

Handel's *Messiah*:
Biblical and Theological Perspectives

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Introduction

A. The Facts

The name of the composition in all the manuscripts is simply *Messiah*, not *The Messiah*. Depending on the edition and how one counts, George Frederic Handel's oratorio consists of 53-56 texts,¹ of which 22 are choral arrangements. By Handel's own testimony, the text for the oratorio was compiled by the wealthy and arrogant Leicestershire country gentleman, Charles Jennens, though one cannot rule out the composer's modification of the text that was provided for him. The score for the oratorio was composed in a mere 24 days, from August 22 to September 14, 1741 (Part I, 7 days; Part II, 9 days, Part III, 6 days; instrumentation, 2 additional days). The oratorio consists of three parts: I, texts 1-21; II, texts 22-44; III, texts 45-53. The text consists entirely of biblical quotations, for the most part taken from the Authorized (King James) Version, though the text is modified slightly in some cases for lyrical and musical reasons. The biblical sources from which the texts are derived may be broken down as follows:

Biblical Book	Number of Verses	References
Job	2 verses	#45 (19:25-26)
Psalms	14 verses	#27 (22:7); #28 (22:8); #29 (69:20[21]); #32 (16:10); #33 (24:7-9); #36 (68:18); #37 (68:1); #40 (2:1-2); #41 (2:3); #42 (2:4); #43 (2:9)
Isaiah	22 verses	7:14; 9:2,6; 35:5-6; 40:1-5,9,11; 50:6; 52:7; 53:3-6,8; 60:1-3; #2 (40:1-3); #3 (40:4); #4 (40:5); #8 (7:14); #9 (40:9; 60:1); #10 (60:2-3); #11 (9:2); #12 (9:6); #19 (35:5-6); #20 (40:11); #23 (53:3; 50:6); #24 (53:4-5); #25 (53:5); #26 (53:6); #31 (53:8); #38 (52:7)
Lamentations	1 verse	#30 (1:12)
Haggai	2 verses	#5 (2:6,7)
Zechariah	2 verses	#18 (9:9-10)
Malachi	3 verses	#5 (3:1); #6 (3:2); #7 (3:3)
Matthew	3 verses	#20 (11:28-29); #21 (11:30)
Luke	5 verses	#14 (2:8-9); #15 (10-11); #16 (2:13); #17(2:14)
John	1 verse	#22 (1:29)
Romans	3 verses	#38 (10:15); #39 (10:18); #52 (8:34)
1 Corinthians	10 verses	#45 (15:20); #46 (15:21-22); #47 (15:51-52); #48 (15:52-53); #49 (15:54); #50 (15:55-56); #51 (15:57)
Hebrews	2 verses	#34 (1:5); #35 (1:6)
Revelation	6 verses	#44 (19:6, 11:15); #53 (5:9,12-14)
Total Old Testament:	43 verses	
Total New Testament:	30 verses	
Total	73 verses	

B. Comments on the Selection of Texts

My task is not to deal at length with the men behind *Messiah*, only to comment on their achievements from a theological and biblical perspective. Nor is it my task to comment in detail on the musical interpretation of the biblical passages of which the oratorio consists. I leave that to persons much better qualified than I am. My task is to offer some commentary on the composition from a biblical and theological perspective.

As the facts above declare, the most remarkable feature of Handel's *Messiah* is that it consists entirely of biblical quotations. Assuming that Charles Jennens was indeed the one primarily responsible for the selection of the texts, it is evident that he had a remarkable grasp of

the Scriptures, or at least of the *Book of Common Prayer* and prevailing English Christological/Messianic interpretation of the Bible. The composition provides a remarkable musical survey of biblical *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of salvation. In fact, some have opined that this represents the first time in musical history that “the mighty drama of human redemption was treated in an epic poem.”² In his texts, Jennens was concerned with one central thought which he chose to develop in three parts: Part I: Promise: The Old Testament anticipation of the advent of the Messiah, and the New Testament fulfillment of this expectation; Part II: Passion and Victory over a Rebellious World: The Old Testament anticipation of the passion and ultimate triumph of the Messiah over the kingdoms of this world, and the New Testament fulfillment of this expectation; Part III: Triumph over Death: The Old Testament anticipation of the victory (only one verse) and its New Testament fulfillment, securing redemption for the individual and guaranteeing his own cosmic exaltation. I shall comment on each of these in turn.

Commentary on the Text of *Messiah*

Part I: Promise: The Old Testament anticipation of the advent of the Messiah, and the New Testament fulfillment of this expectation.

Against the backdrop of the symphonic overture (#1), whose purpose apparently was to create “a mood without hope,”³ Part I opens with one of the most heartwarming and hopeful texts of all Scripture, Isaiah 40:1-5. Whether or not Handel intended this pattern of gloom and despair giving way to light and hope to be a reflection of the biblical text, it is possible to interpret the overture as a musical commentary on Isaiah 1-39, whose message and tone is largely judgmental. In these chapters the prophet Isaiah declares over and over again that because of the hardness of Israel’s heart and the persistence of her rebellion against the divine sovereign and gracious redeemer, Yahweh was about to bring in his foreign agents of judgment. But in chapter 40 the tone and the tune change so dramatically that critical scholars have trouble

imagining 40-66 to have come from the same prophet. Our task here is not to critique such conclusions, but it strikes me that Handel has caught the spirit of the book better than most contemporary scholars. The point of chapter 40 and the rest of 40-66 is that far in advance Yahweh has foreseen and predicted the end of the judgment.⁴ Here the prophet functions as a herald, preparing the way for Yahweh who will go before the people, leading them back to their homeland after their exile in Babylon.

