

The Bible and Handel's Messiah: Some Sources on Their Relation and Use

by David R. Powell

How many times is it now that you have heard the “Hallelujah” chorus come wafting over the bread aisle or reverberating from the radio since just after Halloween (or Reformation Day, if one prefers)? Apart from whatever else one might be thinking on such occasions these December days, how often it happens that one turns to a companion and says, “That comes from Revelation 11 and 19, you know.” Well, perhaps not, but most are at least under the impression that the libretto of this oratorio (never minding for the moment the musicological arguments over calling *Messiah* an oratorio) has been assembled from verses from the Bible. While this is true enough on the surface, it was, of course, no mere cut-and-paste job. Questions arise about how and why the text ended up as it did and about how to respond to it now that we have it. This essay introduces a number of English-language sources that have gone about answering these questions in a variety of ways, some by way of criticism and commentary and others by way of devotion. Still other more general titles will be listed under Further Reading, which approach *Messiah* more historically and musicologically, as some of them are often cited in the more focused sources under consideration.

Messiah was not even intended to premiere during the Christmas season. The libretto for *Messiah* was compiled in 1741 by Charles Jennens, with whom Handel also collaborated on *Saul* and *Belshazzar*, among other works. Jennens submitted the text to Handel with the hope that Handel would set the text to music and perform it during the following Holy Week. The major source for the text was the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible of 1611, although Jennens also used, for the Psalms, the translation from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.¹ Twenty-four days after Handel started to work, the music was complete. *Messiah* premiered in Dublin at the Fishamble Street Musick Hall on April 13, 1742. As glorious as the music is and whatever commentary Handel might be making on Jennens’ libretto, though, where would one find commentary on Jennens’ process and on the libretto itself?

A handy place to start is with Peter Jacobi’s *The Messiah Book: The Life and Times of G. F. Handel’s Greatest Hit* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), in particular pages 104 and following, in which Jacobi lays out the libretto section by section with corresponding biblical references alongside. Other sources often specify sections of the libretto to be discussed, so Jacobi’s layout can be helpful in keeping track of the biblical citations. Jacobi otherwise provides an accessible overview of the production and performance history of *Messiah*, as well as some general commentary on the text and music.

As mentioned above, strains of *Messiah* can be ubiquitous as the Christmas season approaches, and it is the Christmas music, Part I of *Messiah*, to which Mark Brummitt turns his attention in “Hand(e)ling the Messiah” (*The Expository Times* 117:3 [December 2005]: 95-99). Brummitt provides section-by-section commentary on the “clever cut-and-paste” (97) narrative, a “meditation on the story of Christ formed predominantly out of Old Testament texts” (99)—contextualizing the biblical verses, noting more up-to-date translations of the Authorised Version text, and bringing in relevant historical points surrounding the production and performance of *Messiah*. He concludes with some emphasis on the use of Isaiah in the libretto, and the “circle[s] of interpretation” (p. 99) that can result from how and when we hear texts relative to one another—how, for example, the hearing of *Messiah* affects how listeners perceive Isaiah, and vice versa.

¹ While the prayer book generally used the Authorised Version for readings, it used the Psalms translations from Myles Coverdale’s Great Bible of 1539.

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Isaiah, which provides more of the quoted verses in *Messiah* than any of the other thirteen biblical books quoted in the composition, is the focus for Andrew Davies' consideration of the libretto in "Oratorio as Exegesis: The Use of the Book of Isaiah in Handel's *Messiah*" (*Biblical Interpretation* 15 [2007]: 464-484). Davies analyzes not only what parts of Isaiah Jennens used in the libretto but also what Jennens could have used and did not, noting some intriguing omissions and coming to the conclusion that "Jennens...was not a man to allow the unpleasantness of atonement theology to infiltrate his 'fine Entertainment'" (472). Under the rubric of "Music as Exegesis" he goes on to more musicological considerations (which account for more than half the article) through an approach of phenomenological reader-response criticism as he asks "what Handel is saying to us through the *sound* of *Messiah* as well as through its words" (474). The justification for this is the lack of such study in other works on the Bible in music, which "frequently [focus] on the musical work as just another element in the reception history of the biblical text..." (473).

Daniel I. Block, in "Handel's *Messiah*: Biblical and Theological Perspectives" (*Didaskalia* 12:2 [Spring 2001]: 1-23), returns to a section-by-section commentary on the entire libretto from a seemingly more evangelical perspective. While making occasional comments about the music and Jennens' choice of text (and, again, texts that Jennens chose *not* to use), the emphasis is on the text itself, more in the line of biblical commentary. Block addresses linguistic and translational issues, notably leaving out any discussion of the use of the word "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14. He treats the concept of "messiah" slightly more in depth, however, and concludes by noting evangelistic potential in this "remarkable confluence of Hebrew theology and biblical truth, Italian operatic genius, English class, and German piety" (22).

