

Poetic Pedantry or Pastoral Passion: Olney Hymns and John Newton's Old Testament Hermeneutic

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Introduction

Hymns authored by John Newton have permeated nearly every hymnal since his only foray into hymnody, *Olney Hymns*, which he authored along with William Cowper, appeared in 1779. Hailed as ‘one of the most substantial achievements of eighteenth-century hymnology’,¹ Newton’s texts from *Olney Hymns*, such as “Glorious things of Thee are spoken”, “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds”, and most notably, “Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)”, have become familiar to English-speaking Christians throughout nearly every strand of the denominational webbing of the modern church.

Most twentieth-century surveys of hymnody include a section, if not an entire chapter, devoted to Newton and Cowper’s *Olney Hymns*,² and the significance of its publication is almost universally acknowledged in hymn studies. According to Stephen Marini’s 2002 survey of hymn usage in popular hymnals between 1737 and 1860, four of Newton’s texts rank among the 71 most widely published hymns of that period,³ which is a remarkable feat considering that Newton hardly wrote any hymns beyond the 281 published in *Olney Hymns*.⁴ Yet in spite of the impact Newton had on hymnody, most studies of Newton’s hymns have focused on his apparent deficiency in literary prowess, especially when considered in light of his co-author’s fame as a poet in realms both sacred and secular.

In Janet M. Todd’s study, “Preacher as Prophet: John Newton’s Evangelical Hymns,”⁵ the author observes the role of Newton the Preacher in his own hymns, finding that Newton’s hymns give the inhabitants of Olney a ‘cosmic context, both fearful and exhilarating,’ which causes the town to rise to an ‘heroic stature: the sins of Exodus flourish in Buckinghamshire and the Good Samaritan is translated to the streets of Olney.’⁶ Newton himself, as the preacher sent by God in the vein of Elijah and Moses, a sort of ‘after-type of

Christ,' places himself at least to the level of the prophet Ezekiel, Todd says, and approaches that of God, by penning the lines—

Like him [Ezekiel] around I cast my eye,
 And oh! what heaps of bones appear;
 Like him, by Jesus sent, I'll try,
 For he can cause the dead to hear.⁷

Thus, Todd reads Newton's hymns as the work of a one approaching megalomania, who, though smart enough to understand the necessity of a certain amount of humility in the pastorate, in the final say places himself as the iconic example for the congregation to follow in place of Christ: 'The character and attitudes are exemplary, but are so heavily informed by Newton's own conviction of his power and uniquely blessed status that, ultimately, it seems Newton the preacher whom the other must imitate in song.'⁸ Todd constructs a good argument based on her few selections of Newton's hymnody, but lacks a view of the hymns as a whole—she makes no mention of Newton's sources, hermeneutical principles, or his own stated intentions in composing the hymns.⁹

Similarly, Erik Routley's survey, *Hymns and Human Life*, though admitting due credit to the popularity of *Olney Hymns* and the success of many of Newton's individual compositions, could not give a reason for this success.

He wrote hymns because there was nobody else to write them. They never rise to [Isaac] Watts' heights nor sink to his depths; some of them come off magnificently, most of them are in a high degree tedious and didactic. He thought of the hymns as a means of making the church people sing and of engraving the truth of the Gospel on their hearts. He hacked them out of commonplace material and never wrote a line of verse apart from them.¹⁰

For Routley, Newton's hymns are inferior (at least to those of Watts) because they are, on the whole, 'tedious and didactic', existing simply to fill a needed void. Most studies of *Olney Hymns* seem to take up Routley's attitude, extolling the excellency of Cowper's genius and then founding their judgments of Newton's hymnody on a similar literary basis,¹¹ while taking only a minor notice of the author's own intentions. These intentions are clearly set forth by Newton in his preface to the *Olney Hymns*:

There is a style and manner suited to the composition of hymns, which may be more successfully, or at least more easily attained by a versifier, than by a poet. They should be *Hymns*, not *Odes*, if designed for public worship, and for the use of plain people. Perspicuity, simplicity and ease, should be chiefly attended to; and the imagery and colouring of poetry, if admitted at all, should be indulged very sparingly and with great judgment... But though I would not offend readers of taste by a wilful coarseness, and negligence, I do not write professedly for them. If the LORD whom I serve, has been pleased to favour me with that mediocrity of talent, which may qualify me for usefulness to the weak and the poor of his flock, without quite disgusting persons of superior discernment, I have reason to be satisfied.

From this quotation, Newton's goals for his hymns can be distilled as follows:

- (1) To be used in public worship by 'plain people.'
- (2) To communicate the espoused truths with 'perspicuity, simplicity, and ease.'
- (3) To be of use to the 'weak and poor of [the Lord's] flock.'