On the other hand, it is remarkable that a major work called *Messiah* does not even begin with an overtly Messianic text.⁵ Handel's interpretation of Isaiah 40 as a Messianic text is obviously based on the witness of the Gospels in the New Testament, all of which recognize the voice of John the Baptist as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," calling on the people of his day to prepare the way of the LORD.⁶ Whereas the synoptics have the Gospel writers making this connection, John the Baptist claims the role for himself in the Gospel of John. But in the original context, it is doubtful the Israelites or even Isaiah himself would have identified the LORD, that is Yahweh, whose arrival brings comfort to the people, with the Messiah. Matters are different, however, in 61:1-3, where, speaking in the first person, the agent of comfort explicitly recognizes that he is Yahweh's anointed, that is, his Messiah.⁷ But Jennens never includes this text. Instead, latching on to the interpretation of the New Testament evangelist, in texts 2-3 he takes a general prophecy of the restoration of Israel from exile and the return of Yahweh to be a specific prophecy of the Messiah.

While the choice of Isaiah 40:1-5 for the opening texts of *Messiah* is unexpected, especially to the modern interpreter of Scripture, when we examine the subsequent texts it is not difficult to see how Jennens' mind was working. Through the compositional skill of Handel the first triad of texts climaxes in a glorious musical announcement of the arrival of the glory of the

LORD (#4), an event that will be witnessed by all flesh. Speaking of all flesh witnessing the appearance of the glory, Jennens' thoughts were drawn to Haggai 2:6-7, which reminds the reader that the day of Yahweh, that is the return of the glory, has two sides. On the one hand, as the Isaiah text affirms, that day will indeed bring great comfort to God's people who have been languishing in exile in a foreign land. But on the other hand, it will also be a day of judgment. Appealing to Haggai 2:6-7 and Malachi 3:1, Jennens associates the arrival of the Messiah with cosmic convulsions and the shaking of all nations, who bring their wealth to Jerusalem. But the reference of the sudden arrival of the glory of Yahweh in his Temple (#5) triggers a new thought: who can survive the lethal dose of divine glory? The implied answer is no one (#6). The return of the LORD may be cause for hope in Isaiah, but to Malachi this is a scary notion. But in Malachi 3:3 Jennens sees a silver lining even in this cloud: the day of Yahweh may be frightening, but because its purpose is purgative, to rid the Levites, the professional attendants of God, of dross so they might present to God acceptable sacrifices, that is in righteousness, this is good news.

The common denominator of texts 2-7 is obviously the return of the divine glory, which functioned as the alter ego of Yahweh himself. The thought of the return of God draws Jennens' mind to the biblical declaration of divine presence *par excellence*, *immanûel*, "God is with us" (#8).⁸⁷ This text appears in two places in the Bible, once in each Testament: Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. By composing the music for this text in the form of an aria to be sung by an alto, for Handel the primary reference seems to be the Matthew text, which has these words coming from the lips of an angel (in Isaiah they come from the prophet). In assigning this aria to an alto Handel demonstrates himself a true heir of Middle Age fantasies that portray angels as effeminate creatures [with wings], and Van Camp uncritically falls into the same trap when he comments, "The Alto seems to be the voice of the angel speaking to Joseph, and yet she also

speaks to the whole world as she reveals that the promised Messiah is becoming real.”⁹ But this interpretation fails to recognize that, in the Old Testament at least, angels are always portrayed as masculine and always in forms indistinguishable from ordinary humans. In fact, the term *malachi* may not be a proper name at all but merely a transliteration of the expression that translates literally “my messenger.”

Having presented the name Immanuel, meaning “God with us,” Jennens’ thoughts return to Isaiah 40, verse 9 to be specific (#9), where the “Gospel according to Isaiah”¹⁰ calls for a bold, uninhibited, and enthusiastic declaration by the bearer of the good news, “Here is your God!”¹¹ Jennens interprets the significance of the event by juxtaposing verse 9 with Isaiah 60:1-3. Recognizing the shift in mood between vv. 1 and 2, Handel integrated the former with 40:9, which he appropriately set to an enthusiastic ode of praise. The birth of a child to a virgin(!) and the ascription of his name as *Immanuel* “God with us,” is cause for celebration. The bass recitative from vv. 2-3 (#10) provides interpretive commentary, explaining why this is cause for such joy: while the whole world is enveloped in darkness the brilliant light of God’s glory will come to Zion, attracting the gentiles and their kings like bugs and moths to a yard lamp. Speaking of light shining on the people that walk in darkness, the following bass aria (#11) draws upon Isaiah 9:2[1], which provides the backdrop and “blackdrop” to the first explicitly Messianic text in the oratorio and the most complete Messianic statement in Isaiah 1-39. The following chorus (#12) leapfrogs over three verses that describe the effects of that light to the source and basis for the light: the birth of this divine *Wunderkind* bearing the names Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.¹² Even so, through verse 6, the Messianic overtones are suppressed, especially if we understand the term “Messiah” as the ancient Hebrews did. That sense is reflected in verse 7, which Jennens fails to incorporate. Why,

we may only speculate. Perhaps he assumed his audience would be familiar enough with the entire context, verses 2-7, and could fill the lacunae themselves. In Handel's musical arrangement, the enthusiastic choral announcement of the birth of the child is followed by his famed and genuinely beautiful Pastoral Symphony (#13). While the orchestra plays, the people are left to fill in the blanks with :

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever.

