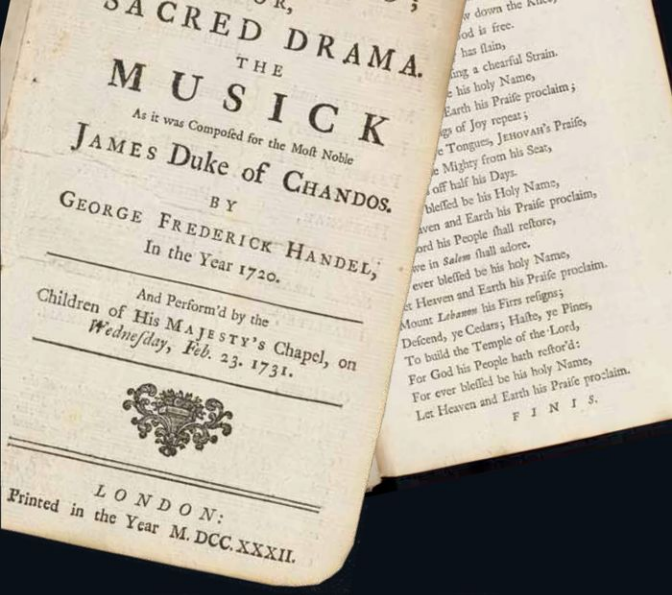

Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti

Sacred Drama and Biblical Exegesis

Deborah W. Rooke

OXFORD

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Preface

The following book is a series of chapters that may be read consecutively as a whole, but which are also intended to be self-contained studies. There has been some gentle editing to ensure that they form a coherent whole for those who choose to read them as such, but each should also be comprehensible on its own.

A word of explanation is in order about what to expect from these studies. Their primary focus is the libretti rather than the music of Handel's Israelite oratorios, a focus that has been dictated by both personal and professional considerations. On the personal side, I come to the oratorios as an amateur musician and a lover of Handel, but lacking the expertise to make what I consider to be meaningful comments in the musical arena where many great figures have trod before and are still treading. On the professional side, however, as an Old Testament scholar I have a keen interest in how the biblical material is reused and revivified in contexts that are far removed from those of its origin—that is, in so-called 'reception criticism'—and the Handel oratorio libretti are a fascinating and little-studied example of this phenomenon. These studies therefore concentrate on the libretti from the standpoint of biblical reception criticism, and are an attempt to answer two basic questions about the libretti's version of the Old Testament texts on which they are based: how do the libretti differ from the biblical text, and what is there in the libretti's cultural, political, or theological *Zeitgeist* that might account for those differences? Where the libretti are based on an intermediate source, such as an earlier play or libretto on the same biblical topic, some discussion of that source too has been included; and most of the chapters include a treatment of the biblical narrative from a modern critical perspective as a point of comparison for the historical interpretations. Because I am a biblical scholar rather than a cultural historian or other kind of eighteenth-century specialist, I have focused on questions that relate to biblical interpretation in the eighteenth century, in the belief that this was where I could make the most meaningful contribution by offering a perspective on the libretti that would not otherwise be explored. Of course, like all those who attempt to cross disciplinary boundaries, I do so with some trepidation, and no doubt it will be obvious to the eighteenth-century specialists where my strengths and vulnerabilities lie. But I trust that the vulnerabilities are not mortal, and that (to use an analogy borrowed from a friend) any holes in the presentation are of the Swiss cheese type rather than the threadbare type.

One study that has been very influential in my own thoughts about the topic is Ruth Smith's *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995). Smith's work laid down a marker in the study of the libretti, taking them seriously as meaningful expressions of their authors' values and ideals, and I think it is true to say that no-one who writes on the libretti now does so without reference to her. I had her book from early on in my own project, and it provided a framework within which many of the present studies have been written. Although I have attempted to footnote as thoroughly as possible where I am

conscious of having used her work specifically, I know that her work has shaped mine in more subtle ways that are not always so easy to highlight. This is therefore an acknowledgement of that more general debt to her work; although I have not always agreed with her conclusions on matters of biblical interpretation, I certainly could not have written this book without the benefit of her immense expertise on the eighteenth-century cultural, political, and historical context into which the libretti fit. I like to think of this project as being complementary to hers: it is primarily a textual study rather than a conceptual one, that is, it works on the premise of offering sustained readings of individual libretti rather than presenting studies of themes that are illustrated by examples from multiple libretti; and it fills out the details in an area that was certainly mentioned but not privileged in her study, namely, that of theological interpretation in the libretti.

Turning both to more official and to more personal acknowledgements, thanks are due to the British Academy for a small grant which enabled me to spend two weeks at the Huntington Library, Pasadena, CA, studying the Handel libretto copies that are part of the Larpent collection housed there. For someone whose interest is in the nuances of textual interpretation and variation, access to these materials was invaluable. Thanks too to all those who have listened to these chapters in the form of papers, asked questions, offered encouragement, written references for the project, given me access to additional bibliographical materials, and asked me when the book would be out. Special thanks to Dr Maria Rosa Antognazza for her assistance with the Italian of Apostolo Zeno's libretto. Equally special thanks to Regent's Park College, Oxford, for giving me a fellowship in the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture where I have been able to put the finishing touches to the volume. And thanks indeed to Oxford University Press for agreeing to take on the project, despite the fact that two commissioning editors have come and gone as my points of contact over the time it has taken to bring it to fruition. Lucy Qureshi was responsible for the enthusiastic initial commission and contract; Tom Perridge allowed me the extra time that was required because of unforeseen circumstances in order to complete the writing; and Lizzie Robottom has recently become the metaphorical midwife in order to see the book through to production. For all their support, patience, guidance, and gentle nudging I am very grateful.

When this project was conceived, in the early noughties, there were very few studies that treated the libretti as anything more than rather crude hooks on which to hang Handel's heavenly music. Since then the number of studies that have evaluated the libretti more positively in their own right and in relation to earlier source material has grown, but there is still plenty of scope for development, particularly in the areas that are of interest to biblical scholars. I trust that this volume will be a positive contribution towards that development, and continue the crusade to rehabilitate the libretti from the damning and often misplaced criticisms to which they have been subjected for so long.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my husband, Dr Larry Kreitzer. He was present at its conception; indeed, it was his example of pursuing his professional New Testament expertise into the world of his personal enthusiasm for literature and film that gave me the impetus to pursue my Old Testament expertise into the world of Handelian libretti. Throughout the elephantine gestation period he has bought me books on Handel and on related topics, stocked and played my

collection of Handel CDs, listened to many of the chapters when they were given as papers, and been a sounding post for, as well as a contributor of, ideas. He has advised, cajoled, chivvied, and supported me all the way, and he will be as relieved as I am that the baby has finally been born. Thank you, my darling. I really couldn't have done it without you.

DWR

Oxford, January 2011

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Contents

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BCE	Before the Common Era
BL	Bible and Literature
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BTC	The Bible in the Twenty-First Century
CE	Common Era
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
DCH	David J. A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 8 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–)
ESHM	European Seminar in Historical Methodology
ET	English Translation
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
FCB 2	Feminist Companion to the Bible, second series
GCT	Gender, Culture, Theory
H-H iv	Walter Eisen and Margret Eisen (eds.), *Händel-Handbuch*. IV. *Dokumente zu Leben und Schaffen* (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik; Kassel/Basel/London: Bärenreiter, 1985)
HIN	*Handel Institute Newsletter*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JSJSup	*Journal for the Study of Judaism* Supplement Series
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
M & L	*Music and Letters*

MT	Masoretic Text (Hebrew text of the Old Testament)
NCB	New Century Bible
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OG	Old Greek
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Oudtestamentische Studiën
PFSCL	*Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
TWAS	Twayne's World Author Series
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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Introit: Handel and Israelite oratorio

George Frideric Handel (the anglicized form of his name that the composer himself adopted) is one of Britain's favourite composers. Born in Halle in present-day Germany in 1685, he travelled first to Hamburg and then to Italy in the pursuit of his musical career and education, and spent four years there before coming to England, where he would eventually settle. Some of Handel's works have struck such a chord in the national imagination that they have taken on free-standing afterlives, divorced from their original contexts; one need only think of his *Water Music*, or the *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, or the ubiquitous *Largo*, the explosive *Zadok the Priest*, or the glittering *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*. Yet, as the last example shows, there is one part of his output that was unique, pioneering, and became extremely popular in its day, which today is all but unknown among non-specialists and until recently has attracted little attention even from the specialists. Many who love the antiphonal oboes heralding Sheba's arrival have no idea that the piece belongs to an oratorio portraying the life of King Solomon, and that the so-called *Arrival* is a symphony opening the oratorio's third act in which Sheba's visit to Solomon is portrayed. Nor is that particular oratorio the only one of its kind that Handel wrote: he produced more than a dozen such oratorios dealing with characters and stories from the Old Testament.[1] Today, the term 'oratorio' in relation to Handel's works is often associated purely with *Messiah*, on the assumption that the two entities are coterminous, but this is an ironical state of affairs, because the non-dramatic, scripturally-based *Messiah*, however much it may coincide with our conception of what an oratorio ought to be, was atypical of the genre that Handel developed. But if *Messiah* does not define the quintessence of Handelian oratorio, what does?

Handel's Israelite oratorios are the fruit of his maturer years, being written for the most part during the period 1732–52 (Handel died in 1759 at the age of 74). They are English-language compositions that merge the musical conventions of Italian opera with dramatic plots that are adaptations of Old Testament narratives.[2] The operatic nature of the works can be seen from the fact that several of

[1] There was also an oratorio based on a Christian martyr story (*Theodora*), but the focus of the present study is the biblically-based oratorios.

[2] Although the works are often also referred to as 'English oratorio', the designation is too inexact for present purposes, since Handel also produced several other English-language operatic compositions that do not have biblical subject-matter, but which also tend to be referred to as 'oratorios'. There is, however, a certain amount of dispute over whether these other works (*Acis and Galatea*, *Semele*, *Hercules*, and *The Choice of Hercules*) should be referred to as oratorios. See, for example, Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*. I. *The Oratorio in the Baroque Era: Italy, Vienna, Paris* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 8–9; Annette Landgraf and David Vickers, 'Oratorio', in *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 454–7 (457). The terminology of 'Israelite oratorio' avoids this ambiguity. In the light of the definition just given, it can be seen that *Messiah* is atypical of Handelian Israelite oratorio in that it is not a drama, and its libretto consists of an assemblage of biblical texts rather than a librettist's dramatic elaboration of a scriptural plot-line.

the oratorios bear the designation 'sacred drama' on the front of the libretto, although experts are agreed, on the basis of contemporary evidence, that they were performed in a choral fashion rather than being staged. They were not part of a deliberate compositional strategy by Handel; rather, it was a happy accident that sparked the transformation of a work that originated as a kind of household entertainment into the genre that came to dominate Handel's concert seasons in London during the mid-1700s. Indeed, it took Handel himself some time to realize the appeal that works of this nature could and did have, and it was not until a decade or so after the first oratorio's performance that he finally abandoned his long-standing commitment to Italian opera and focused instead on producing Israelite oratorio for his London public. A brief survey of Handel's career in London will help to put the development of Israelite oratorio into context and to explain why Handel's shift from opera to oratorio was so gradual.

When Handel came to London in 1710 he had already had experience of composing opera, Italian oratorio, and other types of church music. His arrival in England coincided, whether by accident or design, with the need for a composer to write Italian-style operas for performance at the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket. Italian opera was just becoming established in London, and the Haymarket was its home. Alongside other commissions, which included music for ceremonial and political occasions at the behest of both Queen Anne and later King George I,[3] Handel composed operas for the Haymarket company until its collapse in 1717. Following that, he spent a year or so under the patronage of James Brydges, Earl of Caernarvon and later Duke of Chandos, during which he composed eleven choral anthems and a *Te Deum* for performance in Brydges' private chapel at his mansion in Cannons Park, Edgware. During this time Handel also composed two dramatic works, one of which is described in contemporary sources as a 'little opera',[4] that were probably performed as private entertainments for Brydges and his household. When the opera company at the Haymarket was re-established in 1719–20 under royal patronage as the Royal Academy of Music, Handel was one of three composers to be employed there. Not that this was the only string to his bow, so to speak: alongside his operatic duties his friendly relations with the monarchy continued, and by 1723 he had also been granted a position as a composer to the Chapel Royal and was music master to the royal princesses Anne and Caroline. During these years Handel was given several royal commissions, including most famously the task of writing ceremonial music for

[3] Handel's decision to head for London coincided with his appointment as Kapellmeister to the Electoral Court at Hanover, a post from which he was first given leave of absence to spend some time in London and from which he was released altogether in 1713. This meant that when the Elector of Hanover became George I of England in 1714 the London-based Handel was in an advantageous position with regard to obtaining musical commissions from the royal household. See Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 60–1, 67, 70–4.

[4] Letter from Sir David Dalrymple to Hugh Campbell, 3rd Earl of Loudoun, dated 27 May 1718: 'Since my Last I have been at Canons with E. of Carnarvon . . . he has a Chorus of his own, the Musick is made for himself and sung by his own servants, besides which there is a Little opera now a makeing for his diversion whereof the Musick will not be made publick. The words are to be furnished by M^{rs} Pope & Gay, the musick to be composed by Hendell'. In *H-H* iv, 76.

the coronation of George II and Caroline in 1727—a commission made possible by Handel's naturalization via the pen of George I shortly before the old king died.

The fortunes of the Royal Academy of Music waxed and waned. Rivalries between the highly paid virtuoso Italian singers generated reciprocal rivalries between their fans; a serious conflict leading to the estrangement of George I from the Prince of Wales meant that supporters of one royal could not inhabit the same social sphere as supporters of the other. In both cases, opera audiences were diminished as a result. Financial pressures too were ever present, and in 1729 crisis point was reached, requiring drastic action if the Academy was to survive. At a meeting of the board of investors, an attempt was made to revive the Academy's fortunes: defaulting subscribers were to be pursued, an injection of capital was to be made, and Handel and John Jacob Heidegger (the manager of the Academy) were granted the right to stage opera at the Haymarket for a period of five years, using the props, equipment, clothes, and instruments that were in the theatre.

Now as sole composer of the company, Handel established a basic pattern for the annual programme consisting of original works, revivals, and pasticcios;[5] and this was the context in which his first-ever public performance of an English oratorio took place in 1732. The decision to put on such a work was a spontaneous one, a response to circumstances that were not of his own making, but it was to have a profound effect on the direction of his musical career. On 23 February 1732, Handel's forty-seventh birthday, Bernard Gates, Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, put on at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand a production of *Esther*, one of the 'little operas' that Handel had composed while under the patronage of James Brydges at Cannons. The work consisted of a rather truncated version of the biblical story of Esther, focused on Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews and on Esther's instrumentality in exposing it; it was written for solo voices, chorus and orchestra, and the language of the libretto was English. As well as the production on 23 February, there were also performances on 1 and 3 March. That might have been the end of *Esther*, and of Israelite oratorio, but for two factors: Handel mentioned the performances to Princess Anne, his music pupil, who is said to have expressed a desire to see *Esther* performed at the Haymarket; and a short time later, advertisements appeared for a performance of *Esther* on 20 April, to be put on by person or persons unknown 'at the Great Room in Villars-street York Buildings'.[6] Sensing the commercial viability of the work, and probably not wanting others to steal the initiative in capitalizing on it, Handel hastily augmented the short Cannons score, adding material that included

[5] 'Revivals' refers to the staging of works that had already been staged in a previous season, and often involved some sort of rewriting or adaptation of the original work. A 'pasticcio' is a work that is put together from elements of other works.

[6] The earliest known copy of the advertisement, from which this phrase is taken, is dated 19 April, although scholars have conjectured that other advertisements had already appeared—a reasonable supposition since an advertisement for Handel's revised version appeared in the same journal on the same date, which suggests that he must have known of the pirated performance before then in order to prepare his response to it. See *H-H* iv, 199, 200. Burrows follows Handel's late eighteenth-century biographer Charles Burney in attributing Handel's motivation for reworking *Esther* entirely to Princess Anne's expressed desire to see it on stage at the King's Theatre; see Burrows, *Handel*, 165–6. Other scholars, however, cite the pirated performance as the catalyst. See Landgraf and Vickers, '*Esther*', in eid., *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, 213–15 (214).

versions of two of the Coronation Anthems and filled out the motivations for the plot, and the new expanded version of *Esther* was performed six times at the Haymarket between 2 and 20 May 1732.

Israelite oratorio having been born, however, Handel did not immediately abandon opera in favour of the new genre. It is true that the following year, as well as reviving *Esther*, he produced two more oratorios: *Deborah*, which opened in London in March 1733, and *Athalia*, which he took to Oxford for the Public Act in July of the same year;[7] but he sandwiched the oratorio productions between opera revivals, so that his London season consisted of a mixture of the two types of work. Thereafter he continued to juggle the two genres for several years, mixing new operas with revivals of *Esther* or *Deborah*, and not writing another oratorio until 1738. In fact, he continued writing operas until 1741, and it was only thereafter that he concentrated exclusively on oratorio as his chosen musico-dramatic medium. Handel's refusal to abandon opera may have been influenced by the fact that in 1733 a rival opera company to the rump of the Royal Academy was begun, called the Opera of the Nobility, which was supported by those who were dissatisfied with Handel's established position. As was so common with artistic endeavour among the elite, there was also a political edge to this Company: those who were its main patrons were supporters of Frederick, Prince of Wales, who by this time was enjoying just as strained a relationship with his father George II as the king himself when Prince of Wales had enjoyed with George I. The establishment of a second opera company implied that there was still an appetite in London for Italian opera; and although the Opera of the Nobility collapsed in 1737, thereby demonstrating that the support for opera in London was insufficient to allow both companies to succeed, it is inconceivable that Handel the opera composer *par excellence* would consider abandoning the medium while there was still a possibility that it might be viable. Perhaps it was partly a matter of pride, of the need for Handel to save face and be assured in his own mind that there was no commercial future for opera before he could safely turn to another genre; for others to succeed at opera when he had abandoned it would be read as defeat. In effect, he had to face out the challenge from the rival company before he could safely turn to oratorio. There would also be the question of whether his abandonment of opera in the face of a challenge from supporters of the Prince of Wales might reflect badly on George II, something which Handel would presumably be keen to avoid.

Having traced something of the history of the oratorios' development, it is appropriate at this point to give a more detailed description of their nature. Although their subject-matter might give the impression that they should be regarded as a religious or liturgical genre, they are nonetheless fundamentally theatrical. That is to say, they were never conceived of as acts of worship for performance in a church or chapel, but were intended from the beginning for the stage. Indeed, the evidence for the productions of *Esther* by Bernard Gates indicates that the performances he oversaw were staged in the normal operatic

[7] The Public Act was the University's degree ceremony which lasted for several days and included various entertainments and performances. The modern, much shorter equivalent is the annual Encaenia ceremony, at which honorary degrees are awarded. See also chapter 3, note 2, below.

manner, even though subsequent intervention from the Bishop of London forbade the boys of the Chapel Royal to act on stage in the opera house, and this resulted in the non-staged, concert-style presentations that were a feature of Handelian oratorio.[8] During the early years of the oratorios' production there was a certain amount of controversy about whether it was appropriate that they should be performed in the opera house by opera virtuosi, given the immoral associations of such places and people, but as the genre became more embedded and naturalized, not least because the Italian vocalists on whom Handel initially relied for solo parts were gradually replaced or supplemented with English singers, the controversy died down and Israelite oratorio found acceptance as a valid and valuable indigenous form of operatic entertainment.

As noted earlier, the oratorios are a combination of dramatic, biblically-based plots written in English, and the structural and musical conventions of Italian *opera seria*, or 'serious opera' (so called in contradistinction to *opera buffa*, or comic opera). *Opera seria* was effectively a sung drama, in which the primary musical forms consisted of recitative and aria, both of which were solo forms. Recitative was the operatic equivalent of spoken dialogue in an ordinary play, and consisted of the rhythmic enunciation of blank-verse dialogue to a simple melodic line.[9] It could be either *semplice* (also termed *secco* in modern musical parlance), that is, with minimal musical accompaniment, or *accompagnato*, in which case a variety of orchestration would be employed to accompany the singer, in order to heighten the dramatic effect. Recitative was usually the vehicle via which information that advanced the plot was imparted to the audience. By contrast, the aria was a form that often paused the plot. It consisted of one or more stanzas or strophes of rhymed verse that were set to a more developed melody with orchestral accompaniment, in the course of which words, phrases, and even whole lines could be repeated and musically elaborated upon. Dramatically speaking, arias (or 'airs') functioned to express characters' feelings or responses to situations, to emphasize important moments in the plot, or to sum up the situation. Musically speaking, they were the vehicle via which soloists displayed their vocal agility, since they often contained elaborate coloratura[10] passages or sustained notes that required enormous breath control and technical ability on the part of the singer. The commonest form of aria was the *da capo* (Italian 'from the head', i.e. the beginning) aria, in which the words were divided into two parts for which contrasting musical settings were provided. In performance, both parts of the aria would be sung through from beginning to end, and then the first part would

[8] Burrows, *Handel*, 165–8.

[9] An approximate equivalent to this in the non-operatic sphere would be the chanting of psalms in liturgical contexts. The main difference is that psalm chants repeat the same melodic line for each verse of the psalm, whereas recitative is not repetitive in this way but changes the melody for each line of dialogue in accordance with the content of the words.

[10] 'Coloratura' or 'melisma' is the setting of a single vocal syllable to several notes of music, and may extend for a couple of beats or several bars. A familiar example of coloratura is in the chorus 'For unto us a child is born', from *Messiah*. The second time that the sopranos sing 'For unto us a child is born', the words 'For unto us a child is' are set to music a syllable to a note, and fill the equivalent of a single bar. The word 'born', however, is extended across three and a half bars of music in which there are sixteen notes per bar. This single syllable thus lasts three and a half times as long as the whole of the rest of the phrase, and is sung to a total of fifty-seven notes.

be repeated, so that the actual end of the aria was the mid-point of the words. The *da capo* form also provided further opportunity for soloists to display their vocal ingenuity, as they would often add their own improvisations to the melody of the repeated first half. Because the *da capo* form always ended in mid-flow as far as the words were concerned, it had an unfortunate tendency to close off plot development, and so was not conducive to dramatic verisimilitude. There was thus a tension between the musical and the dramatic aspects of the *da capo* aria, which tended to be resolved in favour of the musical aspect. The convention of placing arias at the end of scenes, so that characters would sing an aria and then leave the stage, may be related to this closing-off tendency: a character leaving the stage forms a natural break, so that the sense of the aria does not need to flow directly into what follows it. Other musical forms that served the same basic purpose as arias were ensembles—most commonly duets—which were often between the primary male and female characters, the *primo uomo* and the *prima donna*, but also sometimes trios and even quartets. The chorus (*coro*) was used sparingly in *opera seria* and had little dramatic function beyond scene-setting at the beginning and rounding off at the end. It consisted of all the cast members singing together, rather than being a separate group of individuals whose role was to sing choral elements.

By contrast with *opera seria*, which was a theatrical genre, oratorio as a genre had a history that was associated with liturgical usage, which may explain the common if erroneous assumption that *Messiah* is the quintessential Handelian oratorio. The very term 'oratorio' indicates the genre's origin as a type of religious work to be performed in the oratories, or prayer-halls, of Rome. Such works were often musical settings of biblical stories, but could also be hagiographic, contemplative, or moralistic, and whilst they often had solo parts for different characters they would not normally have been staged or acted.[11] The history of the genre is complicated, and its exact characteristics vary from location to location and period to period, but by the beginning of the eighteenth century a fairly standard form of oratorio had emerged which was quite elaborate and lengthy (several hours rather than the ten or twenty minutes of some of the earlier forms), and was often presented at free-standing concert performances rather than in any specifically devotional context. Musically speaking, too (at least in Italy), the development of oratorio closely followed that of opera, using the same musical forms and styles, although in terms of content oratorio retained its religious and moralistic character. Indeed, Handel himself produced two Italian oratorios of this nature while he was in Italy: *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (1707), and *La Resurrezione*, which was performed on Easter Sunday and Monday 1708.[12] Inasmuch as it combines the musical conventions of secular opera with at least superficially sacred content, Handel's Israelite oratorio genre continues this sacred oratorio tradition, but in its theatricality it is as closely related to *opera seria* as it is to these liturgical works of biblical paraphrase. It is also distinguished by the

[11] Compare the definition given by Smither: 'the oratorio is nearly always a sacred, unstaged work with a text that is either dramatic or narrative-dramatic' (*History of the Oratorio*, i: 3–4).

[12] Some years later he also wrote the so-called *Brockes Passion* in London in 1716, a German-language dramatized setting of the Passion narrative with contemplative interludes.

significant role of the chorus, a feature that is certainly much less prominent in *opera seria* than in Israelite oratorio.

The other innovation in Israelite oratorio is of course its use of English as the linguistic medium, and this leads to the question of who wrote the words, whether for opera or for oratorio. The words for an opera or an oratorio are referred to as the libretto (Italian 'little book'), from the custom of selling to concert-goers a printed booklet containing the words that they would hear in the work to be performed. Opera and oratorio libretti were not as a rule written by the composers who wrote the music, but by poets and librettists, some of whom became quite well known in their own right.[13] Libretto writing could be undertaken alongside other sorts of employment, and did not necessarily enjoy a particularly high esteem as an occupation; however, it required more skill than has sometimes been recognized. The libretto needed to be good poetry, but not too elaborate, given that over-elaborate literary effects would more than likely be obscured by the musical setting; it needed to have collections of sounds that were easy to sing and which would therefore facilitate rather than impede the composer's job of providing a musical setting; arias by convention were to express one emotion only, and for *opera seria* at least the content of the aria needed to be such that it would facilitate the character who sang it leaving the stage immediately afterwards. If the production was going to succeed as a drama instead of simply being a collection of musical interludes, a good libretto also needed an appropriate balance between recitative and aria/chorus/ensemble. Another feature of *opera seria* that made the librettist's job even more difficult was the expectations of how many arias each character should have: there was a definite pecking order, depending on the status of the performers and their respective characters, and main characters/performers expected to have five or six arias apiece, while humbler characters could expect only one.

Handel was no exception to this rule of composers relying on others for their libretti. For his Israelite oratorios, in addition to several anonymous writers he had five known librettists: Samuel Humphreys, Charles Jennens, James Miller, Newburgh Hamilton, and Thomas Morell. To the extent that these men provided the structures upon which Handel hung his music, the final result owes as much to them as it does to Handel himself. It is the work of these librettists that will form the main focus of this study, although with reference as far as possible to how Handel might have contributed towards the forms of words used. There is little direct evidence of how librettists and composer co-operated, although there is a series of correspondence between Handel and Jennens, and some later anecdotes from Morell about his relationship with the maestro. Otherwise, it is a case of relying on comparisons between the various sources of textual evidence: Handel's autograph scores, the printed libretti, and (for some of the later libretti) the pre-publication copies sent for approval to the London Inspector of Stage Plays, some of which bear annotations in Handel's own writing.

The feature of the oratorios that is arguably the most puzzling in a present-day context is their use of biblical subject-matter; or, otherwise expressed, how an

[13] Two well-known Italian opera librettists of the eighteenth century were Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio. Zeno is discussed in chapter 6 below.

Israelite oratorio could be accepted as a form of entertainment. There can be no doubt that eighteenth-century culture was much more biblically literate than that of the present day, which is part of the explanation. But alongside this biblical literacy there was a keen sense of the Old Testament as having direct political relevance for the British people, specifically in relation to their position as a Protestant nation surrounded by hostile Catholic powers. To its people, Britain was the Israel of its day, preserving the true faith by God's help against a bevy of infidels, just as the biblical Israelites had been chosen by God to preserve the true faith against the surrounding idolatrous nations. In her groundbreaking study *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* Ruth Smith has demonstrated convincingly how the oratorios can be understood against this background as having definite political significance, and this may well account for some of their appeal: they were not simply edifying presentations of favourite stories, they were comments on and affirmations of aspects of British identity in cultural, political, and religious terms.

But there is more to the oratorios' use of biblical material than just the retelling of favourite stories that happen to correspond in some way with certain issues or events. The oratorios are not just 'neutral' reproductions of the biblical source texts; they are edited and manipulated versions of those texts, so that, as the title of this book indicates, they are both sacred dramas and a form of biblical exegesis. Certainly, particular biblical subjects and stories would have been chosen because they were regarded as in some way meaningful at the time when the oratorio was to be composed, but the source texts were then edited and reformulated in order to emphasize or add some aspects and downplay or remove others, with the result that the stories could communicate a message that might be difficult or even impossible to elicit from the biblical text as it stood. Some of these messages are political, as already noted, while others relate to more religious matters, including the eighteenth-century Christian religious understanding of the Bible as a whole and the Old Testament in particular. But in order to appreciate the extent and the nature of the manipulation, it is necessary to place the libretti alongside their biblical source texts for a detailed comparison between the two, as well as relating the libretti to their own temporal, cultural, and theological context. This is what the present study has set out to do, and the following chapters will hopefully demonstrate how fruitful such an approach can be, in elucidating both the biblical text and the Handelian oratorio libretti.

1

To Laugh or Not to Laugh

The Question of Esther

The emergence of *Esther* as Handel's first Israelite oratorio was unplanned and apparently unforeseen by the composer himself. The work was initially composed in the late teens of the eighteenth century, while Handel was serving as music master for James Brydges (later Duke of Chandos) at Cannons, but what prompted its composition is not known. Nor is it known for certain who was responsible for the libretto, although the names of John Gay, Alexander Pope, and John Arbuthnot are the ones most consistently associated with it.[1] Textual evidence suggests that there were two performances of this 'oratorium', one in 1718 and another (following significant reworking of the original composition) in 1720,[2] which would presumably have been private performances for Brydges' friends and acquaintances; but nothing more is heard of the work until 1732, when an enterprising friend of Handel's had it performed on Handel's birthday and on two subsequent occasions in the function room of a London tavern. The interest generated by these performances resulted in Handel revising and lengthening the original work into a full-scale evening's entertainment for the theatre, to be performed by the members of his opera company, and Israelite oratorio was born.

The version of the story of Esther that appears in the Handelian oratorio is not simply a setting of the biblical text to music. As is the case for all of Handel's oratorio libretti, *Esther* is a selective and dramatic adaptation of elements from the biblical narrative that are presented in terms that would resonate with an eighteenth-century London audience. The relationship with the biblical text of Esther

[1] For details, see Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959; repr. 2000), 197–8. The association with Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot comes from a letter written by Sir David Dalrymple to Hugh Campbell (Earl of Loudoun) on 27 May 1718, in which Dalrymple, speaking of a stay at Cannons with the Earl of Caernarvon (James Brydges, later Duke of Chandos), says that 'there is a Little opera now a makeing for his diversion whereof the Musick will not be made publick. The words are to be furnished by M^{rs} Pope & Gay, the musick to be composed by Hendell. . . . I am promised some of the Songs by Dr Arbuthnot who is one of the club of composers' (*H-H* iv, 76). Dalrymple could be referring either to *Acis and Galatea* or to *Esther*, since both works started out as private entertainments for Brydges.

[2] See John H. Roberts, 'The Composition of Handel's *Esther*, 1718–1720', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 55 (2009), 353–89 (353–68).

is further complicated by the fact that the libretto is not based directly on the biblical text but is taken in large part from a play entitled *Esther* by the French playwright Jean Racine. Any attempt to understand how the libretto relates to the biblical text must therefore include an examination of Racine's play. The present study will therefore plot the journey taken by the story of Esther from biblical text via Racinian play to Handelian libretti, and explore how the Handelian versions in particular reflect the culture and circumstances in which they were produced. In order to understand just how far the story has travelled, however, it is necessary to begin with a consideration of the book of Esther in its Judaic context.

THE BIBLICAL ESTHER

The biblical book of Esther is set in the days of the ancient Persian Empire (fifth–fourth century BCE). It tells of how an orphaned Jewish girl came to marry the Persian king, and from this position was able to counteract an irrevocable decree that was issued by the king's second-in-command to eliminate all the Jews in the Empire. As such, the book is the only one in the Hebrew canon to treat the subject of life in the Jewish diaspora,[3] an observation that will become important when considering how Racine and Handel's librettists adapted the story. In Jewish tradition, the book of Esther is the basis for the festival of Purim, a festival that is the quintessential carnival characterized by excess and licence, and this suggests a reading of the Esther story that is satirical, ironical, and (darkly) humorous. However, such a reading is quite at odds with many pious attempts over the centuries to give the book a more soberly religious character. One of the earliest such attempts is the version of the story included in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX) and dating from the end of the first millennium BCE; this is the text lying behind the 'Additions to Esther' that appear in the Apocrypha of English Bibles.[4] Certainly, the anonymous libretto of the story that was produced for Handel in 1718, and subsequently augmented by the poet and librettist Samuel Humphreys in 1732, was not that of a comedy. Like Racine's *Esther*, which took the form of a tragedy, the libretto in both its shorter and longer versions reflects a reading of the Esther story that is serious and pious, as befits what had come to be regarded as the historical account of a national disaster narrowly averted by divine grace.

[3] The book of Daniel might be regarded as an exception to this, in that it is partly concerned with the lives of Daniel and his friends in captivity in Babylon. However, it seems appropriate to make a distinction between involuntary exile, to which an end (however far in the future) is anticipated, and voluntary diaspora, where there is no anticipation of or desire for return to the country of origin. The book of Esther speaks of those who have become accustomed to their expatriate way of life and indeed have known no other, not those who are yearning for return.

[4] Among other additions to the Hebrew text, the LXX inserts lengthy prayers into the mouths of Esther and Mordecai (4.17a–z, = ET 13.8–18, 14.1–19), and describes Mordecai dreaming about evil being overthrown (1.1a–l, = ET 11.1–12).

Esther and Purim

The differences between the Jewish and Christian traditions in their reading of Esther are reflected in the relative positions of the book of Esther in the Hebrew and English Bibles. The English Old Testament (like the LXX) places Esther in supposed chronological order as part of a continuous historical narrative. The Hebrew Bible, however, locates Esther as one of a group of five scrolls which are each associated with a different Jewish festival.[5] As such, the book of Esther is a stand-alone narrative, which facilitates its function as the festival legend of Purim.

Although the origins of Purim are obscure,[6] its observance as part of the Jewish festal calendar in association with the book of Esther has been firmly established since at least the second century CE, as is evidenced from the presence of a tractate in the Mishnah giving instructions about reading the Esther scroll on the days of Purim.[7] The festival itself has developed in a variety of carnivalesque ways,[8] but a basic theme underlying the celebrations is that of reversal, a motif which dominates the Esther narrative and is summed up in the climactic reversal which gives the basis for celebration: 'So in the twelfth month, that is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the month, . . . on the day on which the enemies of the Jews hoped to dominate them, this was overturned (וְנֶהְפּוֹךְ הוּא [*w^{e}nah^{a}pôk hû'*]), so that the Jews were the ones who dominated their enemies' (Est. 9.1). This theme of reversal and of overturning the established order accounts for the sense of lawlessness that tends to pervade the festival celebrations—as one scholar puts it, Purim is 'the celebration of dis-order'.[9]

The association of Esther with the carnivalesque lawlessness of Purim seems at first sight incongruous and completely counter-intuitive in the light of the subject-matter of Esther. After all, what the story describes is a strategy for ethnic cleansing that is aimed at the Jews, and even though the strategy fails and the Jews are saved, tens of thousands of Persians die as a result. However, over the last few years, modern scholarship on the book of Esther, aided by a greater

[5] The other scrolls are Ruth (read at Pentecost), Song of Songs (read at Passover), Ecclesiastes (read at the Feast of Tabernacles), and Lamentations, which is read to commemorate the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple on the 9th of Ab (a month falling in late summer, around August).

[6] Many scholars have argued that Purim was originally a pagan festival that the Jews adopted and absorbed into their own cultural context. For more details, see David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NCB (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), 263–6; Carey A. Moore, 'Esther, Book of', in *ABD*, ii.633–43 (637–8); Daniel F. Polish, 'Aspects of Esther: A Phenomenological Exploration of the *Megillah* of Esther and the Origins of Purim', *JSOT*, 85 (1999), 85–106.

[7] Tractate *Megillah*.

[8] Purim celebrations have, over the years, included elements such as fancy dress and cross-dressing, carnival-type processions, election of a Purim king or Purim rabbi to give pompous and satirical speeches, humorous re-enactments of the story of Esther, excessive drinking, playing cards and dice, and the usual festival accompaniments of special food and drinks, including *Hamantaschen* (triangular pastries filled with honey and poppy seeds) and boiled, salted beans. For summaries of the main elements of Purim celebrations, see Louis Jacobs, 'Purim', in Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edn., 22 vols. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), xvi.740–1; Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC, 9 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1996), 330. N. S. Doniach, *Purim, or The Feast of Esther: An Historical Study* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), describes a wide range of Purim customs from across Europe and the Middle East.

[9] Monford Harris, 'Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order', *Judaism*, 26 (1977), 161–70. Harris discusses cross-dressing and drunkenness as expressions of the complete reversal of the status quo.

consciousness of the literary (as opposed to historical) questions that present themselves in relation to the Old Testament, has come to recognize and emphasize anew that there are in fact many comic elements in the Esther narrative.[10] One of the most obvious comic features is that of exaggeration. The Persian king Ahasuerus is ruler over 127 provinces (1.1); he feasts for 180 days with all the nobles, governors, and princes of the kingdom (1.3–4);[11] and the refusal of his wife Vashti to attend when he summons her apparently jeopardizes the entire social fabric of his 127-province empire, necessitating her banishment (1.16–19).[12] The maidens from among whom Ahasuerus is to choose a successor to Vashti are beautified for a whole year before being sent in to spend a single night with the king (2.12–14). The failure of a single Jew, Mordecai, to bow down before the courtier Haman provokes Haman to engineer a plan for the death of every single Jew throughout the empire (3.1–6); and the amount of money that Haman offers Ahasuerus to replace the revenue that will be lost if the Jews are exterminated—or simply to ensure the king's agreement to his plan (3.9)—is equivalent to two-thirds of the annual revenue of the Persian Empire.[13] Later on in the narrative, Haman plans to hang Mordecai on a gallows which is an enormous fifty cubits (75 feet) high (5.14);[14] and when Haman's plot is foiled the Jews

[10] A number of scholars, many of them Jewish, have drawn attention to the comic, satirical, and ironical characteristics in Esther. See, for example, Edward L. Greenstein, 'A Jewish Reading of Esther', in Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds.), *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 225–43; Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 126–45; Yehuda T. Radday, 'Esther with Humour', in Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, BL, 23/JSOTSup, 92 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 295–313; Stan Goldman, 'Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther', *JSOT*, 47 (1990), 15–31; Celina Spiegel, 'The World Remade: The Book of Esther', in Christina Büchmann and Celina Spiegel (eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (London: Pandora, 1995), 191–203; Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), pp. xvi–xxii; Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Humour, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Are We Amused? Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds*, JSOTSup, 383/BTC, 2 (London/New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2003), 52–64.

[11] As Levenson comments, '. . . it is impossible to imagine that the affairs of a political entity as complex as the Persian empire could have been conducted for long in the absence of so many essential officers. Who was minding the store during this drinkfest of half a year's duration?' (Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, OTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 45.)

[12] Berlin argues that the courtiers' advice to the king about making Persian wives obey their husbands is an attempt to ward off a sexual strike that might result from wives following Vashti's example and refusing to be available for their husbands, a motif that appears in Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* (*Esther*, 13). Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOTSup, 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 31–3, underlines the satirical character of chapter 1 and its importance to an understanding of the book as a whole, arguing that it sets 'a tone that cannot be forgotten, conditioning the reader not to take the king, his princes, or his law at their face value, and alerting the reader to keep his eyes open for ironies that will doubtless be implicit in the story that is yet to unfold' (33). In the light of Clines's comments, it is interesting to note that the events of chapter 1 (the king's feast and his deposing of Vashti) are omitted entirely from the Handelian librettos, and are only alluded to in passing by Racine.

[13] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 296; Levenson, *Esther*, 71. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 383, comments of the sum, '. . . the narrator continues to engage in extravagant hyperbole, once again holding up to ridicule Persian greed and avidity.'

[14] Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 414, argues that satire seems inappropriate at this point, so the height of the gallows is to be taken literally as a public humiliation of Mordecai, since on a gallows that high he would be visible throughout Susa (similarly Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 306). However, Berlin, *Esther*, 55, points out the impracticability of a gallows so high, and observes that even Solomon's

slaughter 75,000 of their enemies in the provinces of the kingdom in one day (9.16).[15] All this exaggeration gives the narrative a cartoon-like feel, as if everything from the length of the feasts to the height of the gallows is larger than life.

As already remarked, reversal is a prominent feature of the narrative, and much of the reversal is ironic, if not comical. Esther is an orphan descended from captives (2.5–7) who becomes queen (2.16–17); Haman is promoted to second-in-command in the kingdom (3.1–2), but ultimately dies in disgrace (7.10), whereas Mordecai, his *bête noire*, begins as a forgotten figure condemned to die but ends up in Haman's place of power and influence with all Haman's goods (8.2, 15). The greatest reversal of all is of course in the status of the Jews: from being a people under sentence of death because of Haman's decree promulgated in the name of the king (3.12–14), they become a people empowered to put to death those who hate them (8.9–13). Indeed, such is the change in their status that the status of their Persian neighbours is also affected: many non-Jews 'convert' to Judaism for fear of the Jews (8.17).

Timing is a third effective comic device, particularly in the middle chapters of the book (5–7). Haman leaves the palace aglow with pride that he alone has drunk with the king and queen and has a repeat invitation for the next day, only to see Mordecai sitting in the king's gate as implacable as ever (5.9), which completely spoils his mood. When he goes home he tells his wife about Mordecai, and she advises him to make a gallows and ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai on it; so Haman builds the gallows and resolves to go to the king the next morning (5.11–14). That night the king's inability to sleep causes him to have the official records read to him, as a result of which he realizes that Mordecai has never been rewarded for uncovering a plot against his life (6.1–3); in the morning, needing advice on how to reward Mordecai, he summons the courtier outside his door, who just happens to be Haman arriving to ask permission to hang Mordecai (6.4–5). When asked by the king to suggest ways of honouring a deserving subject, Haman thinks that he himself is going to be honoured and suggests giving the person quasi-royal honours (6.6–9), only to be ordered by the king to give these honours to Mordecai (6.10–11). At the next day's banquet, when Esther has revealed Haman's plot to the king and Ahasuerus has stepped outside in a rage, Haman falls on the queen's couch in supplication for mercy, but at that moment Ahasuerus reappears and interprets Haman's prone position as attempted rape, and so orders Haman to be hanged on his own gallows (7.7–10).

The most noticeable feature about these slapstick elements is that they are all at the expense of the Persians[16] and those who oppose the Jews. The opening scenes

Temple is only thirty cubits high. Berlin therefore views the height of the gallows as another satirical exaggeration, intended as mockery of Haman.

[15] Although this aspect of the book of Esther seems far from comic, Berlin (*Esther*, 81–2) argues that it should be interpreted within the farcical carnivalesque framework of the whole, since farce is a genre characterized by exaggerated mock-violence which has an important psychological function. 'The make-believe victory is the safety valve for Diaspora Jewry that permits the continuation of the belief in the security of their lives and their community' (82). See also the discussion of the massacres in Kenneth M. Craig, Jr, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 125–36.

[16] Berlin, *Esther*, xix, describes the narrative of the Esther scroll as a burlesque on the Persian Empire and court.

of Ahasuerus's banquet, Vashti's disgrace, and the search for another queen (1.1–2.4) paint the Persian king as a man with enormous bodily appetites and little real sense of how to govern an empire, and this picture of him being ruled by his appetites is underlined by his rather cryptic response to Haman's offer of a fortune in return for permission to kill the Jews (3.11), a response which is probably a polite acceptance of the money.[17] On this showing, the main concerns in Ahasuerus's life could be summed up as wine, women, and wealth. The theme of his appetites continues as he and Haman sit down to drink after concluding their bargain (3.15), and as Esther manipulates him to her will by inviting him to a succession of banquets (5.4–8). The picture of Haman is even more derogatory. Despite all his supposed power as second-in-command to the king (3.1), despite his elaborate scheming to pick an auspicious time to put his plan into effect (3.7), and despite his promulgation of an irrevocable edict against the Jews (3.8–15), his efforts are reduced to a shambles because of his apparent ignorance that Mordecai deserves the king's gratitude for foiling an assassination attempt (cf. 2.21–3; 6.2),[18] because he does not know that Esther is Jewish, and because of his naive reliance on the favour of a king who is given to sudden changes of heart that can have disastrous consequences. Indeed, not only do Haman's plans fail, but the decree that is issued in order to counteract Haman's decree ends up elevating the Jews at the Persians' expense; so that Haman's plans end up by harming those they were supposed to benefit. Against the buffoonery of Haman and Ahasuerus, the characters of Esther and Mordecai appear as canny and wise. Mordecai seems to know more about what is going on in court than Haman does; not only does he report the threatened assassination (2.21–3), but he knows the sum of money that Haman has promised to pay the king for the destruction of the Jews (4.7). Esther for her part is initially ignorant of the decree, but once she has learnt about it and has resolved to petition the king on behalf of the Jews, she adopts an approach that is going to appeal to him and put him at ease: she invites him and Haman to a banquet (5.3–4), twice (5.5–8). Her inclusion of Haman in the invitation not only allays any possible suspicions that Haman might have, but also means that he cannot escape the king's retribution when the truth is finally revealed.[19]

The book, then, mocks the Persians, but presents the Jews as wise, loyal, perspicacious, and ultimately triumphant; and this, together with its lack of

[17] Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 297; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 382. By contrast Berlin, *Esther*, 42, argues that Ahasuerus's response is one of exaggerated generosity in allowing Haman to keep any tribute he can exact from the Jews, which gives the impression that the king simply cannot be bothered with such mundane matters and is happy to have someone else take care of them for him. Levenson, *Esther*, 72, comments that whether or not the king is thought to accept Haman's offer of money, it is significant that he mentions the money first and the people second, while leaving the people's fate in the hands of their enemy.

[18] According to the LXX, Haman is aware of Mordecai's part in foiling the assassination. There, Haman's animosity towards Mordecai and the Jews is said to arise 'because of the king's two eunuchs' (*ὑπὲρ τῶν δύο εὐνούχων τοῦ βασιλέως* [*huper tōn duo eunouchōn tou basileōs*], Est. 1.1r, = ET 12.6), namely, the two who had been plotting to kill the king, but who were put to death because Mordecai informed on them. Presumably this means that Haman himself wants to get rid of the king, and by informing on the eunuchs Mordecai has thwarted Haman's desire.

[19] See also Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 171–211, for discussion of the characters of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), Haman, Mordecai, and Esther.

interest in the gods and religious officials of either race, suggests that its purpose is primarily to emphasize and celebrate the identity and survival of the Jews as a people in their ongoing circumstances of dispersal and lack of autonomy.[20] Inevitably, its transmission as a part of the canon of scripture both Jewish and Christian has led to it being interpreted in the light of other parts of that canon, where God has a much higher profile. But even allowing for the interpretation that the narrative shows the providence of God working to protect his chosen people,[21] the very invisibility of God in this narrative raises the question of whether the focus of the narrative might not be on something other than God in the first instance. After all, as commentators have noted, it is not only God who is invisible in the book, but also any kind of religious observance, even at the most crucial points in the narrative where they would normally be expected to appear.[22] Such omissions might be explained as reverential periphrasis, or perhaps as taking for granted divine involvement in the Jews' affairs; but they certainly suggest that the author's main interest was in highlighting something other than the religious aspect of the narrative.

In summary, then, the book of Esther as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures is an affirmation of Jewish identity, courage, and survival in the face of opposition and the threat of extinction; and it is associated with Purim, a carnivalesque festival in which normal categories of behaviour are overturned as a way of enacting the overturning of a world order in which Jews as an ethnic minority are subject to oppression and persecution. Although Esther has been transmitted as part of a religious corpus, and although it is possible to read it from a religious perspective whereby the overall course of events is an expression of God's providential care for his people, explicitly religious motivations are lacking in the text itself.

ESTHER AND RACINE

As part of the Christian canon, however, which of course was the context in which Handel and his librettists encountered it, the book of Esther has developed a very different complexion. Placed now as part of the historical narrative that runs from

[20] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 236, argues against those scholars who have interpreted the Esther scroll as an expression of secular nationalism, on the grounds that there was no such thing as *secular* nationalism in the ancient world, and so if the scroll really is secular its secularity cannot be a result of nationalistic influences. It is unclear whether Fox is denying the scroll's secularity or its nationalism (or both), or whether he is simply denying any causative connection between the two; but it seems unjustifiable to deny that the narrative is framed in terms of the Jews as a nation versus the Persians as an empire, and that no explicit reference is made to the deities of either group.

[21] Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 154–6, argues that God's presence is not so much hidden as unexpressed, because even though it is not referred to overtly it is evident in the pattern of events.

[22] Not all commentators agree that religious observances are absent from the scroll. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 302, argues that despite the lack of religious language in the description of the fast at 4.16, the religious significance of the act is unmistakable. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 246–7, argues that the author of the scroll mentions religious practices but sets them in a non-religious context, thus deliberately frustrating the reader's expectation of religious expression at these points as a way of conveying a sense of uncertainty about the precise role of God in history.

the beginning of creation to the middle of the fifth century BCE, the story of Esther appears as an episode in that history. Its interpretation has therefore had a markedly historicizing character, and the sense of history has changed Esther's story from parody to tragedy.

Certainly, when the French playwright Jean Racine (1639–99) was asked by the governing authorities of the young gentlewomen's boarding school at Saint-Cyr to compose for performance some sort of poetic work 'sur quelque sujet de piété et de morale' [on some subject of piety and morality],[23] his choice of Esther was greeted with approval, 'cette histoire leur paraissant pleine de grandes leçons d'amour de Dieu, et de détachement du monde au milieu du monde même' [this story seeming to them to be full of great lessons about the love of God and about detachment from the world right in the midst of the world].[24] The school at Saint-Cyr was founded by Mme de Maintenon, a woman of non-noble birth who had risen through court circles to become the confidante and ultimately the wife of Louis XIV. For several years Maintenon had been involved in supporting educational work for impoverished children, and in 1686 a property at Saint-Cyr, near Versailles, was acquired in which the community for young women was set up. It was to be staffed by nuns, and its educational ethos was to enable its pupils to exemplify Christian virtues within a worldly setting, an end towards which dramatic productions were employed as an educational tool.[25] The story of Esther as it was understood by Racine and the school's governing body seemed to be the ideal choice of subject for such an enterprise, and Racine duly set to work, in 1688 fashioning out of the biblical narrative a Greek-style tragedy,[26] complete with accompanied choral interludes.[27] Since Racine's play became the basis for the libretto of the later Handelian oratorio, a consideration of how the play differs from the Hebrew tradition, and to what effect, is an important step in tracing the journey of Esther from biblical text to oratorio libretto.

The plot of Racine's three-act play is as follows. The action is set in Susa, the Persian capital, during the period of the Jews' Babylonian Exile. Act 1 introduces Esther as she explains to her friend Élise how she came to be queen. She then bewails the ruined state of Jerusalem and its Temple. The chorus enter and sing a song of mourning for Sion. Mardochée arrives with the dire news of Aman's pogrom, and urges Esther to go and plead with King Assuérus for the Jews' lives. Despite some initial reluctance she finally agrees to do so, and prays for divine aid. The chorus bewail the coming persecution and urge God to come to their aid.

[23] Jean Racine, *Théâtre complet*, ii, ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 346.

[24] Ibid. These two quotations are from Racine's own preface to *Esther*.

[25] For an account of the life and career of Mme de Maintenon as it relates to the production of *Esther*, see René Jasinski, *Autour de l'Esther Racinienne* (Paris: Librairie A.-G. Nizet, 1985), 57–80.

[26] Naturally, in his own treatment of the narrative Racine was dependent upon a variety of other sources and treatments, and the comments that will be made below about his *Esther* are not meant to imply that the elements discussed are unique or original to him. Rather, the comments are simply intended to provide a basis for comparison of Racine's *Esther* with the later Handelian libretti, by illustrating the kind of exegetical moves that are made in order to appropriate the narrative for a Christian audience. Jasinski, *l'Esther Racinienne*, 95–169, gives a detailed discussion of the sources upon which Racine drew for *Esther*.

[27] Music for the choral interludes was composed by Jean-Baptiste Moreau (1656–1733), who was music master at Saint-Cyr (Collinet, in Racine, *Théâtre complet*, ii.555 n. 7).

Act 2 begins with the courtier Hydaspes telling Aman that the king was kept awake because of a nightmare, but is now taking comfort in having the annals of the kingdom read to him. Aman explains to Hydaspes how Mardochée's insolent refusal to bow down has provoked him to issue the decree for the extermination of all the Jews. Assuérus finds out from the annals that Mardochée has saved him from assassination, and asks Aman's advice on how to honour a worthy individual. Aman, thinking that he himself will be the honouree, advises royal treatment for the person in question, whereupon Assuérus tells Aman to honour Mardochée in the way that Aman suggests. Esther makes her approach to the king and, despite fainting in terror, is received favourably; she arranges a banquet for Assuérus and Aman. The chorus sing about the power of God to control the minds of earthly kings, deplore the worship of idols, and reject worldly wealth and wickedness.

Act 3 opens with Aman disconsolately discussing Mardochée with his wife Zarès. Hydaspes arrives to conduct Aman to the feast with Esther and the king, and tells Aman that the court wise-men have interpreted Assuérus's disturbing nightmare to predict an attack on the queen by a treacherous foreigner, a prediction which Assuérus has taken to refer to the Jews. Heartened, Aman makes his way to the banquet. The chorus offer insults to Aman before singing of the joys of being ruled by a virtuous king. At the banquet, Esther reveals to Assuérus her Jewish origins and exposes Aman as a traitor who has turned the king against the Jews and wants to kill Mardochée, her uncle. Aman begs Esther for mercy, but Assuérus interprets Aman's supplicant posture as an assault on Esther and orders him to be removed. Assuérus gives Mardochée Aman's position and wealth, frees the Jews from slavery to return home and rebuild the temple, and all Persians are ordered to honour the Jewish God. Asaph reports Aman's death at the hands of the crowd; Mardochée asks for help for the Jews, and Assuérus grants a revocation of the orders against the Jews. The chorus sing the praises of God who has delivered the nation.[28]

In turning the story into a tragedy designed for the edification of young women, Racine made a number of alterations to the narrative as it appears in the Old Testament.[29] Two of these alterations are particularly significant for present purposes, in that they are reflected to a greater or lesser extent in the Handelian oratorio libretti. The first and most fundamental alteration is in the play's setting.

[28] For a discussion of Racine's *Esther* in relation to the Jewish and Christian culture of his day, see David Maskell, 'L'*Esther* de Racine: Perspectives juives, perspectives chrétiennes', *Perspectives: Revue de l'Université Hébraïque de Jérusalem*, 13 (2006), 133–50. I am grateful to Dr Maskell for providing me with a copy of his article.

[29] As a Catholic, Racine would have regarded the apocryphal Additions to Esther as an integral part of the book, and elements preserved in the Additions appear at a number of points in his play. This is perhaps most evident in the scene where Esther faints on entering Assuérus's throne room, an episode that appears in the LXX at Est. 5.1–2 (= ET 15.1–16); but other elements in the play are also borrowed from the Additions. Esther's prayer (ll. 247b–92) appears in Est. 4.17k–z (= ET 14.1–19); Aman's wife Zarès speaks of Aman returning to the Hellespont (l. 894), an idea that may have been sparked by the reference to Haman as a Macedonian in Est. 8.12k (= ET 16.10); and the idea for a frightening dream that keeps Assuérus awake (ll. 383–96) may have been inspired by Mordecai's dream in Est. 1.1a–l (= ET 11.2–12). This last suggestion is also made by Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century. Part IV: The Period of Racine 1673–1700*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), i.295.

Following hints that appear in the Septuagintal version of Esther,[30] Racine's *Esther* is clearly set during the final years of the Babylonian Exile,[31] using the contemporary scholarly opinion that the biblical Ahasuerus is the Persian king Darius I (522–486 BCE),[32] during the first years of whose reign the Jerusalem Temple is said to have been rebuilt (Ezra 6.14–15; Haggai 1–2).

Locating *Esther* in exile has three important effects. First and most importantly, it allows the fundamentally ethnic issues at the heart of the Hebrew version of Esther to be replaced with religious issues. For the Old Testament writers, the Babylonian Exile is not simply a matter of physical relocation, but above all a punishment from God for apostasy.[33] Exile is therefore unequivocally a religious state, and so anything that happens in the context of exile must be conceived of in religious categories. The same cannot be said for diaspora, which *may* be regarded as a continuation of exile and therefore conceived of in religious terms, but which may equally be a matter of preference in a situation where return to the homeland is theoretically possible but is undesirable for whatever reason; and in those circumstances it becomes primarily an ethnic state rather than a religious one. The shift from diaspora to exile as the setting for the Esther story has the effect of subordinating issues of ethnicity in the story to those of religiosity. This enables the narrative to be related to a setting such as Racine's, where ethnicity is not a significant issue but religion is. It also counteracts any lingering impulse to view the story as comic, because comedy of any kind, let alone slapstick ethnocentric comedy, is not something that is readily associated with religion.[34]

But more specifically, locating the Esther narrative in exile with its concomitant religious overtones allows a fundamentally Jewish story to be reframed in terms of Christian religiosity. If exile is understood as divine punishment (as it clearly is in the play), then the implication is that as long as the Jews are still in exile they are still under condemnation and being punished for their sins; and if the exile ends with the Jews being destroyed—a real possibility in the light of Aman's edict—then God must be either unable or unwilling to save them. But this then throws into question God's intentions for the future good of humankind: if the Jews are destroyed, then the promised and awaited Messiah, on whom the existence of

[30] See, for example, LXX Est. 1.1c (= ET 11.4); 2.5–6; 4.17n–o (= ET 14.6–9). The LXX of 2.5–6 clearly indicates that Mordecai himself was exiled from Jerusalem with the Judaean king Jeconiah, whereas in the MT it is unclear whether Mordecai himself or his great-grandfather Kish is to be viewed as having been exiled. See Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 287. Berlin, *Esther*, 25, suggests that the MT presents Mordecai as having been exiled from Jerusalem with Jeconiah in order to give him 'added status and authenticity in the Diaspora', and also to glorify him by suggesting that he was a member of the upper classes. The main point, though, is that the reference to exile in the MT should not be taken to indicate that the author had an exilic setting in mind.

[31] For a discussion of the significance of the exile motif in Racine's *Esther*, see Barbara R. Woshinsky, '*Esther*: no continuing place', in *Relectures Raciniennes: Nouvelles approches du discours tragique. Etudes réunies par Richard L. Barnett*, Biblio 17, 16 (Paris/Seattle/Tübingen: Papers on French seventeenth-century literature, 1986), 253–68. Edward Forman, '*Esther*', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 12 (1990), 139–48, emphasizes the importance of the exilic setting for enabling Racine to convey his conception of the tragic experience in *Esther* (146–8).

[32] Racine, *Théâtre complet*, ii.346–7 (preface to *Esther*).

[33] See, for example, 2 Kgs. 21.10–15; 24.20; 2 Chron. 36.15–21; Lam. 2.1–17; Ezek. 16; Jer. 25.1–11.

[34] So Berlin, *Esther*, xviii.

Christianity depends, will not come. This fear is voiced by Esther as she prays for God's aid after agreeing to petition the king:

> Ainsi donc un perfide, après tant de miracles,
> Pourrait anéantir la foi de tes oracles,
> Ravirait aux mortels le plus cher de tes dons,
> Le saint que tu promets et que nous attendons? (ll. 265–8)
> [So then, could one treacherous man, after so many miracles,
> Destroy the trustworthiness of your oracles,
> Rob humans of the dearest of your gifts,
> The holy one whom you promise, and whom we await?]

Of course, such an explicitly Christian sentiment does not appear in any of the ancient versions. However, the Septuagint speaks of the heathen wanting ἐξάραι ὁρισμὸν στόματός σου [*exarai horismon stomatos sou*], 'to destroy the decree of your mouth' (Est. 4.17o, = ET 14.9), a phrase rendered in the Vulgate by 'volunt tua mutare promissa', 'they want to change your promises'; and it seems probable that this is the basis for the Christianizing interpretation that appears in Racine.[35] When the biblical text is understood in this messianic fashion, the exilic setting for the Esther narrative considerably increases the gravity of the situation, since it gives rise to the fear that God has abandoned the long-laid plans both for the Jews and via them for the future of the human race—a state of affairs that if true would have repercussions right down to Racine's own day.

A second significant effect of the change from diaspora to exile is the pathos that is generated by the conceptualization of the period of exile as literal captivity for those in Babylon whilst the land of Judah lay desolate. This understanding of the Exile can be seen throughout the play, lending a melancholy air to the story which again counteracts the levity of the Hebrew text. Esther describes her friend Élise as one who shared oppression with her under the same yoke and who helped her mourn the misfortunes of Zion (ll. 5–6). Esther herself is ashamed to be queen in a foreign land when the Temple in Jerusalem is lying in ruins (ll. 81–8); and when the chorus of young Israelite women is introduced, described as former companions of Esther's captivity (l. 113), Esther urges them to sing a song commemorating the misfortunes of Zion (ll. 129–31). In her prayer before going to the king, Esther describes the people as not only enslaved but threatened with death (ll. 259–60),[36] and after her prayer the chorus bewail the destruction of Zion and the scattering of its captive children (ll. 302–4). When Esther finally gets to plead to the king for her people's life, she paints a picture of them being in irons and suffering persecution from the king (ll. 1108–11). The climax of the play involves a reversal of the Jews' unhappy situation: Assuérus's response to the revelation of Aman's treachery is to free the Jews from slavery (l. 1182); and the final chorus speaks of Zion taking off the garments of her captivity and the captive tribes breaking their fetters (ll. 1237–8, 1241–2).

[35] Jasinski, *l'Esther Racinienne*, 106, argues that Racine based himself to a large extent on the French translation and commentary on the Bible that was produced by Louis-Isaac Lemaistre de Sacy in the late 1600s. Jasinski quotes Sacy's translation of Est. 14.9 which, following the Vulgate, reads, 'ils veulent renverser vos promesses' (110).

[36] The idea of the Jews being in slavery is also present in the LXX of Esther's prayer at 4.17o (= ET 14.8).

Given that the Old Testament itself says virtually nothing about the condition of those either in Judah or in Babylon during the exilic period, this concept of exile as captivity away from a devastated homeland most probably arises via extrapolation from the use of the term 'captivity' by the biblical writers themselves to refer to the experience of overthrow and deportation at the hands of the Babylonian armies (e.g. Jer. 20.6; Lam. 1.5; Ps. 137.3), and from texts such as Lev. 26.31–9, Deut. 28.63–8, Jer. 25.9–11, and 2 Chron. 36.20–1, which portray the period of exile as one in which the ruined land of Judah was literally emptied of all its people, who were taken in chains to Babylon to face slavery and deprivation as a fitting expression of the divine wrath against them. However, other archaeological and documentary evidence, exceedingly slim though it is, indicates that these highly negative portrayals in the biblical literature of total devastation and harsh captivity are both unrepresentative and misleading.[37] The land of Judah was by no means left unpopulated, and there may well have been some kind of continuing ritual at the site of the devastated Temple, as indicated by Jer. 41.5. Those in Babylon were apparently allowed to marry, buy land, and set up homes and businesses (cf. Jer. 29.1–7), living to all intents and purposes a normal life, except that it was not in their homeland; and the fact that there continued to be an important Jewish community in Babylon even after the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire when deported foreigners were permitted to return to their own lands indicates that at least some of the Jews must have found living conditions there more than tolerable. Nevertheless, the Old Testament's ideological portrayal of exile as harsh captivity is what has determined Racine's and later Handel's presentations, and locating the Esther story in that exile gives the story a tragic quality that it simply does not have in the Hebrew version.

The final effect of the play's setting in an exile that is conceptualized as captivity is to provide an acceptable way of rounding off the narrative. If the Esther story is treated as history rather than as a carnivalesque farce, and if it is accepted as part of the Christian Bible, the most problematic elements for Christian readers are arguably the Jews' excessive slaughter of their enemies and the requirement to observe an annual festival commemorating the slaughter (Est. 9). The slaughter offends against morality by being vindictive and bloodthirsty, and the festival to commemorate it is not only therefore questionable in itself but is also specifically for Jews, therefore having little or no relevance for non-Jews. However, the exilic

[37] In particular, portrayal of Judah as empty and desolate for the duration of the Exile is ideologically conditioned, arising from the exiles' desire to claim precedence for themselves as the true guardians of the faith by simply writing out of history anyone who had not been exiled. See Robert P. Carroll, 'The Myth of the Empty Land', in David Jobling and Tina Pippin (eds.), *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Text*, Semeia, 59 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 79–93, for a discussion of the ideological forces behind this portrayal; and Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the 'Exilic' Period*, Symbolae osloenses, 28 (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), for an examination of the material evidence for the situation in exilic Judah. For a discussion of methodological issues surrounding scholarly treatments of the Exile, see Lester L. Grabbe (ed.), *Leading Captivity Captive: 'The Exile' as History and Ideology*, JSOTSup, 278/ESHM, 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). For summary discussions of the conditions during the exilic period both in Judah and in Babylon, see Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 17–38; Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period.* ii. *From the Exile to the Maccabees* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 370–4.

setting of the story removes the necessity for the slaughter and for the subsequent celebration of Purim, because in the light of the issues discussed above, the resolution it demands for the crisis is that the exiles be allowed to return home and rebuild the Temple, which is precisely what Assuérus decrees that they should do (ll. 1182–6).[38] Going home means that there is no need for the Jews to slaughter their enemies in order to maintain themselves in what could prove to be a perpetually hostile environment, and rebuilding the Temple is in itself a commemoration of their return home, as well as giving them the means to celebrate their restoration in future years with appropriately religious festivities. The exaggeratedly nationalistic biblical ending is thus transposed into the same soberly religious key as the rest of Racine's narrative, allowing the issues to be framed in terms that were not only comprehensible to a seventeenth-century Christian audience but were also sufficiently edifying and inoffensive for Mme de Maintenon's young women.

The use of an exilic setting, then, constitutes a major alteration of the biblical text, and is a key element in Racine's presentation of the story of Esther as religious tragedy rather than ethnocentric comedy. A second, and linked, element is Racine's portrayal of Esther herself. If *Esther* takes place in exile, it means that not only is the gravity of the situation increased, so is the significance of Esther's actions. It is her response in the face of this overwhelming threat that can bring about her people's re-establishment, thereby securing the course of salvation history; and her portrayal in the play presents her as a woman with the requisite moral fibre and religious fervour to meet such an enormous challenge.[39]

The most striking characteristic of Racine's Esther is her piety. In the Hebrew text, when Esther is first introduced, she is described as 'beautiful of form and good to look at' (יְפַת־תֹּאַר וְטוֹבַת מַרְאֶה [*yᵉpat-tō'ar wᵉṭôbat mar'eh*], 2.7), and in keeping with the non-religious ethos of the book, not once is her piety or devotion to God depicted or described.[40] By contrast, although the Septuagint mentions Esther's beauty it only has one expression for it (*καὶ ἦν τὸ κοράσιον καλὸν τῷ εἴδει* [*kai ēn to korasion kalon tōi eidei*], 'and the girl was lovely in appearance', 2.7) rather than the double expression in the Hebrew text. The Septuagint also shows Esther as overtly religious, in that she offers a lengthy prayer to God before she

[38] It is true that he gives them the blood of their enemies (l. 1183), but this is more about giving the Jews the same status as other subjects of the Persian empire (ll. 1182, 1184) than about ordering a reverse pogrom.

[39] It is generally agreed that Racine's portrayal of Esther was intended as a compliment to Mme de Maintenon. See Lancaster, *Period of Racine*, i.293–4, 296; Jean-Pierre Collinet, 'Préface', in Racine, *Théâtre complet*, ii.37; Jean Orcibal, *La Genèse d'*Esther *et d'*Athalie, Autour de Racine, 1 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1950), 20–2; Jasinski, *l'Esther Racinienne*, 200–3. However, Edric Caldicott, 'Racine's "Jacobite" Plays: The Politics of the Bible', in Edric Caldicott and Derval Conroy (eds.), *Racine: The Power and the Pleasure* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001), 100–20, cautions against regarding the compliment to Maintenon as deliberate for fear of pushing the analogy between Assuérus and Louis XIV too far (104). But whether or not Racine's portrayal of Esther relates to Maintenon, it still provides an appropriate model of Christian virtue for the young women of Saint-Cyr.

[40] Sabine M. L. Van Den Eynde, 'If Esther Had Not Been That Beautiful: Dealing with a Hidden God in the (Hebrew) Book of Esther', *BTB*, 31 (2001), 145–50, argues that elsewhere in the Old Testament the 'beautiful appearance' motif is often used to spotlight the hero or heroine, as well as indicating divine favour (146–7). On this reading, Esther's beauty in itself has religious overtones.

goes in to face Ahasuerus (Est. 4.17k–z, 5.1a, = ET 14.1–19, 15.2). Doubtless taking his cue from the Septuagint, Racine continues this trend of de-emphasizing Esther's beauty in favour of her piety. In his depiction, she is hardly ever described as beautiful; indeed, she remarks on her own plainness in comparison to all the other young women whom Assuérus has seen, and seems surprised that the king is apparently attracted to her (ll. 63–4, 70). In fact, it is not until the final chorus that Esther is referred to explicitly in terms of her physical beauty, and even then the reference is immediately tempered by a reference to her virtue:

> *Deux Israélites:* Esther a triomphé des filles des Persans:
> La nature et le ciel à l'envi l'ont ornée.
> *L'une des deux:* Tout ressent de ses yeux les charmes innocents.
> Jamais tant de beauté fut-elle couronnée?
> *L'autre:* Les charmes de son coeur sont encor plus puissants.
> Jamais tant de vertu fut-elle couronnée? (ll. 1228–33)
> [*Two Israelite girls:* Esther has triumphed over the Persians' daughters:
> Nature and heaven have vied with each other in adorning her.
> *One of the two:* Everyone feels the innocent charms of her eyes.
> Was ever such beauty given a crown?
> *The other:* The charms of her heart are even more powerful.
> Was ever such virtue given a crown?]

Given the original purpose of the play as a means of providing edifying entertainment for young ladies, it is not surprising that virtue is stressed above physical beauty as the most desirable quality that functions to achieve what needs to be achieved.

As well as downplaying Esther's beauty in favour of her virtue, Racine shows Esther as a devout worshipper of the Jewish God. Building on the picture in the Septuagint of Esther's fervent prayer before she goes to see Ahasuerus (Est. 4.17k–z, = ET 14.1–19), Racine depicts her whole demeanour and outlook as permeated by her religious beliefs. She believes that God has influenced the king to choose her as his wife (ll. 67–9, 72–3), but is deeply troubled by the continued abrogation of worship at the ruined Jerusalem Temple (ll. 81–8). Her immediate reaction to Mardochée's news of the pogrom is to utter an exclamatory prayer (ll. 181–2), and it is Mardochée's rebuke to her in terms of her duty to God that persuades her to go and plead with the king (ll. 205–38). Her subsequent prayer is based closely on the Septuagint, and when at the banquet with Aman and Assuérus she finally makes her plea, it is couched entirely in terms of God's dealings with the Jews as a favoured people. Her final words, summing up the play, also interpret the events in terms of the workings of God: 'O Dieu! par quelle route inconnue aux mortels,/ Ta sagesse conduit ses desseins éternels!' [O God! by what means unknown to mortals/Does your wisdom carry out its eternal purposes!] (ll. 1198–9).

But the play does not simply present Esther as a model devotee of the Jewish God—it presents the crisis situation into which the Jews are thrown as a test of Esther's devotion. When Mardochée tells Esther of the pogrom that has been decreed and orders her to go to the king about it, she initially refuses, for which Mardochée rebukes her. In the Hebrew text the rebuke takes the form of suggesting that perhaps she was given her present position for precisely this moment, and warning her that she will not escape the pogrom even if she keeps silent now (Est. 4.13–14). However, Racine's Mardochée is considerably more scathing, telling

Esther that she is not simply there to be a 'vain spectacle' (l. 214), but for the purposes of God, which may well include self-sacrifice on behalf of his people (ll. 217–18). Mardochée also declares, 'S'il a permis d'Aman l'audace criminelle,/ Sans doute qu'il voulait éprouver votre zèle' [If he has allowed Haman's criminal impudence,/Doubtless he wanted to test your zeal] (ll. 229–30). He goes on to say that God will save the Jews even if she ignores this divine calling, while she will perish because of failing to accept the call (ll. 233–8). Certainly the idea that if she fails to act the Jews will be saved anyway while she and her family perish is already present in the Hebrew text (4.14), but seeing Esther's demise as God's punishment for failing to respond to a calling that was deliberately designed to test her mettle is most certainly not. The effect of this is to focus the play very specifically on Esther; it is no longer so much the story of the exiled and pining Jews as it is of one young woman and her courageous actions which bring about the resolution of a national crisis for her people.[41] Precisely how much this is the story of Esther's courageous actions to save her people is indicated by the final choral scene, in which the chorus sing her praises along with those of God for delivering the Jews from their enemies (ll. 1221–35).

Clearly, then, Racine's treatment of the narrative is dependent on more than just the biblical text; it is an attempt to communicate a particular set of social and religious values to those for whose benefit it was written.[42] Specifically, it focuses on the character of Esther herself, making her a model of demure submissive Christian self-sacrificial piety who is prepared to give herself totally for her people but has no personal ambition. But this is not the end of the investigation; given that Racine's play was used some thirty years later as the basis of what became Handel's first Israelite oratorio, the question now is how far the play's presentation was either retained or adapted for the eighteenth-century British context into which it was translated.

ESTHER AND HANDEL: THE 1718 LIBRETTO

The libretto of Handel's earliest Israelite oratorio is clearly reminiscent of Racine's play: like the play it has a three-act structure, and its general content is similar to

[41] Although Esther's actions are certainly intended to be viewed in a positive light, Vincent Grégoire, 'La femme et la loi dans la perspective des pièces bibliques Raciniennes représentées à Saint-Cyr', *Dix-Septième Siècle*, 179 (1993), 323–36, highlights the gender issues at work in Esther's transgression of the king's law, and argues that the model of femininity commended to the young women of Saint-Cyr by Racine's Esther is one that accepts self-sacrifice in order to preserve the patriarchal order (329–30). Forman, '*Esther*', 143, also comments in passing on the total failure of observers to notice the hidden assumptions being made in the play about the expected role of women and wives, although he does not pursue the issue.

[42] Some scholars have also argued for the play as a kind of political allegory addressing contemporary events and personages. See Martin Turnell, *Jean Racine: Dramatist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), 281; Jasinski, 'Sur un thème d'*Esther*', *Littératures*, 9–10 (1984), 75–82; Forman, '*Esther*', 144–5. Although it is probable that the play evoked particular contemporary resonances for its audience (see Collinet, 'Préface', in Racine, *Théâtre complet*, ii.39), apart from acknowledging the play's compliment to Mme de Maintenon as noted above, it is beyond the scope of this study to pursue what these might have been and whether or not Racine intended them.

that of the play.[43] Act I of the libretto opens with Haman declaring that as the king's deputy he has issued a decree to annihilate all the Jews. Next, the Jews are shown rejoicing because Esther, who worships God, has become queen, but then they learn of the decree against them, and bewail their fate. Act II starts with Esther seeing Mordecai in sackcloth and ashes and asking what is wrong. He tells Esther of the decree and persuades her to go and see the king. When Esther enters Assuerus's throne room she faints in fear, much to his consternation, but at his encouragement she revives, and invites him and Haman to a banquet, to which Assuerus readily agrees. The Israelites are greatly encouraged. Act III opens as the priest and the Israelites call on God to display his anger; then, at the banquet, Esther reveals Haman's treachery to Assuerus and reminds the king of Mordecai's faithful service. Assuerus condemns Haman, who appeals for mercy to Esther, but she rejects his plea; Assuerus orders Haman to be put to death and Mordecai to be honoured, and Haman laments his own precipitous fall. The oratorio closes with Mordecai and the Israelites singing a grand triumphal chorus.

The relationship between the libretto and Racine's play is complex.[44] The closest and clearest resemblances to Racine are in the scenes where Mordecai tells Esther of Haman's decree and where Esther visits Assuerus's throne room; in these scenes there are both verbal and structural similarities between the two works. Elsewhere the libretto appears to have borrowed ideas or language from Racine, but uses them in a completely different context; and not only does the libretto have a different order of events from the play, its overall structure is considerably simplified in comparison with both Racine and the biblical narrative. The clearest similarity is arguably in the use of a chorus in both works,[45] but the function of the chorus differs markedly in each work, as will be discussed below. There is also the question of whether the libretto is based on Racine's French original or on the English translation of Racine's text published in 1715 by Thomas Brereton,[46] a question to which the answer seems to be, 'Both'.[47]

[43] Apart from the words in what survives of the autograph score of Esther, no copies of the libretto from the period of its composition (1718–20) have survived. A printed libretto survives from the 1732 performance that Bernard Gates arranged for Handel's 47th birthday, and it is entitled *Esther: an Oratorio; or, Sacred Drama. The Musick as it was Composed for the Most Noble James Duke of Chandos. By George Frederick Handel, in the Year 1720. And Perform'd by the Children of His Majesty's Chapel, on Wednesday, Feb. 23. 1731* (London, 1732). A copy of the words was also published in *The London Magazine. or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* for May 1732, 85–6, under the heading, '*ESTHER*: An ORATORIO; or SACRED DRAMA. As it is now acted at the Theatre-Royal in the *Hay-Market* with vast Applause. The Musick being composed by the Great Mr *Handel*.'

[44] Dean's statement (*Dramatic Oratorios*, 194) that nearly every line is paraphrased from Racine is an exaggeration.

[45] Susanne Hartwig and Berthold Warnecke, '*Esther*: Prototype of an Oratorio? The Collaboration of Racine and Jean-Baptiste Moreau', in Edric Caldicott and Derval Conroy (eds.), *Racine: The Power and the Pleasure* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001), 188–208, suggest that Racine's play with its musical choruses functioned as the model on which Handel's oratorio genre was based.

[46] *Esther; or, Faith Triumphant. A Sacred Tragedy* (London, 1715).

[47] In some places there are clear reminiscences of Brereton, for example, in the descriptions of the envisaged persecutions under Haman's edict. In the libretto Haman proclaims, 'Pluck root and branch out of the land;/ . . . Let Jewish blood dye every hand;/Nor age nor sex I'll spare'. In Brereton, Mordecai tells Esther, 'Both Root and Branch they seek to spoil our Race!/ . . . Nor Age nor Sex shall scape th'invet'rate Steel' (pp. 9–10), and one of the virgins of the chorus sings, 'Lo! slaughter reigns on ev'ry Side,/The Streets with Blood are dy'd!' (p. 14). Elsewhere, though, there are strong reminiscences of

Despite the libretto's points of contact with Racine, the overall effect is rather different from the earlier play; and this is particularly evident as far as the setting is concerned. The libretto retains the exilic setting of Racine's *Esther*,[48] together with a focus on religious conflict rather than the ethnic conflict that appears in the Hebrew text; indeed, the religious aspect of the conflict is clear from the start, as Haman's defiant question in I.1 (p. 4),[49] 'Shall I the God of ISRAEL fear?',[50] is juxtaposed with the Israelites' praise of God and rejection of idols in I.2 (p. 5). Throughout the libretto, the Israelites repeatedly invoke God as their source of help, until in the final triumphant chorus they declare that 'The Lord our Enemy has slain' (III.3, p. 15). The libretto also retains the Racinian climax to the story that omits Purim, but shows the Jews praising God and returning to their homeland to rebuild the Temple, their exile having come to an end.

elements in the French that are not present in Brereton's translation, which implies that the libretto is drawing on Racine's original. An example of this is in the final chorus, where the libretto has, 'Mount Lebanon his firs resigns;/Descend, ye cedars; haste, ye pines,/To build the temple of the Lord'. Racine has, 'Relevez, relevez les superbes portiques/Du temple où notre Dieu se plaît d'être adoré./ . . . Liban, dépouille-toi de tes cèdres antiques' (ll. 1255–6, 59). However, Brereton's rendering of the same lines is, 'The Gates, at length, the lofty Gates unfold/Of our Jehovah's Dwelling-Place;/ . . . /Refit the Vessels as of old they were' (p. 47). It therefore seems highly likely that in this instance Racine rather than Brereton was the source of the imagery in the libretto.

[48] Contemporary English treatments of the story of Esther indicate that the concept of an exilic setting for the story was by no means unknown. Samuel Wesley, *The History of the Old Testament in Verse: With One Hundred and Eighty Sculptures: In Two Volumes* (London, 1704), begins his treatment of Esther with the line, 'While Israel's Sons in Babel's Chains remain'd' (ii.507); and Robert Burton, *Female Excellency: or, the Ladies Glory*, 3rd edn. (London, 1728), locates the narrative 'during the Captivity of the Jews in Babylon' (43). See also Thomas Pyle, *A Paraphrase with Short and Useful Notes on the Books of the Old Testament. Vol. IV. Containing a Paraphrase on the Books of I Kings, II Kings, I Chronicles, II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (London, 1725), 689. Others, however, viewed the narrative as taking place after the Exile, notably Simon Patrick, *A Commentary upon the Historical Books of the Old Testament, Vol. II. Containing Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, I Chronicles, II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 3rd edn. (London, 1727), 707. John Henley, *Esther Queen of Persia. An Historical Poem in Four Books* (London, 1714), 4, 24, sets his treatment of the narrative in the days of Xerxes, Darius's son (486–465 BCE), which is well after the Exile. Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible, Vol. I*, 4th edn. (Edinburgh, 1700), in his comments on Est. 1.1, is vague about the precise setting of Esther, saying only that there is no agreement as to which Persian king Ahasuerus represents, but it must have been either Darius Hystaspes, Xerxes, or Artaxerxes Longimanus. Poole does note, however, that 'divers both Jewish and Christian Writers' (ibid.) say that Ahasuerus represents Darius Hystaspes, which suggests that among such commentators it was not uncommon to place Esther during the last years of the Exile.