These are the concerns of a pastor, for, as D. Bruce Hindmarsh notes, 'The hymn-writing task was indeed for Newton first and foremost a response to the spiritual needs of his people, and many hymns arose from very specific situations in the parish.'¹²

Newton saw his primary calling as pastoral, to 'shepherd the flock of God that is among you,' (1 Pet. 5:2) whether it was through counselling, preaching, letter-writing, or hymnody.¹³ This latter he took up only as a means to a pastoral end, and once his objective had been attained, his lyrical efforts ceased, as Routley has already pointed out, 'He thought of the hymns as a means of making the church people sing and of engraving the truth of the Gospel on their hearts. He hacked them out of commonplace material and never wrote a line of verse apart from them.'¹⁴

But this readiness on the part of Routley and other critics to dismiss Newton as poor hymnwriter with the occasional fluke success displays a neglect to identify *why* Newton wrote the way he did, and whether or not he succeeded in accomplishing his own goals. Did his poetry soar to the lofty heights of Cowper, Watts, or Wesley? No; admittedly, if not purposefully so.¹⁵ But his

hymns were not ‘hacked out of commonplace material’; they were hacked out of the Scriptures. The purpose of Newton’s hymns, Donald E. Demaray writes, was ‘to reinforce the sermon. This purpose, usually in Newton’s mind, accounts for the fact that the Olney hymn book is weak as a system of praise.¹⁶ But from the doctrinal point of view the hymns are complete to a remarkable degree, for there are whole hymns or parts of hymns on the doctrines of God, creation, providence, Christ, sin, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, the Church, and eternal life.’¹⁷

Therefore, a better understanding of Newton as a hymn-writer will be achieved by observing how well he achieved his own objectives—to clearly and simply communicate biblical truth in his hymns in a manner readily recognisable and digestible to his audience in Olney. This paper will examine the biblical content of select passages from *Olney Hymns* which were authored by Newton, to see how he used his hymns pastorally, as a means to bring the biblical text to the average, unlearned Christian of his day.

Occasion and Structure of Olney Hymns

The occasion of *Olney Hymns* well reflects Newton’s principles of pastoral ministry. By 1769, Newton was conducting regular, evangelical prayer meetings on weekday evenings in the Olney parish, and would often write a hymn for these meetings. These hymns would be published occasionally in periodicals or along with sermons,¹⁸ but it was his acquaintance with Cowper¹⁹ which sparked the idea to publish a new collection of hymns, as Newton relates in the Preface: ‘A desire of promoting the faith and comfort of sincere Christians, though the principal, was not the only motive to this undertaking. It was likewise intended as a monument, to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship.’²⁰

But before much could be accomplished, in 1773, Cowper, having only written sixty-seven hymns, again fell subject to his recurring maladies,²¹ and Newton nearly abandoned the project. ‘My grief and disappointment were great; I hung my harp upon the willows, and for some time thought myself determined to proceed no farther without him. Yet my mind was afterwards led to resume the service.’²² Resume he did, with ‘characteristic industry and abandon,’²³ eventually composing 281 hymns, which, along with Cowper’s 67, made for a grand total of 348 hymn texts in the hymnal.

Olney Hymns was published in 1779; the latest known date of composition for a text being February 10, 1779, and the earliest April 17, 1769—a ten-year endeavour.²⁴ The hymnal's structure, though not entirely new,²⁵ was still a departure from the standard practice of the time, which was to arrange the material in accordance with the church calendar.²⁶ Newton's hymnal was comprised of three Books: Book I bore the title "On Select Passages of Scripture." These were arranged according to the book, chapter, and verse of the Bible which each text was based upon, starting with Hymn 1, "On man, in his own image made," taken from Genesis 3:9, and ending at Hymn 141, "When the beloved disciple took" from Revelation 10. Of these 141 texts, 80 are from the Old Testament and 61 are from the New Testament.²⁷ Book II, "On Occasional Subjects," accords its largest sections to hymns meant to be sung before and after annual sermons,²⁸ along with texts for New Years, Christmas, and the Ordinances, Providences, and Creation. Book III was clearly designed for use after the sermon, bearing the title "On the Rise, Progress, Changes, and Comforts of the Spiritual Life," and including such exhortative headings as, "Solemn Addresses to Sinners," "Comfort," "Dedication and Surrender," and "Praise". Book III closes with a series of short hymns, seven intended for before the sermon, eight for after, and four intended as benedictions.

The prominence such categories cannot be accidental; the reader can scarcely avoid noticing that 'one of the most striking aspects about the arrangement of *Olney Hymns* is the central place given to the sermon,' as Demaray writes. 'Newton's scheme of arrangement meant that the offices of the Prayer Book were made to yield to the sermon.'²⁹ If the sermon is central to the hymnal, and Scripture (presumably) is central to the sermon, then it follows that Scripture must also be central to the hymnal.