In terms of texts, the oratorio is one fifth past by the time Jennens introduces a biblical text that Old Testament readers would have recognized as unequivocally Messianic. To this point he has played around the edges, teasing the hearers with announcements of divine presence but stopping short of actually introducing the Messiah. To be sure, Isaiah 7:14 has referred to the birth of a special child, born of a virgin and bearing the name Immanuel, but there is nothing in that context that would identify the child unequivocally with the Messiah. On the contrary, the opinions concerning the identity of the child range widely even among evangelical scholars: Hezekiah, another son of Ahaz, a son of Isaiah (from a woman who is still a virgin at the time of the prophecy), specifically Maher-shalal-hash-baz.¹³

All of this raises the question of how we are to understand the Messiah. Who is this person? Based on the meaning of the root *mšḥ*, "to anoint," technically the Messiah is someone on whose head the oil of anointing has been poured as a formal ritual act of inauguration and dedication.¹⁴ Nowhere is God, by any of his titles or his name Yahweh, spoken of as being anointed. On the contrary, he is the anointer. But of whom? In the Old Testament five types of persons are identified by the term Messiah (*masīah*): priests,¹⁵ patriarchs who functioned as prophets (Ps. 105:15; 1 Chron 16:22), a foreign king (Cyrus, Isa 45:1), kings of Israel,¹⁶ an

unspecified eschatological figure.¹⁷ While in discourse David and Samuel may refer to Saul as “Yahweh’s anointed,” neither the narrator of 1 and 2 Samuel nor any other Old Testament author ever refers to him this way. On the contrary, with few exceptions, the title is reserved for David and/or his descendant as heir to the throne. This would suggest that ancient readers would have interpreted the unspecified eschatological future as a Davidic figure as well.

But this raises the question of the roots of Israelite Messianism. If I were writing an oratorio called *Messiah*, rather than beginning with Isaiah 40, I would start with 2 Samuel 7, in which Nathan announces to David eternal title to the throne of Israel. David’s response in verse 19 is extraordinary: “Now this was a small matter in your eyes, O Lord Yahweh, what you should have spoken to you servant concerning the distant future, for this is the revelation concerning humanity!” This passage provides the basis for the universal messianic vision of all the psalmists and prophets alike, inasmuch as David is not only granted eternal title to the throne of Israel, but this reign will have eternal and universal significance. It is remarkable that in their references to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the *Messiah*, Jennens and Handel never allude to this text nor to many other obviously Messianic prophetic texts: Isa 1:1-9; 55:3-5; Jer 23:5-8; 30:9; 33:15-17; Ezek 34:23-31; 37:15-28; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:10-12; Mic 5:1-5; Zech 6:12-13. By definition the Messiah is an anointed one, a descendant of David, whose reign is eternal and universal. While we have witnessed hints of the latter, the former are still not named, even in #12. Without verse 7 the *Wunderkind* is the divine sovereign, whose reign is characterized by peace.

The tranquil and soothing so-called “Pastoral Symphony” (#13)¹⁸ provides an excellent transition between the prophecies of ##2-12, which climax in an exuberant choral rendering of Isa 9:6, and their fulfillment in the remainder of Part I (##14-21). Specifically, this instrumental

piece may be heard as a musical commentary on the last work of text #12, but it also sets the tone for the pastoral scene described in #14. Whether or not Handel intended it so, as a “Pastoral Symphony” informed listeners will also hear in this piece echoes of the ancient tradition of David, the shepherd, whom Yahweh called from following literal sheep to feed his flock, the people of Israel.¹⁹ But on the night the prophecies of the Messiah (as identified by Jennens) were fulfilled, the pastoral hillsides of Bethlehem were not quiet for long. Suddenly a messenger from God appears, and the countryside lights up with the brilliance of divine glory.

The remainder of Part I (##14-21) divides into two halves, each consisting of four texts. In the first half Jennens draws entirely on the Lukan version of the nativity story (##14-17). Handel assigns the three recitatives to a soprano. The fact that the last of these (#15) quotes the angel of the Lord suggests he interpreted the angel as a woman.²⁰ The reference to the glory of the Lord in #14 provides an obvious link to the earlier texts. In the solo message the heavenly messenger begins with a general declaration: his message is “good tidings,”²¹ it involves great joy, and it has universal significance - the joy will be experienced by all peoples. But then he becomes specific and declares the content of the good news. To the shepherds (as representatives of Israel and humanity) is born a person who is special for four reasons: (1) He is born in the city of David. This represents the specific link to Israel’s Messianic hope (cf. Mic 5:2). (2) He is the Saviour. This represents the specific hope of Zech 9:9-10. (3) He is the Messiah (Greek *Xristos*). This links the declaration with Psalm 2 and Isaiah 61:1-3. (4) He is *kurios*. Literally the word means “Lord, Sovereign,” but in the Greek Old Testament this word also stood for the divine name, Yahweh. It is probably in this latter sense that the word should be interpreted, in which case the angel makes a most remarkable equation: the child that is born in the city of David is the

Yahweh of the Old Testament. This combination of divine and human qualities finds its earliest roots in Isaiah 9:6-7.

Having completed his solo announcement (there is no reference to singing in the biblical text), the heavenly messenger is joined by a multitude of the heavenly beings who break out in a chorus whose exuberance Handel has captured marvelously (#17):

Glory to God in the highest,
And peace on earth, good will to men.

There are four comments we need to make on this heavenly poem. **First**, the angel's chorus offers the shepherds a divine interpretation of the events that have just transpired in Bethlehem. By definition, angels (envoys, messengers) are not at liberty to make up their own messages. The message they declare is not their message but the verbatim pronouncement of the One who sent them, in this case God in heaven. Accordingly, what these angels announce to the shepherds has been scripted by God himself and represents his declaration of the significance of the birth of Jesus. **Second**, the angels declare the significance of the birth of Jesus from two sides, the heavenly and the earthly. With regard to the former, the birth of the Messiah is the supreme historical event by which God is glorified. According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the first question is "What is the chief end of man?" to which the answer is "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." In the birth of the Messiah this end is achieved perfectly. With regard to the latter, the birth of the Messiah guarantees peace for the human race that has been languishing in turmoil and chaos ever since the Fall. Jesus' mission will be a mission of *shalom*. The dimensions of this mission will be spelled out in the following texts. **Third**, by ascribing glory to God and announcing peace to humankind, the angels' chorus

may be interpreted as the fulfillment of Psalm 29. It is not coincidental that these two notions form bookends around this psalm. Verse 1 reads:

Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of the mighty,
Ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.
Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his name;
Worship Yahweh in holy array.