[49] Page numbers are for the Gates libretto cited above (note 43).

[50] In the biblical account Haman is described as an Agagite (Est. 3.1), and this is often taken as the key to his hostility towards the Jews on the grounds that he is to be viewed as a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites who were the Israelites' sworn enemies (cf. 1 Sam. 15.1–2, 8). But the libretto does not specify Haman's origins, and this has led to the criticism from some scholars that it makes Haman's motive for the Jewish genocide incomprehensible (Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 196). However, the words of Haman's first aria are remarkably reminiscent of some biblical material about the Amalekites. Deut. 25.17–18 tells the Israelites to remember how the Amalekites did not fear God but tried to destroy the Israelites on their way out of Egypt; and Ps. 83.4–8 [ET 3–7] describes a confederation of Israel's enemies, including the Amalekites, who are planning to cut Israel off from being a nation so that their name will be remembered no more. In the light of these references, when Haman says of his planned pogrom against the Jews, 'Shall I the God of Israel fear?', and 'let their [i.e. the Jews'] place no more be found', his words can be seen to characterize him as an Amalekite, while still portraying the conflict between him and the Jews in religious terms rather than in the ethnic terms that are used in the biblical account.

However, despite the conceptualization of exile as harsh captivity as in Racine, the tone of the libretto is generally much more positive than that of the play. When the Israelites are introduced, in I.2 (p. 4), they are singing for joy about Esther's coronation as queen, despite the fact that they are exiled, enslaved, and persecuted. The scene opens with the first Israelite declaring, 'Now Persecution shall lay by her Iron Rod;/ESTHER is Queen, and ESTHER serves the living God' (I.2, p. 4). There follows a series of items (air, chorus, air, recitative[51]) in praise of God, and then the second Israelite sings the air:

> Sing Songs of Praise, bow down the Knee,
> Our Chains we slight,
> Our Yoke is light,
> The Worship of our God is free.
> ZION again her Head shall raise;
> Tune all your Harps to Songs of Praise. (I.2, pp. 5–6)

The scene then ends with the chorus singing, 'Shall we of Servitude complain,/The heavy Yoke, and galling Chain?' (I.2, p. 6). Clearly the expected answer to this rhetorical question is, 'No!' This is very different from the mournful songs of Zion that Esther's chorus sing on being introduced at the beginning of Racine's play, where not even Esther's coronation as queen seems to have raised their spirits:

> O rives du Jourdain! ô champs aimés des cieux!
> Sacrés monts, fertiles vallées
> Par cent miracles signalées!
> Du doux pays de nos aïeux
> Serons-nous toujours exilées? (ll. 141–5)
> [O banks of Jordan! O fields beloved of heaven!
> Sacred mountains, fertile valleys
> Marked out by a hundred miracles!
> From the sweet country of our ancestors
> Shall we be for ever exiled?]

Precisely how different in tone the two treatments are can be seen from the observation that what Racine's chorus of maidens sing *before* hearing about

[51] The recitative that appears in the libretto for the Bernard Gates performance is different from the one in the Handelian autograph score. In the Gates version the recitative reads, 'O God, who from the Suckling's Mouth,/Ordainest early Praise,/Of such as worship thee in Truth,/Accept the humble Lays' (p. 5). In the autograph, however, is an earlier set of words that is crossed out, and reads, 'Methinks I see each stately Tow'r of Salem rise by Esther's Pow'r She shall breake the captive chain and Zion learn our songs again.' Roberts, 'The Composition of Handel's *Esther*', argues on musical and textual grounds that both versions of this recitative would have been intended to precede the air 'Praise the Lord with chearful voice' which in the present arrangement they follow (374). Roberts also argues that the initial change of 'Methinks' to 'O God, who from the Suckling's Mouth' was probably because in 1720 when the oratorio was performed the recitative and associated aria would have been sung by a boy; as Roberts points out, the 'Suckling's mouth' version 'sounds an unmistakable note of juvenile devotion' (376). Some of the sentiments of the 'Methinks' recitative reappear in the longer 1732 version in Mordecai's recitatives at I.1: 'With Transport, lovely Queen, I see/The Wonders God has wrought for thee!/Thy blooming Beauty he bestows,/To end dejected *Zion*'s Woes./The Lord of *Asia*, on his Throne,/Now languishes for thee alone,/And by thy Empire in his Breast,/*Judaea* may again be blest' (pp. 5–6); 'Again shall *Salem*, to the Skies,/From all her Woes triumphant rise' (p. 6).

the decree that has been issued for their extermination becomes the model for the lamentations expressed by the libretto's Israelites *after* they learn of the dire fate that awaits them:

> *Priest.* O JORDAN, JORDAN, sacred Tide!
> Shall we no more behold thee glide
> The fertile Vales along,
> As in our great Fore-fathers Days?
> Shall not thy Hills resound with Praise,
> And learn our holy Song?
> *Chorus.* Ye Sons of ISRAEL, mourn,
> Ye never to your Country shall return.[52] (I.3, p. 7)

The Handelian Israelites need news of an impending national disaster before their mood sinks to the depths of melancholy expressed by Racine's chorus at the start of his play.

Not only in its opening choruses is the libretto more positive than its Racinian model. The first act ends in shock and despair after the Israelites learn of Haman's decree, as noted above, but in the second act, once Mordecai has persuaded Esther to see Assuerus, and she has gained his agreement to come to a feast with her and Haman, the first Israelite declares:

> With inward Joy his Visage glows,
> He to the Queen's Apartment goes:
> Beauty has his Fury charm'd,
> And all his Wrath disarm'd. (II.3, p. 11)

The chorus then rounds off the second act with the words:

> Virtue, Truth and Innocence
> Shall ever be her sure Defence:
> She is Heaven's peculiar Care,
> Propitious Heav'n will hear her Prayer. (II.3, p. 11)

It seems that once Esther has succeeded in persuading the king to come to her feast, the situation is as good as resolved in favour of the Israelites. This positive and optimistic tone continues in Act III, which opens with the priest of the Israelites declaring:

> JEHOVAH, crown'd with Glory bright,
> Surrounded with eternal Light,
> Whose Ministers are Flames of Fire,
> Arise, and execute thine Ire. (III.1, p. 12)

[52] This seems to be an instance where the libretto owes more to Racine than to Brereton's translation of Racine. Brereton renders the equivalent chorus thus:

> O Banks of Jordan's Stream by Heav'n belov'd!
> Which thousand Miracles have prov'd;
> Each sacred Mount, and hallow'd Plain!
> When, when shall we behold your Charms again? (p. 6)

Clearly in its mention of 'fertile vales', 'fore-fathers', and perpetual exile, the libretto is conceptually and verbally closer to Racine than to Brereton.

The chorus then sing:

> He comes, he comes to end our Woes,
> And pour his Vengeance on our Foes:
> Earth trembles, lofty Mountains nod:
> JACOB, arise, to meet thy God. (III.1, p. 12)

If any doubt remained at the end of Act II about whether the situation could be saved, it must surely be resolved by this; and indeed, Esther's subsequent plea to the king to spare her people is instantly efficacious, resulting in Haman being condemned to death as a traitor by the king. The final triumphal chorus serves to confirm not only Haman's destruction but complete restoration for the Jews, including as it does the lines, 'The Lord his People shall restore,/And we in *Salem* shall adore' (III.3, p. 15).

The exilic setting in the libretto is thus drained of its tragic dimension whilst retaining its religious dimension. Instead of being a setting of doubt and despair in which there seems to be little if any certainty of God's will or power to save his people, it becomes a setting in which the initial certainty of divine favour in the light of Esther's appointment as queen, although challenged briefly, goes from strength to strength, and the threat from Haman's decree is faced in the knowledge of that favour. Whereas Racine portrays the story of Esther as the darkest hour before the dawn of restoration, the libretto portrays it as the inexorable approach of day. The dawn has already begun with Esther becoming queen, and although the cloud of Haman's decree obscures it for a while, there is never any real doubt that the day will break.

Another major difference between the two treatments is in the focus on the characters. As already remarked, Racine focuses particularly on Esther and emphasizes her role; her actions and motivations are what are being tested, and her virtues are sung at the end by the chorus when Aman's plot has been foiled. In the libretto, however, rather than centring on Esther as the main interested party, the focus is on the chorus of Israelites, who are portrayed very differently from their Racinian counterparts. Whereas in Racine the chorus consists of Esther's maids, who appear and function largely in accordance with her wishes and commands rather like an extension of her character, in the libretto the chorus consists of Israelites who are completely independent of Esther and who function as a collective character in their own right. In the first place, they appear before Esther does, and apart from her: they dominate the first act, from which Esther is absent, and it is through their eyes that the audience views the burgeoning crisis caused by Haman's action. Esther herself as a character does not appear until Act II, and even when she is introduced in her own right, the chorus's point of view continues to dominate, as can be seen from the way in which the outcome of the exchange between Mordecai and Esther is presented. When Esther has agreed to go to Assuerus and plead for the people's lives, she prays for divine assistance, in an air which ends, 'Take, O take my Life alone,/And thy chosen People spare' (II.1, p. 9). This idea is immediately taken up by the chorus, who sing, 'Save us, O Lord!/And blunt the wrathful Sword' (II.1, p. 9). In this way, the focus which had turned for a while onto Esther and her actions is brought back firmly onto the threat to the

people, and Esther's willingness to go to the king is shown as the answer to the people's need for salvation rather than as a test of her personal qualities.[53]

The 'people's perspective' is retained to the end. Once Haman has been revealed as the traitor and taken away for punishment, the final extended chorus is one of praise to God for saving the Israelites from their enemies, beginning, 'The Lord our Enemy has slain,/Ye Sons of JACOB sing a chearful Strain' (III.3, p. 15). But nowhere in this chorus is Esther even mentioned, let alone given any credit for having played any part in the salvation that has been achieved. This is very different from Racine's final chorus, where Esther's maids sing her praises along with those of Heaven for acting to thwart Aman's wicked designs (ll. 1221–35).

With this change in focus of the libretto from Esther to the Israelites comes a corresponding change in the way in which Esther is portrayed in the libretto. As in Racine, the idea that Esther is beautiful is downplayed, although in different ways. In the first instance, no mention is made of how Esther becomes queen; it is enough that she simply is queen. This contrasts with Racine, where the 'beauty contest' for a new queen is mentioned but undermined because Esther is chosen on the basis of a quality other than her physical beauty.[54] However, in common with Racine, the libretto's first descriptions of Esther speak of her spiritual qualities rather than her physical beauty. When the Israelites are rejoicing because she has become queen, they say, 'ESTHER is Queen, and ESTHER serves the living God' (I.2, p. 4); and later, when Mordecai is trying to persuade her to go to Assuerus to plead for the Jews, he tells her, 'Dread not, *righteous* Queen, the Danger' (italics added) (II.1, p. 8), thus emphasizing her virtue rather than her beauty as the quality that will keep her safe, before God if not before Assuerus. The place where Esther's beauty *is* emphasized is (as might be expected) in the scene with Assuerus in the throne room. When she faints in terror before the king, he exclaims, 'Ye Powers, what Paleness spreads her beauteous Face!/ESTHER awake, thou fairest of thy Race' (II.2, p. 10). His subsequent air again refers to her physical

[53] Henley, *Esther Queen of Persia*, 46–7, similarly focuses at this point on Esther as an agent of corporate salvation rather than on her personal virtue. When she sees the decree, she 'Much her own Fate, but more her People's mourns' (46), and immediately agrees to go to the king despite the danger without having to be persuaded by Mordecai to do so. She then orders fasting and prayers, 'That while their Souls in Pray'r to Heav'n they give,/Their Pitying God might smile, and bid them Live' (47). Compare the Hebrew text, where the Jews are to fast not on their own behalf, but on Esther's (Est. 4.16).

[54] Brereton in his translation of Racine takes this undermining even further, by giving Esther's companion Sarah a speech as an aside to Esther's account of the contest, in which Sarah extols the attractiveness of heavenly virtue rather than physical beauty:

> *Sarah.*(. . .)
> No Maid, however bright, that may contend
> With her, whose Looks have only Heav'n to Friend:
> She, who th'Eternal's Love first makes her Care,
> Shall Man's Affection undesigning share:
> Her Innocence alone will deeper wound
> Than other's Arts.
> *Esther.* And so indeed I found. (4)

By contrast, Henley, *Esther Queen of Persia*, gives lavish descriptions both of Esther's physical beauty and of her virtue (25–6, 27–8).

beauty: 'O beauteous Queen, unclose those Eyes,/My Fairest shall not bleed' (II.2, p. 10).[55] And once Assuerus has agreed to her request to come to the banquet, an Israelite comments, 'Beauty has his Fury charm'd/And all his Wrath disarm'd' (II.3, p. 11). But this is not allowed to stand as the final comment on the episode, or indeed, on Esther's character; the chorus follow it by singing:

> Virtue, Truth, and Innocence
> Shall ever be her sure Defence:
> She is Heaven's peculiar Care,
> Propitious Heav'n will hear her Prayer. (II.3, p. 11)

This is reminiscent of the final chorus in Racine, where the maidens praise Esther's beauty but then immediately praise her virtue as being even more appealing.

In addition to this de-emphasizing of Esther's physical beauty, there is an aspect of Esther's character in the libretto that appears neither in Racine nor in the biblical text, but which underlines the observation that the libretto is constructed to focus on the Israelites rather than on Esther. When Mordecai attempts to persuade Esther to go to the king, the sentiments he uses are similar to those in Racine, although much less barbed in their expression: 'Follow great JEHOVAH's Calling;/For thy Kindred's Safety falling,/Death is better than a Throne' (II.1, p. 9). Esther's response, however, is rather different. In the Hebrew text, she agrees to go to the king after a three-day fast, and 'if I die, I die' (Est. 4.16). In Racine, she tells Mardochée that she will go to the king the next day, and that she is ready to die for her country if necessary: 'Contente de périr, s'il faut que je périsse,/J'irai pour mon pays m'offrir en sacrifice' [Content to perish if I must perish,/I shall go and offer myself in sacrifice for my country] (ll. 245–6). In the libretto, she similarly agrees to go to the king, but this time she actually prays to be taken as a sacrifice instead of the people:

> Hear, O God, thy Servant's Prayer:
> Is it Blood that must atone,
> Take, O take my Life alone;
> And thy chosen People spare. (II.1, p. 9)

This is an idea that appears nowhere in the Hebrew text, the Septuagint, or Racine. Certainly, in the Septuagint (Est. 4.17l, r–t, = ET 14.3–4, 12–14) and Racine

[55] Compare Racine, where no reference is made to Esther's beauty at this point:

> Dieux puissants! quelle étrange pâleur
> De son teint tout à coup efface la couleur!
> Esther, que craignez-vous? Suis-je pas votre frère?
> Est-ce pour vous qu'est fait un ordre si sévère?
> Vivez. Le sceptre d'or, que vous tend cette main,
> Pour vous de ma clémence est un gage certain. (ll. 635–40)
> [Ye gods! what a strange pallor
> Has all at once wiped the colour from her complexion!
> Esther, what are you afraid of? Am I not your brother?
> Was it for you that such a severe rule was made?
> Live. The golden sceptre, which this hand holds out to you
> Is a sure token for you of my mercy.]

(ll. 287–92) Esther prays for divine assistance as she goes in to address the king, but although in all three of the versions mentioned she accepts the risk of death implicit in agreeing to go to him, in none of them does she actively court death or ask to die. However, the idea of one person becoming a sacrifice to save the rest of the Jews does appear in Brereton's English translation of Racine, in a scene that Brereton has added to the Racinian material. At the beginning of Act III, Mordecai appears alone, in prayer, pleads with God for the salvation of the rest of the people, explains why he defied Haman, and then says,

> And if our Sins to such a Height are grown,
> That nothing less than Blood will now attone;
> Sparing the Rest thy Foes design a Prey,
> On Me (who most offend) the Forfeit lay:
> On Me alone a Thousand Lives bestow;
> Those Thousand I with Pleasure wou'd forego,
> If for each Time I Agonizing dye,
> One of thy Saints this Massacre might fly. (p. 32)[56]

This makes good sense, because it is Mordecai's defiance of Haman that has precipitated the crisis, and so it is only logical that Mordecai alone should be the target of any penal action. It also solves a potential difficulty with the Hebrew text, in that there Mordecai never gives a reason for his defiance of Haman, and never acknowledges that he has been the cause of the crisis for the rest of his people, but seems quite happy for Esther to risk her life to alleviate the crisis that he himself has precipitated.[57] However, in the libretto this prayer to die instead of the rest of the people is placed on Esther's lips, and made to refer to the possibility of her being put to death when she goes to see the king. In this way, Esther herself is shown to believe that what she is about to do is a matter of the people's safety rather than of her own virtue, and so here too the focus is shifted from her action, to its effect on and for the people.[58]

[56] The idea that Mordecai would have sacrificed himself to save the Jews also appears in Henley, *Esther Queen of Persia*, where Mordecai is compared to Moses:

> Gloriously lavish of his Soul as He [i.e. Moses],
> He wish'd a Ransom for the Whole to die;
> Burn'd to sustain the Coming Shock alone,
> And greatly for each Life expend his own. (46)

The allusion is probably to Moses' offer to sacrifice himself on the Israelites' behalf in order to satisfy God's wrath after the affair of the golden calf (Exod. 32.30–2). Given that Henley's work was published in 1714 and Brereton's in 1715, the supposition that Brereton borrowed the idea from Henley is attractive. However, the language used at this point in the *Esther* libretto is much closer to Brereton than to Henley, making Brereton the most likely source of the idea in the libretto.

[57] Pierre Degott, 'De Racine à Haendel: Les Tribulations d'*Esther*', *XVII–XVIII*, 52 (June 2001), 35–50, comments that this is one of several additions made by Brereton for the purpose of 'rationaliser l'intrigue, en même temps qu'elles opèrent la transvalorisation de certains des personnages de Racine' ['rationalizing the plot, at the same time as they effect the transvalorization of some of Racine's characters'] (42).

[58] For the messianic overtones of this portrayal of Esther, see Annette Schellenberg, '"Esther". Exegetisch-theologische Beobachtungen zur Rezeption des biblischen Stoffs bei Georg Friedrich Händel', in Christiane Karrer-Grube, Jutta Krispenz, Thomas Krüger, Christian Rose, Annette Schellenberg (eds.), *Sprachen-Bilder-Klänge. Dimensionen der Theologie im Alten Testament und in seinem*

This treatment of the Esther story, then, like Racine's treatment, is no comedy. However, neither is it the tragedy that Racine made it; nor does it have the same focus on Esther herself as Racine does. Rather, what is at issue here is the action of God in preserving his chosen people from their enemies by elevating a person who is his true follower to a position of influence in order to counteract the hostile forces. The libretto shows that those who impiously defy the God of the Jews and attempt to harm his people will certainly come to grief, because God is more than able to respond in defence of his true worshippers, and will topple even the most powerful tyrants in order to save his people.[59] Such an understanding of the message of Esther reflects other contemporary British uses of the story; in particular the Esther story had longstanding associations with the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605,[60] and with the landing of the Protestant prince William of Orange in England on 5 November 1688 to replace the Catholic James II as king (the so-called 'Glorious Revolution', that led ultimately to the throne going to the Protestant house of Hanover in 1714). Both of these events were interpreted as God's deliverance of his people (British Protestants) from their enemies (Catholics) in a way that strongly resembled the deliverance of the Jews in the book of Esther,[61] and this suggests that the libretto can be understood in a similar way. Indeed, eighteenth-century preachers used the book of Esther for commemorative sermons on 5 November,[62] as well as on other occasions, to emphasize God's deliverance of the British Protestant Established Church from popish attempts to exterminate it.[63] So, in focusing on the people's deliverance, the libretto is clearly

Umfeld. Festschrift für Rüdiger Bartelmus zu seinem 65. Geburtstag, AOAT, 359 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 275–94. I am grateful to Dr Schellenberg for providing me with a pre-publication copy of her article.

[59] This reading gives the lie to the comment made by Annette Landgraf, 'Von der Bibel über Brereton zu Händel', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 52 (2006), 129–38, concerning the allocation of solo parts in the 1718 libretto. She observes that although Mordecai is the catalyst for the whole sequence of events in the story of Esther he only has one air and one recitative, a 'Missverhältnis' ('disproportion') that was corrected in the 1732 libretto (135). Such a comment, however, assumes that the libretto was intended to be a close representation of the biblical text, and allows for no other motive in its composition.

[60] See, for example, George Hakewill, *A comparison betweene the dayes of Purim and that of the Powder treason for the better Continuance of the memory of it, and the stirring up of mens affections to a more Zealous observation thereof* (Oxford, 1625), who draws detailed links between the deliverance of the Jews and that of the British Parliament.

[61] Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 277.

[62] William Beveridge, *A Sermon Preach'd before the House of Peers, in the Abbey-Church of Westminster, on Sunday, November the 5th 1704* (London, 1704); Samuel Bradford, *A Sermon Preach'd before the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor and Aldermen, and the Citizens of London, in the Cathedral Church of St Paul, on Sunday, November 5th. 1704* (London, 1704); Thomas Knaggs, *Haman and Mordecai. A Sermon Preach'd at the Cathedral Church of St Paul, . . . On the Fifth of November, 1716* (London, 1716). All of these sermons are based on texts from the book of Esther.

[63] Richard Holland, *Haman and Mordecai. A Fast-Sermon preach'd in the Parish Church of St Magnus the martyr, by London-Bridge, on Friday, April 4. 1701.* (London, 1701); William Harris, *A Practical Illustration of the Book of Esther. A sermon preach'd to the Society that supports the Lord's-day-morning-lecture at Little St Helen's, August 1. 1737* (London, 1737). Thomas Morer, 'A Sermon preach'd at St Lawrence Jewry, to the Goldsmiths at their Yearly-meeting for Works of Charity, on Feb. 6. 1707/8. being the Queen's Birthday', in id., *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London, 1708), 173–98, equates Queen Anne with Esther who was raised up to preserve her nation from its enemies at a given juncture (178–86).

in line with an established contemporary understanding of the story of Esther, and can be seen as celebrating God's protection of Britain and its religion from the attacks of (Catholic) infidels.[64]

ESTHER AND HANDEL: THE 1732 LIBRETTO

Although the circumstances under which the 1718 libretto of Handel's *Esther* was produced are exceedingly obscure, those surrounding the production of the 1732 version are somewhat less so.[65] It appears that the original version was staged by Bernard Gates as a birthday treat for Handel on 23 February 1732, and then repeated a few days later on 1 and 3 March. These performances were very successful, and prompted a pirated performance on 20 April by a person or persons unknown, as a response to which Handel produced a revised version of the oratorio in conjunction with the librettist Samuel Humphreys.[66] This version is longer than the 1718 version, and its libretto includes some additional elements from the biblical narrative that were omitted from the earlier libretto. Like its predecessor, it is a considerable way away from the comedic nature of the canonical book of Esther; but it also has its own particular characteristics.[67]

The libretto opens with a scene in which Esther, Mordecai, and the Israelites rejoice over the fact that Esther has just been made queen and anticipate an upturn in their fortunes as a result. But in the next scene Haman asks king Assuerus for permission to destroy the rebellious Jews, a request which Assuerus grants, before promoting Haman for his loyalty. Haman then issues his decree to exterminate the Jews, to which the Persian soldiers respond with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, the Israelites are praising God's faithfulness, but then they learn of the decree, and the first act ends with them bewailing their fate. The second act begins with the Israelites declaring that tyrants will not escape justice, and then shifts to Mordecai telling Esther of the decree against the Jews and persuading her to go to the king. She eventually agrees, goes to see Assuerus, faints in fear but revives at his encouragement, and asks him to a banquet along with Haman. He is happy to

[64] Roberts, 'The Composition of Handel's *Esther*', suggests that the libretto may reflect the events surrounding the War of the Quadruple Alliance (Britain, France, and the Empire allied against Spain) and the downfall of the Spanish Cardinal Alberoni in 1718–19 (383–9). On such a reading, Haman would represent the hated Cardinal. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 278–81, suggests the possibility of a pro-Catholic reading of the libretto.

[65] See also the Introit above for a summary of the circumstances under which Handel's *Esther* was first brought to a public audience.

[66] See Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 203–5. Humphreys was a poet and translator who had provided translations for the libretti of Handel's Italian operas prior to writing the libretti for Handel's first three Israelite oratorios, and who subsequently published a three-volume biblical commentary between 1735 and 1737. For biographical notes on Humphreys, see Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 189–90; Thomas N. McGeary, 'Humphreys, Samuel (*c*.1697–1737)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14162, accessed 26 July 2011>.

[67] The libretto for the 1732 performances was published as *Esther, an Oratorio: or Sacred Drama. As it is performed At the King's Theatre in the Hay-Market. The Musick formerly Composed by Mr. Handel, and now Revised by him, with several Additions. The Additional Words by Mr. Humphreys* (London: T. Wood, 1732).

oblige her, and the Israelites proclaim that he has been won over by her and will listen to her. They sing an anthem calling on God to save the king, which ends the second act. Act III begins with Mordecai and the chorus calling down Jehovah's anger on his foes, and then the scene shifts to the banquet with Esther, Assuerus, and Haman. In response to Assuerus's questions, Esther reveals Haman's treachery and Mordecai's faithfulness; Assuerus condemns Haman, who pleads with Esther for mercy but is rejected by her. Assuerus orders Haman to be put to death and Mordecai to be honoured with promotion to king's deputy. Haman laments his abrupt change of fortune, and Esther and an Israelite woman sing praise to God. The oratorio ends with a triumphal chorus with hallelujahs that is about a third of the length of the final chorus in the original version.

In terms of the setting, the exilic setting of the previous versions is retained, with its concomitant overtones of religious conflict rather than ethnic conflict. Thus, Mordecai proclaims that Esther's coronation as queen is the means by which the avenging God intends to end Jewish captivity; and Haman tells Assuerus that the 'vassal Jews' are saying their God will 'plead their Cause,/Restore their Temple and their Laws' (I.2, p. 7). Haman then issues his decree in blatant defiance of the God of Israel; but the Israelites, who have declared their rejection of idol worship, plead to that very same God, who ultimately engineers Haman's downfall. However, as the libretto progresses, the exilic setting is de-emphasized by comparison with both Racine and the 1718 libretto, and there is a slide into diaspora, bringing the 1732 version closer to the Hebrew text in this respect. Although the libretto still contains the scene in Act I where the Israelites sing about not regarding their chains as long as they can praise their God, the scene is shorter than in the 1718 version, and the amount of material that focuses on the chains is reduced. Additionally, after the first act there is no further mention of exile. In the 1718 version, the exilic setting is recalled in the final chorus, during which the Israelites sing of returning to Sion and rebuilding the Temple; however, the 1732 version has a shortened version of the final chorus which makes no mention of returning to Sion or of rebuilding the Temple (III.3, p. 19). This, together with Mordecai's promotion to second-in-command of the Persian empire in the penultimate scene (an element present in the Hebrew text but omitted from the 1718 version), gives the impression that the crisis has been resolved not by ending the Jews' exile but by consolidating their position in Persia—precisely the ending that appears in the Hebrew text, where the Jews are portrayed as living in diaspora rather than in exile.

Despite the theme of religious conflict, the atmosphere as in the earlier libretto is extremely positive, not least because of some of the additional elements that have been introduced. The opening scene (an additional element) is dedicated to expressing the conviction that now Esther is queen by the grace of God, the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem will take a significant turn for the better; Act II opens with the declaration that tyrants will surely receive their just deserts (II.1, p. 10—an additional element); and Act III begins with the call on Jehovah to execute his wrath on his enemies (III.1. p. 15). Although Act I closes on a mournful note as the Israelites bewail their fate, Act II closes with a sequence of two recitatives, an air, and an anthem (II.4, p. 18—all additional elements), expressing the conviction that Assuerus will grant Esther's request and that the Israelites will be saved; and Act III closes with the triumphal chorus after Haman has been overthrown and Mordecai promoted. In addition to those at the beginnings and endings of the acts, there are

scenes of rejoicing during the acts. In Act I, even when Haman's request to Assuerus for permission to destroy the Jews has been granted and the decree issued, the Israelites are still given a scene (two recitatives and two airs—I.4, pp. 8–9) singing praises to Jehovah before they hear the news of the forthcoming pogrom. And at the end of Act III, once Haman has sung his final air and left, Esther and the Israelite woman have two airs and a duet rejoicing in God (III.2, p. 18—all additional elements) before the final triumphal chorus.

The portrayal of Esther is significantly different in the 1732 version from that in its shorter predecessor. Whereas in the 1718 version the focus of the narrative was on the people rather than on Esther as a character, in the longer version Esther has far more attention and significance, bringing it in that respect closer to Racine's play. The oratorio's opening scene focuses entirely on Esther: the Israelite woman prays for her, Esther herself praises God, and then Mordecai waxes lyrical about 'the Wonders God has wrought' for Esther in making the Persian king fall in love with her, which will lead to Judah's restoration (I.1, pp. 5–6). The scene ends with the anthem 'My heart is inditing' (I.1, p. 6), that was composed for the coronation of Queen Caroline in the 1727 coronation service for George II and Caroline; its inclusion here was doubtless an initiative taken by Handel himself, and it gives the impression that the scene has been depicting Esther and her compatriots on the day of her own coronation as queen of Persia. Although Esther does not appear again in Act I, the very fact that she has been introduced at the start in such an emphatic way shapes the perception of her importance in the libretto as a whole.

Esther's next appearance is in II.2 with Mordecai when he tells her of Haman's decree and begs her to go to the king on the Israelites' behalf (p. 11). The basic dialogue is the same as that in the 1718 version, but after Mordecai adjures Esther that 'Death is better than a Throne', the Israelite woman prays for Heaven's protection on her, and then the woman and Mordecai sing a duet:

> Blessings descend on downy wings,
> Angels guard her on her Way:
> New Life our Royal Esther brings,
> Since our Cause she pleads to Day. (II.2, p. 12)

It is only after this that Esther finally signals her agreement to go to the king; and even though (as in the 1718 version) she prays that her life might be taken in order to save the people, a prayer which the chorus second with their 'Save us, O Lord!/ And blunt the wrathful Sword!' (II.2, p. 12), the prayers that have already been offered up on Esther's behalf mean that her safety does not appear to be less important than the people's. The preservation of their lives depends upon the preservation of hers.

In Act III, Esther reveals Haman as a traitor and resists his plea for mercy, as in the 1718 version, but once Haman has been condemned and removed, Esther and the Israelite woman sing two airs and a duet in praise of God for the mercies shown both to Esther herself and to the people. Only then do the Israelites all sing the shortened final chorus. From all of this it appears that Esther is much more important in her own right than she was in the earlier version. This is no longer a libretto just about the saving of a nation, but about the woman who saved it, and in this respect it is closer than the 1718 version to the spirit of Racine and of the biblical text.

There is also much more emphasis on Esther's beauty than there was in either Racine or the 1718 version. Whereas both of the earlier works downplayed the

idea that Esther was beautiful and that her beauty was a significant factor in what she achieved, the 1732 libretto seems to have no qualms about underlining her beauty. Although nothing is said about the 'beauty contest' by which Esther became queen (Est. 2), in the first scene Mordecai tells her,

> With Transport, lovely Queen, I see
> The Wonders God has wrought for Thee!
> Thy blooming Beauty he bestows
> To end dejected Zion's Woes. (I.1. p. 5)

He goes on to sing the air,

> So much Beauty sweetly blooming,
> Shall thy Consort's Soul enslave;
> In thy lovely Power presuming,
> Ask him all thy Heart can crave. (I.1, p. 6)

Once again, it is tempting to see Handel's own influence behind this aspect of the libretto, not least because the Coronation Anthem with which the scene closes also includes the line, 'The King shall have Pleasure in thy Beauty' (I.1, p. 6). There is clearly a sense in all this that the king has chosen Esther as queen primarily because of her physical charms rather than because of any other virtue that he might have perceived in her. It also gives much more certainty to Mordecai's declaration in Act II that when Esther goes to plead with the king she need not fear, because 'Love will pacify his Anger' (II.2, p. 11). There is already a sense of the nature of the relationship between Esther and the king, even though they do not appear together in the same scene until part way through the next act.

As in the earlier libretto, during the encounter between Assuerus and Esther (II.3) the king praises Esther's beauty, but there is a difference in the Israelites' response in the scene immediately following the encounter (II.4). In the opening recitative for this scene, as well as the lines, 'Beauty has his Fury Charm'd,/And all his Wrath disarm'd', which were present in the 1718 version, the first Israelite adds, 'Beauty will her Power maintain;/What can Beauty crave in vain?' (II.4, p. 14). This is then followed by an air:

> Heaven has lent her every Charm,
> Rising Fury to disarm;
> And the Monarch's Breast will prove,
> That each Passion yields to Love. (II.4, p. 14)

It is true that the nature of these 'charms' is not defined, but in the context it is only natural to understand them as physical rather than spiritual. This interpretation is supported by the recitative that follows the air: 'The King will listen to his royal Fair,/And own her lovely Prevalence of Prayer' (II.4, p. 14). All of this is a strong contrast with the 1718 libretto, which at this point has a chorus focusing on the efficacy of Esther's spiritual virtues in prevailing with heaven rather than that of her physical virtues in prevailing with the king:

> Virtue, Truth and Innocence
> Shall ever be her sure Defence:
> She is Heaven's peculiar Care,
> Propitious Heav'n will hear her Prayer. (II.3, p. 11)

There are also additions to the picture of Assuerus as compared with the 1718 libretto. In I.2 he is shown together with Haman, giving Haman permission to execute the decree against the Jews and then, in an air, rewarding him with honours because of his apparent loyalty (p. 7). This is arguably a somewhat better portrayal of the king than in the Hebrew text, Racine, and the 1718 version, where no reason at all is given for Ahasuerus's promotion of Haman (cf. Est. 3.1), leaving open the possibility of it simply being a case of favouritism. In the 1732 version, even though Assuerus's promotion of Haman is clearly wrong-headed, there is some basis for it in that Haman is presenting himself as acting in the king's interest with his plan to crush the rebellious Jews, and Assuerus believes that Haman is attempting to protect the safety of the realm. The king's treatment of Haman indicates both that royal honours are distributed on a firmer basis than mere favouritism, and that the king is committed to rewarding those who demonstrate their loyalty to him, a picture that counteracts the biblical portrayal of an appetite-driven, irresponsible, and incompetent potentate. This positive portrayal is repeated in the third act, when in the penultimate scene of the oratorio Assuerus deposes Haman and then sings an air in which he promotes Mordecai to second-in-command of the kingdom, thereby rewarding the deserving Mordecai as emphatically as he had mistakenly rewarded the undeserving and deceitful Haman in the first act. This is a significant expansion of the 1718 version, where in the penultimate act Assuerus declares in recitative that the loyal Mordecai is to be rewarded by being led through the streets in triumph, but he does not sing an air of promotion for him, nor does he make him second-in-command of the empire. Indeed, in the earlier libretto, Assuerus's understated rewarding of Mordecai is virtually eclipsed by Haman's air contemplating his own downfall and then by the chorus's extended paean of praise to God for eliminating their enemy, which is entirely in line with the 1718 libretto's primary focus on the preservation of the chosen people from forces of evil.

In between Assuerus's promotion of Haman and his promotion of Mordecai comes his encounter with Esther (II.3), in which he agrees to come to her banquet, after which the chorus sing an adaptation of the Coronation Anthem 'Zadok the Priest': 'God is our Hope, and he will cause the King to shew Mercy to Jacob's Race. God save the King! long live the King! may the King live for ever!' (II.4, p. 14). This serves to put Assuerus in a positive light, in two ways. Dramatically speaking it shows that he has been transformed from enemy to friend; previously he was quite happy to allow Haman free reign against the Jews, but by the end of his meeting with Esther he has become—in prospect at least—their saviour, and so he now receives the same kind of affirmation that Esther had at the end of the very first scene as the chorus sing a Coronation Anthem in his honour. This implies that both king and queen are now seen as working on the same level and for the same end. But secondly, it saves the plot from descending entirely into bathos by making Esther's influence upon Assuerus the work of God: mercy will be shown to the Jews not simply because Esther has manipulated Assuerus with her beauty (just as Haman manipulated him with his lies), but because God has caused such manipulation to succeed. As such, the anthem corresponds to the sentiment expressed in the choral scene after Assuérus's meeting with Esther in Racine, in which a member of the chorus declares, 'Dieu, de nos volontés arbitre

souverain,/Le cœur des rois est ainsi dans ta main' [God, sovereign arbiter of our wills,/The heart of kings is thus in your hand] (ll. 733–4).[68]

All in all, then, the extra material on Esther and Assuerus together with the additional anthems result in the focus being shifted away from the people as a whole and onto the individual characters. This means that in the 1732 version there is a three-fold emphasis: Esther as an important figure for preserving her people, the Jews as a people to be saved, and the monarch in his role as protector of the people. When the circumstances of the libretto's production are taken into account, it seems beyond doubt that this configuration was prompted by the desire to compliment the royal family; and although it is not possible to say for certain, it seems very likely that the impetus for such a compliment would have come from Handel himself, even if Samuel Humphreys was the one who actually wrote the additions to the libretto. By 1732, Handel was a Composer to the Chapel Royal as well as having been appointed master of music to the Princesses Anne and Caroline,[69] and according to the eighteenth-century writer Charles Burney it was Anne who had heard about the earlier version of *Esther* and wanted to see it put on at the Haymarket.[70] Certainly the inclusion of the two Coronation Anthems, one referring to Esther and one referring to Assuerus, points to a desire to associate the libretto with the royal couple for whom the anthems had been written only five years previously, and this is something that can only have come from Handel himself. By including the anthems, the message is given that like Esther and Assuerus, George and Caroline are the instruments whereby the will of God is performed and the people of God are preserved from harm; and indeed, in the libretto it is only after their respective Coronation Anthems have been sung that Esther and Assuerus begin to act on behalf of the Israelites, Esther by going to the king to plead for the people, and Assuerus by listening to Esther's request, dismissing Haman and promoting Mordecai.[71] Despite these potential

[68] Rendered by Brereton thus: 'So, Sov'raign God! who all things dost o'ersee,/The Hearts of Kings are guided still by Thee' (29).

[69] For Handel's appointment as music master to the princesses, see Donald Burrows, *Handel*, The Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 117.

[70] Charles Burney, *An Account of the Musical Performances in Westminster Abbey . . . in Commemoration of Handel* (London, 1785), 100. On the connection between the royal family and Handel's *Esther*, see Ilias Chrissochoidis, '"A Fam'd *Oratorio* . . . in old *English* sung": *Esther* on 16 May 1732', *HIN*, 18/1 (2007), 4–7. Chrissochoidis quotes a poem published on the second page of *Read's Weekly Journal, or, British-Gazetteer* for Saturday 20 May 1732 that presents a versified summary of the foregoing week's news. For Tuesday 16 May the poem includes the lines, 'In the Ev'ning the King, whom God bless, and the Queen,/At the fam'd *Oratorio* were both to be seen,/Th'*Oratorio* which all in old *English* is sung'. This reference, taken together with other contemporary newspaper reports, indicates that all six performances of the 1732 *Esther* (2, 6, 9, 13, 16, and 20 May; Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 631) were given by royal command and were attended by the royal family, correcting the claim of Otto Deutsch in *Handel: A Documentary Bibliography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 290, that only four of the six performances (2, 6, 13, and 20 May) were attended by the royals (Chrissochoidis, 6). Chrissochoidis also suggests that alongside the potential attraction of the Coronation Anthems that were included in the revised *Esther* (cf. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 281–4), Princess Anne 'might have attached herself to the virtuous heroine', and that it might have been her enthusiasm that persuaded the rest of the family to attend the performances so assiduously (Chrissochoidis, 6).

[71] The desire to associate the libretto with George and Caroline may also account for the de-emphasizing of the exilic motif in the second half of the libretto, given that the whole idea of exile is that the Jews are in an unnatural, undesirable situation that they want to reverse, and this is presumably not how the libretto would want to portray the British people under George and Caroline.

associations, however, the temptation to identify a thorough-going allegorical interpretation of the libretto is to be resisted, if only because there is no close or consistent match between the situation of Assuerus and Esther and that of George and Caroline, and if there is such a clear discrepancy in the major characters of the supposed allegory it is unlikely that any other identifications could be sustained. Rather, instead of a sustained metaphor for a precise set of contemporary events, the libretto may be seen as a general comment on the monarchy and perhaps an attempt to flatter the king and queen with specific associations, for example, Caroline's political savvy, or George's affection for her, or George as a king set in place by God to defend the Church of England.

CONCLUSION

The journey taken by Esther from Bible to oratorio, then, is one from comedy through tragedy to national and royal propaganda. The libretti produced for Handel have neither the sharp satirical sting of the biblical text nor the tragic delicacy of Racine's treatment, but they adapt elements from both in order to produce something that addresses their own political and religious context. Although according to the libretti the Esther story is no laughing matter, there is room for plenty of rejoicing as the providential goodness of God is demonstrated in favour of the beleaguered Jews, whether in their release from exile or in the rise of sympathetic and enlightened rulers who will ensure their protection. This admirably accords with the convictions of the British people who not only took pride in their strong national and religious identity but believed that God did so too.

2

A Gender Agenda

Deborah in Holy Writ and Handel

Following the success of his first Israelite oratorio *Esther*, Handel was apparently persuaded to experiment a little further with this new genre alongside his opera-composing regimen, and 1733 saw two more oratorios produced and performed, both of them in conjunction with the librettist Samuel Humphreys who had assisted Handel in adapting the libretto of *Esther* for the public stage. In re-forming *Esther* Humphreys and Handel had produced a work that used the biblical narrative to present a compliment to the reigning Hanoverian monarchs, partly no doubt because it was a royal request that had resulted in the work being brought to the public stage in the first place; and a number of factors suggest that the choice of subject for their second oratorio *Deborah* may have been similarly motivated.[1] In the first place, the subjects of the two oratorios are comparable: *Deborah*, like its predecessor *Esther*, was based around the biblical story of a woman whose leadership of the Israelite people was instrumental in warding off danger at a time of oppression and threat to them from idolatrous foreigners; and if the story of Esther could be reshaped along lines that complimented the ruling monarchs, then surely that of Deborah could be similarly treated. Then there is evidence that the royal family took an interest in the actual production: the *Daily Journal* of 12 March 1733 carried an advertisement declaring that 'By his Majesty's Command. At the King's Theatre . . . on Saturday the 17th of March, will be performed, Deborah, an Oratorio, or Sacred Drama . . . ';[2] according to a contemporary letter, the Princess Royal encouraged Handel to put up the prices for tickets to the performances, which resulted in great disgruntlement;[3] and the *Daily Journal* of 2 April reported that on 31 March 'the King, Queen, Prince, and the three eldest Princesses were at the King's Theatre in the Hay-market, and saw the Opera called Deborah.'[4] While this may simply have been the normal kind of patronage that

[1] Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959, repr. 2000), 226, and Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 235, suggest that Handel's choice of the story of Deborah was influenced by the fact that Maurice Green had recently set a version of the song of Deborah in December 1732. The two motivations are not necessarily incompatible.

[2] *H-H* iv, 210.

[3] Letter from Lady A. Irwin to Lord Carlisle, dated 31 March 1733 (*H-H* iv, 211).

[4] *H-H* iv, 211.

Handel might expect for his productions, it would surely have been less than astute on his part not to encourage such patronage by producing works that would appeal specifically to his patrons. Thirdly, there is the fact that among the many previous works that Handel plundered in assembling the music for *Deborah* were the Coronation Anthems, specifically, the two that had not been re-used in *Esther*. Again, this could simply be because Handel regarded the music as appropriate for its new context, but it could also be partly because Handel thought that at least some of the audience—including the royal family—would recognize the music and hear in it an allusion to the coronation service with its affirmation of their role.[5]

But perhaps the most definitive evidence that *Deborah* was conceived as a work intended to flatter the royals is that of the printed libretto, which Humphreys dedicated 'To the Queen' (that is, to George II's consort, Queen Caroline). The dedication was ostensibly on the grounds of Caroline's patronage of the arts;[6] but in associating this Queen with Deborah, Humphreys was following a well-established precedent that had at least as much to do with politics as it did with art. Three previous English queens had already been compared favourably to Deborah in literature and in contemporary culture, namely, Elizabeth I, Mary II, and Anne, all three of whom were Protestants who actively opposed Catholicism. Elizabeth and Anne both went to war with European Catholic powers,[7] and Mary

[5] That the musical allusions to the Coronation Anthems were intended to evoke the coronation service is suggested by their location in the libretto. The first allusion (the music of 'Let thy hand be strengthened and thy right hand exalted' to the words 'Let thy deeds be glorious and thy right hand victorious') comes after Barak declares himself ready to join the fray against the enemy, and in the coronation service would have been an affirmation of the king at his enthronment; the second (the music of 'Let justice and judgment be the preparation of thy seat' to the words 'Despair all around them shall swiftly confound them') comes after Deborah and Barak have both declared their readiness to stand for the cause of liberty, and is a part of the same coronation anthem; the third (music from 'The king shall rejoice in thy strength, O Lord' to the words 'The great king of kings will aid us today') comes after Deborah and Barak have sung a duet about liberty, and in the coronation service would have been the anthem sung after the Recognition; and the fourth (music from 'Thou hast prevented him with the blessings of goodness' to the words 'O celebrate his sacred name') comes after Deborah's wish that all who oppose Jehovah should perish, and is again part of the post-Recognition anthem 'The king shall rejoice'. The musical quotations thus all serve to validate Deborah and Barak when they take a stance in favour of liberty and true religion, which is what the British monarchy supposedly stood for.

[6] The opening words of Humphreys' dedication in the libretto read, '*MADAM*, How much soever Mankind may vary in their Opinions on difficult Points of Speculation, they all confess, with a perfect Unanimity, That the polite Arts are favour'd by Your Majesty, with the Approbation and Patronage of the Greatest and Best of QUEENS. The many amiable Instances of Your Majesty's condescending Regard to the *Muses*, in particular, inspired one of the humblest of their Admirers with an ardent Ambition to grace this *Drama* with Your Majesty's sacred Name.' Burrows, *Handel*, 234–5, warns against making too much of a connection between Humphreys' dedication of the libretto to the Queen and his portrayal of Deborah, but such a connection can certainly be sustained, as will be argued below.

[7] The association of Elizabeth I with Deborah began right from the beginning of her reign, when a pageant of Deborah formed part of the procession for Elizabeth's coronation. For discussion of this, and of the significance of the 'Deborah' model for Elizabeth's reign, see John N. King, *Tudor Royal Iconography: Literature and Art in an Age of Religious Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 225–8; A. N. McLaren, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth 1558–1585* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23–35; Dale Hoak, 'A Tudor Deborah? The Coronation of Elizabeth I, Parliament, and the Problem of Female Rule', in Christopher Highley and John N. King (eds.), *John Foxe and his World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 73–88; Alexandra Walsham, '"A Very Deborah?" The Myth of Elizabeth I as a Providential Monarch', in Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (eds.), *The Myth of Elizabeth* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

(along with her husband William of Orange) displaced her Catholic father James II from the English throne in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688.[8] Given the nature of the Deborah story, in which Deborah repels the hostile, idolatrous Canaanites, Humphreys' libretto can be understood as political propaganda that celebrates the success of Protestant (Anglican) Britain under its Hanoverian Queen in repelling the threat of takeover by European Catholic powers. Inasmuch as Britain was not engaged in open conflict with its Catholic neighbours at the time of the libretto's composition, the libretto is a generic, stereotyped portrayal. However, its message is no less potent for that, serving not only to reinforce the prevailing ideology concerning Britain's place among its immediate neighbours, but also to validate the reign of the Hanoverian monarchs by assimilating them into the cultural paradigm of 'British Israel' as true 'defenders of the faith'.

It might be thought strange that the protection of Britain should be associated with Caroline rather than with George II, given that, unlike the other queens who had been associated with Deborah, Caroline was Queen Consort rather than queen in her own right. However, Caroline was known for her superior intellect and political skill, and her influence over George in political matters was acknowledged even during her lifetime. As a satirical verse of the period put it:

> You may strut, dapper George, but 'twill all be in vain,
> We all know 'tis Queen Caroline, not you, that reign.[9]

It is therefore not unreasonable that Caroline should be linked with Deborah as a woman 'acting for the Happiness of her People', to quote from the libretto's dedication to Caroline.

2003), 143–68. Anne's association with Deborah was engineered by Anne herself. Following the Allied forces' victory against the Franco-Bavarian army in the Battle of Blenheim in 1704, she proclaimed a day of thanksgiving, for which the set readings included Judg. 5.1–22 (the Song of Deborah) and Heb. 11.32–5 (part of the list of heroes of the faith, including Barak). This produced a rash of sermons in which Anne was compared to Deborah. See, for example, John Grant, *Deborah and Barak the Glorious Instruments of Israel's Deliverance: A Sermon Preach'd at the Cathedral Church of Rochester on the Seventh of September, 1704* (London, 1704); John Evans, *A Sermon Preach'd at Chester and Wrexam, Septemb. 7th 1704. Being the Day of Publick Thanksgiving for the Glorious Victory at Bleinheim* (London, 1704); Luke Milbourne, *Great Brittains Acclamation to her Deborah. A Sermon Preached In the Parish Church of St. Ethelburga, September VII. 1704* . . . . (London, 1704). In addition, one of the anthems composed by John Blow for the thanksgiving service in St Paul's on this occasion was based upon the Song of Deborah in Judg. 5. See Alexander Shapiro, '"Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature": The Relationship of Handel's First English Oratorios to Early Eighteenth-Century Sacred Music', M.Litt. thesis (Cambridge 1989), 93, 99. The same year, Samuel Wesley published his *The History of the Old Testament in Verse: With One Hundred and Eighty Sculptures: In Two Volumes* (London, 1704), and dedicated it to Queen Anne by means of a poem in which he likened her to Deborah. Anne was also associated with Deborah in an anonymous poem published the following year, entitled *Deborah: A Sacred Ode* (London, 1705).

[8] Upon Mary's death, elegies were published in which she was associated with Deborah. Samuel Wesley, *Elegies on the Queen and Archbishop* (London, 1695), 15, shows Mary entering Heaven and being greeted by a crowd of worthies, including Deborah and Elizabeth. Nahum Tate, *Mausolæum: A Funeral Poem on our late Gracious Sovereign Queen Mary, of Blessed Memory* (London, 1695), 14, pictures the figure of Britannia praising Mary by comparing her reign, as a period of peace and stability, to that of Deborah's rule over Israel.

[9] Quoted in John, Lord Hervey, *Some Materials Towards Memoirs of the Reign of King George II*, ed. by Romney Sedgwick, 3 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1970), i.69.

The assumption, then, is that in his libretto—with Handel's approval—Samuel Humphreys manipulated the biblical material on Deborah in order to convey a strong and positive political message about both Britain and its queen as the upholders of true religion. But it is not just *that* he did this, but *how* he did it, that is of interest. The biblical story of Deborah is one that is inescapably concerned with gender issues; the very fact that it shows the Israelites with a legitimate woman leader is in itself remarkable, because in the patriarchal and androcentric narrative of Israel's history the only other woman to rule in her own right is Athaliah (2 Kgs. 11.1–20//2 Chron. 22.10–23.21), who is portrayed as a wicked usurper. The Deborah narrative therefore invites scrutiny in relation to its gender models. However, when the biblical narrative is compared with the libretto, it can be seen that the gender models in the two are quite different, despite the equally patriarchal nature of eighteenth-century British society, and this results in a significantly different end-product in each case, which can be linked with the aims and circumstances of composition. In order to show this, first the biblical story of Deborah and then the libretto will be examined, and finally some conclusions will be drawn. The characters of particular interest here are the three 'Israelite' heroes, Deborah, Barak, and Jael, because they are the characters for whom there is most continuity between the biblical text and the libretto, and for whom a comparison of their gendered portrayals in each text is most fruitful.

THE STORY OF DEBORAH AND GENDER ROLES IN JUDGES 4–5

The first step, then, is to examine the gender models in the biblical material about Deborah, which is found in the Old Testament book of Judges. Like the rest of the Old Testament, the book of Judges works with a fundamentally patriarchal picture of how men and women ought to function in a well-ordered society: men are leaders, warriors, and guardians of the nation, while women are subsidiary figures concerned with child-bearing and domestic duties. Unfortunately, however, society as it appears in Judges is anything but well-ordered. Rather, the Judges period is portrayed as a time of constant unrest and war, during which there is no consistent strong centralized authority structure; and this is the context in which Deborah appears.[10] She is one of the series of 'deliverers' raised up by Yahweh to lead the Israelites in fighting against their foreign oppressors—into whose hands Yahweh has delivered the Israelites in the first place because they have turned to the worship of these other nations' gods (Judg. 2.11–14). There are two different versions of the Deborah story: a prose version in Judges 4, and a

[10] Jo Ann Hackett, 'In the days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel', in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1987), 15–38, comments that historically speaking women have tended to come to the fore in times of social dysfunction, when strong centralized authority is absent (19). This is certainly the situation reflected in Judges.

poetic version in Judges 5, and each will be examined separately for its portrayal of gender roles.

a. Gender roles in Judges 4

As the biblical text now stands, then, the basic narrative of the Deborah story comes in Judges 4. The story is set in a situation of harsh oppression for the Israelites at the hands of the Canaanite general Sisera, who has 900 iron chariots (Judg. 4.3); this is an exceptional amount of weaponry,[11] and a severe threat indeed. But into this situation of exceptional oppression is introduced an exceptional woman, Deborah (Judg. 4.4); she is exceptional in that she has not only a name but a voice, in a society where all too often women are denied both. Nor does she have just any voice. She is described as a prophetess, meaning that she has the voice of divine authority, a role that is fulfilled by only three other women in the Old Testament,[12] and by only one other anonymous individual in Judges (Judg. 6.8). In fact, the book of Judges is noteworthy for the almost complete absence of religious officials, whether priests or prophets; and those who do appear towards the end of the book—a priest (Judg. 17–18) and a Levite (Judg. 19)—are portrayed as idolatrous and immoral. So Deborah is a figure who completely reverses the trends of the rest of society, and the way the Hebrew text of Judg. 4.4 is structured draws attention to this: דְּבוֹרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה [*dᵉbôrâ 'iššâ nᵉbî'â*], 'Deborah—a woman—a prophetess,' it says, as if to emphasize the unusual nature of this figure. Not only is she a woman (shame on all the men!), but she is a prophetess (shame on all the priests and prophets!). The text then goes on to stress her leadership position in the light of these unusual qualities: *She* it is who was judging Israel at that time (הִיא שֹׁפְטָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּעֵת הַהִיא, *hî' šōp* [*ṭâ 'et-yisrā'ēl bā'ēt hahî'*], Judg. 4.4b). Where men, who are supposed to be the temporal and spiritual leaders of the nation, have fallen short, a woman, who is supposed to be at home looking after the children, has filled the breach.

Deborah has a 'surgery' under a palm tree that bears her name, located on Mount Ephraim (Judg. 4.5). The location on the mountain, the presence of a tree with its implication of a sacred place, and the unusual vocalization of the word for palm tree, תֹּמֶר [*tōmer*], using the vowels of the word for shame, בֹּשֶׁת [*bōšet*],[13]

[11] As James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), remarks, the immense number of chariots 'is certainly a saga-type exaggeration' (55). John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, NCB (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1986), points out that 900 chariots would require 1800 horses, whereas the stables at Megiddo under Solomon and Ahab accommodated only 450 horses, and in 1 Kgs. 10.26 Solomon is said to have had only 1400 chariots throughout the whole kingdom (254).

[12] Five women altogether have the title 'prophetess', although only four of them are shown as fulfilling some kind of religious role by virtue of their position. Miriam is given the title in the context of her song of triumph at the Red Sea (Exod. 15.20–1), Deborah is said to inspire the campaign against Sisera, and Huldah gives divine confirmation to Josiah of the words of the Book of the Law (2 Kgs. 22.14–20). Noadiah appears only in a passing reference in Neh. 6.15, where she is said to be one of Nehemiah's opponents and therefore a hostile figure. The anonymous 'prophetess' in Isa. 8.3 is most probably the prophet's own wife, making 'prophetess' here the equivalent of 'Mrs Prophet'.

[13] This interpretation of the vocalization is supported by J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges*, 2nd edn., OTL (London: SCM Press, 1987), 64. Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary*

imply that this is a 'high place', a type of outdoor shrine that later orthodoxy would condemn as idolatrous.[14] But for the moment, Deborah's habitual location at a shrine reinforces the religious authority that is implied in her description as a prophetess.[15] Her authority is clearly recognized, both by the Israelites, who go to her with a request for help (Judg. 4.5), and by Barak, who obeys the summons that she sends him (Judg. 4.6).

However, a comparison with Deborah's counterpart Sisera, the commander of the enemy forces, reveals an interesting facet of Deborah's portrayal. Deborah's location under her palm tree is static, as implied by the use of the verb יָשַׁב [*yāšab*] to describe her sitting there (Judg. 4.5). The Israelites come to her; she sends to summon Barak. This contrasts with Sisera: although the same verb יָשַׁב [*yāšab*] is used to describe him as located at Harosheth of the Nations (Judg. 4.2), he nevertheless has his 900 chariots, which enable swift and ubiquitous travel throughout the regions that he is dominating and oppressing. In terms of the gender roles portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, this is a classic male–female divide: men are the ones who go out and about, whereas women are those who stay at home, whose independent mobility is limited, and whose venturing away from their habitual realms can cause serious trouble for them and for others (e.g. Gen. 34; Prov. 7). The paradigm is particularly marked in the context of military action, when men go out to fight, but the women stay at home—a scenario used to great effect at the end of the song of Deborah in Judges 5.

Deborah initially attempts to fulfil her duty of deliverance within this paradigm; she does not go herself to rally troops for a battle against Sisera, but from her static position under the palm tree she summons Barak and instructs him to rally the troops, in keeping with the normal (gendered) expectations surrounding the conduct of war. But Barak refuses to go unless she goes too (Judg. 4.8). This is a significant turning point, with important implications. Deborah readily agrees to accompany Barak (Judg. 4.9)—no longer will she remain static and immobile under her palm tree, but she will actively *go*[16]—and the startling nature of this idea as it relates to her is indicated by its occurrence four times in two verses: if you go, if you don't go, I certainly will go, and she went. But Barak pays a price for her company: by refusing to be the man that he should have been, he forfeits the glory of overcoming Sisera, who will instead be *sold* (יִמְכֹּר, [*yimkōr*]) into the hand of a

(Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 183, suggests that the vocalization might indicate a tree other than a palm tree, but Klaas Spronk, 'Deborah, a Prophetess: The Meaning and Background of Judges 4:4–5', in Johannes Cornelis de Moor (ed.), *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as a Historical Person, Literary Character and Anonymous Artist*, OTS, 45 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), 232–42, argues that the 'shame' vocalization is the more likely interpretation (234).

[14] On the basis of various details in Judg. 4.4–5, including the polemical vocalization of תֹּמֶר [*tōmer*], Spronk, 'Deborah, a Prophetess', argues that the palm tree marks a place originally connected with a Baal cult that may well have included necromancy, and that 'Deborah' was the name of the venerated ancestral spirit who could be contacted there (234–7).

[15] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AB, 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 95, suggests that the tree named after Deborah implies the setting where she was responsible for making oracular enquiries of the Lord.

[16] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 274, makes a similar point.

woman (Judg. 4.9).[17] As a leader and prophetess, Deborah is doing most of the things that are usually associated with men, except to fight and lead the troops. But when she calls the man to do this as his part he refuses, and so even in this most masculine area a woman is to take over. This is the ultimate role reversal, and a stinging comment on the state into which the so-called '*sons* of Israel' (Judg. 4.3) have got themselves.

Despite the expectations raised by this exchange between Deborah and Barak, Deborah does not actually overturn the male–female paradigm to the extent of fighting in the army; nonetheless, she is (literally) a commanding presence on the site of muster. The Hebrew of Judg. 4.9 emphasizes that *she* got up and *she* went, with Barak, to Kadesh; both verbs are in the feminine singular, which stands out because it occurs so infrequently. There, Barak drafts 10,000 men, and takes them up Mount Tabor to assemble for battle (Judg. 4.10);[18] and again, Deborah goes with them. Although Barak now seems to be doing his manly military duty—the same Hebrew verb for mustering troops is used of Sisera in verse 13—the Hebrew in 4.10 juxtaposes the 10,000 men who go up under Barak's command[19] and the single woman who goes up with him, implying that the former would be no use without the latter.

Sisera is told that Barak (not Deborah) has gone up onto Mount Tabor (Judg. 4.12), thus emphasizing that war is men's business. His response is to assemble his own troops—including all nine hundred of his iron chariots—at the Wadi Kishon (Judg. 4.13), just as Deborah had earlier predicted would happen (Judg. 4.7). Once both armies are in position the prophetess makes her final commanding contribution to the battle: invoking the name of the Lord twice in close succession, she urges Barak forward (Judg. 4.14). From now on it really is up to the men. This time Barak does not hesitate, and in response to Deborah's urging, he charges down Mount Tabor with the 10,000 men on his heels. But neither he nor Sisera comes out of the battle particularly well. Sisera is disgraced immediately: the Lord forces his chariots and army into such disarray that Sisera abandons his chariot and flees 'on foot' (Judg. 4.15), in a way that is quite unworthy of a king's general.[20] He thus reveals himself as a coward and a bully who is fine when he has superior weaponry but who is completely lost when it comes to hand-to-hand engagement. Barak, now fired with zeal, pursues the chariotry and the army back to their base, and all of Sisera's army is killed—'not a single one was left', says the text (Judg. 4.16).

Barak's humiliation is less immediate than Sisera's. Indeed, for all Deborah's brave, womanly, prophetic speech about a woman getting the glory, it is the mouth of Barak's masculine, phallic sword that has apparently had the last word (Judg. 4.15, 16).[21] But the next scene grabs the reader's attention with the

[17] Compare Deborah's two declarations to Barak elsewhere in the narrative, that God would *give* (נָתַן, *nātan*) Sisera into *Barak*'s hand (Judg. 4.7, 14).

[18] Taking the verb עָלָה [*ālâ*] in this verse to refer to climbing the slope rather than as a metaphorical or idiomatic ascent of some kind.

[19] For this interpretation of the Hebrew בְּרַגְלָיו [*b*^{e}*raglāyw*], see Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 190.

[20] Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 120, calls Sisera's dismount from the chariot 'the dishonorable act par excellence', because in dismounting he relinquishes the symbol of his superiority and thus the superiority itself.

[21] The Hebrew idiom speaks of men falling 'to the mouth of the sword (לְפִי־חָרֶב, [*l*^{e}*pî-ḥereb*])'.

word 'Sisera'. Barak thought he had killed everyone, but all of his frantic 'sword-speech' has proved powerless to reverse the effect of his earlier speech of hesitation. He pursued all those chariots for nothing, because he did not realize that Sisera had already got away, and is now approaching the tent of an ally (Judg. 4.17).[22] But once again, the disruption of gender paradigms will mean that Sisera gets more than he bargained for.

Jael, the woman in the tent, is, like Deborah, an initiator. Although she is shown in a tent, that is, at home, she is not confined to it; rather, she comes outside, as women go out to greet a conqueror,[23] and beckons Sisera in, telling him not to be afraid (Judg. 4.18). Once again a woman is giving orders to a man, and once again the man obeys, putting himself under the woman's control. She makes him comfortable and fulfils his request for refreshment, presenting herself as the archetypal female nurturer by covering him with a blanket of some sort and giving him milk to drink (Judg. 4.19).[24] Emboldened, he tells her to watch at the tent door and to deny his presence inside should any man come asking for him. However, Sisera is now in Jael's domain, under her control, and she has reduced him to the level of a child by seizing the initiative with her acts of maternal nurturing.[25] There is indeed, as he has commanded her to say, no *man* in the tent.[26] And so, instead of going to the tent door and standing guard there, Jael picks up the tent-peg and hammer, creeps over to Sisera, and while he is sleeping, pins him to the ground with it through the head.[27] The nurturer has become the warrior, and the female the male; penetration, in both love and war, is what men do, but here a woman has done it, and this male has been definitively feminized by the penetration of his head, symbolic site of the ability to speak and command and therefore of what identifies him as male to the outside world.[28]

[22] Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 91–102, argues that Sisera fled to Jael's tent because, based on its location and on Jael's identity as a Kenite woman, he perceived it as a sacred space, that is, as a literal sanctuary, in which he would be safe.

[23] Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 79, lists various women in the book of Judges who go outside—Jephthah's daughter (11.34), the Levite's concubine (19.25), the women of Shiloh (21.21–3)—and the consequences of their action. She comments, '[I]n Judges, the act of a woman going outside carries great import.' This is certainly true of Jael, whose going out (unlike that of the other women listed by Schneider, but like Deborah's going out mentioned earlier) results in the final defeat of the Canaanite enemy via the death of their commander.

[24] Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 213; ead., *Murder and Difference*, 121.

[25] Freema Gottlieb, 'Three Mothers', *Judaism*, 30 (1981), 194–203 (200); Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 121.

[26] Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, 'Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5', *JAAR*, 58 (1990), 389–411 (393).

[27] The precise location of the wound inflicted on Sisera by Jael is unclear. The Hebrew word used, רַקָּה [*raqqâ*], is traditionally translated 'temple', but on the basis of its use in Song of Songs (the only other place where it appears in the Hebrew Bible), Marc Rozelaar, 'An Unrecognized Part of the Human Anatomy', *Judaism*, 37 (1988), 97–101, argues that it should be translated as 'open mouth' or 'oral cavity'.

[28] For the head as an embodiment of maleness, see Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 'Introduction: The Spectacle of the Female Head', in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (eds.), *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995), 1–13 (1). If Sisera is indeed to be thought of as being pierced

At this moment, Barak comes panting along in pursuit of Sisera. He has realized that Sisera has escaped, and is trying to track him down, in order to save face. Once again, Jael goes out to meet the soldier, the woman going out to meet the victor, and in direct contradiction of the dead Sisera's instructions, she invites Barak to come and see the man he is looking for, who is now well and truly a no-man; and as Barak sees Sisera, fallen, dead, the tent-peg in his head, he knows that Deborah's prophecy was true and that he has forfeited the glory of destroying the enemy commander to a woman.

b. Gender roles in Judges 5

The prose version of the tale, then, is a narrative of reversals and inversions, of assertive, proactive, vociferous, commanding women and reactive, taciturn, obedient men, in other words, of masculinized women and feminized men. It is told at the expense of both Barak and Sisera, satirizing the men of both Israel and Canaan, but it praises Deborah and Jael.[29] However, there is a somewhat different slant on the gender issues in the poetic version of the narrative in chapter 5, which is presented as the song sung by Deborah and Barak in the light of the victory over Sisera. In the song, Deborah is mentioned four times, and Barak three; none of these mentions show Barak in a negative light, although it is true that he always appears alongside Deborah in a secondary position to her.[30] In Judg. 5.1 he joins in with the song that she is said to sing, and the feminine singular verb form at the start of the verse (וַתָּשַׁר [*wattāšar*]) indicates that the song is indisputably hers rather than his. Then in Judg. 5.12, Deborah is urged to awake and sing, and Barak is urged to capture his captives. This looks like a traditional division of labour with the woman singing and the man fighting; but Deborah's singing comes before Barak's fighting, implying that either the song is her prophetic speech giving him his orders, or indeed that she is the one mustering the troops to enable him to fight.[31] Finally, in 5.15 Deborah and Barak are both mentioned as those to whom the tribe of Issachar is faithful; but Deborah is mentioned first with the chiefs of Issachar, and then Barak appears with the rank and file.

Deborah herself is referred to as a 'mother in Israel' (5.7), a phrase which can be understood in terms of her role as protectress of the people in organizing armed resistance to Sisera, since nothing is said anywhere about her having any children,

through the mouth rather than the temple, the symbolism of the act becomes particularly ironic in view of the association between maleness and speaking and commanding.

[29] Similarly, Bal, *Murder and Difference*, argues that the theme of honour and shame, linked to the opposition between the sexes, is central to the narrative (116), and she speaks of a war between the sexes paralleling the war between the two peoples (118).

[30] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, 31, also makes this point, and argues that according to Judges 5, 'it is Deborah's contribution to the war effort that is primary' (32).

[31] Boling's suggestion (*Judges*, 111) that this is a reference to women singing when warriors return with the spoil seems to pay too little regard to the placement of the verses before the description of the tribal muster.

and, indeed, it is hard to see what her own family situation would have to do with her role in protecting Israel.[32]

The most interesting part of the song from the gender perspective is the final verses, in which Jael kills Sisera, and then his mother is pictured waiting for him to return home (5.24–31). The picture of Jael combines the overtly maternal imagery of her giving Sisera milk (5.25) with the masculine image of the 'workmen's hammer' that she grasps with her right hand to smash Sisera's head (5.26). But the most striking image is, as many commentators have noted, in 5.27, where Sisera is described as falling 'between her legs' in slow motion, in an image that bespeaks at the same time birth, death, abortion, and rape.[33] The penetrated hero drops 'despoiled' (שָׁדוּד [*šādûd*], 5.27) to the floor between the feet of the woman who has turned the gender tables on him. The switch to Sisera's mother watching anxiously at the window (5.28) presents what appears to be a sharp contrast between the false nurturer Jael and this true nurturer. She fears that something shameful has detained her son, as indicated by the use of the verb בּוֹשֵׁשׁ [*bōšēš*] for his delaying.[34] But then she comforts herself—with the thought that the rape and pillage must be taking a long time (5.30). 'A womb or two for each head of hero,' she muses, with a suggestive use of body-part terminology: women are just 'wombs' or 'cunts',[35] faceless genitals that have no identity or purpose beyond servicing the baser instincts of the identifiable 'heads', who are the heroes (including, of course, her son).[36] This puts Jael's actions in a new light, underlining the

[32] For a discussion of the significance of this description, see J. Cheryl Exum, '"Mother in Israel": A Familiar Figure Reconsidered', in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 73–85 (73, 84–5); Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, 38–44.

[33] For a discussion of the imagery, see Susan Niditch, 'Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael', in Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 43–57; also the comments in Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 228. On the basis of this imagery and of the description of Jael's treatment of Sisera in 4.18–19, commentators since rabbinic times have argued that Sisera can be inferred to have slept with Jael before she kills him. See Gottlieb, 'Three Mothers', 198–9; Leila Leah Bronner, 'Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, FCB, 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 72–95 (88–91); Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 37–8. However, this seems to be an unnecessary and unrealistic supposition, either literally or narratively speaking; knowing that he is on the losing side, Sisera is going to be more concerned about securing himself from possible pursuers than he is about taking advantage of the first woman he comes across. He is also going to be exhausted from running so far on foot. On the origin of the imagery of violent eroticism in Judg. 5.24–7, Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer*, 59–61, argues that the picture of Jael is based on motifs associated with the Canaanite warrior goddess Anat, in whom violence and eroticism are combined.

[34] Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 283, argues that the word is not from the root בּוֹשׁ (*bôš*) which means 'be ashamed', but is from a separate, homophonic root. This possibility is also noted in *DCH*, ii.132, although the link with the 'shame' root is not discounted (131).

[35] Adrien Janis Bledstein, 'Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men who play God?', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, FCB, 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 34–54 (41).

[36] It is intriguing to note that two of the major LXX manuscripts translate away the crudity of 'a womb or two for each head of hero' by taking the term רֶחֶם [*raḥam*], 'womb', in the sense of רַחֲמִים [*raḥ^{a}mîm*], 'compassion'. This latter word is generally understood to be a derivative of the 'womb'-root, presumably because the womb or belly as the seat of maternity is also viewed as the source of the (maternal) emotion of compassion. Thus, in Codex Alexandrinus the phrase 'a womb or two for each head of hero' becomes φιλιάζων φίλοις εἰς κεφαλὴν δυνατόυ (*philiazōn philois eis kephalēn dunatou*), 'showing friendship to his friends, to each strong man's head', while Codex Vaticanus renders the

role reversal whereby the womb has smashed the head; in the brutal game of 'rape or be raped', Jael has asserted her identity in order to deprive Sisera of his, becoming the rapist so that he can now no longer be one.[37] The picture of Sisera's mother and her lack of identification with the 'wombs' that her beloved son is supposedly despoiling is a chilling one; as her position of powerlessness looking out of the window symbolizes, she is a woman trapped within an ideology that diminishes every woman, including herself, by depersonalizing them (note that she herself is not named).[38] And this makes it doubly chilling, for she may be projecting onto the enemy the fate that she fears will befall her and her maidservants if her son fails to return. The 'shame' of his delay can thus be seen as his inability to fulfil his manly duty to protect them from harm if enemy soldiers come in his absence. No wonder she is worried.

This version, then, unlike the prose version, is not primarily about Israelite shame, but about enemy shame. Its use of gendered imagery is not directed against the men who have failed to do their duty in the face of oppression, but against the enemy who was oppressing. However, both versions use manipulated depictions of gender to great effect in order to convey their message; and this leads on to the question of how these gendered depictions, particularly of Deborah, Barak, and Jael, compare with those that appear in the libretto of Handel's oratorio.

GENDER ROLES IN THE LIBRETTO OF *DEBORAH*

Humphreys' three-part libretto[39] is an adaptation of the story as found mainly in Judges 4, although with some touches from Judges 5. There are a number of liberties taken with the biblical story-line, not the least of which is the whole of Part II, in which Sisera, accompanied by an entourage consisting of priests of Baal, comes to visit the Israelites and tries unsuccessfully to persuade them to submit to

phrase οἰκτίρμων οἰκτιρήσει εἰς κεφαλὴν ἀνδρός [*oiktirmōn oiktirēsei eis kephalēn andros*], 'merciful, he will have pity on each man's head'. Although the vocabulary differs in each of the Greek versions, the underlying idea is the same, namely, that as a good commander Sisera is making sure that all his men get a fair share of the (inanimate) booty (the previous line reads in each case, 'Will they not find him dividing the spoil?', as compared with the MT's 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?'). This gives quite a different picture of Sisera—and of his mother—from the picture that is presented in the MT, since it completely eliminates the concept of sexual spoil from the victory scenario.

[37] For the idea of Sisera as a rapist, see Johanna W. H. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17–22; Ruth 3', in J. Cheryl Exum and Johanna W. H. Bos (eds.), *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*, *Semeia*, 42 (1988), 37–67 (56–7); Schneider, *Judges*, 96. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 46, 49, hints at the overtones of soldierly rape in the description of Sisera's killing by Jael (Judg. 5.24–7), but does not immediately associate the 'womb' terminology in 5.30 with rape, referring instead to 'sexual booty' and 'female slaves' (46).

[38] Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 206–8, speaks of Sisera's mother's powerlessness in more condemnatory terms, and links her powerlessness with her (culpable?) failure to 'know' what has happened to her son despite her supposed wisdom that is evoked in Judg. 5.29. For Bal, the portrayal of Sisera's mother is a critique of mothers who support an ideology that condemns daughters.

[39] *Deborah. An Oratorio or Sacred Drama. As it is Perform'd at the King's Theatre in the Hay-Market. The Musick Compos'd by Mr. Handel. The Words by Mr. Humphreys* (London: John Watts, 1733).

him and change their religion rather than to fight.[40] As is evident from the discussion above, nothing like this appears anywhere in the biblical accounts of Deborah. In line with earlier comparisons of Deborah to Protestant queens fighting the effects and influence of Catholicism, it is not hard to see in this addition an attack on Catholicism as the despotic, foreign other, represented by the vain idolatrous worship of the Baal priests and the harsh attitude of their leader Sisera. However, Parts I and III of the libretto are much closer to the biblical text, and as such they also contain the material that is most relevant for present purposes, so they will form the focus of most of the discussion. They contain a number of significant alterations to the biblical story, many of which show the manipulation of gender ideology for the purpose of giving a positive reading of the story of Deborah. The main actors in the libretto, as in the biblical story, are Deborah, Barak, and Jael, and so they will be discussed in turn, beginning with Barak.

a. Barak

The libretto's presentation of Barak is perhaps its most important difference from the biblical text. In the libretto Barak is transformed from a weak and hesitant character to a veritable hero burning with patriotic zeal.[41] His manly character is anticipated by the opening chorus in Part I, in which the Israelites pray for a leader 'Whose Name, with Honour, we may boast' (I.1, p. 3), and following their prayer, Deborah tells Barak that he is the one chosen by Heaven to save the Israelites. Barak's initial response is one of amazement because he is unworthy of the honour, and in a duet with Deborah he expresses his bewilderment as she urges him to trust in God for the requisite help:

[40] The same motif appears in Charles Cleeve's so-called paraphrase of the Song of Deborah, published in 1685, which is in fact more of an elaboration and expansion than a paraphrase. See Charles Cleeve, *The Songs of Moses and Deborah Paraphras'd. With Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1685), 40–1.

[41] The portrayal of Barak is surprisingly varied in contemporary sources, and is by no means universally positive. Some writers do give him an heroic profile; for example, Robert Burton, *Female Excellency: or, the Ladies Glory*, 3rd edn. (London, 1728), shows Barak killing Jabin the Canaanite king and Sisera's superior, thereby freeing Israel from bondage (18), and then describes Barak as Israel's 'renowned Head' (20). Similarly, Richard Blackmore, *A Paraphrase on the Book of Job: As likewise on the Songs of Moses, Deborah, David, on Six Select Psalms, some Chapters of Isaiah, and the Third Chapter of Habakkuk*, 2nd rev. edn. (London, 1716), styles Barak as a 'valiant Chief/Whose conqu'ring Arms have brought Relief/To Israel in our vast Distress,/And made our haughty Foes their Impotence confess' (231–2). Cleeve, *The Songs of Moses and Deborah*, calls Barak 'The Deity's great Lieutenant' (15) and 'Abinoam's God-like son' (29). However, other writers show him less sympathetically. The anonymous *Deborah: A Sacred Ode* (London, 1705) shows Israel trembling, commanderless, at the sight of the enemy: 'Barak their Captain comes not nigh,/Th'affrighted Host makes haste to fly;/'Till Deborah their Judge and Prophetess/Arose to their Deliverance,/And to brave Danger did advance' (7–8). Wesley, *The Old Testament in Verse*, mentions Barak ('*Abin'am*'s Son') in his version of Judges 4, although without commenting on his character or conduct in the battle (i.178), and completely omits him from the version of Judges 5, despite entitling the latter 'The Song of Deborah and Barak' (i.180–1). Wesley also prints Judg. 4.21–2 with an illustration of Jael showing Barak the dead Sisera in her tent (i.179), and from the tone of his version of Judg. 4 it seems unlikely that this is meant to reflect well on Barak. The portrayal of Barak in Humphreys' libretto must therefore be viewed as a deliberate choice from the range of interpretative options that was current at the time, rather than merely a reflection of contemporary convention.

Barak Where would thy Ardours raise me!
How shall I soar to Fame!
Will then my conduct praise me,
And thus adorn my Name!
Deborah Trust in the God that fires thee,
To vindicate our Laws;
Act now, as he inspires thee,
Thou shalt revive our Cause. (I.1. p. 4)

The musical setting of the duet gives a good sense of Barak's hesitancy. He and Deborah each sing their respective parts, and then the two characters enter a dialogue in which Barak poses questions that Deborah then answers: 'Where would thy Ardours raise me!' 'Trust in the God that fires thee.' 'Where?' 'Trust in the God!' How?' 'As he inspires thee!' 'Will then my conduct praise me?' 'Thou shalt revive our cause!' As the duet progresses, the question-and-answer style gives way to the two characters singing their lines together in harmony, with Barak still questioning, 'How shall I soar to fame?' and Deborah repeatedly assuring him, 'Thou shalt revive our Cause.' The voice of Barak's doubt is thus muffled and prevailed over by that of Deborah, and at the end of the duet her urging is reinforced by the chorus, who sing:

Forbear thy doubts! to Arms! away!
Thy God commands, do thou obey. (I.1, p. 4)

Faced with such overwhelming assurances and encouragement, Barak allows his modest disbelief at being chosen for such an important task to give way to humble acceptance of the honour, but then asks Deborah as a prophetess to request divine aid and exhorts Judah to unite in the same process. This request replaces Barak's 'If you will go with me, I will go, but not if you don't' speech in Judg. 4.8–9, so that instead of appearing hesitant and cowardly he appears appropriately cautious and reverent.[42] The chorus agree that God hears the voice of prayer, and so Deborah duly invokes divine aid (I.1, p. 5), seconded by the chorus. Deborah then tells the 'Sons of *Israel*' that God has heard their prayer and that Sisera will die ignobly by the hand of a woman. This means that the saying about Sisera's death at the hand of a woman is presented as Deborah's prophetic response to the Israelites' prayer for aid, assuring them of their oppressor's ignominious demise, rather than as a personal rebuke to Barak for his cowardice.[43] It therefore loses the negative

[42] A similar rehabilitation is undertaken by the LXX. In both the A (Alexandrinus) and B (Vaticanus) versions, Barak excuses his desire to have Deborah with him by the plea that he does not know on what day the Lord will send an angel to go with him (Judg. 4.8), which presumably means that he is expecting Deborah the prophetess to be able to tell him. Simon Patrick, *A Commentary upon the Historical Books of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, 3rd edn. (London, 1727), draws attention to the LXX addition to Judg. 4.8, after making his own comment on Barak's desire for Deborah's presence: 'He had great Reason, he thought for it; because he might want her Advice in doubtful Matters, and her Authority also, both to gather Soldiers, and to keep them together in good Order, and to inspire them with Courage' (106).

