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Handel, Messiah, and the Jews



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GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL'S MOST FAMOUS WORK CAN BE SEEN AS PART OF A RELIGIOUS BACKLASH AGAINST JEWS AND OTHER "NONBELIEVERS."

By Michael Marissen, Daniel Underhill Professor of Music

subjects (such as *Israel in Egypt*) he was pro-Jewish. Handel and his contemporaries did have a high opinion of the characters populating the Hebrew Bible, not as "Jews" but rather as proto-Christian believers in God's expected Messiah, Jesus. On the subject of living Jews and Judaism after the advent of Jesus, contemporary English sources have virtually nothing positive to say and very little that is even neutral.

To create the libretto for Handel's *Messiah*, Charles Jennens (1701–1773), a formidable scholar and a friend of the composer, brought together a series of scriptural passages adapted from the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *King James Bible*.

As a traditionalist Christian, Jennens was troubled by the spread of deism—the notion that God had simply created the cosmos and let it run its course without divine intervention. Christianity rested on the (biblical) belief that God broke into history by taking human form in Jesus. For Jennens and his ilk, deism represented a serious menace.

Deists argued that Jesus was neither the son of God nor the messiah. Since Christian writers had habitually considered Jews the

most grievous enemies of their religion, they came to suppose that deists obtained anti-Christian ammunition from rabbinical scholars. Anglican Bishop Richard Kidder (1633–1703), for example, claimed in his huge 1690s treatise on Jesus as messiah that "the [d]eists among us, who would run down our revealed religion, are but underworkmen to the Jews."

Kidder's title bespeaks it all: "A Demonstration of the Messiah, in Which the Truth of the Christian Religion Is Proved, Against All the Enemies Thereof; but Especially Against the Jews." Jennens owned an edition from 1726, and he appears to have studied it carefully.

Central to Kidder's traditional Christianity is a mode of interpretation called "typology," which means that events in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) point to events in Christian history not only through explicit prophecy and fulfillment but also through the more mysterious implied spiritual anticipation of Christian "antitypes" in Old Testament "types."

In Romans 5:14, for example, the Apostle Paul describes Adam as a type of "the one to come" (Jesus, the antitype).

Such thinking was the driving force behind Kidder's book and Jennens's choice and juxtaposition of texts for his libretto. In *Messiah*, Old and New Testament selections stand fundamentally in a typological alignment.

Jennens saw that he could not thwart his adversaries simply by producing reading matter insisting that biblical texts be understood both typologically and as Christ-centered. What better means to comfort disquieted Christians against the faith-busting wiles of deists and Jews than to draw on the feelings and emotions of musical art—over and above the reasons and revelations of verbal argument?

Music lovers accustomed to gathering for December sing-alongs may be surprised to learn that George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* was meant not for Christmas but for Lent, and that the "Hallelujah" chorus was designed not to honor the birth of Jesus but to celebrate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 CE. For most Christians, this violent event was construed as divine retribution on Judaism for its failure to accept Jesus as messiah.

Although many Handel scholars claim that significant numbers of Jews attended the original performances of Handel's oratorios (1732–1751), they can offer no compelling evidence. Most Jews in 18th-century England were too poor to attend such concerts, and observant Jews would have balked at the public utterance of the sacred name of God in the oratorios, even though "Jehovah" was a Christian misunderstanding of the Lord's prohibited name.

Scholars often assert, too, that because Handel wrote oratorios on ancient Israelite

Editor's Note: "Faculty Expert" is a new department of the *Bulletin* that will focus on faculty scholarship and research at Swarthmore. In each issue, we will bring you articles written by faculty members as they pursue new knowledge and bring it to the College's classrooms and labs. We invite your comments—scholarly or otherwise—on these articles.

Messiah does exactly this, culminating in the “Hallelujah” chorus. At Scene 6 in Part 2, the oratorio features passages from Psalm 2 of the Old Testament set as a series of antagonistic movements that precede excerpts from the New Testament’s Book of Revelation set as the triumphant “Hallelujah” chorus: type and antitype, prophecy and fulfillment.

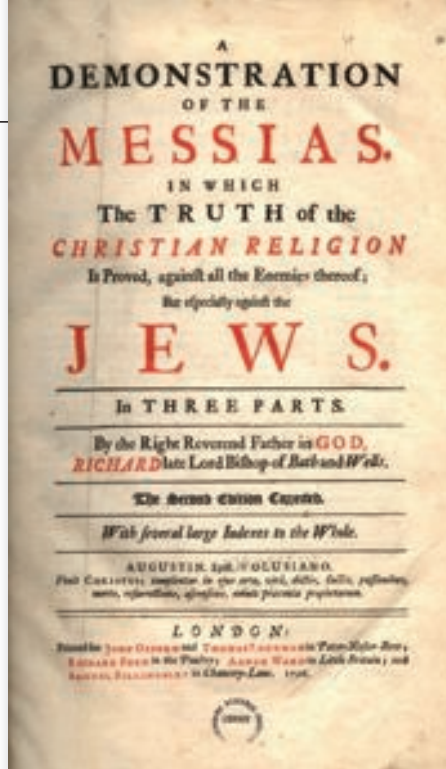
The bass aria that opens Scene 6 asks, “Why do the nations so furiously rage together, and why do the people imagine a vain thing?” But in the standard biblical sources, the passage (Psalm 2:1) reads not “nations” but “heathen.”