And then notice the ending of the Psalm:

Yahweh sat at the flood;
Yahweh sits as King forever.
Yahweh gives strength to his people;
Yahweh will bless his people with peace.

Between these two verses we have an enthusiastic celebration of the awesome power of the voice of Yahweh. As the prologue to the Gospel of John will declare, in the incarnation we have the speech of God becoming flesh. **Fourth**, contrary to the impression created by the Authorized Version, the birth of Christ does not result in goodwill for all. No, virtually all recent translations capture the sense of the last phrase, *en anthropois eudokias* more accurately:

NAS On earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.
NIV On earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.
NRSV On earth peace among those whom he favours.
REB On earth peace to all in whom he delights.
NJB On earth peace for those he favours.
NLT Peace on earth to all whom God favours.

As already intimated, by means of an aria, a recitative, a second aria, and then a climactic chorus, texts #18-21 provide commentary on the chorus. Unlike contemporary western Christianity, which each December indulges in an orgy of sappy and sentimental pseudo-Christian rites, Jennens moves quickly from the nativity to a description of the life and ministry of Jesus. Citing Zech. 9:9-10, #18 restates the thesis: the Messiah is the righteous Saviour who has come to speak peace to the nations (AV “heathen”). In the ministry of Jesus this involves two

types of activities, as summarized in ##19-20. Citing Isaiah 35:5-6, the recitative describes the healing ministry of the Messiah. Citing Isaiah 40:11 and Matthew 11:28-29, the alto and soprano aria celebrates his pastoral ministry, which involves feeding the flock, tenderly caring for the lambs, and gently leading those with young. With the Matthean citation the aria applies the gracious message to the hearers, inviting them come to the Messiah and find in him the perfect shepherd. The concluding chorus concludes the citation by giving the rationale for the invitation: the Messiah places no heavy burdens on his people.

The manner in which *Messiah* adapts the quotations of Jesus is worth a comment. Students of Handel's *Messiah* have often discussed whether or not this oratorio is intended as a drama. In 1763 Dr. John Brown opined, "Though that grand entertainment is called an *oratorio*, yet it is not dramatic; but properly a Collection of *Hymns* or *Anthems* drawn from the sacred Scriptures."²² Christopher Hogwood disagrees, declaring "...there is drama, but it unfolds in what has aptly been termed the 'moral autobiography of man.'"²³ I wonder if Jennens and Handel would not have preferred "an autobiography of the Messiah," but be that as it may, Hogwood is certainly correct in observing that

Messiah is not typical Handel oratorio; there are no named characters, as are usually found in Handel's setting of the Old Testament stories, possibly to avoid charges of blasphemy. It is a meditation rather than a drama of personalities, lyrical in method; the narration of the story is carried on by implication, and there is no dialogue.²⁴

One way in which *Messiah* suppresses the drama is by taking words out of Jesus' mouth and transforming first person statements into third person assertions. This pattern begins with this adaptation of Jesus' tender appeal in Matthew 11:28-30 and it will continue throughout the oratorio. In a sense this depersonalizes the Messiah, but at the same time it serves to objectify the image. I have not been able to find out who was responsible for this shift, Jennens or Handel, but

it seems to me that this is fundamental to the oratorio's style and should therefore be attributed to Handel. Perhaps this is one of the many "Maggots" in Handel's head that Jennens found so objectionable.²⁵

Part II: Passion and Resurrection: The Old Testament anticipation of the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and the New Testament fulfillment of these expectations.

Unlike modern western popular Christianity, which places an inordinate emphasis on the nativity of the Messiah, but more like Eastern Orthodox traditions, Jennens' text spends much more time on the passion and resurrection of the Messiah than on his first advent. Textually, Part II divides into four parts: A: The death of the Messiah (##21-31); B: The resurrection and glorification of the Messiah (##32-36); C: The proclamation of the victory of the Messiah (##37-43); D: The heavenly celebration of the triumph of the Messiah (#44).

The transition from Part I to Part II is abrupt. Text #21 had closed Part I with a notice of the lightness of the burden that the Messiah puts on his people; Text #22 opens Part II with a reference to the heavy load that the Messiah takes on himself - the sin of the whole world. The reference to the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world combines notions of substitution from the Passover and atonement from the daily sacrifices offered in the Temple. But this quotation of John the Baptist's introduction of Jesus also echoes Isaiah 53 where the prophet 700 years earlier had foreseen the Messiah's sacrificial role. It is natural, therefore, that Jennens' attention should move from the Baptist's announcement to the so-called Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-4[1-9]; 49:1-6[1-13]; 50:4-9[1-11]; 52:13-53:12). Texts 23-26 all derive from these songs, and except for #23a, which derives from the third Song, the quotations derive from Isa. 53:3, 4-5, 5, 6.

