



‘Jesus shall reign’—A Matter of Punctuation

Treasure No 25: ‘*Jesus shall reign*’—A Matter of Punctuation: by Erik Routley, An article from Bulletin 95, Spring 1962

In many hymn books, ‘Jesus shall reign’ appears in four verses, which correspond to verses 1, 5, 6 and 8 of Part 2 of Isaac Watts’s version of Psalm 72. It thus appears in *EH*, *A & M*, and *SP*. But other books including most of the non-anglican books and the *Clarendon Hymn Book*, insert Watts’s fourth verse. This, with the original fifth, gives the following sequence:

4. *For him shall endless prayer be made
And praises throng to crown his head:
His name like sweet perfume shall rise
With every morning sacrifice;*

5. *People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on his love with sweetest song;
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on his name.*

It will be noted that we here print a semi-colon at the end of the fourth verse, where all contemporary hymnals print a full-stop.

This we do on hearing from Mr R. L. Arrowsmith, a senior Classics Master at Charterhouse, a suggestion that this is the true reading, it appears in certain editions of Watts, including that of 1801 (in Mr Arrowsmith’s possession), but not including all the earliest. The first edition of 1719 prints a full-stop.

However the case Mr Arrowsmith makes is this: that by reading a semi-colon at that point, we avoid a disagreeable transition from the future to the present tense.

We are then singing, as it were, ‘People and realms of every tongue shall dwell on his love’ ... and infant voices shall proclaim ...

It is true that in the following verse ‘Blessings abound’, and the seventh that most excellent verse that few hymnals now include:

*Where he displays his healing power
Death and the curse are known no more;
In him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost*

the present tense is established decisively. But it is one thing to write in the present tense throughout two verses, and another to write in the course of eight lines three futures, one present and one future.

Watts appears, then, to be preserving the future tenses in his first, third and fourth verses (the second, beginning with the word ‘Behold’ could be held to be a variant future form), while in his fifth, sixth and seventh he moves to the present (the ‘realised future’, as it were) and in the eighth to the imperative.

There is an excellent case, then, for returning to the semi-colon. It is much more probable that Watts’s printer was careless with a mark of punctuation than that Watts himself should not write smoothly.

But of course when you have got over that hurdle, what in the world are you going to do with the theologically impossible expression ‘For him shall endless prayer be made’? This, a proper thing to hope for in the case of any king of historic Israel, is intolerable when sung of Christ. The *Clarendon Hymn Book* alters to ‘To him’, which seems, if the verse is to be retained, a decent emendation. For our part, we find more to be sorry for in the dropping of verse 7 than to be glad in the retention of verse 4. But if it be retained, it should certainly begin with ‘To’, and, we think end with Mr Arrowsmith’s semi-colon.—*Editor*.

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