[43] Interestingly, despite Patrick's apparent willingness to excuse Barak's hesitancy, as noted above, he nevertheless understands the saying about Sisera's death as 'a Small Punishment of his [i.e. Barak's] Backwardness to do as he was bidden' (*Historical Books II*, 106). Similarly, Edward Taswell in the introduction to his paraphrase of the Song of Deborah regards Deborah's words to Barak as 'a

connotations that it has in Judg. 4.8–9, and becomes instead God's assurance of decisive salvation for his chosen people.

Barak's response to this proclamation is to accept it with rather pompous chivalry:

> To whomsoe'er his Fate the Boaster owes,
> My Breast no Pangs of pining Envy knows.
> Thy lovely Sex, O *Deborah*! may claim
> Equal Prerogative with Man in Fame:
> And none, but Savage Breasts alone,
> Their charming Merit can disown. (I.1, pp. 5–6)

Barak thus eliminates any residual shame that might attach to his not doing the deed himself, by surrendering the responsibility to someone else rather than having it taken away from him, and by allowing women the right to have the same amount of fame as men. To stress the point, he then sings an air:

> How lovely is the blooming Fair
> Whose Beauty Virtue's Laws refine!
> She well may claim our softest Care,
> For sure she almost seems divine. (I.1, p. 6)

The recitative and air, with their references to women as lovely, charming, fair, and beautiful, exhibit stereotypical idealizing concepts of women as the next best thing to goddesses, and one wonders precisely who owns the savage breasts who would deny women's 'charming Merit' if not men. One wonders also whose is the softest care that the beautiful virtuous woman may claim if not men's.

Barak, then, is presented as a capable, appropriately pious male who knows what his duty is and is ready to do it; in other words, right from the start of the libretto he is being re-masculinized in comparison with his presentation in the biblical text. This process is given an extra boost by introducing Barak's father Abinoam into the plot. After Barak's air about women being entitled to equal fame with men, and an exchange between Deborah and Jael, Abinoam enters and urges Barak to do his manly duty in battle so that he will be a son for Abinoam to boast of. He then instructs Barak on how to conduct himself on the battlefield:

> Awake the Ardour of thy Breast,
> For Victory, or Death, prepare;
> Let all thy Virtue shine confess'd
> And leave the rest to Heaven's Care:
> Should Conquest crown thee in the Field,
> Be humble; or if Death's thy Doom,
> Thy Life with Resignation yield,
> And Crowds will envy thee thy Tomb. (I.3, p. 8)

Punishment for his Diffidence' (*Miscellanea Sacra, Consisting of Three Divine Poems; viz. The Song of Deborah and Barak, The Lamentation of David over Saul and Jonathan, The Prayer of Solomon at the Dedication of the Temple* [London, 1718], 2).

Barak responds emphatically to these instructions with an air of his own, the sentiments of which answer to those of Abinoam's air and assure Abinoam that Barak will fight bravely without fearing death, just as his father adjures him:

> All Dangers disdaining,
> For Battle I glow:
> Our Glory maintaining[44]
> I'll rush on the Foe.
> Tho' Death all around me,
> Stalks dreadfully pale,
> No Fear shall confound me,
> My Cause will prevail. (I.3, p. 8)

This exchange between Abinoam and Barak is an important element in the re-masculinization process, because it shows Barak as the product of a masculine line from which he has learnt the true meaning of virtue, courage, and honour, and to which he must live up. He is not dependent upon women to back him up in(to) doing what he does not really know how to do. Rather, he is preserving the male traditions of honour that are alive and well in Israel and are handed down from father to son, and despite his concession of women's right to equal fame with men he is not soft—he knows how to be a real man, because he has learnt it from another real man. Indeed, his air implies that he is positively straining at the leash to get onto the battlefield.[45]

Abinoam, for his part, can be seen as the antithesis to Sisera's mother in the biblical text (she does not appear in the libretto), in that instead of encouraging his son to base acts of inhumanity and greed, as she by implication does hers, Abinoam inspires his son to true manly deeds.[46] Indeed, Abinoam's function in the plot is purely to ensure and to emphasize that Barak behaves in accordance with the ideal of male heroic virtue that would have existed in contemporary upper-class circles; Abinoam never interacts with any of the other characters

[44] The autograph score, in Handel's writing, at this point reads 'Thy glory maintaining'. This makes Barak's main concern his family honour and Abinoam's reputation rather than the national, communal honour that is indicated by the libretto's 'Our Glory'.

[45] By contrast with this picture, Burton, *Female Excellency*, shows Barak and his army being terrified by the enemy and needing Deborah's encouragement to enter battle, although once the fighting has begun they fight 'with much Valour' (17).

[46] Of course, the introduction of Abinoam as a character in the libretto would also have been influenced by the array of vocal talent that was available when *Deborah* was written. The principal singers in Handel's opera company at the time were the sopranos Strada and Gismondi, the contralto Bertolli, the castrato Senesino, and the bass Montagnana, a range of voices that corresponds exactly to those required for the major roles in *Deborah*. In the first performances, Strada took the role of Deborah, Gismondi (probably) that of Jael, Senesino that of Barak, Bertolli that of Sisera, and Montagnana sang Abinoam (Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 236). The convention of using higher voices to represent young, virile male characters while bass voices represented older men who functioned in advisory and hortatory roles meant that a part reflecting that character type was needed for Montagnana; Abinoam is the obvious answer to the problem, something which is overlooked by Dean when he laments Humphreys' failure to introduce Sisera's mother as a character (*Dramatic Oratorios*, 225). Nonetheless, practicalities apart, there is no doubt that the picture of the warrior's aged father yearning for his son to acquit himself honourably in the battle contributes significantly to the rehabilitation of Barak and the portrait of him as a commander fired up with righteous patriotic fervour.

except Barak, and all of Abinoam's speech is focused on the subject of Barak's conduct on the battlefield.

This characterization of Barak as the brave and honourable commander continues throughout the libretto, so that when in Part III after the battle Jael enters and announces that Sisera is dead (III.3, p. 18), the news is much less dangerous to Barak's reputation than it was in the biblical text. Its potential for damage is reduced still further by making Barak say that he knows what has happened and that Jael should tell the assembled company about it (III.3, pp. 18–19). This gives Barak control over the situation, in that, just as he did in his response to Deborah's prophecy about Sisera's death at a woman's hand, Barak is granting Jael the right to fame, rather than having her take it away from him. Also, Barak's public acknowledgement that Jael has killed Sisera indicates that this is not a shameful matter for him, because he is willing to let everyone know what has happened. But perhaps most importantly, just prior to Jael's announcement of Sisera's death, Abinoam has congratulated Barak for bravery on the battlefield, and sung an air expressing pride and joy in his son (III.2, pp. 17–18). Hence, Barak's honour has already been established, and this, taken together with his willing acknowledgement of Jael's actions, means that Barak can rejoice in Sisera's death along with everyone else, because his personal honour does not depend upon it.

b. Jael

Barak's presentation in the libretto, then, grants him the manly honour of which he is deprived by the Hebrew Bible. But he is not the only character to receive a 'gender makeover'; a similarly cosmetic process is undergone by Jael. Instead of appearing almost out of nowhere at the end of the story and committing a premeditated act of virtual treachery in killing Sisera, Jael is introduced near the beginning of the libretto, well before the battle, as a woman who is trapped by the proximity of war,[47] and is just looking for a peaceful place to live and mind her own business. As she explains, in her opening recitative, to Deborah:

> O *Deborah*! where-e'er I turn my Eyes,
> Grim Scenes of War in all their Horrors rise.
> O grant me, in my green Retreat,
> Where Solitude has fix'd her Seat,
> To live in Peace, sequester'd far
> From dire Alarms and sanguine War. (I.2, p. 6)

Jael's desire for peace and solitude reflects an ideology of domesticity that was prevalent among the middle and upper classes, whereby women were to keep to themselves and not seek honour or fame outside the house. In the words of George (later 1st Baron) Lyttelton, whose poem 'Advice to a Lady' was published in 1733, women should

[47] Although in Judg. 4 Jael does not appear until after Barak has fought and routed Sisera's troops, in Judg. 5 she comes in somewhat earlier, when before Sisera's forces are routed caravans are said to cease and travellers keep to the by-ways in the days of Shamgar and Jael (5.6). That may therefore be the pattern that Humphreys is following here.

> Seek to be good, but aim not to be Great,
> A Woman's noblest Station is Retreat;
> Her fairest Virtues fly from publick Sight,
> Domestick Worth, that shuns too strong a Light.
> To rougher Man Ambition's Task resign;
> 'Tis ours in Senates or in Courts to shine.[48]

Four years earlier, the same sentiments had appeared in the newly published translation from French of the Marchioness de Lambert's advice to her daughter:

> Publick Virtures are not the portion of Women but peaceable and private: Fame troubles her head not with us . . . . Chuse solitude . . . Solitude [. . .] assures Tranquillity, and directs to Wisdom . . . Fly the great World; there is no certainty to be found in it.[49]

Hence, in her desire for a quiet life Jael is presented as a well-bred eighteenth-century woman desperately trying to keep to the principles she believes in. Despite the subsequent course of events, she certainly has no ambition for fame in battle. Nothing is said about her husband, Heber the Kenite, who is described in Judg. 4.17 as an ally of Jabin the Canaanite king for whom Sisera is fighting. This omission has two effects. First, it removes the taint of treachery from her in that when she kills Sisera she is not killing someone who is supposed to be her (husband's) ally. Second, it makes her appear considerably more vulnerable as a lone woman just trying to find a peaceful place to camp, and gives an excellent motive for her subsequent act of killing Sisera, namely, preserving her chastity. Chastity was regarded as the quintessential feminine virtue, to be preserved at all costs, and not simply in physical terms.[50] Loss of one's reputation could be as socially damaging as any physical breach of chastity, and a single woman found alone with a sleeping man would certainly be risking her reputation. Hence, Jael's action is the way out of an impossible bind for her, whereby she violates one taboo but preserves the more important one for her as a woman, namely, that of her (reputation for) chastity. This is also a light in which to read Deborah's response to Jael's complaint about the proximity of war. Deborah tells Jael:

> Thy Virtue, ere the close of Day,
> Shall shine with such a bright Display,
> That thou shalt be, by all, confess'd
> Thy Sex's Pride divinely bless'd. (I.2, p. 6)

Those who know the biblical story immediately think that Deborah is referring to Jael's killing of Sisera, and in a way she is. But the 'Virtue' can also be interpreted as Jael's desire to preserve her chastity. In addition, eliminating Sisera will enable peace to ensue, so that Jael can continue to live her retiring life untroubled by the

[48] George Lyttelton, Lord Lyttelton, *Advice to a Lady* (London, 1733), 6.

[49] Anne Thérèse de Marguenat de Courcelles, Marquise de Lambert, *Advice from a Mother to her Son and Daughter* (London, 1729), 88, 121, 122–3.

[50] Conduct books of the period waxed lyrical about the importance of women's chastity and how to preserve it. See, for example, John Essex, *The Young Ladies Conduct: or, Rules for Education, Under several Heads; with Instructions upon Dress, both before and after Marriage. And Advice to Young Wives* (London, 1722), 33–45.

exigencies of war. Hence, even though the killing is an act that is quite out of character for a well-bred woman, it can be understood as Jael's way of preserving her female virtue from severe and possibly permanent damage.

The killing itself is narrated by Jael in recitative in III.3 (p. 19), and it is no surprise to find that in her description its potentially negative aspects are minimized. In the first instance, it is 'Vengeance divine' that leads Sisera to Jael's tent, and when he gets there he begs her to hide him. There is no hint that she stood outside the tent and invited him in as she does in the biblical text, so she cannot be accused of treachery. Then she gives him a drink to relieve his thirst, and he sinks down to rest, but she does not cover him with a blanket or make any other comforting moves towards him that might be construed as lulling him into a false sense of security. Thus far, she has been shown as the passive woman who is simply swept along by a situation that is out of her control. But then the idea to kill him bursts into her mind as she realizes that Heaven has given her an opportunity to rid the Israelites of their enemy, and so she grabs a nail and mallet and breaks his head with it. The opportunity for the killing is thus shown as divinely engineered, and the killing itself as a spontaneous response to the opportunity, rather than the result of a calculated deception or an unseemly grasping for fame.[51] Jael follows her account with an air in which she identifies herself with the Israelites by declaring, 'Tyrant, now no more *we* dread thee' (italics added), and de-emphasizes her own role in Sisera's demise with the words, 'Justice to thy Ruin led thee' (III.3, p. 19), thus completing the picture of a truly virtuous and modest woman who is motivated to an extraordinary act not by personal ambition or cruelty but by divine impulse.

c. Deborah

Deborah is the character in the libretto who at first sight has most in common with her biblical counterpart. In both cases she is a respected figure of authority who has achieved her position by dint of being endowed with prophetic power from God; so her unusual status as a woman in an important role of leadership is acceptable because it derives from the divine will. However, as before there are subtle differences between the biblical versions and the libretto. The first is that, unlike the biblical text, the libretto gives no hint of sarcasm or rebuke in Deborah's

[51] This type of defence of Jael appears in several other contemporary sources. Cleeve, *The Songs of Moses and Deborah*, shows Sisera pushing his way into Jael's tent uninvited (45), and when he falls asleep Jael moves to kill him, thinking of the women he has raped and widowed; she hesitates because the deed is so unbecoming, but is finally moved to act by 'noble, manly anger' (48) over the havoc that Sisera has wrought in Israel (46–9). Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible, Vol. I*, 4th edn. (Edinburgh, 1700), comments on Judg. 4.21 that Jael was incited to kill Sisera by the circumstances which both conspired against him and gave her the opportunity for the deed, but primarily by a divine impulse. Patrick, *Historical Books II*, in his discussion of Judg. 4.18 and 4.21, says that when Jael invites Sisera into her tent it is not certain that she intends to do what she subsequently does (107), and that she was moved by divine power to carry out the deed in fulfilment of Deborah's prophecy, so if God ordained it she cannot be accused of it as a crime (108). This latter idea is repeated in Patrick's comment on Judg. 5.27, where he again dismisses moral objections to Jael's deed, on the ground that Jael was moved to act by the same spirit as inspired Deborah and Barak (114).

dealings with Barak; she deals with him as with an equal, to the extent that they sing two duets together (duets in operatic convention being generally reserved for the principal male–female couple). This is of course also dependent upon Barak's own characterization as a brave military hero rather than as a timorous coward.[52] Secondly, throughout the libretto, the Israelites, who form the chorus, are characterized positively as the devout victims of wicked external oppression; hence, Deborah's presence cannot be construed as a rebuke to them, or as an indication of a failure in male civic or religious leadership.[53] Indeed, far from being the only religious official in sight, as she is in the book of Judges, in the libretto Deborah is surrounded by a chorus of Israelite priests, who are only too pleased to assert their God's power. Her presence therefore does not indicate any lack on the part of the Israelites, but can be construed as a positive benefit for them and an indication of divine favour.

The most important difference between Deborah in the biblical text and in the libretto is that in the biblical narrative, particularly in Judges 4, she is presented as an individual in her own right, whereas in the libretto she constantly identifies herself with the people. In her first duet with Barak she tells him,

> Trust in the God that fires thee,
> To vindicate *our Laws*;
> Act now, as he inspires, thee,
> Thou shalt revive *our Cause*. (I.1, p. 4; italics added)

In her invocation of the Almighty on Barak's behalf, she prays, 'Thy Succours to *our Cries* accord!' (I.1, p. 5, italics added). And as the Israelites prepare for battle after a visit from Sisera's herald, she says, 'Let him approach pacifick, or in Rage;/ *We* in the Cause of Liberty engage' (I.5, p. 9, italics added). This constant identification with the people emphasizes that the fulfilment of her divine calling is not in self-aggrandisement but in service to them. Of course, those who are hostile to her will not see it in this way, as is clear at the beginning of Part II, when Sisera comes to parley with the Israelites[54] and accuses Deborah of fomenting rebellion:

[52] The idea of Deborah and Barak duetting may have been derived from Judg. 5, where Deborah and Barak are said to sing together (Judg. 5.1). The two also sing a duet in Maurice Greene's 1732 setting of Judg. 5 (*The Song of Deborah and Barak: An Oratorio,* ed. Frank Dawes (London: Schott, 1956).

[53] Wesley, *The Old Testament in Verse*, is unusual in that his treatment of the narrative does portray Deborah's rise as filling the gap left by the men: 'The Sex that boast themselves for Empire made,/Had dropp'd the Sword, the Sov'reign Pow'r betray'd:/Undaunted Deborah reclaims their Right' (i.178).

[54] As observed above (note 40), this motif appears in Cleeve, *The Songs of Moses and Deborah Paraphras'd*, 40–1. The comparison between Cleeve's poem and Humphreys' libretto is suggestive. Cleeve shows a single verbal confrontation between the enemy sides, which is led by Sisera, who says to the Israelites:

> Ye Slaves, attend the Terms that mighty Jabin gives;
> And from our Hands receive your forfeit Lives . . . .
> Go Home fond Men, beneath the Palm-tree's Shade,
> There attend your War-like Maid:
> There sit, and listen to those Laws,
> That We, your gracious Conquerors, will impose.

> That here rebellious Arms I see,
> Proud *Deborah*, proceeds from thee!
> But wouldst thou, yet, thy vain Ambition cease,
> Whilst our affronted Mercy offers Peace,
> Bow down submissive, ere th'impending Blow
> Lays thee and all thy lost Associates low. (II.1, p. 10)

Sisera thus acknowledges Deborah's authoritative position, but he misreads it as 'Pride' and 'vain Ambition', in other words, as usurping an unsuitable position for a woman who ought to be 'submissive', and thus destabilizing society by precipitating rebellion in others who are inspired by her example to get above themselves. However, the libretto shows that Deborah's so-called 'vain Ambition' is neither vain nor ambition; rather, she is expressing her prophetic vocation in the context of an identification with and concern for her oppressed people, in other words, as a true mother—an appropriately feminine role. Her reply to Sisera embodies this sense of vocation and identification, as she speaks on behalf of Israel's God and Israel's people:

> Go frown, Barbarian, where thou'rt feared!
> None, but *our God*, is here rever'd;
> *Our Breasts* his Inspiration warms,
> To vindicate *our Cause* by Arms:
> And, to thy Ruin, thou shalt know
> What 'tis to find that God thy Foe. (II.2, p. 11, italics added)

Deborah's vocation is also shaped by another specific ideology. Her various recitatives and airs invoke three cardinal values of her people's life that are threatened by Sisera's oppression: their laws ('Trust in the God that fires thee/ To vindicate our Laws'), their liberty ('We in the cause of Liberty engage'), and their religion ('None, but our God, is here rever'd). This is the classic eighteenth-century trilogy of values that is invoked time and again in contemporary literature as being threatened by Catholic rule, and for which Britons were prepared to fight

Barak responds to this by invoking Heaven, and then the armies join battle. However, in Humphreys' libretto, there are two verbal confrontations between the opposing sides. The first is towards the end of Part I, between the Israelites and Sisera's herald. The herald says to the Israelites:

> My Charge is to declare
> From *Sisera*, a Name renown'd in War,
> That he with Indignation knows,
> How you presume to be his Foes:
> Yet such Compassion in his Bosom reigns,
> That ere he galls ye with redoubled Chains,
> He condescends to offer these your Chiefs
> An Interview, that he may learn your Griefs;
> And the sad Waste of Humane Blood to save,
> Will grant you all that Slaves may dare to crave. (I.4, p. 9)

Barak responds to this by telling the herald that Judah is not afraid and is ready to fight. Sisera himself then comes to the Israelites at the beginning of Part II, and addresses Deborah as described in the main text above, to which she offers a response. It thus seems as if Humphreys' two confrontations, in which Barak responds to the herald's 'terms' and then Deborah responds to Sisera's words, reflect an elaboration of the motifs that are present in Cleeve's single confrontation in which Barak responds to Sisera's 'terms'.

tooth and nail. The presence of these values in Deborah's manifesto in the libretto, and their absence from the biblical text, is a clear indicator that in its specific formulation the libretto is addressing the religious and political concerns of Handel's and Humphreys' day.

This evidence of eighteenth-century concerns in the libretto's formulation indicates in turn that, although it is unwarranted to look for a thoroughgoing allegorical interpretation of the libretto, in the light of the libretto's dedication to Queen Caroline and the characterizations just examined, she is to be seen behind the picture of Deborah, and Barak represents George II. The fact that the libretto characters sing two duets with each other indicates that they are thought of as belonging together, and Deborah's gently commanding words together with Barak's persona as a man of action is a fair reflection of the respective characters of the royal couple. Just as Caroline was known for her political acuity, George was known for his love of all things military; he had served with distinction on the battlefield in 1708 during the War of Spanish Succession,[55] and would later become the last British monarch to lead his troops into battle at Dettingen in 1743.[56] Barak's admiring father Abinoam can also be seen as part of this schema, idealizing the notoriously troubled relationship between George I and George II, and giving additional weight to the picture of the Hanoverians as virtuous, stable, dedicated rulers.

CONCLUSION

In writing the libretto of *Deborah*, then, Samuel Humphreys was aiming to associate the Hanoverians (via Queen Caroline) with the defence of liberty and true religion in Britain, and one of the ways in which he achieved this was via a reworking of the gender models that appear in the biblical text. In Judges, the story of Deborah can be construed as a satirical attack on the waywardness of Israel and the failings of its men, just as much as an attack against the enemies of Israel. Both aspects are achieved by inverting the normal gender paradigm of strong brave men protecting weak retiring women, so that strong brave women triumph over weak and cowardly men. In the libretto, however, the story is presented much more positively for Israel. The cause is righteous, and both the men and the women act bravely and appropriately in a united front, so that it is the enemy alone who is demonized. This reworking of gender models is part of the process whereby, as was the case with the libretto of *Esther*, the biblical narrative is turned into an instance of political propaganda that is intended to flatter the reigning Hanoverian monarchs and to assert their legitimate and beneficial rule over 'British Israel' as the upholders of the country's laws, true religion, and liberty.

[55] Charles Chenevix Trench, *George II* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 12–18.
[56] Trench, *George II*, 215–21.

3

Jezebel, Joash, and Jesus Christ

Aspects of Athalia

The second oratorio that Handel and Humphreys produced in 1733, and their third in total, continued the pattern of focusing on a strong female character as both *Esther* and *Deborah* had done, and like *Esther* it drew for its plot on an original treatment of the subject by Jean Racine. This time, however, its heroine was more of an anti-heroine, and the oratorio, *Athalia*, narrated her downfall rather than her triumph over adversity. The basic biblical story line behind the oratorio is that of Athaliah, a daughter of the wicked Israelite king Ahab, who is married to Jehoram, king of Judah.[1] When Jehoram dies, his and Athaliah's son Ahaziah succeeds to the throne of Judah, but is killed by the reformer Jehu, leaving the Judaean throne vacant. Athaliah seizes power in Judah by killing all of her dead son's children, as she thinks, but one of them, an infant named Joash, is saved from slaughter by Jehosheba, who is a sister of the dead king Ahaziah. Joash is hidden in the Temple for six years, during which period Athaliah reigns. In the seventh year Jehoiada the chief priest brings the army captains to the Temple, and shows them Joash. They anoint Joash and acclaim him king, and the noise alerts Athaliah, who comes running accusing them of treason. At Jehoiada's command the army captains seize Athaliah and take her outside the Temple to kill her. The people then go and destroy the idolatrous temple of the god Baal that Athaliah was supposedly patronizing, and kill its priest, and peace returns to the city.

Athalia was written to be performed during the week-long Oxford 'Act' or degree ceremony in July 1733,[2] an event for which the fledgling oratorio genre with its ceremonial-style choral elements was a natural choice of musical

[1] Although David and Solomon are said to have reigned over a single kingdom stretching 'from Dan to Beersheba' (1 Kgs. 5.5 [ET 4.25]), after Solomon's death the kingdom was divided into a larger northern kingdom called Israel and a smaller southern kingdom called Judah (see 1 Kgs. 12.1–19). The term 'Israelite' in this context is thus a specific term which refers to an inhabitant of the northern kingdom, rather than a generic term referring to someone from the Palestine area.

[2] The Act's modern (and much shorter) counterpart is the annual Encaenia, at which honorary degrees are conferred. See the entry for 'Encaenia' in Christopher Hibbert (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Oxford* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 129–30. For an account of the proceedings in 1733, which was the last old-style Act, see H. Diack Johnstone, 'Handel at Oxford in 1733', *Early Music*, 31 (2003), 248–60. The trip to Oxford may have been prompted by the offer to Handel of an honorary degree of doctor of music, although if such an offer was made Handel apparently refused it. See Johnstone, 250–2.

entertainment. But the choice of subject matter is rather more puzzling, as becomes clear when the narrative of Athaliah is viewed in the context of its eighteenth-century resonances. For modern audiences, both the biblical narrative and the oratorio built upon it are equally obscure, not to say irrelevant. However, in 1733 the story of Athaliah was a narrative with a recent political past. It was cited in 1657 by 'William Allen' (the pseudonym of Silius Titus) in his pamphlet 'Killing noe Murder', as justification for an assassination plot against Oliver Cromwell.[3] Some thirty years later it was cited by pamphleteers in the arguments both for and against allegiance to William and Mary in the immediate aftermath of the Glorious Revolution of 1688,[4] when the Catholic James II had been deposed in favour of his Protestant daughter and son-in-law; and it continued to be used by non-jurors[5] and Jacobites as justification for their ongoing loyalty to the deposed Stuart line of kings (represented in such interpretations by the Davidide Joash). Given these associations, and the fact that Oxford was known as a seat of High Church Tories and Jacobites, the Athaliah story looks like a strange choice of subject-matter for an oratorio that was specifically written to be performed in

[3] *Killing Noe Murder. Briefly Discourst in Three Quaestions* (1657). Titus argues that in killing Athaliah, Jehoiada acted on his own personal initiative in carrying out an act that was clearly just, because Athaliah was a usurper and a tyrant (11). Two contemporary replies to the pamphlet both challenge that interpretation. The anonymous author of *Killing is Murder: Or, An Answer To a Treasonous Pamphlet Entituled, Killing is no Murder* (London, 1657), 26–7, suggests that Jehoiada would have had recourse to divine guidance via the Urim and Thummim (sacred lots) of the high priest, and that in any case he was acting to enable the Davidic line to continue to rule, which was the revealed will of God; Michael Hawke, *Killing is Murder, and no Murder: or An Exercitation concerning a Scurrilous Pamphlet . . . Intituled Killing no Murder . . .* (London, 1657), argues not only that Jehoiada was acting on divine authority, but also that rather than being a private agent he was fulfilling his responsibilities both as the young Joash's guardian and protector, and as high priest, that is, as a judicial agent of the state (40–1, 43–4). The original pamphlet *Killing noe Murder* was reprinted numerous times throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

[4] During 1690 and 1691 a flurry of pamphlets was exchanged between the clergymen Zachary Taylor, William Sherlock, Thomas Wagstaffe, and John Kettlewell, in which Taylor and Sherlock argued in favour of submission to William and Mary, while Wagstaffe and Kettlewell argued the opposite. The case of Athaliah, a usurper who seizes the throne of Judah but is ousted from it in favour of the child heir Joash of the Davidic line, is cited by Wagstaffe and by Kettlewell as scriptural validation for refusing submission to a ruler who has authority but no legal right to the throne. Taylor and Sherlock, however, argue that the case of Athaliah is unusual because of the divine promise that the line of David alone should rule in Judah, which made it justified to resist Athaliah, but that where there is no such divine entail it is right to submit to the rulers whom God allows to take power. See Sherlock, *The Case of the Allegiance due to Soveraign Powers, Stated and Resolved, According to Scripture and Reason, and the Principles of the Church of England, . . .* (London, 1691), 21–2, 34–5; Wagstaffe, *An Answer to a late Pamphlet, Entituled Obedience and Submission to the Present Government . . . With A Postscript in Answer to Dr Sherlock's Case of Allegiance* (London, 1690), 4, 17–19, 34–40; Kettlewell, *The Duty of Allegiance Settled upon its True Grounds, According to Scripture, Reason, and the Opinion of the Church: In Answer To . . . Dr William Sherlock, . . . The Case of the Allegiance . . .* (London, 1691), 49–50, 64–5; Taylor, *The Vindication of a late Pamphlet, (entituled, Obedience and Submission to the Present Government . .) . . .* (London, 1691), 16–18; Sherlock, *A Vindication of the Case of Allegiance due to Soveraign Powers . . .* (London, 1691), 20–37, 52–3, 78; Wagstaffe, *An Answer to Dr Sherlock's Vindication of the Case of Allegiance due to Sovereign Powers . . .* (London, 1692), 29–30, 34–62, 76–7, 95–6, 100–1, 142–3, 148–9, 152–5. A summary of the exchanges at the time is given in Jean Orcibal, *La Genèse d'*Esther *et d'*Athalie, Autour de Racine, 1 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1950), 136–41.

[5] 'Non-jurors' were those whose continuing support for the deposed Stuart king James II meant that they refused to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary or to their successors, most notably the Hanoverian monarchs, as long as there was a male Stuart heir alive. As a result of this stance non-jurors were barred from clerical and public offices, for which they were required to take the oath of allegiance.

Oxford by the Hanoverian-aligned Handel.[6] However, what it might actually have been was an astute compromise on the part of Handel and his librettist. After all, as noted above, the Jacobites were not alone in claiming that the Athaliah narrative embodied their political aspirations, and when the oratorio libretto is examined in the context of the biblical text and the tragedy *Athalie* by Racine on which the libretto was based, it is possible to see how the version of the Athaliah story in the libretto was refashioned in a way that made it susceptible to a more Hanoverian interpretation. This refashioning applies particularly to the portrayals of Athaliah and of Joash, and to the narrative's religious outlook; and so these three aspects of the narrative will be considered as they appear in the biblical text, in Racine's play, and in the Handelian libretto. In this way it should be possible to demonstrate how the same basic narrative is used to express quite different concerns in each case, and how Handel's oratorio in particular might be able to stay true to his Hanoverian benefactors despite using a narrative so beloved of those who opposed them.

KINGS VERSUS CHRONICLES: ASPECTS OF ATHALIAH

The first step, then, is to examine the biblical material more closely. Two versions of the narrative of Athaliah are preserved in the Hebrew Bible, one in 2 Kings 11 and one in 2 Chron. 22.10–23.21. Each version has its own ideological foci, and these will be highlighted in relation to the three aspects mentioned above, so that the elements taken up in Racine's play and Humphreys' subsequent libretto can be identified.

a. Athaliah, Ahab, and Jezebel

The first aspect to consider is the portrayal of Athaliah, and in particular the relationship between Athaliah, King Ahab of Israel, and Queen Jezebel his wife. In both Kings and Chronicles Athaliah is described as a 'daughter of Omri', the father of Ahab (2 Kgs. 8.26//2 Chron. 22.2),[7] and she is presumably also to be

[6] David Hunter, 'Handel among the Jacobites', *M & L*, 82 (2001), 543–56, discusses Handel's relationship with Jacobitism, and suggests that he would have fared well under a restored Stuart monarchy, pointing out that throughout his career Handel is known to have worked with and for individuals from a wide range of political, social, and religious backgrounds. However, Hunter is working on the basis of a Stuart restoration in the 1710s, a period during which Handel's strong ties to the Hanoverian monarchy had yet to develop. By 1733, when *Athalia* was produced, Handel would have been much more closely associated with the Hanoverians; by this time he had been appointed to teach the royal princesses and made a composer for the Chapel Royal in 1723, been commissioned to compose the anthems for the coronation of George II in 1727, and received royal patronage for his first two oratorios, *Esther* (1732) and *Deborah* (1733). It thus seems reasonable to say that despite Handel's continuing policy of using artists from a wide range of political and religious backgrounds, at the time of *Athalia* he would have (been) identified quite strongly with the Hanoverian monarchy.

[7] Commentators are divided over whether to interpret the Hebrew term בַּת [*bat*] ('daughter') in these verses literally, or to take it in the more general sense of 'female descendant'. The problem is that as it stands the information conflicts with that given in 2 Kgs. 8.18//2 Chron. 21.6, which appears to

identified with the anonymous 'daughter of Ahab' who is married to King Jehoram of Judah (2 Kgs. 8.18//2 Chron. 21.6).[8] Both Athaliah's son Ahaziah and her husband Jehoram are said to follow the evil ways of the house of Ahab because of their link with that house through Athaliah (2 Kgs. 8.18, 27; 2 Chron. 21.6, 22.2–3). Athaliah herself is thus implicated as sharing in the wicked qualities of the house of Ahab.

However, Kings and Chronicles differ in the background against which they place this evaluation of Ahab and Athaliah.[9] In Chronicles, the only narrative about Ahab describes the battle in which he is killed in accordance with God's will (2 Chron. 18), and although Ahab is described as a bad influence, that influence is only defined in general terms as leading the people into unfaithfulness as the rest of the kings of Israel had done (2 Chron. 21.13). The wickedness to which Athaliah as a daughter of Ahab encourages her son is equally vaguely defined as 'walking in the ways of the house of Ahab' (2 Chron. 22.3) and 'doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord' (2 Chron. 22.4). The picture in Kings, however, is rather more specific. There, Ahab is said to have done more evil than all the kings of Israel who preceded him (1 Kgs. 16.30), and this wickedness is defined as not only maintaining the illegitimate shrines set up by his predecessor Jeroboam, but also marrying a Sidonian princess named Jezebel, adopting her idolatrous worship of the god Baal, and building a temple to Baal in Samaria (1 Kgs. 16.31–2). Jezebel for her part is shown as a woman who is quite prepared to murder the prophets who oppose her religion (1 Kgs. 18.4), and who arranges the death of an innocent citizen on trumped-up charges in order to take possession of his land (1 Kgs. 21.1–16). She is also blamed for inciting Ahab to evil (1 Kgs. 21.25), and even after Ahab has died and their son Joram has succeeded Ahab as king of Israel, Jezebel as queen mother is accused of continuing her 'harlotries and sorceries' which disturb the peace of Israel (2 Kgs. 9.22). Hence, the picture of what it means to walk in the ways of the house of Ahab is considerably fuller in Kings than it is in

refer to Athaliah as a daughter of Ahab. John Gray, *I & II Kings*, 2nd edn., OTL (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1970), 534, H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, NCB (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 305, and G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 2 vols., NCB (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), ii.446–7, cite (with varying degrees of favour) Katzenstein's idea that Athaliah was a young daughter of Omri who was orphaned and brought up by her elder brother Ahab as his own daughter. This certainly enables the information in both sets of verses to be reconciled without textual emendation; however, it may be an over-literalistic reading. See also note 11 below.

[8] This rather unlikely alliance, given the negative assessment of Ahab in the text, is apparently arranged by King Jehoshaphat of Judah (Athaliah's husband Jehoram is Jehoshaphat's son), who is shown as a devout worshipper of Yahweh ('Yahweh' is the Hebrew name for God in the Old Testament). On the assumption that the peace made by Jehoshaphat with Israel (1 Kgs. 22.44) and his marriage alliance with Ahab (2 Chron. 18.1) are the same event from different perspectives, perhaps the motivation for it was to re-unite the two kingdoms, or at least to broker peace between them.

[9] The books of Chronicles are concerned only with the history of the line of kings descended from David, and thus, after Solomon's death, only with the southern kingdom of Judah. As a result, they include narratives about the kings of the northern kingdom Israel only when those narratives impinge in some way upon the Judaean kings. By contrast, the books of Kings are concerned with both the northern and the southern kingdom, and although their treatment of the north is often tendentious and dismissive, not to say condemnatory, they contain several cycles of narrative that cover events in Israel. This difference in approach is clearly reflected in the material about Ahab that each work contains. See also the comments on the relationship between Kings and Chronicles in chapter 8 below on *Solomon*.

Chronicles; and describing Athaliah as a daughter of Ahab in this context is to cast the shadow of the murderous, idolatrous Jezebel over her,[10] even though there is no explicit connection between Athaliah and Jezebel—Athaliah is nowhere said to be Jezebel's daughter, only Ahab's.[11]

This background is very important when it comes to evaluating Athaliah's six-year reign over Judah, because neither version gives any details about her reign other than that it happened, which means that its nature has to be inferred from other hints in the text. In the Kings account, the implicit associations between Athaliah and Jezebel mean that the brutal way in which Athaliah seizes power (2 Kgs. 11.1) is enough to imply that she reigned as Jezebel *rediviva*, a concept which evokes a sense of horror in the reader's mind. In Chronicles, however, Jezebel's absence from the account means that the presentation of Athaliah is less ideologically loaded than it is in Kings. Instead of functioning as evidence that Athaliah is a second Jezebel, Athaliah's murder of her own grandchildren is explicitly placed in the context of a power vacuum that results from Jehu's murder of Azariah and all the princes of Judah (2 Chron. 22.9). In this version of events, therefore, Athaliah appears as a shrewd and ruthlessly ambitious woman who moves into the gap left by Azariah's death, rather than as the vindictive harpy whose fearsome revenge for the death of her son ushers in the terrifying spectre of history repeating itself.

b. Joash

The second aspect to consider is the portrayal of the young king Joash. In both Kings and Chronicles, Joash is a non-entity before he is enthroned; however, once he becomes king, each account gives its own version of how he fared. In 2 Kings, Joash is said to have followed the Lord (2 Kgs. 12.2), and he oversees a refurbishment of the Jerusalem Temple (2 Kgs. 12.5–17 [ET 4–16]); but when Hazael king of Syria invades, Joash buys him off by using treasure from the palace and the Temple (2 Kgs. 12.18–19 [ET 12.17–18]).[12] He is then said to have died as the result of a conspiracy among his servants (2 Kgs. 12.21–2 [ET 12.20–1]). Joash's reign therefore ends fairly ignominiously; but even though he plunders the Temple in order to buy off the Syrians, he is not portrayed as malevolent or deliberately evil.

By contrast, 2 Chronicles shows Joash behaving piously as long as Jehoiada the chief priest is there to advise him (2 Chron. 24.2–14). However, once Jehoiada dies, Joash starts to introduce idol worship (2 Chron. 24.17–18), and when Jehoiada's son Zechariah challenges the people about this, Joash orders him stoned to death (2 Chron. 24.20–2). As a result the Syrians come up and attack and wound Joash, and he is then finished off by a conspiracy of his servants

[10] For comments on the rhetorical and ideological force of the Ahab and Jezebel narratives in determining Athaliah's character, see Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Narrative Art, Political Rhetoric: The Case of Athaliah and Joash*, JSOTSup, 209 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 70–1, 110–12.

[11] This observation might support Katzenstein's idea that Athaliah was in fact a daughter of Omri who was brought up by Ahab. See note 7 above.

[12] Interestingly, the Temple treasure used by Joash to pay off Hazael is said to consist of votive gifts placed there by the 'bad' kings Jehoram and Ahaziah as well as by the 'good' king Jehoshaphat (2 Kgs. 12.19 [ET 12.18]). This tends to mitigate the unremittingly negative portrayal of Jehoram and Ahaziah that appears earlier on in 2 Kgs. 8.16–27.

(2 Chron. 24.23–5). The picture of Joash in 2 Chronicles is therefore much more ambivalent than the one in 2 Kings.

c. Religion

The third aspect to consider is the religious outlook of the narrative. In the 2 Kings version, the foregrounded concern is the restoration of the true line of kingship; the whole point about Joash is that he is the rightful heir to the throne because he is a son of the late king. There is also a religious aspect to Joash's restoration: once Joash has been declared king and Athaliah has been killed, Jehoiada makes a covenant between the Lord and the king and people so that they will be the Lord's people (2 Kgs. 11.17), and then they go and tear down the temple of Baal (2 Kgs. 11.18). However, despite the concern that Judah should have its proper king and its proper religion, very little is said about who the proper king should be or what the proper religion should look like.

The version in 2 Chronicles is more specific on these matters. First, it is more overt about the restoration of the *Davidic* line: Jehoiada explicitly connects Joash with the sons of David (2 Chron. 23.3) in a way that in 2 Kings he does not.[13] Then, the Temple-based coup is carried out in such a way as to ensure that the Temple is not defiled; this means that priests and Levites are the only ones who are allowed inside the Temple to guard the young king (2 Chron. 23.6–7). Finally, when the temple of Baal has been destroyed, Jehoiada's posting of watchmen over the house of the Lord under Levitical supervision is taken as an opportunity to invoke the liturgical practice authorized by David (2 Chron. 23.18). As a son of David, therefore, Joash is presented not only as the rightful heir genealogically speaking, but also as the spiritual heir of the king who was the institutor and guardian of orthodox Yahwism.[14] Hence, carrying out the coup in accordance with these norms will not only start the king's reign in the way that it ought to continue, but will also align the Davidic heir with religious orthodoxy, thereby emphasizing how important it is for the country's religious life to have the rightful Davidic king upon the throne.

d. Summary

Within the biblical materials, then, the presentations of the narrative differ, and the Kings and Chronicles versions each have their own particular emphases and

[13] This invocation of David in 2 Chron. 23.3 may be seen as a reference back to 2 Chron. 21.7, where because of the covenant with David the Lord refuses to destroy the house of David, despite the evil deeds of king Jehoram to which his wife Athaliah urges him on. The period under Jehoram, Ahaziah, and Athaliah is a low point for the Davidic line, during which it risks losing first its identity and secondly its very existence to the evil forces of the northern kingdom as embodied in Athaliah, but Joash's preservation at the hands of orthodox Yahwists is an earnest of God's faithfulness in the face of apparently overwhelming odds. Thus, in Chronicles even Athaliah's destruction of the royal house of Judah is read in the light of the covenant with David, and Joash's restoration is an expression of that same covenant, as Jehoiada emphasizes in 2 Chron. 23.3.

[14] 'Yahwism' is the worship of Yahweh (cf. note 8 above).

messages to communicate to the reader. Depending on which account is followed, Athaliah is either a frightening new Jezebel or simply a ruthless power-broker; Joash is either well-intentioned if somewhat ineffectual, or initially good though later corrupt; and the religious stance either generally supports the proper king in order to ensure the proper worship, or specifically requires the *Davidic* king to establish and sustain worship practices in accordance with those laid down by *David* himself. The question now is how these nuances may have been taken up and to what effect, first by Racine in *Athalie* and subsequently by Humphreys in his libretto for Handel's *Athalia*.

RACINE AND *ATHALIE*

The play upon which Humphreys' libretto is based, Racine's *Athalie*, was completed in 1690, two years after the Glorious Revolution in England, and like his *Esther* was written for the pupils at the school of Mme de Maintenon at Saint-Cyr.[15] Much of *Athalie* consists of an imaginative reconstruction of the events leading up to the enthronement of Joash, and it makes use of biblical material from both Kings and Chronicles, blending the traditions together in the harmonizing fashion that was typical of pre-critical scholarship on the texts.

[15] For brief details about the school, see chapter 1 above. Although the play was not staged publicly until 1702, there were private readings without costumes or scenery at the school at Saint-Cyr and at Versailles during the period 1691–3. See Vincent Grégoire, 'Avatars de la pratique théâtrale adoptée par Mme de Maintenon à Saint-Cyr', *PFSCL*, xxiv, 46 (1997), 35–52 (35, 47–8). Orcibal, *La Genèse d'*Esther *et d'*Athalie, argues that both the choice of subject-matter and the long delay in staging was influenced by contemporary political events in England. Racine would have known that English High Churchmen had used the Athaliah story to defend the divine right of kings with reference to James II who had fled to France when William of Orange arrived in England, and in the play he was making a plea for the restoration of the Stuart line on the basis of the divine right (55–60). However, during the course of 1690 the political tide in the French court turned decisively against James when, despite the support of French troops, he was defeated at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland and fled back to France; this made it politically inopportune both at home and abroad to perform a play that was effectively urging William's overthrow (74–83). However, Grégoire, 'Avatars', attributes the lack of public performance to Mme de Maintenon's concern that participating in public stage performances had had a negative effect on her young ladies, making them wilful and disobedient (35–6, 47), and remarks that James II and his wife were present at one of the private readings (47–8). Nor has Orcibal's 'Jacobite' interpretation of the play itself gone unchallenged. Bernard Chédozeau, 'Ultramontains, Anglicans et Gallicans devant *Athalie*', *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 90.2 (1990), 165–79, sets the play in the context of debates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France about the extent of papal authority over monarchs, a debate that was centred on the Athaliah story. Chédozeau concludes that *Athalie* probably does refer to the contemporary English situation, but that Orcibal's overtly Jacobite reading of the play is improbable; Racine's depiction of Joad as merely God's chosen instrument in an extraordinary and miraculous chain of events would have prevented the play being read as a typological narrative sanctioning papal authority to oust the reigning monarch, and this in turn would have prevented it being used by English Catholics as justification for rebellion. More recently, Edric Caldicott, 'Racine's "Jacobite" Plays: The Politics of the Bible', in Edric Caldicott and Derval Conroy (eds.), *Racine: The Power and the Pleasure* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001), 100–20, argues that Orcibal's case is overstated, and that rather than using *Esther* and *Athalie* to urge support for the Jacobite cause Racine was offering homage to the Bourbon monarchy, a homage that would have included James Stuart inasmuch as he was Louis XIV's cousin, but which was not specifically intended for James.

Athalie is set at the celebration of the Festival of Pentecost,[16] and takes place in the Temple at Jerusalem. Joad the high priest, and Josabet, his wife and the sister of the dead king Ochosias, have secreted the child heir Joas in the Temple for the last several years, and are now planning to reveal him to the people in the course of the festival. But their plans are disrupted by the appearance of Athalie in the Temple: she has had a recurring nightmare in which first she is warned by her mother Jézabel that the Jewish God is pursuing her, and then a child dressed in Jewish priests' robes stabs her in the heart. She comes to the Temple to look for the child, sees the young Joas serving at the altar, and demands an interview with him. The child, known to himself and everyone except Joad and Josabet as an orphan named Éliacin, is brought, and responds precociously to her questions. Athalie leaves, apparently satisfied, but then, disturbed by rumours about the child, sends Mathan the priest of Baal and his aide Nabal to the Temple, to demand that the child be surrendered to her. Joad rebuffs the two men, and decides that Joas must be crowned immediately. But before Joad can act, he is overcome by the Holy Spirit and prophesies Joas's future apostasy, the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Exile, and the foundation of the Church. Emerging from his reverie, he orders the crown to be brought, and Joas is crowned, as Athalie's troops surround the Temple. Athalie sends an ultimatum demanding the child's surrender; Joad agrees to admit her to the Temple, and when she enters he displays the enthroned Joas to her. Armed Levites surround her, the people rise in support of Joas, Athalie's troops flee, and Mathan is killed. Athalie curses Joas before being taken away at Joad's command to be put to death.

There are a number of striking features about Racine's presentation of the narrative, but as hinted earlier the most significant are his picture of Athalie, his treatment of the religious ethos of the narrative, and his portrayal of the young heir Joas. A closer examination of these aspects will show just how distinctive they are, and how important they are for an understanding of the play.

a. Athalie

Racine's characterization of Athalie is perhaps the most notable feature about his treatment of the biblical material. As remarked earlier, the only information about Athaliah in the biblical text is that she was a daughter or possibly a sister of Ahab, was married to Jehoram, king of Judah, and that when her son Ahaziah was killed she killed her grandchildren, seized power in Judah, and reigned for six years. Racine, however, has taken full advantage of the silences and ambiguities in the biblical text to construct a complex character. In his play Athalie is shown

[16] In his preface to the play, Racine explains that he chose Pentecost because various commentators think Joas was proclaimed king at a festival, and the setting of Pentecost which was one of the three great Jewish festivals would provide more varied content for the choral interludes (Racine, *Théâtre complet*, ii.408). However, Robert E. Hill, 'Racine and Pentecost: Christian Typology in *Athalie*', *PFSCL*, xvii, 32 (1990), 189–210, argues that, given the content of the play, Racine's choice of Pentecost was because of its continuing significance for Christianity and the possibilities that such a setting offered for typological presentations of Christian themes. Some of the play's Christian typology is discussed further below.

unequivocally as the daughter of Jézabel as well as of Achab, and this relationship with Jézabel is invoked by her opponents in characterizing her as murderous and bloodthirsty. Thus, the loyal soldier Abner fears that 'de Jézabel la fille sanguinaire' [the bloodthirsty daughter of Jezebel] (l. 59) is planning to launch an attack on the Temple, and later on Joad warns that 'de Jézabel la fille meurtrière' [the murderous daughter of Jezebel] (l. 1329) will attempt to eliminate the newly crowned Joas.[17] Additionally, in a choral interlude after Athalie's exchange with the young 'Éliacin', the chorus describe the boy as speaking 'comme un autre Élie/Devant cette autre Jézabel' [like another Elijah/Before this other Jezebel] (ll. 760–1), thus characterizing Athalie as her mother's daughter not only biologically but symbolically,[18] and making her the sworn opponent of everything that the boy stands for.

However, when Athalie herself speaks, as she does at some length, a rather different character emerges; and with supreme irony, one of the places where this happens is in the description of her nightmare, which is also the place where she is most clearly linked with Jézabel. The nightmare links the women in two ways. First, its depiction of Jézabel is uncannily reminiscent of that of Athalie herself: a proud woman whose spirit and sheer presence misfortune has failed to crush, but who is condemned by the God of the Jews (ll. 491–8).[19] Then, when Athalie is recounting the dream, she refers to Jézabel as 'Ma mère' [my mother] (l. 491), and quotes Jézabel's description of her as 'Ma fille' [my daughter] (l. 500), terms which bind the two women together in the closest possible biological relationship. But the familial terminology, together with Athalie's attempt in the dream to embrace Jézabel (l. 502), softens Athalie's portrayal by casting her as a loving daughter, a softening that is also visible in the maternal response she displays towards the enigmatic young boy in the dream (ll. 510–12).[20]

In other ways too she is humanized. Not only does she set her own deeds of slaughter in the context of the outrages that she herself has suffered at the hands of Jehu, who has killed her entire family (ll. 711–22), she describes the peace, stability, and advantageous foreign relations that her reign has brought to Judah (ll. 471–7). She also displays a range of positive emotions, including tolerance of those who are opposed to her and would depose her (ll. 593–7), an openness to other religious viewpoints (ll. 527–30, 677–85), a degree of tenderness towards the

[17] It is notable that these associations are not made when Athalie is described as the daughter of Achab. Rather, as 'la fille d'Achab' she is described as 'affreuse' [frightful] (l. 1086) and 'sacrilège' [sacrilegious] (l. 1564), in situations where there is no immediate context or connotation of bloodshed. It seems that Achab was characterized as an idolater, but Jézabel as a murderess, and so Athalie is shown as inheriting idolatry from her father but bloodthirstiness from her mother.

[18] According to 1 Kings, Elijah the prophet denounced and opposed Jezebel in the name of the God of Israel.

[19] Hill, 'Jézabel Seen, Jézabel Heard', in Claire Carlin (ed.), *La Rochefoucauld*, Mithridate, *Frères et Sœurs, Les Muses sœurs: Actes du 29e congrès annuel de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature, the University of Victoria, 3–5 avril 1997*, Biblio 17, 111 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1998), 295–304, points out that Athalie's description of Jézabel as she recounts her nightmare is in fact a self-description (300–1). This has the effect of identifying the two women, and of warning that Jézabel's (deserved) fate will also be Athalie's.

[20] Hill, 'Jézabel', 302–3. See also the comments of Helen Bates McDermott, 'Matricide and Filicide in Racine's *Athalie*', *Symposium*, 38 (1984), 56–69 (58–9), on how the dream both identifies Athalie with Jézabel and portrays Athalie (as well as Jézabel) in a sympathetic light.

child Joas (ll. 651–4, 690–8), and a reluctance to destroy the Temple despite knowing that it is the seat of opposition to her (ll. 1577–87);[21] and she is shown as susceptible to self-doubt and uncertainty (ll. 871–6). Ultimately, she does harden into the implacable enemy of Joad and Joas, and when she realizes that her efforts are in vain, curses the child to apostatize in order to avenge Achab, Jézabel, and Athalie (ll. 1784–90); but there is much more to her character than just the cold-blooded assassin who is portrayed in such a minimalist fashion in the biblical text.[22] Daughter of Jézabel she may be, but not in the way that is hinted at by the author of Kings.

Such a portrayal appears at first sight to be surprisingly positive. However, it needs to be set against the play's portrayal of another female character which is similarly expanded from that in the biblical text: that of Josabet. In the biblical versions, Jehosheba (Jehoshabeath in Chronicles) appears in only one verse, as a daughter of King Jehoram, sister of Ahaziah, and (according to Chronicles) the wife of Jehoiada the high priest, who rescues her nephew Joash from slaughter (2 Kgs. 11.2; 2 Chron. 22.11). In *Athalie*, however, Racine expands this glimpse into a full picture, giving Josabet a significant role alongside her husband Joad as a devoted parental guardian of the young Joas, and presenting her as a foil to Athalie. Josabet is referred to as a daughter of David (l. 1020) in contrast to the daughter of Jézabel, and as such she is, as one might expect, pious, devoted to her children, and respectful of her husband Joad, addressing him as 'Seigneur' ('my Lord' or 'sir'). When occasion demands she can take the initiative, as when she rescued the vulnerable Joas from certain death (ll. 241–54), or when she rebuffs Mathan who comes to persuade her to give up the child Éliacin (ll. 963–1018). But for most of the time she is under the authority and guidance of Joad, and she is Joad's supporter rather than an initiator in the strategies to reveal Éliacin as the Davidic heir Joas. Bearing in mind the play's purpose as an educational tool for the young women of Saint-Cyr, it is not hard to see in Athalie and Josabet two contrasting models of womanhood, one positive and one negative, with Josabet as the positive model to be emulated and Athalie, despite her humanization, as the negative model to be shunned.

b. Religion

Racine's treatment of the narrative's religious outlook is equally distinctive. The religious position of the biblical versions is one of support for the Judaean Yahwistic religion against Baal worship, and this translates in the play into the triumph of the Jews' God over Baal. But there is an additional element in Racine's

[21] McDermott, 'Matricide and Filicide', 59–61, discusses this portrayal of Athalie in terms of a re-emergence of the mother/child within her, a process that is initiated by her meeting with Éliacin.

[22] Roy Knight, 'Meditations on *Athalie*', in William D. Howarth, Ian McFarlane, and Margaret McGowan (eds.), *Form and Meaning: Aesthetic Coherence in Seventeenth-Century French Drama. Studies Presented to Harry Barnwell* (Amersham: Avebury, 1982), 187–99, comments that this most human and complex of the play's characters has 'seduced' generations of critics (191), and hints at her status as an archetypal Aristotelian tragic hero, neither too good nor too evil and never forfeiting the audience's pity (192).

presentation that does not appear in the biblical versions: the Jewish characters are operating with a messianic hope whereby God has promised that a descendant of David will become a world-wide king, and this is what gives the play its sense of gravitas. Joas's restoration to the throne is necessary not only for the continuity of the Davidides but also for the credibility of the Hebrews' religion; if their God's promise of a Davidic succession is not maintained, their belief system and world-view will be severely undermined. This messianic note is sounded very early on in the first scene, when Abner, the loyal captain of the guard, says,

> Mais où sont ces honneurs à David tant promis,
> Et prédits même encore à Salomon son fils?
> Hélas! Nous espérions que de leur race heureuse
> Devait sortir de rois une suite nombreuse,
> Que sur toute tribu, sur toute nation,
> L'un d'eux établirait sa domination,
> Ferait cesser partout la discorde et la guerre,
> Et verrait à ses pieds tous les rois de la terre. (ll. 129–36)
> [But where are these honours promised so firmly to David,
> And predicted again to Solomon his son?
> Alas! We hoped that from their blessed stock
> Would come a numerous line of kings;
> That over every tribe, over every nation,
> One of them would establish his domination,
> Would put an end everywhere to discord and strife,
> And would see all the kings of the earth at his feet.]

Abner thus interprets the present crisis in terms of the messianic promises that he believes should be in force but which appear to be under threat and possibly even in abeyance with Athalie's rise to power. Other characters too invoke the promises of God to David. Praying to God for the young Joas, Josabet refers to the child as 'l'héritier de tes saintes promesses' [the heir of your holy promises] (l. 263), and in a moment of great irony Athalie, having interviewed Joas and been rebuffed by him, speaks witheringly of 'ce roi promis aux nations,/cet enfant de David, votre espoir, votre attente . . . ' [this king promised to the nations,/this child of David, your hope, your expectation] (ll. 734–5). Little does she know that she has just been speaking to the child whose existence is keeping those hopes alive.

But for Racine, this messianism is about more than just the Jews' hopes of fulfilment; because Christianity equated its Saviour with the Jewish Messiah, a threat to the Davidic line is also a threat to Christianity. From Racine's perspective, if Joas is not restored to the throne, Christianity ultimately cannot be born,[23] and this is the issue that is addressed in a rather bewildering fashion in Joad's prophecy. The negative near future of Joas's apostasy (taken from Chronicles) is set in the context of the positive distant future, where despite the destruction of Jerusalem and God's rejection of its kings a new Jerusalem (the Church) will arise and will be the pride of the earth to which all other kings and nations will flock for

[23] This messianic reading of the play is made quite explicit by Racine himself in the Preface to *Athalie* (*Théâtre complet*, ii.407–8, 409). Racine takes a similar stance in *Esther*, where he links the survival of the Jews in the Persian Empire with the fulfilment of God's promise for a Messiah. See chapter 1 above on Esther.

worship (ll. 1139–74).[24] This gives the play a much broader frame of reference than simply the set of events that it narrates; it is shown as being about the whole of salvation history rather than just a palace coup in ancient Jerusalem. It is necessary to put Joas on the throne, even though he will become evil, because he is part of the line of religious continuity down to Racine's own time; and this continuity is expressed in the fact that Abner's words quoted above reflect ideas from Isaiah 9.5–6, Zechariah 9.9–10, and Psalm 110.1, all passages which have a long tradition of Christian exegesis as prophecies of Jesus Christ. The play thus lends itself to a kind of double reading: although it is ostensibly about the messianic hope from the Jewish point of view, in reality it is presenting a Christian understanding of that hope, and showing how the events of Joas's coronation make a vital contribution to the contemporary Christian self-understanding.

c. Joas

Closely connected with his messianic reading of the Athaliah narrative is Racine's treatment of Joas: as many commentators have noted, Joas is a Christ-figure.[25] There are several aspects to this Christological portrayal of Joas. Perhaps the most striking is the fact that throughout the play Joas is spoken of in terms of one who has been resurrected from the tomb.[26] Thus, for example, in conversation with Josabet, Joad speaks of God as the one who caused Joas to be pulled from the oblivion of the grave and rekindled the torch of David (l. 281). Again, towards the end of Act V, when Joas's coronation is announced to the people, the Levite Ismael reports to Joad their reaction: 'Tous chantent de David le fils ressuscité' [Everyone is singing about the resurrected son of David] (l. 1765). Linked to the motif of Joas's 'resurrection' is the motif of his visible wounds, which is also part of the biblical resurrection paradigm. At the beginning of Act V, when Joad's son Zacharie describes to his sister Salomith how Joas has been anointed and crowned,

[24] Hill, 'Racine and Pentecost', views Joad's prophesying itself as a type of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (200), so that in both form and content the birth of the Christian Church is recalled at this point.

[25] See, for example, the comments of Robert E. Hill, '*Athalie*: Typology, Rhetoric, and the Messianic Promise', in Charles G. S. Williams (ed.), *Actes de Columbus: Racine, Fontenelle: Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes, Histoire et Littérature. Actes du XXI^e colloque de la North American Society for Seventeenth Century French Literature, Ohio State University, Columbus (6–8 avril 1989)*, Biblio 17, 59 (Paris/Seattle/Tübingen: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature, 1990), 47–63 (51–2). H. P. Salomon, 'Athalie et le Dieu des Juifs', *Cahiers Raciniens*, 23 (1968), 10–19, disagrees with this interpretation of Joas, opining of him, '[C]e petit monstre de pédantisme ne peut par aucun effort d'imagination préfigurer le Christ' [this pedantic little monster can by no stretch of the imagination foreshadow the Christ] (14). However, his opinion seems to take no account of the symbolic elements in the play that point to Joas being a Christ-figure, and is apparently based instead on a sentimental concept of 'gentle Jesus meek and mild', to which Joas does not in his opinion conform. This is clearly a nonsense.

[26] Hill, '*Athalie*: Typology, Rhetoric, and the Messianic Promise', comments that Joas's false name Éliacin indicates that Joas's survival is a type of the Resurrection (51). The name is constructed from the Hebrew elements *'el*, meaning 'God', and *yākîm*, meaning 'he will raise up', and appears in 2 Kgs. 23.34//2 Chron. 36.4 as the name of a son of Josiah who is put on the throne of Judah by Pharaoh Necho but who does evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kgs. 23.37//2 Chron. 36.5).

he tells her, 'on voit encor la marque du couteau' [you can still see the mark of the knife] (l. 1518), marks which Joad points out to Athalie in order to prove to her Joas's identity (l. 1720), and which Athalie herself recognizes (l. 1770). This recalls the way in which the risen Christ is recognized by his disciples by means of the scars of crucifixion that he bears (John 20.19–20, 24–7).[27]

A second powerful Christological motif is that of the boy Joas in the Temple. In Joas's dialogue with Athalie, he is presented as a child displaying a wisdom beyond his years and making a deep impression on the adults who hear him, a picture which recalls the narrative in Luke 2.42–9 of the boy Jesus in the Temple discussing with the doctors of the Law and amazing them with his understanding. During the exchange between Athalie and Joas, there is also a link with the adult Jesus. When Athalie asks him who has taken care of him, he replies, 'Dieu laissa-t-il jamais ses enfants au besoin?/Aux petits des oiseaux il donne leur pâture,/Et sa bonté s'étend sur toute la nature' [Would God ever leave his children in need?/To the smallest of the birds he gives their food,/And his goodness extends over the whole of nature] (ll.646–8). This is reminiscent of Matthew 6.26–31, where Jesus tells his audience that God feeds the birds and clothes the grass and so is certain to meet the needs of the faithful.

Thirdly, although Joas is notionally raised as the child of Joad and Josabet, on a number of occasions he is described as one whose true and only father is God. During the period of his concealment, he is brought up in the Temple precincts, and at one point Josabet prays to God of him: 'Nourri dans ta maison en l'amour de ta loi,/Il ne connaît encor d'autre père que toi' [Nourished in your house in the love of your law,/He knows no other father than you] (ll. 257–8). Joas is thus presented as being brought up in the Temple which is his Father's house. Perhaps the most striking example of this idea is in the very last line of the play, where upon receiving the news that Athalie has been put to death, Joad tells the young Joas to remember

> Que les rois dans le ciel ont un juge sévère,
> L'innocence un vengeur, et l'orphelin un père. (ll. 1815–16)
> [That kings have in heaven a stern judge,
> Innocence an avenger, and the orphan a father.]

The notion of God as the orphan's father (l. 1816) recalls the situation of Joas himself, and is presumably meant to emphasize to Joas that God has acted on his behalf as a father. However, in so doing it continues the Christological motif of Joas as the human, Davidic child whose (true) father is God.

Finally, in the choral interlude that ends Act IV, one of the voices sings an adaptation of Psalm 2, framed in terms of the wicked attempting to stifle the worship of God on earth and to throw off his yoke, and ending with the line, 'Que ni lui, ni son Christ ne règnent plus sur nous' [let neither him nor his Christ reign

[27] Ann T. Delehanty, 'God's Hand in History: Racine's *Athalie* as the End of Salvation Historiography', *PFSCL*, xxviii, 54 (2001), 155–66, argues that in the light of Joad's dream foretelling Joas's murder of Zacharie, the scarred Joas should be regarded not as prefiguring Jesus but as representing the marked fratricide Cain (162–3). However, Joas's future downfall need not invalidate the Christological typology. The whole point of typology is that the imperfect type points towards the perfect antitype, and if Joas were the perfect type he would himself be the Christ, thereby undermining the Christian message of the play.

over us any more] (l. 1485), which is a version of Psalm 2.2. In the immediate context, of course, bearing in mind the root meaning of the term 'Christ' as 'anointed one', the song refers to those such as Athalie attempting to stifle worship and to throw off the reign of Joas who is in the process of becoming God's anointed king. However, the use of the French term 'Christ' (English 'Christ'), probably based on the Vulgate's 'christum', as opposed to the French 'Oint' (English 'Anointed') makes it clear that Joas is being portrayed not just as an ordinary king, for whom the title 'the Lord's anointed' was the normal designation, but as a type of Jesus Christ, who is the only one to whom the specific title 'Christ' is applied.[28]

d. Summary

In the play as a whole, then, the Christological description of Joas combines with the play's messianic religious outlook to present an anticipation of Christianity which is what gives the narrative of Athaliah its true significance in Racine's eyes. Such an approach to the narrative means a good deal of stress on Joas and on his lineage, and in the light of Racine's associations with the French court where England's deposed king James II took refuge, this has led some scholars to propose 'Jacobite' readings of the play.[29] However, the Christological elements in Joas's character, together with Joad's prophecy about the development of Christianity and Joas's apostasy, lift the play above the level of (mere) political allegory to address more timeless concerns. Racine's play may indeed have had points of contact with the contemporary political situation, but to read it as nothing more than a covert plea for Stuart restoration to the English throne is to misread it. In particular, such a reading ignores the purpose for which the play was written, that is, as an educational tool for young French women, for whom the restoration of James II to the English throne would have been a matter of indifference, but for whom the development of a model of Christian womanhood was of prime importance.

[28] Gabriel Spillebout, *Le vocabulaire biblique dans les tragédies sacrées de Racine*, Publications Romanes et Françaises, 99 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1968), argues that in l. 1485 'ce *Christ* n'est pas "Jésus-Christ"' (129); however, although this is true up to a point, it seems foolish to deny that in the context the term has Christological resonance, a possibility that Spillebout does not seem to recognize. The seventeenth-century Bible scholar and translator Louis-Isaac Le Maistre de Sacy's translation of the verse uses the term 'Christ': 'Les Rois de la terre se sont élevez: & les Princes ont conspiré contre le Seigneur & contre son CHRIST' (*Pseaumes de David. Traduction nouvelle selon l'hebreu. Nouvelle édition* (Paris, 1688), 2–3); compare the Vulgate: 'Astiterunt reges terrae, & principes convenerunt in unum: adversus Dominum, & adversus Christũ ejus.' (ibid.) Certainly, Sacy's introductory comment on the psalm indicates that he saw it as Christological: 'Que c'est en vain que les hommes, & principalement les Rois & les Princes de la terre, s'opposent au Royaume de IESUS-CHRIST; puisque c'est luy qui a este étably par Dieu son Pere pour estre le Roy de tout le monde. Excellente exhortation aux Rois.' [How vainly do men, and particularly the kings and princes of the earth, set themselves against the kingdom of Jesus Christ; since it is he who has been appointed by God his father to be the king of all the world. An excellent admonition to kings.] (*Pseaumes de David*, 2). Knowing Racine's dependence on and admiration for Sacy, it is likely that he too would have interpreted the psalm Christologically.

[29] See note 15 above for comments on several such readings.

HUMPHREYS AND *ATHALIA*

Racine's treatment of the Athaliah narrative may have transformed it into a vehicle of instruction for young women, but the same cannot be said of the oratorio libretto based on the play some forty years later by Samuel Humphreys.[30] This time there were definite political overtones to the adaptation, as an examination of the libretto in relation to its biblical and Racinian sources will demonstrate.

Although the libretto follows the basic outline of Racine's plot, it is much shorter, and a number of the plot elements are simplified.[31] The libretto begins in the Temple at Pentecost[32] with a series of praises to God. Joad enters and bemoans Athalia's celebration of pagan rites, before pleading with God to hear Judah's groans. The scene changes to the Palace, where Athalia is distressed after a nightmare that has foretold her demise at the hand of a young boy dressed in priests' robes. Mathan, the priest of Baal, tries to calm her, and orders a search of the Temple. Abner the captain of soldiers, who is loyal to the Jewish God, goes to the Temple to warn Joad and Josabeth of the impending search, arriving just as they are planning to reveal the rescued boy king Joash to the people of Judah. Josabeth reacts despairingly, but Joad declares that God will prevail.

Part II begins with more songs of praise to God as the festival of Pentecost begins. Athalia enters, and seeing the young Joash, styled 'Eliakim', interrogates him and declares her intention to take him into her care. The child reacts in horror at the thought of her idolatry, and Athalia, angered, tells Josabeth that she will have him regardless. She departs. Josabeth once again despairs, but then she and Joad declare their trust in God. The chorus affirm God's care for Judah and the punishment that is destined for the 'Guilty' and 'Proud'.

Part III opens with Joad under the influence of the Holy Spirit predicting Athalia's downfall. He then crowns Joash, and the chorus affirm their loyalty to the young monarch. Athalia appears demanding the child she saw earlier, and the priests display to her the crowned Joash and acclaim him king. Furious, Athalia calls on Abner to avenge her, but he too declares his loyalty to Joash. Athalia then calls on Mathan to invoke Baal's vengeance on the assembled company, but Mathan says that the Hebrews' God has won. Athalia realizes that she is doomed, but goes to her death defiantly. Joad and Josabeth rejoice together, Abner declares God's goodness, and the chorus end with a song of praise and a hallelujah.

[30] *Athalia. An Oratorio: or Sacred Drama. As Perform'd at the Theatre in Oxford. At the Time of the Publick Act. In July, 1733. The Musick Compos'd by Mr Handel. The Drama by Mr Humphreys* (London: John Watts, 1733).

[31] For a detailed comparison of the libretto and the play, see Annette Christina Held, 'Händels Oratorium *Athalia* (HWV 52, 1733) und die biblischen Tragödien Racines', *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge*, 8 (2000), 75–103 (87–98).

[32] Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 274, mistakenly identifies the festival as Tabernacles, thereby losing the point of Pentecost in Jewish tradition as the celebration of the law-giving on Sinai. This is important for an understanding of the libretto, inasmuch as within the British Israel paradigm British law was associated with the God-given law on Sinai, and the subjection of the national legal system to the overriding power of papal and canon law was one of the most dreaded consequences of a Catholic take-over.

As was the case for Racine's play, Humphreys' treatments of Athalia, Joash, and the narrative's religious outlook are instrumental in giving his version its particular flavour, and these will be considered in turn, beginning with Athalia herself.

a. Athalia and Jezebel

Humphreys' portrayal of Athalia is less generous than Racine's, and in place of the woman who is sinned against as well as sinning, there is in the libretto simply a wicked soul who is deservedly pursued by God (which is, of course, the implication of Athaliah's portrayal in the biblical text). This characterization is exemplified in the three airs Athalia has to sing. Her first air comes after she has described her nightmare. Refusing to be comforted by Mathan the priest of Baal, she sighs, 'Heav'n a Weight of Woes decrees me,/Horrors all my Hopes destroy;/ . . . Vain is all the Voice of Joy' (I.3, p. 8). Her second air follows her conversation with the young 'Eliakim'; when he refuses her offer to adopt him, she declares that she will have him regardless, and sings, 'My Vengeance awakes me,/Compassion forsakes me,/All softness and mercy away!' (II.2, p. 13). Neither of these airs has an equivalent in Racine's play. The final air comes after Joash has been enthroned, and Athalia realizes that her cause is lost; despite being defeated she remains defiant, and sings as an exit aria:

> To Darkness eternal
> And Horrors infernal
> Undaunted I'll hasten away;
> O Tyrants, your Treason
> Shall in the due Season
> Weep Blood for this barbarous Day! (III.4, p. 19)

All three of these airs therefore picture her negatively, as an unhappy, vengeful creature of darkness.

As in Racine's treatment of the narrative, an important element in the libretto's picture of Athalia is her link with Jezebel. Humphreys associates Athalia with Jezebel in two places, both of which also appear in Racine (although with different nuances). The first is in Athalia's nightmare, where Athalia sees her mother warning her of God's vengeance and then being eaten by dogs, a picture which evokes the biblical description of Jezebel's death (1 Kgs. 21.23; 2 Kgs. 9.10, 30–7). The other allusion to Jezebel comes in the penultimate scene of the libretto, where, having perceived that she is defeated and destined to die, Athalia declares: 'Let *Jezebel*'s great Soul my Bosom fill,/And ev'n in Death, proud Priests, I'll triumph still' (III.3, p. 19). However, the link between Athalia and Jezebel in these two references is surprisingly tenuous: despite the implication of the dream, Athalia's mother is not called Jezebel, nor is Jezebel called Athalia's mother when Athalia invokes her at the end of the libretto. This suggests that the purpose of linking Athalia and Jezebel was not primarily to stress their physical family connection, a suggestion that gains in credibility when other contemporary treatments of Jezebel are taken into account. The name Jezebel appears in the New Testament book of Revelation (2.20) as the designation for a false prophetess who is leading believers astray; and in an adaptation of this metaphor, English writers from the

sixteenth century onwards used the figure of Jezebel as an image for the Catholic Church, in order to denote it as the mother who leads her children astray.[33] In the light of this, Humphreys' treatment of Jezebel in the libretto makes sense. Showing Jezebel as the (unnamed) mother of Athalia in the dream sequence characterizes Athalia as wicked by association, because it evokes the specifics of the Old Testament narrative about Jezebel; while Athalia's invocation of Jezebel, in a context of religious confrontation without any reference to family relationships, enables the genealogical link between the two women to be overpainted with the allegorical sense of Jezebel as it appears in the New Testament, transformed in this context to represent the spirit of Catholicism. Hence, Humphreys' presentation of Athalia as the daughter of Jezebel is both literal and metaphorical, enabling Athalia to represent the ruler who obeys the false and idolatrous dictates of her Mother, that is, the Catholic Church.

b. Joash

The presentation of Joash is one of the most important aspects of the libretto, since it shows that the real theme of the oratorio is God's preservation of his chosen people ('Judah') from the tyranny of unjust rule. In the libretto, Joash's part is significantly reduced by comparison with Racine's version, and there is a

[33] This idea appears particularly among commentators on Revelation. Henry More, *An Exposition of the Seven Epistles to the Seven Churches; Together with a Brief Discourse of Idolatry; with Application to the Church of Rome* (London, 1669), in para. 12 of the Preface discusses the etymology of the name 'Jezebel' and sees in it a prophecy of the fate of the Catholic Church during the Reformation; in para. 14, he justifies the Protestant schism from Rome on the strength of the reference to Jezebel in Rev. 2.20. In the main body of the *Exposition* More likens the Papal hierarchy to Jezebel the false prophetess, who leads people astray by claiming infallibility (89–94, 99–101), and views Jezebel in Rev. 2.20 as a prophecy of the Roman Church (179). In *An Antidote Against Idolatry* (More's 'Brief Discourse of Idolatry' that is bound together with the *Exposition*), Jezebel is equated both with the Pope (Papal hierarchy) (76; 110–1; 126, 136) and with the Roman Church more generally (117, 135), references which More reaffirms in *A Brief Reply to a Late Answer to Dr. Henry More his Antidote Against Idolatry* (London, 1672), 274–5, 278, 287. Finally, in his *Apocalypsis Apocalypseos; or, the Revelation of St John the Divine unveiled* (London, 1680), 20–1, 94, 109, 128, 355, More again refers to the Roman hierarchy as 'Jezebel'. Similarly, Edward Waple, *The Book of the Revelation Paraphras'd; with Annotations on Each Chapter: Whereby it is made plain to the meanest Capacity* (London, 1715), understands Jezebel in Rev. 2.20 to refer to the Roman Church in its apostasy, idolatry and cruelty (41–6). The notion of history being periodized into seven according to the seven churches to whom letters are addressed in Rev. 2–3, with the Thyatiran period being that which ended with the Reformation when 'Jezebel' was cast away from the true (Protestant) church, appears both in More, *An Exposition*, 11, and in Richard Roach's anonymous publication *The Great Crisis: or, the Mystery of the Times and Seasons Unfolded* (London, 1725 [1727]), 213–17 (= 229–33). Other types of material too evidence the uncomplimentary identification of Jezebel and the Roman Church. White Kennett, *The Witch-craft of the present Rebellion. A Sermon Preach'd in the Parish Church of St Mary Aldermary in the City of London: On Sunday the 25th of September, 1715* (London, 1715), 10, identifies the Roman Church with the whore of Babylon (Rev. 19.2), whom he likens to Jezebel because of Babylon's fornications and sorceries. In a similar vein, Joseph Trapp, *Popery Truly Stated, and Briefly Confuted* (London, 1726), takes as his point of departure for discussing the Roman Church's corruptions 2 Kgs. 9.22, 'What peace, so long as the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel, and her witchcrafts, are so many?' (97–8), and cites the same text to stress that there can be no reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic as long as these corruptions continue (220).

corresponding increase in what might be termed corporate aspects of the narrative. Racine's play opens with Abner yearning for the promised son of David and then Joad and Josabet discussing the Davidic child Joas and his planned restoration; but the libretto opens with corporate praise followed by corporate lamentation at the woes currently being suffered by Judah under Athalia. After these laments, Athalia describes her dream, in which an unnamed boy appears and stabs her; but whereas in Racine the dream comes after Joad and Josabet's discussion about Joas, and therefore takes its significance from that discussion, in the libretto Joash is not mentioned until after the dream, and so the boy in the dream appears primarily as the vehicle for Athalia's downfall rather than as the rightful king whose restoration is an end in itself. A little later in the libretto, when Josabeth panics at the news that Athalia intends to search the Temple, Joad rebukes Josabeth for her failure to trust that God will confound Judah's foes and end the festival in joy; these thoroughly communitarian sentiments are absent from Racine's play. Another set of communal praises opens Part II of the libretto, and although much of this Part consists of Athalia's exchange with Joash and its aftermath, the reaffirmations of faith that close Part II are all framed in terms of God renewing his blessings upon Judah and punishing the guilty. By contrast, much of the choral ode following the exchange between Athalie and Joas in Racine is spent with the chorus marvelling at the child they have just seen and speculating on his significance. Part III of the libretto begins with Joad prophesying that Jerusalem will be freed from tyranny by Athalia's downfall and death, but the prophecy makes no mention whatsoever of Joash or of anything that will happen after the end of the libretto; this is very different from Racine, where the prophecy anticipates Joas's future (poor) conduct and ultimately the foundation of the Church. In the libretto, when the newly enthroned Joash is revealed to Athalia, both Joad's and Abner's rejoicing is focused on the revival that Judah will experience as a result of Joash becoming king; no such sentiments appear in Racine, where the emphasis instead is on the loyalty inspired by the person of Joas. The final scene of the libretto shows Joad, Josabeth, and Abner expressing their joy, relief, and praise to God once Athalia has been dethroned, but Joash has no part in this scene, despite being named in the list of characters for it. Finally, Racine's play ends with Joad warning the young king to remember that God is watching over human affairs to assist and to punish (ll. 1813–16), but the last individual to speak in the libretto is Abner, who strikes a thoroughly corporate note:

> Rejoice, O *Judah*, this triumphant Day;
> Let all the Goodness of our God display
> Whose Mercies to the wond'ring World declare,
> His chosen People are his chosen Care. (III.5, p. 20)

The theme of the restoration of the rightful king is thus subordinated throughout to the concept of God's goodness to his chosen people and his rescue of them from tyranny, the latter being the end to which Joash's coronation is the means.

As well as diverting the focus away from Joash towards more communitarian concerns, Humphreys has completely eliminated Christological elements from his presentation of Joash, and has limited the mention of David's line to two references in Part III. The first is just before Joash is crowned: Joad asks him on which

of Judah's kings he would model himself if he ever became king, and Joash replies, 'Like righteous *David* I would wish to reign' (III.1, p. 16). Joash may indeed be of the Davidic line, but in the context his mention of David is better read as a declaration of religious orthodoxy rather than as an (ironical) indicator of actual physical descent. The point is that the true Davidic heir is defined by his moral and religious integrity, regardless of his physical lineage. The second reference to David is when Athalia is shown the crowned Joash and commands Abner to avenge her, but Joad invokes Abner's loyalty to Joash by urging him, 'Thou canst not be to *David*'s Race a Foe' (III.4, p. 18). Here again, the physical lineage of Joash may well be in view, but it is striking that that lineage is only invoked at a point *after* Joash has declared his intention to become David's moral and religious successor. The implication is that 'David's Race' consists of those rulers who, unlike Athalia, embrace David's righteous spiritual principles, thereby effectively sidelining the question of physical lineage which was so important for Jacobites and non-jurors.

c. Religion

From these comments about Athalia and Joash, it can be seen that in the libretto the opposition between Athalia as present ruler and Joash as potential ruler is framed not in terms of legitimate or illegitimate descent, but in terms of true and false religion. Hence, the theme of the libretto becomes the opposition between true and false religion, together with the certain triumph of true religion. This is evidenced at many points. The opening choruses of praise include the air and chorus:

> Tyrants would, in impious Throngs,
> Silence his Adorer's songs;
> But shall *Salem*'s Lyre and Lute
> At their proud Commands be mute?
> Tyrants, ye in vain conspire!
> Wake the Lute and strike the Lyre!
> Why should *Salem*'s Lyre and Lute
> At their proud Commands be mute? (I.1. p. 4)

This picture of proud, impious tyrants whose tyranny and pride is characterized in terms of their vain desire to put an end to legitimate worship appears several times in the libretto, and is particularly applied to Athalia. Following the opening scene of worship, Joad the high priest enters and bewails the situation of Judah in a recitative:

> O *Judah*! *Judah*! chosen Seed;
> To what Distress art thou decreed!
> How are thy sacred Feasts profan'd!
> Thy Rites with vile Pollution stain'd!
> Proud *Athalia*'s impious Hand
> Sheds Desolation thro' thy Land;
> She bids unhallow'd Altars flame,
> And proudly braves *Jehovah*'s Name. (I.2, p. 5)

Athalia is pictured here primarily as an apostate who does not worship the God of Judah, which is enough to condemn her and to characterize her as morally depraved. Similarly, the young Joash's response to Athalia's invitation to come and live with her, a response much truncated from the equivalent scene in Racine, is, 'Shall I behold the God by whom I'm bless'd,/Profan'd by you, with Rites that I detest?' (II.2, p. 12). In Joash's mind, the idea of Athalia as an apostate idolater is more than sufficient justification for his refusal of her offer, presumably because apostasy and idolatry are associated with depravity.