Olney Hymns and Scripture

It should come as no surprise that 'frequently, when Newton was expounding a Bible text, he composed a hymn to accompany his teaching and so encapsulate in hymnic form his teaching on that particular passage'.³⁰ Newton's hymns were thereby very often miniature sermons, tending to follow the same thought patterns which govern the sermon. Within the somewhat limited subject matter of this study, Newton's first fifty hymns from Book I, we have observed two readily identifiable styles used by Newton to communicate the truths of

Scripture: (1) the Bible-Story Hymn; and (2) the Sermonized-Text Hymn. The Bible-Story Hymn, much like the standard expository sermon, consists of a fairly straightforward retelling of a Biblical story, usually in the opening sections of the hymn, extracts a lesson from it, then applies the lesson to the contemporary situation of the Christian. Twenty-five of the fifty hymns analysed fall into this category, with minor variations.

Hymn 37, “Though Jericho pleasantly stood,” is a prime example of the Bible-Story Hymn. The first two stanzas of this text describe the story of II Kings 2:19-22, in which the prophet Elisha is approached by some men of the city of Jericho who complain of the city’s lack of usable water, and the resulting failure of their crops. Elisha asks for a pot filled with salt, tosses it into the head of the spring, then tells the men that the Lord has healed their water. The account ends with the narrator’s confirmation that the waters were indeed healed, and have been to the present day. Newton wastes no words on the facts of the story, and in twelve lines the essence is related with minimal embellishment.

Hymn 37

II Kings 2:19-22

Though Jericho pleasantly stood,

19 ‘...the situation of this city is
pleasant...

And looked like a promising soil;

...as my lord seeth:

The harvest produced little food,

To answer the husbandman’s toil.

The water some property had,

...but the water is naught,

Which poisonous proved to the ground;

...and the ground barren.’

The springs were corrupted and bad,

The streams spread a barrenness round.

But soon by the cruse and the salt,

20 ‘Bring me a new cruse, and put
salt therein.’

Prepared by Elisha’s command,

...he said...And they brought it
to him.

The water was cured of its fault,

22 So the waters were healed unto
this day...

And plenty enriched the land:

21 ‘...there shall not be from thence
any more death or barren land.’

No detectable references are made to other texts of Scripture in these lines, but

with line 13 comes the hermeneutical twist:

An emblem sure, this, of the grace
 On fruitless dead sinners bestowed;
 For man is in Jericho's case,
 Till cured by the mercy of God.

The story of the cruse and salt, says Newton, is 'an emblem sure, this, of the grace' of God, which is bestowed on 'dead sinners,'- a phrase taken from the second chapter of Ephesians. He then elucidates on what exactly the emblem consists of: the salt is God's mercy, while man, whom the reader is to identify with, is in the position of Jericho: fruitless and dead (Jude 12), until, just as Elisha poured out the salt into Jericho's headwaters, God pours out his grace on the unworthy sinner. Once the tale is told and the symbolism revealed, Newton uses the mention of 'man' in line 15 as an occasion to delve into a theological discourse on man in the state of sin, coordinating other Scripture references in much the same way as a preacher supplements his sermon:

Hymn 37

How noble a creature he seems!
 What knowledge, invention and skill!
 How large and extensive his schemes!
 How much can he do if he will!

His zeal to be learned and wise,
 Will yield to no limits or bars;
 He measures the earth and the skies,
 And numbers and marshals the stars.

Yet still he is barren of good;
 In vain are his talents and art;

For sin has infected his blood,
 And poisoned the streams of his heart:

Scripture Reference

Gen. 11:6 'Now nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do.'

Is. 40:12 'Who hath...meted out heaven with the span...and weighed the mountains in scales?'

Gen. 15:5 'Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them.'

Ecc. 1:14 'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and...all is vanity.'

Though cockatrice eggs he can hatch, Or, spider-like, cobwebs can weave;	Is. 59:5 ‘They hatch cockatrice’ eggs, and weave the spider’s web.’
’Tis madness to labour and watch For what will destroy or deceive. But grace, like the salt in the cruse, When cast in the spring of the soul;	Ps. 127:1 ‘Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. Col. 4:6 ‘Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt.’ Is. 58:11 ‘The Lord shall...satisfy thy soul in drought...thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water.’
A wonderful change will produce, Diffusing new life through the whole: The wilderness blooms like a rose, The heart which was vile and abhorred; Now fruitful and beautiful grows, The garden and joy of the Lord.	Is. 35:1 ‘The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.’ Mark 7:23 ‘All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you. Is. 32:15 ‘The wilderness [will] be a fruitful field.’ Is. 51:3 ‘He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord.’