These Songs present a vision of the Messiah that is unique within the entire Biblical record--the Messiah will play a substitutionary sacrificial role on behalf of his people. This picture comes into focus only gradually as one moves from one Servant Song to the next, but in Isaiah 53 the picture becomes crystal clear. But there is a glorious irony in this Song that generally passes unrecognized, even in the writings of Old Testament scholars. The debate over these Songs has generally revolved around the identity of the Servant. Is it Israel? Is it Isaiah? Is it some other prophet? Is it Hezekiah? Is it the Messiah? The question is best answered by asking who the Servant of Yahweh is elsewhere in the Old Testament. In Isaiah Israel is indeed occasionally referred to as Yahweh's servant (44:1, 21). But prior to this the title has generally been applied to an individual (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob [Gen 26:24; Isa 45:4; Ezek 28:5]); Moses (Exod 14:31; Num 12:7); Joshua (Judg 2:8); the prophets (2 Kgs 9:7; 17:13); even the foreigner Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). But it is clear from texts like 2 Samuel 7 and numerous references in the prophets that "the Servant" *par excellence* in the Old Testament is David and/or one of his descendants (2 Sam 3:18; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25).

But the irony in Isaiah 53 lies in the unexpected and unprecedented change in the role played by the servant. As a descendant of David and the embodiment of the Davidic house, the servant could be expected to exercise a governing role (cf. #12). Indeed, this is what Yahweh had promised David as an eternal right in the Davidic Covenant mediated through the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7). Referring to his pastoral roots, Yahweh had declared to Nathan, "Thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says Yahweh of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the [real] sheep, that you should be ruler over my people Israel'" (v. 8). Hereafter the members of the dynasty are often called "shepherds," a designation which functions virtually synonymously with "kings."²⁶ But in a glorious shift in Isaiah 53, the Shepherd assigned by God

to lead the flock takes on the role of a Lamb and gives his life for the sheep. Surely this view of the Shepherd underlies Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11), for which the Jewish leaders determine to kill him.

Handel's musical interpretation of the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Christ is appropriately somber and serious (##22-25), but the tone of #26a, which describes the intentional waywardness of the sheep for whom the Lamb dies, catches us by surprise. The musical score effectively reflects the willfulness of the sheep's wandering, but at first hearing, the lightheartedness of the score seems unworthy of such a serious matter. On further reflection, however, it represents another stroke of Handel's genius. Myers comments,

In Handel's famous chorus sin glories in its shame with almost alcoholic exhilaration. His lost sheep meander hopelessly through a wealth of intricate semi quavers, stumbling over decorous roulades and falling into mazes of counterpoint that prove inextricable. A less dramatic composer than Handel would scarcely have rendered his solemn English text with such defiance, for the discrepancy between the self-accusing words and his vivacious music is patent to any listener emancipated from the lethargy of custom.²⁷

The scene and the text shift in texts ##27-28 from the suffering Servant to the bystanders at the cross. Their mockery and brazenness are described with quotations from Psalm 22:7-8 and Lamentations 1:12, to be followed by a description of the Messiah's response in the words of Psalm 69:20. We might have expected Jennens to follow the lead of the Gospel writers who capture the Messiah's pathos and sense of abandonment by citing Jesus' heart-rendering cry, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46 = Mark 15:34), which is itself a direct quotation of the first verse of Psalm 22. Instead he goes to two new texts, neither of which in its original context had any messianic connection at all. But again Handel tinkers with the text, changing first person singular pronouns into the third person. This segment of Part II concludes

with an interpretive comment on the substitutionary death of the Messiah drawn from Isaiah 53:8.

In segment B of Part II (##32-36) the tone changes dramatically as the concern shifts from the passion and crucifixion of the Messiah to his resurrection. Again changing first person speech into third person narration (while retaining the direct address of God!), Jennens attributes the resurrection of the Messiah to the will and power of God by quoting Psalm 16:10. But Messiah's resurrection did not involve merely a return to earthly existence, like that of Lazarus (John 11:43-44). On the contrary, having been raised from the grave, in Hebrew identified as Sheol,²⁸ the pathetic Lamb rejected by all has been transformed into the glorious King of Glory. Jennens appeals to Psalm 24:7-9 to paint a celebrative picture of a triumphant King marching up to the Temple on Mount Zion. As a divine warrior the Messiah has triumphed over death. The psalmist calls on the gates of Zion and the gates of the Temple to open wide for the King that he might take up his throne in the Temple. No natural grammatical historical exegesis would have led to a Messianic interpretation of this text, but as a result of Jennens and Handel's work, in the minds of most, especially those familiar with this oratorio, this interpretation is determinative.

Having traced the Messiah's return from Sheol and his entry into the Temple, Texts 34-36 capture the theological significance of this event. Quoting Hebrews 1:5-6 (which contains a quotation of Psalm 2:7), Jennens recognizes that the resurrection and glorification of the Messiah demonstrate his superiority, not only over humanity, but also over the heavenly realm as well. In the original context the quotation from Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son, Today I have begotten you," represents an adaptation of the adoption formula. With God's election of David as his chosen king over Israel, his anointing by Samuel (1 Sam 16:13), and his bestowal upon him of eternal title to the throne, David enjoys a special relationship with Yahweh as his adopted son.

The appearance of the dove and the sound of the voice from heaven at the time of Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:14) had formally recognized this role and status for Jesus, but in the mind of Jennens it was the resurrection above all else that proved Jesus' special relationship with God. Therefore all the angels are called upon to worship the Messiah. This segment concludes with a quotation from Psalm 68:18, which declares that not only the angels worship the Messiah. Because he has returned to Zion at the head of a victory procession, he is worthy to receive the tribute of all, for in his person the Messiah embodies the very presence of Yahweh.

In segment 3 of Part II (##37-43) Jennens captures the missiological implications of the triumph of the Messiah. The new movement opens with a vision of the courts of heaven where God issues a command (presumably to proclaim to all the universe) the victory of the Messiah (#37). The AV rendering of Psalm 68:11[12] obscures the textual difficulties. NAS captures the literal rendering of the Hebrew, "The women (a choir?) who proclaim good tidings are a great host," unless, of course one treats *hambāsrot* as an abstract plural, "the proclamation of tidings was a mighty host!" In any case, AV "preachers" is an odd rendering of this word, which means, "to proclaim news."²⁹ In #38 the hearer's attention is drawn to the messengers themselves. Most commentators on the oratorio assume this to be a quotation from Rom 10:15, but since Paul is here quoting Isaiah 52:7, the citation could just as well have been taken directly from the Old Testament prophet.