Jennens took his reading from Henry Hammond (1605–1660), the great 17th-century Anglican biblical scholar, whose extended and fiercely erudite commentary on Psalm 2 suggests the advantage of “nations” over “heathen”: “nations” can readily include the Jews. In the 18th century, no one would have uncritically used the *King James Bible* and the *Book of Common Prayer’s* word “heathen” for Jews or Judaism.

Handel sets Psalm 2:1 as an aria drawing on the *stile concitato* (agitated style), with repeated 16th notes as a convention for violent affects to underline the raging of the nations, pointedly including the Jews. “The people,” when they “imagine a vain thing,” are further associated with a conspicuous violin line of oscillating pitches.

A similar melodic idea depicts the Jews in the earlier recitative “All they that see him laugh him to scorn; they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads.” The recitative sets Psalm 22:7—a text that can be understood (typologically) to foreshadow a New Testament passage, Matthew 27:39–40, which refers to Jewish pilgrims attending Passover and to Jesus on the cross: “They that passed by, reviled him, wagging their heads.” The oscillating pattern and its scornful tone capture the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as messiah.

Later in Scene 6, at the tenor aria, Jennens skips to Psalm 2:9, “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron.” His excision of verses 5–8 makes the violent language in “Thou shalt break them” refer to the Jesus-rejecting Jews, because without the intervening verses, “them” refers to “the nations” (including the Jews) and “the people” (the Jews) of the bass aria, rather than the gentiles referred to in the missing verse 8.



Anglican bishop Richard Kidder's 1690's treatise on Jesus as messiah was a diatribe against Jews and their “underworkmen,” the deists. Charles Jennens, who wrote the libretto for Handel's *Messiah*, owned and studied this 1726 edition.

If Jews are understood to make up “them,” who does “thou” refer to? Contemporary commentators widely agree it was the resurrected Jesus, who unleashed his anger on the Jews by having the Roman armies lay waste Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE.

Indeed, Christians were all but unanimous in believing that the violence of Psalm 2:9 represented the prophesying type for a later event: the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the fulfilling antitype.

Now having brought in Psalm 2 and its understood prophecy of the destruction of the temple—widely believed to signal God's rejection of Judaism—what is Jennens's response? “Hallelujah! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth; the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Revelation 19:6, 19:16, and 11:5).

Jennens undoubtedly got the idea of juxtaposing these passages directly from Hammond, who wrote: “Now at Revelation 11 is fulfilled that prophecy of Psalm 2. The Jewish nation have behaved themselves most stubbornly against Christ, and cruelly against Christians, and God's judgments are come upon them.”

Handel's music makes its own contribu-

tion to the theological message here. The mood of the “Hallelujah” chorus is over-the-top triumph. For the first time in *Messiah*, trumpets and drums are used together, although they would have been appropriate or welcome at several earlier places. In Baroque music, trumpets with drums were emblems of great power and of victory. In *Messiah*, the combination is saved for celebrating the destruction of Christ's crucifixion-provoking “enemies” prefigured in Psalm 2.

With Old Israel supposedly rejected by God and its obsolescence long before ensured, why did 18th-century writers and composers rejoice against Judaism at all, whether explicitly or, as here, implicitly? There must have been some festering Christian anxiety about the prolonged survival of Judaism: how could a “false” religion last? Might Judaism somehow actually be “true”?

These issues were a matter of life and death, says Jennens's key guide, Kidder: “If we be wrong in dispute with the Jews, we err fundamentally and must never hope for salvation. So that either we or the Jews must be in a state of damnation. Of such great importance are those matters in dispute between us and them.”

This would represent ample motivation for the text and musical setting of *Messiah* to engage these issues and would perhaps help explain any lapse from decent Christian gratitude into unseemly rejoicing in the “Hallelujah” chorus.

While still a timely, living masterpiece that may continue to bring spiritual and aesthetic sustenance to many music lovers, Christian or otherwise, *Messiah* also appears to be very much a work of its own era. ♫

Michael Marissen received a B.A. from Calvin College and Ph.D. from Brandeis University, joining the Swarthmore faculty in 1989. He teaches courses on medieval, renaissance, baroque, and classical European music; Bach; a conceptual introduction to the music of various cultures; Mozart; and the string quartet. He is the author of Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's “St. John Passion” (Oxford University Press, 1998) and The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's “Brandenburg Concertos” (Princeton University Press, 1999). He is currently writing a monograph, Handel's “Messiah” and Christian Triumphalism. A different version of this essay appeared in The New York Times on April 8.