The link between tyranny and apostasy is also evidenced in Humphreys' treatment of the character of Mathan, the priest of Baal, especially in Part III of the libretto. Contrary to both the biblical versions and Racine, Mathan is present at the grand denouement as Athalia sees the child she knew as Eliakim now enthroned as Joash, the Davidic heir. Athalia, realizing that all her supporters have deserted her, turns to Mathan in desperation and begs him to ask his God to punish the rebels. But Mathan knows that his cause is hopeless, and replies,

> He hears no more, our Hopes are past,
> The *Hebrews*' God prevails at last;
> Alas! alas! my broken Vow!
> His dreadful Hand is on me now. (III.4, p. 19)

He then sings the despairing air:

> Hark, hark, his Thunders round me roll,
> His angry awful Frowns I see;
> His Arrows wound my trembling Soul.
> Is no more Mercy left for me!
> Ah no, he now denies to save!
> Open, O Earth, and be my Grave! (III.4, p. 19)

Such prominence given to a relatively minor character at the very height of the denouement is unexpected, but is explained very well by the idea that the libretto is at least as much, if not more so, about the clash of true and false religion as it is about the struggle for the throne. On the assumption that Baal worship stands for Catholicism, the libretto is emphasizing the fate that awaits Catholic priests: they are rejected by God and damned to perdition, with their hopes of world domination crushed. Joad follows Mathan's air with the comment, 'Yes, proud Apostate, thou shalt fall;/Thy Crimes aloud for Vengeance call' (III.4, p. 19), thus completing the picture of Catholicism and its adherents as wicked and worthy of punishment.

Any doubt that the libretto is about cleansing the land from Catholicism, and should therefore be regarded as pro-Hanoverian instead of pro-Stuart, must surely be dispelled by Joad's air interspersed with the Chorus that is sung when the boy king Joash is revealed to Athalia:

> Reviving *Judah* shall no more
> Detested Images adore;
> We'll purge with a reforming Hand
> Idolatry from out the Land. (III.4, p. 18)

Once again, this is unique to the libretto, appearing in neither the biblical versions nor in Racine, and it expresses very well the concept of Catholicism as an

idolatrous religion characterized by the worship of images. Equally noteworthy is the two-line chorus following this air: 'May God, from whom all Mercies spring,/ Bless the true Church, and save the king' (III.4, p. 18). The true Church is placed before the king, thus giving the Church the place of primary importance; enthroning Joash is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, namely, crushing the idolatrous religion favoured by the Queen and protecting the interests of the one true faith—Anglicanism.[34]

CONCLUSION

In its treatment of the Athaliah story, then, Humphreys' libretto refashions Racine's play in a way that shifts the focus away from Joash's Davidic claim to the throne and onto the rescue of God's chosen people from tyrannous rule as embodied in Athalia and Mathan. Thus, although the biblical narrative arguably had Jacobite associations, which might suggest a pro-Jacobite reading for the oratorio, the libretto is much more ambiguous than it appears, and does in fact display strong pro-Hanoverian, anti-Catholic features. Indeed, it is possible that this ambiguity was deliberate, enabling Handel to produce an oratorio that would satisfy the potentially hostile High Church and Jacobite factions in Oxford without being disloyal to his Hanoverian benefactors. To that extent, far from being a puzzling choice of subject in the context, Athaliah was in fact the ideal choice, and was a significant factor in the success of Handel's visit to Oxford.

[34] Philip Brett and George Haggerty, 'Handel and the Sentimental: The Case of "Athalia"', *M & L*, 68 (1987), 112–27, comment that this chorus is 'surely calculated by the court composer [Handel] to generate loyalty towards the reigning house of Hanover in the notoriously Jacobite atmosphere of Oxford' (115), a comment that applies equally to the words and their musical setting.

4

Saul

Tragedy, Treachery, and Theology

Despite the success of *Athalia* during Handel's visit to Oxford, it would be a further five years before he produced another new oratorio, although he staged revivals of *Esther*, *Deborah*, and *Athalia* between his opera performances in London during the 1734–7 seasons. But a lack of subscriptions for the 1738–9 opera season[1] seems to have been the eventual catalyst for Handel's fourth Israelite oratorio, *Saul*, which was completed in 1738 to a libretto written by Charles Jennens.[2] This was the first collaboration between Handel and Jennens, but not the last; Jennens would provide another two and possibly three libretti for Handel. *Messiah* (1741) is probably Jennens's best-known libretto, but in addition to this, *Belshazzar* (1744) was definitely from his pen, and *Israel in Egypt* (1738) is often attributed to him, largely because of its similarity in format to *Messiah* (it is a catena of biblical texts with a large choral element, rather than a dramatic adaptation of a scriptural narrative in which solo parts predominate).[3] Just as Samuel Humphreys' libretti had focused on women leaders, on 'queenship' in its various biblical manifestations, Jennens's libretti show a partiality for the theme of kingship, two of them (*Saul*, *Belshazzar*) depicting earthly kings and a third (*Messiah*) exploring the nature of the heavenly king.[4]

Saul is a complex work which operates at a number of levels and addresses several interwoven themes in its depiction of Israel's first king. This study will aim to highlight these themes by means of a close analysis of the libretto in relation to

[1] Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 201–2.

[2] For biographical details on Jennens, see Ruth Smith, 'The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700–1773)', *M & L*, 70 (1989), 161–89. It seems that Jennens sent the libretto to Handel several years earlier, in 1735, but Handel did not act upon it until the failure of the opera subscription in 1738. See Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959, repr. 2000), 274. Handel's collaboration with Samuel Humphreys was ended by Humphreys' death in 1737.

[3] In a letter of 10 July 1741, Jennens refers to providing 'another Scripture Collection' for Handel to set, on the subject of Messiah. It has been inferred from this that the earlier collection was *Israel in Egypt*. See Burrows, *Handel*, 246, 259.

[4] It is tempting to see all of Jennens's librettos as Christological. As will be argued below, in *Saul* David is a type of Christ; and Cyrus in *Belshazzar* could be viewed similarly, given his designation in Isa. 45.1 as the Lord's anointed (specifically cited in the oratorio), and the way in which he is depicted as setting the captive Jews free from Babylon. See Minji Kim, 'The Messianic Portrait of Cyrus in Handel's *Belshazzar*: Theological and Textual Parallels with *Messiah*', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 55 (2009), 391–403. Clearly in this vein *Messiah* is the ultimate Christological oratorio.

the biblical text upon which it is based. Consideration will also be given to the possible political implications of the libretto, given that Jennens was known as a non-juror, a stance that might account for his persistent interest in the theme of kingship in his libretti.

SAUL AND DAVID: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The first step in the analytical process for a libretto such as *Saul* would normally be to review the biblical material upon which the libretto is based. However, what will be reviewed here is material that Jennens omitted from his libretto, but which is vital for contextualizing the narrative of Saul as it develops in the biblical account. The biblical narrative about Saul begins in 1 Samuel 9 with an account of how Saul was designated by Samuel to be king, and follows his fortunes from then on; but the libretto begins some eight or nine chapters later, at a point after David has killed the Philistine giant Goliath (an event narrated in 1 Samuel 17). By this stage in the biblical account Saul is firmly established as the reigning king, but following a series of incidents related in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 his kingship has been repudiated by Yahweh,[5] casting a shadow over his position. Jennens, however, all but ignores this ambivalent state of affairs,[6] and the omission of this material makes a significant difference to his portrayal of the relationship between Saul and David, as will become clear.

However, in order to get a proper sense of context, all of the biblical material about Saul needs to be understood in the context of the historical work of which it forms a part. The book of 1 Samuel in which the Saul and David narratives appear is part of what is known to modern scholarship as the Deuteronomistic History. This umbrella term refers collectively to the history books Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, which together form a continuous history of Israel from the time of the settlement of the land to the time of the Babylonian Exile, and show marked affinities with the themes, vocabulary, and ideology of the book of Deuteronomy. Most scholars date the present text of the History somewhere in the Babylonian Exile (587–539 BCE), and on this reading, the History's function is to justify as divine punishment the calamitous loss of the land which Israel has suffered, by showing how the people failed to keep the God-given Law as set out in Deuteronomy. The thrust of the History is that it was the kings who failed to promote the principles of the Law and who led the people into apostasy by the principles and style of worship that they adopted. Monarchy is thus an institution that is regarded with a good deal of ambivalence, and although individual good kings win the approval of the Historian, many of the kings are assessed negatively. Indeed, the description of how monarchy came into existence in Israel (1 Sam. 8)

[5] 'Yahweh' is the Hebrew name for the God of the Old Testament.

[6] There is a reference towards the end of the libretto to the incident in 1 Sam. 15 as justification for Saul's downfall, but it does not cohere well with the overall narrative thrust of the libretto, and seems to be introduced contrary to narrative logic for a specific theological purpose, as will be discussed below. There is certainly nothing in the libretto of the other material to be discussed here, and no sense that Saul's kingship is already under question from the beginning of the story.

is redolent with negativity. The people demand a king because Samuel's sons, who are currently in charge, are corrupt. Samuel is displeased and prays to Yahweh, who tells him that by their demand for a king the people have rejected not Samuel but Yahweh. Samuel is to grant them their request, but he is to warn them about how the king will oppress them, and they should expect no sympathy from God when these warnings come true. Samuel duly warns the people about what having a king will mean, but they insist upon having one, and so Yahweh and Samuel accede to their request.[7]

This is the immediate and rather unpromising backdrop to the choice of Saul as king, whose nomination and anointing are described in the next two chapters; and other negative elements appear as the story of the newly elected monarch progresses. In 1 Sam. 10.17–27, after Saul has been privately anointed by Samuel, he is publicly brought before the people, designated by divine lot,[8] and affirmed as king. In the first part of the chapter, all seems extremely positive, as Saul is affirmed in his new role by being given the spirit of God which enables him to prophesy (1 Sam. 10.5–6, 9–10). However, when Samuel calls the people together to present their new king to them, he begins by repeating the message that their demand for a king to rule over them is tantamount to rejecting the Lord (1 Sam. 10.18–19). Thus, there is an ongoing undercurrent of negativity that taints the whole concept of human kingship and raises doubts in the reader's mind as to the wisdom and legitimacy of the venture. In an interesting twist, this negativity is expressed openly by some of the people themselves, who doubt Saul's ability to protect the people (1 Sam. 10.27); but these doubts are proved groundless when in the ensuing narrative Saul defeats and destroys the Ammonites who are attacking the Israelite town of Jabesh (1 Sam. 11.1–11). This seems to convince even the sceptical Samuel, who summons the people to Gilgal where they 'renew the kingdom' with great rejoicing (1 Sam. 11.14–15). But the bonhomie does not

[7] For a discussion of the ideology of 1 Sam. 8–12, see Gerald Eddie Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History*, SBLDS, 87 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 140–57. Gerbrandt argues that it is the notion of kingship as a replacement for Yahweh's function as military leader of the people that is viewed as evil, and not the notion of kingship per se. He thinks that Saul is rejected for his failure, in the context of battle, to obey Yahweh's commands as communicated to him by the prophet Samuel: 'In war and in defence of his people, Yahweh was king, and the human king was subservient to him' (157). Hence in 1 Sam. 8–15 the struggle is over how the role of king should be defined, rather than over whether it should exist in the first place.

[8] Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History. Part Two: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 103–4, comments that the use of lots to designate Saul (1 Sam. 10.20–2) has negative overtones, because the only two other occasions on which individuals are identified by lot before the Lord are situations where an unknown transgressor needs to be singled out. Polzin concludes that the use of the lots to identify Saul 'is intended, above all else, to emphasize the guilt and sin inherent in the royal office for which he is taken' (104). However, Diana Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, JSOTSup, 121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 56 n. 1, disagrees that the lot-casting should be read as negative, arguing that in ancient Israel as a whole casting lots was a neutral method of determining the divine will, and the fact that the two other biblical examples of lot-casting involve determination of guilt is coincidental. Edelman's point is valid; on the other hand, the issue here is not whether historically speaking lot-casting had inherently negative associations, but how lot-casting is represented in the Old Testament, or specifically in the Deuteronomistic History, which is where all three examples of lot-casting before the Lord appear (Josh. 7.14–18; 1 Sam. 10.20–1; 1 Sam. 14.41–2). On this latter basis, it would seem reasonable to admit the possibility of negative overtones for the lot-casting in 1 Sam. 10.

last long. Chapter 12 is Samuel's 'farewell discourse' in which he formally steps down from governing the country, and once again the negativity surges to the fore. Samuel characterizes the people's demand for a king as rejecting God who is their true king (1 Sam. 12.12),[9] and he calls down unseasonal thunder and rain from heaven to emphasize the people's wickedness (1 Sam. 12.17). Not surprisingly, the people are terrified, although Samuel reassures them that as long as they remain faithful to the Lord they will be all right. But his final thrust is that if they are unfaithful then both they and their king will be destroyed (1 Sam. 12.25). Kingship is thus presented as an evil that God is tolerating rather in the way that parents allow their children to have things of which they themselves disapprove as long as the children behave appropriately in relation to the items in question.[10] It is clear that kingship is conditional, and that even though Saul seems to be established firmly in his new role it cannot be taken for granted that he will remain so.

The pattern over these introductory chapters, then, is that whenever there is a positive affirmation of Saul or the kingship, there is a corresponding negative element warning against the dangers of kingship and preventing the reader from feeling comfortable about what is likely to transpire, either for Saul or for any other subsequent king. As a result, the reader is not surprised that Saul's kingship runs less than smoothly; but it is also necessary to ask why it goes quite so badly wrong. 1 Samuel 13 shows the first of two major *faux pas* that result in Saul being rejected by Yahweh: Saul gathers his army to fight the Philistines, and as he has been told when he was anointed (1 Sam. 10.8), waits for Samuel to come in order to offer sacrifice before they go into battle. But Samuel does not appear and the nervous army is dispersing, so Saul offers sacrifice himself, only for Samuel to arrive and condemn him for disobedience (1 Sam. 13.13–14). It is hard not to sympathize with Saul here; he has been put into a no-win situation where whatever he did would be wrong. Commentators have noted how Samuel's appearance just as Saul has carried out the sacrifices is rather suspicious.[11] It is as if Samuel has deliberately manipulated Saul into an untenable position in order to prove his point about the dangers of kingship; and certainly in the light of Samuel's continual negative comments about the monarchy in chapters 8–12 one cannot but question whether the real opposition to monarchy is in the mind of Samuel rather than anywhere else.[12]

[9] Samuel represents the threat from the Ammonites as the event which precipitated the people's (evil) desire for a king, even though Saul's response as king to this crisis was exemplary and led to great rejoicing. In this way even Saul's acts of valour in securing the people from attack are undermined by the implication that his position of leadership is illegitimate.

[10] Contrast Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel*, JSOTSup, 365 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 179, who takes 1 Sam. 8 and 12 to mean that kingship is not essentially wrong although it goes very badly.

[11] See, for example, the comments of Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 99: '[Samuel] comes so quickly that the reader can only marvel at the timing . . . . It almost appears as a setup, in which Samuel is testing to see how far he can keep Saul under his control and subordinate to his priestly authority.'

[12] As Brueggemann comments of the episode in 1 Sam. 13, 'The commandment that appears to have been broken is, "Thou shalt not violate Samuel's authority"' (*First and Second Samuel*, 100).

However, there is another more sinister aspect to the narrative of Saul's demise, namely, the role of Yahweh. Yahweh, after all, has said that kingship is effectively the people's rejection of his own rule over them (1 Sam. 8.7), and although he is the one who has apparently designated a king for them (1 Sam. 9.27–10.1), the matter is not resolved. As Sarah Nicholson observes, 'Having chosen a king for the people, Yhwh now finds him unequal to the task for which he has been chosen and proscribes his leadership.'[13] Indeed, Saul is apparently unable to do right for doing wrong in the eyes of the deity, as is evidenced by a second rejection episode that comes in 1 Samuel 15.[14] At the command of Yahweh via Samuel, Saul undertakes a campaign against the Amalekites and is told to put all the people and livestock to the sword; but he spares the king of the Amalekites, and keeps the best of the livestock, ostensibly to be sacrificed to God. As a result, Yahweh sends Samuel to Saul with the message that because Saul has disobeyed Yahweh's command the kingdom has been taken from him and will be given to someone else.[15] The most striking aspect of both this and the former episode of rejection is the complete absence of any opportunity given to Saul for repentance, and even though on the second occasion Saul admits to having sinned and begs for forgiveness, Samuel dismisses his protestations out of hand (1 Sam. 15.24–6).[16] Yet despite being told that Yahweh has rejected him from being king over Israel, Saul is not immediately dismissed from being king. He is told that the kingdom will be given to a neighbour of his (1 Sam. 15.28), but no indication is given of a timescale or of who the neighbour might be. That being the case it is hardly surprising that he develops feelings of paranoia and depression, suspecting everyone in his entourage of conspiring against him (1 Sam. 22.7–8). But as if this were not enough, Yahweh also torments him by sending an evil spirit upon him (1 Sam. 16.14–15), with the ironical consequence that the person who is ultimately to take over from Saul as king is the very person employed to bring him relief from the torment of the evil spirit. It is noticeable that once Saul begins (rightly) to suspect David as the pretender to his throne David's soothing music loses its effectiveness in calming Saul's troubled mind, and David is sent away from court (1 Sam. 18.8–13), ultimately being forced to flee for his life from the kingdom (1 Sam. 20.42).

[13] Sarah Nicholson, *Three Faces of Saul: An Intertextual Approach to Biblical Tragedy*, JSOTSup, 339 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 42. The term 'Yhwh' used here is an abbreviated form of the divine name 'Yahweh'.

[14] In all likelihood, the two 'rejection' episodes are variant traditions of a single clash between king and prophet, but the focus of the present analysis is on the final form of the text, and so they are treated as separate episodes.

[15] David Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, JSOTSup, 14 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 39–50, argues that the rejection episodes in 1 Sam. 13 and 15 both turn on the question of how Saul has interpreted the commands he receives from Yahweh via Samuel; in each case, Saul believes that he has interpreted the command appropriately, but Yahweh's interpretation differs from Saul's, effectively putting Saul in the wrong.

[16] Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24–30, argues that the rejection episodes demonstrate an essential fearfulness in Saul that makes him unsuitable for the kingship, and that Saul's desperate pleas to Samuel for forgiveness in 1 Sam. 15 are about saving face in front of the people rather than being an expression of true repentance. This seems excessively hard on Saul, though, and does not sufficiently address the question of the deity's role in the whole affair.

Under the circumstances, then, it is not surprising that Saul behaves as he does, and while commentators have also highlighted indicators in the narrative that he has certain character flaws such as indecisiveness and hesitancy together with a tendency for rash decisions and inflexibility, there is no evidence that he is fundamentally morally depraved, or indeed that his dedication to Yahweh is lacking. Rather, the evidence implies the opposite: Yahweh's dedication to *him* is severely lacking, to the extent that Saul is made the scapegoat for Yahweh's sense of rejection when the people demand a king. However, once Saul has been made an example of, and Yahweh has had time to get used to the idea of a king, he can then have one of his own choosing in his own time; and that appointment will not be terminated regardless of the failings of the person in question.

SAUL AND DAVID: JENNENS'S LIBRETTO

In the biblical text, then, Saul can be seen as being victimized by Yahweh in the context of a challenge to the legitimacy of the monarchy itself as an institution. However, the portrayal of Saul in Jennens's libretto[17] was dictated by quite a different set of ideological presuppositions, as will become clear.

The libretto begins at the point where David has just defeated the Philistine giant Goliath, as the people sing a song of triumph to celebrate David's victory. There then follows an exchange between David, Saul, and Jonathan in which Saul urges David to stay in his employ and promises him his daughter Merab's hand in marriage, and Jonathan is drawn irresistibly to David because of David's piety. The *entente cordiale* is soon shattered, however, when the people celebrate the victory once again by singing that Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands, and Saul flies into a jealous rage, seeing David as a threat to his own kingship. David goes to calm him by playing the lyre, as he has done in the past, but the enraged Saul throws his spear at David, which David evades. Saul then orders Jonathan and everyone else to do away with David. Jonathan is shocked, but soon resolves to protect David as an act of duty to both God and Saul, and the people and high priest pray that God will protect David.

The second act opens with the famous 'Envy' chorus, which describes envy in demonic terms, after which Jonathan tells David that in a spirit of envy Saul has commanded everyone in his retinue to kill David. David seems puzzled at Saul's erratic behaviour towards him. Jonathan attempts to dissuade Saul from his murderous intentions by pointing out the good that David has done for the kingdom, and Saul agrees that David should be restored to favour and marry his daughter Michal (Merab having been given to another man). Saul receives David courteously; but it is clear that despite this apparent benevolence Saul intends to send David against the Philistines and get him killed. David and Michal declare their love for each other; but David is soon telling Michal how Saul has again tried to kill him when he brought Saul news of military successes. Michal

[17] *Saul, an Oratorio; or, Sacred Drama. As it is Perform'd At the King's Theatre in the Hay-Market. Set to Musick by George-Frederic Handel, Esq;* (London: T. Wood, 1738).

realizes that David is in danger and urges him to escape, then defies the messengers who arrive from Saul to kill David. The focus returns to Saul who swears to kill David at the imminent feast of the New Moon, but when the feast comes David's place is empty, and Jonathan tells Saul that David has gone home to Bethlehem for a family celebration. Saul is incensed and orders David to be brought and killed; when Jonathan asks why, Saul throws his spear at him. The act closes with a chorus declaring that Saul's rage will drive him to destruction.

The final act shows a desperate Saul on the night before a battle with the Philistines. In the realization that he has driven away David and been deserted by God, Saul visits a witch in order to contact the dead prophet Samuel for advice. The conjured Samuel is dismissive of Saul's plea for help, telling Saul that as previously foretold he has forfeited the kingdom, which has been given to the virtuous David, and that Saul and Jonathan will die in the impending battle. The next scene is after the battle; David intercepts a messenger from the battlefield who tells him that Israel has been defeated and Saul and Jonathan are dead. David asks the messenger how he knows that Saul and Jonathan are dead, and when he hears that the messenger himself killed the mortally wounded Saul at Saul's own request, David orders the messenger to be put to death for killing the Lord's anointed. There then follows an elegy for Saul and Jonathan, after which David is acclaimed as the one who will restore what Saul has lost and will bring victory to the people.

Virtue and villainy

In considering what sort of ideas the libretto might have been intended to communicate, there is some important evidence from Jennens himself to assess. The printed libretti for the 1738 performances and 1740 revival have on the cover two quotations from classical authors which Jennens chose as being germane to the libretto's subject-matter.[18] The first is in Greek:

> Ἀρετῇ ποιεῦ φίλον ὅστις ἄριστος
>
> [Make a friend for yourself of whoever is most excellent in virtue.]

This is from the so-called 'Golden Verses' (*Aurea Carmina*), which are a collection of instructions for life attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Pythagoras. The second quotation is in Latin:

> Qui autem in virtute summum bonum ponunt, praeclare illi quidem: Sed haec ipsa virtus Amicitiam & gignit & Continet: Nec sine virtute Amicitia esse ullo pacto potest.
>
> [But those who place the supreme value on virtue, certainly make an excellent judgement; yet this very same virtue both creates and maintains friendship, and without virtue it is in no way possible for friendship to exist.]

This is a quotation from Cicero's philosophical treatise *De amicitia*, 'On Friendship', in which he explores the nature of friendship in a Platonic-style dialogue

[18] Apparently Jennens mentioned having chosen the quotations himself, in a letter to his friend Edward Holdsworth. See Smith, 'Achievements', 170.

between three well-known figures of the previous century. Immediately prior to this quotation the speaker has argued that friendship is the best of the gifts given to humankind by the gods, by showing how fleeting and unreliable some of the other things are that humans value, such as riches and health. He then acknowledges the value of virtue, but claims that this proves his point about friendship as the greatest benefit because virtue results in friendship; in other words, virtue is not its own reward but leads beyond itself to something else, namely, friendship.

Just how significant these two quotations are for understanding the libretto can be seen from an examination of the characters of Saul and David as portrayed by Jennens. To begin with Saul, it must be said that Jennens's choice of material for the libretto makes Saul look worse than he appears in the biblical narrative. Apart from the opening Epinicion which is based in part on Psalm 8, the libretto is derived from 1 Samuel 17–20 and 28, and 2 Samuel 1; this means that Jennens has focused on Saul's early encounters with David, his realization and fear of David's popularity, his sworn enmity towards David, and finally his consultation with the Witch of Endor. There is nothing of the apparent rapprochement that takes place between David and Saul when David (twice) comes near enough to the unguarded Saul to kill him but refuses to do so (1 Sam. 24; 1 Sam. 26), nor does Saul ever acknowledge David's right to the kingship, as he does in 1 Sam. 24.20; all that the libretto shows is the relationship between the two men degenerating past the point of no return, and a Saul who is committed to destroying David. David for his part receives something of a whitewash; nothing is mentioned about him going over to the Philistines (1 Sam. 27.1–2), or actually preparing to fight with the Philistines against Israel on the eve of the battle at Gilboa in which Saul and Jonathan are killed (1 Sam. 28.1–2; 29.1–3). Nor is there anything of David's band of malcontents roaming round the wilderness in guerilla opposition to Saul's regime (1 Sam. 22.1–2; 25.5–8).[19]

But as already remarked, perhaps the most important omission is of material concerning Saul's rise to kingship and his clash with Samuel/Yahweh (1 Sam. 8–15), all of which occurs in the biblical text before David is even mentioned, but is vital for contextualizing and understanding the dynamics of the relationship between Saul and David. The absence of this important material is made even more obvious by the presence of two passing allusions in the libretto to pre-Goliath material about Saul and David. The first is when Saul storms away in rage at the people's unflattering comparison of himself with David, and Michal, attributing Saul's behaviour to 'his old Disease', tells David to go and soothe Saul with the harp 'as thou oft hast done' (I.4, p. 8). This alludes to the narrative in 1 Sam. 16.14–23 of how David is appointed to play his harp for Saul, in order to soothe the effects of the evil spirit sent on Saul by the Lord after David has secretly been anointed as Saul's replacement. But nothing is said in the libretto of this affliction being from the Lord—rather, it is simply Saul's 'old Disease', some personal indisposition or character flaw that serves to imply that Saul is somehow unfit to be king, or is at constant risk of becoming so.

[19] On Jennens's selection of biblical material for the libretto, Dean comments that he 'omits all that is confusing or inessential, such as David's sojourn with the Philistines and the many incidents associated with it' (Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 279). Dean apparently fails to recognize that omitting such material makes a significant difference to the portrait of David that appears in the libretto.

The second allusion to pre-Goliath material is in the ghostly Samuel's speech to Saul, where Samuel tells Saul that what has happened is what was foretold:

> Did I not foretel thy Fate,
> When, madly disobedient, thou didst spare
> The curst *Amalekite*, and on the Spoil
> Didst fly rapacious? Therefore God this Day
> Hath verify'd my Words in thy Destruction;
> Hath rent the Kingdom from thee, and bestow'd it
> On *David*, whom thou hatest for his Virtue. (III.3, p. 20)

The allusion here is to the episode in 1 Samuel 15, where Saul defeats and slaughters the Amalekites, but contrary to the instructions given to him by Samuel spares some of their animals and the Amalekite king Agag, claiming that he wanted to offer the animals as sacrifices to God. This series of events marks the final breakdown of relationships between Samuel and Saul, and the definitive rejection of Saul as king over Israel; it is following this that Samuel is instructed by God to anoint David, and that an evil spirit from God comes to torment Saul, requiring that someone (David) should be found to soothe him by playing on the lyre (1 Sam. 16). In the biblical text, it is thus clear not only that Saul is doomed, but also that God is active in bringing about that doom; and the Amalekite incident in 1 Samuel 15 is an important key to understanding the subsequent events of the narrative as that doom is worked out in practice. The libretto's allusion to the Amalekite incident is equally significant, because it hints that there is more to what has happened to Saul than meets the eye. Saul's clash with David was not simply a chance rivalry that has developed to destructive levels because of a defect in Saul's personality; God himself has been involved in the process. The question, though, is to what extent. From the narrative as it is presented in the libretto, there is no hint until now that David is officially destined to be Saul's successor, and although David does eventually gain the throne (or at least the leadership) at the end of the oratorio, and the audience finally learns from Samuel's words that it is God who has caused the change of leadership, Saul's response both to the Amalekites and to David is portrayed in Samuel's speech as entirely culpable. In the reference to the Amalekite incident a 'madly disobedient' Saul is said to 'fly rapacious' on the spoil, emotive terms that clearly indict Saul.[20] Then Samuel speaks to Saul of 'David, whom thou hatest for his Virtue', an embellishment to the biblical text that once again lays the blame squarely at Saul's door. Jennens's God is firmly on the side of truth and righteousness, and the dark, ambivalent deity of 1 Samuel who seems to victimize a helpless Saul is nowhere to be found.

Nor is it only in this third and final part of the libretto that Saul is portrayed as culpable. Throughout, his negative response to David and his fits of rage are presented as sinful and hellish, and he clearly fears David as a contender for the throne, but no reason is given for this beyond the women's victory song in I.3 (p. 7), making his behaviour seem arbitrary and paranoid. Michal's reference to

[20] Some of this language comes from the KJV of the Bible; in 1 Sam. 15.19 Samuel asks Saul, 'Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the Lord, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst evil in the sight of the Lord?' But Jennens's addition of the qualifiers 'madly' and 'rapacious' results in a much more damning indictment of Saul.

Saul's 'old Disease' (I.4, p. 8) noted above is presumably meant to give some kind of context to his initial outburst; but as the libretto progresses, it becomes obvious that her assessment of the situation is too casual, and the progression of Saul's behaviour appears to have little to do with the 'old Disease' that could formerly be controlled by the use of music therapy. The net result is that Saul appears to be not mad but malevolent. As David tries fruitlessly to calm him by playing the harp, Saul 'mutters horrid Words, which Hell,/No human Tongue, has taught him' (I.5, p. 8), behaves '[w]ith wild Distraction', 'Stamps on the Ground, and seems intent on Mischief' (I.5, p. 9); he orders his entourage to destroy David, an act which Jonathan deems 'sacrilegious' (I.6, p. 10); and he is said to hate David 'without a cause' and to pursue David's life 'in defiance of (God's) laws' (ibid.). Saul's acquiescence to Jonathan's request that he readmit David to the royal court (II.3, p. 13), together with his grant of Michal to be David's wife (II.4, pp. 13–14), is shown as a calculated deception intended to ensnare David and get him killed, and when it fails to do so Saul throws his javelin at David again in open fury (II.6, p. 15).[21] He then sends Doeg to arrest David, but Michal helps David escape, and when Doeg threatens her with Saul's enraged reaction, in an implicit reference to Saul she refuses to be cowed by the 'Power' and 'Spite' of the 'Guilty' whose 'lawless Force' Jehovah will restrain (II.7, p. 16). The climactic scene of the New Moon feast shows Saul planning his revenge on David (II. 9, p. 17), and then responding in by-now characteristic rage when David does not come to the feast (II.10, p. 18). This is followed by the chorus 'O fatal Consequence', which refers a third time to Saul's disregard of the law, as it pictures him on a rage-driven, unstoppable journey to self-destruction:

> With ev'ry Law he can dispense;
> No Ties the furious Monster hold:
> From Crime to Crime he blindly goes,
> Nor End, but with his own Destruction, knows. (II.10, p. 18)

The chorus's dire prediction is fulfilled almost immediately, as the very next event is Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor, and as he hesitates at the witch's door it is clear that he has been sobered by the realization of what he has done to himself:

> Wretch that I am! of my own Ruin Author! (III.1, p. 19)

[21] By contrast, the biblical text separates the readmittance (1 Sam. 19.1–7) and the marriage to Michal (1 Sam. 18.20–9), and although the marriage is intended to be to David's detriment (1 Sam. 18.25), the readmittance has every appearance of being a genuine rapprochement (1 Sam 19.6–7). Eighteenth-century commentators were divided on the genuineness of the rapprochement; several understood it as sincere if short lived, so Jennens's treatment of it as completely false is clearly an interpretative choice on his part, adding to his portrait of Saul as completely lacking in virtue. For more generous interpretations of the rapprochement, see Edward Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: being the two Books of Samuel, and the two Books of Kings* (Oxford, 1726), 66; Simon Patrick, *A Commentary upon the Historical Books of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, 3rd edn. (London, 1727), 245; Samuel Humphreys, *The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testament, recited at large* (London, 1735), 813. Thomas Ellwood in his *Sacred History: or, The Historical Part of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament*, 2nd edn. (London, 1720), 254, says that Saul may or may not be genuine in his reacceptance of David, athough in his poem *Davideis. The Life of David King of Israel: A Sacred Poem in Five Books*, 2nd edn. (London, 1727), 33, Ellwood implies that Saul's acceptance of David is genuine while it lasts.

He then bewails the fact that his rage has driven David away and that God has forsaken him, thereby making it clear that he regards himself as responsible for this state of affairs.[22] Even Samuel's words to him reinforce the sense of his culpability; as noted above, Samuel tells him that God 'Hath rent the Kingdom from thee, and bestow'd it/On *David*, whom thou hatest for his Virtue' (III.3, p. 20). The idea that Saul hates David because of his virtue is a sure-fire way of characterizing Saul as wicked and culpable, because only the wicked would be repelled by virtue.[23]

The picture of Saul in the libretto is therefore quite different from that in the biblical text. In the biblical narrative, Saul is shown as genuinely conflicted over his relationship with David and as being capable of rapprochement with him. But in the libretto no such rapprochement is possible; rather, Saul is simply overcome by hatred and envy, and pursues David relentlessly, to the point where he alienates not only David, but his own family and even God. He is thus portrayed in the libretto as the embodiment of villainy, something that cannot be said of the Saul who appears in 1 Samuel.

But it is not only Saul whose portrayal in the libretto receives significant manipulation in comparison with the biblical text; David's portrayal too is massaged. Not only are the biblical passages that present David in a potentially negative light omitted, as already noted, but the material that is included is given a much more explicitly virtuous 'spin' than it has in the biblical text. As a result, David becomes the embodiment of virtue in much the same way as Saul is presented as the embodiment of villainy. The scene in which David first appears after killing Goliath is devoted to establishing David's virtue (I.2). Abner describes him as 'the brave, victorious Youth' (I.2, p. 4), but David is not only brave but also modest and pious, refusing what he sees as Saul's excessive praise of his achievements because such praise should go to God who was the real author of the victory. It is this humility that so captures Jonathan's affections, as he exclaims, 'O early Piety! O modest Merit!' (I.2, p. 5). Merab's scornful comments about David's low birth prompt Jonathan to defend his action with reference to David's virtue: 'Birth and Fortune I despise!/From Virtue let my Friendship rise' (I.2, p. 5). He then tells David,

> No Titles proud thy Stem adorn;
> Yet born of God is nobly born:
> And of his Gifts so rich thy Store,
> That *Ophir* to thy Wealth is poor. (I.2, p. 5)

[22] Interestingly, there is no indication as to why Saul has been forsaken by God, and the implication is that it is because of his treatment of David, or at the very least because of his rage-driven behaviour. The introduction of the Amalekite incident in Samuel's recitative seems to offer a different answer to the question.

[23] By contrast, Rüdiger Bartelmus, 'Handel and Jennens' Oratorio "Saul": A Late Musical and Dramatic Rehabilitation of the Figure of Saul', in Carl S. Ehrlich and Marsha C. White (eds.), *Saul in Story and Tradition*, FAT, 47 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 284–307, argues that the oratorio's depiction of Saul is a true tragedy because it shows Saul 'hounded into insanity and death by . . . a God-given reality' (292). However, although this can certainly be said of the biblical text, it is difficult to see it in the libretto, especially in the light of the textual details just discussed.

Their friendship is blessed by the high priest as setting an eminent precedent: 'your great Example/Shall teach our Youth to scorn the sordid World,/And set their Hearts on Things of real Worth' (I.2, p. 5). Although Merab then affects horror at being told that she is to marry David, her reaction is immediately counteracted by that of Michal, who reflects that Merab does not appreciate the honour done to her, and that David is too good for her. David's virtuous character is thus firmly established right at the beginning of the libretto, and continues to be evident. A short while later, as David plays his harp to calm the enraged Saul, he sings an air praying for God's mercy on sinful 'Man' (I.5, p. 8), but in the context it must refer to Saul—not the usual reaction to one's mortal enemy. When Saul commands Jonathan and the others to kill David, Jonathan agonizes over the morality of killing 'the Brave, the Virtuous,/The God-like David', and declares that he cannot 'with sacrilegious Blow/Take Pious David's life away' (I.6, pp. 9–10); then the High Priest prays that God who always protects those 'Who the Ways of Virtue choose' will protect David from Saul's rage (I.6, p. 10), thereby again emphasizing David's virtue. When Jonathan next sees David, he exclaims, 'Ah! dearest Friend, undone by too much Virtue!' (II.2, p. 11), and then pleads for David with Saul to 'Think, to his Loyalty and Truth/What great Rewards are due!' (II.3, p.13). Michal declares that she has long loved David on account of his virtue (II.5, p. 14), and the chorus sing of how God protects the man who directs all his ways to pleasing God (II.5, p. 15), presumably with reference to David. Even the sulky Merab, who initially despises David because of his low birth, is moved to confess David's good qualities and to pray that Jonathan can dissuade Saul from persecuting David (II.8, p. 17). When Saul consults the ghost of Samuel, he is told that God will give the kingdom to David, 'whom thou hatest for his Virtue' (III.3, p. 20), a sentiment that is absent from the biblical text. Finally, once David has lamented Saul and Jonathan after the battle of Gilboa, and asked how Israel can 'raise again [its] drooping Head' (III.5, p. 23), Abiathar declares that 'pious David will restore/What Saul by Disobedience lost' (III.5, p. 24). The final chorus is then in praise and encouragement of David, declaring that he will terrify his foes, 'While others, by thy Virtue charm'd,/Shall crowd to own thy Righteous Sway' (III.5, p. 24).

David is thus as virtuous as Saul is villainous, and just as Saul goes through the libretto alienating all the other characters, David goes through gaining their full support. The chorus too are supportive of David throughout in their comments about him, from the opening Epinicion (I.1, pp. 3–4) to their prayer for his protection (I.6, p. 10), their approving comments about the virtuous man (II.5, p. 15), and their final affirmation of David as the new leader of Israel (III.5, p. 24). This makes Saul's persistent opposition to David stand out all the more, and underlines its complete irrationality and wickedness, because he is the only one (except, perhaps, for Doeg) who does not recognize David's virtue.

Jennens's portrayals of David and Saul can thus be seen to cohere with the sentiments expressed in the quotations that appear on the front of the libretto. The Pythagorean advice about choosing as friends those who are excellent in virtue seems to be fulfilled in Saul's initial reaction to David after the youth has killed Goliath; Saul offers this brave and pious champion a place in the royal court and the hand of a princess in marriage. But soon the relationship between Saul and David is soured, recalling Cicero's comment that without virtue friendship

cannot exist. Clearly David is not lacking in virtue, so Saul must be. Contrast Jonathan's relationship with David, which begins at the same time as Saul's, but which endures despite Saul's hostility towards it and despite the conflict of loyalty in which Jonathan finds himself because of Saul's hostility; indeed, Jonathan's relationship with the virtuous David is maintained at the expense of his filial relationship with the villainous Saul, confirming from a different perspective that without virtue friendship cannot endure. Both of the quotations, therefore, can be taken as comments on Saul and on the progress of his relationship with David, with the second more negative one offering an explanation for why things go so terribly wrong between them, and indeed, in general—Saul, unlike David, is lacking in virtue.[24]

Monarchy and Messianism

However, Jennens's choice of Saul and David as his exemplars of vice and virtue implies that the libretto is about more than just the consequences of ethical and unethical living. Saul and David are not just private individuals—they are the king of Israel and his successor; and it is hard to believe that in his presentation of them Jennens is not also expressing something of his own view about monarchy. However, his view is different from the one that appears in the biblical text. Whereas the books of Samuel are questioning the very institution of monarchy, and Saul becomes the example to prove its inadequacy, the libretto is not concerned with the legitimation of the monarchy per se but with the appropriate way for a monarch to behave. In other words, the libretto is about the monarch's personal responsibilities rather than the validity of the institution. In the biblical text, Saul can legitimately be read as a victim, because he is the scapegoat for Yahweh's disapproval of the innovation of monarchy, but in the libretto the monarchy is an established element of society, and Saul has no-one to blame but himself for his negative behaviour. This means that he is pictured as a villain, and the price of that villainy is to be deprived of the kingdom by God. The message thus seems to be that kings have an obligation to behave virtuously if they are to retain their kingship.

There are, however, certain aspects of Jennens's libretto which suggest that it is not simply a reflection on human monarchy, but that it is also an exploration of divine kingship, and in particular, of Christian messianism. The first of these aspects is Jennens's choice of material for the libretto. Despite the oratorio being entitled *Saul*, the content of the libretto indicates that Jennens is not interested

[24] This is another reason for questioning Bartelmus's interpretation of Saul's fate in the libretto as a God-driven tragedy: Jennens himself claims to be illustrating in the libretto the theme of virtue and its importance in a blessed life. Under those circumstances, for the libretto to depict a virtuous Saul being blighted by God is to render the epigrams meaningless. For other comments on the theme of virtue in the libretto, see Smith, 'Love between Men in Jennens and Handel's *Saul*', in Chris Mounsey and Caroline Gonda (eds.), *Queer People: Negotiations and Expressions of Homosexuality, 1700–1800* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 226–45 (232–7). The present piece was prepared independently of Smith's essay.

purely in Saul, but in Saul vis-à-vis David. As noted earlier, Jennens includes nothing of the biblical material about Saul that comes before David's appearance on the scene; indeed, both in form and in content the libretto begins and ends with David. In terms of its form, the opening and closing scenes of the libretto consist largely of two long choral odes, both of which are based on material attributed to David; the former celebrates David's defeat of Goliath in a victory song based on Psalm 8 (a psalm supposedly written by David), and the latter is a setting of David's lament over Saul and Jonathan from 2 Samuel 1. It is also David who, in a libretto where female parts are extremely limited,[25] is given a duet to sing with the most prominent female character, Michal, a structural feature which suggests that David is at least as much the hero of the piece as is Saul.[26]

But it is not just the fact of the libretto's structural focus on David that hints at a more religious meaning. Several aspects of the libretto's content also point in the same direction. The first of these aspects is the use of Ps. 8.1–2 as the basis for the libretto's opening Epinicion, an extremely interesting move that is full of interpretative resonances. The main reason for choosing this psalm seems to be the notion, initially propounded by Henry Hammond in 1659, that Psalm 8 was written by David about his victory over Goliath in mind. Although this might look like a rather arbitrary interpretation, it arose because of the Hebrew word הַגִּתִּית [*haggittith*] in the heading to the psalm, which was taken to refer to Goliath 'the Gittite', that is, the inhabitant of Gath (cf. 1 Sam. 17.4). This led to the infant who stills the enemy in Ps. 8.2[27] being understood as a metaphor for David who was like an infant compared with the monster Goliath.[28] However, in addition to the Davidic interpretation, the psalm also had longstanding Christological associations,[29] and many interpreters understood the psalm's presumed celebration of

[25] There are in fact only two female parts in the libretto, namely, Merab and Michal, Saul's two daughters. The Witch of Endor is sung by a male, in accordance with contemporary practice for such figures.

[26] David's prominence is also noted by Ernst-Joachim Waschke, 'Die Beurteilung Sauls im Spannungsfeld des "Gesanges der Frauen" (1 Sam 18,6f.) und der "Klage Davids" (2 Sam 1,17–27)', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 52 (2006), 105–17 (114).

[27] 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger' (Ps. 8.2, KJV).

[28] Hammond set out the details of his 'Goliath' interpretation in *A Paraphrase and Annotations Upon the Books of the Psalms, Briefly explaining the Difficulties thereof* (London, 1659), 44, 46–7. Other interpreters who show an awareness of this interpretation include J. Johnson, *The Psalter, or, Psalms of Holy David, According to the Translation used in the Common-Prayer-Book* (London, 1707), 11; William Nicholls, *A Commentary on the Book of Common-Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, &c. Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David*, 2nd edn. (London, 1712), paraphrase of Psalm 8; Richard Daniel, *A Paraphrase on some select Psalms* (London, 1722), 8–11; Edward Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: Being the Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Canticles* (Oxford, 1727), 90; the anonymous *Poetical Essay on the Te Deum, Twelve Select Psalms, with Arguments prefix'd, and the Third Chapter of Habakkuk* (London, 1728), 7–9; Simon Patrick, *The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon, Paraphras'd; with Arguments to each Chapter, and annotations thereupon* (London, 1731), 78; Thomas Fenton, *Annotations on the Book of Job, and the Psalms* (London, 1732), 143–5.

[29] That is, it was understood to be saying something about the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Christological associations of Ps. 8 originate with the New Testament, where Ps. 8.2 is used to refer to Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21.16), and Ps. 8.4–6 are used to refer to Christ's exaltation over the created order (1 Cor. 15.27; Heb. 2.6–9).

David's victory over Goliath as typologically or prophetically celebrating Christ's victory over the devil.[30] Such a spiritualized understanding of David's battle with Goliath is clearly hinted at on several occasions in the Epinicion. First of all, in the second stanza the phrase 'rebel Host' is used to describe the Philistines. Given the context of the story in 1 Samuel this is rather a strange designation for them, since the biblical text views the Philistines as enemies of God rather than as rebels against God; on the other hand, 'rebel Host' can easily be understood as an allusion to the angels who according to tradition rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven to become Satan and his aides. Secondly, the descriptions of Goliath in the third stanza and of David in the fourth stanza have distinctly supernatural overtones: Goliath is called a 'Monster' with 'more than Human Pride', and David is termed 'The Youth inspir'd by Thee, O Lord'. Thirdly, Goliath's description in the fourth stanza as 'the Boaster' again has sinister supernatural overtones, since in the New Testament boasters are associated with those who blaspheme and hate God (Rom. 1.30; 2 Tim. 3.2). Thus, the use of this particular psalm to form the basis of the Epinicion,[31] together with the presentation of the battle between David and Goliath in terms that hint at a spiritual battle between good and evil, is an evocation right at the start of the libretto of David's significance within Christianity as both the ancestor and the type of Christ, and it invites the audience to view the rest of the libretto in the light of that significance.[32]

Indeed, when the rest of the libretto is viewed in the light of the typological evocations in the Epinicion, there are two features in particular that suggest that, like the Epinicion, the libretto too can be read as a clash between paradigmatic divine forces of good and evil, with David representing the divine good and Saul

[30] A good example of this interpretation is in Wells, *An Help: Job, Psalms*, 90, where Wells introduces Ps. 8 as follows: 'To the Chief Musician, to be sung and play'd upon Gittith, i.e. an Harp that David brought from Gath, or rather on account of David's remarkable Victory over the Giant Goliah, who was a Gittite or one of Gath. Whence as this is a Psalm of David, so in a prophetical Sense it is understood of Christ's Conquest over the Devil.' Others who express the same view include Johnson, *The Psalter*, 11, Daniel, *A Paraphrase on some select Psalms*, 8–11; the anonymous *Poetical Essay*, 7–10; and Patrick, *Job, Psalms*, 78. Other Christological readings of Ps. 8 that did not depend on the David–Goliath typology were also circulating; for example, John Clutterbuck, *A Brief Explanation of the Obscure Phrases in the Book of Psalms* (London, 1702), 6, and Fenton, *Annotations on Job and the Psalms*, 143, regard the psalm as referring prophetically to God's exaltation of human nature to heaven in the person of Jesus.

[31] Ps. 9 was also traditionally thought to celebrate David's defeat of Goliath, but it has no tradition of Christological interpretation like Ps. 8. Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, draws a connection between the libretto of *Saul* and the order of morning service for the Feast of King Charles the Martyr, which has 2 Sam. 1 (David killing the Amalekite and lamenting for Saul and Jonathan) as its first lesson and Ps. 9 as its first psalm, and comments, 'the service contained the beginning, as well as the end, of Jennens' libretto' (328–9). To the extent that both the service and the libretto contain a song of triumph over Goliath and the lamentation over Saul and Jonathan, this is correct; but Jennens's use of Ps. 8 rather than Ps. 9 as the basis for the Epinicion distances the libretto somewhat from the order of service, and implies that in writing the libretto Jennens was concerned with something other than simply reinforcing the political message associated with the Feast of King Charles the Martyr. Smith appears to assume that Jennens was using Ps. 9, although she does not include the psalm in the list of sources for *Saul* given on p. 351 of *Handel's Oratorios*; in any case, she shows no awareness of the links between the Epinicion and Ps. 8.

[32] Waschke, 'Die Beurteilung Sauls', 114–15, makes a similar point about the messianic significance of David in the libretto, as signalled by the Epinicion, but he does not explore the libretto's messianic typology in any depth.

the forces of evil. The first of these features is that both Goliath and Saul are shown as atheists. In the third stanza of the Epinicion, Goliath is described as follows:

> Along the Monster Atheist strode
> With more than Human Pride,
> And Armies of the Living God
> Exulting in his Strength defy'd. (I.1, p. 3)

This description of Goliath as 'the Monster Atheist' is presumably based on his defiance of the God of Israel (1 Sam. 17.26, 36, 45), since the biblical text, far from showing Goliath as an atheist, describes him cursing David by his own, Philistine, gods (1 Sam. 17.43). Saul for his part is never explicitly termed an atheist in the libretto, but his portrayal in much of it is of one who could legitimately be termed an atheist by eighteenth-century standards. Sir William Dawes in his 1694 poem *An Anatomy of Atheisme*, in its fourth edition in 1731, described three types of atheist, one kind of which is defined as follows:

> A Third sort own they do a God believe,
> But at such random Rates and Methods live,
> That by their Practice they a God defye,
> And by their Actions give their Tongues the Lye[.][33]

This description fits the portrayal of Saul in the libretto. In I.6, after Saul has commanded his entourage in general and Jonathan in particular to kill David, the high priest sings an air praying for David's safety, in which he says,

> Let not thy faithful Servant fall
> A Victim to the Rage of Saul,
> Who hates without a Cause,
> And, in Defiance of thy Laws,
> His precious Life pursues. (I.6, p. 10)

Describing Saul as one who is acting in defiance of God's laws is effectively to categorize him as an atheist, in the sense of one who acts as if God has no concern for how humans behave. As to the question of whether Saul claims to believe in God, in the course of the libretto he neither denies nor affirms a belief in God as such. However, he does swear by Jehovah, which implies a belief in God. In II.3, when Jonathan urges him to allow David back into the royal court, Saul declares, 'As Great Jehovah lives, I swear,/The Youth shall not be slain' (p. 13). But despite his oath Saul is planning to send David into battle so as to get him killed, making Saul's godless actions inconsistent with his pious words. This inconsistency is dramatically highlighted when David returns from battle unscathed, and Saul disregards his oath and tries to kill him, first by throwing his spear at David and then by sending Doeg to kill David at home (II.6, 7, pp. 15–16).[34] Thus, when

[33] William Dawes, *An Anatomy of Atheisme*, 4th edn. (London, 1731), 1. Dawes begins his poem by likening the various sorts of atheists abounding in society to Goliath and himself to David, affirming that by the strength of the God whom atheists deny he would refute them so thoroughly as to leave them completely silenced (1–2).

[34] Saul also swears an oath by Jehovah in III.2; when he asks the witch to call up Samuel she hesitates for fear of punishment, and Saul swears to her, 'As Jehovah lives,/On this Account no Mischief shall

the opening Epinicion pictures Goliath, the embodiment of atheism, falling before David, it becomes a proleptic picture of Saul's downfall in his clash with David.

The second notable feature of the libretto that suggests that the work's underlying theme is the supernatural fight between good and evil is the language used of David and Saul: both Saul's villainy and David's virtue are described in supernatural terms. David is 'The Youth inspired by thee, O Lord' (I.1, p. 4) in the Epinicion; both Michal and Jonathan describe him as 'God-like' (I.2, p. 4; I.6, p. 10; II.3, p. 13); Jonathan deems him 'born of God' (I.2, p. 5); Michal tells him to soothe the enraged Saul with 'Sounds Divine', and says that when he plays his lyre he does so 'with Celestial Fire' (I.4, p. 8); and she later tells him that his words and actions declare 'The Wisdom by thy God inspired' (II.5, p. 14). By contrast, Saul is spoken of as being prey to the forces of evil and hell. After Saul's initial outburst, Michal speaks of the 'Fiend' in his breast (I.4, p. 8);[35] Abiathar deems the king 'Rack'd with Infernal Pains', and says he is muttering words 'which Hell,/No human Tongue, has taught him' (I.5, p. 8); and David prays that God will 'the busy Fiend controul' (ibid.). Act II begins with the chorus, 'Envy! Eldest-born of Hell!/Cease in human Breasts to dwell' (II.1, p. 11), and it soon becomes clear that this refers to Saul when Jonathan tells David that Saul is being driven to oppose him by 'A Spirit of Envy' (II.2, p. 11)—in other words, that Saul is under the influence of a force from hell.[36] Under the circumstances, it is no surprise that Saul ends up in Act III consulting the Witch of

befal thee' (p. 19). It is hugely ironical that Saul should swear by Jehovah to protect someone in order that he can continue with the necromancy that he has already admitted breaches the law to which he no longer adheres (see III.1, p. 19), and as with his earlier oath which was contradicted by his subsequent behaviour this would seem to count as atheism. However, Saul's own words in III.1 suggest a more complex reading of the scene; he claims to have sought advice from God to no effect, which implies a belief in God, but if God has abandoned Saul then Saul has little choice but to act in what might otherwise be deemed an atheistical fashion. Nonetheless, by making this deliberate choice to consult the witch Saul continues to defy God's laws whilst proclaiming a belief in God, and so can be described as to all intents and purposes an atheist.

[35] This is in contrast to the biblical text, where the evil spirit that troubles Saul is said to be from God (1 Sam. 16.14).

[36] This is clearly a gloss on the biblical text, which speaks only of Saul's fear and of the evil spirit motivating him to throw his spear at David (1 Sam. 18.8–12). Nonetheless, the envy interpretation is common, and in using it Jennens is locking into existing traditions about the narrative. See *The Tragedy of King Saul* (London, 1703), 25; Ellwood, *Davideis*, 21; Patrick, *Historical Books, Vol. II*, 242. In line with contemporary ideas about envy, its causes and its origins, such an interpretation also enables the evil spirit to be separated from divine agency: envy is a hellish quality that originates in hell with the Devil, so this is nothing of God's doing. See, for example, Richard Allestree, *The Government of the Thoughts: A Prefatory Discourse to the Government of the Tongue*, 3rd edn. (London, ?1710), 38–43; Thomas Wise, *Fourteen Discourses on some of the most important Heads in Divinity and Morality* (London, 1717), 174–5; Isaac Watts, *Discourses of the Love of God and the Use and Abuse of the Passions in Religion, with a devout Meditation suited to each Discourse* (London, 1729), 68; Robert Moss, *Sermons and Discourses on Practical Subjects: Never Before Printed. Vol. IV* (London, 1732), 173–4. The envy interpretation also allows Saul to supposedly accept David back into his favour while still being determined to kill him, which is a different version from the biblical text where Saul can legitimately be read as sincere in his acceptance of David back into favour on the basis that David is a good thing both for Saul and for Israel (1 Sam. 19.4–6). In fact, the peaceful rapprochement seems to last until David goes to war again and gains great success in battle, at which point the evil spirit starts to trouble Saul once more (1 Sam. 19.7–10). Envy, however, could never allow a potential rival to exist in peace at such close quarters.

Endor, declaring, 'If Heav'n denies thee Aid, seek it from Hell!' (III.1, p. 19), and describing the witch in satanic terms: ''Tis said, here lives a Woman, close Familiar/ With th'Enemy of Mankind. Her I'll consult' (ibid.). The witch in her turn prays to 'Infernal Spirits' (III.2, p. 20) in order to produce the apparition of Samuel. In this way, Saul's opposition to David is shown both to embody and to represent the great spiritual battle between good and evil that is hinted at in the opening Epinicion by the use of Psalm 8.

There are also other aspects of the libretto that suggest that it should be understood in religious, and specifically messianic, terms. As noted earlier, the libretto presents Saul's downfall as supremely his own fault. He is a sinner, as demonstrated by his frantic persecution of David, and he will be—indeed, is being—punished for it. However, this reading raises the problem of the reference in Samuel's speech to Saul sparing the Amalekite (III.3, p. 20), an incident which chronologically speaking occurred before the start of the libretto, and is not mentioned in the libretto before this point. Bringing it up for the first time almost at the end of the libretto is puzzling in terms of narrative logic, because it indicates that, contrary to what has been implied thus far, Saul's present parlous state is not the result of his own rage and envy towards David, but is God's punishment for Saul's prior disobedience. This undermines the understanding of the situation between David and Saul that has been built up, and raises the question of why Jennens introduces the new motif so unexpectedly. A clue can perhaps be gained from the air that is given to Abiathar after the lament for Saul and Jonathan; in the air, Abiathar urges the people to stop weeping, 'For pious David will restore/What Saul by Disobedience lost' (III.5, p. 24). The sentiment is strongly reminiscent of Rom. 5.19, which in the KJV reads, 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.' The verse in Romans is referring to Adam and Christ, but the application of the same principle to Saul and David once again endows the figure of David with Christological associations (although of a somewhat different type from those of the opening Epinicion). During the libretto itself there is no explicit act of disobedience on Saul's part; although Saul is described in terms of lawlessness, and although in Act III he obliquely characterizes himself as a 'son of disobedience' (III.1, p. 19)—a term used several times in the New Testament to describe those who are under evil influences and who are the opposite of Christians[37]—he never directly disobeys a specific command from God. Introducing the Amalekite incident, during which Saul is said to have been 'madly disobedient', therefore provides the specific hook on which to hang the terminology of disobedience, and allows the Saul/David relationship to be characterized in terms of the Adam/Christ relationship, although (as noted) rather at the cost of the narrative logic of the rest of the libretto.

On this point, it is instructive to compare the libretto with *The Tragedy of King Saul*, a dramatic poem published anonymously in 1703 but attributed to Joseph Trapp by some and the Earl of Orrery by others.[38] This treatment of the Saul narrative has roughly the same beginning and end points as Jennens's libretto, and

[37] Eph. 2.2, 5.6; Col. 3.6.

[38] For the attributions to Trapp and the Earl of Orrery, see Smith, 'Achievements', 187 n. 155.

it includes the Witch of Endor scene, in which it shows one of the witch's familiar spirits taking the shape of Samuel and giving Saul the following prophecy:

> Why hast thou brought me from my Rest below,
> To tell thee what thou shou'dst abhor to know?
> Searching to read thy Fortune bad or good,
> I found it writ in Characters of Blood.
> Thy Fall is near, to Morrow is the Day
> Must take the Scepter and thy Life away,
> Thy Host and Offspring; and when thou art gone,
> The Son of Jess shall fill thy empty Throne.
> Farewell to Morrow thou shalt visit me,
> And then, as I, an airy form shalt be. (57)

There is nothing here about the Amalekite incident from 1 Samuel 15, nor, several scenes later, is there anything elsewhere about the idea of Saul's disobedience as a catalyst for his fate. Nor is any emphasis subsequently laid on the fact that it is an Amalekite who comes to bring the news of Saul's death to David (61, 64–5); indeed, the messenger's ethnicity is completely ignored, and although he is slaughtered at David's command after claiming to have killed Saul (65), it is solely his perceived crime of regicide that prompts David to order him slain, not the crime *plus* the fact that he is an Amalekite, which is what prompts David's ire in both the biblical text and in Jennens's libretto. The motif of Saul's disobedience in relation to the Amalekites plays no role in *The Tragedy of King Saul*, and the narrative makes sense without it. There was therefore no necessity for Jennens to include it in his presentation, but including it allowed him to make the wider theological points noted above.

An additional reinforcement for the Saul–David/Adam–Christ typology is provided by the way Saul's death is reported in the libretto. In the biblical text, following Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor and Samuel's speech about Saul failing to punish Amalek (1 Sam. 28.18), the narrative returns to David, and relates how David and his men, now serving Achish, king of Gath (cf. 1 Sam. 27.1–7), are preparing to fight on the side of the Philistines in the impending battle against Israel. However, the Philistine commanders refuse to have them out of fear that they will switch sides during the battle (1 Sam. 29). David and his men therefore return to their base at Ziklag, only to find that the Amalekites have raided the town and kidnapped all the women (1 Sam. 30.1–5). David avenges the raid, recovers all the women (1 Sam. 30.6–19), and brings back the Amalekites' flocks and herds, to be shared as spoil (1 Sam. 30.20–31). The narrative then goes on to describe the battle between Israel and the Philistines, in which Israel is defeated, Saul's three sons including Jonathan are killed, and Saul, wounded, falls on his own sword rather than fall into Philistine hands (1 Sam. 31.1–7). The royal bodies are abused by the Philistines, but recovered by the men of Jabesh Gilead and given proper burial (1 Sam. 31.8–13). Three days later, a messenger comes to David at Ziklag with the news that Saul and Jonathan are dead, saying that he himself killed Saul at Saul's own request, and offering Saul's kingly regalia to David. David mourns greatly, and then asks the messenger where he is from; upon learning that the messenger is an Amalekite, David orders him to be killed for not fearing to

raise his hand against the Lord's anointed (2 Sam. 1.1–16). David then sings a lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1.17–27).

There is thus quite a bit of material (three whole chapters) between Saul's visit to the witch, and his death in battle being reported to David. However, in the libretto, Samuel's condemnatory speech to Saul at Endor with its reference to Saul's disobedience in sparing the Amalekite (III.3, p. 20) is followed directly by the messenger coming to David with the news of Saul's demise (III.4, p. 21).[39] This means that Saul's failure to kill the Amalekite king when he should have done is juxtaposed with David's unhesitating slaughter of the Amalekite messenger who claims to have killed Saul, creating an association between the two events inasmuch as David is shown as doing what Saul failed to do. Saul is said to have spared the Amalekite king and fallen greedily on the spoil (III.3, p. 20); David, by contrast, kills the Amalekite and (by implication) refuses the spoil—that is, the crown and bracelets—that the Amalekite brings him (III.4, p. 21). This is quite a different reading from that facilitated by the biblical text, where the link between Saul's failure to eliminate Amalek and David's slaughter of the Amalekite messenger is considerably less clear. The libretto has the sequence 'Saul spares Amalekite—Amalekite kills Saul—David kills Amalekite', a sequence which first adds a twist of punitive irony to Saul's death in that he is killed by the ones he wrongfully spared, and then allows David to finish Saul's unfinished business by killing the Amalekite. In the biblical text, however, even if David's action does have the effect of completing the business left unfinished by Saul, it is more natural to understand David's slaughter of the Amalekite regicide as related primarily to the injuries suffered by David himself at the hands of the Amalekites who have just raided his settlement. Indeed, the biblical text virtually demands such an interpretation, since 2 Sam. 1.1 sets the scene for the arrival of the messenger by saying that David had stayed in Ziklag after slaughtering the Amalekites, thus making David's avenging of the Amalekite raid on Ziklag the immediate context for his encounter with the Amalekite regicide.

In addition, the fact that in the biblical text the Amalekite's version of how Saul died (2 Sam. 1.6–10) contradicts what the narrative has already reported about Saul's death (1 Sam. 31.3–6) means that Saul's death cannot be understood in the same ironically retributive way as is implied in the libretto—Saul is not killed by those he wrongfully spared, he commits suicide. So despite the Amalekite's claim to have killed Saul, there is no direct association in the biblical text between Saul's earlier sparing of Amalek, Saul's death, and David's killing of the Amalekite messenger. However, in the libretto, placing David's slaughter of the Amalekite regicide immediately after Samuel's reminder of how Saul wrongly spared an Amalekite, and omitting both the Amalekite raid on Ziklag and Saul's death by suicide, inevitably implies that David's actions are the corrective to Saul's, and that he is quite specifically doing what Saul failed to do. Thus David is shown reversing Saul's disobedience, even before Abiathar makes his pronouncement about David restoring what Saul lost by disobedience.

[39] In the musical setting, there is an instrumental symphony between these two scenes, supposedly to represent the battle between Israel and the Philistines. However, no other characters or events are introduced verbally between the two scenes, so that the link between them in terms of their content is still preserved.

The way Saul's death is reported in the libretto can also be seen as part of the focus on David that opens and closes the work. For the libretto to move straight from the seance at Endor to the messenger bringing David news of Saul's death, without reference to the first biblical account of how a wounded Saul died by suicide, is rather a curious move for a libretto that is ostensibly about Saul, since in the light of the ideas about suicide that were current in the eighteenth century Saul's death by his own hand would seem to be an appropriately moral ending to the story of his spiritual decline. The orthodox Christian view, which had originated with Augustine, was that suicide was a foul and unnatural crime and a breach of the sixth commandment ('Thou shalt not kill'), which meant that those who wilfully killed themselves (apart from those who were mentally deranged at the time of the deed) were condemned by God. They were appropriating to themselves an authority over their own lives that they had no right to appropriate; they were rejecting the providence of God for a counsel of despair; and unlike ordinary murderers, those who murdered themselves committed a crime for which they had no opportunity of repentance.[40] Indeed, in a number of contemporary writings on suicide, Saul himself is cited as an example of someone who commits suicide in the context of having sinned and being cut off from God, along with Judas Iscariot and David's esrtwhile counsellor Ahithopel;[41] and certainly in the scene in the libretto with the Witch of Endor Saul is quite clear about the fact that God has forsaken him (III.1, 3, pp. 19, 20), which would make his suicide a fitting end to his life. However, Jennens shows Saul dying not by his own hand, but at the hand of the Amalekite (admittedly after Saul has tried and failed to take his own life), an event which is not shown directly but reported to David after the fact. That once again this is an interpretative choice made by Jennens is shown by comparison with the accounts of Saul's death in other biblical and contemporary writings. In 1 Chronicles 10 Saul's death is reported, but the only version there is the 'suicide' version as in 1 Samuel 31, and no mention is made of the Amalekite claiming to have killed him or of David's lamentation for Saul and Jonathan. The summary at the end of 1 Chronicles 10 declares that Saul died for

[40] Augustine's ideas about suicide appear in *City of God* I.17–27, and were largely repeated by Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* II.2.64.5. For eighteenth-century material expressing strong opposition to suicide, see John Cockburn, *A Discourse of Self-Murder. In which the Heinousness of the Sin is Expos'd* (London, 1716); anon., 'Suicide: Or, Self-Murder', in *Occasional Poems, Very seasonable and proper for the present Times* (London, 1726), 20–3; John Henley, *Cato Condemn'd: or, the Case and History of Self-Murder, Argu'd and Display'd at large* (London, 1730); anon., *A Discourse upon Self-Murder: or The Cause, the Nature, and immediate Consequences of Self-Murder, fully Examined and truly Stated. In a Letter to a Free-Thinker that despis'd Life* (London, 1732); Richard Gilpin, *Demonologia Sacra: or, a Treatise of Satan's Temptations* (Edinburgh, 1735), 530–9. It is notable that John Edwards, *Theologia Reformata: or, the Body and Substance of the Christian Religion, Comprised in distinct Discourses or Treatises upon The Apostles Creed, The Lord's Prayer, and The Ten Commandments. The Second Volume* (London, 1713), begins his treatment of the sixth commandment (Thou shalt not kill) with four and a half closely written pages on the heinousness of suicide and self-harm which he regards as forbidden by the commandment (489–93), and only then moves on to deal with the commandment's implications for interpersonal relationships. Although there were some groups in eighteenth-century society who argued that suicide was an acceptable way to die, the Augustinian stance, as taken up and codified by Aquinas, remained the basic Christian view on suicide until well into the nineteenth century.

[41] Cockburn, *A Discourse of Self-Murder*, 3; Henley, *Cato Condemn'd*, 11–12.

his transgressions against the Lord, including consulting a medium instead of the Lord, and so the Lord killed him and turned the kingdom over to David (1 Chron. 10.13–14). The suicide is therefore seen as the appropriately moral ending to the story of Saul's sinful life. In *The Tragedy of King Saul*, both versions of Saul's death are included; first, Saul is shown committing suicide (60–1), and then the Amalekite comes, finds his body, and strips the royal insignia which he takes to David with the story that Saul urged him to kill him (61, 64–5). The question is therefore why Jennens has chosen to end the libretto as he has.

The effect of omitting the suicide report and going straight on to David's encounter with the Amalekite regicide is that Saul's death as such is not the focus of the scene, nor is it the end of the story. Rather, the focus is on David and how he reacts to the news of the death. In 1 Chronicles, where the account of Saul's suicide is the only version of his death, there is a sense of finality about it, that this is the end of the story of Saul, and that a definite boundary is being drawn between him and David. In *The Tragedy of King Saul*, where the suicide is shown, even though the version with the Amalekite messenger is also presented, the end of the play is David's lamentation for Jonathan and his vow to avenge his dear companion. This work has much more of a sense that it is in fact about Saul and not about David; it begins with Saul and his men encamped before the Philistines, and ends with Saul's suicide in battle and David's resultant lamentation. Even though it is clear that David will go on and be king, the final note of lamentation keeps the focus on Saul and his family, and there is no sense of triumph, just the overwhelming sorrow at the tragedy that has occurred—the tragedy of Saul. This is quite different from Jennens's libretto. Showing Saul's death only at second hand means that the focus is on David and his response to the news, rather than on the news itself. In other words, David rather than Saul becomes the subject of the libretto at this point. David certainly offers lamentations, but there is not the same degree of finality about Saul's death as there is in *The Tragedy of King Saul*—it does not end the narrative, it merely becomes the means whereby the narrative can continue in a new direction. This of course is what is required for the religious subtext of David undoing the effect of Saul's disobedience, and this could not happen if the narrative were to be closed down with an account of Saul's suicide.

But there is another aspect to the omission of Saul's suicide from the libretto, and the use instead of the Amalekite's report of Saul's death: it allows the idea of the inviolability of the king's person to be put forward. This would have been very important to Jennens; he was known to be a non-juror, one of a group of men whose continuing allegiance to the deposed Stuart monarchic line and refusal to swear oaths of allegiance to the Hanoverians was born out of a high view of monarchy and a belief in the divine right of kings. Is the libretto of *Saul* as a whole, therefore, in some sense a reflection of Jennens's non-juring stance? The libretto is certainly no simple allegory for the Stuart/Hanover relationship. If it were, David should logically represent the Hanoverians, since he is not king, has apparently no pretensions to being king, and is not even of a royal family. And yet it is clear from the start of the libretto that, unlike the Hanoverians in Jennens's mind, David is the one with whom divine favour rests. The Christological overtones of Psalm 8 as the basis for the opening Epinicion reinforce this impression, and although it is difficult to argue for a sustained Christological reading of the libretto, the glimpse that the Epinicion gives into a wider, more far-reaching

conception of what is at stake in the story of David and Saul should not be ignored, because it sets the tone for what follows in the rest of the libretto. David, then, and not Saul, is the favoured one, and remains so throughout the libretto. Saul has to be displaced in order for the Christologically significant David to take the throne.

The main argument for viewing the libretto as in some sense pro-Stuart seems to be the scene between David and the Amalekite (III.4, p. 21), in which David orders the Amalekite to be killed for claiming to have slaughtered Saul, the Lord's anointed. The order of morning prayer for the feast of King Charles the Martyr (that is, the anniversary of Charles I's execution on 30 January 1649) had this passage (2 Sam. 1) as its Old Testament reading, and preachers on that occasion would take as their texts biblical passages such as this, and others in which David refuses to kill Saul even when given the opportunity to do so, because Saul is the Lord's anointed.[42] The argument was that this showed that whatever the king has done, his person is inviolable because he is the Lord's anointed, and that if God wants to get rid of him it will be done without the help of those who set themselves up to take the law into their own hands. The same principle would also apply to the deposing of James II in 1688, which had led eventually to the installation of the Hanoverians in preference to the Catholic Stuarts, and as a result of which the non-juring movement had emerged. From that perspective, if the libretto is meant to reflect the legitimate claim of the Stuarts on the throne and picture their return to it, David as the divinely favoured and chosen one must represent the Stuarts; but that is to give too much legitimacy to the Hanoverians, who would presumably be represented by Saul, a man whose claim to the throne is never denied, and who is even referred to as the Lord's anointed. Altogether, it seems wiser to consider the libretto's monarchic stance as a general meditation on the kingly office, that shows how even those who are anointed by God can fall short, but denies the legitimacy of any human efforts to remove them. This would well reflect the quandary in which non-jurors like Jennens found themselves when confronted with the reality of the Hanoverian monarchy.

CONCLUSION

In sum, then, Jennens's libretto *Saul* is a rich mixture of elements that covers a range of themes with both political and theological overtones: virtue and vice, Messianism, and the nature of monarchy. By a judicious reworking of the biblical

[42] See Sampson Letsome, *An Index to the Sermons, Published since the Restoration* (London, 1734), 7, which lists 30th January sermons on the texts 1 Sam. 24.4–7, 1 Sam. 26.9, 1 Sam. 26.10–11, 2 Sam. 1.12, and 2 Sam. 1.14. Id., *An Index . . . Part II* (London, 1738), 8, lists 30th January sermons on the texts 1 Sam. 24.5–6 (2 sermons), 1 Sam. 24.10, 1 Sam. 26.9, 1 Sam. 26.11, 2 Sam. 1.14 (3 sermons), 2 Sam. 1.16, 2 Sam. 1.17–18, 2 Sam. 1.18 (2 sermons), and 2 Sam. 1.21. All of these texts either show David refusing to harm the Lord's anointed, or are part of the 2 Samuel 1 reading that is set for the morning prayers (the Amalekite regicide coming to David, followed by David's lament for Saul and Jonathan). Not all 30th January sermons in Letsome's index are on these passages, and not all of the sermons on these passages that Letsome lists are 30th January sermons; but these texts were clearly popular with preachers on that occasion.

text, the story of Saul is transformed from that of a tragic figure hounded by God into that of a wicked man who in his opposition to the virtuous David is the embodiment of evil. This in turn paves the way for a depiction of their conflict as symbolizing the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, as well as for reflection on the legitimacy of regicide.

5

From Wild Man to War Hero

The Story of Samson*

After the production of *Saul*, a further four years were to pass before the public appearance of another 'sacred drama' from Handel's pen. Not that he had been inactive in the interim; in addition to producing two more Italian operas (*Imeneo* and *Deidamia*) he had also written two other non-dramatic oratorios, both probably to libretti by Charles Jennens (*Israel in Egypt* in 1738, and *Messiah* in 1741), and a range of smaller orchestral and choral works.[1] But by 1742 it was clear that Handel's future theatrical success lay in the direction of oratorio rather than opera. In 1741 he had completed a draft of *Samson* alongside *Messiah*, before going to Dublin for the 1741–2 season where he gave two series of productions that consisted largely of revivals of English-language works, with the first performances of *Messiah* as the finale to his visit. By all accounts Handel and his performances were extremely well received in Dublin, and when he returned to London in the summer of 1742 he had apparently decided to concentrate on oratorio as opposed to opera for future theatrical seasons. That autumn he went back to *Samson* and completed it for performance the following spring, and it premiered on 18 February 1743 at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, followed just over a month later on 23 March by the London premiere of *Messiah*.[2]

The libretto of *Samson* is an adaptation of John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, an extended poem which in an imaginative treatment of the biblical Samson narrative presents the last twenty-four hours of Samson's life in a format reminiscent of

* An earlier version of this chapter entitled 'Samson Down the Centuries: From Biblical Text to Handelian Oratorio', was given as a paper at the conference 'John Rich and the Eighteenth-Century London Stage: Commerce, Magic and Management', held in London on 25–27 January 2008, and is to be published on the John Rich website at http://www.johnrich2008.com.

[1] Details of Handel's works during this period can be found in Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215–58. Both the oratorios *Israel in Egypt* and *Messiah* are collections of scriptural texts set to music rather than freely dramatized narratives from the Old Testament, and so are not being examined here.

[2] These were not the first oratorios to be staged at Covent Garden; revivals of *Esther*, *Deborah*, and *Athalia* had been performed there between 1735 and 1737, a period during which Handel had had an agreement with John Rich, the manager of the theatre, for staging opera at Covent Garden. Nevertheless, the *Samson* premiere was an important watershed which marked the start of a long association between Handelian oratorio and Covent Garden: of the ten subsequent Israelite oratorios composed by Handel, only one, *Belshazzar* (1745), received its premiere not at Covent Garden but at the King's Theatre, Haymarket.

both Greek tragedy and the biblical book of Job. The libretto of *Samson* was prepared by Newburgh Hamilton, a friend of Handel who had earlier adapted John Dryden's poem *Alexander's Feast* for Handel to set to music.[3] In his adaptation of *Samson Agonistes* to the libretto format, Hamilton reproduced the schema and in places the vocabulary of Milton's poem quite closely, but gave the libretto a significantly different emphasis. The following discussion will show precisely how Hamilton updated Milton's seventeenth-century biblically based poem so as to enable it to speak to Handel's eighteenth-century theatre audience.

THE 'BIBLICAL' SAMSON

The raw material from which Milton's (and thence Hamilton's) work was shaped was the biblical narrative of Samson; and it has to be said that to modern eyes, Samson is an unlikely figure of heroism. The picture of his exploits in Judges 14–16 is, when viewed dispassionately, one of those narratives that raises the question of how it came to be deemed 'scripture', and it has clearly undergone a contextualization that is intended to make it fit more readily within the schema of the book of Judges. As part of the Deuteronomistic History,[4] Judges describes a series of inter-tribal skirmishes between Israelites and non-Israelites which it interprets as coming about because of the Israelites' unfaithfulness to God: the Israelites turn to worshipping idols, and so God gives them into the power of their enemies until they repent and turn to God for forgiveness, whereupon God raises up a 'deliverer' who leads the people in throwing off the enemy yoke. The deliverer then 'judges' (that is, rules) the people for a generation or so, but after the deliverer dies the people turn to idols again and the process is repeated. This is the pattern into which the story of Samson is fitted. Samson is described in two ways: as a Nazirite (that is, a person specifically dedicated to God) from his miraculous birth, and as a deliverer or judge of Israel, both of which descriptions imply a figure whose main characteristics are leadership of Israel and religious fervour (or at least commitment). However, given Samson's exploits as narrated in the text, it is difficult to take these contextualizing descriptions seriously, and without them there would be no difficulty in viewing Samson as a mischievous figure of local legend whose exploits had more to do with satisfying his own bodily appetites than with serving God or with delivering Israel from oppression.

[3] Burrows, *Handel*, 187. *Alexander's Feast* premiered in 1736. Brief details about Hamilton can be found in Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959, repr. 2000), 270–1; Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 192; and Hans Dieter Clausen, 'Hamilton, Newburgh', in Annette Landgraf and David Vickers (eds.), *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 282–3.

[4] The so-called Deuteronomistic History runs from Joshua to 2 Kings, and presents the history of Israel from a perspective that judges events according to how well Israel keeps the Law given by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. For the deuteronomistic historians, the most important aspects of this law were the demand for total devotion to the God of Israel and the prohibition of the worship of any other deities, and the people's fortunes are linked to their fidelity (or otherwise) in observing these demands. See also the comments on the Deuteronomistic History in chapter 4 above.

The narrative begins with Samson's miraculous birth to a barren mother (Judg. 13.1–25), with all that that implies about his particular chosenness by God. Commentators have rightly drawn attention to the other figures for whom the same is true: Isaac and Samuel in the Old Testament, and John the Baptist and Jesus in the New; and indeed, the perceived parallels between the annunciation to Samson's mother in Judges 13 and to Mary in the New Testament were an important plank in the interpretative tradition that saw Samson as a type of Christ.[5] This miraculous conception is accompanied by other characteristics: Samson is to be a Nazirite, that is, one who is specially dedicated to God, and this status is characterized by the command that he is not to have his hair cut (Judg. 13.5). Additionally, during the pregnancy his mother is to avoid all grape products, wine, strong drink, and impurity on account of the child's status, a demand that is repeated three times (Judg. 13.4, 7, 14), and this is usually also held to be a requirement for the child himself once he is born; however, nothing in the narrative gives that demand, and it seems to have been assumed by interpreters on the basis of the Nazirite laws in Num. 6.1–21. Indeed, the adult Samson's clear disregard of all of the Nazirite stipulations is made a lot more understandable if he is only required not to cut his hair, and it is after all the hair-cutting that is the significant element in the narrative and which eventually proves his downfall. The third related aspect of Samson's portrayal is that the Spirit of the Lord begins to impel him (Judg. 13.25), a characteristic that is reserved for the great male heroes of the faith. Othniel, Jephthah, Saul, and David are others who experience the same 'Spirit of the Lord', and all are warriors and rulers over Israel. Samson, though, is the only one (apart from Jesus) who has both the miraculous birth and the endowment with the divine spirit, making him as it were doubly divine: God's son by nature and by spirit. But the endowment with the Spirit is arguably a mixed blessing; the last man to receive it before Samson was Jephthah, and although it may have enabled him to defeat Israel's enemies the Ammonites, it could not stop him making a vow which cost his daughter's life—indeed, it may even have impelled him to do so (Judg. 11.29–31).[6]

Samson is thus marked out as a man unlike any other: he has both a miraculous birth and the impulsion of the Spirit of the Lord. Robert Alter draws attention to the vocabulary used in Judg. 13.25 of Samson's impulsion by the Spirit: he argues that the verb used is the piel form *pā'ēm* [*sic*] from the root *pā'am*, and it means to stamp or pound, implying that the Spirit is driving Samson 'in a series of pulsating motions, like the movements of violence, like sexuality itself.'[7] And indeed, the

[5] Typological interpretation of this kind began as early as the patristic period, and was still prevalent in the seventeenth century when Milton was writing *Samson Agonistes*. For a review of how the figure of Samson was interpreted in Christian tradition down to the seventeenth century, see F. Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Biblical Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949). David M. Gunn, *Judges*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 175–82, gives a review of Christian typological interpretations of the Samson story from antiquity to modernity.