Of course the link between these two verses is the *mēbasēr*, "one who proclaims news." But from the first time I heard the Messiah sung I have wondered about these feet. Why would a messenger have beautiful feet? Because they are size 12 like mine? Or because they are perfectly shaped like Dr. Mims? Or because they are shod with decorative shoes? I think I may have found the answer. We may interpret the beautiful feet either as a figure of speech for the messenger

himself (whose appearance is most welcome), or this is what we see when we fall prostrate before a superior. In the Bible, when people are confronted by a heavenly messenger (angel) the natural response is to fall down on one's face before the messenger (Gen 18:2). Put yourself in this position. If you fall down before someone what do you see? The feet of course! Since this person comes from heaven, and brings such wonderful tidings, naturally the feet should be beautiful. Anyone who is sent from heaven on a mission for God must represent the perfections of the heavenly court. The following chorus (#39) also quotes two texts. Again, most commentators find the inspiration for this citation in Romans 10:18, but one could just as well claim Psalm 19:4 as its source. In any case, this text announces the scope of the Messiah's triumph in the herald's proclamation - wherever the heavens declare the glory of God, there the messengers proclaim the triumph and exaltation of the Messiah.

Tragically, however, this does not mean that all who hear the message receive it with gladness. On the contrary, citing Psalm 2:1-3, the oratorio declares the persistence of human rebellion. Rather than accepting the salvation, which the Messiah offers, the kings of the earth see him as a threat to their own power, and with derisive folly conspire against the Lord and his Messiah. For the first time in the oratorio Jennens cites a text that actually includes the word "Messiah," that is "the anointed one." But of course the Lord and his anointed will have the last laugh (#42). With no effort at all, Yahweh will smash the rebels who revolt against him and his Messiah (#43).

Unlike the previous segments of Part II, segment D consists of a single text (#44). But this is the most famous piece in the entire oratorio - the Hallelujah Chorus. If sentimental rhapsodists have imagined every note of *Messiah* to have been divinely inspired,³⁰ nowhere is this more true than with reference to the Hallelujah chorus. Drawn into this romantic view of

Handel is the story (which is incapable of confirmation) that while he was composing this piece he imagined seeing heaven before his very eyes and “the great God Himself” enthroned in glory.³¹ And whatever the origin of the custom,³² the piece has such emotional power that to this day in the English speaking world audiences rise as if in prayer as soon as the opening notes are struck. At the risk of pretending to know anything about the history of music, from what I know about their respective works, here, more than anywhere in the composition and anywhere in Bach, with Italian operatic flair Handel appears to have written for the applause of the audience. Not only does this piece have the climactic flourish that one expects at the end of an oratorio; even the text, a conflation of Revelation 19:6 and 11:15, drawn from the end of the Bible, and from God’s climactic act in history, leads one who hears this oratorio for the first time to expect the end of the performance. In fact, on both textual and logical grounds, one could wish that this chorus was transposed with “Worthy is the Lamb” in #53. Jennens’ insertion of this piece here was undoubtedly driven by a concern to declare the dissolution of the hostility that the kings of the earth had expressed in ##40-41. There is no sentimentality in God and his Messiah who laugh the rebellious nations to scorn and who will break them with a rod of iron and smash them like a potter’s vessel. For those who have spurned his grace there is no hope. No wonder then that Jennens and Handel wanted to end this Part on a triumphant note: “Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigns! The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of the Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign forever and ever. He is indeed ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’” These last phrases are drawn, not from either of these texts but from Revelation 17:14 and 19:16.

Part III: Triumph over Death: The Old Testament anticipation of the victory (only one verse) and its New Testament fulfillment, securing redemption for the individual and guaranteeing his own cosmic exaltation.

Part III is short, consisting only of nine texts (##45-53). It opens with the most familiar verse from the book of Job. In fact, so entrenched is the interpretation of this verse in the evangelical consciousness that it is difficult for modern readers to recognize the obscurities in the text itself, let alone consider a different interpretation. The truth is that Job 19:25-26 is capable of several different renderings. Literally the Hebrew translates something like

I know that my vindicator lives,
And in the end he will rise upon the dust.
And after my skin is destroyed,
Yet from my flesh I shall see God.

Whatever else the passage declares, Job hereby expresses confidence that ultimately a *gō'ēl* (a close relative who functions as one's avenger), will redeem him, but whether or not this involves resurrection is not clear. While I maintain that Old Testament saints had a clearer vision of the afterlife than we give them credit for, the truth is there are few explicit references to this notion.³³ So if Jennens wanted to begin Part III with an Old Testament prophecy on this subject his options were limited. The striking feature of this choice is that it highlights the personal implications of the cosmic triumph of the Messiah. But Job 19:25-26 is used to announce a new general theme: the victory of the Messiah over death itself.

From the addition of 1 Corinthians 15:20 to the opening soprano aria (#45) we are reminded how important the Joban text has been in Christian perceptions of death and afterlife. In fact, the next six texts (##46-51) are inspired by Paul's presentation of the doctrine of bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. In this first verse Jennens clearly identifies the Redeemer of the Joban text with the Messiah (Paul uses the Greek word *Xristos*), and by extension notes that the resurrection of Christ guarantees the resurrection of the believer. Just as the first fruits of the harvest that the Israelites presented to the Yahweh served as a paradigm, a deposit, a down

payment, a guarantee of a full harvest belonging to God, so the resurrection of Christ represents the beginning of a new race of the resurrected, the new “Order of the Empty Tomb.” The basis for this new hope is expressed in #46. As in Adam all die, so in the Messiah shall all be made alive.