The hymn could have easily been a sermon on Isaiah 64:6, ‘But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.’ Certainly Newton was meditating on the prophet Isaiah at the time; there are at least six references to Isaiah, possibly more. This hymn is one the least in terms of explicit quotations to the New Testament, and is among only a handful which lack a reference to Jesus [see p. 21], but the doctrine it espouses in no way clashes with the Apostle Paul’s teachings on humanity and sin, and in fact seem to be spurred on at its turning point (lines 13-14) by Ephesians 2 (specifically verses 1 and 5; see above). In any case, it would seem a difficult thing indeed for the imaginative Newton to avoid relating, in an accompanying sermon, the

redemptive Isaian texts to their fulfilment in Christ,³² because, for Newton, there was no other ‘grace’ (line 33) than that which comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

The second type of composition is the Sermonized-Text Hymn, which takes a biblical text, usually consisting of a verse or two, and expounds it in a similar manner as a sermon. If the Bible-Story Hymn corresponds to the expository sermon, the Sermonized-Text Hymn is akin to the topical sermon.³³ Hymn 41, Newton’s greatest contribution to hymnody, illustrates this type quite suitably.³⁴

John Henry Johansen, as a comment on Newton’s tendency for autobiographical writing, says that ‘There is nothing borrowed in the lines [of *Amazing Grace*].’³⁵ The analysis of this study would beg to differ: much of ‘*Amazing Grace*’ is borrowed from Scripture, and in fact, the hymn affords one of the highest occurrences of scriptural references and allusions of texts included in our study. It was, like most other texts in *Olney Hymns*, composed ‘without any ceremony as part of his...established routine’,³⁶ to accompany a sermon on January 1, 1773, on the text of I Chronicles 17:16-17.

In this passage, King David, having received God’s great promise that his throne would be eternally established through his seed (17:11-14), utters a cry of thanksgiving before God, saying, ‘Who am I, O Lord God, and what is mine house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?’ Newton superimposes a keen christological interpretation onto the prophecy; the promise of a ‘seed’ from 17:11 is taken as a Messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and from there it is ‘in Christ’ that the promise of blessing (Eph. 1:3) comes to the Christian: ‘The Lord has promised good to *me*.’ So David’s cry of thanksgiving becomes a song of praise for every Christian to apprehend for himself:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound!)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Though the images are thoroughly intended to be applied personally by the individual,³⁷ these first four lines are primarily rooted in Scripture and abound with biblical references: the ‘sweet sound’ is the voice of the beloved from Song

of Solomon 2:14, which Newton interprets christologically,³⁸ and the label of ‘wretch’ is applied to the believer,³⁹ following in the steps of Paul: ‘O wretched man that I am!’ (Rom. 7:24) Lines 3 and 4 are both nearly direct quotations from the Gospels, the first from the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:24-‘For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’), and the second from Jesus’ healing of the man born blind (John 9:25- ‘One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.’).

Nor do the biblical allusions end with the first verse; the second verse begins with a paraphrase of Psalm 86:11 (‘Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name.’):

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
 And grace my fears relieved;
 How precious did that grace appear
 The hour I first believed!

The precious appearance of God’s grace (Titus 2:11—‘For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men’) at the ‘hour’ of his conversion is surely not far from Newton’s mind, as he preached in his sermon, ‘the never to be forgotten hour when he enabled us to hope in his mercy.’⁴⁰ The third verse continues in the autobiographical strain, but as before, much is borrowed from the life of St. Paul:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
 I have already come;
 ’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
 And grace will lead me home.

Note the usage of the first-person pronoun in nine out of these first twelve lines (and a total of fifteen out of the twenty-four lines in the hymn). Newton was prone to see a great homology between his own experiences and those recorded in Scripture, writing that, soon after his conversion—

In perusing the New Testament, I was struck with several passages, particularly that of the fig-tree, Luke 13; the case of St. Paul, I Tim. 1; but particularly the prodigal, Luke 15; a case I thought had never been so nearly exemplified as by myself; and then the goodness of the father in receiving, nay, in running to meet such a son; and this intended only to illustrate the Lord’s goodness to returning sinners; this gained on me.⁴¹

A reference to the story of the prodigal has already been made (line 3), and the ‘many dangers, toils, and snares’ are a simple reduction of Paul’s famous autobiographical ramblings in 2 Corinthians 11:26-27—

In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils of the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

And, just as Paul’s account of himself culminates in a revelation of grace in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 12:9- ‘And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for thee’), so Newton’s semi-autobiographical ‘dangers, toils and snares’ lead to a confession of grace: “Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,/And grace will lead me home.’