[6] The ambiguity over Jephthah's vow, and the possibility that it should in fact be understood as inspired by God, has been addressed in various ways by interpreters over the centuries. For further discussion, see chapter 10 below.

[7] Robert Alter, 'Samson Without Folklore', in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, SBL Semeia Studies (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 47–56 (49). In fact, the form

ways in which Samson's miraculous birth and Spirit-endowment show themselves are by enormous sex drive coupled with immense physical strength. Sex and violence are inextricably linked in the subsequent narrative, in that Samson's sexual encounters all lead to violence of some sort (although this is a link that both Milton and Hamilton are careful to sever in their respective presentations of the narrative). The first piece of information that is supplied about the adult Samson is that he goes down to Timnah, sees a Philistine woman and wants her as his wife (Judg. 14.1–2). Even his parents' misgivings and attempts to warn him off make no difference: all that matters to Samson is that the girl is beautiful and he wants her (14.3). Given the nature of Samson's Spirit-endowment as just described, the comment that this is from the Lord in order to give Samson an opportunity against the Philistines (14.4) makes a certain sort of sense, although it is not a very reassuring picture.[8] Samson's encounter with a lion on his way to Timnah to see the woman (14.5–6) is one of the several macho feats of strength with which Samson is credited in the course of these few chapters, and it has the recurrent feature of him defeating strong opponents with his bare hands or with minimal weaponry.[9] Here, as the Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him with the same impulsive force as it has already done in the camp of Dan, he kills the lion barehanded, and if it was previously unclear what it meant for the Spirit to impel him, it is now crystal clear.[10] The killing of the lion completes the characterization of Samson, showing exactly what he can do, and in the light of the comment about seeking an opportunity against the Philistines it sends a shiver of anticipation down the spine: what *couldn't* a man like that do against Israel's enemies? The negotiations for the marriage go ahead, and when Samson returns

referred to (rather than quoted) by Alter, לְפַעֲמוֹ [*lᵉpaʿamô*], is not unambiguously piel, and may equally well be a suffixed qal infinitive construct. Nonetheless, Alter's point about the repetition of the פעם root in the rest of the narrative (49–51) is well made.

[8] John Vickery, 'The Story of Samson', in Burke O. Long (ed.), *Images of Man and God: Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), 58–73, similarly argues that Samson's sexual drives and frustrations stem from the Spirit of the Lord just as much as do his feats of strength, and that the intensity of his passion for the Timnite woman is an index of his vulnerability that will lead to tragic consequence (65–6).

[9] This disdain for tooled weapons, together with Samson's preference for an outdoor life, his unshorn hair, and his incompetence in social relationships that becomes evident as the narrative progresses, has been taken to indicate that the Samson narrative has been informed by a 'wild man' typology that can be identified in various folk-tales and mythologies around the world and down the ages. For a discussion of parallels in Greek mythology, see David E. Bynum, 'Samson as a Biblical *φηὴρ ὀρεσκῷος*', in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, SBL Semeia Studies (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 57–73, and for a treatment of similar figures in ancient Near Eastern materials, see Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, LHBOTS, 453 (New York/London: T. & T. Clark International, 2006). Susan Niditch, 'Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak', *CBQ*, 52 (1990), 608–24, notes the 'wild' elements in Samson's character, and describes him as a bridge between culture and nature (613–4).

[10] The verb used in 14.6 for the Spirit rushing on Samson is צָלַח [*ṣālaḥ*], the usual verb for the descent of the Spirit in this type of context (Alter, 'Samson Without Folklore', 49), as opposed to the earlier *pāʿam*. However, given Samson's response to the Spirit, the change in vocabulary does not imply any qualitative or quantitative difference in the effect of the Spirit on Samson from what was described earlier; rather, it is a clarification of what *pāʿam* signifies, namely, an onrushing of the Spirit followed by some great act of physical prowess.

to celebrate the marriage, the lion's carcass has become home to a swarm of bees and their honey (14.8). The sexual symbolism of the honey, particularly as it appears in Samson's subsequent riddle to the Philistines, has been explored by commentators,[11] and is unquestionably a factor in its significance, but it also seems to feed Samson's pride—he was the one who killed the lion, and the honey from its carcass is an affirmation of the benefits that come from his great strength, a metaphor for the anticipated sweetness of victory over the Philistines.[12] But the victory is not to be as simple as Samson thinks it will be. It seems clear that the Philistines do not trust Samson; at the wedding feast, they send thirty men to be with him, and he attempts to get the better of them by making a riddle about the lion and the honey and setting them a wager to answer it before the end of the feast (14.11–14). They cannot answer his riddle, and pressurize his bride to pressurize him for the answer; he, for all his great physical strength, is unable to resist her badgering, and tells her the answer; she tells them, and at the very last minute they confront him with it in triumph (14.15–18).[13] Samson clearly has not anticipated this outcome, and responds in the only way he knows: with violence, apparently sanctioned by the descent of the Spirit of the Lord upon him, as he kills and despoils thirty other Philistines for the goods to pay his lost wager (14.18–19).[14] The arrogance of inexperienced youth has been dealt a severe blow, as he returns home without his bride (14.20).

Samson's first venture into adulthood, then, shows him as a man with a roving spirit and strong, impulsive drives—seeing, wanting, fighting—to which he is subject and which seem to control him; he does not anticipate or think ahead, but is naively confident in his own abilities, including his strength, and when these fail him he lashes out in fury. The same can be said of him in the next episode as

[11] See, for example, James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1978), 114–16; Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 42–6; Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, 'The Words of the Wise and their Riddles', in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, SBL Semeia Studies (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 127–51.

[12] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AB, 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), comments that honey was widely understood to have enlightening and courage-producing qualities, citing the incident where Jonathan eats wild honey on a military expedition (1 Sam. 14.24–30), and suggests that the honey might therefore have been a sign to Samson (230).

[13] The Hebrew text translated as 'before *the sun* (הַחַרְסָה, [*haḥarsâ*] went down' (14.18) is regarded by some commentators as unusual enough to warrant emendation to 'before he entered *the bridal chamber* (הַחַדְרָה, [*haḥadrâ*]', a word that appears in Judg. 15.1. This would imply that Samson has not yet consummated the marriage, and would make his subsequent fury much more comprehensible. See George F. Moore, *Judges*, ICC, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), 339; James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 167. Soggin, however, disagrees, pointing out that the emendation finds no support in the LXX or Vulgate (J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges*, 2nd edn., OTL (London: SCM Press, 1987), 242). Bal's reading of the Samson story assumes that the marriage was unconsummated, although the proposed textual emendation of 14.18 does not figure in her argument (Bal, *Lethal Love*, 46).

[14] Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man. The Story of Samson (Judges 13–16)*, Bible in History (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), regards this action as revealing a mature aspect of Samson's personality insasmuch as he is accepting responsibility for his obligation to pay the bet (115); but this seems to be an unwarranted valorization of Samson's fit of pique. However, by contrast later on she views it as a manifestation of Samson's childishness (170).

he attempts to contact his wife. Assuming that she is still his for the taking, he goes to see her, wanting sex (Judg. 15.1). But her father prevents him from going in to her, because, thinking that Samson was displeased with her, he has given her to one of the other young men at the wedding (Judg. 15.2). He offers Samson the girl's younger sister instead, whom he says is prettier,[15] but Samson is unimpressed, and as before takes out his frustration on Philistines who have nothing to do with the situation, this time by burning their crops and harvests (Judg. 15.4–5). Once again, a naive confidence in his own rights and abilities, together with a strong sexual drive, leads Samson into trouble, and when he does not get his own way he lashes out. This is a dangerous combination: an intellectual and emotional child in a strongman's body. The Philistines' barbarous response to his devastation of their food supply is to burn the Timnite woman and her father to death (Judg. 15.6), presumably for being the cause of the Philistines' ill fortune, and Samson, having used the supposed treachery of his erstwhile father-in-law as an excuse to wreak havoc upon the rest of the Philistines, now takes offence that the Philistines have punished the in-laws that he himself appears to have disavowed, and avenges himself by slaughtering the Philistines in great numbers (Judg. 15.7–8). But his pursuit of personal grievances has been so extreme that it has provoked an armed response from the Philistines, who now come and encamp against the tribe of Judah in an attempt to corner Samson (Judg. 15.9–10). The Judaeans, wanting to pacify the Philistines, send an armed force to get Samson, and when he is asked why he has aggravated the Philistines so, Samson says, 'As they have done to me, so I have done to them' (Judg. 15.11). He has carried on a personal vendetta to satisfy his own sense of pique, and his wild, uncontrolled, immature behaviour has had the characteristics of tit-for-tat retribution. Not surprisingly, the Judaeans tie him up and hand him over to the Philistines, hoping to rid themselves of his troublesome presence (15.12–13), but once he is in Philistine hands at Ramath-Lehi, the Spirit of the Lord impels him to another act of slaughter, this time of a thousand Philistines using only the jawbone of an ass that happens to be within reach (15.14–17). This seems to be the end of the Timnite cycle of violence, during which Samson's immaturity and sexual frustration, egged on by the Spirit of the Lord, have led to the escalation of a private quarrel to a national quarrel; but it is not yet the end of the story.

The remaining chapter of Samson's story contains the same elements of sex and violence, although in a somewhat more restrained fashion. Despite—or perhaps because of—his great slaughter of the Philistines at Ramath-Lehi, Samson's sexual impulses remain unsatisfied, and so when on another of his jaunts out and about he sees a prostitute in Gaza, he goes in to her (Judg. 16.1). It seems as if here finally he gets the sexual satisfaction he has been craving for so long, and we are led to think that now he is sexually satisfied, perhaps the desire for blood that seems to have driven him for much of the previous two chapters has abated. But then there is a replay of an earlier scenario: Samson falls for a woman, who is approached by

[15] The situation is reminiscent of Jacob being given Leah when he had been promised her younger sister Rachel (Gen. 29.15–30), and of David being refused Saul's eldest daughter Merab when he had been promised her, so that he eventually marries Merab's younger sister Michal (1 Sam. 18.17–27). In both of these instances the younger woman is actually more desirable than her elder sister for the man. Samson, however, takes the offer of the younger woman as an insult.

the Philistines and given a strong incentive to worm out of him information that will enable him to be bested (Judg. 16.4–5).[16] Samson seems to prefer his sexual liaisons uncomplicated by the presence of friends and relatives, and Delilah as an apparently independent woman fits the bill perfectly in that respect. Indeed, such is his confidence with her that he seems to regard her questioning about the source of his strength as a game, and plays along with her, tantalizing her with false answers (16.6–14). He seems quite to have forgotten that the last time a woman pressed him for the answer to a question it led to problems, and despite having been outwitted by the Timnite woman he seems either unaware of the danger with Delilah, or unable to protect himself from it. Like someone who is locked into a destructive pattern of behaviour, Samson's disclosure of his secret to Delilah is inevitable, as are the consequences: his sexual power and fulfilment is both figuratively and literally terminated, as he is shaved, blinded, and imprisoned (16.18–21). Shaving and blinding are symbols of castration; and once he is in the prison mill, grinding, his sexual needs are unlikely to be fulfilled.[17]

But Samson being Samson, his libido is not so easily extinguished, and as the text says almost in an aside, his hair begins to grow again (Judg. 16.22). The final movement of the story sees the Philistines not learning from their experience either, making the same mistake with Samson as he had made with Delilah: over-confidence. It does not occur to them that a blind Samson could be dangerous, and they do not think to cut his hair again. Maybe they need his strength to grind in the prison mill, and enjoying the benefits of it they become complacent. In any case, they hold a festival to their god Dagon, rejoicing at how Dagon has given Samson over to them (Judg. 16.23–4). This is the first time the Philistines' god has been mentioned, and clearly it is not going to go down well with someone who is supposedly the special servant of the God of Israel. Just as religious dedication was invoked at the beginning of the story, now it is going to be invoked again (though implicitly) at the end. Samson is summoned to the festival in order to 'play' in front of the people (Judg. 16.25), to be mocked by them, but there may be more to it than that. The verb 'play' (וַיְצַחֵק [*way*^{e}*ṣaḥēq*] may have sexual overtones,[18] and it is possible to imagine that Samson's libido has been growing with his hair, with the net effect that being subjected to some kind of sexual mockery is enough to bring his frustration to boiling point. The results are predictable: an explosive display of superhuman strength that is to everyone's detriment. But even now, in this contest of gods, Samson is bent on personal revenge: 'remember me,' he prays to the Lord, 'so that I can take vengeance on the Philistines for one of my two eyes' (Judg. 16.28). And in a final orgasm of violence, he pulls down the building on top of everyone, himself included, killing thousands of them—even more deadly in

[16] Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*, sees the liaison between Samson and Delilah as a variation on the theme of an animalistic male being transformed via the love of a woman, but argues that in Samson's case the taming is a lapse: Yahweh wants Samson wild and helps him to revert to his wildness, as evidenced by Judg. 16.28 (108).

[17] Niditch, 'Samson as Culture Hero', argues that not only the shaving but the grinding in the mill is a womanization of Samson: as well as grinding actually being women's work, the term 'grinding' is used of women in Job 31.10 and Isa. 47.2–3 as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (616–17). However, Gunn, *Judges*, 174, cites the rabbinic notion reported in *Numbers Rabbah* that Samson's 'grinding' consisted of everyone bringing their wives to him so that they could conceive from him.

[18] Niditch, 'Samson as Culture Hero', 617.

death than he was in life (Judg. 16.30). The God who began to impel him and pulse in his veins as he grew up has answered his prayer and impelled him for the last time.[19]

The biblical Samson, then, is characterized by privileged status in the eyes of God, great physical strength, strong sexual drive, minimal powers of reason, lone action, and roaming from place to place. But he is not shown as particularly successful; rather, he is a chaotic force needing to be tamed, and his portrayal can arguably be read as a critique of such macho-man behaviour.[20] Although Samson does manage to kill a large number of Philistines at his own death, the overall position of the Israelites vis-à-vis the Philistines is not really improved by the time Samson is removed from the scene;[21] indeed, the book of Judges goes on to describe great apostasy and civil strife that takes place in Israel after Samson's death.

THE MILTONIC SAMSON

Chaotic and recklessly impulsive the biblical Samson may be; but John Milton's Samson, who is the more immediate predecessor of Hamilton's and Handel's Samson, could not be more different. Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, upon which the libretto of the later Handelian oratorio was based, was published in 1671 together with *Paradise Regained*, to which it seems to be a companion piece. Despite this relatively late date of publication, the content of the poem is often related by scholars to Milton's experiences during and after the English Civil War.[22]

Samson Agonistes is set on the day of the festival of Dagon recorded in Judg. 16.23–4. On account of the festival Samson, blind and in chains, is given a day's rest from grinding in the prison mill, and while sitting outside he ponders his fate, struggling to make sense of the contrast between his present piteous state and the great things that were promised for him at his birth. First alone, and then via a series of visitations, from friends (the chorus), family (his father Manoa), and

[19] Pnina Galpaz-Feller, '"Let my soul die with the Philistines" (Judges 16.30)', *JSOT*, 30 (2006), 315–25, sees Samson's final prayer as the author's redirection of the motive for Samson's death from the personal realm towards the national realm, in that describing the prayer helps to glorify God and his followers in their victory over Dagon and his worshippers: only by God's help is Samson able to destroy the temple (325). This seems to be an over-optimistic view of the matter.

[20] Adrien Janis Bledstein, 'Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men who Play God?', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, FCB, 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 34–54, characterizes Samson as an anti-hero who is all brawn and little brain (50). Similarly, Renate Jost, 'God of Love/God of Vengeance, or Samson's "Prayer for Vengeance"', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Judges*, FCB 2, 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 117–25, comments that the Samson narrative can be read as a critique of the 'Samson syndrome', because Samson is portrayed as a tragi-comic figure rather than as a hero to be emulated (124).

[21] Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*, argues that Samson's destruction of the Dagon temple is the prelude to the creation of an Israelite nation in its own right (115), but this seems to be a more positive reading of the text than is justified from the material following the Samson narrative (Judg. 17–21).

[22] The edition of *Samson Agonistes* used for this study is one that was roughly contemporary with Hamilton's libretto: *Samson Agonistes: A Dramatick Poem* (London, 1727).

adversaries (Dalila, and the Philistine Harapha), who recall and discuss with him various aspects of past events, Samson reflects on his life. Over the course of these exchanges Samson is enabled to accept responsibility for his own downfall, and as a result moves from a mood of initial despair to one of purposeful resolution. When he is then summoned to perform at the Dagon festival he at first refuses, but later, impelled by some internal motivation, he agrees to go. The havoc that he subsequently wreaks by pulling down the building on the festival crowd is recounted to Manoa and the chorus by a messenger, in the style of Greek tragedy.[23]

Rather than simply being a portrayal of the biblical Samson's exploits, therefore, *Samson Agonistes* is a much more psychologically focused piece that explores Samson's internal motivations in a way that is quite foreign to the biblical text.[24] It is, in effect, Samson's own commentary upon his actions, rather than a representation of them, and as such, it offers a much more purposeful picture of its hero than the one given in the biblical text.[25] Three aspects in particular of this alternative version of Samson are of special interest for present purposes, because they are taken up in various ways in Hamilton's libretto: Samson's sense of identity and vocation; his status in the eyes of his compatriots; and the question of how far Samson's fortunes are the expression of a battle between God and Dagon.

First and foremost, then, is Samson's sense of identity and vocation. As far as his identity is concerned, it is no exaggeration to say that Samson's relationship with the deity is at the heart of the poem. Samson is clearly someone who thought he had a particularly close relationship with God, but whose conviction has been called into question because of the dramatic change in his circumstances, and he is now struggling to reconcile his present situation with his previous self-understanding. One element in that self-understanding is the annunciation of his

[23] The poem's similarity to a Greek tragedy was noted earlier. It is particularly reminiscent of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, in which the Greek warrior Philoctetes, who has inherited Heracles' unerring bow, has been abandoned on an island suffering from a festering snake bite, while his comrades besiege Troy. Unfortunately, they cannot win the siege without Philoctetes and the bow, so in the play various characters return to the island to try and persuade the languishing Philoctetes to rejoin the siege. For a comparative discussion of the two works, see Andre Furlani, '"In place": *kairos* in *Samson Agonistes*', *The Seventeenth Century*, 10 (1995), 219–35. Furlani compares the Greek concept of *kairos* in the sense of fateful or decisive moment as it appears in *Philoctetes* and in *Samson Agonistes*, and in his discussion, he refers to the biblical narrative's use of the *pāʿam* root (221–2), noted by Alter (see note 7 above), equating the Hebrew noun *paʿam* with *kairos* as 'both the blow and the critical moment to strike it' (222). He then goes on to argue that Milton 'establishes an intimate and coherent link between Samson's "impulsions" [expressed via the *pāʿam* root] and *kairos*, one which culminates in the climax of the drama' (225).

[24] For a discussion of Samson's journey of spiritual growth over the course of the poem from the perspective of the Christian humanism that is evidenced elsewhere in Milton's writings, see Joan S. Bennett, *Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 5 (119–60). A shortened version of the same chapter is included as 'Reading *Samson Agonistes*', in Dennis Danielson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 219–35.

[25] Malka Milo, '*Samson Agonistes* et les commentaires bibliques', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 49 (1975), 260–70, suggests that Milton may have been influenced in his portrait of Samson by the works of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan biblical commentators, including Richard Rogers and William Gouge.

miraculous birth and his special nurture, which are mentioned right at the beginning of the poem as Samson contrasts his auspicious beginnings with the state of degradation in which he now finds himself (*SA* 23–42). In his recalling of the annunciation, the overtones of miraculous conception are absent; the emphasis is rather on the *double* announcement and the angel's ascent to heaven in front of *both* of his parents (*SA* 23–6), which stresses the indisputability of the event and the certainty that this really was a visitation from God. Nothing is said at this point of Samson's own relationship to the deity; later on, however, Samson, in an agony of despair at his 'sense of Heav'n's desertion' (*SA* 632), describes his former relationship to God as that of a son to his father:

> I was his nursling once, and choice delight,
> His destin'd from the womb,
> Promis'd by Heav'nly message twice descending.
> Under his special eye
> Abstemious I grew up and thriv'd amain;
> He led me on to mightiest deeds
> Above the nerve of mortal arm
> . . .
> But now hath cast me off as never known . . . (*SA* 633–41)

This vividly portrays Samson's sense of belonging to God, in images of nurture and training that evoke a man initiating his son into the rigours of manhood. The impact of the imagery is strengthened by the fact that the speech which contains these words comes immediately after Samson has been visited by Manoa, his earthly father, whose fussy, homely character and parochial concerns are quite different from those of his mighty warrior son.[26] In his sense of vocation and his extraordinary gifts and acts, Samson is much more truly God's child than he is Manoa's; little wonder, then, that he should despair so profoundly at being 'cast off' by his heavenly father. Indeed, such is the strength of the father–son relationship between God and Samson that the chorus recognize a 'family resemblance' between the two: praying that God will treat Samson more leniently, they refer to him as 'this once thy glorious Champion,/The image of thy strength' (*SA* 705–6).

This being marked out from before birth for a special relationship with the deity will equip Samson for a particular and special vocation which he expresses by saying, 'Promise was that I/Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver' (*SA* 38–9). This is a much more specific and definite understanding of his vocation than the one that appears in the biblical text. There, the initial annunciation to Manoa's

[26] Rachel Trubowitz, '"I was his nursling once": Nation, Lactation and the Hebraic in *Samson Agonistes*', in Catherine Gimelli Martin (ed.), *Milton and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 167–83, argues that Samson must reject Manoa along with Dalila (who later offers to free Samson from prison and take him home to care for him) as an ungodly nurturer, because God is the only 'mother' from whom Samson can receive holy nurture and pure identity (167–8). She sees this as reflecting Milton's vision for the Reformed England of a universalist model of identity that is independent of either maternal or paternal nurture and echoes the sentiments of Gal. 3.28 in cutting across social, political and racial categories (168–9). Achsah Guibbory, '"The Jewish Question" and "The Woman Question" in *Samson Agonistes*: Gender, Religion, and Nation', in Martin, *Milton and Gender*, 184–203, regards Manoa as 'the earthly, corporeal father whom Samson leaves behind for the divine,' and sees Manoa's 'offer of domestic ease', an offer through which Manoa is feminized, as a 'counterpart to the life of sensuality that Dalila will offer in the next scene' (194).

wife tells her only that this Nazirite child will *begin* to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Judg. 13.5), and as the story progresses there is no evidence that Samson himself thinks in terms of delivering Israel from its overlords, only that he wants to hit back at the Philistines when they cross him. But in Milton, Samson's sense of vocation is the key to understanding all of his actions, most particularly his liaisons with women which are so troubling in the biblical text.[27] Not only does Samson see himself as the unqualified deliverer of Israel from Philistine rule, he knows that when he is attracted to the Timnite woman it is a divine impulse, and for that reason he insists on the marriage so that he can fulfil his role as deliverer (*SA* 219–26). This interpretation takes advantage of an ambiguity in the wording of the biblical text: Judg. 14.4 (KJV), reflecting the underlying Hebrew, states, 'But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the Lord, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines'. The question here, of course, is whether the 'he' who is seeking the occasion against the Philistines is the Lord or Samson. If it is the Lord, then Samson is portrayed as an unwitting stooge who is being made to cause trouble without realizing it. If, on the other hand, Samson himself is seeking the occasion, then he is consciously co-operating with God in fulfilling his vocation rather than simply following his gonads. Milton follows the understanding that Samson is knowingly co-operating with God in marrying the Timnite woman; but he also extends the principle to cover Samson's liaison with Dalila (*SA* 227–33), so that Samson claims to have married first the Timnite woman and then Dalila for the express purpose of giving himself an opportunity against the Philistines. In this way the potentially scandalous sexual aspects of the biblical narrative are glossed over by justifying the exogamy as purposeful and by regularizing the affiliation with Dalila into a marriage (the prostitute at Gaza is omitted altogether).[28]

Samson's acts of violence are similarly brought under the umbrella of his vocation as a deliverer. The chorus are the first to mention them directly, in an opening speech which gives a list of the great feats performed by 'That heroick, that renown'd,/Irresistible Samson' (*SA* 125–6). The very adjectives used to describe Samson—'heroic', 'renowned'—indicate how the chorus regard his exploits, since the exploits are the basis upon which the chorus have arrived at their assessment of Samson. They describe how he tore the lion (*SA* 128) and defeated fully equipped armies whilst unarmed himself (*SA* 129–34), and in this context 'the bold Ascalonite' (*SA* 138) is said to have turned and fled from him. These are probably all

[27] Krouse, *Milton's Samson*, comments that the tradition of understanding all Samson's waywardness as being from God goes back as far as the patristic period (95–6). Gunn, *Judges*, 196, highlights the picture in seventeenth-century commentator Joseph Hall's *Contemplations* (1615) of Samson claiming divine inspiration for his desire to marry the Philistine woman, and comments that in this respect Milton's Samson follows Hall's.

[28] Not all interpretations of the Samson story found it necessary to omit Samson's visit to the prostitute. Certain allegorical or typological interpretations viewed the episode at Gaza as a symbol of Christ's descent into hell followed by his bursting the gates of death at his resurrection (in Judg. 16.3 Samson is said to have arisen from the prostitute at midnight and left the city, taking its locked gates with him). Gunn, *Judges*, 176–8, cites Augustine as an early proponent of this interpretation; and for a seventeenth-century example see Thomas Hayne, *The general view of the Holy Scriptures, or: The times, places, and persons of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1640), 218. Others got round the difficulty by saying that Samson repented of his momentary lapse, which was why he got up early instead of spending all night there. See Matthew Poole, *Annotations on the Holy Bible, Vol. I*, 4th edn. (Edinburgh, 1700), on Judg. 16.3.

allusions to the Timnite narrative, in the course of which Samson kills the lion (Judg. 14.5–6), kills and despoils thirty men from Ashkelon in order to gain the wherewithal to pay his bet with the wedding party (Judg. 14.19), and takes on the Philistines barehanded after he has burned down their corn and they have killed his erstwhile bride and father-in-law in response (Judg. 15.7–8). The biblical narrative gives an ambivalent picture at best of these actions, especially the ones that involve slaughtering Philistines. However, severing them from their narrative context and presenting them as part of a list of mighty feats that are attributed to an avowedly heroic individual dissociates them from the 'tit-for-tat' cycle of retribution over a private quarrel and gives them an heroic character that they do not have in their original context.[29] Samson himself later alludes to the same acts as 'those great acts which God had done/Singly by me against [our] conquerors' (*SA* 243–4), thus presenting them as not merely heroic but divinely inspired, and showing them as being undertaken in pursuit of his vocation as deliverer (cf. *SA* 245–6).

However, it soon becomes clear that Samson's compatriots do not share Samson's view of himself as a divinely appointed deliverer, as Samson explains to the chorus why Israel is still under Philistine rule despite his efforts to deliver them. His heroic acts against the Philistines notwithstanding, Samson was first ignored by Israel's rulers and then handed over by them to the Philistines to stop him doing anything else that might provoke retribution against Israel from the Philistines (*SA* 241–61). Undismayed, Samson wreaked havoc among the Philistine forces who were to take him prisoner, and created an unparalleled chance for the Israelite forces to join him and defeat the Philistines (*SA* 261–7). But the Israelites failed to do so, and Samson reflects bitterly,

> . . . what more oft in nations grown corrupt,
> And by their vices brought to servitude,
> Than to love bondage more than liberty,
> Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty;
> And to despise, or envy, or suspect
> Whom God hath of his special favour rais'd
> As their deliverer . . . ? (*SA* 268–74)

In fact, throughout the poem Samson is a lone figure. Despite the recitation of Samson's renowned heroic deeds by the chorus when they first enter, it seems clear that these deeds have earned Samson only negligible support, for he greets the chorus as if they are the first ones to visit him:

> Your coming, friends, revives me, for I learn
> Now of my own experience, not by talk,
> How counterfeit a coin they are who friends
> Bear in their superscription (of the most
> I would be understood) in prosp'rous days
> They swarm, but in adverse withdraw their head,
> Not to be found, though sought. (*SA* 187–93)

[29] Notable too is the fact that although the prostitute at Gaza is nowhere mentioned, Samson's stealing the gates of Gaza is one of the mighty feats enumerated by the chorus (*SA* 146–50). Compare Krouse's comment: 'Like all who interpreted the story throughout seventeen centuries, Milton treated Samson as a hero' (*Milton's Samson*, 90).

Perhaps the most poignant expression of Samson's lone-ness is his departure with the officer to the Dagon festivities, where he forbids the chorus, his new-found friends, to come along with him, 'lest it perhaps offend them/To see me girt with friends' (*SA* 1414–15). His final act of strength is performed in a crowded arena, yet alone.

But the most significant aspect of Samson's isolation, as already remarked, is whether God too has abandoned him, and this is the question that the poem sets out to answer. It is intertwined with another question, which at first sight takes precedence: the extent to which Samson's fortunes are an expression of the conflict between God and Dagon. This is an issue which is implicit in the biblical narrative, but which is brought into sharper focus in *Samson Agonistes* by the poem's setting in Gaza on the day of the Dagon festival. It is also raised explicitly in the poem on several occasions, the first of which is during Manoa's visit, when he tells Samson that the worst aspect of what has happened is that it has allowed Dagon to be exalted at God's expense (*SA* 433–47). Samson replies that of all his sufferings, this is what torments him the most (*SA* 448–59), but asserts that God will soon vindicate himself (*SA* 460–71), an assertion that Manoa takes as prophetic (*SA* 472–8). The issue resurfaces later on in Samson's exchange with the Philistine giant Harapha, when Harapha derisively accuses Samson of using magic to strengthen himself (*SA* 1130–8). Samson insists that his strength is from God; he challenges Harapha to pray to Dagon to invalidate Samson's supposed magic 'spells', and then the two men will fight to prove whose god is stronger. Harapha taunts Samson that his God has abandoned him to his enemies, but Samson responds that God may yet pardon him, and reiterates the challenge 'By combat to decide whose God is God' (*SA* 1176). Their continuing exchange then moves away from the idea of a contest between the two gods, but the indication has been given that the final denouement should be interpreted in terms of such a contest. However, when the messenger brings the news that Samson has destroyed the Dagon temple, the idea that this was God defeating Dagon is absent from his report, and as good as absent from the reactions of Manoa and the chorus to the news. One of the semi-choruses that follows the messenger's report speaks disparagingly of the Philistines worshipping their idol while being impelled by the living God to invite their own destruction upon themselves (*SA* 1669–81), but the main theological thrust of Manoa's and the chorus's closing speeches concerns the idea that God did not abandon Samson but in fact vindicated him in the end (*SA* 1718–20, 1751–2). From this it seems that the more fundamental question at issue in the material about the contest between God and Dagon is not whether God is able to vindicate himself before Dagon and Dagon's followers, but whether God has given up on Samson. Manoa raises the issue of God being dishonoured before Dagon because he himself feels stigmatized by the shame of his son's actions having brought God into dishonour (*SA* 440–7), but his swift change of subject in the light of Samson's reassurances (*SA* 472–86) implies that he is not really concerned about God's ability to defend God's own honour, because he knows he does not need to be. When Samson later raises the question of 'God versus Dagon' in his exchange with Harapha, it is because Harapha is sneering at Samson's claim to have been endowed with divine strength in his hair (*SA* 1130–8), and when Harapha tells Samson that God has abandoned him, Samson reasserts his trust in God and then challenges Harapha to single combat to see

whose god is god (*SA* 1156–77). This is clearly as much about whether God is prepared to support Samson as it is about whether God is more powerful than Dagon. So it is not really surprising that the main thrust of the poem's ending is that God has not abandoned Samson rather than that God has defeated Dagon. God may well have defeated Dagon, but in doing so God has vindicated Samson, which is the more important outcome.

Milton's Samson, then, retains some of the characteristics of the biblical Samson—the privileged status with the deity, the great physical strength, the lone action—but other characteristics are modified to more acceptable levels. In particular, the sexual drive is metamorphosed by interpreting it either as divine imperative (as in the case of the Timnite woman) or as a stratagem to defeat the Philistines (as in the case of Dalila); and the lack of rational powers is completely reversed as a highly articulate Samson presents all his actions in terms of strategies against the enemy, analyses his own life and identifies his mistakes, and argues with Dalila and Harapha in order to undermine their positions. This Samson is therefore significantly more successful than the biblical Samson; the chaotic element of his character has been removed, and even though his lone campaign thus far has failed to inspire any more than local adulation, at the end of his life he is adjudged to have brought Israel the opportunity for freedom, as well as endless fame for his family (presumably a compensation in the absence of offspring) (*SA* 1714–17). Although there is no sequel to the narrative as there is in the biblical text, the sense is that whatever would follow would be good, rather than the descent into anarchy that occupies the remaining chapters of Judges after the death of Samson.

THE HAMILTONIAN/HANDELIAN SAMSON

This, then, is the model of Samson that Newburgh Hamilton used for his libretto,[30] and (as already hinted) in doing so he made some interesting and significant adaptations to Milton's poem. The libretto begins with Samson sitting outside on the day of the Dagon festival, musing dejectedly, as the Philistines rejoice and sing. He is visited by Micah and the chorus of Israelites, who commiserate with him over his sufferings, and then Samson's father Manoa enters. After expressing his sorrow over Samson's fate, Manoa tells Samson that as a result of his capture Dagon is being celebrated and God blasphemed. Samson expresses his anguish at this, and calls on God to rise and take action. Manoa then says that he is working to buy Samson's freedom from the Philistine prison, but Samson expresses only the desire to die. Manoa urges him to trust in God, but Samson continues to despair, and Micah and the chorus pray for God to vindicate Samson. Manoa having left, Dalila enters, and pleads with Samson to forgive her, claiming to have been motivated in her actions by love of Samson, and urging him

[30] *Samson. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Alter'd and adapted to the Stage from the Samson Agonistes of John Milton. Set to Musick by George Frederick Handel* (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1743).

to come home with her and be pampered. Samson refuses her fiercely, and after an accusatory duet between the two she leaves. Then the giant Harapha enters and taunts Samson, but is shocked by Samson's spirited response. Micah challenges Harapha to call on Dagon to weaken Samson in order to prove Dagon's superiority, and the chorus plead for God's help. The scene ends with choruses of Israelites and the priests of Dagon each asserting that their god is supreme. Harapha then returns to order Samson to come and perform at the festival of Dagon, but Samson refuses. Harapha threatens Samson and leaves. Micah expresses concern, but Samson is adamant. The chorus plead with God for help, and Samson expresses an impulse to go with Harapha, just as the giant returns to repeat his command. Samson leaves with him, and then Manoa returns with news that the Philistines were amenable to freeing Samson for a sufficient price. Manoa imagines himself caring for the released Samson, but then a terrible commotion is heard, and an officer comes running with the news that Samson has pulled down the Dagon temple on himself and everyone in it. Lamentation for Samson follows, but then Manoa declares that Samson died heroically, and Micah declares that God did not abandon Samson but through him has given the Israelites freedom. The libretto ends with a grand celebratory chorus in praise to God.

The vast majority of Hamilton's libretto uses material from Milton's poem, in several places quoting Milton verbatim, and Hamilton has preserved Milton's basic story line intact. Nevertheless, he has given it quite a different nuance, and this appears particularly in the aspects of the story already discussed for Milton's poem: the treatment of Samson's perceived vocation; Samson's status in the eyes of his compatriots; and the contest between God and Dagon as embodied in Samson and the Philistines.

The first difference is in Hamilton's treatment of Samson's vocation as a deliverer, which is much more muted than in Milton's portrayal. In line with both the biblical account and Milton's poem, the libretto pictures Samson's miraculous birth, but less emphatically—it makes no reference to the *double* annunciation, and no stress is laid on the fact that *both* parents saw the angel ascend. Instead, Samson's birth is simply announced, and his parents see the angel ascend. The same is true of the idea that Samson is God's 'nursling': Manoa uses this phrase of Samson, and the chorus refer to Samson as the image of God's strength, but Samson himself does not dwell on his relationship with his heavenly father as he does in Milton's poem. The notion that Samson has a vocation from God has a similarly low profile—the idea is present in the libretto, but little stress is laid upon it, and it does not appear until quite late on in the second Act. However, when Samson's vocation is finally mentioned, it is expressed in quite a distinctive fashion. In response to Harapha's disparaging remarks about Samson's strength, Samson sings an air in which he claims that he was granted his strength by God in order to quell tyranny:

> My Strength is from the living God,
> By Heav'n free-gifted at my Birth,
> To quell the Mighty of the Earth,
> And prove the brutal Tyrant's Rod:
> But to the Righteous Peace and Rest,
> With Liberty to all opprest. (II.4, p. 17)

The first two lines of this are taken from *Samson Agonistes* 1140–1, but the remaining four lines are Hamilton's composition. The idea that Samson's strength was given to him so that he could put down tyrants and free the oppressed reflects the eighteenth-century British view of (Protestant) Britain as a haven from (Catholic) tyranny and a land of liberty. On the assumption that the Israelites in some sense stand for Britons, Samson as one of them is of course going to be divinely equipped to champion the cause of liberty and put down tyrants. In this way, the very specific concept of a deliverer whose vocation is to free his people from oppressive overlords is modified and generalized to make it resonate with Handel's and Hamilton's eighteenth-century audience.

This reconceptualization of Samson's vocation is accompanied by a corresponding change in the presentation of his relationships with women and his mighty feats of strength. In Milton's poem both of these aspects of Samson's persona were seen as outworkings of his very specific vocation as a deliverer, but the libretto's generalized understanding of Samson's vocation makes such an interpretation of his actions impossible. Thus, whereas in Milton's poem Samson's irregular sexual liaisons are presented as the deliverer's calculated acts of war against the Philistines, in the libretto his marriage to the Timnite is completely omitted, and his marriage to Dalila is shown as quite simply a bad mistake:

Micah . . . Yet Men will ask,
Why did not *Samson* rather wed at home?
In his own Tribe are fairer, or as fair.
Samson O that I had! Alas, fond Wish! too late.
That specious Monster! *Dalilah*! my Snare! (I.2, p. 5)

As for Samson's military exploits, they are alluded to in the libretto in general terms, but unlike Samson *Agonistes* the Samson of the libretto never discusses these acts in detail or gives any rationale for them, nor does he ever claim to have had a strategy that he was following in carrying them out. This generalized presentation of Samson's exploits as 'mighty acts' means that instead of being seen as either a calculating deliverer or an uncontrolled hoodlum he is seen as a brave warrior whose main activity was military combat. Typical of this approach is Micah's opening recitative, where he expresses shock at the sight of the blind bedraggled Samson:

Can this be he?
Heroick *Samson*? whom no strength of Man,
Nor Fury of the fiercest Beast cou'd quell?
Who tore the Lion, as the Lion tears the Kid;
Ran weaponless on Armies clad in Iron,
Useless the temper'd Steel, or Coat of Mail. (I.2, p. 3)

Similarly, Samson's father Manoah exclaims at his first sight of Samson:

O miserable Change! Is this the Man
Renown'd afar, the Dread of *Isr'el*'s Foes?
Who with an Angel's Strength their Armies duell'd,
Himself an Army; now unequal Match
To guard his Breast against the Coward's Spear. (I.3, p. 6)

At the beginning of Act II Manoah tries to console Samson with the memory that he was chosen by God, describing Samson as 'by him led on/To Deeds above the Nerve of mortal Arm' (II.1, p. 10), but without defining or describing those deeds any more closely. Later, when the giant Harapha comes to challenge Samson to a verbal sparring match, he sneers,

> Had Fortune brought me to that Field of Death,
> Where thou wrought'st Wonders with an Ass's Jaw,
> I'd left thy Carcase where the Ass lay thrown. (II.4, p. 16)

But in none of these cases is any further elaboration or context given to explain how these deeds came about; they are simply brave and marvellous exploits that indicate Samson's apparently unconquerable warrior prowess. This means that in the libretto, rather than having a specific vocation as a deliverer which has inexplicably ended in failure, Samson is primarily a mighty warrior who has come to grief.

The second major difference between Milton and Hamilton is in the portrayal of Samson's relationship with his compatriots. By contrast with the biblical text and *Samson Agonistes*, where Samson has effectively been acting alone and on his own initiative, in the libretto Samson's fate is more than just a personal tragedy: it is a national disaster, because Samson is Israel's champion. This picture of Samson as a national hero pervades the libretto, and is achieved in several ways. In the first instance there is a redesignation of the chorus from a chorus of Danites in Milton to a chorus of Israelites in the libretto. This redesignation immediately marks out Samson as a pan-Israelite hero, because the group of people who come to see him represent the whole of Israel rather than simply his own locality of Dan. A comparison between Milton and the libretto on this point is very interesting. In Milton, the chorus's first words to Samson are,

> Matchless in might,
> The glory late of Israel, now the grief,
> We come thy friends and neighbours not unknown
> From Eshtaol and Zora's fruitful Vale
> To visit or bewail thee . . . (*SA* 178–82)

Hamilton's version of this speech, in the mouth of Micah who is a kind of spokesperson for the chorus, is as follows:

> Matchless in Might! once *Isr'el*'s Glory, now her Grief;
> We come, thy Friends well known, to visit thee. (I.2, p. 3)

Although the two are superficially very similar, there are nevertheless subtle but significant differences between them. The most obvious difference is that whereas Milton specifies the places from which the friends come, Hamilton does not. The locations given by Milton, Eshtaol and Zora, are found in the biblical narrative of Samson. Zorah is where Samson's father Manoah lives (Judg. 13.2), and 'between Zorah and Eshtaol' is both where the Spirit of the Lord is first said to inspire Samson (Judg. 13.25), and where Samson is eventually buried, in his father's tomb (Judg. 16.31). The men in Milton's chorus are thus clearly and specifically Danites, like Samson himself. By contrast, Hamilton's chorus, including Micah, are generic Israelites, described in the stage directions only as 'Chorus of Israelites' with no

sense of where exactly they might have come from; as such, they are representatives of a whole nation, unlike Milton's chorus who only represent one tribe out of twelve within the nation as a whole.

This redesignation gives the chorus's description of Samson as once the glory and now the grief of 'Israel' quite a different nuance in each case. In Milton, when Samson's local neighbours use the phrase, they are expressing their proud view of the man who was born and grew up among them, and are fondly claiming him as a figure of national significance. In the libretto, however, when Micah as representative of the chorus uses the phrase, he is expressing the view of all Israel, because the chorus consists of 'Israelites' and is therefore conceived of as representing all Israel. Their opinion of Samson as Israel's glory or grief thus arguably carries greater conviction than that expressed by a chorus consisting only of Danites.

A further difference between the two versions is in the friends' description of themselves. Milton portrays the Danites as somewhat diffident, not claiming a very strong acquaintance with Samson; their self-designation as 'thy friends and neighbours not unknown' implies that Samson will have met them previously but perhaps might not remember them very well. By contrast, Hamilton's Israelites are quite confident of their relationship with Samson, introducing themselves via Micah as 'thy Friends well known'. Again, the portrayal of Samson with good Israelite friends rather than simply Danite acquaintances adds to the sense of him as a figure of national importance and influence.[31] The Israelite chorus of the libretto thus establishes Samson's status as a national hero in a way that does not happen in *Samson Agonistes*.

This 'national hero' theme reappears prominently in two instances towards the end of the libretto. The first of these is where Samson agrees to go with Harapha to the feast of Dagon. Having bidden the chorus farewell, Samson prays for God's spirit to inspire him, and declares,

> Then shall I make Jehovah's Glory known,
> *Their Idol Gods shall from his Presence fly*,
> *Scatter'd like Sheep before the God of Hosts.* (III.1, p. 22; italics added)

He then sings an air describing the scattering of these 'idol gods', to which Micah responds:

> With Might endu'd above the Sons of Men,
> *Swift as the Light'ning's Glance his Errand execute*,
> And spread his Name amongst the Heathen round. (Ibid.; italics added)

Micah, followed by the chorus, then urges Samson on by singing,

> The Holy One of Israel be thy Guide,
> The Angel of thy Birth stand by thy Side:
> *To Fame immortal go*,
> *Heav'n bids thee strike the Blow:*
> The Holy One of Israel is thy Guide. (Ibid.; italics added)

[31] Dorothea Siegmund-Schultze, 'Die Samson-Gestalt bei Milton und Händel', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 18–19 (1972–3), 9–25, observes that in the libretto alongside Manoah the loving father, the figure of Micah the true friend is introduced, and she links this with the eighteenth-century tendency to stress the value of friendship (23).

This is another example of clever reworking of Milton's poem. By reallocating speeches to different characters and adding some extra lines (those in italics in the above examples), Hamilton has made the libretto text give quite a different impression from that given by *Samson Agonistes*. All of the material in the above quotations that is used from the poem comes from the speech of the chorus that follows Samson's farewell speech, and it is a speech which is most logically understood as being spoken after Samson has left (*SA* 1427–40). It is therefore presented as the chorus's hopes for Samson rather than their 'commissioning' of him, emphasizing as in other instances Samson's lone and lonely journey of self-rediscovery. In the libretto, however, while still on stage with the chorus Samson himself is claiming for himself what the chorus of *Samson Agonistes* wished for him after he had left, and Micah and the chorus encourage him in that claim. He is thus sent on his way to the Dagon festival with the support and prayers of the chorus of Israelites, and their support makes it clear that he is going as their champion rather than just pursuing his own personal spiritual rehabilitation.

Any doubt about Samson's status as a national hero in the libretto can be dispelled by consideration of how it portrays the return of Samson's body after his death. In Milton's poem, Samson's body is not collected, and there is no great funeral procession; rather, Manoa invites the chorus to go with him and retrieve the body, and describes how it will be brought back by friends and relatives for a solemn burial, and a memorial will be erected (*SA* 1725–44). The poem then ends with a final moralizing comment from the chorus, after which they and Manoa will presumably go off to find the body, but no retrieval or burial actually takes place within the poem. The libretto, however, presents what is effectively a small-scale state funeral (III.3, p. 27): at the news of Samson's death, laments are sung by Micah and the chorus, urging 'Israel' to mourn its hero Samson; then the body itself is brought, and Manoa declares that 'all *Isr'el*'s valiant youth' (III.3, p. 27) will visit Samson's tomb to inspire themselves with valour. Finally, Manoa and other Israelites sing elegies, before Manoa declares that this is no time for lamentation (!). As so often before, much of the recitative is taken from Milton, but by altering the relative position of pieces of dialogue and allocating them to different characters Hamilton has created quite a different effect. This is not just a father and a few friends acknowledging the final vindication of a person whose agonized struggles they have witnessed; this is a whole country together with a father paying their respects to a national hero.

The third major difference between *Samson Agonistes* and the libretto is the idea of the contest between God and Dagon, which is more developed in the libretto than it is in the poem, and runs through all three acts. The theme is introduced right at the beginning of the libretto, as Samson hears the celebration of the Dagon festival while he is sitting outside musing (I.1, p. 1), and later on in Act I, Manoa tells Samson that the Philistines are celebrating a festival to Dagon, to whose power they attribute Samson's capture (I.3, p. 7). The exchange between Manoa and Samson here is adapted from *Samson Agonistes*, but it has been given quite a different nuance. In Milton the point of Manoa's (much longer) speech is to underline the shame that Samson's capture, and the resultant dishonouring of God, has brought on both Samson and Manoa (*SA* 434–47). Samson acknowledges that he has indeed been the means of bringing God into disrepute, but declares that God will respond by asserting his glory and defeating Dagon

(*SA* 448–71). Manoa accepts that Samson believes this (*SA* 472–78), and then goes on to talk about his own plans for getting Samson out of prison (*SA* 478–86). The whole exchange is thus conducted on the basis that this is a personal, individualized issue for Samson (and for Manoa); it is not so much about the dishonour brought to God as about the depth of Samson's shame, and whether there is a way out of it for him. But in the libretto, a different atmosphere prevails. As in *Samson Agonistes*, Manoa tells Samson that Dagon is to be celebrated, and God dishonoured, on account of Samson's capture (I.3, p. 7), but the harsh accusatory note is absent; here, Manoa is concerned for God's glory, not his own. Samson acknowledges his part in the situation, and asserts that God will certainly respond to the provocation from Dagon, but then he sings an air which is a dramatic appeal to God to arise and confound all his foes:

> Why does the God of *Isr'el* sleep?
> Arise with dreadful Sound,
> And Clouds encompass'd round,
> Then shall the Heathen hear thy Thunder deep.
> The Tempest of thy Wrath now raise,
> In Whirlwind them pursue,
> Full fraught with Vengeance due,
> Till Shame and Trouble all thy Foes shall seize.[32] (I.3, pp. 7–8)

The character who responds to this air is not Manoa, but Micah, representing the nation of Israel, who says:

> There lies our Hope; true Prophet may'st thou be,
> That God may vindicate his glorious Name;
> Nor let us doubt whether God is Lord, or *Dagon*. (I.3, p. 8)

The chorus then sing:

> Then shall they know, that He whose Name
> *Jehovah* is alone,
> O'er all the Earth but one,
> Was ever the most High, and still the same.[33] (Ibid.)

Manoa then rejoins the conversation with an expression of concern for his 'dearest Son' who is lying 'neglected, in this loathsome Plight', and the dialogue moves on to Manoa's plans to ransom him from prison. But the main point has already been made: the issue is not about Samson himself, but about Israel and Israel's God. Focusing Samson's air on his appeal to God to arise in self-vindication makes that, and not Samson's guilt-ridden shame and contrition, the heart of the scene; giving Micah rather than Manoa the response to the air and its sentiments broadens out the situation once more so that it concerns the status of all Israel rather than just one family; and the same is achieved by Micah's use of first-person plural terms ('*our* hope', 'Nor let *us* doubt'). Hamilton has thereby transformed the accusatory exchange between father and son into a scene where the major concern is asserting God's glory upon which the well-being of the nation depends.

[32] The words for this air are based on Milton's paraphrases of Pss. 81 (ll. 29, 30) and 83 (ll. 57–62).
[33] This chorus too is based on Milton's paraphrase of Ps. 83, ll. 65–8.

A second major expression of this theme comes during Samson's exchange with Harapha (II.4). Samson challenges Harapha to single combat, which causes a horrified Harapha to invoke Dagon at Samson's insolence. The two heroes sing an acrimonious duelling duet, and then Micah has an important piece of recitative:

> Here lie the Proof:—If *Dagon* be thy God,
> With high Devotion invocate his Aid,
> His Glory is concern'd. Let him dissolve
> Those magick Spells that gave our Hero Strength,
> Then know whose God is God; *Dagon*, of mortal Make,
> Or that Great One whom *Abra'm*'s Sons adore. (II.4, p. 18)

Three elements are particularly interesting about this recitative. In the first place, as already remarked, it is given to Micah, whereas the passage in Milton on which it is based is part of Samson's words to Harapha. In fact, in Milton the whole of the exchange between Samson and Harapha takes place without intervention from the chorus, and it is only after Harapha has left that the chorus once more picks up the conversation with Samson. Giving these words to Micah therefore once again turns a private argument into a public controversy, indicating that the whole nation of Israel is affected by the outcome of the exchange between Samson and Harapha. Secondly, Micah's description of Samson as 'our Hero' shows that Samson's role in the plot is not just as a private individual trying to exorcise his inner demons, but as the champion of a nation, who has been defeated by the enemy and is struggling to regain the advantage on behalf of his people. Thirdly, the final two lines of the recitative again highlight the main issue at stake as being the contest between Dagon and the God of Israel, while the associated definition of God as 'that Great One whom *Abra'm*'s Sons adore' shows that the contest between Samson and Harapha has ramifications for the nation as a whole, at least on Samson's side, because it is their God whose hero Samson is supposed to be. The involvement of the whole nation in this contest is underlined by the chorus coming in at this point with a plea to God to hear them and save them, a plea which does not seem to arise from the events of the libretto as they have unfolded thus far, but which shifts the focus from the quarrel between Samson and Harapha to the clash between the two deities. This clash is then emphasized further as choruses of Israelites and the priests of Dagon each claim that their god is the greatest.[34]

A third expression of the theme occurs in Act III, when Samson bids the chorus farewell before he goes to attend the festival of Dagon. Unlike Milton's Samson, who is moved to go to the festival but has no real sense of what he is going to do when he gets there (*SA* 1413–26), this Samson speaks confidently of scattering idol gods with the help of the God of Hosts, in material which is added by Hamilton to the Miltonic *Vorlage*:

[34] A similar sentiment appears in Edward Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: being the books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (Oxford, 1725). Wells glosses Samson's prayer before destroying the Philistine arena (Judg. 16.28) as asking God to allow him to take vengeance on the Philistines, so as to teach them that God, not Dagon, delivered Samson into their hands in order that this vengeance could be taken and they would learn how inferior Dagon was to God (71).

(recit.)
Their Idol Gods shall from his Presence fly,
Scatter'd like Sheep before the God of Hosts.
(air)
Thus when the Sun from's watry Bed,
All curtain'd with a cloudy Red,
Pillows his Chin upon an orient Wave;
The wand'ring Shadows ghastly pale
All troop to their infernal Jail,
Each fetter'd Ghost slips to his sev'ral Grave.[35] (III.1, p. 22)

This shows that Samson views the festival as a showdown between God and Dagon. Micah and the chorus encourage Samson in this understanding by urging him on:

To Fame immortal go,
Heav'n bids thee strike the Blow. (Ibid.)

It is not immediately clear from the context what 'the blow' is, but it is clear that in striking it Samson will be acting as Heaven's instrument, that is, as the representative of the true God. The exhortation to go 'to fame immortal' implies that Samson's actions will achieve widespread recognition, and serves to strengthen the picture already built up of Samson as the whole country's hero.

The picture of Samson as an undisputed national hero is expressed in Micah's final recitative:

Praise we *Jehovah* then, who to the End
Not parted from him, but assisted still,
'Till Desolation fill'd *Philistia*'s Lands,
Honour and Freedom giv'n to *Jacob*'s Seed. (III.3, p. 28)

As in previous instances, this is partly based on Milton, but also goes beyond Milton. The sentiment that Jehovah is to be praised because despite appearances he did not desert Samson but remained with him to the end is certainly present in Milton (*SA* 1719–20). But Milton says nothing about the desolation filling Philistia, or, for that matter, the honour and freedom given to the Israelites;[36] these are

[35] This air is based very closely upon stanza xxvi of Milton's poem 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'.

[36] Milton at this point in *Samson Agonistes*, describing what Samson has achieved, has the words,

'. . . on his enemies
Fully reveng'd, hath left them years of mourning,
And lamentation to the sons of Caphtor
Through all Philistian bounds; To Israel
Honour hath left, and freedom, let but them
Find courage to lay hold on this occasion[.]' (ll. 1711–16)

Although Hamilton's equivalent words are reminiscent of Milton's, there are subtle differences between the two versions. In Milton, Samson has left the Philistines 'mourning and lamentation' rather than 'desolation' as in the libretto; and, importantly, the 'honour and freedom' granted to the Israelites are dependent upon them taking the opportunity afforded to them by Samson's actions, whereas according to the libretto they are a 'giv'n', and by implication come from God rather than from Samson.

Hamilton's contribution, in the light of his desire to make the oratorio an expression of corporate rather than individual struggle. Additionally, in *Samson Agonistes* the lines which are the source for this recitative are part of Manoa's speech, but once again Hamilton has given them to Micah who represents the point of view of the nation. This brings the sentiments out of the private sphere into the public realm; they no longer express Manoa's personal sense of vindication for himself and his son, but the relief and joy of a nation whose ill fate has been reversed by the course of events that has just concluded.

In this way, then, Hamilton presents Samson as a man with special gifts of strength who is recognized by his country as their champion, but who marries the wrong woman, with the result that he is captured and blinded and the enemy exalt their own god above the true God. The most important thing about this Samson is not that he recover his own internal sense of vocation, but that he be empowered to act in order to destroy the idolaters, discredit their deity, and free his country from the enemy. This gives the libretto a distinctively communal thrust that is lacking from both the biblical story of Samson and Milton's poem.

CONCLUSION

There is thus a clear development in the character of Samson from the biblical text to the Handelian oratorio. The biblical Samson is a wild, uncontrolled loner who despite being styled a national hero is really acting in accordance with his own impulses to satisfy his own desires. Milton's Samson, though still a loner, is no longer wild and impulsive, but strongly conscious of his vocation, and all of his actions are calculated as a means of fulfilling that vocation. Hamilton's Samson is neither wild nor a loner, but is a respected national hero who has accidentally come to grief, and his motivation is to further the cause of his and his nation's God against the god of the enemy. As such, his portrayal embodies the characteristically British ideals of resistance to tyranny and defeat of idolatrous (Catholic) religion that were so strong in the minds of Hamilton's and Handel's contemporaries.

6

Joseph: Saint or Sinner?

Italian Opera, Handelian Oratorio, and Eighteenth-century Commentaries

From 1743 onwards, Handel's primary theatrical medium was English oratorio rather than Italian opera, and although he did produce three dramatic theatrical works in English on non-sacred subjects between 1743 and 1751, his composition of nine oratorios over the same period indicates clearly where his priorities lay. In fact, the next oratorio premiere after that of *Samson* in 1743 came the following year, when *Joseph and his Brethren* opened at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden on 2 March 1744. Owing to a continuing disagreement between Handel and Charles Jennens over Handel's setting of *Messiah*, the composer had to look elsewhere for a librettist, which partly explains why the libretto for *Joseph and his Brethren* was by James Miller. Miller was a clergyman and playwright whose collaboration with Handel on Israelite oratorio was limited to this one instance (Miller died on 27 April 1744, less than two months after the oratorio's premiere).[1]

A number of Miller's stage plays were adaptations of French originals,[2] so it is no surprise that he used a similar technique for this libretto too, basing *Joseph and his Brethren* largely on the Italian libretto *Giuseppe* by Apostolo Zeno that had appeared in 1722. Zeno's libretto, itself based on an earlier French play,[3] focuses

[1] For a short biography of Miller, see Paula O'Brien, 'Miller, James (1704–1744)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18724, accessed 28 July 2011>; Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 192–4.

[2] Miller's play *The Mother-in-Law* (1734) was adapted from Molière, and his last work, *Mahomet* (1744), was adapted from Voltaire.

[3] *Joseph* (1711), by Charles-Claude Genest. Genest was Abbé of St Wilmer and a member of the Academie Française. For brief comments on Genest's play and the circumstances of its composition, see Duncan Chisholm, 'New Sources for the Libretto of Handel's *Joseph*', in Stanley Sadie and Anthony Hicks (eds.), *Handel Tercentenary Collection* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 182–208 (183–6). In view of Zeno's comments about how he perceived his own sacred dramas, it is perhaps worth noting that the title page of Genest's play refers to *Joseph* as 'Tragedie, tirée de l'Ecriture Sainte' [A Tragedy, taken from Holy Scripture]. Although Zeno's two-act libretto is much more compact than Genest's five-act play, there are clear correspondences between the two works. So, for example, both are set at the palace in Memphis; in both, the action begins at a point after the brothers' first visit where Joseph is awaiting their return with Benjamin, and it ends at the point of Joseph's joyous reunion with his brothers; both

on an emotive portrayal of Joseph's reunion with his brothers in Egypt, and the greater part of Miller's libretto is effectively an English translation of Zeno's work. However, Miller's version also has some significant differences from its Italian predecessor, and the following discussion will attempt to set those differences in the cultural and intellectual context in which Miller's libretto was composed.

THE BIBLICAL JOSEPH

First, though, it is appropriate to take a brief look at the narrative of Joseph as it appears in the biblical text in Genesis 37–50. Joseph is the eleventh and favourite son of the patriarch Jacob, and Jacob's indulgent attitude towards him, together with the dreams that Joseph receives which indicate that he will rise above all his brothers and his parents, arouse the ire of his elder brothers. One day Joseph is sent to take food to his brothers who are herding the flocks. From a distance they see him coming and plot to kill him, but at the last minute change their minds and sell him to passing traders, who take him to Egypt where he becomes the household slave of Potiphar. Here by dint of hard work and divine favour Joseph prospers, until Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him, he rebuffs her, and she accuses him of attempted rape. Joseph is imprisoned, but once again with divine help wins the favour of the prison superintendent. One day he hears of dreams had by two of his fellow inmates who are Pharaoh's officials, and interprets them; events transpire in line with Joseph's interpretation, so that one of the officials (Pharaoh's cupbearer) is freed while the other (a baker) is executed, as Joseph had predicted. Joseph asks the freed cupbearer to remember him before Pharaoh, but the cupbearer forgets, and Joseph remains in prison until Pharaoh has dreams that none of his officials can interpret. Then the cupbearer remembers Joseph, who is summoned and interprets Pharaoh's dreams to indicate seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh immediately promotes Joseph to second-in-command of the country, and puts him in charge of making provision during the years of plenty in anticipation of the years of famine. When the famine finally hits, people come from the countries all around to buy corn from Egypt, and among them are Joseph's ten elder brothers, their father Jacob having refused to let Benjamin, the youngest son and Joseph's only full brother, make the journey. Joseph recognizes the ten, but they do not recognize him. He interrogates them harshly, accusing them of being spies, dismissing their claim to be ten of eleven surviving brothers, and imprisoning them for three days. Nonetheless, he eventually gives them the corn they request and secretly returns their purchase money. He demands that in order to prove their claim, they must come back with their youngest brother, and he retains Simeon (the eldest but one) as a hostage against their return. When they next return it is with Benjamin, having persuaded a very

open with the idea of a grand procession through the streets honouring Joseph for what he has done for Egypt; in both, despite the prevailing joyous atmosphere Joseph is troubled and mournful because of having seen his brothers, but he feels unable to confide in his Egyptian acquaintances about what is causing his sorrow; and in both, Asenath is instrumental in going to Pharaoh on Joseph's behalf to ask for permission to bring Joseph's father to Egypt.

unwilling Jacob to let him go; Joseph releases Simeon and treats them all to a banquet, but then as they leave for home with grain he frames the young Benjamin for the theft of his silver cup and demands that Benjamin stay as his slave as penalty for the supposed crime. The brothers are horrified, and in a heartfelt plea for the sake of their elderly father who will be devastated by Benjamin's loss, Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin. At this, Joseph can contain himself no longer, and reveals his true identity to his brothers, to their great amazement. At Joseph's insistence they return to Canaan in order to bring their families and their father down to Egypt to live as Pharaoh's guests.

Unlike many other parts of the biblical material, the Joseph narrative stands out as a self-contained, integrated piece of work that is characterized by the interweaving of scenes and the development of plot and character rather than being an episodic succession of detached incidents. This has led to it being identified as an independent unit of tradition, and many scholars today would concur with that identification, regarding the work as a novella. Although initial assessments of the narrative located it in a supposed 'Solomonic Enlightenment' some time in the tenth century BCE,[4] other scholars have proposed a later dating, most commonly somewhere in the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, and this later dating is now more widely accepted. But whether the Joseph story is dated to the tenth century or to the fifth or later centuries BCE, it is an example of a didactic genre rather than an historical genre; that is, it is intended to edify and instruct rather than to record history. On the understanding that the Joseph story should be dated later rather than earlier, it is often regarded as a 'diaspora novella', and compared with the books of Esther and Daniel. In these works, Hebrews (Jews) find themselves in a foreign culture, and by their conduct in that culture earn the respect of their foreign neighbours and rise to high office.[5] The point of the genre is to offer to Jews living in a predominantly Gentile environment encouragement and exemplars of how to behave, and also to assert at some level the superiority of the Jews, their lifestyle, and their religion to those of their involuntary hosts. These works therefore address issues of identity for Jewish groups living permanently outside Palestine in non-Jewish cultures.[6]

Such a genre definition, though, would have been foreign to eighteenth-century readers of the narrative, who would have viewed it purely as 'scripture', that is, as an historical record of what actually happened all those millennia ago in ancient

[4] See, for example, W. Lee Humphreys, 'Novella', in George W. Coats (ed.), *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, JSOTSup, 35 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985, repr. 1989), 82–96; George W. Coats, 'Joseph, son of Jacob', in *ABD*, iii.976–81, especially 980–1.

[5] Arndt Meinhold, 'Die Gattung der Josephgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diaspora-Novelle', *ZAW*, 87 (1975), 306–24; 88 (1976), 72–93, was the first to suggest the concept of the diaspora novella. For a recent discussion of the Joseph story from this perspective, see Bernhard Lang, *Joseph in Egypt: A Cultural Icon from Grotius to Goethe* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 21–30. For a discussion of the motif of Jews rising to high office in foreign parts, see Harald Martin Wahl, 'Das Motiv des "Aufstiegs" in der Hofgeschichte, am Beispiel von Joseph, Esther und Daniel', *ZAW*, 112 (2000), 59–74.

[6] So, for example, Thomas Römer, 'Joseph approche: source du cycle, corpus, unité', in Olivier Abel and Françoise Smyth (eds.), *Le livre de traverse: de l'exégèse biblique à l'anthropologie* (Patrimoines; Paris: Cerf, 1992), 73–85, argues that the Joseph novella dates from the sixth to the fifth centuries BCE and was produced in order to affirm the identity of the Egyptian diaspora by giving them a founding father, and to oppose by the use of irony the stricter Jewish orthodoxy that was emanating from Jerusalem.

Egypt. And although analyses of the Joseph novella by modern scholars are not dissimilar to those of eighteenth-century critics in that they examine issues in the narrative such as character, plot, meaning, and theology, they are in other ways poles apart, in that the modern critic is not defending what is seen as 'sacred history' that must be shown to be above moral reproach if it is to retain its credibility. The two treatments of the Joseph story to be discussed here, however, are based on the view of Joseph as a moral exemplar, and in the case of Miller's treatment it is precisely the desire to defend Joseph from criticism that seems to have resulted in his particular version of the narrative, as will be shown below. But in order to make that case, Zeno's libretto, on which Miller's was based, must first be discussed.

ZENO'S LIBRETTO *GIUSEPPE*

Apostolo Zeno (1668–1750), poet, scholar, and antiquarian, was born in Venice, where he pursued an intellectual career which he financed by writing opera libretti. His first libretto was written in 1696, and by 1718, when he was appointed as court poet to the emperor Charles VI in Vienna, he had written some thirty libretti. He remained in Vienna until 1729, and during this period he started to write oratorios, or sacred dramas, which were performed in the imperial chapel. *Giuseppe* (1722), upon which Miller based the libretto for *Joseph and his Brethren*, was his fourth such oratorio.[7]

Zeno is often credited with having single-handedly reformed the disjointed, overly convoluted style of opera libretto writing that prevailed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in which improbable plots and large numbers of arias were designed primarily to facilitate displays of vocal virtuosity from the soloists and elaborate special effects on the stage. Although Zeno's influence as a reformer is overstated,[8] he was certainly dissatisfied with some of the artistic standards in contemporary libretti, and it seems that his time in Vienna was crucial in enabling him to realize his ideal of improved libretti. In 1735 he published sixteen of his oratorio libretti in a volume entitled *Poesie sacre drammatiche* which he dedicated to his imperial patrons Charles VI and the Empress Elizabeth, and in the volume's dedicatory preface he spoke of his patrons' influence on his style of writing. Faced with the dignity and serious-mindedness of the imperial couple, says Zeno, he realized that the prevailing style of opera libretto was inappropriate for staging in the imperial theatre, and so he resolved to base the opera libretti that he wrote for them on illustrious figures from antiquity, and to present these ancient figures' virtuous acts as a reflection of the virtues that he

[7] For a short biography of Zeno and a list of his works, see Elena Sala Di Felice, 'Zeno, Apostolo', *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/30928, accessed 28 July 2011>.

[8] For a discussion of Zeno's contribution to libretto reform, see Robert Freeman, 'Apostolo Zeno's Reform of the Libretto', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 21 (1968), 321–41; Di Felice, 'Zeno'.

saw practised by his imperial patrons.[9] Similarly, the sacred dramas were a way of reflecting the imperial couple's acknowledged religious devotion, and the sacred subject-matter required an appropriately dignified treatment; hence, says Zeno, he adopted for it the classical tragic unities of time, action, and place, and dialogue which expressed the thoughts of the doctors of the Church in the style of the Scriptures.[10]

Zeno's comments provide a useful background against which to evaluate *Giuseppe*, which was presumably a product of this drive for dignity. The two-act libretto opens as Joseph, now Pharaoh's second-in-command, is processing round Memphis being feted by the crowds. Azanet, Joseph's wife, is talking to Ramse, Joseph's steward, and tells him that Joseph is afflicted with a mysterious secret sorrow. Their conversation is cut short as Joseph enters and sends Ramse to bring him 'the Hebrew prisoner', and then, left alone, reminisces about his homeland and father, bemoaning his brothers' cruelty. The prisoner—Joseph's brother Simeon, held hostage until the others return—arrives; Joseph interrogates him sternly, but can barely control his tears when Simeon speaks of their father. When Simeon has left, Azanet returns and asks Joseph what is wrong; he says he is concerned about all those outside Egypt who are affected by the famine, but Azanet is not convinced. At that moment Ramse appears to say that the other brothers have returned with a youth, and Joseph goes to speak to them. The brothers are concerned because last time their purchase money was put back into their corn sacks, but Ramse reassures them that all is in order. Joseph interviews the brothers, accepting gifts from them, but a conversation with Benjamin again almost destroys his self-control. Joseph orders a meal to be served for himself and his brothers, but when Benjamin urges him not to delay sending assistance to their poor old father, Joseph exits weeping, leaving the brothers perplexed.

Act II opens with Azanet and Ramse discussing the brothers' supposed theft of Joseph's sacred cup. Joseph enters looking distressed and tells Azanet that his father is alive but destitute on account of the famine. Azanet suggests that he be brought to Egypt, but Joseph expresses fear of public opinion and of the king. Azanet dismisses these objections, but Joseph then says that his father would never tolerate Egyptian idolatry. Azanet says that she worships the same God as Joseph, so his father can stay with them, and she sets off to ask permission from Pharaoh for Joseph's father to come. Joseph then turns his attention to the brothers, who angrily deny stealing Joseph's cup. The cup is duly found on Benjamin, and despite all the brothers' pleas Joseph orders him to be detained, and leaves. The brothers debate frantically amongst themselves about what to do, recalling how they themselves long ago had ignored Joseph's pleas for mercy. Joseph returns, and Judah pleads desperately for Benjamin, offering himself as a prisoner in Benjamin's place. At this, Joseph orders Ramse to bring Benjamin, sends away the servants, and reveals his identity to his amazed brothers. Azanet enters with news that Pharaoh has given permission for the family to come to Egypt, and Joseph leads the assembled company in praising God.

[9] Zeno, *Poesie*, Preface, 5th to 8th pages (the preface has no printed page numbers).
[10] Zeno, *Poesie*, Preface, 9th to 12th pages.

Zeno's comments in the preface to *Poesie sacre drammatiche* appear to distinguish between operas and sacred dramas, so that each genre addressed different aspects of the gravitas that Zeno was aiming for in his productions: operas presented noble figures from the past as exemplifying the moral virtues of the imperial couple, while oratorios were intended to appeal to the religious sensibilities of the audience and arouse 'contrition and delight' in the hearers by the sublimity of the thought and dialogue.[11] *Giuseppe*, however, can be understood in terms of the criteria for both operas and oratorios, in that it is a 'sacred drama' whose hero is a noble figure facing the double quandary of how to help his ageing father and deal with his treacherous but vulnerable brothers. In fact, the character of Joseph exemplifies several of the features that Zeno says he aimed to highlight in the heroes of his opera libretti: maturity of counsel in uncertain circumstances; generosity of forgiveness for offences suffered; kindness; and self-control.[12] Joseph's maturity of counsel is shown by devising the ruse with the cup to test his brothers' trustworthiness;[13] his generous forgiveness appears when he does not exact punishment from the brothers for their maltreatment of him, but welcomes them as soon as he is convinced of their integrity;[14] his kindness is shown as he feasts them,[15] and gives them their money back;[16] and his self-control appears when he refuses to avenge himself on Simeon even though he is angry with Simeon and could easily have taken punitive action against him.[17] In addition, the relationship between Azanet and Joseph is a 'memorable example . . . of conjugal love', another virtue prized by Zeno in his heroes.[18] But as well as behaving like an exemplary hero from antiquity, Joseph is also thoroughly pious, thereby reflecting the religious devotion of the imperial couple for whom the oratorio was written.[19] At the very start of the libretto, in her opening conversation with Ramse, Azanet stresses Joseph's humility in the midst of all his glory, humility which she regards as a gift of the God whom Joseph adores and of whose exploits he tells her.[20] Later, Joseph says how terrible his father would find Egyptian idolatry, and declares that there is only one God for the whole universe;[21] and in the final scene he tells the brothers that God was behind the course of events, and urges everyone to praise God.[22]

Giuseppe, then, if Zeno's comments are to be believed, was written for the edification of the great and good, and as more of a devotional than a commercial

[11] Zeno, *Poesie*, Preface, 12th to 13th pages.

[12] Zeno, *Poesie*, Preface, 7th and 8th pages: 'maturità di consiglio ne' dubbi affari, o magnanimità di perdono nelle offese sofferte . . . beneficenza . . . temperanza . . . '

[13] Apostolo Zeno, *Drammi scelti*, ed. by Max Fehr (Bari: Giuseppe Laterza & Sons, 1929), 184, 189.

[14] Zeno, *Drammi*, 189–90.

[15] Zeno, *Drammi*, 179, 181.

[16] Zeno, *Drammi*, 177. It is not made explicit in the libretto that Joseph ordered the money to be given back to the brothers, but this is what the biblical text says (Gen. 42.25), and the audience would presumably know this.

[17] Zeno, *Drammi*, 173–4.

[18] Zeno, *Poesie*, Preface, 7th page: 'dovunque io trovava memorabili esempli . . . di amor conjugale . . . ' [whenever I found memorable examples . . . of conjugal love . . .]

[19] In *Poesie*, Preface, 9th page, Zeno praises his patrons for 'vostra pietà e religione' [your piety and religion].

[20] Zeno, *Drammi*, 172.

[21] Zeno, *Drammi*, 183.

[22] Zeno, *Drammi*, 190.

exercise. It portrays a noble Joseph who is wrung by inner turmoil but who is able to negotiate with integrity and magnanimity the difficult and emotional situation in which he finds himself, and who rather than yielding to the temptation for revenge offers forgiveness to the brothers who wronged him.

JAMES MILLER'S LIBRETTO *JOSEPH AND HIS BRETHREN*

As already noted, Zeno's noble Joseph formed the basis for Miller's 1743 libretto. Its second and third parts follow Zeno's two-part libretto very closely, but it also contains a scene-setting first part for which there is no equivalent in Zeno. Miller's libretto begins with Joseph in prison, bewailing his fate and urging himself to be strong. Phanor, the butler, appears, and tells Joseph he is required to interpret Pharaoh's dream. The scene shifts to Pharaoh's palace, where Pharaoh asks Joseph to interpret his dream, and after due invocation of the deity Joseph does so. Pharaoh immediately promotes him to second-in-command of the kingdom, and gives him all the trappings of state. Asenath, daughter of the Egyptian high priest, is watching, and is smitten with love for Joseph. Joseph comes to find her, and asks her to marry him, and with the approval of Pharaoh and her father they are married, to the rejoicing of the Egyptians. This ends the first part, and thereafter the plot follows Zeno's libretto (Phanor the butler becomes Joseph's steward, replacing Zeno's character Ramse).

The closeness of the correspondences between Miller's and Zeno's libretti makes it somewhat disingenuous to present a study of 'Miller's' treatment of the Joseph story, since two-thirds of what Miller presents is almost entirely translation of Zeno. However, the intellectual atmosphere in which Miller's libretto was produced was quite different from that which surrounded the composition of Zeno's work. Rather than being composed under the supportive aegis of devout imperial patrons for semi-private production in an imperial chapel, Miller's libretto was produced for public and commercial performance, at a time and in an environment where there was a certain amount of controversy surrounding the figure of Joseph. This raises the question of what it was in Zeno's libretto that attracted Miller to it in his very different circumstances, and of how far Miller adapted the borrowed material in order to address his contemporary concerns. The first step in answering these questions is to examine other treatments of Joseph that appeared in English during the eighteenth century.

Joseph in eighteenth-century literature

The established Christian tradition of interpretation relating to Joseph was a positive one,[23] and many eighteenth-century treatments of Joseph cite Joseph as

[23] For a survey of treatments of the Joseph narrative from antiquity to the early nineteenth century, see Lang, *Joseph in Egypt*.

a positive exemplar for a range of virtues from self-control to forgiveness,[24] and even as a type of Christ.[25] However, at the time when Miller prepared his libretto there were also more polemical ideas about Joseph circulating. One significant attack on Joseph was published in 1740 by Thomas Morgan in the third volume of his *The Moral Philosopher*, in which Morgan presented Joseph as ambitious, calculating, and tyrannical.[26] Morgan claims that once Joseph became aware that Pharaoh's chief butler and baker were in prison with him, he was 'a Man of too much Policy and Penetration not to make his own Use of it.'[27] As a result, when Joseph had interpreted both men's dreams, he made the butler swear to mention him to Pharaoh when the butler was restored to his former position; but the butler, realizing what an enterprising and ambitious man Joseph was, did not mention him until he felt impelled to do so by the perturbation over Pharaoh's dream, blaming a lapse of memory for his silence thus far.[28] Once Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh's dream and been put in charge of the land, Morgan argues that he must have gathered the corn into strongly fortified magazines; otherwise the Egyptians would have seized the corn themselves and would never have been prepared to hand over their goods, land, and selves in return for food,[29] as they do later on in the biblical narrative after Joseph's reunion with his brothers. Having achieved such a position of power, Joseph was able to bring his family to Egypt

[24] Joseph as an example of chastity is particularly common. See, for example, Benjamin Jenks, *The Glorious Victory of Chastity; in Joseph's hard Conflict, and his Happy Escape* (London, 1707); Peleg Morris, 'Joseph and his Mistress, or, Virtue on Trial', in *Leisure Hours well-employ'd: being a Collection of Hymns and Poems* (London, 1741), 35–41. Thomas Seaton, *The Conduct of Servants in Great Families* (London, 1720), 142–4, uses Joseph's resistance of his mistress's advances as an example to servants of how they should behave if propositioned by their employers. Joseph's reunion with his brothers is used as an example of forgiveness by William Reading, in a sermon on Gen. 45.5 for Evening Prayers on the fourth Sunday in Lent (*One Hundred and Sixteen Sermons, Preached out of the First Lessons At Morning and Evening Prayer, for all Sundays in the Year, Vol. II*, 2nd edn. (London, 1736), 13–25). A number of poetic renderings of the Joseph narrative also existed at this time, which presented Joseph in a positive light throughout: William Rose, *The History of Joseph. A Poem* (London, 1712); anon., *The History of Joseph in Verse* (Ipswich, 1736); Elizabeth Rowe, *The History of Joseph. A Poem* (London, 1736; 2nd edn., 1737); Richard Grey, *Historia Josephi patriarchae, literis tam Romanis quam Hebraicis excusa* (London, 1739).

[25] The idea of Joseph as a type of Christ originates in the patristic era, where its most thorough exposition occurs in Ambrose's *De Joseph Patriarcha* (*c.*387 CE). Eighteenth-century instances of the idea include Nicolas Fontaine, *The History of the Old and New Testament*, 3rd edn. (London, 1703), 37, 41; John Entick, *The Evidence of Christianity, Asserted and Proved from Facts, as authorised by Sacred and Prophane History* (London, 1729), 236–7. Anne Dutton, *A Discourse upon Walking with God: in a Letter to a Friend. Together with Some Hints upon Joseph's Blessing, Deut. 33.13, &c.* (London, 1735), 133–58, gives a detailed exposition of how the Joseph narrative presents Joseph as a type of Christ, and how Moses' blessing of Joseph in Deut. 33.13–16 is to be understood in the light of that typological interpretation. The anonymous *History of Joseph* (Ipswich, 1736) intersperses the story of Joseph in verse with typological interpretations comparing Joseph with Christ.

[26] Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. Vol. III. Superstition and Tyranny Inconsistent with Theocracy. . . . By Philalethes* (London, 1740). 'This rising Favourite of Fortune', says Morgan, 'discovered very early his enterprizing Genius and aspiring Temper; and it was this boundless Ambition, and Thirst of Wealth and Dominion, which incurr'd the Displeasure of his Brethren, made him insufferable in his Father's House, and occasion'd a Vassalage, which turned up so much to his Advantage, and to the Ruin of his own Country, as well as of *Egypt*.' (7–8).

[27] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 9.

[28] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 10.

[29] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 13.

and settle them in the choicest part of Egypt;[30] everything was provided for them free of charge, while the Egyptians had to part with everything they had or starve.[31] Additionally, Joseph prolonged the famine by monopolizing the corn supply, and not providing the Egyptians with seed-corn until they were reduced to slavery.[32] Finally, in an attack on what he saw as sinister priestcraft, Morgan argues that, having married the daughter of a priest, Joseph managed the situation so that all the land in Egypt was divided between the priests and Pharaoh, and because the priests had independent land they had independent power.[33]

This is clearly a highly negative reading of Joseph, which despite claiming to be based on the 'Hebrew Historians themselves',[34] sometimes goes beyond what it is reasonable to infer from the text, as those who challenged it were quick to point out.[35] Nonetheless, even though his presentation might be rather extreme, Morgan was not the first to criticize Joseph. Two commentaries published initially in the mid-1730s give consolidated treatments of a range of criticisms of Joseph that were based both on the type of political grounds cited by Morgan and on more theological grounds, indicating that such criticisms were a matter of concern for the devout. Thomas Stackhouse's *A New History of the Holy Bible* (1733; second edition, London 1742) and Samuel Smith's *The Family Companion: or, Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (London, 1735 and 1739) both attach to their commentary on the biblical Joseph narrative supplementary dissertations in which they cite what appear to be established objections to aspects of the narrative, and then refute the objections with what appear to be equally established rebuttals.[36] Of

[30] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 14–15.