Somewhat surprisingly, Jennens skips the next few verses in the Corinthians passage, which elaborate on the Messiah as the first fruits of the new order and especially on his delivery of the kingdom that he has won to the God and Father in view of his victory over death. Instead the text jumps ahead to verse 51 to begin the longest continuous quotation of a biblical text (1 Cor 15:51-57 is even longer than Isa 53:4-6 or Ps 2:1-4 in Part II). But now the tone has become celebrative. At the sound of the last trumpet the dead in Christ shall be raised incorruptible as the final demonstration of the Messiah’s triumph over death (##47-48).

But the reference to the last trumpet deserves further comment. The image derives from the ancient court in which a specially appointed herald would be assigned to blow the trumpet as a signal that the king is about to emerge from his chamber and enter the throne room to take his seat on the throne. The trumpet sounds the signal for all to stand in honour of the king. (The original paradigm for this heavenly scene is found in Exodus 19.) This trumpet blast will serve as a signal to the dead that the time has come for them to rise and appear before the heavenly king. This will be the final demonstration of the defeat of death (#49). The notion of “Death being swallowed up in victory” derives from Isaiah’s apocalypse, which in this context also celebrates the triumph of Yahweh of hosts over death itself. Hear the rest of Isaiah 25:8-9:

He will swallow up death for all time,
And Adonai Yahweh will wipe tears away from all faces,
And he will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth;
For Yahweh has spoken.

And it will be said in that day,
Behold this is our God for whom we have waited that he might save us.
This is Yahweh for whom we have waited;
Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

In the original context the word for death, *māwet* is probably best understood as a personal name, the Hebrew version of *Mot*, the name of the Canaanite god of death and the Netherworld. The point is that Yahweh is supreme over all. He alone holds the keys even to death and Sheol. As an independent being, Mot is but a figment of a futile and depraved imagination. Yahweh is supreme over all the forces of chaos.

In #50 Jennens picks up Paul's taunt song over the defeated forces of death. This too represents an adaptation of an Old Testament text, Hosea 13:14, but with a glorious interpretive twist. As in the Isaiah text just cited, in this passage *māwet* functions as a personal name alongside Sheol, and the quotation involves a divine challenge to Death and Sheol to come and wreak their havoc on God's people. But Paul turns the quotation around into a rhetorical question, asking what has happened to the sting of death and to the apparent triumph of the grave. The answer is patent: the forces of the grave and death have been neutralized by the triumph of the Messiah - which in Paul and in this composition leads to a spontaneous doxology, an outburst of praise to God who has given the victory through the Lord, Jesus, the Messiah.

The rhetorical questions continue in #52 as the last aria asks whether, in the face of the Messiah's triumph, anything or anyone else but the risen Christ has any power over God's elect. No, if God justifies, no one can condemn! Instead of standing over us as the only one who could condemn, the Messiah who died and rose again is at the right hand of God interceding for us. Before God deals with us he has to deal with the Messiah. And this leads to the final outburst of praise (#53) in which the work of the Messiah is summarized. Appealing to the glorious

expressions of heavenly adoration and worship in Revelation 5:9-14, this chorus offers a summary biography of the Messiah. The historical fact is that He is the Lamb that was slain. The soteriological fact is that by this act he has redeemed us to God. The theological fact is that in this way he has demonstrated himself to be worthy of all power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and blessing (=praise). Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb forever and ever. Amen! Amen! Amen! Amen!

Conclusion

With this triumphant note we have come to the end of Handel's *Messiah*, which if performed in full will last approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes. Those of us who have sung *Messiah* know that the experience leaves us all breathless. But the same is true of those who attend a performance of *Messiah*. Like Ezekiel's opening vision, by which the God of glory broke into the mundane world of this prophet on alien soil, leaving him stunned (Ezek. 1:24), so in our time, many have experienced a similar emotion after Handel's aural presentation of the glory of the Lord. Through music, Jennens and Handel have invited us to retrace the steps of the Messiah. The adventure has led us through winding and circuitous paths, playing with our emotions like a roller coaster, taking us down with the Messiah to the depths of our own depravity and then lifting us to the heights of "Hallelujah," sending us down to the Netherworld to taste the bitter gall of death, but then escorting us into the heavenly throne room to join the myriads of angels and other creatures and especially the redeemed to sing the praises of the Lamb! In Handel's *Messiah* all, regardless of their spiritual condition, are invited to a spiritual experience, for one really must be dead not to be moved by this piece.

Scholars and musicians will continue to debate whether this is a "sacred oratorio" or simply an "entertaining oratorio" until the cows come home. In my estimation, in this piece we

see the remarkable confluence of Hebrew theology and biblical truth, Italian operatic genius, English class, and German piety. For the true people God, those who have experienced the redemption offered by the sacrificial death of the Lamb, this oratorio should always be a doxology of praise, and for the rest, those still aligned with the kingdom of this world and the realm of darkness, this oratorio presents a challenge. Eventually every knee will bow prostrate before the Lamb. The question is, will we do so submissively in this life, as an act of voluntary homage, or by constraint in the life to come. Through the music and lyrics of *Messiah*, Jennens and Handel have driven us to contemplate the truth expressed in the *Majora canamus* that prefaces the composition, which I quote in closing:

And without Controversy, great is the Mystery of Godliness: God was manifested in the Flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the World, received up in Glory. In whom are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge. (*1 Tim 3:10; Col 2:3*)

ENDNOTES

¹¹ Robert Manson Myers in *Handel's Messiah: A Touchstone of Taste* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), identifies 56; Albert Scheibler and Julia Evdokimova in *Georg Freidric Handel: Oratorien Fuhrer* (Bonn: Neu Deutsche Händel-Gesellschaft, 1993), pp. 377-84, identify 55; Leonard Van Camp in *A Practical Guide for Performing, Teaching and Singing Messiah* (Dayton: Roger Dean Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 163-66, and the Watkins Shaw edition of the score *Handel's Messiah* (Borough Green, Seven Oaks, Kent: Novello, n.d., 1966 reprint), pp. ix-x, identify 53. We will follow the later numeration.