So now the question might arise, what is it that the hymn conveys to the congregation—is it simply a likable poem about Newton’s own personal spiritual journey, or does it actually communicate the truths of Scripture in a way that, as with Scripture, Christians can identify with? Hindmarsh writes, ‘That the hymn has become so nearly a folksong in many countries, suggests that Newton’s capacity to universalise his own experience was indeed one of his distinctive traits as a hymn-writer’.⁴² The reason that Newton was able to universalise his own experience was because it was his *intention* to educate and edify his congregation in accordance with the Word of God, and he accomplished this in his hymns by limiting himself to biblical sources. Let us illustrate, using the final three verses of ‘Amazing Grace’:

Hymn 41

The Lord has promised good to me,-
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.
Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,

Scripture Reference

I Chron. 17:26 ‘Lord, thou art God, and hast promised this goodness unto thy servant.’
Job 11:18 ‘And thou shalt be secure, because there is hope.’
Ps. 142:5 ‘Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living.’
Ps. 73:26 ‘My flesh and my heart faileth.’

And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,

A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,

The sun forbear to shine;

But God, who call'd me here below,

Will be for ever mine.

Heb. 6:19 'Which hope we have...and...entereth into that within the veil.'

Rom. 15:13 'Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.'

Ps. 75:3 'The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved.'

Rev. 22:5 'And there shall be no... light of the sun...'

I Pet. 5:10 'But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory...'

Gen. 17:8 'I will be their God.'⁴³

In both of the identified methods (the Bible-Story Hymn and the Sermonized-Text Hymn) employed by Newton to communicate a biblical text, the hymn becomes a vehicle to convey much more than the source text. Many other Scriptures are introduced in the form of altered quotations or allusions, heightening the message of the original text through the use of biblical language and theology. The hymns work well as sermons, condensing and summarising what would be an hour-long speech into pithy, metered verse, which could easily be memorised and sung throughout the week by the congregation. Newton's personal style, which emphasises how the Gospel can be found in the Old Testament, and how such texts relate to the Christian, consistently makes the hymns meaningful to his audience as a source of biblical instruction.

A New Testament Hermeneutic

As for Newton's view concerning the relationship between Scripture and hymnody, within months of the publication of *Olney Hymns*,⁴⁴ he wrote to the wife of his patron, John Thornton, 'The Scripture affords a large fund of materials for hymn-making, and after all that has been done in this way, there is still room for many volumes.'⁴⁵ Consistent with his practice of hymning what he preached, his teaching on Scripture can be found within the hymnal:

Precious Bible! What a treasure
Does the Word of God afford!

All I want for life or pleasure,
 Food and med'cine, shield and sword;
 Let the world account me poor,
 Having this I need no more.⁴⁶

The 'food and medicine' which Newton says 'the Word of God afford[s]' is, specifically, Jesus Christ: 'On the dying Christ I feed,-/ He is meat and drink indeed!'⁴⁷ This description of the role of Scripture emphasised that the focal point of all of divine revelation—including the Old Testament—was Jesus Christ. Demaray writes—

Newton made Christ central to his preaching, and he selected his texts accordingly. His aim in preaching was to drive home the truth of his text; Christ was the truth, and he therefore felt compelled to preach most frequently from the texts which spoke of Christ.⁴⁸

Analysis of the first 50 *Olney Hymns* penned by Newton (all of which were based on Old Testament texts) reveals that only 22 (out of 50) did not contain the words 'Jesus' or 'Christ'; when alternate references to Christ are included, such as 'Redeemer,' 'Saviour,' or the slightly more obscure 'promised Seed,' the number drops to 12 (out of 50). Christ, for Newton, was the alembic through which the tales, tropes, and teachings of the Old Testament were meant to be poured.

The New Testament is also widely represented in the Old Testament-based hymns. There are at least 77 quotations or explicit allusions to New Testament verses, 35 of which come from the Gospels. These 77 references are found in 32 of the 50 hymns. Another 83 allusions, less direct but still reasonable to assume that a connection with the New Testament was meant to be made, are scattered throughout the 50 hymns, giving a total of 160 quotations or allusions to the New Testament.

The Old Testament texts, the New Testament quotations, the references to Jesus Christ, and the sermonic nature of the hymns together point to Newton's pastoral intentions in producing *Olney Hymns*: to bring God's Word to the congregation in a simple and memorable way, 'for the use of plain people.'⁴⁹ This can be further evinced by the appearance of a first-person pronoun in 48 of the 50 hymns. Many hymns begin in the third-person ('How sweet the name

of Jesus sounds/In a believer's ear!')⁵⁰ but will, in nearly all instances, move to the first-person before reaching an end ('But when I see thee as thou art/I'll praise thee as I ought').⁵¹

When the 32 hymns with New Testament quotations/allusions are combined with the 38 which refer to Jesus, only 2 hymns remain which evade both categories. This is notable, because these are hymns which were intentionally drawn from the Old Testament Scriptures, and this pattern reveals a clear principle of Newton's hermeneutic: the New Testament Gospel of Jesus Christ is central. Hindmarsh calls it 'a typological habit of mind which was always uniting the Old Testament to the New in terms of promise and fulfilment'.⁵²