[31] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 17.

[32] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 20.

[33] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 21. For a brief discussion of Morgan's work in its historical context, see Lang, *Joseph in Egypt*, 255–69.

[34] Morgan, *Moral Philosopher*, 6.

[35] The most thorough refutation of Morgan's ideas is that of Samuel Chandler, *A Defence of the Prime Ministry and Character of Joseph* (London, 1743), which formed the second part of his work *A Vindication of the History of the Old Testament, in Answer to the Misrepresentations and Calumnies of Thomas Morgan, M.D. and Moral Philosopher* (London, 1741). Chandler's response to Morgan's comments about Joseph takes over 350 pages. (Chisholm, 'New Sources', 189, seems to regard the two works as separate and the *Defence of the Prime Ministry* part as an anonymous tract.) Chandler's own views were attacked by Peter Annet in *The History of Joseph Consider'd: or, the Moral Philosopher vindicated against Mr Samuel Chandler's Defence of the Prime Ministry and Character of Joseph* (London, 1744).

[36] As is evident from the dates, the second edition of Stackhouse's work appeared shortly after the publication of Morgan's attack on Joseph. It claims on the title page to have been 'carefully revised, corrected, improved, and enlarged, by the author', and it does contain some additional material in the dissertation in defence of Joseph that was not in the first edition, but the parts that are referred to in the present study remain unchanged from the earlier edition. Page numbers here are taken from the second (1742) edition, inasmuch as it is closer to the date of *The Moral Philosopher* and to the date of Miller's libretto. It is perhaps worth noting that Stackhouse had an apologetic motive for his work from the start: both editions begin with an 'Apparatus to the History of the Old Testament' which discusses a number of interpretative issues that might prove stumbling blocks to the reader, '[a]nd this we are the rather induc'd to do, because a bolder Spirit of *Infidelity*, than usual, has, of late, gone out into the World; teaching *some*, to look upon all Religion, as a mere *Trick*, . . . conserv'd by the *Interest* of *Priests*; others, to call in Question the *Genuineness* of some particular Books of Scripture, thereby to make way for the Subversion of the *whole*; others, to disparage the *whole*, as . . . unbecoming the Spirit of God to dictate, or Men of *Letters* to read; and others again, from the pretended *Sufficiency* of *Natural Religion*, to deny the Necessity of any *divine Revelation* at all' (*New History*, 1st edn., iii–iv; cf. 2nd edn., v–vi).

these objections, five are relevant to the part of the Joseph story that is covered by Miller's libretto, and are reflected in the libretto: first, Joseph marries into an idolatrous family, which is unacceptable for a follower of the true God;[37] second, he swears by the life of Pharaoh, which is an impious and idolatrous act since oaths are properly an appeal to God;[38] third, he practises divination, which again is unacceptable for a follower of the true God;[39] fourth, he advises the king to take advantage of a famine in order to impoverish everyone except the priests;[40] and fifth, he uses his brothers cruelly and gives his aged father frights.[41] The responses given by Smith and Stackhouse to these objections are as follows.

The first objection, that of Joseph marrying into an idolatrous family, is answered on the grounds of practicality. Both Smith and Stackhouse note that since Joseph was in a strange country, he had no opportunity of attempting to marry a woman of his own stock; besides, according to the biblical text, the marriage was arranged by Pharaoh, which meant that Joseph could not refuse it without the risk of forfeiting Pharaoh's favour and thereby losing the opportunity for doing the good that he later did.[42] They also suggest that Joseph might have been advised to undertake the marriage by a divine revelation, and argue that it is 'highly reasonable to believe' that he converted Asenath before marrying her.[43] This latter view is a tradition that goes all the way back to early Judaism, and a version of it is attested in the Jewish pseudepigraphical work from the turn of the eras entitled *Joseph and Asenath*.[44] In this work, Asenath, who is a priestess of

[37] Stackhouse, *New History*, 349. Smith's volume has no page numbers, but all the comments here are found in the excursus headed 'Dissertation VIII' which comes at the end of Smith's comments on Genesis. The material in Smith's defence of Joseph is taken practically verbatim from Stackhouse, although it is much truncated, as is evidenced by the comments below on each writer.

[38] Stackhouse, *New History* 349, 355. Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII, gives no definition of an oath or explanation of why swearing by the life of Pharaoh might be deemed unacceptable, but he nevertheless takes care to exonerate Joseph from the charge of swearing.

[39] Stackhouse, *New History*, 349; Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII.

[40] Stackhouse, *New History*, 349. Smith does not cite this as a charge against Joseph, but he does defend Joseph's conduct during the famine, thus showing that he was aware of criticisms against Joseph in this area (*Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII).

[41] Stackhouse, *New History*, 349; Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII.

[42] Stackhouse, *New History*, 355 Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII.

[43] Stackhouse, *New History*, 355; Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII. Other commentators cite similar justifications for the marriage. Thomas Pyle, *A Paraphrase with Short and Useful Notes on the Books of the Old Testament. Part I* (London, 1717), says that Joseph consented to the marriage because it was proposed by the king and because he had little or no expectation of living with his own family again, and considers it probable (although not certain) that Joseph would have converted Asenath before marrying her (222, 242). Samuel Humphreys, *The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testament, recited at large* (London, 1735), addresses the issue from a different angle, and claims that it is improbable that Joseph would have become in such a short time 'so compleat a courtier' as to marry the daughter of an uncircumcised person, but that the desirability of the match would have enabled him to persuade Asenath's father to submit to circumcision (113). Humphreys makes no comment on Asenath's presumed spiritual state; apparently, her father's circumcision is more important. Stackhouse for his part is sceptical of the (originally rabbinic) idea that Joseph managed to convert Potipherah and thereby introduced circumcision to the Egyptian priesthood (355). Interestingly, some commentators make no mention of the fact that Joseph supposedly marries an idolater; see, for example, Simon Patrick, *A Commentary on the Historical Books of the Old Testament, Vol. I*, 3rd edn. (London, 1727), 138.

[44] For a brief summary of critical issues surrounding *Joseph and Asenath* together with further bibliography, see Randall D. Chesnutt, 'Joseph and Aseneth', in *ABD*, iii.969–71. For a translation of and

numerous Egyptian deities, sees Joseph when he comes to visit her father's house to collect surplus corn for storage, and is so smitten by him that she repents of her idolatry and receives a revelation from God. She is thereby converted and cleansed of her idolatry, and the next time Joseph comes to the house she is ready to marry him.

The second objection, that Joseph swears by the life of Pharaoh, and thereby blasphemes, is countered by Stackhouse and Smith with the claim that what appears to be an oath is nothing more than a 'vehement asseveration', namely, that Joseph's words to his brothers when they first arrive in Egypt, 'by the life of Pharaoh surely ye are spies' (Gen. 42.16), mean, 'as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies'.[45] This seems to be a common understanding among eighteenth-century commentators, whether or not they draw attention to the religious implications of oath-taking. Thomas Ellwood, in his digest of and commentary upon the historical books of the Old Testament, glosses Joseph's supposed oath with the comment in parentheses 'that is, as sure as Pharaoh lives',[46] and refers his readers to Robert Sanderson's Latin dissertation from 1646 on oath-taking, in which Sanderson argues that Joseph's words amount not to an oath but to an 'Asseveratio… vehementiore obtestatione confirmata'.[47] Other commentators who follow this line of argument are Edward Wells,[48] Simon Patrick,[49] and Samuel Humphreys;[50] all deny that Joseph's turn of phrase is to be understood as an oath in any religious sense, thus clearing him of the charge of blasphemy. Like the tradition that Asenath was a convert to Judaism, this is another interpretation that has ancient origins; as Patrick notes in his commentary, it was propounded by the fourth-century patristic commentator Basil of Caesarea in his homily on Psalm 15 (Psalm 14 according to the Septuagintal numbering used by Basil).[51]

The third objection, that Joseph practises divination, is again one that seems to have a long pedigree, and several ancient Jewish rewritings of the Joseph narrative show an awareness of it: the first-century CE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in his paraphrase of the Joseph story, omits all references to divining in relation to

commentary on the work, see C. Burchard, 'Joseph and Aseneth', in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 2* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 177–247. An interesting survey of early Jewish post-biblical treatments of the Joseph story can be found in Susan Docherty, 'Joseph the Patriarch: Representations of Joseph in Early Post-biblical Literature', in Martin O'Kane (ed.), *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible*, JSOTSup, 313 (London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 194–216.

[45] Stackhouse, *New History*, 355–6; Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII.

[46] Thomas Ellwood, *Sacred History: or, the Historical Part of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament*, 2nd edn. (London 1720), 65.

[47] Robert Sanderson, *De Juramenti Promissorii Obligatione Praelectiones Septem: Habitae in Schola Theologica Oxonii Termino Michaelis Anno Dom. MDCXLVI* (London, 1710), 99. The defence of Joseph is in the fifth of the seven treatises. Sanderson was the Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford, and it is interesting that he chose to defend Joseph as part of his inaugural lectures.

[48] Edward Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: being the Book of Genesis* (Oxford, 1724), 234, 238. Wells understands Joseph's supposed oath in the light of Gen. 43.3, where in relaying to Jacob Joseph's words in Gen. 42.15, 'By the life of Pharaoh, ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither', Judah tells his father, 'The man did *solemnly protest* unto us, saying, Ye shall not see my face, except your brother be with you (italics added).'

[49] Patrick, *A Commentary*, 140.

[50] Humphreys, *The Sacred Books*, 115.

[51] Patrick, *A Commentary*, 140. Patrick also claims that the seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian Georg Calixtus follows the same interpretation. Humphreys (*The Sacred Books*, 115) repeats verbatim Patrick's comments about Basil and Calixtus.

the cup, describing it instead in neutral terms that have no hint of magical activity,[52] as also do the author of the mid-second-century BCE book of Jubilees, and Josephus's Alexandrian contemporary Philo.[53] Eighteenth-century biblical commentators, however, not being in a position to rewrite what is for them the canonical text, rebut the charge of divination by exegetical expedients. Stackhouse, and Smith in less detail, argue that Joseph may have gained a reputation among the Egyptians as a diviner on account of his dream interpretations, but the steward's words to Joseph's brothers in Gen. 44.5 about the stolen cup ('Is not this the cup in which my Lord drinketh, and whereby indeed he divineth?'), and Joseph's own words to his brothers in Gen. 44.15 ('Wot ye not that such a Man as I can certainly divine?'), should not be taken to indicate that he used the cup to divine. Rather, they signify that one with Joseph's skills would of course be able to establish very quickly who stole his cup.[54] On this interpretation, neither the steward nor Joseph himself believes that Joseph uses the cup to divine. Not all interpreters would go so far as to justify both Joseph and the steward. Thomas Pyle argues that the steward understands the verb 'divine' (נחש) in the superstitious sense of Egyptian usage, but that Joseph himself speaks rather of prophetic insight. This is reflected in Pyle's paraphrase of the text of Genesis, in which he describes the steward as expostulating with the brothers 'for their Impiety and Folly, in filching away the very Cup his Master used in *his Divinations*' (italics added),[55] whereas he paraphrases Joseph's words to the brothers thus: '. . . is my Character of a sudden so low with you, that you conclude I am not *Prophet enough* to discover a Trick play'd upon my very Self' (italics added).[56] Thomas Ellwood, somewhat more generously towards the steward, takes the steward's words to mean that the cup is the means whereby Joseph will find out what kind of men the brothers are, and Joseph's own words to mean that someone like himself will quickly be able to discover who stole his cup.[57] Arguably the most elaborate comments come from Simon Patrick. On Gen. 44.5, he argues that the steward's words could in theory refer to a kind of divination by cups that might take place at

[52] See *Ant*. II.128 ('that loving-cup in which he had pledged their healths'; cf. Gen. 44.5: 'Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he divines?'); 136 ('What thought ye then, ye miscreants, of my generosity or of God's watchful eye, that ye dared thus to act towards your benefactor and host?'; cf. Gen. 44.15: 'What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed divine?').

[53] The equivalent passages to Gen. 44.5 and 44.15 in *Jubilees* read respectively, 'You have robbed me of the silver cup from which my lord drinks' (*Jub*. 43.2), and 'Did you not know that a man would be pleased with his cup as I am with this cup?' (*Jub*. 43.10). (Translation from O.S. Wintermute, 'Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction', in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 35–142.) Philo, *On Joseph*, describes the cup as Joseph's 'finest piece of silver, the cup out of which he was accustomed to drink himself' (207), and Joseph's servant describes it to the brothers as 'the finest and most valuable of my master's cups in which he pledged you' (213) (from *Philo VI*, trans. F.H. Colson, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/London: Heinemann, 1935)).

[54] Stackhouse, *New History*, 356–7; Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII.

[55] Pyle, *A Paraphrase*, 258.

[56] Pyle, *A Paraphrase*, 260. Wells, *An Help: Genesis*, takes a similar view of the matter (243, 244).

[57] Ellwood, *Sacred History*, 68, 69. Ellwood also comments wryly of Joseph awaiting his brothers' forced return, '*Joseph* mean while (who without a Cup could divine in whose Sack the Cup would be found) staid at home . . .' (*Sacred History*, 69).

the meal table, but it should not therefore be taken that Joseph practised this, nor that the steward is saying that he did; rather, the steward is asking a question that might make the brothers think that Joseph practised divination. But based on the Hebrew verb translated as 'divine' (נחשׁ), the words might also more simply mean that the cup is the means of testing the brothers' honesty, to see whether or not they would steal it (an interpretation that Patrick attributes to the twelfth-century rabbinic commentator Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra); or, somewhat more improbably, that as Joseph's drinking vessel the cup enables him to see what kind of men are with him at his table when they all drink liberally together.[58] Patrick appears to prefer the meaning that the cup is the means of testing the brothers' honesty. As for Gen. 44.15, where Joseph claims to be able to divine, Patrick takes this to mean that Joseph could foretell the famine, so of course he could find out who stole his cup.[59] But the most revealing treatment is that of Humphreys; he gives a detailed review of opinions on the meaning of 'divination', including several that understand divination as a magical phenomenon, before concluding, 'The character of magician, or sorcerer, is so odious, that we ought not to apply it to that great patriarch, unless we should be obliged by any formal text of Scripture; but there can be none brought to support such an opinion, and the sentiments of those who say, that Joseph made profession of discovering the greatest mysteries, either by the natural talents he had received from heaven, or by extraordinary revelations from thence, are more charitable and more probable also.'[60] Humphreys thereby lays bare the assumption with which he, and all the other exegetes, are working, namely, that because this is Scripture, the charitable interpretation must be the correct one.

The remaining two objections are based more on questions of morality than of religious orthodoxy. The fourth objection is that Joseph advises the king to take advantage of a famine in order to impoverish everyone except the priests. Although this objection has more relevance to the later part of the Joseph story than to the part that is presented in Miller's libretto, it is not entirely irrelevant here, inasmuch as the libretto does touch on Joseph's handling of the famine crisis. Stackhouse's reply is much more detailed than Smith's. Joseph's policy of buying up the surplus grain, of (presumably) keeping it in fortified granaries, and of (presumably) selling it at a high price is presented as reasonable in the circumstances: the granaries would protect the supplies, the selling price would recoup

[58] Patrick, *A Commentary*, 144. Stackhouse also recounts the ideas about the cup as a test of the brothers' nature, in the context either of temptation to theft or of shared drinking, but he favours the interpretation that stresses Joseph's innate insight and resultant ability to search out the thief (*New History*, 356–7).

[59] Patrick, *A Commentary*, 144.

[60] Humphreys, *The Sacred Books*, 120. These words are taken verbatim by Humphreys from James (Jacques) Saurin, *Dissertations, Historical, Critical, Theological and Moral, On the most Memorable Events of the Old and New Testaments: … In Three Volumes. Vol. I. Comprising the Events related in the Books of Moses* (London, 1723), 285–6. Saurin spends 283–5 reviewing the opinions on what was meant by 'divination' before defending Joseph against the charge of practising anything so sordid. Unlike Humphreys, though, Saurin is ready to admit that Joseph's actions were not always as wholesome as they might have been: '[A]s we cannot forbear acknowledging, that this Patriarch used with his Brethren a Dissimulation worthy of Blame, it will not be easy to reject absolutely the Notions of those Persons, who think that he carried the same Dissimulation so far, as to feign a Skill in Magic' (286).

the initial cost of purchasing the surplus, and keeping the price high would discourage wastefulness.[61] As to Joseph's enslaving the people, Stackhouse avoids the issue, saying only that the people offered Joseph their cattle of their own volition, and that he restored their land and liberties after the famine (a version of events similar to that in Josephus).[62] Additionally, Stackhouse claims that there is no report of any rebellion during the entire period, which points to the success of Joseph's administration.[63]

The final objection is that Joseph's treatment of his brothers, and indirectly of his father, was cruel and heartless. Smith comments that Joseph's seeming rigour produced a great deal of good, and was only a thickening of the plot in order to make the intended good more surprising and agreeable,[64] and Stackhouse makes the same point, only much more elaborately. Joseph's initial harsh address to his brothers was only a way of eliciting information from them about Benjamin and Jacob, as is proved by the kindly way in which he speaks to the brothers when they return with Benjamin.[65] Also, being endowed with the divine spirit, Joseph would certainly have known that depriving Jacob of Benjamin would not endanger Jacob's health, but would only increase his joy when Benjamin returned, and thereby prepare him to receive the good news of Joseph's own advancement, which might otherwise have been too great a shock for him to bear.[66] The incident with the cup, and threatening to enslave Benjamin, was because Joseph wanted to test how his brothers would now react, and whether they were worthy of the benefits he was thinking of giving them.[67] In sum, the incident provides the most wonderful illustrations of injured innocence, meekness, and forbearance on Joseph's part, and of the fears and self-convictions of long-concealed guilt on the brothers' part.[68] Joseph's 'harshness' thus thickened the plot and made the intended outcome more pleasurable.[69]

The idea that Joseph wanted to find out about Jacob and Benjamin, and to test his brothers to see if they had changed, appears very early in the interpretative tradition relating to Joseph; once again, Jubilees, Josephus, and Philo[70] all have versions of it. It

[61] Stackhouse, *New History*, 359.

[62] Stackhouse, *New History*, 359–60; compare *Ant.* II.189–93, where Josephus says that those who had land surrendered it to purchase food, and then hints at the 'degrading means of subsistence' to which the people were driven, before saying that Joseph returned the land to the people after the famine was over. By contrast, the biblical text says that Joseph initially demanded livestock to pay for corn, and then the people offered their lands and persons, so Joseph bought them all up for Pharaoh and enslaved the whole country (Gen. 47.15–21). It also says only that the people were allowed to farm the land after the famine, not that Joseph returned it to them (Gen. 47.23–26).

[63] Stackhouse, *New History*, 359–60. Smith too makes the point about there being no report of any commotion during Joseph's administration, and asserts that Joseph returned the people's land and liberties after the famine (*Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII).

[64] Smith, *Family Companion*, Dissertation VIII.

[65] Stackhouse, *New History*, 357.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Stackhouse, *New History*, 357–8.

[68] Stackhouse, *New History*, 358.

[69] Ibid.

[70] *Jubilees* 42.25 describes Joseph's instructions to his steward to fill the brothers' bags with food, return their purchase money, and put the cup in Benjamin's sack, prefacing the description with the comment, 'And Joseph thought of an idea by means of which he might learn their thoughts, whether they had thoughts of peace for one another.' Philo, *On Joseph*, 232–5, states that all of Joseph's actions towards his brothers were designed to test what sort of feeling they would demonstrate towards

is certainly common among eighteenth-century commentators,[71] and indeed, several of them argue that in taking responsibility for selling corn to foreigners Joseph was actively looking for news of his family.[72] However, it is Humphreys who again offers the most interesting, and sustained, defence of Joseph's conduct. To the complaint that Joseph behaves rudely and vengefully towards his brothers, Humphreys replies that if Joseph intended vengeance he would have taken much more severe action, whereas what he had in mind was either pricking their consciences over their treatment of him, finding out about his father and family, or increasing the eventual relish of his kindness by 'infusing a few preparatory and innocent terrors into their minds'.[73] To the question of why Joseph sent for Benjamin when he knew of the potentially life-threatening distress it would cause Jacob to send Benjamin, and of the possibility of the rest of the brothers starving if Jacob refused to let him to come, Humphreys argues that Joseph could have sent Simeon home at any time with whatever message he saw fit should the brothers fail to return within a reasonable time; also, Joseph would have foreseen the outcome of events, and known that Jacob's short time of sorrow would be fully recompensed by the joy of receiving back not only Benjamin but also Joseph himself.[74] But perhaps the most striking defence of Joseph is in Humphreys' comments on Joseph's words to his brothers when he made himself known to them (Gen. 45.4–13): 'This discourse, represents to us, in the most emphatical manner, the sweet and engaging temper of this great patriarch. He himself excuses those who had injured him with the greatest barbarity, and gives us, at the same time, an admirable lesson of humanity and moderation to those who have treated us in any injurious manner. He was so far from uttering the least reproaches against his brethren, that he seem'd sollicitous to dispel the dark clouds of fear, which the consciousness of their crime had drawn over their souls. He had a full power to punish them with the utmost severity, but he only employs it in gratifications, and endearing behaviour; and instead of anger and revenge, melts them with the tenderness of his affection to them.'[75] As such, Humphreys continues, Joseph is an 'admirable figure' of 'the divine redeemer of mankind'.[76]

Benjamin, '[f]or he feared that they might have had that natural estrangement which the children of a stepmother often shew to the family of another wife who was no less esteemed than their own mother' (232) (tr. Colson). Josephus for his part comments of Joseph's initial interrogation of his brothers, 'It was but to discover news of his father and what had become of him after his own departure that he so acted; he moreover desired to learn the fate of his brother Benjamin, for he feared that, by such a ruse as they had practised on himself, they might have rid the family of him also' (*Ant*. II.99) (*Jewish Antiquities*, Books I–IV, trans. H. St J. Thackeray, LCL (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP/London: William Heinemann, 1930, repr. 1961)). On Joseph's plan to put the cup in Benjamin's sack, Josephus says, 'This he did to prove his brethren and see whether they would assist Benjamin, when arrested for theft and in apparent danger, or would abandon him, assured of their own innocence, and return to their father' (*Ant*. II.125). He also shows Joseph telling his brothers when he reveals his identity to them, 'All this that I have done was to test your brotherly love' (*Ant*. II.161).

[71] Pyle, *A Paraphrase*, 246, 257; Wells, *An Help: Genesis*, 233, 234, 243; Patrick, *A Commentary* I, 139, 140, 144.

[72] Pyle, *A Paraphrase*, 245; Wells, *An Help: Genesis*, 233; Patrick, *A Commentary* I, 139.

[73] Humphreys, *The Sacred Books*, 115.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Humphreys, *The Sacred Books*, 122.

[76] Ibid. As is frequently the case for material in Humphreys' commentary, this idea is by no means unique to Humphreys. As noted above, the interpretation originates, like many such typological

From this, then, it is evident that even before Thomas Morgan's comprehensive attack on the patriarch's character and policies there was a well-established canon of criticism relating to the Joseph story, and an equally well-established battery of defence against that criticism. The task now is to see to what extent these critical issues of interpretation might be reflected in the libretto of *Joseph and his Brethren*.

Miller's libretto

It is clear that Miller's treatment of the Joseph story follows the tradition of positive readings that prevailed among the exponents of orthodox Christianity at the time; his picture of Joseph is universally positive and praiseworthy.[77] This is, of course, owing in no small part to Zeno's source libretto, upon which Miller was heavily dependent and in which Joseph is portrayed equally positively; indeed, this may have been what prompted Miller to use Zeno's work in the first place. However, not all of the nuances of interpretation are the same in both works, and Miller's version has some distinctive elements that seem to correspond well with some of the defences of Joseph in the commentaries.

Joseph's marriage to an idolatrous wife

The first area of criticism mentioned above was that of Joseph's marriage to a supposedly idolatrous woman, and this is an issue which Miller's addition of a prologue act to the libretto he inherited from Zeno[78] allowed him to explore. Miller elaborates on the bald statement in Gen. 41.45 that Pharaoh gave Joseph Asenath the daughter of Potiphera, and presents Asenath as overhearing Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dream (I.4, p. 10). She is smitten by Joseph's wisdom and beauty, and in two airs she soliloquizes about her ecstatic feelings towards Joseph (I.4, p. 10; I.5, p. 11). However, the attraction is not all one way; Joseph for his part is similarly moved by her 'modest charms', and asks her to marry him, having already secured permission for such a match from Pharaoh and Potiphera (I.6, p. 11). This is an important detail, as it shows that the match was not foisted upon Joseph by Pharaoh as something that Joseph dare not refuse; rather, Joseph himself sought it out, and as a man who has just displayed his gifts of divine insight and wisdom, it is inconceivable that he should make an inappropriate choice of spouse. Just how appropriate the match is, is shown as the pair sing a rapturous duet, in which each assigns the other a divine descriptor ('Celestial

interpretations, in the patristic era, and its formulation in Humphreys is taken more or less word for word from Fontaine, *History of the Old and New Testament*, 41. But it is interesting that none of the other commentaries surveyed here refer to this idea in the context of their rationalizing explanations.

[77] *Joseph and his Brethren. A Sacred Drama. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. The Musick by Mr Handel.* (London: J. Watts and B. Dod, 1744).

[78] Chisholm, 'New Sources', 188, 192–3, uses this terminology of the libretto's structure.

Virgin!' 'Godlike Youth!'), declares the other full of innocence and truth, and calls the other heaven's completion of their own felicity (I.7, p. 12).[79] This stops short of saying that Joseph receives a divine revelation validating his marriage to Asenath, but is probably the equivalent of it in terms of the operatic conventions governing the portrayal of love-interests. Joseph then declares Asenath to be a greater jewel than all the other honours Pharaoh has given him (I.7, p. 12), and after the marriage Pharaoh speaks of Asenath's sweetness, dignity, and virtue (I.8, p. 13). Asenath and her marriage to Joseph are thus shown in an entirely positive light from beginning to end, and the implicit association of idolatry with immorality that so frequently appears is completely absent.[80]

For all Asenath's sweetness, innocence, and modest charms, however, there is no overt indication in Part I that Joseph converted her before marrying her. In Part II, Miller follows Zeno's portrait of Asenath, showing her as sympathetic to Joseph's religion but giving no indication of her own religious stance, and it is not until Part III, when Joseph balks at the idea of bringing his father Jacob to live amidst Egyptian idolatry, that Asenath declares herself a worshipper of Joseph's God, and says that Jacob can stay with them and avoid the idolatry (III.2, p. 25). This too is taken from Zeno's version, and suggests that perhaps Asenath should after all be thought of as having embraced Joseph's religion from the beginning. However, it is interesting to note that these words are sidelined in the printed libretto and were not set to music in Handel's autograph score. Those reading the libretto would see it, but those listening to the oratorio would not hear it. This implies that the portrayal of Asenath in Part I is sufficient to establish her spiritual credentials, so to speak, and that the material in Part III could be omitted in performance without damaging the overall impression of her or Joseph's religious integrity.

[79] A number of features of Miller's presentation are reminiscent of those in the early Jewish work *Joseph and Asenath*, most notably Asenath's immediate attraction to Joseph (*Jos. Asen.* 6), his reciprocal passion for her (*Jos. Asen.* 8.8–9; 19), and Joseph's petitioning of Pharaoh for permission to marry Asenath (*Jos. Asen.* 20.9). The epithets 'Celestial Virgin' and 'Godlike Youth' that the couple use of each other also appear to echo descriptions of them in the ancient work. When Asenath first sees Joseph he is wearing a white tunic, a purple and gold robe, and a golden crown with twelve precious stones and twelve golden rays, and he holds a royal staff and an olive branch laden with fruit (*Jos. Asen.* 5.5); although much of this is royal imagery, the crown with twelve stones and rays is characteristic of the sun god Helios (see references in Docherty, 'Joseph the Patriarch', 200). Joseph is therefore portrayed as a 'Godlike Youth', and Asenath accordingly describes him as a son of God (*Jos. Asen.* 6.3, 5). Later on, when Joseph returns to Asenath after her conversion, Asenath has been endowed with supernatural beauty and both she and Joseph have received an angelic visitation describing her future role as Joseph's bride and as a protectress of God's faithful ones (*Jos. Asen.* 16.16; 19.4–9)—a description that is well summed up by the phrase 'Celestial Virgin'.

[80] Zeno in his own way appears to be conscious of the issue of Asenath's religious allegiance, and although his libretto begins at a point where Joseph and Azanet are already an established couple, he shows Azanet as being highly sympathetic to Joseph's religious ideas. In the opening dialogue between her and Ramse, she mentions Joseph's humility which is the gift of his God, and goes on to say that Joseph tells her about this God's wonders, leaving her amazed and charmed (Zeno, *Drammi*, 172; the motif is borrowed from Genest, I.1). Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that this is the source for Miller's picture of Asenath in his own Part I: Zeno's picture of her as being charmed by Joseph's stories of God's wonders is translated into a picture of her being captivated by hearing Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream. This idea is supported by the fact that Miller omits from his libretto the lines from Zeno in which Azanet talks about being charmed by stories of Joseph's God, which would indicate that the purpose of those lines has already been served by the material in Miller's Part I.

Joseph's supposed swearing by Pharaoh and supposed divination

The second and third areas of criticism (Joseph swears by the life of Pharaoh and divines, both of which are blasphemous activities incompatible with the character of a truly pious man) are treated differently in each libretto. On the question of swearing by Pharaoh, Zeno in his libretto never shows Joseph saying 'by the life of Pharaoh'. In Miller's libretto, however, Joseph uses the phrase on one occasion in his interrogation of Simeon (II.4, p. 18), and given that Miller has added it to the Italian *Vorlage*, he seems to have seen no harm in using it. The divination issue is rather more substantial, and Miller's treatment of it differs somewhat from Zeno's. Following the pattern of Zeno's Part II, Miller's Part III opens with Asenath and Phanor discussing the presumed theft of Joseph's cup, and in speaking of the stolen item Asenath refers to it as 'the silver Cup/That's sacred to my Lord's peculiar Use' (III.1, p. 22). Then, when Phanor confronts the brothers with the accusation of theft, he accuses them of stealing 'the sacred Cup that's set apart,/For my Lord's Use' (III.3, p. 26). In neither instance is the cup spoken of as being used for divination, and the designation 'sacred' is loose enough to be understood to mean that the cup was for the exclusive use of Joseph rather than that it had some particularly religious significance. In Zeno's version, by contrast, Ramse initially describes the cup as 'the silver cup which he [Joseph] uses at table and for his sacred omens',[81] and then a little later he refers to the vessel as 'the sacred silver cup'.[82] 'Sacred' here thus definitely has connotations of religious activities, unlike in Miller's version where these connotations are played right down. Miller does, however, present Joseph himself speaking of the cup as a non-magical instrument of discernment: just prior to the confrontation with the brothers, in a recitative that is almost entirely sidelined, Joseph soliloquizes on the impending meeting, and says of the cup, in two lines that are absent from Zeno's libretto, 'This Cup shall, like the gen'rous Juice it serves,/Lay ope' the Mark, and Bias of your Hearts' (III.2, p. 26). Here there are echoes of the kind of interpretations noted above that view the biblical talk of 'divination' with the cup as a metaphorical expression to indicate that the cup is a tool by which the brothers' true motivations will be revealed: just as the wine that is drunk from the cup loosens the tongue to reveal a person's true character, the brothers' reaction to the theft of the cup itself will show Joseph all he needs to know about whether or not the brothers have changed their ways.

However, despite scrupulously avoiding the terminology of divination in connection with the missing cup, Miller does shows Joseph at an earlier stage in the libretto claiming to be able to divine. During an interview with the imprisoned Simeon before the other brothers have returned, Joseph comments darkly that the cruelty of men exceeds that of the beasts which are supposed to have torn Joseph in pieces. Simeon, his conscience pricked, attempts to protest against Joseph's suspicion, but Joseph cuts him off, telling him, 'know you not yet I can divine,/And view the dark Recesses of the Soul?/In vain from me you'd hide the Truth,

[81] 'L'argentea tazza, ond'ei si serve a mensa/e ne' suoi sacri auguri' (*Drammi*, p. 181).
[82] 'la sacra argentea tazza' (*Drammi*, p. 184).

Impostor!' (II.4, p. 18). From the audience's point of view this is an enormously ironical comment, because of course Joseph knows exactly what happened to Simeon's brother, and is not divining at all. However, it suits his purposes to let Simeon think he can 'divine' in this sense. But this is not mechanical or magical divination, more a kind of prophetic insight, which even if Joseph does not have (or need) in this precise instance would not be viewed as incompatible with orthodox religion. Zeno at this point presents Joseph saying to Simeon, 'you know that I enter the most firmly closed hearts; it is hard to hide truth from me',[83] without using the terminology of 'divining'; nonetheless, a marginal reference here to Gen. 44.15 in the 1735 edition of Zeno's libretto indicates that Zeno viewed these lines as reflecting Joseph's words to the brothers, 'Don't you know that a man such as I can divine?'[84] A second such incident occurs in both libretti during Joseph's interrogation of the brothers over the theft of the cup: Joseph claims to be able to see in their hearts an old crime of betrayal against an innocent party, and the brothers are terrified. Once again, this is clearly not 'divination', although it suits Joseph's purposes to let his brothers think that it is. In terms of the libretti's relationship to the biblical text, it is a way of giving content to Joseph's claim to be able to divine, without actually showing him doing so.

Joseph's management of the famine crisis

The fourth area of criticism related to Joseph's management of the famine crisis. As noted earlier, Miller's libretto does not address in detail the later progression of the famine and how Joseph deals with the Egyptians once their money to buy corn runs out; but there are one or two hints about how Joseph manages the early stages of the famine, and as in Zeno's libretto these are entirely positive. The opening scene of Part II begins with a jubilant chorus of Egyptians declaring how 'Zaphnath [Joseph's Egyptian name] Egypt's fate foresaw,/And snatch'd her from the Famine's Jaw.' (II.1, p. 13). This is followed by a conversation between Phanor and Asenath about Joseph, in which they describe in lavish terms how much the people

[83] 'Sappi, ch'io nel più chiuso entro de' cori;/mal mi si asconde il ver' (*Drammi*, p. 175).

[84] In its treatment of the issue of divination, Zeno's libretto follows the same pattern as in Genest. There, when Joseph is interviewing the hostage Simeon, he tells him, 'Peut-être ignorez-vous que je lis dans les ames,/Et perce les replis de vos perfides trâmes' [Perhaps you don't know that I can read hearts,/and pierce the folds of your treacherous plottings] (II.3). However, when Thiamis, Joseph's steward, accuses the brothers of stealing the cup, he says,

> Vous avez emporté le Vase précieux,
> Dont mon Maître se sert en consultant les Cieux;
> Ce trésor tout sacré, cette Coupe augurale
> Où quand il sacrifie…
> [You have carried off the precious vessel
> That my master uses in consulting Heaven,
> This highly sacred treasure, this augural cup
> Where when he sacrifices…]

(IV.2—the line breaks off at this point as Judah interrupts to plead the brothers' innocence.) As in Zeno, Joseph's claim to be able to read hearts is clearly ironical, and the only person who speaks of mechanical divination is the Egyptian.

love him for what he has done. Particularly noteworthy are Phanor's words, which are Miller's addition to Zeno's text at this point:

> The raptur'd Virgins hail him in their Lays,
> And gazing Matrons lift their grateful Hands,
> Whilst hoary Sages rise, and bow the Head,
> And Infants half articulate his Name. (II.1, p. 13).

The whole of society is acknowledging its debt to Joseph, motivated, as Asenath says, by 'Sincere Benevolence, and Love,/And Bosoms glowing with a grateful Transport' (II.1, p. 14).

Equally significant, and possibly more so, is another chorus that follows shortly after these comments, declaring,

> Blest be the Man by Pow'r unstain'd,
> Virtue there itself rewarding!
> Blest be the Man to Wealth unchain'd,
> Treasure for the Publick hoarding! (II.1, p. 14).

This again is Miller's addition to Zeno's libretto, and is clearly meant to define Joseph as the ideal public servant, who is motivated entirely by concern for those he is serving and not by any potential opportunity for personal advancement or power plays. The idea of this Joseph enriching himself and the king at the expense of the populace is unthinkable. Later on in Part III, where Joseph is agonizing over what he can do to assist his father, Asenath points out that Joseph has the resources of Egypt at his disposal, to which Joseph replies:

> *Pharaoh* made me not
> Dispenser, only Keeper of his Treasures;
> Nor should Corruption cleave unto these Hands,
> Or would I touch what's sacred to the Publick,
> To save myself and Race from instant Ruin. (III.2, p. 24)

This is rather a surprising statement, given that in Part I Joseph has been made second only to Pharaoh, and given authority to rule over the whole country (I.4, p. 10); but it serves well to make the point about Joseph's integrity. The final three lines of this recitative ('Nor . . . Ruin') are again Miller's addition to Zeno's libretto, and like the chorus 'Blest be the Man' mentioned above have often been interpreted as Miller's snipe at the recently fallen prime minister Robert Walpole, who was known for using his position to advance the interests of his friends and family.[85] Political resonances aside, however, the words still contribute towards

[85] See Miller's satirical poems attacking Walpole, *Are These Things So?* (London, 1740), 8, and *The Great Man's Answer to Are These Things So?* (London, 1740), 10–11. The idea that the libretto of *Joseph* at this point refers to Walpole is suggested by O'Brien, 'Miller, James', Chisholm, 'New Sources', 191–2, and Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 304–7. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the first two lines ('Pharaoh . . . Treasures') are taken directly from Zeno, but have been moved in Miller's libretto into a different position. In Zeno, the lines come about halfway through Part I, when Azanet first asks Joseph what is troubling him, and he laments that he is not empowered to use Egyptian wealth to help the peoples outside of Egypt. It is only later in the libretto that it becomes clear that the 'peoples' he has in mind are his father and family. Miller, however, places the lines later in the narrative, in the context

the picture of a Joseph who governs Egypt with complete integrity, to the point of being unable to bring himself to aid his impoverished father with money from Egypt's coffers because it is not within his remit to grant such aid. This is no calculating despot who intends to enslave the people, but a man with a deep consciousness of his responsibilities towards the people he is governing.

Joseph's ambition

Related to the question of Joseph's management of the famine crisis is the issue of his supposed ambition. As noted earlier, Thomas Morgan portrayed Joseph as incurably ambitious and power-thirsty, using every situation for his own advancement. Miller's Joseph, however, displays no such driving ambition. The opening of the libretto shows him in prison, urging himself to endure the punishment in the hope of ultimate vindication, telling himself, 'Down, down, proud Heart,/Nor blindly question the Behest of Heaven!' (I.1, p. 7). His reaction to the news that Pharaoh wants to see him is thoroughly decorous; not 'Good! at last my plan has worked!', but 'Jehovah, whom I serve, bears witness to me;/And from the Horrors of the Pit, once more,/Will deign Deliverance to his Servant's Soul' (I.2, p. 8). He then sings an air in which he prays for inspiration to interpret Pharaoh's dream, and expresses not the desire for his own advancement but that Egypt will come to praise God:

> Thus, whilst I o'er *Pharaoh's* Dream,
> Bright Interpretation beam,
> *Pharaoh's* Self shall Temples raise,
> And *Egypt* Incense to thy Praise. (I.2, p. 8)

When Phanor then apologizes to Joseph for having forgotten him for so long, expressing shame at his own ingratitude, Joseph responds, 'Pardon thyself—Ingratitude's a Vice . . . /Which makes a Desert of the human Mind,/And merits more of Pity than Resentment' (I.2, p. 8). It is hard to see this as the response of a man consumed with ambition. Equally, it is hard to see Phanor's reaction to this as that of a man who is afraid of Joseph's naked ambition: Phanor at once definitively renounces his ingratitude in an air (I.3, p. 9).

In the next scene, Joseph's successful interpretation of Pharaoh's dream—achieved with appropriate invocations of Heaven to make it clear that the interpretation does not come from Joseph himself—leads Pharaoh to place Joseph in charge of the land, a turn of events which Joseph greets with the exclamation, 'These are thy Workings, Infinite *Jehovah!*' (I.4, p. 10)—in other words, this is not Joseph's own idea. In his subsequent proposal of marriage to Asenath he asks her 'To help allay the anxious Toils of Grandeur,/And smooth the rugged Brow of

of Joseph's discussion with Asenath about how to help his father, and they refer specifically to the possibility of Joseph using Egyptian wealth to do so—a course of action that is never even countenanced in Zeno's libretto, where as soon as Azanet finds out about Joseph's father she suggests that Joseph bring him to Egypt.

Publick Care' (I.6, p. 11), indicating a certain nervousness about his new-found position of responsibility. This picture of the virtuous and unambitious Joseph is continued at the beginning of Part II, where, as in Zeno's libretto, Asenath tells Phanor in their discussion of Joseph, 'we mention not his highest Glory,/Mark midst his Grandeur what Humility,/The Gift of that great God whom he adores' (II.1, p. 14). Two scenes later Joseph himself confirms these hints that ruling the country is not his chosen vocation; in a recitative soliloquy he sighs,

> The wide Circumference of *Egypt*'s Regions,
> The vast Extent betwixt the *Nile* and Ocean
> Given me to rule, is Slav'ry, not an Honour;
> Not Rest, but Travel (II.3, p. 16).

He then goes on to reminisce about his peaceful former life among flocks and family, and finally he sings an air about the pastoral idyll:

> The Peasant tastes the Sweets of Life,
> Unwounded by its Cares;
> No courtly Craft, no publick Strife
> His humble Soul insnares.
> But Grandeur's bulky noisy Joys
> No true Contentment give;
> Whilst Fancy craves Possession cloys,
> We die thus whilst we live. (II.3, 16)

This is a clear denial of any ambition or thirst for power in Joseph, but what is particularly interesting is that although the scene is based on Zeno's version it alters the Italian significantly. In Zeno, Joseph similarly bewails his lot of ruling Egypt, and yearns for his old life; but the reason is not weariness with the trappings of power—rather, it is the desire to see his father again. This is clear from the ending of the recitative in each case:

(Zeno's version)

> Giorni oh quanto più lieti io vissi un tempo,
> Ebrón, fra le tue valli! Oh, rivederle
> e trarvi al pasco l'innocente greggia
> potessi ancor! Potessi
> del padre mio baciar la destra ancora,
> e i santi udirne insegnamenti, . . .
> ed Abramo ed Isacco e le divine
> promesse e d'Israel l'alte speranze!
> O caro padre! o mio Giacobbe! o troppo
> disumani fratei! Taci, o Giuseppe.
> Vien Simeon . . . (Part I, p. 173)
> [How much happier a life did I once live,
> Hebron, among your valleys! Oh, to see them again
> and lead there the innocent herds to pasture—
> if only I could! If only I could
> kiss my father's right hand again,
> and hear from him the sacred teachings . . .

(of) Abraham and Isaac and the divine promises
and the great hopes of Israel!
O dear father! O my Jacob! O brothers too cruel!
Quiet, Joseph, here comes Simeon . . .]

(Miller's version)

Ye departed Hours,
What happier Moments have I seen!—O *Hebron*!
What Peace enjoy'd amidst thy smiling Valleys!
Might I review thee! might I careless tend
Thy fleecy Herd; might I once more embrace
My good old Sire; list to his sacred Lessons . . .
Jehovah's divine promise to our Fathers,
The glorious Hope[86] of *Abraham* and his Seed—
It cannot be—Tyrant, enslaving Greatness!
Who'd languish in thy gilded Chains an Hour,
That in the Courts of Quietness could dwell?
(Air: 'The Peasant tastes the Sweets of Life')
But *Simeon* comes . . . (II.3, pp. 16–17)

Zeno's libretto makes no mention at all of any yearning for a pastoral idyll; rather, in his version, Joseph's dissatisfaction with his present position is directly attributable to a sense of traumatic bereavement at having been forcibly separated from his homeland and father by the cruel actions of his brothers. Miller's libretto, by contrast, takes the specifics of Joseph's sense of loss, and by means of the additional lines of recitative and the air converts them into symptoms of a more generic dissatisfaction with 'greatness' in general. This once again serves to portray Joseph as completely unambitious, thereby effectively countering negative readings such as Morgan's in which Joseph is driven by ambition and a thirst for power.

Joseph's cruelty to his father and brothers

The final criticism of Joseph that is relevant for Miller's libretto is Joseph's treatment of his brothers when they come to buy corn in Egypt; and indeed, this is one of the most puzzling aspects of the narrative in Genesis. As is common in Hebrew Bible narratives, nowhere are Joseph's motives explained, leaving the reader to speculate on what might have caused Joseph to act as he does. In Zeno's libretto, Joseph's words indicate that his actions are driven by a strong desire to help his father, together with a genuine uncertainty as to whether or not he can trust his brothers, and Miller has adopted this portrayal virtually unchanged. Thus, for example, Joseph does not allow himself to trust the brothers as a whole before he has tested them by means of the stratagem with the cup (III.2, p. 26), and his care for his father is shown by his struggles to control himself whenever the

[86] This is the version of the words that Handel set in his autograph, which is noticeably closer to the Italian than the printed libretto. The libretto omits the line about Jehovah's divine promise, and instead of 'The glorious Hope' has 'And Hope Divine'.

other brothers speak of Jacob, and by his agonizing over how best to provide for Jacob (III.2, pp. 24–5). In this way, Joseph is shown carrying out the same actions that are described in the biblical text, but elements of commentary upon them are added, so that the audience can see that Joseph is not just being manipulative or cruel for the sake of it; rather, he desperately wants to help his father, but he is genuinely conflicted over how to respond to his brothers.

However, Miller has also made an interesting change to Zeno's libretto. At the point in Zeno's libretto where Joseph sends Benjamin to prison and leaves the remaining brothers to their fate, Simeon sings an aria in which he first complains about those who flee the poor for fear of yielding to their cries for pity, and then declares that it is the height of cruelty to distribute favours and then remove them without warning.[87] Although in his version of the incident Miller retained Simeon's words about fleeing from the cries of the poor, he omitted those about giving and withholding favours on a whim. Perhaps the implied criticism of Joseph was too near the bone, in that it corresponds to some of the attacks that were made upon Joseph by the sceptics, and if Miller was indeed offering a positive reading of Joseph that was intended to counter those sceptical readings it would not do to leave himself a hostage to fortune by including such a negative sentiment. For Zeno, however, whose libretto was written as a devotional and didactic composition intended for the Viennese imperial court, such a sentiment would arguably have been received by the audience as moral admonition rather than as criticism of Joseph, and so there would have been no difficulty about including it.

CONCLUSION

Miller's treatment of the story of Joseph in his libretto for Handel can thus be understood in the light of some of the criticisms of Joseph that were circulating in contemporary literature. In order to give as positive a picture of Joseph as possible, Miller borrowed Zeno's libretto with its positive portrayal of Joseph, and adapted it by means of a prologue act and certain verbal additions and alterations, so as to address issues that might be read as criticism of Joseph. Thus, what in Zeno's hands was a devotional work written for the edification of a sympathetic upper-class audience, was transferred into a new commercial context where it could function as a partisan statement of Joseph's integrity, thereby implicitly defending the Established religious understanding of Scripture as it related to this part of sacred history.

[87] Zeno, *Drammi*, pp. 186–7.

7

Judas Macchabaeus

*Justifying the 1745 Anti-Jacobite Campaign**

To His Royal Highness
Prince William,
Duke of Cumberland,
This Faint Portraiture
of a
Truly Wise, Valiant, and Virtuous
Commander
As to the Possessor of the like Noble Qualities,
is
With the most profound Respect and Veneration,
Inscribed,
By His Royal Highness's
Most obedient, and
Most devoted Servant,
The Author.

(Dedication in the libretto of *Judas Macchabaeus*)[1]

Thus far, the oratorios discussed have been shown to have a range of political, cultural, and theological nuances that are relevant to the context in which they were composed. Few of them, if any, however, have quite the overt political significance of *Judas Macchabaeus*. The oratorio was completed in the wake of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745–6 as a compliment to the younger son of George II, William, Duke of Cumberland, who in his position as commander of the king's army had overseen the final quelling of the rebellion.[2] The rebels had intended to

* An earlier version of this chapter was published as 'On the "Handel-ing" of 1 Maccabees: Thomas Morell's Use of Biblical Sources in the Libretto of *Judas Maccabaeus*', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 57 (2004), 125–38.

[1] *Judas Macchabaeus. A Sacred Drama. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. The Musick by Mr. Handel* (London: J. Watts, 1747).

[2] Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 291, suggests that the libretto was originally written to celebrate Cumberland's success in driving Charles back to Scotland in December 1745, that is, before the definitive victory over the Jacobites at Culloden in April 1746. However, Thomas Morell (the librettist) later claimed that the libretto was written after the prince returned victorious from Scotland, that is, in 1746. Practically speaking, though, it makes

depose the Protestant Hanoverian George II from the British throne in favour of the Catholic Charles Edward Stuart, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', also known as the Young Pretender, who was the grandson of the deposed James II and who was seen by his supporters as the rightful heir to the throne.[3] However, Cumberland's decisive victory over the rebels at the battle of Culloden in April 1746, together with his subsequent campaign to purge Jacobite support in the Scottish Highlands, marked the end of any military attempts, and indeed, of any serious hopes, to restore the Stuart line to the British throne.

Following the production of *Joseph and his Brethren*, Handel had returned to a collaboration with Charles Jennens for the biblical oratorio *Belshazzar* (1745), a work which in its theme of a legitimate but depraved monarch (Belshazzar) who is removed by God's chosen and righteous avenger (Cyrus) is reminiscent of Jennens's *Saul*. However, Jennens's position as a non-juror meant that Handel would have been unable to approach him in 1746 for a libretto to celebrate the Hanoverian defeat of the Stuart cause. Indeed, it seems that the Jacobite rebellion effectively put an end to the artistic collaboration between Handel and Jennens.[4] Fortunately, help was at hand in the shape of Thomas Morell, an Anglican clergyman who was on the fringes of the royal circle. Morell was a minor academic who was a graduate of King's College, Cambridge; a classicist and a theologian, he also wrote religious verse and had an interest in music.[5] In his own later account of how he came to work with Handel, Morell reported that Handel had contacted him in 1746 'and added to his request the honour of a recommendation from Prince Frederic [the Prince of Wales]'; Morell's response had been to take Handel the first act of *Judas* two or three days later, and his work met with Handel's

little difference at exactly what point the libretto was written, because it was not performed until 1747, and whether it was meant to celebrate an interim victory or the final one it still complimented Cumberland and asserted the rightness of the campaign.

[3] The term 'Young Pretender' was used to distinguish Charles from his father, James Francis Edward Stuart, the 'Old Pretender', who had styled himself 'James III' and who had attempted to regain the throne by an invasion from France which culminated in the unsuccessful Jacobite rebellion of 1715. For further details on the Jacobite movement and the two risings, see Bruce Lenman, *The Jacobite Risings in Britain, 1689–1746* (London: Methuen, 1980); Daniel Szechi, *The Jacobites: Britain and Europe 1688–1788*, New Horizons in History (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994). For more detailed accounts of the 1745 rebellion, see F. J. McLynn, *The Jacobite Army in England, 1745* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983); Jeremy Black, *Culloden and the '45* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990).

[4] Although the professional collaboration between Jennens and Handel may have ceased with the Jacobite rebellion, their relationship apparently continued in some form. In 1749 Handel responded to a request from Jennens for advice on an organ to be installed in Jennens's home in Gopsall (Burrows, *Handel*, 330–1), and in a codicil to his will dated 4 August 1757, Handel bequeathed Jennens 'two pictures the Old Man's head and the Old Woman's head done by Denner' (*H-H* iv, 509). For facsimilies of the original copies of the codicil, see Donald Burrows (ed.), *Handel's Will: Facsimiles and Commentary* (London: The Gerald Coke Handel Foundation, 2009), 42, 52, and for comments on the bequest to Jennens, see Ellen T. Harris, 'Handel and his will', in *Handel's Will*, 9–20 (15).

[5] For short biographical details about Morell, see Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959; repr. 2000), 462–3; Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 195–9; ead., 'Thomas Morell and his Letter about Handel', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 127 (2002), 191–225; ead., 'Morell, Thomas (1703–1784)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19201, accessed 28 July 2011>.

approval.[6] The association between Handel and Morell would continue for the remainder of Handel's oratorio-writing career, and indeed in some form to the end of Handel's life: Morell supplied Handel with at least three more oratorio libretti, including that for Handel's last oratorio *Jephtha* in 1752; and in a codicil to his will dated 6 August 1756, Handel bequeathed Morell £200.[7]

The story of the Maccabees—and of Judas Maccabaeus in particular, upon which the oratorio libretto is based—would have been familiar to Handel's original audience from both the Bible and tradition. Although its source in the Old Testament Apocrypha[8] might have led to it being frowned upon by some, the story of Judas also circulated apart from the Bible as a component in the stories of the 'Nine Worthies': outstanding figures from biblical, pagan and Christian antiquity, whose exploits were recounted as exemplars of virtue, courage and piety.[9] Indeed, the oratorio's continuing popularity both during Handel's lifetime

[6] *H-H* iv, 407, 526.

[7] *H-H* iv, 499. For facsimiles of the original copies of the actual codicil, see Burrows, *Handel's Will*, 39, 49; for comment on the bequest, see Harris, 'Handel and his will', 15. As well as producing libretti for Handel during the composer's lifetime, following Handel's death Morell collaborated with John Christopher Smith the younger, Handel's assistant between 1752 and 1759, to produce several Handelian pasticcio oratorios in which libretti by Morell were set by Smith to excerpts from Handel's music. For discussion of these works, see Richard G. King, 'John Christopher Smith's Pasticcio Oratorios', *M & L*, 79 (1998), 190–218.

[8] The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, in which the story of Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers is found, are both components of what is regarded by Protestant Christianity as the Apocrypha and by Catholic Christianity as the deutero-canonical books. The books formed part of the ancient Greek rendering of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint (LXX), a rendering which includes several additional works that do not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Although 1 Maccabees is often thought to have been translated from a Hebrew original, neither 1 nor 2 Maccabees has any equivalent in the Hebrew canon, and in fact 2 Maccabees (like other works in the Septuagint) shows all the hallmarks of having been composed in Greek. The books date from around the time of the events they describe, which took place in the first half of the second century BCE, and each gives its own version of those events, with 1 Maccabees focusing more on the exploits of the Maccabaean family members Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, and 2 Maccabees concentrating on the events which led up to the Maccabaean rebellion and then on Judas's subsequent reclaiming and cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple.

[9] The concept of the Nine Worthies originated in the Middle Ages in a courtly poem by the French poet Jacques de Longuyon (*Voeux du Paon*, 1312). In English literature a printed poetic account of the Worthies was produced in 1584 by Richard Lloyd, entitled *A briefe discourse of the most renowned actes and right valiant conquests of those puisant Princes, called the Nine worthies*, and the concept of the Worthies appears in Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* (1590–1600) where Judas Maccabaeus is named as a Worthy (Act 5, scene 1). The Worthies were also known in more popular circles, as is demonstrated by the existence of an anonymous ballad entitled 'A brave warlike Song. Containing a brief rehearsall of the deeds of Chivalry, performed by the Nine Worthies of the World, the seaven Champions of Christendome, with many other remarkable Warriours. To the tune of List lusty Gallants' (1626). Of Judas Maccabaeus the ballad speaks thus:

> Iudas Machabeus,
> the sonne of Matathyas
> Opposd king Antochius,
> and mighty Demetrius,
> Lysias and Timotheus,
> Gorgeas and Nicanor,
> Were by him slaine or vanquished:
> thus Israel got honour.

and after his death implies that it resonated with eighteenth-century audiences in a way that bespeaks their familiarity with its underlying narrative. But as well as knowing the story of Judas Maccabaeus, eighteenth-century audiences would surely have appreciated how peculiarly appropriate the story was for the use to which Handel and Morell put it. The biblical narrative in 1 and 2 Maccabees describes how in the second century BCE the Syrian-based emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes, of whose domains Israel was a part, attempted to abolish the Jewish Law and forbid Jewish religious observances by persecuting the people, desecrating the Temple in Jerusalem, and imposing pagan observances across the country. He was opposed by a resistance force initiated by a Jew named Mattathias and his five sons, one of whom was Judas Maccabaeus; the forces drove back the imperial armies, reclaimed and purified the Temple, and re-established the Jewish way of life. When the tale of the Maccabees is seen in relation to the British view of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, it is not difficult to understand how the Jews' defeat of oppressive imperial forces could function effectively as a cipher for the Hanoverian defeat of the Jacobite army. Charles's landing in Scotland from France in July 1745 at a time when England and France were at war was seen as a French attempt to annexe England as a province and impose upon it Catholic rule and worship; and this, coupled with contemporary views of so-called 'popery' as utterly autocratic, intolerant, and oppressive,[10] clearly explains the logic of retelling the tale of the Maccabees in order to compliment the man who crushed the Jacobites.[11]

A prose account of the Worthies, *The History of the Nine Worthies of the World*, was produced by 'R.B.' (Nathaniel Crouch) in 1687, and was reprinted eight times between 1695 and 1769, with an abbreviated edition (*The Famous and Renowned History of the Nine Worthies of the World*) also appearing in *c.*1700 and 1701. It is notable that all the editions of Crouch's *History of the Nine Worthies* describe Judas Maccabaeus as a 'valiant commander', which is the same term used by Morell of Cumberland in the dedication to his libretto, possibly as an allusion to the Nine Worthies tradition.

[10] There are many contemporary sermons on this theme. A good example is Thomas Newton's 'Pharisaism and Popery parallel'd, in a sermon Preach'd in the Parish Church of St Mary-le-Bow, And Grosvenor Chapel, On occasion of the present Rebellion in Scotland. October 1745', in *Two Sermons; One upon the Liturgy of the Church of England, Preach'd according to the last-will of Mr John Hutchins Citizen and Goldsmith; The other against the corruptions of the Church of Rome, Preached on occasion of the present Rebellion in Scotland; in the Parish Church of St. Mary-le-Bow, And published at the particular request of several of the Audience* (London, 1745), 33–64. Having drawn parallels between the practices of contemporary 'Papists' and all the aspects of the Pharisees' behaviour that are condemned by Jesus in Matthew 23, Newton says, 'And what a horrid and impious attempt then is this to impose Popery upon us with a Popish Pretender, for a Popish Prince would soon make way for the Popish religion, and the Popish religion is attended with all these evils which you have heard, and many more! The Protestant religion can be supported only by supporting the Protestant succession, and if it should please God for our sins to punish us with a change . . . , what a change it would be! a change from liberty to slavery, from the purest religion to the grossest idolatry and superstition, from a mighty kingdom to a province of France, from a florishing Church to a servile dependency upon the See of Rome, from the legal and mild government of a Protestant King to the arbitrary exactions and heavy oppressions of a Popish Tyrant!' (58). For a discussion of anti-Catholicism in England in the eighteenth century, see Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, c. 1714–80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993).

[11] For a detailed discussion of the oratorio's libretto in the context of the contemporary political circumstances, see Ruth Smith, 'The Meaning of Morell's Libretto of *Judas Maccabaeus*', *M & L*, 79 (1998), 50–71.

THE LIBRETTO

The plot of Morell's libretto for *Judas Macchabaeus* is a simplified version of the Maccabaean campaign as told by the biblical writers, and can be summarized briefly as follows. The oratorio opens with the beleaguered Jews mourning the death of Mattathias and needing a leader for their campaign of resistance against the enemy. Judas is appointed to head the resistance forces, and the people vow their loyalty to him. Judas gains impressive victories against the enemy forces, and the people sing his praises, but news of a further imminent attack force dampens their spirits. After hearing encouraging words spoken by his brother Simon, Judas resolves to fight this force too, and Simon for his part takes it upon himself to cleanse and rededicate the Jews' ruined Temple that has been defiled by pagan observances, in order to give spiritual support to the Jewish military campaign. The restored Temple is rededicated, and then news is brought of Judas's victories over all the opposition forces, together with a diplomatic agreement with Rome to protect the Jews from all further harassment by outside powers. The oratorio ends with gratitude to God and Judas, and general rejoicing.

In producing the libretto for *Judas Macchabaeus*, Morell drew on both 1 and 2 Maccabees (although the end result owes more to the former than to the latter), and for much of the libretto Morell relied quite closely on these biblical source texts.[12] However, in some aspects of his treatment of the narrative, he departed significantly from the source material; and it is these departures that are of interest for the present purposes. They fall into two quite distinct groups, those in Part I of the libretto, which deals with the initiation of the Maccabaean campaign, and those in the remainder (Parts II and III) of the libretto, where the campaign itself is described. These two groups will be examined in turn.

JUDAS MACCHABAEUS PART I: INITIATING THE CAMPAIGN

In many ways, it is the compositional strategies employed by Morell in Part I of the libretto that are of most interest. A comparison of the libretto with the narrative in 1 and 2 Maccabees shows that the libretto's second and third parts are clearly derived from the biblical source texts (although much truncated): Part II draws its main content from the military engagements described in 1 Maccabees 3, and the description of the pagan rites imposed on the Jews in 2 Maccabees 6, while Part III covers rekindling the altar flame from 1 Maccabees 4 and 2 Maccabees 10, and the defeats of Lysias and Nicanor plus the treaty with Rome from 1 Maccabees 6–8. Part I, however, unlike Parts II and III, owes very

[12] Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 465, comments that Morell also used Josephus, *Antiquities* xii.6–10 (i.e. xii.6.1–10.6, = xii.265–419), who tells the same story and includes some details that do not appear in Maccabees, one of which is the name of the Feast of Lights (given by Morell in Part III of the libretto). A couple of other potential echoes of Josephus that appear in Part I of the libretto are mentioned below in notes 29 and 31, but despite these echoes the observation that Morell's major source was 1 Maccabees remains valid.

little to its supposed source text. It covers the death of Mattathias, father of the five Maccabaean brothers, and the appointment of Judas to head the struggle against the enemies of the Jews; as such it is ostensibly based on 1 Maccabees 2, since it begins with the Israelites mourning Mattathias, an event which appears only in 1 Maccabees 2 (Mattathias is not even mentioned in 2 Maccabees). But the libretto presents a series of exchanges between the people, Judas, and his brother Simon, which appear nowhere in either 1 or 2 Maccabees. This raises the question of what Morell was doing in shaping the libretto as he did, and where the additional material came from.

An answer to the first of these two questions can perhaps be given in terms of Morell's own words about the libretto in another context:[13] the reason for this compositional strategy is because the work is intended not as a complete narrative of events, but rather as an oratorio. By his own admission, Morell is not presenting the history of the Maccabaean rebellion for its own sake, but as a compliment to the Duke of Cumberland for his military exploits, in the context of the anti-Jacobite campaign. Morell's dedicatory statement explicitly equates Cumberland with the libretto's portrayal of Judas, thus making the character of Judas a cipher for Cumberland; and the result is that Morell's picture of Judas functions as a propaganda statement about Cumberland's conduct of the anti-Jacobite campaign. But this is only a partial answer; it does not get to the heart of the question, which is why the deviations from the biblical text took the form they did. Here, however, an earlier published work of Morell's may offer a clue. On 9 January 1739/40, war having been declared against Spain, Morell preached a sermon which was later published, entitled 'The Surest Grounds for Hopes of Success in War'.[14] The sermon is based on two verses from Solomon's Temple dedication prayer, namely, 1 Kings 8.44–5, which in the KJV read:

> If thy people go out to battle against their enemy, whithersoever thou shalt send them, and shall pray unto the LORD toward the city which thou hast chosen, and *toward* the house that I have built for thy name: Then hear thou in heaven their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause.

[13] Some early editions of the libretto include the following footnote in Part III: 'Several Incidents were introduced here by way of *Messenger* and *Chorus*, in order to make the Story more compleat, but it was thought they would make the Performance too long and therefore were not Set, and therefore not printed; this being design'd, not as a finish'd Poem, but merely as an *Oratorio*.' This seems to be Morell's own comment, and according to Merlin Channon, it reflects his aggrieved reaction to cuts that Handel made to his libretto. See Channon, 'Handel's Early Performances of *Judas Maccabaeus*: Some New Evidence and Interpretations', *M & L*, 77 (1996), 499–526 (504–5). Other librettists, however, had their libretti printed in full, with text that was not set to music being indicated either by a vertical line drawn beside it in the left-hand margin or by inverted commas at the beginning of the lines of text in question. This was the case for *Samson* (Newburgh Hamilton), for *Joseph and his Brethren* (James Miller), and for *Belshazzar* (Charles Jennens).

[14] *The Surest Grounds for Hopes of Success in War. A Sermon, preached at Kew Chapel, on January 9 1739/40, Being the Day appointed for a General Fast, &c.* (London, 1740). At least two other recent writers on Handel have noted the existence of this sermon, but neither of them has explored its potential as a specific interpretative key to *Judas Macchabaeus*; rather, both have cited it for its identification of contemporary Britain with ancient Israel. See Dorothea Siegmund-Schultze, 'Zur gesellschaftlichen Situation in London zur Zeit Händels', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 32 (1986), 85–98 (96), and Smith, *Handel's Oratorios*, 220.

Morell uses this text as the basis on which to expound what might be termed a 'theology of successful war', and his exposition provides an important interpretative key to the libretto of *Judas Macchabaeus*. For when the sermon is compared with the libretto, a significant number of the elements that Morell has introduced into the libretto, particularly into Part I, correspond clearly with the notions expressed in the sermon about the conditions under which it is legitimate to hope for success in battle,[15] as will be demonstrated.

Morell begins his 'theology of successful war' by noting that Solomon speaks of the people going out to battle, '*whithersoever, or by the Way that thou shalt send them*—'. He comments,

> This is one of the Conditions, upon the Observance of which, *Solomon* presumes to pray for Success in Battle. And a very necessary one it is: For seeing War is contrary to the primary Intention of the Supreme Creator and Preserver of the World, for any King or People to engage therein, without an express Command from God, or sufficient Grounds from Circumstances, and the Reason of Things, which is little less, must needs be displeasing to him; and it would be vain Presumption to expect, downright Impudence to ask, Success.[16]

However, Morell continues, as long as the Israelites had divine approval, which also implied that their cause was just, they experienced invincibility, regardless of the number of the foe: 'for he, whose Eyes are too pure to behold Iniquity, fought for *Israel*, and constantly assisted them in chastising the Baseness of . . . undeserved Provocations.'[17]

Another condition for success is evidenced, Morell argues, by the fact that Solomon continues his prayer with the words, 'And they shall pray unto the Lord':

[15] It should perhaps be said that Morell was by no means the only person to express the kind of ideas that appear in the sermon about the conduct of war, nor indeed was his choice of 1 Kgs. 8.44–5 (or its parallel 2 Chron. 6.34–5) as the point of departure for such ideas unique. Other examples of similar sermons under similar circumstances include Henry Sacheverell, *A Sermon Preach'd before the University of Oxford On the Tenth Day of June 1702, Being the Fast Appointed for the Imploring a Blessing on Her Majesty and Allies Engag'd in the Present War against France and Spain* (Oxford, 1702), on 2 Chron. 6.34–5; Edmund Arnold, *National Humiliation the best Attonement for National Sins. A Sermon Preached in the Parish Church of Mortlake, in the County of Surrey, On Wednesday, January 9th, 1739. Being the Day set a-part by Authority for a Publick Fast* (London, 1739), on 1 Kgs. 8.44–5; Edward Cobden, *The Duty of a People going out to War. A Sermon Preached . . . at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, on Wednesday the Eleventh of April, 1744. being the Day appointed by his Majesty for a Solemn Fast* (London, 1744), on 2 Chron. 6.34–5. Nonetheless, the very fact that Morell preached and later published a sermon containing these ideas implies that he believed them to be valid, and that he regarded them as the appropriate reflections to be offered to a nation in the context of a declaration of war. Also, although his sermon is clearly tapping into a long tradition of theological rationalization about war and the conduct of war, especially in its discussion of if and when it is appropriate for Christians to go to war (see also note 20 below on this), his presentation of the tradition differs enough from other expositions of the same topic—including those that are based on the same biblical text—to make it reasonable to regard the correspondences between the sermon and the libretto as reflecting Morell's personal appropriation of ideas that were undeniably prevalent in contemporary thought. Ultimately, though, for present purposes it is unimportant whether or not his ideas were original; the point is that wherever his ideas originated, it is possible to identify a consistency in his expression of them in the two different media of sermon and libretto.

[16] *The Surest Grounds*, 6–7.

[17] *The Surest Grounds*, 9.

> Whenever his People went out to Battle, it was not enough, he thought, that their Cause was good and just, nor even that they were commissioned by God himself; but they must likewise be sensible of this his Regard for them, and by Prayers, and fervent Applications, solicit the Continuance of his Favour, as they expected Success at his Hands: . . . they must first render themselves worthy . . . , by their sincere Obedience to his Will, by offering up their solemn Prayers to him, and relying upon his Goodness for Success. And while they thus behaved, they prospered whithersoever they went; but were as miserably beaten and enslaved by their Enemies, . . . when *they forsook the Lord God of their Fathers, and followed after other Gods* . . . [18]

The Israelites' faithfulness to and obedience of their own ancestral God, expressed by their invocation of him prior to battle, was therefore the *sine qua non* of victory. But this invocation had to be properly carried out: it was not simply a matter of offering prayer 'any old how'. Solomon's mention of praying towards God's chosen city and the Temple built for God's name shows that the people's prayer must be undertaken in a specific way if it was to receive due regard:

> [W]ithout proper Prayer, or Prayer made in a proper Manner, and Place appointed by God himself, to be, as it were, the Centre of Unity in religious Worship, they had Reason to expect their Prayers would be rejected as mere Formality and Hypocrisy, and themselves severely chastised for their schismatical Disobedience.[19]

Having set forth these conditions for the Israelites' success in battle, Morell then proceeds to apply them to the contemporary circumstances of war. He first of all deals with the question of whether it is ever appropriate for Christians, who purport to follow the 'Prince of Peace', to engage in armed conflict, and argues that

> notwithstanding . . . the many Evangelical Precepts of *Meekness*, *Patience*, and *Long-suffering*, there are certain Seasons and Exigencies, when the rough Habiliments of War are unavoidably necessary, and even more becoming a Christian, than the soft Robes of Peace; when Meekness may be overborn, Patience insulted, and Long-suffering abused beyond Measure; or the . . . Divine Instructor had never commanded *him that hath no Sword, to sell his Garment, and buy one*.[20]

[18] *The Surest Grounds*, 11–12; italics original. This sentiment is also reflected in the libretto, in the chorus that ends Part II just before the purification of the Temple: 'We never, never will bow down/To the rude Stock or sculptur'd Stone./We worship God, and God alone' (II, p. 12).

[19] *The Surest Grounds*, 13.

[20] *The Surest Grounds*, 19–20. The question of whether and when it is appropriate for Christians to go to war has been debated throughout the history of Christianity, and thinkers from Augustine (354–430) onwards have argued that under certain circumstances defensive warfare is compatible with Christian belief. Probably the most influential just war theologian was Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who based himself on Augustine's writings when formulating his own doctrine of just war in *Summa Theologica* IIa IIae q. 40 a. 1. Aquinas argued that three conditions were necessary for a war to be just: it was to be initiated only at the command of the lawful sovereign; it was to be for a just cause, which would often be the avenging of wrongs suffered at the hands of other nations or powers; and it was to be conducted with the intention of advancing good or avoiding evil. For a history of just war doctrine, see Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), James Turner Johnson, *Ideology, Reason, and the Limitation of War: Religious and Secular Concepts, 1200–1740* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), and id., *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Enquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); for readings from some of the most significant thinkers on just war down the ages, see Larry May, Eric Rovie and

Having ascertained that war can on occasion be justified for Christians, Morell moves on to the difficult issue of how to know when one is being commissioned by God for war. He says,

> We cannot indeed consult the Almighty, nor expect such express Commands, to go out to Battle, as the *Israelites* were once favoured with; but the Justice and Necessity of our Cause may be such, as to encourage us to hope, it is what God approves, and will give Success to.[21]

On the question of the proper observance of prayer before battle, Morell stipulates an important precondition that must be fulfilled if such prayer is to be effective:

> we must first put away those Sins, whatever they be, that we are conscious of to ourselves; . . . and which we know cannot but provoke the Lord, and consequently will restrain his wonted Goodness, and prevent his intended Blessing.[22]

There is also a proper location and manner of prayer that must be observed: prayer 'must be offered up in the House of the Lord',[23] which to Morell's mind is a building of the Established Church, and 'in one Manner',[24] because on the basis of Old Testament analogies Morell firmly believes in 'the Necessity of Uniformity in Public Worship'.[25]

How, then, does this 'theology of successful war' help to account for the shape of Part I of the *Judas Macchabaeus* libretto? The first condition for success that Morell states is to have either a divine command to fight, or a clearly just cause, and ideally both. The biblical book of 1 Maccabees certainly contains the element of a just cause: it opens with a description of the evils suffered by the Jews at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Macc. 1.11–64), which is clearly intended to show the justice of the Maccabaean cause. Not surprisingly, this is reflected in the libretto, in the opening chorus and the recitatives and duet of the Israelitish Man and Woman:

Chorus	Mourn, ye afflicted Children, the Remains Of captive *Judah*, mourn in solemn Strains; Your sanguine Hopes of Liberty give o'er; Your Father, Friend, and Hero is no more.
Recitative (Israelitish Man)	Well, Brethren, may your Sorrows flow In all th'expressive Signs of Woe; Your softer Garments tear, And squalid Sackcloth wear; Your drooping Heads with Ashes strew, And with the flowing Tear your Cheeks bedew.

Steve Viner (eds.), *The Morality of War: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2005).

[21] *The Surest Grounds*, 21.

[22] *The Surest Grounds*, 26–7. It is a very common theme in sermons that were preached on national fast days instituted during times of war, that prayer to solicit divine aid must be accompanied by true repentance for it to be efficacious.

[23] *The Surest Grounds*, 27.

[24] *The Surest Grounds*, 29.

[25] *The Surest Grounds*, 30.

Recitative	Daughters, let your distressful Cries,
(Israelitish Woman)	And loud Lament ascend the Skies;
	Your tender Bosoms beat, and tear
	With Hands remorseless your dishevell'd Hair.
	For pale and breathless *Mattathias* lies:
	Sad Emblem of his Country's Miseries!
Duet	From this dread Scene, these adverse Pow'rs,
(Israelitish Man	Ah! whither shall we fly?
and Woman)	O *Solyma*, thy boasted Tow'rs
	In smoky Ruins lie.
	Ah whither shall we fly? (Part I, pp. 1–2)

Although at first sight this series of items looks like a lament for Mattathias, in reality it functions as a lament for the people of Judah, picturing the people as 'afflicted', 'captive', despairing of freedom, and being subjected to 'miseries' at the hands of 'adverse powers'. Morell uses the death of Mattathias as a focalizing point for the people's general despair over their oppressive situation, so that the dead man becomes, in the words of the Israelitish Woman, the 'Sad Emblem of his Country's Miseries'. The description of the acts of mourning, the ruins of Jerusalem, and the adverse powers reflects the circumstances leading up to the Maccabaean campaign as they are presented in 1 Maccabees 1, although in a sufficiently generalized way to allow the eighteenth-century audience to apply the picture to their own situation,[26] and it serves in the libretto as justification for military action.

The 'just cause' theme also reappears towards the end of Part I, where in a recitative Judas recalls his father's death-bed exhortation to take action against the indignities being perpetrated upon Judah, and then declares himself ready to obey the exhortation. This once again draws rather generally on the source text of 1 Maccabees 2: in 1 Macc. 2.64–8, Mattathias is shown just before he dies commissioning both Simon and Judas, and urging that the wrongs done to the Jews should be avenged. But as well as reflecting the biblical text, the libretto also corresponds in both ideas and vocabulary to Morell's sermon. In the libretto, Judas tells how Mattathias spoke of 'the Miseries/In which the long-insulted *Judah* lies' (I, p. 5) and of the people's 'dire Distress' (I, p. 6) before urging his sons to 'attempt Redress' (ibid.). Judas then declares,

[26] The only detail in the libretto of the disasters suffered by Jerusalem and its inhabitants is the picture of Jerusalem's 'boasted Tow'rs' lying in ruins; and yet this has no basis in 1 Macc. 1, which in all its descriptions of the evils befalling the city does not mention Jerusalem's towers but speaks only of its *walls* being destroyed (1 Macc. 1.31). The libretto text here seems to be a reference to Ps. 48.12 (KJV: 'Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof'), with the destruction of the towers used as a symbol of the destruction wrought in Jerusalem as a whole by Antiochus's men. In terms of the libretto's meaning in its original context, Smith is of the opinion that Morell was referring to the worrying destruction in 1746 of barrier fortresses in Flanders which protected Britain from France (*Handel's Oratorios*, 300; 'Meaning of Morell's Libretto', 65), an interpretation that assumes that the libretto was written after rather than before Culloden (see note 2 above).

> We come; O see, thy Sons prepare
> The rough Habiliments of War. (Part I, p. 6)

This reflects the part of Morell's sermon where he justifies Christians going to war. There he argues that when 'Patience' has been 'insulted, and Long-suffering abused beyond Measure', 'the rough Habiliments of War are unavoidably necessary'.[27] So both the sermon and the libretto speak of taking up the 'rough Habiliments of War' in a context of long-standing insult and abuse, and both present such a war as entirely justified. Hence, although the basic idea of a legitimate struggle to avenge dire wrongs is present in 1 Maccabees, its form at this point in the libretto corresponds to the way it is expressed in Morell's sermon on the theology of successful war.

In depicting the Maccabaean cause as just, then, Morell is working within the broad outline of his biblical source material. But he also departs from it radically, by introducing an explicit divine commissioning for Judas. One of the most striking features of the account in 1 Maccabees is that it nowhere invokes a divine imperative for anything that the Maccabaeans do, and neither Mattathias nor his sons are shown as taking up arms on the basis of being divinely designated to do so. Yet early on in Part I of the libretto, Morell pictures Simon, Judas's brother, receiving a message of divine commission for Judas:[28]

> I feel, I feel the Deity within,
> Who, the bright *Cherubim* between,
> His radiant Glory erst display'd:
> To *Israel's* distressful Pray'r,
> He hath vouchsaf'd a gracious Ear,
> And points out *Macchabaeus* to their Aid.
> *Judas* shall set the Captive free,
> And lead us on to Victory. (Part I, p. 3)

In this way, the Maccabaean rebellion according to Morell is vindicated not only by the justice of its cause, but also by a clear divine imperative to military action—

[27] *The Surest Grounds*, 20.

[28] Interestingly, Morell's concern over the lack of a divine imperative here seems to match that of the audience for whom 1 Maccabees was composed. It is generally agreed that in 1 Maccabees the descriptions of situations and characters were consciously modelled on those in earlier parts of the Old Testament, in a bid to claim legitimation for the Maccabaean rebels by portraying them in terms of the respected heroes of Israel's past. Thus, even though there is no explicit divine commissioning, the narrative in itself is intended to indicate divine approval of the cause, and indeed, there is the pointed comment in 1 Macc. 5.62 after the Syrian general Gorgias has routed the non-Maccabaean Israelite commanders Joseph and Azariah, that 'these men came not of the seed of those, by whose hand deliverance was given unto Israel'. But there is also the comment in 1 Macc. 14.41, when Simon Maccabee is elevated to the high priesthood, that 'the Jews and priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high priest for ever, until there should arise a faithful prophet', indicating a decision that was consciously based on a human rather than a divine imperative. For examples of the way in which 1 Maccabees uses accepted scriptural precedents in order to validate the Maccabaean campaign, see Deborah W. Rooke, *Zadok's Heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood in Ancient Israel*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 280–5, 296–300. Of course, in portraying contemporary events in scriptural colours in order to claim some kind of religious validation for them, Morell is doing exactly the same thing for the Duke of Cumberland as the writer of 1 Maccabees did for Judas and his brothers.

the two cardinal criteria laid down by Morell in his sermon for ascertaining when it is appropriate for the followers of a God of peace to go to war. This double vindication is underlined in Simon's air following the divine commissioning, 'Arm, arm ye Brave' (I, p. 3), where the cause is described as not only 'noble' but as 'the Cause of Heav'n':

> Arm, arm ye Brave; a noble Cause,
> The Cause of Heav'n your Zeal demands;
> In defence of your Nation, Religion and Laws,
> The Almighty *Jehovah* will strengthen your Hands.[29]

However, this divine commissioning stands in some tension with Judas's subsequent declaration, noted earlier, that he is fulfilling his father's dying exhortation to attempt redress; and this tension is increased when the libretto text is compared with that of 1 Maccabees 2. In 1 Macc. 2.66 the dying Mattathias specifically commissions Judas to lead the armed struggle; but the libretto starts at a point where Mattathias is already dead, and so the divine commission delivered to Judas via Simon seems to take the place of Mattathias's commission to Judas to lead the troops, making the subsequent reference to Mattathias's dying exhortation quite unexpected. So does Morell want the audience to understand that Judas is divinely commissioned, or that he is simply following his father's last wishes? Here again, perhaps the sermon can help. On the subject of divine commissioning, Morell says,

> We cannot indeed consult the Almighty, nor expect such express Commands, to go out to Battle, as the *Israelites* were once favoured with; but the Justice and Necessity of our Cause may be such, as to encourage us to hope, it is what God approves, and will give Success to.[30]

Morell clearly sees a difference between the ancient and contemporary situations in the way that the necessity for war is determined; equally clearly, in his libretto he wants to portray the Maccabaean cause as having unmistakable and unqualified divine favour, because that will lend legitimacy to the contemporary anti-Jacobite campaign for which it is a metaphor. And yet, if he expresses the favour shown to the Maccabaeans in a way that is too far removed from the contemporary world-view and experience, he is liable to undermine the comparison. So although he introduces the divine commissioning, which is in line with his full 'theology of successful war' and with what the Israelites might expect, he also

[29] Smith suggests that the second half of this air echoes the phrases 'strength cometh from heaven . . . we fight for our lives and our laws . . . the Lord himself will over throw them' from 1 Macc. 3.18–22 ('Meaning of Morell's Libretto', 59–60). However, the air as a whole seems to be equally reminiscent of Judas's speech in 1 Macc. 3.58–60 and its parallel expanded version in Josephus *Ant*. xii.302–4. In 1 Macc. 3.58 Judas tells his troops, 'Arm yourselves, and be valiant men,' and in Josephus *Ant*. xii. 304 he says, 'exert yourselves accordingly, . . . holding firmly to the belief that if you die for such precious causes as liberty, country, laws and religion, you will gain eternal glory' (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* Books XII–XIV, tr. Ralph Marcus; LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/London: Heinemann, 1936), 157). The significance of both these observations for present purposes, though, is that once again Morell has introduced into his version of Judas's commissioning elements that do not appear in the immediate source text 1 Macc. 2, but which serve Morell's own theologizing purposes.

