the name Dan, implies a settlement of what is right where there is a charge upon a person, and so it comes to signify the decision of a cause. It is rendered judge in more than thirty passages. It is a judicial word, while shaphath is rather administrative. The one would mark the act whereby men’s position and destiny are decided; the other would point to the mode in which men would be governed and their affairs administered.⁶

In our case, v. 10 is promising the last judgment, while the last verse in each Psalm is anticipating the Lord’s administration over the earth.

4 The term appears in Nicholas Lunn, *Word-Order Variation in Biblical Hebrew Poetry: Differentiating Pragmatics and Poetics*, Paternoster, 2006, p. 245, and goes back to Randall Buth, The taxonomy and function of Hebrew tense-shifting in the Psalms (qatal-yiqtol-yiqtol-qatal, antithetical grammatical parallelism), *START* 15, 1986, pp. 26-32, <https://www.sil.org/resources/archives/7212>

5 Andrew Witt, ThM Thesis, SW Baptist Theo Seminary, Wake Forest, NC, 2008, https://www.academia.edu/2265450/The_Syntax_of_the_Verb_in_Biblical_Hebrew_Poetry_The_Textlinguistic_Theory_of_Alviere_Niccacci

6 Girdlestone, R. B. (1998). *Synonyms of the Old Testament: their bearing on Christian doctrine.* (p. 252). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.