Eskew and McElrath, in their introduction to Christian hymnology, identify well one of the primary objectives of hymn-writing in general—

Scripture is the basic raw material from which hymns are produced. A hymn cannot be useful unless and until it relates closely to the revealed truth about God and his mighty acts as written in the Scriptures. Therefore the effectiveness of any hymn is measurable in large part by the extent to which it functions as a vehicle for scriptural truth.⁵³

As for the ever-ready-to-preach Newton, who was 'thoroughly imbued with the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*,⁵⁴ Scripture was the looking-glass through which to view one's own life in order to understand who God is and what He means to the Christian—

When we consider [life's circumstances] by the light afforded us in the Holy Scriptures, we may collect indisputable proof from the narrow circles of our own concerns, that the wise and good providence of God watches over his people from the earliest moment of their life; overrules and guards them through all their wanderings in a state of ignorance, and leads them in a way that they know not, till at length his providence and grace concur in those events and impressions which bring them to the knowledge of him and themselves.⁵⁵

Conclusion

In 1964, J. Obert Kempson conducted a study concerning the psychological effects that hymns had on parishioners. As part of the study, a survey was made of pastors on their role in hymn selection which ended with the question, 'How

do you feel that we could better use our hymns in worship?’ The overwhelming response of the ministers was that they wished the people understood the profound meaning of what they sung. One pastor summed it up as follows, ‘If people only realized what they were singing and meant it as they would in everyday speech, people would get more out of them. There is too much singing of words that they do not mean.’⁵⁶

Newton, nearly two hundred years prior, undoubtedly felt a similar passion to lead his congregation into a greater understanding of the truths of Scripture through the use of hymns, and actively took steps to accomplish such a task: He married sermon to song. What he found in Scripture was not only preached but put into a hymnal, purposefully avoiding ‘the imagery and colouring of poetry, [which,] if admitted at all, should be indulged very sparingly, and with great judgement.’⁵⁷

The results may not, as a whole, warrant the title of ‘great poetry’, but great poetry was never the point. The point was to ‘promot[e] the faith and comfort of sincere Christians’,⁵⁸ which, for Newton, was a synonym for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He succeeded in his objectives, partly because his hymns are simple, straightforward, and peppered with Scripture throughout, but most importantly because because the hymns unwaveringly point to Christ.

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ENDNOTES

1. Lodwick Hartley, “The Worm and the Thorn: A Study of Cowper’s Olney Hymns,” *Journal of Religion* 29 (1949): 1. Also see Erik Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 143; and William J. Reynolds and Milburn Price, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody* (Carroll Stream: Hope Publishing Company, 1987), p. 57.
2. For examples, see Albert Edward Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and Interpretations* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), pp. 123-35; Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (NY: CUP, 1993), pp. 121-54; Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), pp. 89-146; Routley, *Hymns and Human Life*, pp. 75-8; J. R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A*

- Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 282-99; Harvey B. Marks, *The Rise and Growth of English Hymnody* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1938): pp. 109-14.
3. Stephen Marini, "Hymnody as History: Early Evangelical Hymns and the Recovery of American Popular Religion," *Church History* 71 (2002): 8-9. Two of Cowper's contributions to *Olney Hymns* also made the top 71.
 4. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition: Between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 259.
 5. Janet M. Todd, "The preacher as prophet: John Newton's evangelical hymns," *The Hymn* 31 no. 3 (Jl 1980): 150-154.
 6. Todd, "Preacher as prophet,": 151-152.
 7. *Olney Hymns*, Book II, Hymn 15, lines 13-16.
 8. Todd, "Preacher as prophet,": 154.
 9. The chapter on Newton in Todd's book, co-authored with Madeleine Forell Marshall, draws a similar conclusion: 'The majority of Newton's hymns are flawed by his inability to subordinate his clerical self-consciousness to the hymn-writing task. This is, ultimately, the same self-consciousness that provoked Newton to see spiritual significance in every item of daily life. In too many hymns, however, we hear the preacher address his flock from the pulpit, a kind of address that is fundamentally unsuitable for congregational song.' Marshall and Todd, *English Congregational Hymns*, p. 92; 'These sermon hymns are disappointing poems. Material seemingly conducive to great poetry lies undeveloped as Newton's role as preacher supersedes his role as hymn-writer,' p. 93.
 10. Routley, *Hymns and Human Life*, p. 76.
 11. Todd does not elaborate on her evaluative principles, but Marshall and Todd do (pp. 3-5), clearly stating that their analysis is of a literary nature. The closest Routley comes to a statement of evaluative principles is to say that a hymn must be able to be sung by the congregation present and must direct the people's minds 'not primarily to poetic or musical but to religious values' (p. 3); however, his observations about Newton's hymns violate these statements by highlighting the poetic genius of Cowper over against the simplicity of Newton.
 12. Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 261.
 13. 'I have seldom one hour free from interruption. Letters come that must be answered, visitants that must be received, business that must be attended to. I have a good many sheep and lambs to look after, sick and afflicted souls dear to the Lord.' Letter to William Bull, as quoted by Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From*

- Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007): 241.
14. Routley, *Hymns and Human Life*, 76.
 15. 'The late Dr. Watts...might, as a poet, have a right to say, That it cost him some labour to restrain his fire, and to accommodate himself to the capacities of common readers. But it would not become me to make such a declaration. It behoved me to do my best. But though I would not offend readers of taste by a wilful coarseness, and negligence, I do not write professedly for them,' Newton's preface to *Olney Hymns*; In a letter (July 8, 1779), to Mrs. John Thornton, wife of his chief patron, he writes that the hymns 'are better suited for the eye of candour than of criticism, but I hope the subject matter will not be unpleasing to serious minds. They were composed for the use of a very plain people. My poor folks at Olney are simple and devout, but they know little of the meaning of the word Taste. So far as my ability would reach, I have chiefly had the poor in view.' Quoted by Donald E. Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton (1725-1807): Synergism of Word and Church Music in 18th Century Evangelicalism* (NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), pp. 244-5.
 16. This sentence seems to flow in the same stream as the former critiques; the hymnal was 'weak as a system of praise' because of its didactic, Scripture-laden, sermon-heavy nature.
 17. Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton*, p. 259.
 18. *Olney Hymns*, preface.
 19. For details of Newton's meeting and subsequent friendship with Cowper, see Bull, *But Now I See*, pp. 157-8, and Schaefer, 'Concepts on mentoring a hymn writer.'
 20. *Olney Hymns*, preface.
 21. For more on Cowper, see Hartley, 'The Worm and the Thorn,' pp. 220-9.
 22. *Olney Hymns*, preface.
 23. Routley, *Hymns and Human Life*, p. 76.
 24. Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton*, pp. 232-4.
 25. The structure of *Olney Hymns* was somewhat indebted to Watts' 1707 hymnal, which was also divided into three books, Scripture-based in Book 1, hymns of 'human composure' in Book 2, and sacramental hymns in Book 3. See Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 270.
 26. Before 1822, hymns could not technically be used in Church of England services, Lionel Adey, *Class and Idol in the English Hymn* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), p. 34 and in the 1770s, the debates were heated in many circles over exclusive psalm-singing versus hymns. Newton clearly disagreed with the psalm-only faction, but was at pains to avoid entering into the controversy, such as it was. In response to an essay, given to him anonymously, which advocated

exclusive psalm-singing, he wrote cautiously that ‘Some of us here, know that the Lord has comforted us by Hymns, which express Scriptural truths, tho not confined to the words of David’s Psalms’ (Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 264). In this same devotional vein, numerous hymnals had been published, (by Dissenters and Anglican clergy alike) and naturally tended to follow the church calendar. Nevertheless, for outdoor revival gatherings and evening Evangelical prayer meetings, hymns had become exceedingly popular. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and the Dissenting party had brought hymnody into the limelight of English Christianity, and *Olney Hymns* was both the pinnacle of the Evangelical, frowned-on-by-the-Church hymnals and the beginning of the end of that same disapproval. After the publication (and subsequent popularity) of *Olney Hymns*, all that the Established Church needed was a little more pressure to break and officially allow hymnody in services. See John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnody* (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892): pp. 346-50.

27. Newton composed 120 of the 141 texts in Book I; Cowper authored 21.
28. Of the 100 hymns in Book II, 30 are to be sung either before or after a sermon.
29. Demaray, Innovation of John Newton, 239-240.
30. Michael A. G. Haykin, “With Ev’ry Fleeting Breath”: John Newton and the *Olney Hymns*,’ *Banner of Truth* 527/528 (Aug/Sep 2007): 5.
31. ‘You...were dead in trespasses and sins...’ (2:1); ‘We were dead in sins’ (2:5).
32. ‘Often [Newton’s] Sunday discourses drew on Old Testament typology.’ Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 189.
33. Newton’s hymn-writing style was clearly linked to his homiletical style, of which Demaray writes, ‘[Newton’s] doctrine of the written Word caused him to preach expository sermons more frequently than topical ones. The text usually furnished the theme or subject and either provided or suggested the outline. Even in Newton’s topical sermons the text played an important part.’ Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton*, pp. 102-3.
34. Twenty of the fifty hymns fit into this category.
35. John Henry Johansen, *The Olney Hymns* (NY: The Hymn Society of America, 1956), p. 15.
36. Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (NY: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 79.
37. Newton, “Amazing Grace: The Sermon Notes,” The John Newton Project (originally preached Jan. 1, 1773) <http://www.johnnewton.org/Mobile/default.aspx?article_id=50733> ‘Omitting David’s personal concerns, I would accommodate them to our own use as a proper subject for our meditations on the entrance of a new year.’ To see how