[30] *The Surest Grounds*, 21.

stresses the justice of the cause in terms of a dying father's desire for vengeance for his people—a motif that could be applied very effectively to the Duke of Cumberland purging the land of the Jacobite forces that threatened his father's throne.

The libretto, then, leaves its audience in no doubt that the Maccabaean campaign—and therefore its anti-Jacobite counterpart—was not only legitimate but had divine approval, thereby fulfilling a vital condition of Morell's theology of successful war. A second feature of this theology is that prayer needs to accompany the undertaking right from the start, just as Solomon had described in his prayer, 'If thy people go out to Battle against their enemy, whithersoever thou shalt send them, and shall pray unto the Lord, . . . hear thou . . . their prayer . . . and maintain their cause.' Unfortunately, not once in 1 Maccabees 2–3, when Mattathias initiates the battle and Judas subsequently takes it on, is there any mention of prayer; in fact, the people do not explicitly seek divine aid until 1 Macc. 3.44, when Antiochus, galled by Judas's successes against the Syrian commanders Apollonius and Seron, sends Gorgias to extirpate the Jews once and for all (events described in summary fashion in Part II of the libretto). And so the apparent lack of prayer at the start of the Maccabaean war is rectified in Morell's libretto. Simon comforts the mourning and despairing Israelites with the reminder and assurance that God will hear their sincere prayer:

> Distractful Doubt and Desperation
> Ill become the chosen Nation,
> Chosen by the great *I AM*,
> The Lord of Hosts, who, still the same,
> We trust will give attentive Ear
> To the Sincerity of Pray'r. (Part I, p. 2)

The Chorus responds to this encouragement with a prayer for aid:

> O Father, whose almighty Pow'r
> The Heav'ns, and Earth, and Seas adore!
> The Hearts of *Judah*, thy Delight,
> In one defensive Band unite.
> Grant us a Leader bold, and brave,
> If not to conquer, born to save. (Part I, p. 3)

As a result, Simon is moved by the deity to designate Judas as the liberator, as described earlier; and once Judas has accepted the commission, the Israelitish Woman prays for blessing on him:

> To Heav'n's almighty King we kneel,
> For Blessings on this exemplary Zeal.
> Bless him, *Jehovah*, bless him, and once more
> To thine own *Israel* Liberty restore. (Part I, p. 4)

There follows a series of airs to liberty, after which Judas recalls Mattathias's inspirational dying words, and urges that the forthcoming struggle be motivated solely by the desire for peace. Part I of the oratorio is then ended by the Chorus with a prayer as they head off to battle:

> Hear us, O Lord, on thee thy Servants call,
> Resolv'd on Conquest, or a glorious Fall.[31] (Part I, p. 6)

The net result of this is that the libretto gives the Maccabaean enterprise a genesis in prayer that reflects not the biblical source of 1 Maccabees 2 but Morell's declared convictions about the appropriate conduct of war as based on 1 Kgs. 8.44–5.

Nor is it simply the act of prayer, but the description of the manner in which that prayer is to be undertaken, that reflects Morell's theological convictions. In his sermon, Morell argues that prayer should be not only 'sincere and humble',[32] but also 'decent', a notion for which he claims the authority of the Apostle Paul and which he explains as meaning '[in] one Place, and in one Manner'.[33] Morell then proceeds to praise the English Constitution, which has enshrined in law prescriptions for a common place and style of worship, and, having deplored what he regards as the dangerously debilitating divisions in religious practice, he urges his listeners to try and persuade everyone to attend the Anglican Church.[34] The notion of 'decency' in Morell's theology is therefore a catchword for the observances of the Established Church. In the libretto, Simon's reminder to the despairing Israelites that God will hear their *sincere* prayers is followed by the air,

> Pious Orgies, pious Airs,
> Decent Sorrow, decent Pray'rs,
> Will to the Lord ascend, and move
> His Pity, and regain his Love. (Part I, p. 3)

In the light of Morell's sermon, this rather strange text, described as 'bizarre' by one recent commentator,[35] can be seen as a tilt at those who would deviate from the Established forms of worship, as well as a piece of propaganda in favour of those forms.[36] It is no accident that Morell follows this air with a prayer in and for unity sung by the chorus—that is, the whole nation—which in turn is followed by Simon's recitative declaring that the prayer has been heard and Judas is to be the deliverer. 'Pious' and 'decent' prayer is truly effective in Morell's libretto. Handel's setting of the chorus's six-line prayer, 'O Father, whose almighty Pow'r' (I, p. 3), also contributes very effectively to this presentation of the appropriate manner for public prayer; the first four lines are set in hymn-like block harmonies in which the four vocal parts move almost exactly together, and the opening line is sung in

[31] This once again seems to reflect the sentiments of Judas's elaborated speech in Josephus *Ant.* xii.304, where Judas tells his troops, 'exert yourselves accordingly, . . . holding firmly to the belief that if you die for such precious causes as liberty, country, laws and religion, you will gain eternal glory' (*Antiquities*, tr. Marcus, 157).

[32] *The Surest Grounds*, 24.

[33] *The Surest Grounds*, 29.

[34] *The Surest Grounds*, 30–1.

[35] Robin King, in the programme notes for the 1992 Hyperion recording of *Judas Maccabaeus* (CDA66641/2), 6. Dean is similarly dismissive of Morell's verse at this point, referring to 'the imbecility of such couplets as "Pious orgies, pious airs,/Decent sorrow, decent prayers"' (*Dramatic Oratorios*, 464).

[36] Deviators from the Established forms of worship would, of course, include not only Protestant dissenters such as Baptists and Quakers, but also Catholics and non-jurors, among whom would have been found the main supporters of the Jacobite cause.

unaccompanied four-part harmony, allowing the chorus to demonstrate a unity that needs no external support. After this display of unanimity, the final two lines of the prayer consist of a lively fugal treatment in which the chorus plead energetically and repeatedly for a leader who will save them. Both words and music thus exemplify this concept of decency, which is characterized by unity and sincerity.

The net result of all this reshaping of the biblical narrative is that Morell's portrayal of the Maccabaean rebellion's initiation and the appointment of its commanding officer corresponds to his own and others' convictions about the will of God as revealed in scripture for the proper, and therefore successful, conduct of war: the campaign is pictured as legitimate, as having explicit divine sanction, and as being embarked upon in an appropriately prayerful manner. Not all of these elements are explicit in the narrative in 1 Maccabees, but they have been made so in the libretto, as part of a strategy for enabling the completed oratorio to function as a celebration and validation of the anti-Jacobite campaign.

JUDAS MACCHABAEUS PARTS II AND III: WAGING THE WAR

Parts II and III of the libretto are based much more closely than Part I on the biblical source texts, but they are by no means simple summaries of the narratives. Rather, like Part I, they too show the influence of contemporary theological concerns which have dictated the precise form in which the Maccabaean campaign is presented. The effect of this is that the sense of the campaign's legitimacy and divine approval that was set out so carefully in Part I is not only maintained but confirmed, indeed, strengthened, over the course of the whole libretto.

As noted earlier, Part II of the libretto is based on the accounts of Judas's battles in 1 Maccabees 3, and on the descriptions of pagan rites in the Temple from 2 Maccabees 6. It can be divided into two movements: in the first, Judas returns from his initial battles triumphant and is praised by the Israelites, although he turns the praise away modestly to Heaven; and in the second, fresh enemy attacks are announced, which Judas sets out to counter, while Simon urges the remaining Israelites to purify and restore the Temple in order to ensure Judas's success in battle. As before, aspects of the sermon's 'successful war theology', along with other theologically driven adaptations, can be identified in the libretto's formulations of these events.

The first half of Part II is mainly concerned with Judas's exploits in battle. As indicated in the dedicatory statement at the beginning of the libretto, Morell is concerned to give a picture of Judas as a 'truly virtuous, brave and valiant commander', and certainly this is how Judas is depicted in Part II. The opening chorus describes in triumph how enemies have fallen in battle before Judas:

> Fall'n is the Foe! So fall thy Foes, O Lord,
> Where warlike *Judas* wields his righteous Sword. (Part II, p. 7)

The chorus contains two terms that give it an appropriately theological twist. First, the 'Foes' who fall before Judas are identified as '*thy* Foes, O Lord'. Secondly, the foes fall 'Where warlike Judas wields his *righteous* Sword'. In this way Morell's cardinal criterion of justifiable aggression is invoked in order to justify the military campaign. This is no personal vendetta or crusade for glory by Judas, but the purging of the enemies of God; Judas's enemies are God's enemies and therefore evil by definition, so Judas's cause is just and his action against them is righteous.

Following the chorus's declaration of victory, the Israelitish Man describes in a recitative based on 1 Macc. 3.10–24 how Judas defeated Apollonius and Seron, calling Judas 'Victorious Hero' and speaking of his 'resistless Prowess' (II, p. 7). The Israelitish man speaks of mass casualties on the part of both Apollonius and Seron in their encounters with Judas, and in each case their forces are depicted as being of considerable size, certainly to be understood as larger than Judas's force. Thus, in the victory against Apollonius, Judas is said to have pursued 'all Samaria . . . /Through Hills of Carnage, and a Sea of Blood' (II, p. 7), presumably referring to the fallen bodies of Apollonius's forces. Similarly, Seron, described as 'the haughty Seron, Syria's Boast' and thus clearly designated as an enemy of God, is said to have fallen 'with his unnumber'd Host' (ibid.) before Judas. Judas's ability to defeat apparently overwhelming forces is summed up in the Israelitish Man's air:

> So rapid thy Course is,
> Not numberless Forces
> Withstand thy all-conqu'ring Sword;
> Tho' Nations surround thee,
> No Pow'r shall confound thee,
> 'Till Freedom again be restor'd. (Part II, p. 7)

This air is followed by a recitative and air from the Israelitish Woman, which also praise Judas's exploits, and then the Chorus sum up the mood with a song of joy for the salvation that Judas has effected for Judah.

However, Judas attempts to tone down the Israelites' extravagant praises by using the biblical example of Gideon as a negative precedent. According to the book of Judges, Gideon told his men to cry 'The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon' when they had surrounded the Midianite camp and were about to attack it (Judg. 7.18, 20). But Judas decries the reference to anything other than divine power in the context of a victorious battle, and lays very heavy stress upon the role of Heaven, mentioning it three times in as many lines at the start of his recitative:

> Thanks to my Brethren.—But look up to Heav'n;
> To Heav'n let Glory, and all Praise be giv'n;
> To Heav'n give your Applause,
> Nor add *the second Cause*,
> As once your Fathers did in *Midian*,
> Saying, *The Sword of God and* Gideon.
> It is the Lord, who for his *Israel* fought,
> And this our wonderful Salvation wrought. (Part II, p. 8)

This recalls the idea that in his pursuit of the enemy Judas/Cumberland is carrying out the commands of Heaven, as expressed earlier in Simon's air 'Arm, arm, ye Brave':

> Arm, arm ye Brave; a noble Cause,
> The Cause of Heav'n your Zeal demands. (Part I, p. 3)

Judas's recitative thus has the effect of making God responsible for the victories, and hence for the defeat of the Jacobites. It is also entirely in line with the position stated in Morell's sermon, namely, that it is the Lord who fights for his people, and that their victory depends not upon their own strength of arms but upon God's gracious and invincible aid granted to them in the service of a righteous cause.[37] So once again, the righteousness of the Israelites' cause (and therefore of that of the Hanoverian forces) is being stressed. The point that God alone determines the outcome is re-emphasized in Judas's air that follows his recitative:

> How vain is Man, who boasts in Fight,
> The Valour of Gigantic Might;
> And dreams not that a Hand unseen
> Directs, and guides this weak Machine! (Part II, p. 9)

To be fair, a similar idea is also present in the underlying biblical text: in 1 Macc. 3.18–22 before the engagement with Seron, Judas encourages his men with the thought that God is fighting for them and with them. But in the libretto it is presented as an after-the-fact assessment of the victories, which means that it can much more readily be applied to the battles in the anti-Jacobite campaign.

The first movement of Part II, then, shows Judas's initial victories over superior forces, victories that confirm his divine designation and the righteousness of his cause that were portrayed in Part I. However, for all their magnificence, these victories have not managed to achieve the final defeat of the enemy, and as Judas ends his air the start of the second movement is marked by the entry of a messenger bringing bad news: he tells of a new, greater threat to the Jews that is intended to be the 'final solution', ending in their total annihilation. This message and the consequent mood-change herald an interesting series of departures from the biblical source text. So far in Part II the content has been fairly closely based on 1 Maccabees 3, to the extent that the Israelitish Woman's recitative in praise of Judas's mighty deeds quotes 1 Macc. 3.3–4 verbatim (II, p. 8).[38] However, as Judas rallies the people again to fight against the foe, Simon steps in with the announcement that while Judas takes care of the fighting he for his part will take responsibility for restoring the ruined and profaned Temple in order to secure victory:

> Lo *Sion*, holy *Sion*, Seat of God,
> In ruinous Heaps is by the Heathen trod;
> Such Profanation calls for swift Redress,
> If e'er in Battel *Israel* hopes Success. (Part II, p. 11)

[37] *The Surest Grounds*, 11–12.
[38] The libretto has a footnote to 1 Macc. 3.3 at the end of the Israelite Woman's recitative.

This is a significant departure from the source texts, where both Simon and Judas are involved in military action, and in both 1 and 2 Maccabees it is Judas, not Simon, who restores the Temple during a lull in the fighting (1 Macc. 4; 2 Macc. 10). There, the Temple restoration is a sign of victories already achieved;[39] here, however, it is symptomatic of a desire for victory, a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The stress on restoration of the Temple before victory can be achieved is reminiscent again of Morell's sermon, where he speaks of the necessity for proper religious observances before battle:

> For as without Prayer, notwithstanding the Goodness of their Cause, they might fear a Defeat . . . ; so without . . . Prayer made in a proper Manner, and Place appointed by God himself, to be, as it were, the Centre of Unity in religious Worship, they had Reason to expect their Prayers would be rejected as mere Formality and Hypocrisy[.][40]

Given that the proper place for the Jews to pray is the Temple, they are clearly risking a great deal if they fail to restore the Temple to usable status before praying for success in battle. They may have been granted some initial victories without having restored the Temple, but now that they know God is on their side they must respond appropriately by attending to their religious duties as well as to their military ones. It is also particularly important for them to restore the Temple in the light of this new threat, which is an attempt, as the Messenger puts it, 'to erase/ Ev'ry Memorial of the *Sacred Place*' (II, p. 9). As Simon's air shows, restoring the Temple is as much an act of resistance as is fighting battles:

> With pious Hearts, and brave as pious,
> O *Sion*, we thy Call attend:
> Nor dread the Nations that defy us,
> God our Defender, God our Friend. (Part II, p. 11)

Simon's air is followed by a description of the rites that need to be purged from the defiled Temple, in which Morell has supplemented the biblical material with his own comments in order to relate it to the Jacobite campaign. The Israelitish Man, in a recitative based on 2 Maccabees 6, urges that Jupiter Olympus be hurled from his throne and that worship of Bacchus should cease, because

> Our Fathers never knew
> Him, or his beastly Crew,
> Or knowing scorn'd such idol Vanities. (Part II, p. 11)

However, the Israelitish Woman then urges the expulsion of '*Ashtoreth*, yclep'd the *Queen of Heav'n*' (II, p. 11), calling for her to be

> . . . with her Priests, and Pageants, hurl'd
> To the remotest Corner of the World,
> Ne'er to delude us more with pious Lies. (Part II, p. 12)

Nothing about Ashtoreth appears anywhere in 1 or 2 Maccabees, making this Morell's own contribution to the narrative, and giving a clear indication that the

[39] Compare the notion in 1 Kgs. 5.3–5 that Solomon is only in a position to build the Temple once the Lord has given him rest from his enemies all around.

[40] *The Surest Grounds*, 13.

material about idolatrous rites should be read as anti-Catholic polemic. This can be seen once again by comparison with Morell's sermon. In expounding his ideas on the appropriate nature of the public worship that should be undertaken prior to military action, Morell speaks of the need to persuade everyone to worship together in Anglican churches according to Anglican forms, and urges that the following considerations (among others) be used in order to win over those who currently reject the Established way:

> Let us assure them, . . . that they are hereto invited by the best and purest of Churches in the World; a Church which we have Reason to believe was begun here in the Apostolic Age; and whatever new Doctrines, whatever new Sacraments, whatever Innovations *Rome* would have introduced, and did in the Night of Error and Ignorance, they are now, by the Blessing of God, quite abolish'd; never, we hope, to rise again in these Lands. Let us assure them, . . . that her Worship, if rightly examined, is by no means pompous or theatrical, but truly plain, and grave, and solemn . . . [41]

The ideological fiction that the Anglican Church was founded in the Apostolic age and later corrupted by Catholic influences is by no means unique to Morell, but he clearly accepted it, and it is reflected in the Israelitish Man's view of Bacchus worship as an evil innovation that previous generations either did not know about or refused to accept. Similarly, the Israelitish Woman's reference to Ashtoreth as the Queen of Heaven recalls the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the derogatory mention of Ashtoreth's 'Priests, and Pageants' recalls Morell's assertion that true, Anglican, worship 'is by no means pompous or theatrical, but truly plain, and grave, and solemn'.[42] Finally, the wish that Ashtoreth and her priests should 'Ne'er . . . delude us more with pious lies' recalls Morell's comment that whatever erroneous innovations were once introduced by Rome into British Christianity, they are now completely and, hopefully, permanently abolished.

Part II of the libretto, then, has a mixture of close adherence to the biblical text and significant departure from it, in order to continue the message that the Maccabaean campaign, and thus its anti-Jacobite counterpart, was initiated by God and waged with divine support. Part III shows a similar mix of biblical and non-biblical material, of which the most striking element for present purposes is the description of the rededication ceremonies of the Temple with which Part III begins. In 1 Maccabees the cleansing and rededication takes place after Judas has defeated Lysias and before he has engaged Nicanor in battle, and in 2 Maccabees it takes place before Gorgias or Lysias or Nicanor have been engaged in battle. In the libretto, however, the cleansing and rededication appears to take place while Judas is fighting Lysias and Nicanor, because the rekindling of the altar flame is followed almost immediately by a messenger entering with the news that Judas has defeated them both. Even more interesting is the libretto's description of how the altar flame is renewed. In both 1 and 2 Maccabees the flame is rekindled by those who cleanse the Temple (1 Macc. 4.53; 2 Macc. 10.3), but in the libretto the flame is miraculously rekindled in response to the priest's prayer with which Part III opens. The Israelitish Man describes the event in a dramatic accompanied recitative:

[41] *The Surest Grounds*, 31–2. [42] Ibid.

> See, see yon Flames that from the Altar broke,
> In spiry Streams pursue the trailing Smoke?
> The fragrant Incense mounts the yielding Air;
> Sure Presage that the Lord hath heard our Pray'r. (Part III, p. 13)

This is reminiscent of the miraculous fire from heaven that consumes the burnt offering in Elijah's contest with the priests of Baal (1 Kgs. 18.36–8), a situation resembling that of the Maccabees in that the true religion and its supporters are under great pressure from the advance of a foreign and impious religion. No doubt the reference here is intended to convey a message similar to that of the Elijah story, namely, that the beleaguered Jews, who represent English Protestants, have the support of the one true God.

As noted already, the rekindling of the altar flame is followed shortly by the entry of a messenger telling of Judas's victories over Lysias, Timothy, and Nicanor. The content of the messenger's recitative summarizes the campaigns as they are described in 1 Maccabees 4–7, but the fact that the victories are reported just after the Temple is dedicated means that they are presented as the direct result of the cleansing and rededication. The proper religious observances have been undertaken, and so God has seen fit to aid his people to victory. The immense importance of the Temple dedication is underlined by the fact that the messenger tells of the defeat of Nicanor. In the biblical text Nicanor swears to raze the rededicated Temple to the ground (1 Macc. 7.33–8; 2 Macc. 14.31–6), and his defeat and death in battle are seen as punishment for this specific act of blasphemy (1 Macc. 7.39–49; 2 Macc. 15). In the libretto, however, Nicanor does not survive long enough to blaspheme against the Temple, because its rededication alone is enough to cause his defeat, and so his sin is described in more general terms as blasphemy and pride rather than as threatening to destroy the Temple (III, p. 14).

Parts II and III of the libretto, then, show a combination of close adherence to and strategic reworking of the biblical text, that makes the story recognizably that of the Maccabaean rebellion, but also enables it to be related directly and specifically to the anti-Jacobite campaign, and gives theological justification for the latter in terms of contemporary theological ideas. In this way Parts II and III continue what was begun in Part I, giving a consistent picture of a divinely validated campaign against the Jacobites.

CONCLUSION

It seems, then, that in Thomas Morell Handel found a librettist who was well able to strike the requisite notes of rejoicing over and justification for the successful anti-Jacobite campaign. In constructing the libretto of *Judas Macchabaeus*, Morell used and freely adapted the biblical sources that were available to him, in order to portray a campaign that had divine support and was conducted flawlessly in accordance with scriptural principles from beginning to end: it was just and righteous, it was carried out with reliance on God in legitimate and appropriate prayer, its commander was designated by God, and God aided the armies to win

the battles. Given that the libretto, as indicated by its dedication, is a cipher for the anti-Jacobite campaign under Cumberland's leadership, the effect of this portrayal is to assert unequivocally that not only the campaign, but also the Established Church whose interests the campaign sought to protect, and indeed, the nation as a whole, were favoured by God.

8

Solomon and his Women

A Handelian Triptych

Following the phenomenal success of *Judas Macchabaeus* in the 1747 season, the militaristic flavour of Handel's oratorio programme continued for the 1748 season, with the production of *Joshua* and *Alexander Balus*. Both of these works can be seen as sequels to *Judas Macchabaeus*, though in different ways. *Joshua*, the first of the two, adopted a similar formula to that of *Judas Macchabaeus*; its anonymous libretto (attributed by some to Morell) tells the story of the Israelite commander Joshua, another of the Nine Worthies, who like Judas Maccabaeus is divinely appointed to fight against the enemies of Israel, this time to establish and consolidate Israel's position in the promised land after their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. As such the oratorio might be seen as the political sequel to *Judas Macchabaeus*, perhaps reflecting Cumberland's follow-up purge of Jacobite supporters in the Highlands after his decisive victory at Culloden in April 1746. By contrast, *Alexander Balus* is what might be termed a narrative sequel to *Judas Macchabaeus*. Like *Judas Macchabaeus*, its libretto was by Morell and was based on a narrative from the Apocrypha, this time from 1 Maccabees 10–11; its plot takes place after Judas Maccabaeus has been killed in action and his brother Jonathan has become high priest and ruler of the Jews. The oratorio's main character, Alexander Balus, is king of Syria. He falls in love with and marries Cleopatra, daughter of Ptolomee, king of Egypt; but Ptolomee has only permitted the marriage to happen in order to further his own political ambitions, and once it has taken place he invades Syria and displaces Alexander. As a result Alexander is killed, but three days later Ptolomee himself dies in battle, so that he does not live to enjoy the fruits of his scheming. Unusually for the Israelite oratorios, the main Jewish character—here, Jonathan Maccabee, the Jewish ruler and high priest—is on the periphery of the action. Rather than being the focus of the plot, Jonathan has a supporting role as Alexander's ally, and in his virtue and piety he provides a contrast to the two pagan rulers: Alexander who is well-intentioned and virtuous but believes in idol gods; and Ptolomee who is driven by ambition with no respect for virtue. As a result of their moral and religious shortcomings, both Alexander and Ptolomee lose their kingdoms and their lives, whereas Jonathan's kingdom of Judah is protected by the hand of the Almighty, and it is Jonathan who together with the Israelites has the final word in the oratorio. The imperial powers of Egypt and Syria are reduced to chaos, but the tiny kingdom of Judah remains secure, because it is the Lord who determines who rules, and those who worship him will

prosper. It is difficult not to read this libretto as once again asserting at some level Britain's divine chosenness and the superiority of its established religion to that of its larger European neighbours.

For the 1749 season, though, Handel produced two oratorios that were of quite a different character from those of the previous two seasons, and which marked a shift away from public and political subjects in his oratorios. The two for 1749 were *Solomon* and *Susanna*, and the first of the two to be considered is *Solomon*, inasmuch as it might be regarded as a transitional work between the earlier oratorios with their focus on national political and religious intrigue, and the more personal subjects of the later oratorios.

Solomon was composed in the summer of 1748 for its 1749 Lenten premiere,[1] and although it differs in both structure and content from the militaristic oratorios that were a response to the Jacobite rebellion, it is, as Paul Lang remarks, 'at least an epilogue to them.'[2] Unlike its immediate predecessors with their martial themes and their developing plots, *Solomon* is a display of royal qualities, a piece of pageantry with a political message. Its three parts, each of which is effectively self-contained, illustrate three aspects of Solomon's (and by extension George II's) reign: his appropriate and strong religious stance together with his happy marriage; his administration of justice; and his external relations. As a celebration of George's reign, *Solomon* can be seen as depicting the blessedness of the status quo that has been arrived at by defeating the Jacobite threat to the English throne, and it is in this sense that the oratorio is an epilogue to the two previous seasons' oratorios: it is the 'happily ever after' that reassures the people of the wisdom of defeating the Jacobites, and reasserts the right of the Hanoverian monarch to the English throne. However, what is of interest for present purposes is not so much the notion that the oratorio was intended to celebrate George's reign, but rather the way in which the biblical text was adapted in order to facilitate such a celebration, and this is what will form the focus of the following discussion.

As is well known, there are two depictions of Solomon in the Old Testament. The earlier in terms of both its age and its position in the canon is the account in 1 Kings 1–11, in which Solomon virtually usurps the throne from his elder brother Adonijah (1 Kgs. 1), is granted divine wisdom that he demonstrates by deciding between two harlots fighting over custody of a baby (1 Kgs. 3), establishes himself as the wisest and richest king on earth (1 Kgs. 4), builds the Temple (1 Kgs. 5–7), receives a visit from the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs. 10), and ultimately falls into apostasy because of his weakness for foreign women (1 Kgs. 11). The later, in 1 Chronicles 28–2 Chronicles 9, depicts Solomon as having being chosen by David (and God) to be the divinely appointed builder of the Temple (1 Chron. 28), and

[1] Although it was completed before *Susanna*, *Solomon* was the second of the two oratorios to be performed in the 1749 season, being performed on 17, 20, and 22 March 1748/9 while *Susanna* was performed on 10, 15, 17, and 22 February (Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959, repr. 2000), 526, 546, 638). The anonymous libretto of *Solomon* was published as *Solomon. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Set to Musick by Mr. Handel* (London: J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper, 1749).

[2] Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 464. Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio. II. The Oratorio in the Baroque Era: Protestant Germany and England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 319–20, makes a similar comment.

although Solomon's grant of wisdom from God and the visit of the Queen of Sheba both appear in Chronicles (2 Chron. 1, 9), other aspects of his reign as it appears in 1 Kings are conspicuously absent. By contrast with the scheming and the bloody reprisals surrounding Solomon's succession in 1 Kings, in Chronicles Solomon is explicitly designated by David as the heir to the throne, and there is never any doubt about his right to succeed, nor is there any challenge from other potential claimants (1 Chron. 28.1–10, 29.20–5). Although God is shown to grant Solomon extraordinary wisdom (2 Chron. 1.7–12), the tale of the two harlots on whom Solomon demonstrates his wisdom (1 Kgs. 3.16–28) is absent; and perhaps most notably of all, there is no mention of Solomon's vast harem and resultant apostasy. Instead, the depiction in Chronicles focuses strongly on Solomon as the divinely designated successor to David whose religious devotion is unwavering and whose primary task is to build the Temple.

Modern scholarship has for a number of years recognized that the account of the monarchy in Chronicles has its own narrative integrity and theological agenda, and that, contrary to the name given to it in the Septuagint—'Paralipomena', or 'the things left out'—it is not just a collection of odds and ends that were omitted from Kings for some reason. Rather, it is a distinctive presentation that pictures the monarchy and its institutions in terms that have their own internal coherence,[3] a coherence which cannot be appreciated if Chronicles is treated simply as a supplement to Kings. However, eighteenth-century Bible readers, whether lay or professional, had no such conception of Kings and Chronicles as separate works of literature that were each to be appreciated on their own terms. Rather, both were viewed as factual accounts of the same time period, which needed to be read together in order to produce a synthesis and a fuller account of events than either work could give on its own.[4] This approach is evidenced in the histories of the world and histories of the Old Testament that date from the first half of the eighteenth century, which intersperse details from the briefer account in Chronicles with the fuller account in Kings in order to write their histories of Israel's monarchic period. So when the libretto of *Solomon* is examined, it is no surprise to see the anonymous librettist using incidents from

[3] An early exponent of this type of approach was Martin Noth, in the second part of his essay *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, published in 1943 (ET *The Chronicler's History*, trans. H. G. M. Williamson, JSOTSup, 50 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987)).

[4] See, for example, the comments of Simon Patrick in *A Commentary on the Historical Books of the Old Testament, Volume II*, 3rd edn. (London, 1727). In the Preface to his commentary on 1 Chronicles (first published in 1706), Patrick says, '[Ezra] having wrote the Books of the Kings in the Time of the Captivity, he found at their Return more ancient Registers, containing larger Accounts of several Transactions; which he thought good to add to what he had before written, to make the History more compleat:... those things are here supplied, which were omitted in other Books of holy Scripture, especially in the Books of the Kings; as other things are here amplified and enlarged: Others explained and made more clear' (506). Similar views had already been expressed by Hugo Grotius and Matthew Poole in their respective books of annotations on the Old Testament (Grotius, *Opera Omnia Theologica in Tres Tomos Divisa*. I. *Annotationes ad Vetus Testamentum* (London, 1679), 175; Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Scripture* (London, 1683), on 1 Chron.). The view that the name 'Paralipomena' points to the author of Chronicles having gathered material that had been omitted from Kings was first expressed by the fifth-century bishop Theodoret of Cyrus in his commentary on the first book of Chronicles. See Ralph W. Klein, 'Chronicles, Book of 1–2', in *ABD*, i.992–1002 (992).

both biblical accounts in order to create his own version of the Solomon narrative.[5]

Although the libretto draws on both 1 Kings and 1–2 Chronicles in its presentation of Solomon, there are two major ways in which it is arguably closer to the Kings account than to the version in Chronicles. The first is in the libretto's character as more of a pageant than a narrative, which, like the account in 1 Kings, presents a description of aspects of Solomon's reign rather than a chronicle of it—snapshots of Solomon, so to speak. But a second, even clearer reminiscence of the account in 1 Kings is the libretto's use of female figures. A striking feature of the Solomon narrative in 1 Kings is its women, who appear at the beginning and end of the description of Solomon's reign. At the beginning there is the daughter of Pharaoh, whom Solomon marries (1 Kgs. 3.1), followed closely by the two harlots (1 Kgs. 3.16–28). Towards the end there is the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs. 10.1–13), and finally there are all Solomon's wives and concubines (1 Kgs. 11.1–8), who appear as a postscript to the description of the reign proper. By contrast, as already noted, 2 Chronicles completely omits the episode of the harlots and any reference to Solomon's wives and concubines, and Pharaoh's daughter is only mentioned in an aside after the account of the Temple dedication (2 Chron. 8.11). The libretto, however, is divided into three parts, each of which uses a female figure to illustrate its particular theme: Part I, following the Temple dedication, concerns itself with Solomon's relationship with his queen, the daughter of Pharaoh; Part II depicts Solomon's judgement on the two harlots; and Part III is centred around the visit from the Queen of Sheba. At one level this is not really surprising, since in the biblical sources the main dramatic characters are unquestionably the harlots and the Queen of Sheba, and they are the ones that would most readily suggest themselves for inclusion in the libretto of a dramatic oratorio. They are the only ones in the biblical accounts (apart from God) who interact directly with Solomon; everything else is narrative, and there is no direct interaction between other characters and the king.[6] Nevertheless, it is intriguing that in the libretto each aspect of Solomon's reign is portrayed by means of a female figure (or figures),

[5] Elements that reflect the Chronistic account rather than the Kings version include the focus on the Temple—the libretto opens with the Temple being dedicated (I.1, pp. 3–4), and it is one of the items that evokes the admiration of the Queen of Sheba (III.1, pp. 15 and 17); the chorus of priests who sing praise to the Lord and play musical instruments (I.1, p. 3; cf. 2 Chron. 5.11–14); the heavenly fire that descends on the sacrifice in answer to Solomon's prayer before the Temple (I.1, p. 4; 2 Chron. 7.1) and the Israelites responding by singing God's praise (I.1, p. 4; 2 Chron. 7.3); the inclusion of a Levite as a speaking character (in Chronicles, Levites are much more prominent than they are in Kings); and Zadok's reference to David being prevented by God from building the Temple because 'his Hands were stain'd with Blood' (III.1, p. 18; 1 Chron. 28.3). The duet between Solomon and the first Harlot also has a Chronistic flavour, imparted by the inclusion of the words 'For his Mercy endureth for ever' as one of Solomon's lines (II.3. p. 13); this is a refrain that occurs several times in 1 and 2 Chron., including three times in connection with the Temple dedication (2 Chron. 5.13; 7.3, 6), but appears nowhere in Kings.

[6] Hiram of Tyre might be regarded as an exception to this, in that he communicates with Solomon about supplies for the building the Temple, but this is done via messengers and there is no face-to-face interaction between the two men (1 Kgs. 5.1–12; 2 Chron. 2.1–16). Later on in 1 Kgs. he appears to speak one sentence to Solomon directly, expressing his dissatisfaction with the cities that Solomon gave him in exchange for building materials supplied for the Temple (1 Kgs. 9.10–14), but this is hardly the basis for a dramatic incident, and certainly not something that the librettist would want to use in a work that is intended to glorify Solomon.

raising the question of precisely how such a choice of characters and their portrayal contributes to serving the libretto's purpose of glorifying George II via a glorified Solomon. But if part of the explanation for the structure of the libretto is in its borrowing from the biblical text, this raises the question of why the *biblical* author gave such prominence to these women. So in order to understand how the women function in the libretto, it will first be considered how they might be functioning in the biblical text.

THE WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF KINGS

There are several observations that can be made about the female characters in 1 Kings 3–11 as a group, the first of which is that they are all nameless. Two of them—the daughter of Pharaoh and the Queen of Sheba—might appear to have names, but these are designations of social role and status rather than personal names, a fact that becomes clear when their designation is compared with that of Hiram, king of Tyre. Hiram is given a personal name as well as a social role/status designation (1 Kgs. 5.1, 9.11), and more often than not he is referred to by his personal name rather than by his role designation. The same is true of Solomon, who is sometimes called 'Solomon', sometimes 'the king', and sometimes 'king Solomon' (e.g. 1 Kgs. 4.1, 27; 5.13, 6.2, 8.5). But none of the women is ever designated by anything other than her social role; the implication is that it is their social role and status that matters, not their identity as individuals, and they therefore function as types within the narrative rather than as specific characters.[7]

This observation is strengthened by the fact that all the women in 1 Kings 3–11 have a second feature in common: they are either foreign or 'strange'.[8] Pharaoh's daughter, the Queen of Sheba, and Solomon's wives and concubines are foreign, and the harlots are 'strange', presumably Israelite but liminal figures, outcasts from the mainstream of respectable womanhood. All, too, are presented as being sexually available—Pharaoh's daughter becomes Solomon's bride, as do the hordes of other wives and concubines; the harlots are sexually available by definition; and the story of the Queen of Sheba makes no mention of a King of

[7] Adele Reinhartz, 'Anonymous Women and the Collapse of the Monarchy: A Study in Narrative Technique', in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, FCB, 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 43–65, concludes from her discussion of anonymous women in the narratives of Samuel and Kings (including the Solomon narrative) that the anonymity of women characters serves to deflect attention from them as individuals, leading them to being viewed as types, and that it also directs the reader's attention to the male characters with whom the anonymous women interact (63–4). Both of these conclusions are true of the Solomon narrative in 1 Kgs.

[8] The concept of the 'strange woman' (Hebrew אִשָּׁה זָרָה or נָכְרִיָּה, [*iššâ zārâ* or *nokriyyâ*] appears primarily in Prov. 2.16–19, 5.3–23, and 7. She is represented as a figure of sexual temptation who displays complete and utter disregard for her own marriage and is simply out to allure men for sex. There is also an association between rampant female sexuality and foreignness, since the term נָכְרִיָּה [*nokriyyâ*], used in Prov. 2.16 and 7.5 as part of the 'strange woman' rhetoric, literally means 'foreign woman'. In several places in the Old Testament foreign women are represented as a threat to both the sexual and the religious integrity of Israelite men, since they embody the temptation to both sexual impurity and idolatry. See, for example, the narrative in Num. 25 about the Israelites and the Midianite women, in which the Israelites are drawn into apostasy by consorting with foreign women.

Sheba, and could be—indeed, has been—taken to imply that Solomon satisfied her sexual desires as well as any others that she might have had (cf. 1 Kgs. 10.13).[9] So all of the women are personifications of the threat that uncontrolled female sexuality represents, which in turn is a personification of otherness; and it is how Solomon deals with them in their otherness that determines the picture of him as wise or foolish.[10] The harlots and the Queen of Sheba are used to validate Solomon's reputation for wisdom; in the case of the harlots this is done by his ability to decide the apparently intractable case between them (1 Kgs. 3.23–8), and in the case of the Queen of Sheba by his ability to answer all her questions (1 Kgs. 10.1–3). The daughter of Pharaoh seems at first to validate his wisdom, in that his marriage to her seals a diplomatic relationship with the neighbouring superpower Egypt (1 Kgs. 3.1), but later on this marriage is listed with all the others that lead Solomon into apostasy (1 Kgs. 11.1–3), and it is not clear whether the writer views Pharaoh's daughter as one of the culprits in leading Solomon astray. But there is no mistaking the foolishness of the other marriages, because they lead to apostasy, thereby provoking God's anger which results in political schism after Solomon's death (1 Kgs. 11.9–13; cf. 1 Kgs. 12.1–20).

These nameless women are thus the barometers of Solomon's wisdom and his power and control over his own kingdom. As long as he is in control of them, the kingdom flourishes; but once they gain the upper hand, the kingdom starts to degenerate, as is shown by God raising up enemies to harass Solomon once Solomon has become embroiled with foreign wives and concubines (1 Kgs. 11). Nor are these enemies simply external foes; one of them is apparently related by marriage to Solomon's father-in-law Pharaoh (1 Kgs. 11.14–22), and another of them is one of Solomon's own trusted servants (1 Kgs. 11.26–40).

[9] The idea that Solomon and Sheba had a sexual liaison that resulted in the birth of a child to the Queen appears in the medieval Jewish work *The Stories of Ben Sira* (also known as the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*). According to this pseudonymous work, the child born from the liaison was the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who was responsible for destroying the Jerusalem Temple in 587 BCE. For details of the narrative and a translation of the text, as well as other Jewish and Muslim traditions about the Queen of Sheba, see Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 19–21, 167–8. The idea of a child resulting from a liaison between Solomon and Sheba is also an important element in Ethiopian national identity. According to the fourteenth-century Ethiopian national epic *Kebra Nagast* ('Glory of the Kings'), when the child born to Sheba had grown up he went to visit Solomon and on his return to Ethiopia brought back the Ark of the Covenant, thereby transferring the legitimacy of the Davidic monarchy to Ethiopia. The narrative was used to validate the claims of the recently founded Ethiopian Solomonic imperial dynasty, which ended with the death of the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1975. For more detail of the Ethiopian tradition, see Edward Ullendorff, 'The Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian Tradition', in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba* (London: Phaidon, 1974), 104–14. For other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions about Solomon and Sheba, see Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti, *Three Mirrors for Two Biblical Ladies: Susanna and the Queen of Sheba in the Eyes of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006).

[10] Compare the exhortations in Prov. 1–9 about avoiding the strange woman and embracing Lady Wisdom, especially in the light of the fact that the book of Proverbs is traditionally attributed to Solomon. For a discussion of how the motifs of wisdom and 'strange women' intersect in the Solomon narrative, see Claudia V. Camp, 'Reading Solomon as a Woman', in ead., *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible*, JSOTSup, 320/GCT, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 144–86.

Given this general assessment of the place of the women in the Solomon narrative in 1 Kings 3–11, then, it is now possible to comment more specifically upon the biblical portrayal of those who appear in the libretto of the oratorio *Solomon*. The first is the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kgs. 3.1; 7.8; 9.16, 24), who is mentioned in a mere four separate verses. Identified only in relation to the men in her life—her father Pharaoh and her husband Solomon—and the object of a diplomatic marriage that seals Solomon's relationships with Egypt, she is the classic example of a woman who functions as a unit of currency between men, and who is defined solely in relation to her male guardians. In the biblical narrative, she has no power as a subject; rather she is shown as entirely passive. She never speaks, and she simply goes where she is sent, first in terms of whom she marries, and secondly in terms of where she lives. Solomon builds her a house and she goes to it, away from the city of David (and presumably from the seat of power) (1 Kgs. 9.24); Pharaoh gives her the city of Gezer, which he has captured (1 Kgs. 9.16), in a gesture that is seen as problematic for Solomon by many commentators.[11] In the end, she is grouped together with the foreign women that Solomon loved (1 Kgs. 11.1) and who became his downfall because they would not submit to the authority of him and his God.

By contrast with the daughter of Pharaoh, the two harlots are much stronger characters. It is interesting to note that there are multiple versions of this story in cultures around the world, where two women fight over a baby and in the face of a judgement that involves potential harm to the child the real mother pleads for the child to be given to the other woman so that the child may be unharmed.[12] The folklorish character of the story is evident not only in the anonymity of the two harlots but in that of the king, who throughout these verses (1 Kgs. 3.16–28) is never referred to by name. However, his anonymity here is counterbalanced by his abundant identification elsewhere, unlike the harlots who are nowhere identified and who do not appear again in the narrative. So whereas for Solomon the incident illustrates a single facet of his multifaceted character—that of the king who offers justice to all of his subjects—the entire character of the harlots is determined by this single incident.

In several of its other versions worldwide, the story is about one man's two wives, whose relative positions are dependent upon their ability to bear children, and this raises the question as to why in the biblical version the women are depicted as harlots. One answer is that it provides a reason why they appeal to the king for judgement. If they were two wives of the same husband, or even wives of different husbands, then presumably the husband(s) would be responsible for sorting out the dispute. But harlots are independent women; they have no permanent male presence within their household who could act as an arbitrator,

[11] Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 124, gives a good summary of what makes this gift problematic: 'It is startling to learn that Pharaoh's army is in Israel (Gezer is just twenty miles from Jerusalem!), and that he is able to capture a city that apparently neither David nor Solomon has yet taken. It is also discomfiting that Pharaoh gives this city not to Solomon but to his own daughter as a "going-away present." A strategically significant site remains, symbolically at least, in non-Israelite hands. In the context of 9.7 and 9.10–14, the case of Gezer is yet another presage that Israel will someday be cut off from the land.'

[12] Hugo Gressmann, 'Das solomonische Urteil', *Deutsche Rundschau*, 130 (1907), 212–28, lists over twenty variations of the narrative. Paul G. Brewster, 'Solomon's Judgment, Mahosadha, and the Hoei-Kan-Li', *Folklore Studies*, 21 (1962), 236–40, describes Indian and Chinese versions of the story that resemble the Hebrew narrative.

nor are there any other men who could sort out the dispute by identifying the children that they have fathered. Under these circumstances, the harlots have no other recourse but to appeal to the king. But another reason for depicting the women as harlots is that identifying them as such complicates their case considerably, in a number of ways. First, it removes the expectation of witnesses that could help to sort out the dispute, by explaining why there are no fathers to identify the children, why there is no-one else who lives in the house, and why no-one else (particularly no other man) is there at the time—men would not go to a harlot who was in the advanced stages of pregnancy. But secondly, it typecasts the women as 'harlotrous', that is, as being completely without scruples and lacking in commitment to anything except their own interests.[13] This is perhaps a light in which to understand the detail that both women are said to have given birth to sons. In a patriarchal society such as ancient Israel, sons would have a value as future protection for their mothers that daughters would not; hence, the loss of a son would arguably be much more of an issue for a single mother than the loss of a daughter. So the reason for both harlots claiming the living child as their own is not because either of them is concerned about the child per se, but because they are concerned about their own future, for which a son would be seen as some kind of security. This is what makes the case such a good opportunity for Solomon to demonstrate his wisdom: with no witnesses and by implication no guarantee of honesty from the self-interested plaintiffs, it appears utterly intractable.

The 'harlot' type, then, is used to set the stage for a supreme demonstration of Solomon's judicial wisdom. His approach to the case is reminiscent of Alexander the Great and the Gordian knot: instead of trying to unravel the issue by orthodox means, he simply slices through it by brandishing a sword, relying on the power of his threat in order to bring about a resolution to the otherwise unresolvable conflict.[14] Like a slap for squabbling children, the spectre of male violence puts an end to the female attempt to confuse and manipulate, as one harlot remains true to harlot-type and demands that the child be divided, but the other cries out in horror and is transformed into the maternal type: self-sacrificing as opposed to self-interested, and concerned for nothing so much as for the good of her child.[15] Women on their own are bound to squabble, the incident seems to say, and it takes a man to sort things out.[16] It is notable that at the end of the narrative the

[13] Phyllis Bird, 'The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts', in ead., *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 197–218 (217).

[14] Anne C. Dailey, 'The Judgment of Women', in Christina Büchmann and Celina Spiegel (eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (London: Pandora, 1995), 142–9, 339 (148–9), argues that Solomon's raised sword is a tool for silencing the women and solving the dispute quickly and expediently, but in taking this action he 'erases the fullness and complexity of their lives' (149) rather than taking the time to listen with care to what they have to say, which is what is required in order truly to show wise understanding in judgement. Indeed, Solomon's use of the sword is hardly unprecedented. Despite his name, meaning 'man of peace' in popular etymology (cf. 1 Chron. 22.9), on his way to securing the throne for himself he has ordered the execution of Adonijah his elder brother, Joab his father's army commander, and Shimei the Benjaminite (1 Kgs. 2). Given that he seems used to getting his way by the sword, it is not surprising that a sword appears when he has to judge between his squabbling subjects.

[15] Bird, 'Harlot as Heroine', 217–18.

[16] Compare the words of Maricel Mena López, 'Wise Women in I Kings 3–11', in Sean Freyne and Ellen van Wolde (eds.), *The Many Voices of the Bible*, Concilium, 2002/1 (London: SCM Press, 2002),

focus shifts abruptly to Israel's, not the women's, reaction to Solomon's judgement (1 Kgs. 3.28),[17] indicating that the whole point of the incident is in order to demonstrate to the world how wise Solomon is.

The Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs. 10.1–10, 13) has elements in her depiction of both the daughter of Pharaoh and the harlots. Like the daughter of Pharaoh, she is a foreigner of royal status from a region to the south of Israel; like the harlots, she is an independent woman who comes to Solomon of her own volition with her own purpose in mind, and is articulate in making her feelings known to him. She is wealthy, powerful, and intelligent; but she is ultimately no match for Solomon and his pomp,[18] which overwhelms her and leaves her breathless (1 Kgs. 10.5). However, she recovers enough breath to sing his praises and to load him with gifts, which express her sense of awe and gratitude to him; and he magnanimously responds by giving her whatever she wants out of his bounty (1 Kgs. 10.13). With her visit, Solomon's status as the wise king *par excellence* is confirmed. He has now trumped both the lowest of the Israelite low in their efforts to confuse him and the highest of the foreign high in her efforts to outwit him. In the biblical narrative these two incidents—the harlots and the Queen of Sheba—function rather like book-ends, enclosing the report of Solomon's successful reign with paradigmatic displays of his wisdom in relation to both home affairs and foreign policy.

In 1 Kings, then, the women who are the main characters to interact directly with Solomon are employed to represent elements that Solomon in some way overcomes; they are types rather than developed characters, and their purpose is to allow him to demonstrate his wisdom and success. In other words, they are used to make him look good; their function is to be bested by him, and as long as he is besting them his kingdom prospers. The question is now whether the same can be said of the way that these women are presented in the libretto.

THE WOMEN OF *SOLOMON*

As noted, each of the three parts of the libretto has a woman or women at its heart. The first part focuses on Solomon's wife, the daughter of Pharaoh; the second part

24–32: 'The text organizes [the women's] relationship in such a way that the women are incapable of finding a solution. In order to legitimize the power of the man, their relationship is made into one of rivalry, chaos, darkness' (24). The motif of rivalry between women appears several times in the Old Testament, usually in a situation where two women are married to the same man and one wife is fertile but the other barren. Examples are Sarah and Hagar, the wife and concubine of Abraham (Gen. 16, 21); Leah and Rachel, the wives of Jacob (Gen. 29–30); and Hannah and Peninnah, the wives of Elkanah (1 Sam. 1).

[17] Note that when the people of Israel hear of Solomon's judgment, their reaction is to fear him (1 Kgs. 3.28; Heb. וַיִּרְאוּ מִפְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ [*wayyir'û mipp^{e}nê hammelek*]), ostensibly because the wisdom of God is within him, but maybe also because they understand from his reaction to this case the lengths to which he is willing to go in order to satisfy the requirements of 'justice' in his kingdom. See Jerome T. Walsh, 'The Characterization of Solomon in First Kings 1–5', *CBQ*, 57 (1995), 471–93 (489).

[18] López comments on 1 Kgs. 10.3, where the king is shown to surpass the queen in understanding, 'I see here a patriarchal rhetoric that has to include control of women's bodies and understanding to reaffirm itself' ('Wise Women', 27).

on the two harlots; and the third part on the Queen of Sheba. An initial observation about how the women are presented is suggestive: as is the case in the biblical text, none of the women is named except the Queen of Sheba, and even though she is given the name 'Nicaule' in the list of characters,[19] when she actually appears in Part III she is referred to throughout in the libretto as 'Queen of Sheba'. The implication is that like their biblical counterparts these women too are representative types rather than genuine characters;[20] and a closer look at the way the women are portrayed confirms what their anonymity suggests.

a. Pharaoh's daughter

The female foil to Solomon in Part I is Pharaoh's daughter, Solomon's queen, who appears immediately after Solomon has had his dedication of the Temple validated by divine fire from heaven. This juxtaposition of Queen and Temple in itself contributes to a positive view of Solomon, because it negates the potential for criticism of the marriage on the grounds that the Queen is a foreigner who might cause him to apostatize. Here is a man who is devout and pious, and who despite having married an Egyptian princess is still dedicated to and approved by his God. This may reflect the tradition, alive and well in the eighteenth century, that Pharaoh's daughter became a proselyte and so was not one of those who lured Solomon away from the true faith. Robert Millar, for example, in his *History of the church under the Old Testament* described the daughter of Pharaoh as a convert to the true religion, as a type of the Gentiles being brought into the church alongside the Jews.[21] This concept doubtless contributes to the effusive portrayal of the pair together in the libretto, and is a positive rereading of the biblical text which is at best neutral and at worst negative, particularly in Kings where Pharaoh's daughter

[19] The name 'Nicaule' for the Queen of Sheba is taken from Josephus, *Antiquities*, viii.158.

[20] In fact, the only character apart from Solomon who is named consistently is Zadok, the high priest. The symbolic nature of the oratorio has been remarked upon by other scholars. Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 515, argues that Solomon himself is a symbol, 'the regal personification of his age', and that several of the other characters (the Queen, Zadok, the Queen of Sheba) have partly symbolic value. From a different perspective, Klaus Hortschansky, '*Solomon* – ein symbolisches Oratorium?', *Händel-Jahrbuch*, 52 (2006), 161–72, suggests that Handel's musical borrowings in the oratorio hint at a Christological significance for its portrayal of Solomon.

[21] Robert Millar, *The History of the church under the Old Testament, From the Creation of the World: wherein also The Affairs and Learning of Heathen Nations before the Birth of Christ, and the State of the Jews from the Babylonish Captivity to the present Time, are particularly considered* (Edinburgh, 1730), 164. The tradition that Pharaoh's daughter was a proselyte to the Israelite religion is noted by other commentators; see Grotius, *Annotationes*, 145; Poole, *Annotations*, on 1 Kgs. 3.1; Edward Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: being the two Books of Samuel, and the two Books of Kings* (Oxford, 1726), section 38, 5–6; Simon Patrick, *A Commentary, Volume II*, 368; Samuel Humphreys, *The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testament, recited at large: and illustrated with Critical and Explanatory Annotations* (London, 1735–7), 922; Thomas Stackhouse, *A New History of the Holy Bible, from the Beginning of the World, to the Establishment of Christianity*, 2nd edn. (London, 1742), 756–7, 775. In Jewish tradition, the idea was put forward by the medieval rabbis David Kimchi (1160–1235) and Levi ben Gerson (1288–1344); see Shaye J. D. Cohen, 'Solomon and the Daughter of Pharaoh: Intermarriage, Conversion, and the Impurity of Women', *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 16–17 (1984–5), 23–37 (31).

is associated with the other foreign wives and concubines who cause Solomon's descent into apostasy (1 Kgs. 11.1–2).

The Queen's presence in the libretto is much more developed than it is in the biblical text, where she is merely glimpsed; there, she neither speaks nor is spoken to, and there is no indication of what kind of relationship she and Solomon may have had. In the libretto, however, there is an extended amorous exchange between the pair that is doubtless inspired by the Song of Songs; although direct verbal reminiscences between the Song and the libretto are few,[22] the Song was held by some to be Solomon's wedding-song to his bride,[23] and so the librettist appears to have borrowed the concept if not the words.[24]

In the course of their exchange, the Queen has two airs, two recitatives totalling eight lines, and one duet with Solomon; for his part, Solomon has three recitatives totalling fourteen lines, one air, and one duet with the Queen. In terms of the amount of speech they have, therefore, they are pretty evenly matched; indeed, the Queen gets to sing more about Solomon than he does about her. But there are some interesting differences in content between the two characters' words. The first difference is that the Queen is quite overt in her expressions of love for Solomon, whereas his comments about her are far more generalized and much less explicitly complimentary to her than hers are to him. The nearest that he gets to actually praising her is in his half of the duet that they sing together:

> Myrtle Grove, or rosy Shade,
> Breathing Odors thro' the Glade
> To refresh the Village Maid,
> Yields in Sweets, my Queen, to thee. (I.2, p. 6)

The only other directly amorous expression offered by Solomon is in a short recitative that is taken from Song of Songs 2.10, 13b:

> My blooming Fair, come, come away,
> My Love admits of no Delay. (I.2, p. 7)

This is followed by his air, 'Haste to the Cedar Grove', which makes no mention at all of the Queen, instead referring allusively to the grove 'Where fragrant Spices

[22] The most obvious reminiscence is in Solomon's recitative, 'My blooming Fair, come, come away,/ My Love admits of no Delay' (I.2, p. 7; cf. Song of Songs 2.10, 13b). The nature imagery that is particularly prevalent in Solomon's words may also owe something to the Song—the cedars, spices, turtles (i.e. turtle-doves), and tinkling streams that are mentioned in Solomon's air 'Haste to the Cedar Grove' (I.2, p. 7) all appear in the Song (1.17, 2.12, 4.14–15, 5.15, 6.2).

[23] See, for example, Humphreys, *Sacred Books*, 922; Stackhouse, *A New History*, 756; and in the seventeenth century, Grotius, *Annotationes*, 267, and Poole, *Annotations*, on 1 Kgs. 3.1 and in the introduction to Canticles. This interpretation, which is characteristic of Christian rather than Jewish exegesis, seems to have originated with Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428 CE), and was revived by the reformer Sébastien Castellion (1515–63) in 1547. See Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB, 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 119, 126. For a more recent view on the relationship between Pharaoh's daughter and the Song, see Victor Sasson, 'King Solomon and the Dark Lady in the Song of Songs', *VT*, 39 (1989), 407–14, who argues that the couple who are portrayed in the poem are Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter.

[24] The tradition of Solomonic authorship for the Song is reflected in another contemporary work, namely, Edward Moore, *Solomon, A Serenata* (London, 1749), which is a paraphrase of the Song of Songs set to music by William Boyce.

bloom,/And am'rous Turtles love,/Beneath the pleasing Gloom.' Compared with the Queen's recitative and air, this is weak indeed. She says:

> (recit.)
> When thou art absent from my Sight,
> The Court I shun and loath the Light.
> (air)
> With thee th'unsheltered Moor I'd tread,
> Nor once of Fate complain;
> Tho' burning Suns flash'd round my Head
> And cleav'd the barren Plain.
> Thy lovely Form alone I prize,
> 'Tis thou that canst impart
> Continual Pleasure to my Eyes,
> And Gladness to my Heart. (I.2, p. 7)

Solomon talks with puppy-dog enthusiasm about the pretty place where they might go together, but the Queen talks earnestly about Solomon as the very meaning of her life.

The second difference between Solomon's words and those of the Queen is in the imagery that they use. In her first recitative, the Queen describes Solomon as 'The brightest Star that gilds the East', and tells him, 'No Joy I know beneath the Sun/But what's compriz'd in *Solomon*' (I.2, p. 6). In their duet, while Solomon compares her to a fragrant grove of trees, she compares him to the daylight by which a pilgrim who has lost his way in the darkness can reorientate himself:

> Welcome as the Dawn of Day
> To the Pilgrim on his Way,
> Whom the Darkness caus'd to stray
> Is my lovely King to me. (I.2, p. 6)

So Solomon is depicted by the Queen as the vital element without which her life is in chaos, whereas Solomon's depiction of her makes her out to be sweet and desirable but gives no indication that she is essential to him.

In her characterization, therefore, the Queen functions as a verbalization of praises for Solomon, directing all the attention away from herself towards him. This is particularly noticeable in her first air, in which she sings,

> Bless'd the Day when first my Eyes
> Saw the wisest of the Wise!
> Bless'd the Day when I was led
> To ascend the Nuptial Bed!
> But completely bless'd the Day,
> On my Bosom as he lay,
> When he call'd my Charms divine,
> Vowing to be only mine. (I.2, pp. 5–6)

Here the Queen is characterized according to the male fantasy of a woman who is not only the passive and willing recipient of male attentions, but who counts herself incomparably fortunate to be such. Despite the ostensible mutuality of their passion, the overall picture of the relationship between Solomon and the

Queen clearly puts Solomon in a position of dominance, and emphasizes his exceptional qualities rather than hers. She regards herself as blessed to have been led into marriage with this man who is wise, faithful, the source of all her joy, the literal light of her life, her strong protector for whom she would do anything, and breathtakingly handsome. He, for his part, calls her 'my Queen, my wedded Love' (I.2, p. 5), 'fair Inhabitant of Nile' (I.2, p. 6), and 'my blooming Fair' (I.2, p. 7), promises her an elaborate palace as a sign of his 'Tenderness' (I.2, p. 5), and calls her sweeter than a fragrant grove (I.2, p. 6). But this lacks the outright besottedness of her lines about him, and ultimately she is just a pretty girl to whom he is kind in a rather patronizing sort of way that says more about the image he wants to project than it does about his feelings for her.[25]

b. The harlots

As was true of the daughter of Pharaoh in Part I, the judgement between the harlots in Part II is only introduced after an initial element that at first sight seems unconnected with it. Following an opening chorus blessing Solomon and praising his piety, Solomon describes in recitative how he was led by God to the throne along a route that involved killing three of his opponents, including his half-brother Adonijah. Commentators have seen this recitative as either a concession to the inviolability of (unsavoury) sacred history[26] or as the librettist's deliberate slight against Solomon;[27] but there is more to it than that. After the recitative about killing his opponents, Solomon sings an air praising God, and then a Levite tells him in recitative,

> Great Prince, thy Resolution's just,
> He never fails, in Heav'n who puts his Trust;
> True Worth consists not in the Pride of State;
> 'Tis Virtue only makes a Monarch great. (II.1, p. 9)

The Levite then sings an air:

> Thrice bless'd that wise discerning King
> Who can each Passion tame,
> And mount on Virtue's Eagle Wing
> To everlasting Fame. (II.1, p. 9)

By showing the killings in the context of God's guidance, Solomon's pious wisdom, and the Levite's declaration that such an attitude is the way to virtue, the acts of political murder are transformed into acts of justice that are undertaken only because there is no other way of dealing with such evil people. And it is certain that these victims were evil; in Solomon's recitative, they are all described in terms that leave no doubt about their guilt:

[25] Assuming that the idea for this episode was based on the Song of Songs, it has not stayed particularly close to the biblical text, where both the man and the woman express their love for each other in quite explicit terms, and both parties are equally emphatic about their feelings.

[26] Dean, *Dramatic Oratorios*, 513.

[27] Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 315. See also the next note.

Strengthen'd by him, each Foe with horror fled,
Then impious *Joab* at the Altar bled;
The Death he oft deserv'd, stern *Shimei* found;
And *Adonijah* sunk beneath the Wound;
Forc'd by his Crimes, I spoke a Brother's Doom,
Ah may his Vices perish in his Tomb! (II.1, pp. 8–9)

Putting Adonijah, the half-brother, in the last and thereby most emphatic place in the list (in the biblical text he is the first of the three to be removed) underlines the rigour in Solomon's exercise of justice: his resolve to execute just punishment is not weakened even by blood ties when a man commits crimes worthy of death. Solomon is shown as regretting Adonijah's death, but as knowing that he has no choice but to steel himself for it, and the audience is clearly meant to sympathize with Solomon rather than with Adonijah.[28] By taking this action, Solomon has thus demonstrated that he can indeed 'each Passion tame', and that justice alone and the facts of the case are what will sway him, rather than any emotional concerns, and so he can be relied upon to do what is right in a highly charged emotional situation.

Against this background, the harlots provide Solomon with an opportunity to demonstrate his facility of impartial judgment. There is certainly plenty of strong emotion here; when the harlots are introduced by the attendant, one is said to be in tears and the other is 'fierce and threat'ning loud' (II.2, p. 10). This characterization of the two continues throughout their interaction with the king. The first harlot is deferential and grief-stricken. She addresses Solomon as 'son of David'; this reflects the opening of Part II where the chorus sing, 'Live, live for ever, pious David's Son' (II.1, p. 8), and is an implicit appeal to Solomon to act as the true son of his pious father. In her opening recitative the harlot begins and ends by

[28] Smith's comments about this aspect of the libretto miss the point. She argues that the librettist had no need to refer to the three political assassinations at all because an alternative version of events was available in Chronicles, and so the inclusion of the assassinations is a deliberate compositional choice that gives a negative tone to the portrayal of Solomon (*Handel's Oratorios*, 314–15). However, as already noted, the versions of events in Chronicles and Kings were not seen as alternatives but as complementary; even though the assassinations do not appear in Chronicles, the assumption would still be that they had taken place, because Chronicles was only supplementing the main account in Kings with details that are not mentioned in Kings. In fact, when the 1 Kings version is interpreted in the light of the Chronicles version, it makes Adonijah's attempt to claim the throne look much worse, because according to Chronicles David has made a public announcement prior to his death that Solomon is God's choice to succeed him (1 Chron. 28–9). This means that Adonijah's actions are not just a genuine attempt to claim what he not unreasonably believes is his due, but a positively treasonable attack on Solomon's divine right to the kingship. Under these circumstances, it is no more than would be expected to hear about the death of those who have opposed Solomon on his way to the top. Eighteenth-century commentators offer considerable justification for Solomon's assassination of the three men, and it is not regarded as a blot on his character, but rather a regrettable necessity which it was entirely appropriate for him to carry out. See Poole, *Annotations*, on 1 Kgs. 2, especially 1 Kgs. 2.22; Patrick, *A Commentary, Vol. II*, 365–8; Wells, *An Help: Samuel and Kings*, Section 38, pp. 1–5; Thomas Brett, *A general history of the world, from the creation to the Destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar* (London, 1732), 196–7. In terms of the libretto, when the assassinations are understood as part of the portrayal of Solomon's unswerving justice, they become positive elements, because they convey the message that he is not influenced by his emotions but will deal with every case according to its deserts.

characterizing herself as a mother, and in the following trio between herself, the other harlot and Solomon, she again refers to herself as a mother. By contrast, the second harlot is harsh and abrupt, not in the least bit cowed by being in the presence of royalty; she makes no deferential address to the king, and never refers to herself as a mother, but simply demands the baby. It seems fairly clear that the first harlot is indeed the genuine mother, but Solomon is not swayed by appearances or emotional appeals into making a hasty judgement over the custody of the child. Rather, having allowed them both to have their say, he makes the famous demand to halve the child, which provokes the equally well-known decisive responses from the women. The second harlot shows no remorse at the thought of the child's death; rather, her reaction is one of satisfaction that her opponent will not have the child. She deems Solomon's judgement 'prudent and wise', although this is surely ironic; the judgement is prudent and wise in that it ultimately succeeds in establishing who is the child's mother, but the second harlot seems to be calling it prudent and wise because of what it will achieve if it is carried out as commanded. She therefore misunderstands the nature of the judgement and shows herself to be heartless and calculating, reflecting well on Solomon's astuteness in making the judgement. The first harlot's pleas to spare the child and give it to the other woman rather than killing it prove her claim to be its mother, and Solomon duly recognizes her as such. In his recitative he explains the rationale behind what appeared at first to be an exceptionally harsh procedure:

> *Israel*, attend to what your King shall say;
> Think not I meant the Innocent to slay.
> The stern Decision was to trace with Art,
> The secret Dictates of the human Heart.
> She who could bear the fierce Decree to hear,
> Nor send one Sigh, nor shed one pious Tear,
> Must be a Stranger to a Mother's name—
> Hence from my Sight, nor urge a further Claim:
> But you whose Fears a Parent's Love attest,
> Receive, and bind him to your beating Breast;
> To you, in Justice, I the Babe restore,
> And may you lose him from your Arms no more. (II.3, p. 12)

So once again, Solomon has proved himself capable of making a correct judgement that is not swayed by surface emotions, and in doing so has ensured that justice is done. The comment that he had no intention of slaying the innocent stands out particularly in the context of his earlier recitative about eliminating his opponents, including his half-brother. It emphasizes that Solomon does not simply kill people for no reason, and so if he has ordered his brother's death there must have been a very good reason for it. In his judgement between the harlots he proceeded on the basis of tracing, successfully, 'the secret Dictates of the human Heart'; the implication is that he knows what he is doing when he makes judgements about people, and so his judgement about Adonijah was correct, despite its harshness. Half-brother and harlots thus both provide Solomon with opportunities to demonstrate his unflinchingly righteous judgement; and the series of airs and choruses in praise of Solomon that follows the encounter with the harlots makes an appropriately if predictably affirmative ending to Part II.

c. The Queen of Sheba

The Queen of Sheba, to whose visit Part III is devoted, is depicted in terms that are reminiscent of Pharaoh's daughter in Part I. Like Pharaoh's daughter, Sheba is portrayed in a way which emphasizes Solomon's greatness rather than her own. Her recitative, which opens the action in Part III, sets the tone for their encounter:

> From *Arabia*'s spicy Shores,
> Bounded by the hoary Main,
> *Sheba*'s Queen these Seats explores,
> To be taught thy heav'nly Strain. (III.1, p. 15)

Her declaration that she has come to Solomon in order to be taught by him is contrary to the biblical text, where according to 1 Kings 10.1 she comes to 'prove him with hard questions', and only after he answers her questions does she acknowledge his greatness (1 Kgs. 10.4–7). In the libretto, though, Sheba is overwhelmed by Solomon from the moment she arrives at his court, as her opening air demonstrates:

> Ev'ry Sight these Eyes behold;
> Does a different Charm unfold;
> Flashing Gems, and sculptur'd Gold,
> Still attract my ravish'd Sight:
> But to hear fair Truth distilling,
> In Expressions choice and thrilling
> From that Tongue, so soft and killing,
> That my Soul does most delight. (III.1, p. 15)

The use of positively erotic language is noteworthy here, not only in describing the 'Charms' that unfold before Sheba's eyes, and her 'ravish'd' sight, but in expressing how she responds to Solomon's wisdom. The description of his speech as 'thrilling' and his tongue as 'soft and killing', with the resultant delight of her soul, remind one of nothing so much as a young woman in love, and the audience is left to wonder whether it is the wisdom or the man that has the most profound effect upon her. Arguably, the implication is that it is the man. Solomon responds by offering her a short concert of different types of music that evoke a range of emotions in the hearer,[29] at the end of which she addresses him as 'great King' and 'illustrious Prince', and offers him 'tribute'. In the light of Solomon's 'flashing Gems and sculptur'd Gold' that have so 'ravished' her sight earlier, her own gift to him of gold and gems, along with balsam, seems rather superfluous; but Solomon seems happy to accept it. Significantly, there is no mention of him reciprocating in kind, as he does in the biblical text by giving her gifts from his royal bounty (1 Kgs 10.13). In the libretto, his gift to her is the opportunity to see all his splendour, to hear his wise sayings 'from that tongue so soft and killing', and to listen to his music. What more could she possibly want? Sheba is simply the admiring

[29] This episode is strongly reminiscent of Handel's *Alexander's Feast* (1736), in which various states of emotion are invoked by the lyre-player Timotheus using a range of musical styles.

audience who gives Solomon the chance to display his riches and wisdom to best effect.

Her farewell recitative and air again show her completely under his spell. In the recitative she addresses him as 'illustrious *Solomon*', and declares that she will remember what he has taught her:

> Thy wise Instructions be my future Care,
> Soft as the Show'rs that chear the vernal Air;
> Whose Warmth bids ev'ry Plant her Sweets disclose,
> The Lilly wakes, and paints the op'ning Rose. (III.1, p. 19)

In this way she compares herself to a flower that is brought into bloom by spring showers of rain, the implication being that Solomon's words have the same kind of life-giving, fructifying power as the rain. Here again, as was the case with Pharaoh's daughter, nature imagery is used of the female character, whereas the male is characterized as the source of an elemental substance without which life is not only vain but impossible. In the air immediately following this, Sheba declares that she will never forget her visit, either for the great wealth she has seen or for the things she has learned from Solomon:

> Will the Sun forget to streak
> Eastern Skies with amber Ray,
> When the dusky Shades to break
> He unbars the Gates of Day?
> Then demand if *Sheba*'s Queen
> E'er can banish from her Thought
> All the Splendor she has seen,
> All the Knowledge thou hast taught. (III.1, p. 19)

This is from a woman who is well able to give Solomon rich gifts in return; but presumably what she can give pales into insignificance before what Solomon already has. His dominance in their encounter is complete.

CONCLUSION

In the libretto of *Solomon*, then, the use of female figures plays upon the gender stereotype whereby women's role is to reflect well upon men and complement them, giving men the opportunity to display their abilities and prowess. Although this element is present in the main source text of 1 Kings, in the libretto it is even more marked, particularly in the case of the daughter of Pharaoh and the Queen of Sheba. Pharaoh's daughter in 1 Kings is a marginal and ambivalent figure, but in the libretto she is a major character with a completely positive characterization as the besotted bride of a faultlessly pious man. The Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings comes to test Solomon, and at the end of their exchange, even though she admits defeat, as it were, their gift-giving is reciprocal. In the libretto she has only one aim, which is to 'undergo the Solomon experience'; she is overwhelmed from start to finish, and although she gives him gifts he does not return the favour. In both the biblical text and the libretto, the harlots allow Solomon the chance to display his

discerning wisdom in an intractable case; but in the libretto, by their juxtaposition with Solomon's reluctant removal of his enemies on the way to the throne, they also function to vindicate what would otherwise seem callous and ambitious political manoeuvrings. Solomon's women reflect his glory; and in so doing, allow Solomon to reflect an equally glorious image of His Royal Highness King George II.[30]

[30] Compare the wry comment of Howard H. Cox, who remarks that one could describe the theme of the oratorio as 'How Solomon charmed all the women, from the highest to the lowest, by his wisdom and immense wealth', adding, 'George II must have loved it' ('Character Portraits of the Hebrew Kings in Handel's Oratorios', *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge*, 5 (1993), 216–23 (221)).

9

Susanna

A Marriage Made in Heaven

The second of Handel's new oratorios for the 1749 season was *Susanna*, written like its companion piece *Solomon* in 1748. The two works were probably conceived of as a pair, as is indicated by the correspondences between them:[1] for example, both make extensive use of pastoral and nature imagery, both contain an intractable judicial situation, and both portray wedded love, *Solomon* from the masculine and *Susanna* from the feminine perspective. However, despite the points of contact between the two oratorios, the choice of Susanna as an oratorio subject is a definite departure from the type of subject-matter hitherto treated in the Israelite oratorios. Susanna herself is not a figure of public or political significance like every other character on whom previous oratorios had been based. Rather, she is the wife of a wealthy Jew, and thus a high-status character; but in the context of the history of Israel her actions are neither critical for the safety of her people nor significant in salvation-historical terms. Nor can she readily be understood as a cipher for a particular prominent eighteenth-century individual. Rather, the story as presented in the oratorio describes a personal tragedy averted and a private individual vindicated from wrongful accusation. How, then, might it be understood? The first step is to examine the biblical text.

BIBLICAL SUSANNA

The story of Susanna in the English Bible appears in the Apocrypha. In its ancient biblical form it is one of the so-called 'additions to Daniel', that is, it forms part of the Greek version of the book of Daniel, in which (as in the Greek version of the book of Esther) there are several chapters that do not exist in the Hebrew version of the book. There are two versions of the Susanna story preserved in Greek manuscript tradition: a longer one, which is attributed to the second-century CE reviser Theodotion and upon which the translation of Susanna in the English Apocrypha is based, and a shorter (and probably older) one, known as the 'Old

[1] Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959; repr. 2000), 537–8, argues on the basis of style and content that both libretti were written in short succession by the same author.

Greek', which has not found a place in any form of the Christian canon.[2] Both versions have the same basic plot, although they differ in details and emphases. The present study will be based on the longer, so-called Theodotion version, since that is the one that found its way into the canon and can be traced down through reception history.

The plot of Susanna is as follows. Susanna is the wife of a wealthy Babylonian Jew called Joachim whose house is the venue for hearing cases and making judgements. Susanna likes to walk in the garden attached to the house, where she is seen by two Jewish elders who come to the house to hear the cases. They lust after her, and spy on her. One hot day, as the elders are hiding in the garden watching for her, Susanna decides to bathe in the garden, and sends away all the maids, locking the garden doors. The elders accost her and try and force her to sleep with them, but she refuses, and cries out. The elders too cry out, the servants come running, and the elders accuse Susanna of having met a paramour in the garden. The next day the elders summon Susanna to a hearing, and testify to having seen her with a young lover. The elders are believed, and Susanna is condemned to death. But when the verdict is announced she cries to God, and as she is being led away for execution God stirs up a young man in the crowd—Daniel—who challenges the conviction. Daniel cross-examines the elders and shows their testimony to be inconsistent and thus unreliable. As a result the elders are condemned to death, Susanna is set free, and Daniel is greatly revered among the people.

In its present form and context, the story has several 'morals'. Its most pervasive theme, in the sense of an element that appears throughout the narrative, is a critique of unjust or immoral leaders. This is supplemented by the introduction of the young Daniel towards the end of the narrative, who adds a second, related element to the critique by showing that positions of respect in society and seniority in years are no guarantee of personal integrity (cf. Sus. 52–3). The third and arguably most religious motif is that of God's protective care exercised on behalf of the innocent and righteous who trust in him (Sus. 60, 62).[3] But the relative prominence of these 'morals' raises the question of where the central focus of the story lies; is it really about Susanna, as its title suggests, or is Susanna more of a means to an end, with the main focus elsewhere? A reading of the story from the perspective of who sees or is seen, and who hears or is heard, highlights the

[2] The Old Greek version was displaced by the Theodotion version in Christian Bibles during the patristic period, and, thus displaced, remained unavailable to commentators until 1772 when a tenth-century manuscript of it was published. See John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 3–5, for a summary of the situation regarding the Greek MS versions of Susanna. The most detailed consideration of both versions is Helmut Engel, *Die Susanna-Erzählung: Einleitung, Übersetzung und Kommentar zum Septuaginta-Text und zur Theodotion-Bearbeitung*, OBO, 61 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

[3] This emphasis is lacking in the OG. Marti J. Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon: Narrative and Faith in the Greek Legends of Daniel*, SBLDS, 141 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), regards Theodotion's version as 'a story about individuals' (133): it starts with Susanna and her family, and ends with the same family together with Daniel and his rapid rise in influence. Steussy comments, 'Quite possibly the story once illustrated the general thesis, "innocent blood will be saved" . . . , but this general theme is now subsumed under the OG's interest in leadership and TH's in the particular characters' (133 n. 82).

androcentric nature of the narrative, and suggests that its focus is not ultimately on Susanna but on the male characters around her, in particular, the elders, Daniel, and God.

Male/female, subject/object, heard/seen

Many commentators have noted the story's visual aspect, how the elders watch for and gaze at the beautiful Susanna (Sus. 8, 12), the fact that she takes a bath in the garden, suggesting that she is undressing or is undressed when the elders see her (Sus. 15–19), and how the elders lift her veil to show her to the gathered crowd (Sus. 32). Indeed, a common representation of the story in visual art depicts a (semi-)naked Susanna cowering away from the elders as they accost her at a fountain in the garden, thus reproducing the idea that seeing is an important aspect of the story, and often making a voyeur out of the viewer.[4] But the element of hearing is just as important, because in the narrative what is heard—the cries of Susanna and the elders, the elders' testimony, Susanna's prayer, Daniel's challenge to the 'guilty' verdict—is ultimately more influential than what is seen. In fact, an analysis of who sees or is seen and who hears or is heard in the story highlights how the male characters, particularly the elders and Daniel, are presented as subjects, while the female Susanna is reduced to an object.[5]

In terms of the seeing and hearing aspects, the narrative falls roughly into two parts; in the first part the motif of seeing is more prominent, whereas in the second part the motif of hearing predominates. The visual aspect appears early on with the comment that Susanna was very beautiful (Sus. 2); although this might seem harmless enough, the androcentric context in which it appears gives grounds for suspecting that it is more ideologically charged than just being a passing compliment. In the opening verses of the narrative, Susanna is surrounded by the male figures from whom she derives her identity: Joachim, the man who 'takes her' as his wife (Sus. 1–2); Chelsias, her father (Sus. 2), who together with her unnamed mother subsumed under the masculine noun 'parents' 'teaches her' (Sus. 3); the Lord, whom she fears (Sus. 2), and Moses, whose law she is taught (Sus. 3). Neither here nor in the following verse in which the description of Joachim is elaborated upon is anything said about the physical appearance of the men: Joachim simply '*was* a man living in Babylon' (Sus. 1), Susanna's parents were 'righteous' (Sus. 3), and Joachim was rich, owned a house and garden, and was well thought of (Sus. 4). Susanna's description in terms of her male relatives who act upon her, and of her physical appearance, sets the pattern for the rest of the

[4] This is a rather ironical development, given that the OG omits the bathing scene altogether, and simply describes the elders seeing Susanna walking in the garden and going up to accost her (OG Sus. 12–13, 19a). The sense of eroticism that pervades the bathing scene has certainly captured the Christian imagination, to the extent that the bathing scene now epitomizes the story of Susanna.

[5] The following reading is influenced by, though not taken from, Jennifer A. Glancy, 'The Accused: Susanna and her Readers', in Athalya Brenner (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, FCB, 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 288–302.

narrative: as a female, she is for the most part an object that is seen rather than a subject who is heard.

That Susanna's beautiful appearance is significant in the overall scheme is confirmed by the next act of seeing mentioned in the narrative, when the two elders see her walking in the garden and are smitten with love/lust for her (Sus. 8).[6] In her walking, Susanna is at last the subject of two main verbs (εἰσεπορεύετο [*eiseporeueto*]; περιεπάτει [*periepatei*], Sus. 7) instead of being the object of other people's actions, but her subjectivity is limited by the enclave of 'her husband's garden' (Sus. 7) to which her walking is confined, and which makes her function as part of his estate or 'house' (cf. Exod. 20.17). The garden, an expression of her husband's wealth, has overtones of sexuality, as in the Song of Songs,[7] and the picture of Susanna walking in the garden is arguably eroticizing as well as objectifying: a beautiful woman enjoying the heat of the noonday sun like some sort of exotic but unattainable animal. In addition, even this meagre exercise of her subjectivity is transformed into objectivity by the elders who watch her day in and day out (Sus. 8).

The effect on the elders of this continued vigil is that they turn their minds away from justice and their eyes away from looking towards heaven (Sus. 9), a wonderfully physical and visual metaphor that associates their ogling of Susanna with a deliberate abandonment of the ideals of justice that they as elders are bound to uphold. Yet although the description of their characters and actions (not their appearances) is less than flattering, the elders are given subjectivity and agency: they are credited with both minds and eyes, active faculties via which they think and see and which they consciously manipulate. Their feelings and motives are also described (Sus. 10–11), unlike Susanna, whose main endowment is a beautiful appearance and whose role is to be the object of their gaze.