² Myers, 59.

³ Thus Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins, Composition, Sources* (new edition; New York/London: W. W. Norton, 1972) 103.

⁴ Cf. 46:9-13, "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other, I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish my good pleasure,'... Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, I will do it... I bring near my righteousness, it is not far off; and my salvation will not delay. And I will grant salvation in Zion, and my glory in Israel."

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the ancient Israelite perceptions of the Messiah see D. I. Block, "My Servant David: Ancient Israel's Vision of the Messiah," forthcoming (Baker, 2003).

⁶ Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-5; John 1:23. In all of the Gospels this appropriation of the Isaiah text sends an early signal that Jesus is much more than the son of a carpenter from Nazareth; he is publicly identified with Yahweh.

⁷ Cf. R. Schultz, “The Lord’s Anointed,” *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 160. The importance of Isaiah 61:1 for New Testament changeable is summarized by M. Goulder, “The Anointed” in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. L. North*, ed. S. Moyise (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 66: “Isaiah 61:1 is probably the most primitive and the most determinative text in the history of the Christian movement. It is likely that it formed Jesus’ first conception of his vocation; that it provided a bridge to his later and more ambitious identity; that it gave shape to his own view of his message, and to that of the principal wings of his movement; and that it led to a limitation which was the ruining of one of them.”

⁸ The spelling, Emmanuel, is traditional, but is based upon a faulty vocalization.

⁹ L. Van Camp, *A Practical Guide for Performing, Teaching, and Singing Messiah* (Verona, WI: Roger Dean, 1993) 42.

¹⁰ This designation is based on the phrase *mebasseret siyyôn*, “teller of good news of Zion.” The feminine form has in mind Jerusalem, which as a geographic name according to Hebrew convention must be portrayed as feminine.

¹¹ Literally “Behold your God!”

¹² The Hebrew, translated literally, is a little different: “Wonder of a Counselor,” “Mighty El,” “Father of Eternity,” “Prince of Peace.”

¹³ See R. F. Youngblood, “Immanuel,” *ISBE*, rev. ed., 2:807.

¹⁴ Cf. J.N. Oswalt, “גִּזְרָה,” *NIDOTTE* 2:1124.

¹⁵ Lev 4:3,5,16; 6:15; cf. Num 3:3.

¹⁶ That is as “Yahweh’s anointed.” Unspecified: 1 Sam 2:35. Saul: 1 Sam 12:3,5 (by Samuel); 24:7,11 (by David). David: 1 Sam 16:6 (by Samuel); 2 Sam. 22:51 = Ps. 18:51 (by David); Ps 2:2; 20:7[6]; 28:8; 84:10[9]; 89:39,52[38,51]; 132:10,17 (all by psalmists); Hab 3:13 (by Habakkuk). Solomon: 2 Chron. 6:42 (by Solomon; //”your servant David”).

¹⁷ 1 Sam 2:10 (by Hannah), and Dan 9:25,26 (by Gabriel).

¹⁸ Handel’s autograph identifies this instrumental piece simply as *pifa*, apparently a colloquial expression for the Italian reeded woodwind instrument, the *piffaro*.

¹⁹ 1 Sam 16:11,12; 2 Sam 7:8; Ps 78:70-72.

²⁰ Cf. Van Camp’s (*Messiah*, 54) ridiculous comment that “The soprano voice seems most angelic.” The opposite is probably the case.

²¹ The Greek word *euangelizomai* links this announcement with LXX of Isaiah 40:9.

²² As cited by Christopher Hogwood in G.F. Handel, *Messiah: The Wordbook for the Oratorio. Words Selected from the Holy Scripture by Charles Jennens* (Introduction by Christopher Hogwood. Paintings by Barry Moser, N.p.: Willa Perlman, 1992), i.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cf. Myers, 55-57. On page 76 Myers quotes an excerpt from a letter Jennens wrote to a friend complaining about Handel:

“I shall show you a collection I gave Handel call’d Messiah, which I value so highly, and he has made a fine Entertainment of it, tho’ not near so good as he might and ought to have done. I have with great difficulty made him correct some of the grossest faults in the composition, but he retain’d the Overture obstinately, in which there are some passages far unworthy of Handel, but much more unworthy of the Messiah.”

²⁶ E.g., Jer 23:1-4; Ezek 34:1-6. Cf. J.A. Soggin, *THAT* 2:793.

²⁷ Myers, 72.

²⁸ AV mistakenly reads “hell.” But the Old Testament perception of Sheol is quite different from the New Testament portrayal of hell as a place of eternal torment.

²⁹ The news need not be good (cf. S.T. Hague, *NIDOTTE* 1.776). But AV does better than LXX, which renders the term *euangalizo*, which the translators generally understood to mean, “proclaim good news.”

³⁰ Cf. Myers, *Handel’s Messiah*, 79.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*

³² On the origins see Myers, *Handel’s Messiah*, 116-17; cf. Hogwood, in Handel, *Messiah*, p. v.

³³ The only certain reference to eschatological personal resurrection is found in Dan. 12:1-3, though Ezek 37:1-14 speaks of the restoration of Israel in resurrection terms.