- the sermon and hymn correspond, see Haykin, “With Ev’ry Fleeting Breath,” 5-7.
38. See Hymn 57, “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds,” drawn from Cant. 1:3.
 39. Newton spends considerable time on this subject in his sermon, as it is his first point: ‘1. Who am I?... This question should be always upon our minds. Who am I? What was I when the Lord began to manifest his purposes of love?’ The sub-points follow: 1.1 Miserable; 1.2 Rebellious; 1.3 Undeserving. Newton, “Amazing Grace: The Sermon Notes.”
 40. Newton, “Amazing Grace: The Sermon Notes.”
 41. Newton and Cecil, *Life of John Newton*, 87.
 42. Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 278.
 43. C.f. Ex. 6:7; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 32:38; Eze. 11:20; 36:28; 37:23; 37:27; Zec. 8:8; II Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 21:7.
 44. The exact date of publication is not known. Bull says it was in February, 1779; but a letter by Newton to Mr. Thornton dated May 22, 1779 implies that the hymnal was not yet ‘ready to appear.’ See Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton*, 239.
 45. From a letter to Mrs. John Thornton, dated July 8, 1779, as quoted in Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton*, p. 245.
 46. *Olney Hymns*, Book II, Hymn 63, lines 1-6.
 47. Lines 11-12. Adey, *Class and Idol*, p. 28, commenting on this text, agrees that ‘What would nowadays be perceived as eucharistic symbols, ‘Food to which the world’s a stranger’ and ‘cordials’ of grace reviving ‘faint and sickly faith,’ here denote Bible-reading.’
 48. Demaray, *Innovation of John Newton*, p. 103.
 49. *Olney Hymns*, preface.
 50. *Olney Hymns*, Book I, Hymn 57, line 1.
 51. *Olney Hymns*, Book I, Hymn 57, lines 23-24. There are four more lines after these in the hymn (two of which use a first-person pronoun), but these two lines all too well embody Newton’s desire for ‘perspicuity, simplicity, and ease.’
 52. Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 274.
 53. Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), p. 45.
 54. Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition*, p. 79.
 55. Newton and Cecil, *Life of John Newton*, p. 8.
 56. J. Obert Kempson, “Hymn Communication,” *Pastoral Psychology* 15 no. 146 (Sept. 1964): 14.
 57. *Olney Hymns*, preface.
 58. *Olney Hymns*, preface. Newton says this was ‘the principal...motive’.

Fourth, both Testaments of Scripture should be interpreted in contemporary terms. The old English metrical psalms. This meant his new texts could easily be sung by congregations that already knew these basic melodies.

Second, Watts's psalms and hymns contributed to a reform in the practice of congregational singing. In his preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London, 1707) he wrote: "While we sing the Praises of God in his Church, we are employ'd in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven; and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon Earth...." The implication of Watts's criticism is that he intended his psalms and hymns to be sung as complete stanzas, rather than as disjointed lines. Much of the Old Testament scripture is considered narrative—stories told by a narrator, with elements of dialog. Included in the works of narrative are the books of Genesis through Esther as well as major portions of the prophetic books. Proper interpretation and application of Old Testament narrative is built on the principle that such scripture is historical, theological and literary in nature. Old Testament Narrative as History. Requiring archaeological confirmation of an Old Testament event in order to consider it historic is not a standard applied to other historic accounts. Old Testament narratives employ a literary style that is distinctly different from the mythology written by other cultures of this time. Newton, John, *Olney hymns*, in three books : I: On select texts of scripture; II. On occasional subjects; III. On the progress and changes of the spiritual life., (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1806). Wolffe, John, *Olney Hymns*, in *Religion, Exploration and Slavery*, (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2004), pp. 15–52. External links. The Olney Hymns online. The Victorian Web "The Olney Hymns by John Newton. The Cowper & Newton Museum. Amazing Grace: The story of John Newton. William Cowper. Newton's Olney Hymns made a wonderful addition to my hymn book collection. These hymns by John Newton tell a story of repentance and the joys brought through salvation by grace. The richness of the language and the message in the hymns make reading them and singing of them a blessing. A fine addition to any collection. Read more. 6 people found this helpful. Helpful. Report abuse. Karen. bay psalm book. Olney Hymns. John Newton and william cowper. John Wesley. Main contribution was collecting, editing, publishing, and promoting his brothers hymns. "Just as i am". Charlotte Elliott. Dictionary of hymnology. John Julian. Hymns ancient and modern. the greatest hymnic legacy of the Oxford Movement. 20th century church light music group.