On the other hand, there is William H. C. Propp, who focuses entirely on translation and other issues in his short piece "Bah, Humbug! A Scholar Rips Handel's *Messiah*" (*Bible Review* 18:6 [December 2002]: 43-45, 58-59). After a brief overview of the structure of *Messiah*, Propp shows where the "biblically literate pedant" (43) will notice where the King James translators and Charles Jennens have mistranslated, misappropriated, or otherwise rearranged the texts, limited in this case to Hebrew Bible cullings in the libretto. This includes one of the longer, though still brief, discussions among the works in question here of the occurrence of "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14, as well as the textual problems with Job as quoted in the aria "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Propp does include a number of references to biblical scholarship so that one could pursue the issues.

Beyond the translation issues and commentary, though, is a piece that gets at what might have been an underlying theological agenda in *Messiah*. Michael Marissen argues that this "choral masterpiece much celebrated for bringing together people of diverse backgrounds . . . was designed to teach contempt for Jews and Judaism" (169), in "Rejoicing against Judaism in Handel's *Messiah*" (*Journal of Musicology* 24:2 [Spring 2007]: 167-193). Marissen notes examples of the theological works that comprised part of Jennens' library as typical of the period and as the sort of work that informed Jennens' compilation of biblical texts in the libretto. Marissen also proceeds from the view that biblical interpretation of the period included typological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible (containing the types) and Christian Testament (containing the antitypes). Specifically, Marissen sees Jennens' dependence for his theology and some of his textual readings on Richard Kidder's *A Demonstration of the MESSIAS: In which the Truth of the Christian Religion is proved, against all the enemies thereof; but especially against the JEWS*, and Henry Hammond's *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament* and a similar volume on the Psalms. Both the underlying theology and the selection of variant readings, as well as Handel's musical emphasis, clearly demonstrate, according to Marissen, the anti-Jewish intent of *Messiah*. Even the "Hallelujah" chorus is implicated.

If one would prefer to take Martin Marty's approach (reacting to Marissen) and "forgive one another for doing violence to one another's texts and then sing lustily" (Marty, "Handel Scandal," *Christian Century* 124:10 [May 15, 2007]: 47), a number of monographs might enable that approach by treating *Messiah* from a devotional perspective. With slight differences in structure and the expected different perspectives among individual interpreters, each one proceeds through the libretto to comment on it section by section. Joseph E. McCabe's *Handel's Messiah: A Devotional Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978) covers the entire text of the work, though relegating some of the sections to appendices for being relatively obscure, and provides three short devotions per section. Despite the intended timing of the premiere performance, McCabe's emphasis is to look at the text from the point of view of Advent and Christmas.

David Winter in his *Forty Days with the Messiah: Day-by-day Reflections on the Words of Handel's Oratorio* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) and Randy Seiver, who authored *The Glory Revealed: An Exposition of Handel's Messiah* (Palm Harbor, FL: New Wine Press, 1999), consider the text from beginning to end, with each devotion consisting of two to three pages. There is no particular seasonal emphasis in Winter's book despite the possible Lenten implications with the forty-day structure. Winter also provides a brief section of notes for group study.

Roger A. Bullard, who authored *Messiah: The Gospel According to Handel's Oratorio* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), returns more to the commentary end of the spectrum "for the benefit of those who sing and hear *Messiah* with perhaps as little background for an appreciation of the words as I had [in college]" (vii). He treats, again, each of the fifty-three sections of the libretto though still only within a few pages per section or group of (brief) sections.

Finally, Carol Bechtel Reynolds with her *Hallelujah: The Bible and Handel's Messiah* (Pittsburgh: The Kerygma Program, 1995) has provided a two-volume offering of curriculum with the intent of doing group Bible study (based on the NRSV) through an appreciation of selections from *Messiah*. The "Resource Book" includes the study material, reflection questions, etc., and the "Leader's Guide" provides various session plans, supply lists, suggested topics for lectures, activities, and so on.

So from the bread aisle to the concert hall, the efforts of Handel and Jennens will soon be everywhere. Wherever one encounters this stirring, inspirational, and perhaps even controversial composition and its more popular parts, these resources can provide a broader understanding of the work and an opportunity to explore the concept of this Messiah.

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