The strength of their desire to see her is expressed in Sus. 12—'they assiduously kept careful watch day by day in order to see her'—giving the impression of a process that goes on for an extended period of time. The cycle of looking and longing is only altered by them seeing something else: each other at the same place looking for the same woman, at which point each confesses his desire to the other (Sus. 14). The watching resumes (Sus. 15), but it is now more threateningly purposeful: both are watching together, and looking for a time when they can find her alone (Sus. 14). Eventually their diligent watching pays off, as one day Susanna prepares to bathe in the garden (Sus. 15), where they are hidden and so can see without themselves being seen. The exotic/erotic aspect of the rare species in the garden is heightened considerably by the text stressing the elders' hiddenness and their eager scrutiny of her (Sus. 16). Susanna's desire to bathe (ἐπεθύμησε λούσασθαι [*epethumēse lousasthai*], Sus. 15) is strong, expressed as it is in the same terms as the desire the elders have for her (ἐγένοντο ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ αὐτῆς [*egenonto*

[6] Susanna's walks at lunchtime (Sus. 8, 13) suggest an association between eating and sex, as elsewhere in the Old Testament; see, for example, the story of Tamar (2 Sam. 13), and indeed, the story of the humans and the snake in Eden (Gen. 3). In *Susanna*, the elders are determined to devour Susanna; she becomes their meal, in the sense that instead of going home to eat they return to try and accost her (Sus. 13–14). And as she herself realizes, she will be 'consumed' by them whether or not she accedes to their advances, because they will destroy her (Sus. 22).

[7] See, for example, Song 4.12–5.1; 6.2, 11; 8.13.

en epithumiai autēs], Sus. 8)—as is also the coveting of one's neighbour's goods that is forbidden by law in Exod. 20.17 (*οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις* [*ouk epithumēseis*]). Once again Susanna is expressing her subjectivity, but in a limited way: she wants something bodily and trivial—a bath—that might reasonably be construed as part of her beauty regime and so characterizes her in terms of a typical feminine paradigm of bodiliness and sensuality; and in order to get it she is eliciting the assistance of her female servants whose job it is to suppress their own subjectivity in order to actualize Susanna's (Sus. 15, 17). Once again, too, her subjectivity is compromised by the elders who are watching her every move. They see her making all the preparations—telling the servants to shut the doors and then sending them away to get bath oils—but neither she nor the servants see the elders (Sus. 18); they are hidden, a condition that characterizes not only their physical position in the garden but their true natures, which are invisible behind the facade of virtuous eldership.

Once the servants have gone the elders rush up to Susanna and urge her to 'Look!' (*ἰδού* [*idou*], Sus. 20)—the doors are shut and there is no-one to see them (Sus. 20). They are not going to become the objects of others' gaze as Susanna has been of theirs. She is to 'be with them', because they want her, and if she refuses they will testify that she has had a lover (Sus. 21). They are pressurizing her to accede to their sexual subjectivity regardless of her own wishes, continuing once again their objectifying behaviour towards her. If Susanna exercises her personal subjectivity in resisting the elders, they will accuse her of exercising sexual subjectivity, something that is quite intolerable for a woman because it cuts across her husband's right of exclusive sexual access to her body.[8]

However, what the elders have not taken into account, and what Susanna relies upon, is that there are other eyes watching, and it is this gaze which determines her response: she chooses to fall into the elders' power rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord (Sus. 23)—that is, she pledges obedience to the heavenly male rather than to the earthly ones—and she asserts her own subjectivity over against that of the elders by crying out. Here, her training in the law of Moses comes to the fore: a betrothed woman who is accosted in the city by another man is to cry out in order to summon help if she is not to be condemned for adultery (Deut. 22.24). By her actions Susanna undercuts the elders' sexual agency, effectively rendering them impotent because they are denied the opportunity to satisfy their lust, and

[8] Deut. 22.22–9 gives the law on adultery by which Susanna seems to be operating when she cries out at the elders' advances. According to these laws, the penalties for illicit sexual intercourse are dependent upon the status of the woman involved: if she is married or betrothed to another man the penalty is death for both parties involved in the illicit encounter, unless an encounter involving a betrothed woman takes place in the countryside where no-one would have heard her if she cried for help. If the woman is unmarried and unbetrothed the penalty is for the man to pay her father 50 shekels and marry her with no possibility of divorce. The point is that these encounters are seen as offences against the rights of the men under whose authority the women spend their lives, which is why the woman's status determines the penalty. The men themselves are allowed sexual access to more than one woman, as is shown by the laws about polygyny in Deut. 21.15–17, but women are expected to be completely monogamous. For a modern perspective on the same issue, see the comments on male sexual proprietariness in Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, 'Till Death Us Do Part', in Rose Weitz (ed.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behaviour*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 257–70.

this is an enormous affront to their manhood. The elders too cry out (Sus. 24), no doubt in order to rally support for themselves by bringing others to see the situation in the garden and then giving their version of what has just happened. One of them opens the garden gate so as to give the impression that someone has left through it in a hurry (Sus. 25), thereby confusing still further what really has been seen and what will soon be heard. The servants arrive—not the two female *korasia* with whom Susanna had been walking in the garden, but male *douloi* who would presumably be of more use in a confrontation—having heard the noise and wanting to see what has happened to their mistress (Sus. 26). They certainly see Susanna and the elders, but they do not see what happened. Instead, they now hear the elders' tale of Susanna and her lover, which shames them into silence (Sus. 27). Any subjectivity that Susanna may have exercised in crying out and making her voice heard is now lost, as these male servants hear only what the elders say about Susanna and are ashamed. Once again Susanna becomes an object, seen but not heard, this time objectified by the elders' words rather than their gaze.

From this point on the emphasis in the story changes from seeing to hearing. The problem is that no-one except the elders and Susanna has actually seen what has happened, but via their right to be heard the elders will be attempting to make the people think that they have seen what no-one at all has seen because it never happened, namely, Susanna's dalliance with a young lover. And the way they will do this is not only via the story that they tell, but also via what the people see of the elders themselves and of Susanna. The elders summon Susanna to court, in terms that relate her once again to the men in her life, especially her husband (he, after all, is the one to whom the greatest wrong has been done, if the elders are to be believed): 'Send for Susanna the daughter of Chelchias, who is the wife of Joachim' (Sus. 29). Their summons is obeyed; Susanna comes to court with an entourage of parents, children, and relatives (but no husband) (Sus. 30), presumably in order that she will be viewed as a woman of unimpeachable family values. But once again in a focus on her physical characteristics her beauty and refinement is emphasized (Sus. 31), and even though she has veiled herself, presumably in order to display proper modesty, the elders order her to be revealed,[9] thereby once again cutting across her subjectivity, so that they can gaze at her (Sus. 32). As well as feeding the elders' lust, this may serve two other related purposes in persuading the crowd to condemn her: first, it treats her like an adulteress, therefore preparing the ground for the elders' subsequent spoken accusations by means of the visual message;[10] and second, it tacitly gets the crowd on the elders' side by showing just how beautiful Susanna is and therefore playing into stereotypical attitudes (or male fantasies) that associate female beauty with wanton

[9] Theodotion adds the comment, 'for she was veiled', so limiting the extent to which Susanna's body is exposed. However, in the OG there is no such qualifying comment, and the order to reveal her may well have meant that she was to be stripped. See Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*, AB, 44 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 102–3; Collins, *Daniel*, 431–2.

[10] Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, adulteresses are shown as being subject to stripping. See Hos. 2.5, 11–12 (ET 2.3, 9–10); Ezek. 16.37–9. The ordeal for the suspected adulteress (Num. 5) gives instructions to the priest to let loose the woman's hair (Num. 5.18), presumably to imitate a post-coital state of dishevelment. See also Moore, *Additions*, 102–3; Collins, *Daniel*, 431–2.

sexuality. This provokes a startling response from her relatives and from all who see her (Sus. 33): they cry. In front of the whole assembly the elders get up and place their hands on her head (Sus. 34),[11] in a further objectifying gesture that expresses condemnation but is probably at some level the playing out of their fantasies about her as well as an expression of their power over her: here, despite the presence of dozens of witnesses, they can touch her with impunity, nor can she herself protest. Susanna is not exempt from the weeping, but in her weeping she does what the elders ceased to do some time ago: she looks up to heaven (Sus. 35). Their turning their eyes away from heaven to ogle her was both symptom and cause of their lustful desire; by contrast, Susanna's looking up to heaven, together with the trust in God that that implies, is what will save her. Oblivious to her trust in heaven's justice, the elders proceed to spin their tale of brazen adultery against Susanna, how while walking in the garden they saw a young man, hidden until the servants were dismissed, approach and lie with her, but they were unable to catch him (Sus. 38–9). The picture of the elders standing with their hands on Susanna's head, describing the non-existent young man coming to lie with her, is disturbing, and smacks of them fantasizing about what they wanted to do but could not—a vicarious satisfaction of their desire that is made all the more sinister by being presented in public as evidence of Susanna's immorality. They are having their way with her in front of everyone, and no-one is going to stop them. As males and elders they have the right to speak and be heard that is denied to Susanna; she is not heard, and the only thing that is heard on her behalf is the elders' account of events. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the crowd take what they have heard together with what they see in front of them, and even though no-one has seen Susanna with the young man, the sight of the elders (elders!) with their confident assertions and of the beautiful woman in her unveiled state leads the crowd to believe that they have as good as seen the young man, and so they condemn Susanna to death (Sus. 41). In terms of her relationship to the males surrounding her, Susanna is nothing more than an object of the judicial process who can only be seen and not heard. Her objectification is about to reach its nadir, as there is nothing that eliminates subjectivity like being put to death.

Here, though, another aspect of the seeing and hearing comes into play. Susanna cries out to the Lord, who not only knows hidden things—the things that no-one else can see—but also knows everything that happens before it happens (Sus. 42). To this God Susanna cries that the elders have testified (made the people hear) wrong things against her, and calls upon the deity to see (look! ἰδού [*idou*]!) that she is on the point of dying for what she has not done (Sus. 43). In effect, she asserts her subjectivity before God; and God hears her prayer (Sus. 44). Hearing now becomes the *modus operandi* by which the people are persuaded that they have not seen Susanna caught *in flagranti* because the elders have not seen it either. But Susanna's subjectivity before the deity does not

[11] Various interpretations of this gesture have been proposed. It is often associated with the hand-laying that is carried out on sacrificial victims before slaughter. Collins, *Daniel*, 432, sees associations here with the scapegoat ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), in which the sins of Israel are transferred onto a goat by the high priest laying his hands on the goat and confessing all the sins, and the goat is then driven into the wilderness (Lev. 16.21–2).

serve to grant her subjectivity before the people, and her voice is still not heard by the crowd. Instead, it is Daniel's voice from the crowd, claiming his innocence of Susanna's blood (Sus. 46), that gives the people pause, and they stop to listen, as he tells them that they have heard false testimony (Sus. 49). This young boy is granted a subjectivity that is denied the rich, beautiful, high-status woman, and it is via his words, not her own, that she will be saved.

The first thing that Daniel does is to change the people's perception of Susanna: he calls her a 'daughter of Israel' (Sus. 48),[12] thus linking her with the people themselves, whom he has just addressed as 'sons of Israel' (Sus. 48). In this way he contradicts the portrayal of her as an embodiment of evil that must be purged from the midst of society, which is what the elders have been building up; instead of the ostracized 'other', she becomes a fellow member of the people of God. But despite this initial move towards recognizing Susanna's subjectivity, Daniel does not go on to request Susanna's version of events. She still apparently has no right to be heard. Instead, his strategy for saving her is to focus on the elders and discredit their testimony.

Ordering the elders to be separated from each other, Daniel interrogates them one at a time over exactly what they did see. In a verbal version of the elders' visual exposure of Susanna to the people before accusing her, Daniel castigates each of the elders before interrogating them, so that the people hear of the elders' past record of wrong-doing. Then, upon being asked under which tree in the garden he saw the adulterous pair, the first elder says that they were under a mastic tree (Sus. 54); the second elder, however, answers the same question by saying that they were under a holm-oak (Sus. 58). The people are thus able to hear that the elders' testimony does not agree, which shows that the elders have abused their right to be heard by using it to impugn Susanna's reputation. What the elders made the people see by their story about Susanna is untrue, because the elders themselves did not see it (Sus. 61).

Although the story ends with Susanna being reprieved, however, there is no sense in which her position as an object is improved. When the people see that the elders' stories are false, they 'praise God who saves those (masculine plural) who hope in him', and condemn the elders to death; and the narrator comments, 'And innocent blood was saved that day' (Sus. 62), thus reducing Susanna from a person to an impersonal substance. Perhaps even more disappointing is the reaction of Susanna's parents and husband, who praise God that nothing unseemly was found in her rather than that her life was saved (Sus. 63). Susanna's own response, or what may have happened to her subsequently, is not recorded; by contrast, the narrative ends by saying that 'Daniel became great in the eyes of the people from that day onwards' (Sus. 63). The story of Susanna is thus the story of how other people continually speak for her. The elders speak for Susanna to the servants and in front of the trial crowd; Daniel speaks for her in cross-examining the elders; her husband and family speak for her in summing up reactions to the final decision. Susanna herself is not consulted, nor does she give her reaction to

[12] Later, Daniel refers to her as a daughter of Judah in contrast to the daughters of Israel who were cowed into submission to the elders by fear (Sus. 57); this brings her even closer into the heart of the community.

the final vindicating verdict rendered courtesy of Daniel; and in the ultimate objectification, she ends up being the means via which Daniel is set on his path to fame. Via Susanna, the elders are shown to be wicked, God is shown to be faithful, and Daniel is shown to be inspired; she is the means whereby the males get their villain or hero tag, but she hardly seems to be important in her own right.[13]

SUSANNA IN THE LIBRETTO

The biblical Susanna, then, is a means to an end. Her pious vulnerability in the face of deadly accusations is the background against which to highlight the dangerous corruption among officials, the heavenly wisdom of Daniel, and the faithfulness of the God who protects the innocent and punishes the wicked. Susanna's marriage to Joachim is barely mentioned, and indeed it seems that Joachim's function in the narrative is simply to define Susanna's status: it is her position as a married woman that makes the elders' accusations so deadly. Despite its domestic setting, the narrative is about the behaviour of public figures—the elders, Daniel (who goes on to become a prophet), and God (whose intervention in this case is decidedly public)—and so it could equally well be defined as both a political narrative and a private story.

The same, however, cannot be said of the Handelian oratorio. Although the plot of the oratorio is evidently based on the biblical story of Susanna, there are equally evident adjustments to it. The libretto,[14] set in Babylon, opens with a mournful chorus expressing how Israel is languishing in exile as punishment for their sins. Joacim calls on his wife Susanna to chase the gloom from his bosom, and they declare their love to one another, as Chelsias (Susanna's father) looks on fondly. Joacim then tells Susanna that he has to leave town for a week on business, and after affectionate farewells between him and Susanna, he and Chelsias exit. Left alone, Susanna is overcome by a feeling of foreboding, and prays for Joacim and herself. The scene switches to a chance meeting between the two elders, who find out that they are both consumed with love for Susanna. They see her sitting beneath a tree and resolve to accost her. The chorus express disapproval and the threat of divine judgment on the guilty. Part II begins with Joacim on his business trip pining for Susanna, then moves to show Susanna at home in Babylon, with a female attendant, similarly pining for Joacim. The women exchange reminiscences about love, and then Susanna sends the attendant to fetch ointments so that she can bathe in some nearby water. The attendant leaves, and the elders accost Susanna. She strenuously resists their advances, but they summon help and accuse Susanna of adultery with a young man, demanding that she be taken to

[13] For this kind of interpretative pattern, see Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, JSOTSup, 310 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), in which Fuchs argues that even positive portrayals of women in the Hebrew Bible are ultimately designed to reflect well upon the men rather than to affirm the women in their own right.

[14] *Susanna. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Set to Musick by George-Frederick Handel, Esq.* (London: J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper, 1749).

judgement. The news of the accusation is conveyed to Joacim, who refuses to believe that Susanna is unfaithful and immediately sets off back to Babylon to Susanna's aid. Part III opens with Susanna being condemned to death by the court. She accepts the sentence, but protests her innocence in a final message for Joacim. As she is to be led away, Daniel challenges the sentence, and is invited by the judge to re-examine the case. He cross-examines the elders, shows their testimony to be false, frees Susanna and condemns the elders. Joacim and Chelsias arrive and express their praise of virtue, Susanna thanks heaven for deliverance, and Joacim and Susanna again declare their love for each other. The final chorus proclaims that a virtuous wife is more precious than a golden crown.

The message of the oratorio

From the summary above it can be seen that there are some changes in emphasis between the libretto and the biblical text. As already noted, the biblical version emphasizes the wickedness of the elders, the divinely inspired wisdom of Daniel, and the action of God to preserve the innocent and punish the wicked; but it pays very little attention to the character of Susanna and presents her largely as a passive object who is seen and not heard. By contrast, the libretto presents her as an active subject who is heard as well as seen.[15] This is arguably a consequence of the decision to use the narrative of Susanna as the basis of an oratorio: since oratorio is a dramatic rather than a narrative medium, Susanna has to be given a voice if the oratorio about her is to succeed. The oratorio has no narrator who can 'tell' the story and evoke the appropriate mental pictures for the audience regardless of whether or not characters speak; instead, the action and the relationships between characters have to be 'shown' by means of dialogue.[16] The decision to base an oratorio on Susanna is therefore a decision to give her subjectivity. But the libretto does not focus on Susanna for her own sake; rather, it focuses on the nature of marriage, as embodied in the relationship between Susanna and Joacim. This is evident on several counts. First, the fact that Joacim is included as a full character rather than as simply a determinant of Susanna's status,[17] and that he is depicted primarily in terms of his relationship with Susanna, indicates that much more importance is being placed upon their relationship than is the case in the biblical text, where it is virtually ignored. Indeed, in the libretto, all the events take place in the context of this intense and devoted relationship, which means that it is not just Susanna's personal virtue but the relationship itself that is being tested. Secondly, in his very first air on the first page of the libretto Joacim comments how 'true Faith and wedded Love/Banish Pain, and Joys improve' (I.1, p. 3), thereby extolling the benefits of a sincere and faithful marriage relationship. Thirdly, in I.1

[15] In the 1749 libretto, Susanna has the largest part of any character: she sings seven airs, two duets and a trio.

[16] For the distinction between 'showing' and 'telling' (dialogic and monologic narrative), see David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6–7.

[17] Next to Susanna, Joacim has the largest number of arias—six, plus two duets with Susanna.

Chelsias, Susanna's father, comments fondly on the relationship between Susanna and Joacim, holding it up as an example for others to follow. Addressing first Joacim and then Susanna, he says,

> Your wedded Truth each wond'ring Husband know,
> Catch the bright Pattern, and with Fondness glow;
> From thee, *Susanna*, may each wedded Wife
> To Faith connubial dedicate her Life. (I.1, p. 5)

Chelsias's words could just be a throwaway comment, were it not for a fourth feature of the libretto, namely, the ending. The biblical text relates that as soon as Daniel finished his interrogation of the elders the crowd praised God who saves the faithful, and put the elders to death in accordance with the law, so that innocent blood was saved that day; Chelsias and his wife along with Joachim and all the family praised God because nothing shameful had been found in Susanna; and Daniel became great in the eyes of the people (Sus. 60–4). In the libretto, however, after interrogating the elders Daniel has fourteen lines of recitative in which he declares Susanna innocent and the elders guilty, warns all judges to exercise their duties conscientiously, and orders the elders to be taken away to their fate. But this is not the end of the libretto. Daniel now sings an air in praise of chastity; then Joacim and Chelsias enter for the final scene, and the remaining two pages of the libretto focus on Susanna's virtue and chastity, and how much she and Joacim (still) love each other.[18] The closing chorus sums up the scene, and indeed the thrust of the oratorio, in the words, 'A virtuous Wife shall soften Fortune's Frown,/She's far more precious than a golden Crown' (III.2, p. 24). The multiple sentiments at the end of the biblical version—the deserved punishment of the corrupt elders, the inspired wisdom and growing fame of Daniel, the faithfulness of God—are thus exchanged for a single one at the end of the libretto, namely, the value of the virtuous wife, a sentiment, moreover, which is derived not from the biblical *Susanna* but from Prov. 12.4 and 31.10.[19] The biblical *Susanna* says nothing at all about the nature of the marriage relationship or of the partners' value to each other.

[18] After the tenth line of Daniel's above-mentioned recitative the autograph manuscript has a four-line chorus, which runs as follows:

> Righteous Daniel! matchless youth,
> heaven guides thy pious tongue
> Hence we found the paths of truth
> To thy fame our lyres be strung.

Had this chorus been included it would have resulted in a greater emphasis on the figure of Daniel, but its omission means that the main emphasis is reserved for the themes of chastity and marital bliss that reappear in force in the closing scene. The action does not pause to reflect on Daniel's worth, but moves straight on to contemplate the moral issues illustrated in the libretto's treatment of the Susanna story.

[19] In the eighteenth-century context, the concept of 'virtue' as applied to women essentially referred to chastity, as is evidenced in conduct books. Such an interpretation means that the KJV rendering of the Hebrew phrase אֵשֶׁת־חַיִל [*'ĕšet ḥayil*] in Prov. 12.4 and 31.10 as 'virtuous woman' is particularly resonant in the context of the narrative of Susanna, whether or not the Hebrew would originally have had such overtones.

Other treatments of the story of Susanna

Although it might seem obvious to interpret the story of Susanna as an illustration and celebration of marital fidelity, such an interpretation is in fact quite unusual. Although (judging from the number and nature of available treatments of it) the story seems to have declined somewhat in popularity in England over the course of the seventeenth century, presumably as a consequence of the strengthening of anti-Catholicism and a resultant antipathy towards the Apocrypha,[20] several extended English poetic versions exist from this period, as well as some from the sixteenth century. But despite their frequent elaboration on various aspects of the story, including the character of Susanna, none of these treatments draws any morals from it about the nature of marriage or virtuous wives.

Of the treatments in English that have survived, one of the earliest is Thomas Garter's 1578 play, *The Commody of the most vertuous and Godlye Susanna*,[21] which in the words of its own prologue sets out

> . . . a matter old, as it were done anew.
> And sheweth forth how prone God is, to helpe such as are just,
> And in that God before all men, doe put assured trust,
> Of Susans lyfe the story is, what trouble she was in,
> How narrowly she scaped death because she would not sinne,
> How wonderously she was provokte, how vertuously she fled,
> The strong assaultes of wicked men, that lecherous lusts had led,
> To ravish her, and to pollute, her chaste and wyfely view,
> This is the somme of all that shall be shewed unto you(.) (ll. 6–14)

The play itself portrays a Job-like scenario whereby the Devil is determined to provoke the godly Susanna to sin, and employs his son Ill Report in order to bring this about. Ill Report in turn enlists the help of Voluptas and Sensualitas, who take on the role of the elders; they spy on, try to seduce, and then slander the innocent Susanna, while Ill Report acts as a town crier spreading news of the trial. Despite their combined efforts, however, Daniel intervenes at the last moment and exposes the elders' lying testimony so that Susanna is saved. In the end the 'elders' and Ill Report are revealed for who they really are and, amidst a good deal of comic banter, all meet with an appropriately punitive fate. Although the play does therefore show Susanna's virtue and her vindication because of her trust in God, at least as much attention is given to the bumbling and comedic goings-on between the various evil principles embodied as officials, and this gives the play a decidedly satirical tone rather than that of a celebration of marital bliss and fidelity. Such a reading of the play is supported by comments in the last twenty lines from Ioachim and Helchias, as they offer their concluding reflections about what has happened before leaving the stage:

[20] Steven C. Walker, 'Susanna', in David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 741–2, speaks of the story's 'universal appeal' and cites a range of genres in which treatments of it occur (741). However, many of his examples are from Catholic or Orthodox cultures, or (for English treatments) predate the seventeenth century.

[21] Thomas Garter, *The Commody of the most vertuous and Godlye Susanna, never before this tyme Printed* (London, 1578).

Ioachim Also good Lorde amongst thy giftes, which every day are seene,
We have to prayse thy mighty grace, for our most noble Queene.
Defende her Lorde in all affayres, give passage to thy word.
And cut them short that will her wo, graunt this O living Lord.
Helchias And to her noble counsayle Lord, give wisedom and good helth,
Graunt that they doe may glory thee, and mende the common welth.

This suggests that in some sense Susanna in the play represents Queen Elizabeth, and the elders and Ill Report represent those who would attempt to discredit or displace her. In that case, the play's lack of focus on the institution of marriage is entirely comprehensible, since the Queen was of course famously unmarried.

In 1599 Robert Roche (*c*.1576–1629) published *Eustathia, or the constancie of Susanna. Containing the preservation of the Godly, subversion of the wicked, precepts for the aged, instructions for youth, pleasure with profitte*, an erotic epyllion that takes 107 pages (nearly 3,000 lines) to tell the story.[22] Roche's picture of Susanna is much fuller than that in the biblical text; in his poem she is a woman not only of virtue but of spirit, independence, intelligence, and strong feelings, and is highly articulate. Yet the focus of the tale is not her and Joachim's marriage, but God's protection of the faithful and the fate that will befall evil-doers, as is shown by Roche's concluding epilogue:

> Thus heere you see, how God preserveth his;
> And those that do them iniurize, confowndeth.
> Hence may you learne, what t'is to live amisse.
> What falles to him, that with prowd sin abowndeth.
> That hee which stedfast hope, in Gods helpe growndeth
> Gainst him not hell, nor hel houndes shall preveile,
> For God will help, when help of man doth faile.

Similar comments could be made about Robert Aylett's 44-page epic poem *Susanna: or, the arraignment of the two unjust elders* (London, 1622). Aylett[23] presents a much more detailed picture of the characters of Joachim and Susanna than the biblical text does, but once again the point of the poem is to highlight God's intervention to bring about justice despite the wickedness of the judges. Aylett ends the poem with two or three pages of comments about the moral of the story, in which he compares Susanna to justice, warns corrupt judges to act justly and judges and people to exercise careful discernment when making decisions, and urges chaste women to trust in God (42–3).[24] The final pages of the poem

[22] The poem was published in Oxford. Brief details of Roche and his work are given by Thomas Seccombe, 'Roche, Robert (*bap*. 1576, *d*. 1629)', rev. Eleri Larkum, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23916, accessed 28 July 2011>.

[23] Matthew Steggle, 'Aylett, Robert (*c*.1582–1655)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/932, accessed 28 July 2011>.

[24] As well as these comments at the end of the poem, Aylett also includes a page before the poem begins, headed 'The Argument, or Morall, of the *whole Historie*.' In ten rhyming pentameter couplets, he sets out the interpretation of Susanna as Right or Justice (Astrea), whom unjust judges try to corrupt and then slander and disgrace, until Jove is awakened by the cry of those being oppressed and takes

liken Susanna in her innocent suffering to Christ, the elders to the world and the devil, and Daniel to God on the throne of judgement who will reward the good and punish the wicked (43–4). There is nothing here about the virtues of marriage.

Another major verse treatment of the story was published by George Ballard in 1638, entitled *The History of Susanna. Compiled according to the Prophet Daniel, amplified with convenient Meditation; sung by the devoted honourer of the divine Muses*. It is divided into seventeen sections, each of which tells a part of the story and is followed by a meditation on the part of the story just related. Ballard's introductory petition to God before the poem begins indicates that his work was intended to promote morality:

> Fill me with Sions fountain streames, to chant
> Thy prayse (O God) in praysing such a Saint.
> Furnish my lins, with secret pow'r to kill
> Unjust revenge, and carnall fires to chill;
> That that immortal chastity, and honour,
> May (with thy blessed gifts conferr'd upon her)
> All Readers move to studious admiration
> Of Susan's goodnesse, in her imitation;
> That babes unborn, while World endures may dread
> Thy sacred Lawes, in hope of bounteous meed;
> And Vice . . .
> May be abandon'd from the soules of men,
> Unto the place of torment Satans den.

At the end of the poem following the final meditation, Ballard also adds a 'Conclusion' in which he states that virtue alone must last for ever. As in the other two poems, the relationship between Joachim and Susanna is much elaborated upon, together with Susanna's own capacity for speaking her mind and her attempts at self-help. Yet again, though, the theme of Joachim and Susanna's marriage is the background to the narrative rather than the focus of it, and none of the lessons that are drawn from the story concern the value of marriage or celebrate marriage in and of itself.

In 1651 Henry Stubbe produced versions of the biblical Susanna narrative in Greek and Latin verse, along with a similar treatment of the book of Jonah (*Horae Subsecivae: seu Prophetiae Jonae et Historiae Susannae Paraphrasis Graeca Versibus Heroicis*), but as the title of the work implies, Stubbe's renditions of *Susanna* adhered closely to the biblical text. Indeed, the verses of his Greek and Latin translations were numbered to correspond to those of the biblical version, and it seems that Stubbe attempted to stay as close as possible to his source text within

action to restore Justice to her former status. Clearly, Aylett had a legal interpretation in mind for his poem, which given his professional identity as an ecclesiastical lawyer is not surprising. The legal theme also appears in other ways. On the title page, under the title itself, Aylett quotes Deut. 16.20, 'That which is just and right shalt thou follow, that thou maist live and enjoy the Land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.' Then, Aylett dedicates his work to the Earl and Countess of Warwick, addressing the Earl as 'Thou who art in thy Country iustly hight,/Another Daniel for iudging right'. Although Aylett's treatment of Susanna does not address the topic of marriage, his later work, *A Wife, Not Ready Made, But Bespoken* (London, 1653), does.

the constraints of his chosen medium. Hence, his version does not present the story of Susanna as that of an exemplary marriage, because no such presentation appears in the source narrative.

In 1673 the mysterious 'W.V.' published a forty-page version of Susanna's story entitled *The Ladie's Blush: or, the history of Susanna, the great example of Conjugal Chastity. An Heroick Poem.* In a preface to his readers the author claims to be highlighting Susanna as an example of the virtue of conjugal chastity, in a way that would appeal to those who would rather go to the theatre than listen to a sermon, or who are unfairly prejudiced against the Apocrypha. Although the poem is considerably longer than the biblical story of Susanna, there is very little on Joachim and Susanna's characters, and Susanna is much less articulate in this version than she is in the earlier ones. Her response to the elders when they accost her is close to her response as presented in the biblical text, and in her trial she does not speak except to pray to heaven for aid (28–9). Once she has prayed, the remainder of the poem focuses on the retrial, ending with the thankful prayers of Susanna's family that she has been rescued, and a statement of Daniel's fast-growing fame (39–40). The effect is therefore very similar to that of the biblical text: despite the title and the readers' preface, those who come out well from this narrative are Daniel and God, and Susanna's chastity is seen as a gem on Daniel's metaphorical crown (40).

Two other seventeenth-century treatments were a ballad entitled 'The constancy of Susanna' of which ten editions are known for the period 1625–1710, and Robert Burton's *Female Excellency*, in which the stories of nine renowned women including Esther, Deborah, and Susanna were recounted in prose. Burton's work, which in its treatment of Susanna quotes several extracts from *The Ladie's Blush*, first appeared in 1688, with second and third editions in 1710 and 1728 respectively. But once again, neither the ballad nor Burton ventures to explore Susanna's relationship with Joachim, and the morals that these works emphasize relate to God's preservation of the innocent and condemnation of unjust judges, rather than to anything concerning the nature of marriage.

The same is true of eighteenth-century poetic treatments. In 1720 Alexander Pennecuik published a poem entitled 'Beauty in Distress', which is a 37-page rendering of the story of Susanna consisting of a mixture of biblical, mythological, and pastoral elements.[25] Here Susanna's character is not shown in detail other than in her exchanges with the elders, nor is Joachim's character or her relationship with him explored beyond a couple of passing references. Rather, Pennecuik focuses on the elders, their characters, their actions, and their fate; his poem begins with them being shot by Cupid's arrows, and ends with a detailed description of them being stoned to death. Finally, two versions from the 1730s hardly go beyond the biblical text. John Free's poem, entitled *The story of Susanna: a poem* (1730), retells the story very soberly in 296 lines of iambic pentameters. John Bartlett's version, 'The History of Susanna and the Two Elders', in his volume of *Poems* (1732), consists of 164 lines of alternating iambic quatrains and trimeters, followed by a conclusion of 34 pentameter lines that are taken (unacknowledged) from Robert Aylett's 1622 poem and urge judges, jury, and witnesses to act with

[25] In Pennecuik, *Streams from Helicon: or, Poems on Various Subjects* (London, 1720), 1–38.

integrity and women to remain chaste like Susanna. Both Bartlett and Free focus more upon the elders and on Daniel than they do on Susanna and Joachim, decrying corrupt judicial processes rather than celebrating virtuous marriage.

In commentaries and devotional biblical paraphrases, too, the same lines of interpretation prevail. In fact, hardly any such material relating to Susanna was available in England in the early 1700s, but what little there was understood the story to be about topics other than marriage. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the only commentaries on Susanna available in England were foreign. In 1560 the reformer Sébastien Castellion (1515–63) included a treatment of Susanna in his *Sacred Dialogues*, a Latin work of which a thirteenth edition was printed in London in 1709 and a seventeenth edition in 1739.[26] In 1670 the French commentator Nicolas Fontaine (1625–1709) produced a retelling of and commentary on Bible stories; this was translated into English as *History of the Old and New Testament*, and in 1705 a third English edition was produced which included the Apocrypha and so treated the story of Susanna.[27] Both Castellion and Fontaine drew morals from the story, but not about virtuous wives. Castellion's moral is 'Impii peccata peccatis tegere volunt. Deus innocentium preces exaudit. Impii in foveam cadunt, quam piis excavarunt' (Wicked men want to cover up sin with sin. God hears the prayers of the innocent. The wicked fall into the pit that they have dug for the virtuous).[28] Fontaine for his part holds up Susanna not just as the pride of her sex, but as an example of someone who resolved to preserve her holiness not before men but before God so as to secure the life that never ends.[29] The earliest English commentator on *Susanna* appears to be Samuel Smith in his 1739 *Family Companion: or Annotations upon the Holy Bible*;[30] he draws from the narrative the moral that wicked designs are by providence commonly made the means of punishing their authors, and that innocence is under divine protection and will be either be defended against its enemies or rewarded with joy and

[26] *Dialogorum Sacrorum Libri IV, Et ad Linguam recte formandam, et ad Vitam sancte instituendam, Christianae Iuventuti apprime utiles*. The English translation of this work, entitled *The history of the Bible. Collected into one hundred and nineteen dialogues* (London, 1715), completely omits the section on the Apocrypha (Liber III in the Latin edition, containing 18 dialogues).

[27] According to the data in the English Short Title Catalogue, subsequent editions containing the Apocrypha were published in 1712, 1752–3, and 1780. Editions without the Apocrypha were published in 1691, 1697, 1699, 1700–1, 1703, 1711, and 1730. Hugo Grotius's Latin *Annotationes in Vetus et Novum Testamentum*, which includes a treatment of the Apocrypha, would also have been available at this time (editions were produced in 1679 and 1727), although as far as Susanna is concerned Grotius comments only on individual words and phrases in the text, without considering what the significance of the story as a whole might be.

[28] Castellion, *Dialogorum Sacrorum Libri IV*, 17th edn. (1739), 115.

[29] Fontaine, *History of the Old and New Testament* (1705), 185.

[30] Samuel Wesley includes the story of Susanna in his version of the Holy Bible in verse, *The History of the Old Testament in Verse: With One Hundred and Eighty Sculptures* (London, 1704), but contrary to his treatment of narratives from the main canon he does not render Apocryphal stories in verse, rather he quotes them straight from the biblical text. For *Susanna* he prints an 'expurgated' selection of verses from the story, omitting all references to burning lust and adultery (ii.683–7), presumably to make it suitable for the young audience at which his book was aimed. The message of the selection seems to be that God saves those who trust in him, although this is not made explicit. Samuel Humphreys, who comments on the whole Bible, reproduces the text of the Apocrypha (including *Susanna*) in its entirety, but declines to comment on it inasmuch as it is not by his reckoning 'scripture' (*The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testament, Recited at Large* (London, 1735–7), 2188).

tranquility, either here or in the next life. 'How vain are the most subtil stratagems of man, if God will not have them succeed!'[31] Smith also comments that the account of Susanna's trial and the discovery of the elders redounds 'to the honour of Daniel, the shame of the Elders, and the illustration of Susanna's innocence and virtue'.[32] Smith's comments are followed closely by John Marchant, who in his 1745 *Exposition on the Books of the Old Testament* repeats pretty much verbatim what Smith says. The moral of *Susanna*, he claims, is that wicked designs are made to punish their authors, and innocence is under divine protection either to defend it or to reward its sufferings either in this life or the next.[33]

The libretto's presentation of the story of Susanna as a celebration of marriage, then, is quite unprecedented when viewed in the context of other treatments of the story over the previous century and a half, a fact which raises the question of what might have caused the librettist to adopt this distinctive position in the reworking of the story.

Marriage à la mode

A clue to understanding what is going on in the libretto is the way in which Susanna and Joacim's marriage is portrayed. First and foremost it is a true match of hearts; both partners are equally devoted to each other, and there is nothing of the sense in the biblical text that Joacim simply 'takes' Susanna without reference to her own wishes. The duet that they sing almost at the beginning of the libretto makes the mutuality of their feelings clear:

Joacim When thou art nigh
My Pulse beats high,
And Raptures swell my Breast:
Susanna Search, search my Mind,
And there you'll find
Your lovely Form impress'd.
Both With Joy in their Wings the young Moments shall fly,
And chase ev'ry Cloud that would darken the Sky:
If thou art but present my Cares to beguile,
Oppression is softnd, and Bondage will smile. (I.1, p. 4)

Nor is this simply a blaze of lust or infatuation on either one's part. Joacim is attracted by Susanna's beauty, but it is her virtue that has truly captured his heart, as he declares:

A Flame, like mine, so faithful and so pure,
Shall to the Length of latest Time endure:
For Heav'n-born Virtue does the Warmth inspire,
And smiling Angels fan the Godlike Fire. (I.1, pp. 4–5)

[31] Smith, *Family Companion*, second page of comment on Susanna (no page numbers in the original).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Marchant, *Exposition*, 1114.

On the understanding that the term 'virtue' when used in relation to women refers primarily to their chastity,[34] this characterizes both partners as sexually chaste. Joacim is dedicated to Susanna in purity for her purity, and already there is a hint of the heavenly about it: Susanna's virtue is 'heav'n-born', and angels are fanning the flame in Joacim's heart. This is truly a match made in heaven, with both partners being inspired with chaste, pure love by divine power. Susanna for her part has only ever had one true love, and that is Joacim:

> Let me confess, I hear my Praises sung
> With matchless Pleasure, by thy tuneful Tongue;
> And ne'er this Bosom felt the sharpen'd Dart,
> 'Till from your Lips I caught the am'rous Smart. (I.1, p. 5)

Indeed, such is Susanna's love for Joacim that in breach of custom she would have declared him hers long before their wedding day, although she decorously managed to contain herself until the appointed time:

> Would Custom bid the melting Fair
> The Purpose of her Soul declare,
> I then had call'd you mine;
> Long ere the Day our Hands were ty'd,
> And I became thy happy Bride
> At Heav'n's eternal Shrine. (I.1, p. 5).

A few lines later, as he tells her of his business trip, Joacim addresses Susanna in a summary of all the terms in which he has described her so far: 'Source of each Joy, thou Comfort of my Life,/My fair Susanna, my Unspotted wife!' (I.1, p. 6). She cheers his life, she is beautiful, and she is virtuous. There can be no doubt that this relationship is indeed a meeting of hearts and minds.

However, as hinted in Susanna's air about wanting to own Joacim publicly before their wedding, it is also a marriage with a hierarchy, in which the man (Joacim) gives the orders for the woman (Susanna) to follow. As Joacim prepares to leave on business, he instructs Susanna to entertain and encourage all their friends and to welcome true believers to the house while he is gone, to which she replies,

> In this alone with Sorrow I obey;
> What Joy have I when *Joacim*'s away?
> Forgive the Tears that trickle from my Eyes;
> Be dumb my Sorrows, and unheard my Sighs (I.1, p. 6).

Once again the utter devotion of the couple to each other is evident, but alongside this is a picture of Susanna's wifely submission. 'In this alone with sorrow I obey'

[34] Robert Nelson, *The Practice of True Devotion* (London, 1715), 136: 'The sense of all nations has made the Honour of Women to consist in their Modesty; and the word Virtue when applied to them particularly relates to their chastity.' John Essex, *The Young Ladies Conduct; or, Rules for Education* (London, 1722), in 'speaking of this supream Virtue [chastity], without which there can be no Purity,' quotes 'the Saying of a great and learned Ancient; *Whatsoever Virtues you possess, and with what Difficulties soever you keep your selves Mistresses of them, if you want the Band or Gift of Chastity, you want them all*' (34).

implies that her normal stance is one of glad obedience to Joacim. Joacim then sings an air in which he pictures himself in terms of a mother bird worrying about her nestlings while she is away searching for food and feeling great joy when she gets back and finds them all there safe. This gives a surprisingly feminized picture of Joacim, at the same time as casting him in the role of Susanna's provider and sustainer. But as before it stresses the two aspects of their relationship: the elemental nature of their mutual attraction which is as strong as a blood tie, and the hierarchical nature of their marriage relationship.

On this note he departs, and, left alone, Susanna exclaims,

> On *Joacim*, may ev'ry Joy attend
> At once a Husband, Lover, and a Friend. (I.2, p. 7)

This sums up the nature of their relationship in an important way: it is not just a legal contract (husband/wife), but a relationship of passion (lover) that involves mutual trust and support (friend)—a marriage of true companionship. Even when they are apart they are dedicated to each other, as is shown by the first two scenes of Part II, in which first Joacim pines for Susanna and then Susanna pines for Joacim.

In fact, it is a picture of an ideal eighteenth-century marriage within the middle and upper classes who would have made up the oratorio-going public. The marriage is a true match of hearts between Joacim and Susanna, and it also has the approval of Susanna's father Chelsias, as required by convention, so there is no tension in that respect.[35] Indeed, so far from there being any tension between the generations, all is idealistically happy between them. Chelsias is blissfully contented about his daughter's wonderful marriage; Susanna loves Chelsias as much as she does Joacim; and there is even the implication that Joacim and Chelsias have some kind of business partnership, because when Joacim leaves on business Chelsias leaves with him, and the pair return together at the end of the oratorio. As far as the relationship between the two marriage partners is concerned, there is mutual love and respect between them, combined with decorous submission by Susanna to Joacim; in a familiar eighteenth-century pattern, he is the one who is free to go abroad and pursue his business while Susanna remains at home,[36] and Susanna's words about obeying Joacim indicate that she is the subordinate partner. The picture of wifely obedience is one that is stressed in eighteenth-century literature on marriage, and is also part of the New Testament teaching on husband–wife relationships.[37] Nonetheless, Susanna is presumably able to fulfil the duties of 'minding the shop' while Joacim is away, which is why he is asking her to do it. In addition, the husband who is secure enough in himself and his relationship to be able to reject the imputation of adultery to his wife, as Joacim

[35] Essex, *Young Ladies Conduct*, 95–6; Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 12th edn. (Oxford, 1727), 167–72; Ingrid H. Tague, *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690–1760*, Studies in Early Modern Cultural, Political and Social History, 1 (Woodbridge, Suffolk/Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2002), 38, 39.

[36] For examples of this, see Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1998).

[37] See, for example, *The Ladies Library Vol. II. Written by a Lady*, 3rd edn. (London, 1722), 38–43, where the duty of wifely submission is urged on the basis both of nature and of New Testament injunctions.

does, is rare indeed, given that, as the literature on marriage stresses, a wife's misbehaviour harms her husband's reputation.[38]

In her recent study on ideals of femininity in England during the period 1690–1760, Ingrid Tague discusses 'the two keystones of early eighteenth-century feminine values: the emphasis on personal modesty and chastity, and the valorization of the sentimental marriage'[39] as these are presented in didactic literature and conduct books, and the models of behaviour and concepts of womanhood that such literature championed. Tague begins by discussing the conduct books, a discussion that relates very appropriately to *Susanna*. Tague argues that early eighteenth-century didactic literature evidences a change in thinking about femininity as compared with its late seventeenth-century predecessors, and that instead of relying on biblical or social justifications for the chastity, modesty, and submission that were women's most important characteristics, writers now presented these qualities as an inevitable result of women's nature.[40] Moreover, 'the institutional basis for this view of femininity was companionate marriage.'[41] The formation of this new ideology of femininity was complete by about 1740, according to Tague, which means that it would have been in place by the time that *Susanna* was produced. Tague argues that many commentators perceived a crisis in the institution of marriage during the early eighteenth century, and that the conduct books' response to this was to stress marriage as the natural destiny for women, in order to counteract the corruption caused to women by the 'fashionable life'; but in order for this strategy to work, marriage had to be pleasurable for them, hence the need for marriages based on love rather than on mercenary considerations or coercion. In addition, for women to obey men, as befitted their subordinate status, it was necessary for them to love the man to whom they were married. 'Love was essential in order to make women accept the natural order of marriage, which demanded their obedience to their husbands. Obedience was woman's part of the marriage contract, a vow made voluntarily that she could not break.'[42] Interestingly for Tague's argument, the 1740s were also a decade during which several other well-known artistic works relating to marriage appeared. Samuel Richardson's two novels on feminine fortunes, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), portray women who have to contend with being pressured to marry rich men against their will, which conflicts with their own commitment to preserving their personal virtue and integrity. In a different genre, William Hogarth produced his series of images entitled 'Marriage à la Mode' in 1745, which satirize the practice of marriages arranged by parents for their children where there is no attraction between the prospective partners but which will result in financial gain for one of the families involved.

Against such a background, the presentation of Susanna in the libretto can be seen as part of this idealizing dialogue about marriage, holding up marriage based on mutual love and virtue as the way to true happiness. But the libretto also offers a clear message about how such marriages come about, which again reflects aspects of

[38] Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 187; the same idea is repeated in *The Ladies Library*, 65.
[39] Tague, *Women of Quality*, 15.
[40] Tague, *Women of Quality*, 23–4.
[41] Tague, *Women of Quality*, 24.
[42] Tague, *Women of Quality*, 40.

contemporary didactic literature: it is womanly virtue consisting primarily of chastity, and in Susanna's case arising out of piety, that proves to be the main attraction for the male partner.[43] This is affirmed in the very first scene, when Joacim declares that his attraction to Susanna is inspired by her virtue (I.1, pp. 4–5), and as the libretto progresses, Susanna's pious virtue is demonstrated in a range of ways. Indeed, she is the perfect example of wifehood as described by Oswald Dykes in 1722: 'she that is faithful to the Trust of her Husband for the Sake of God, and afraid of nothing but offending God for the Sake of her Husband.'[44] Inasmuch as Susanna's piety is a central motif in the biblical version, the story is ideally suited as a vehicle to promote pious chastity among women in an attempt to shore up the foundations of marriage.

However, there is an interesting difference in the way that Susanna's piety is presented in the libretto as compared with the biblical text. This appears clearly in Susanna's pious outburst as Joacim leaves for his business trip. Having wished him all possible blessings, she has a disturbing premonition, expressed in accompanied recitative:

> What means this Weight that in my Bosom lies?
> What mean these Shades that swim before my Eyes?
> If ought prophetic in this Breast I feel
> Portending Good, Oh! quick the same reveal.
> Let *Joacim*, my Husband, find it all;
> If bad, on me alone the Danger fall. (I.2, p. 7)

She then follows this with an air:

> Bending to the Throne of Glory,
> This alone, great God, I crave;
> Let me innocent before you
> Rise from the devouring Grave.
> If thy Will is now requiring
> That I die before my Time,
> All my longing Soul's desiring
> Is to fall without a Crime. (I.2, pp. 7–8)

[43] Compare the comments of Wetenhall Wilkes, A *Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady* (Dublin, 1740), 76: 'Chastity heightens all the Virtues which it accompanies, and sets off every great Talent that human Nature can be possest of. It is not only an Ornament, but also a Guard to Virtue. This is the great Point of female Honour; and the least Slip in a Woman's Honour is never to be recover'd. This more than any other Virtue places your Sex in the Esteem of ours, and invites even those to admire it who have the Easeness to profane it.' Oswald Dykes, *The Royal Marriage. King Lemuel's Lesson . . . with Remarks, Moral and Religious, upon the Virtues and Vices of Wedlock* (London, 1722), 147, opines that 'a Woman endu'd with impregnable Virtue, captivates all Mankind with her Charms'.

[44] Dykes, *The Royal Marriage*, 141. In the preface to his work, Dykes says that he aims to 'sharpen up Religion and Morality a little, or to give a keener Edge to the Practice of both in this dull Iron-Age. I shall endeavour to whet People to all Virtues by gently correcting or curing their contrary Vices' (x). For all that he avers to offer universal instruction, however, a little further down the page he expresses the hope that his book 'will prove a tolerable, honest, inoffensive Family-Book; . . . a kind of Looking-glass, at least for Ladies, and other young People, to see their Virtues and Vices in at full View' (ibid.). Given that the largest part of the work is an extended paraphrase and discussion of Prov. 31.10–31, which describes the ideal wife, it is hard not to conclude that Dykes is concerned more with female virtue than with its male equivalent.

She wishes the bad upon herself in order to spare Joacim, and even if that should result in her death her only desire is to be found innocent—truly 'afraid of nothing but offending God for the sake of her husband'. But the reason for this fearlessness is that, unlike in the biblical text but in accordance with eighteenth-century Christianity, Susanna is shown as believing in a post-mortem vindication. This belief later affects the way in which she responds to the elders' advances and to her subsequent condemnation to death, both scenes where in the biblical text she cries aloud, either for help or to God. When the elders attempt to pressurize her with their tale of her adultery with a young lover, instead of crying out for help she responds:

> If guiltless Blood be your Intent,
> I here resign it all;
> Fearless of Death, as innocent,
> I triumph in my Fall:
> And, if to Fate my Days must run,
> Oh righteous Heav'n! thy Will be done. (II.4, p. 16)

Similarly, when the death sentence is later passed upon her by the credulous crowd as a result of the elders' false testimony, instead of crying out to God for help, she welcomes death as the passport to happier realms of existence:

> I hear my Doom, nor yet the Laws accuse,
> The Witnesses your much-wrong'd Ears abuse.
> Then welcome Death! I meet you with Delight,
> And change this Earth for Realms of endless Light. (III.1, p. 18)

She does not pray to God about the injustice of her sentence because in a sense she does not need to. She is not dying in vain in a world where there is nothing after death; rather, she is dying for a heavenly reward. This frees her from fear and intimidation, not least because the angelic associations of 'virtue' understood as chastity mean that those who practise it are already in a sense on their way to heaven. So now, as the condemned Susanna prepares to die, she sings an air in which she anticipates being welcomed into the realm of angels on account of her virtue:[45]

> Faith displays her rosy Wing;
> Cherubs Songs of Gladness sing;
> Virtue, clad in bright Array,
> Streaming with eternal Day,
> Whispers in my ravish'd Ear,
> "Innocence shall never fear;
> "Welcome to this bright Abode,
> "Seat of Angels, Seat of God." (III.1, p. 18)

She will indeed be ravished, not, however, by the elders, but in a way that will paradoxically confirm her innocence. This alters the perception of what is at stake

[45] A similar set of ideas appears in the oratorio *Jephtha*, where Jephtha's daughter, having been dedicated to perpetual virginity instead of being sacrificed, is sung of in terms that associate her with the angels. See chapter 10 on *Jephtha*.

for Susanna; and not only does it assure her of a heavenly reward, it frees her to think of Joacim. She does not need to worry about herself because she is going to a better place, but she is strongly aware of how her condemnation for adultery will affect her husband both privately and publicly. Not only will his trust in her be shattered, causing him great personal injury, but his reputation will be harmed, if she is believed to have been unfaithful to him. And so her final words (as she thinks) are for Joacim and the crowd, to tell them all that she is innocent of the charges laid against her and to save him from being branded a cuckold:

> But you, who see me on the Verge of Life,
> I charge you, greet him from his dying Wife;
> Tell him, howe'er the Elders have decreed,
> Their impious Lust provok'd the bloody Deed;
> And, had *Susanna* plighted Vows betray'd,
> Beneath the Cover of yon conscious Shade,
> Their venal Tongues had spar'd her much-wrong'd Name,
> Nor mark'd her Actions with the Brand of Shame. (III.1, p. 19)

In this way the pious, virtuous Susanna fulfils her wifely responsibilities to the very end, even in the face of impending death.

CONCLUSION

In producing the libretto of Susanna, then, Handel's anonymous collaborator transformed the biblical narrative from a tale in which Susanna is the medium for an object lesson about other people's virtue and vice, to a drama of which she herself is the subject and in which she functions as the example par excellence of wifely virtue. The concerns to which the libretto relates had not traditionally been associated with treatments of the Susanna story, but they were becoming more prominent in the 1740s; and that being the case, the libretto can be understood alongside other works of art and literature from the period that reflected on the values underlying the marriage relationship. The result is a very different type of oratorio from those that preceded it, but its focus on personal dilemma rather than national crisis set a pattern that would be followed in Handel's remaining Israelite oratorios.

10

Sex and Death, or, the Death of Sex

*The Fate of Jephthah's Daughter**

Following the productions of *Solomon* and *Susanna* in 1749, Handel returned to collaboration with Thomas Morell for what would prove to be the composer's last two oratorios. The first of these was *Theodora* (1750), a narrative about a Christian saint martyred under Roman persecution, and unique among the Israelite oratorios in having a religious but not a scriptural basis (for this reason it will not be considered here). Handel himself apparently thought very highly of the work, although the subject-matter has not proved particularly popular with either eighteenth-century or modern audiences. The same, however, cannot be said of Handel's final oratorio, *Jephtha*,[1] which has some similarities of theme to *Theodora*[2] but which is based on the biblical narrative of Jephthah in Judges 11. In particular, it deals with Jephthah's vow to the Lord, which puts him in the position of having to sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering in exchange for the victory in battle granted to him by God. The oratorio was completed in 1751 and premiered in 1752, and has remained one of the most popular of Handel's Israelite oratorios. This is perhaps because it is less firmly anchored to a specific political context than some of the other oratorios, addressing instead more fundamental issues about life, death, and human relationships. Morell's libretto drew on a sixteenth-century play about Jephthah by the humanist George Buchanan, as well as reflecting the state of scholarly opinion (and, indeed, controversy) about Jephthah that prevailed in Morell's own day, and offers a fascinating example of how biblical narrative is transformed by the sensitivities of the culture in which it is interpreted. The transformation occurs most notably in the depiction of the daughter's fate, and so this is the aspect that will be considered in detail here, tracing its changing configuration from the Bible via Buchanan to Morell's libretto.

* A version of this chapter appeared as 'Sex and Death, or, the Death of Sex: Three Versions of Jephthah's Daughter (Judges 11.29–40)', in Charlotte Hempel and Judith M. Lieu (eds.), *Biblical Traditions in Transmission: Essays in Honour of Michael A. Knibb*, JSJSup, 111 (Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 2006), 249–71.

[1] *Jephtha, an Oratorio. Or, Sacred Drama. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Set to Musick by Mr Handel* (London: J. Watts, n.d.).

[2] In both oratorios the plot revolves around a virtuous maiden who is condemned to death for reasons that are related to religious observance, a situation that causes great consternation and prompts efforts to save her from among the other characters.

JEPHTHAH'S DAUGHTER IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

The biblical story of Jephthah and his daughter is set in the early days of Israel's history, when the Israelites are battling against neighbouring tribes to establish themselves in the land. Jephthah is a guerilla fighter. He has been expelled from his family home in Gilead by his so-called brothers because he is the son of a harlot, but he is brought back by them to head their army against the attacks of marauding Ammonites. Jephthah is endowed with the spirit of the Lord in order to undertake his military campaign, and he vows that if the Lord gives him victory over the Ammonites he will sacrifice the first creature that comes out of his house to meet him when he returns from battle. The battle is won, and Jephthah comes home victorious, only to be met by his daughter who is his sole child. He is at a loss, but she calmly accedes to her fate, asking first a two-month stay of execution while she goes to the mountains to 'bewail her virginity'. He agrees; she goes and returns two months later; and then he 'did with her according to his vow which he had made' (Judg. 11.39). The daughters of Israel are then said to have set up an annual festival in her honour.

When reading the narrative of Jephthah's vow and its fateful outcome, it is hard not to be struck by the surreal terseness of the account. A man intends to sacrifice his only child as an offering to his God because of a vow that he has sworn and that no one except the deity has witnessed; and yet no one, not even the nameless child herself, tries to stop him. But this bizarre spectacle of acquiescence has a very particular effect: it focuses the attention on Jephthah himself, keeping the story as one about him rather than about his daughter. Because no-one at all challenges his intention or questions his vow, he does not have to insist on it or defend it, and so he is not shown as actively seeking to sacrifice his daughter. Instead, there is an inevitability, an inexorability, about the course of events that allows him to appear foolish and unfortunate in being constrained by such a dreadful necessity, rather than callous and brutal in inflicting such suffering on his own defenceless flesh and blood. This is Jephthah's tragedy, not his daughter's, and as such it adds to and epitomizes the tragedy of his whole life, which is one of isolation, anonymity, and extinction. Jephthah is a man with no past and no future, and in the biblical narrative of his life this isolation is expressed by using the twin motifs of sex, as embodied in his harlot mother and virgin daughter, and death, as exemplified by the sacrifice of his daughter.

How, then, might Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter express his own isolation and extinction? The most striking aspect of the sacrifice for modern readers may well be its emotional pathos, arising from the emphasis in the text on the nameless daughter as Jephthah's only child (11.34—'she alone was his only child; apart from her he had neither son nor daughter'). However, for the biblical audience, the death of an only child would have been more than just a matter of pathos. In the society in which Jephthah's tale first circulated, death was the end, and there was no life beyond death except by being memorialized in some way, most usually through one's descendants who by their very existence would maintain the family name and line. As long as Jephthah had offspring who could marry and raise their own children, his existence could continue via the living memorial to him that his descendants would embody. But the childless death of the only child is also the death of the parent, whose prospect of living on through later generations is

snuffed out along with the child's life. There is, however, a further (or, indeed, a prior) consideration that affects the view of Jephthah's position. In the ancient Israelite world-view men were regarded as seed-producers and women as fields in which to sow the seeds. Genealogy therefore came to be reckoned exclusively via the male line, and women were the resource by means of which men were able to realize their genealogical aspirations. As such, women passed from the authority of one man to another as they traversed the various stages of their life. This meant that a father would ultimately lose his daughter to the man who married her, and any children that she bore would memorialize her husband's name, not that of her father.[3] So in having a sole daughter as his offspring, Jephthah is already genealogically challenged, so to speak. He is effectively dead to posterity even before his daughter's death, and as soon as she is introduced as his only child it is clear that his line is doomed to annihilation whether or not she is sacrificed.[4] The sacrifice merely hastens the inevitable and highlights with greater clarity Jephthah's true situation; the real tragedy for him is not that he has to sacrifice his daughter, but that his only child is a daughter.[5]

Sex and death therefore conspire to undermine Jephthah's chances of transcending his own demise, and condemn him to extinction. But having a (slaughtered) daughter as his sole child is only part of the genealogical problem troubling Jephthah. His own paternal descent is overshadowed by his nameless maternal line, causing his fellows to reject him (11.2);[6] indeed, his father's line is so obscure that he is described as having been fathered by Gilead, which is the name of his

[3] This is epitomized in the provisions of so-called levirate marriage in Deut. 24: where a man dies childless, it is the duty of his brother to impregnate his widow in order to raise up children for the dead man and to prevent his name from being wiped out in Israel.

[4] Note the pun in 11.34 on בֵּיתוֹ [*bêtô*] ('his house') and בִּתּוֹ [*bittô*] ('his daughter') which, taking בַּיִת [*bayit*] in the dual sense of 'household' as well as 'dwelling place', raises and immediately dashes the possibility of Jephthah having sons—'he came to Mizpah to his house(hold); and behold, his daughter . . .' The reader expects to see a household, but all there is is a daughter, who is Jephthah's only household.

[5] So Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 10: 'The lack of sons is the tragedy and major impulse of the judges.'

[6] A parallel can perhaps be drawn here with the Abraham/Sarah/Hagar episode, where the offspring of the concubine slave-girl is expelled in favour of the offspring of the wife. Bal argues that the designation 'harlot' for Jephthah's mother is undeserved, and that the text describes a situation where one of Gilead's marriages is patrilocal and the other is virilocal; as the son of the patrilocal marriage, Jephthah is being sent back to his mother's and grandfather's place of abode by the sons of the virilocal marriage (*Death and Dissymmetry*, 112). The fact that Jephthah's brothers simply refer to him as the son of 'another woman', so that the term אִשָּׁה [*'iššâ*] is used indiscriminately of both Gilead's wife and the supposed harlot, implies that there is no difference in the status of the two women (ibid; so also Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2000), 163). However, two considerations seem to favour the more traditional interpretation in this context. First, the interpretations to do with virilocal versus patrilocal marriage are founded to a large extent on the question of how to interpret the narrative in Judges 19 about the Levite and his 'concubine', and in particular, how to translate the Hebrew term פִּילֶגֶשׁ [*pîlegeš*] which is used to describe the woman. However, the text as it appears in Judg. 11.1 clearly states that Jephthah is the son of a harlot (זוֹנָה, *zônâ*), a word about which there is no such ambiguity; and although it may conceivably be a pejorative gloss on a situation of patrilocal marriage, its effect on the interpretation of the subsequent narrative cannot simply be ignored. Secondly, the confusion between Gilead as place, tribe, and progenitor is a warning against taking the narrative too literally.

tribe (11.1).[7] After all, no one can really be sure of the paternity of a harlot's child, not even the woman herself.[8] So the effect on Jephthah of having a harlot mother and a sacrificed virgin daughter is to make him an isolated character who comes from nowhere and who goes nowhere genealogically speaking; his line of descent is compromised because of his mother, and doomed to extinction because of his daughter. This genealogical isolation is mirrored in Jephthah's social isolation.[9] Because of his low birth, he is driven out of the country; and although he is recalled to fight the Ammonites, the subsequent report of his death in the Hebrew text of 12.7 says that he was buried *in the cities of Gilead*, rather than in any one specific place.[10] Even the manner of his daughter's death reinforces this picture of isolation. She is offered as a burnt offering, which means being slaughtered and then burned to ashes on the altar, so that she is eliminated as completely as if she had never lived. Thus, neither father nor daughter has an identifiable place of burial, the one form of physical memorial that in the absence of descendants might keep their names alive for future generations. In this way, the text maintains to the end the picture of Jephthah as a generic Gileadite who has no identifiable origin and no identifiable destination.[11]

Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, then, is just one element among several that bespeak Jephthah's destiny of extinction. But although this might answer the 'what' question—what is going on in narrative terms when Jephthah sacrifices his daughter—it does not answer the 'how' question, which is about the ideology that allows a man to sacrifice his daughter with impunity: how is it possible that Jephthah can do this without anyone attempting to stop him? The issue becomes particularly pressing when the narrative of Jephthah's daughter is compared with the two other Old Testament narratives in which Israelite figures set out to sacrifice their own children. The most well-known is Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22.1–19), but there is also the incident in 1 Samuel 14 where king Saul makes an oath which his son Jonathan then unwittingly transgresses, thereby

[7] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology, 13 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 94; Schneider, *Judges*, 162.

[8] Perhaps, too, making Jephthah the son of a harlot is a way of underscoring his mercenary character—like a harlot, he will go where he gets the best profit, regardless of group or kinship loyalty. Indeed, the reaction to Jephthah by the Gileadites can also be likened to the treatment of a harlot—just as the harlot is ostracized socially but tolerated when her services are required, so Jephthah is ostracized by his 'brothers' or fellow Gileadites but is tolerated when his services are required. Jephthah is to the Gileadites militarily what the harlot is to them sexually.

[9] This point is also made by J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Tragic Vision and Biblical Narrative: The Case of Jephthah', in ead. (ed.), *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 59–83 (65).

[10] The fifth-century CE midrashic commentary *Genesis Rabbah* 60.3 takes the Hebrew literally; it argues that Jephthah died a painful death in which his limbs dropped off as he went round the cities and were buried where they fell, and that this was his punishment for sacrificing his daughter. See Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*, 3 vols., Brown Judaic Studies, 104–6 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), II: 316.

[11] Similarly Exum, 'The Tragic Vision', 72. Francis Landy, 'Gilead and the Fatal Word', in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Jerusalem, August 4–12 1985. Division A: The Period of the Bible* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 39–44, identifies a slightly different pattern of social and geographical exclusion in the Jephthah narrative. He argues that Jephthah's descent marks him out as a marginal figure and an outsider, and that both of the places where Jephthah lives, Gilead and Tob, are ambiguous frontier lands in relation to the rest of Israel (40–1).

bringing sin on the people and making Jonathan liable for the death penalty. Both Abraham and Saul are prevented from killing their sons. Abraham is prevented by God himself, who at the last moment tells Abraham not to harm the lad and provides a ram as a substitute (Gen. 22.12–13), and Saul is prevented by the Israelites, who protest against Saul's intention and ransom Jonathan so that he is not killed (1 Sam. 14.45). Not so for Jephthah's daughter; as was noted earlier, not a word of protest is raised to prevent her being sacrificed, and she dies by her father's hand.[12] Nor is she the only example in the Old Testament of a virgin daughter who is deemed expendable in a crisis. Although there are no other narratives of daughter *sacrifice*, in both Genesis 19 and Judges 19 fathers offer their virgin daughters as victims to a hostile mob in order to prevent the mob from molesting the fathers' male houseguests. All these examples suggest that Jephthah is enabled to sacrifice his daughter by an ideology of expendability that attaches to women in general and virgin daughters in particular.[13]

But this in turn raises the question of why daughters should be expendable. The answer to this question seems to be that sons have functions that are important in the public domain, and therefore to the well-being of the nation as a whole, whereas daughters do not. In the first place, as already discussed, sons beget, and so it is they who maintain the identity and lineage of the nation. But in addition to this, sons are governors and warriors, thereby once again maintaining the stability and security of the community. These factors are clearly at work in the narratives of Abraham and Isaac, and Saul and Jonathan. As future progenitor of the nation, Isaac is evidently *not* expendable, and it is precisely this fact that makes God's command to sacrifice him such a fearsome test of Abraham's faith, as well as ultimately ensuring that he is not sacrificed. Jonathan for his part is *not* expendable because he is a skilled warrior at a time when the country is under attack from the neighbouring Philistines, and it is this that makes the people ransom him. 'Shall Jonathan die, when he has achieved this great salvation in Israel?' they say (1 Sam. 14.45). 'Like hell he will!' Jonathan is far too valuable a military asset to be slaughtered on a whim, oath or no oath. But Jephthah's daughter is not a progenitor of the nation—in fact, she is not a progenitor at all. She can bear, but she cannot beget, and so she cannot maintain the lineage and identity of the nation. Indeed, far from maintaining it, the example of Jephthah's harlot mother suggests that his daughter (like any daughter) could actually become a threat to the nation's lineage and identity. Neither does Jephthah's daughter have any function in the public realms of government or battle; her

[12] The Targum of Judg. 11.39 (second–seventh century CE) is clearly uncomfortable at the apparent ease with which Jephthah sacrifices his daughter, and adds a statement at the end of the verse to the effect that offering children as holocausts was thenceforth forbidden by law. It also states that Jephthah did not consult Phinehas the high priest, but if he had done, Phinehas would have advised him on the possibility of redeeming his daughter with blood (i.e. an animal sacrifice). See Daniel J. Harrington and Anthony J. Saldarini, *Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets*, The Aramaic Bible, 10 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 83.

[13] On the concept of the expendability of virgin daughters, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 172–5; Anne Michele Tapp, 'An Ideology of Expendability: Virgin Daughter Sacrifice in Genesis 19.1–11, Judges 11.30–39 and 19.22–26', in Mieke Bal (ed.), *Anti-Covenant: Counter Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 157–74.

death will have no detrimental effect on the war effort or the stability of the community, because she contributes to neither. She is needed for nothing; therefore, she is expendable, and so she is sacrificed.

In his well-known study *Violence and the Sacred*, anthropologist René Girard comments on the principles that govern how human victims are selected for sacrifice. Girard argues that in societies where human sacrifice is practised, the superficially diverse categories of sacrificial victim all consist of those who are perceived as in some way marginal to the sacrificing community. Thus, typical victims include prisoners of war, slaves, children, unmarried adolescents, and the disabled.[14] When the scenario of Jephthah's daughter is viewed in the light of this principle, the reason for her expendability becomes clear: from the perspective of the men who are doing the sacrificing—and incidentally, it is always the men who offer sacrifice[15]—she is completely other. From the perspective of the adult male Israelite sacrificing community, Jonathan son of Saul is a completely unsuitable victim, because as a healthy adult male Israelite, he is a fully integrated and participatory member of the sacrificing class in Israel. To sacrifice him would be the equivalent of self-mutilation for the sacrificing class; it would be to turn the cathartic power of sacrificial violence against the sacrificers themselves, like the body's immune system attacking the body's own cells instead of foreign ones. Isaac son of Abraham is more marginal, because he is only a child or at most an unmarried adolescent; but although he is 'other' in terms of his age, he is nevertheless a male, which means that he has a link with the adult norm that constitutes the basis of full membership in the society. But the unnamed daughter of Jephthah has neither age nor sex on her side. She still lives with her father, which implies that like Isaac she is at most an unmarried adolescent; and she is a female, which means that she has nothing in common with the adult norm by which full membership in the society is reckoned, nor indeed will she ever have. From the perspective of an adult male, an adolescent female is completely other, and so she can be sacrificed with impunity.

This, then, accounts for the 'how' of the sacrifice—what makes it possible for a young woman to be sacrificed at all; but not for the 'why', that is, for the rationale behind the vow and the resultant sacrifice. Jephthah's vow is surely the equivalent of one that would give a portion of the victor's spoil to the Lord, and in this instance it can be argued that Jephthah's own people and household are conceived of as part of the spoil inasmuch as they are protected from and so in a sense recovered from the Ammonites.[16] Hence, in the same way that human

[14] René Girard, *La Violence et Le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1974), 27.

[15] For a discussion of this, see Nancy Jay, 'Sacrifice as Remedy for Being Born of Woman', in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1987), 283–309.

[16] W. Lee Humphreys, 'The Story of Jephthah and the Tragic Vision: A Response to J. Cheryl Exum', in Exum (ed.), *Signs and Wonders*, 85–96, comments that Jephthah's vow has no clear link with the conflict, 'for example, through dedication of the spoils of victory or something of that sort' (87). He does not seem to think it a possibility to regard the victor's preserved household as having anything to do with the conflict. Bal, 'Between Altar and Wondering [*sic*] Rock: Toward a Feminist Philology', in *Anti-Covenant*, 211–31, draws a parallel between Jephthah's daughter and Achsah the daughter of Caleb in Judges 1, who is given by her father as a reward to Othniel for capturing the town of Kiriath-sepher; instead of being given to a human husband, Jephthah's daughter is given to the male deity

conquerors can take unmarried, virgin women as spoil from their defeated enemies (cf. Num. 31.17–18), the deity in a fit of anthropomorphism chooses Jephthah's unmarried, virgin daughter as his share of the spoil. When seen in this light, the sacrifice can be read as a metaphor for sexual union with the deity, especially if, as some scholars argue, the two months that the girl spends bewailing her virginity on the mountains reflect some kind of pre-marital rite of passage.[17] The penetration of the sacrificial knife and the resultant flow of blood becomes the equivalent of first intercourse, and the subsequent burning to ashes ensures the woman's total commitment to the male who has chosen her. Indeed, metaphorically speaking, whenever a woman has sex for the first time, a virgin dies; but in the case of Jephthah's daughter, the metaphor and the reality have changed places. For her, it is not a case of sex as metaphorical death, but death as metaphorical sex.

In the biblical narrative, then, the death of Jephthah's daughter is part of the whole pattern of his life, a life that comes from obscurity, is spent in isolation and ends in annihilation. Jephthah has no clear origins because his mother was a harlot, and no hope of establishing his own family line because his only child is a daughter; in this context, the sacrifice of his daughter pitilessly exposes his genealogical vulnerability, and eradicates all physical traces of his offspring, just as at his own death he has no identifiable burial site. However, the daughter's sacrifice also exposes her vulnerability; her inability to provide Jephthah with descendants, together with her general secondary status as a woman, makes her expendable and therefore sacrificeable in a way that would not be true of a son. Hence, she is available to be given to the deity as spoil, in a ritual of death that both mirrors and replaces sex as her exit from her virgin state.

GEORGE BUCHANAN, *JEPHTHES, SIVE VOTUM*

Unsurprisingly, Morell's libretto for Handel's oratorio shows no awareness of such complicated genealogical symbolizations; rather, it portrays a fully-fledged human tragedy for both father and daughter, in which not only is Jephtha tortured by the necessity of fulfilling his vow at the cost of his daughter's life, but the daughter has her impending marital happiness cut short (she is engaged to be married, to one of Jephtha's victorious soldiers). However, for all its distinctive features, Morell's treatment is not entirely original. For its main outlines it draws heavily on a play by the sixteenth-century Scottish humanist and intellectual George Buchanan (1506–82), a sometime tutor to Mary Queen of Scots and

(213). The difficulty with this is that it seems to imply that Jephthah intends to sacrifice his daughter, whereas viewing the sacrifice as dedication of spoil to the deity allows for the deity to demand the portion of spoil that will be dedicated regardless of Jephthah's own intentions.

[17] For this approach, see Beth Gerstein, 'A Ritual Processed: A Look at Judges 11:40', in Bal, *Anti-Covenant*, 175–93 (186); Bal, 'Between Altar and Wondering [*sic*] Rock', 214–18. Peggy L. Day, 'From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter', in ead., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 58–74, sees behind the narrative a ritual celebration of menarche.

James VI, who spent much of his adult life in France and Portugal.[18] In the 1540s, while teaching at the College de Guyenne, a boys' school in Bordeaux, Buchanan transformed the narrative of Jephthah's daughter into a neo-classical Latin tragedy to be performed by his pupils,[19] modelling it on two plays of Euripides' which both include the sacrifice of a virgin daughter, namely, *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Hecuba*.[20] The resulting treatment of the Old Testament narrative is entitled *Jephthes, sive votum* ('Jephthah, or, the vow'), and indeed, over half of it (ll. 495–1330, i.e. 836 out of 1450 lines[21]) focuses on the question of whether or not it is right for Jephthah to fulfil his vow at the cost of his daughter's life. This of course is precisely the debate that is so conspicuously absent from the biblical narrative, and a (much shorter) version of it is later included by Morell in his libretto. But as well as the detailed focus on the vow, there are a number of other significant ways in which Buchanan has adapted the biblical narrative for his play, some of which would also be borrowed by Morell, as will become clear.

The first important adaptation is in the prologue, which sets the context of Jephthah's military exploits. Here, an angel explains that the reason for choosing a man of low birth to deliver the nation is so that the people will realize that they owe their deliverance to God, not to their own strength of arms (ll. 41–51). Moreover, the angel continues, in order to ensure that Jephthah himself remains humble, enormous grief will overwhelm him as a result of his vow, in order to shatter his pride (ll. 51–67). Thus, both Jephthah's low birth and the outcome of his vow are incorporated into the theological scheme that dominates the whole prologue and contextualizes the play: too much experience of God's goodness breeds complacency, arrogance, and apostasy, and so God deliberately inflicts periodic hardship (including war) in order to recall the people to their proper devotions (ll. 15–32). According to this understanding, Jephthah's questionable origins and sacrificed daughter are not simply expressions of Jephthah's isolation and ultimate annihilation, but reflect a broader concern on the part of God to engender in both the nation and its heroes an appropriately deferential attitude.

The second important adaptation is the way in which Jephthah's vow is presented. The Hebrew version of the vow in Judg. 11.30–1 uses masculine singular forms to refer to the creature or person that comes out of the house to meet Jephthah, which makes it quite legitimate to translate the vow, '*Whoever* comes out of my house, . . . I will sacrifice *him*'. This is partly because the Hebrew

[18] The definitive biography of Buchanan is I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Duckworth, 1981). A summary of Buchanan's biographical details is given in D. M. Abbott, 'Buchanan, George (1506–1582)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3837, accessed 28 July 2011>.

[19] Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 134–5.

[20] For details of Buchanan's debt to Euripides and other classical authors for *Jephthes*, see P. G. Walsh, 'Buchanan and Classical Drama', in I. D. McFarlane (ed.), *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Sanctandreani: Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, St Andrews, 24 August to 1 September 1982*, Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts and Studies, 38 (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1986), 99–112 (103–12).

[21] Line numbers and Latin textual quotations are taken from the edition of the text in George Buchanan, *Tragedies*, ed. by P. Sharratt and P.G. Walsh (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983).

language has no neuter gender and so no way of saying 'whatever' rather than 'whoever'; but it could also be because Jephthah envisages a human victim from the start (although presumably not his daughter). Indeed, the Hebrew vocabulary used to describe the action of coming out of the house to meet Jephthah is more appropriately used of humans than of animals;[22] and the biblical narrative is inexplicable without the assumption that human sacrifice was acceptable under certain circumstances. So Jephthah's vow is ambiguous; it is not clear whether he means an animal or a human. But there is no such ambiguity in Buchanan's play. Unlike Hebrew, Latin does have a neuter gender, and Buchanan uses it in his presentation of the vow. In the prologue, the angel says that Jephthah has promised to make a sacrifice of *whatever* (*quodcumque*, l. 58) should first come to meet him.[23] Later on, Jephthah himself reiterates the vow, and promises as a sacrificial victim the first *thing* (*quod primum*, l. 484) that meets him from his house. In this way, it is made clear that Jephthah does *not* envisage a human sacrifice, and so when his daughter comes to meet him the shock is quite devastating. The vow has been offered in good faith, but it has been turned against Jephthah in a way that he never intended.[24] Gone is the biblical narrative's fatalistic acquiescence that springs from an acceptance of human sacrifice in general and virgin daughter sacrifice in particular; now, there is a clear sense that it would be morally wrong to sacrifice the girl. This provides the tension that gives the plot its interest, by setting up a God-inflicted moral dilemma: is it a greater sin to neglect a vow to the Almighty, or to kill one's daughter in fulfilment of the vow? The resolution of this dilemma forms the heart of the play.[25]

Having set up this dilemma by the wording of Jephthah's vow, Buchanan then makes a third major alteration by means of which the dilemma is explored: drawing on his Euripidean models, he introduces several other characters, all of whom plead with Jephthah not to sacrifice his daughter. Most striking by comparison with the biblical narrative is the introduction of Jephthah's wife, whom Buchanan names Storge (a Greek word for the affection between parents and children). There is also a friend of Jephthah called Symmachus (meaning 'fellow fighter', and implying a comrade in arms), and a priest whom Jephthah consults for advice over what to do about his vow.[26] Finally, there is a chorus of young women who comment on the action at intervals, thereby both expressing and

[22] David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1986), 13–14. The Hebrew text reads, הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדַּלְתֵי בֵיתִי לִקְרָאתִי [*hayyôṣē" ᵃšer yēsē middaltē bêtî liqrā'tî*].

[23] Contrast the Vulgate of Judg. 11.31, which follows the Hebrew exactly by using the masculine pronoun, thereby clearly envisaging a human (though male) victim: '*quicumque* primus fuerit *egressus* de foribus domus meae mihique occurrerit revertenti cum pace a filiis Ammon *eum* holocaustum offeram Domino.'

[24] John R. C. Martyn, 'The Tragedies of Buchanan, Teive and Ferreira', in McFarlane, *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Sanctandreani*, 85–98, thinks that the angel regards Jephthah's vow as rash (87), but there is no indication in the text that the vow is seen as rash.

[25] As Shuger puts it, 'Jephthah is about the moral heteronomy of God: whether, according to the judgments of human reason, God delights in evil' (*Renaissance Bible*, 138).

[26] The introduction of a priest to advise Jephthah may reflect the Jewish tradition in *Genesis Rabbah* 60.3 and the Targum to Judg. 11.39 that had Jephthah gone to the high priest Phinehas to ask advice, he would have been told to redeem his daughter by sacrificing an animal instead. See notes 12 above and 40 below.

manipulating the audience's perception of the course of events. This all transforms the sense of isolation in the biblical narrative into a highly charged, emotional scenario, with Jephthah tormented by the tension between the perceived irrevocability of his vow and his love for his daughter whom everyone else is urging him to spare.

The daughter herself is rescued from the shadows of anonymity and given the name Iphis, in a clear allusion to the classical myth of Iphigenia who was doomed to be sacrificed by her father Agamemnon in order to facilitate the success of the Greek army in their campaign against Troy. Iphis's characterization owes more to the Euripidean Iphigenia than to the biblical daughter of Jephthah; although she does ultimately agree to die and relieve her father (ll. 1256–81), an outcome which is in line with the biblical narrative, she does not do so without having first attempted to dissuade him from his plan (ll. 1215–28). In fact, so feisty is she that when Jephthah is overcome at her decision to die and resolves to die himself in her place (ll. 1297–1313), she dismisses the idea and tells him not to weaken her own resolve by his gentle words (ll. 1314–18).[27] In this way, her death is shown as her own choice that is made in the face of a proffered alternative, rather than as the fatalistic acceptance of patriarchal power by a powerless victim.

But when it comes to the way in which Iphis's death and its significance are depicted, there is a fascinating transformation. Physically speaking, Iphis remains a young woman to the end of the play; but once she leaves the stage for the last time having resolved to die, she undergoes a kind of conceptual sex change. First, she is praised by the chorus for her courage and manly spirit (*animi nimium virgo virilis*, l. 1333) through which she puts to shame all those men who are afraid to die for their nation (ll. 1331–60). Then the messenger who comes to report her death to Storge speaks of Iphis's 'firmness of heart beyond her sex' (*supra . . . sexum pectoris constantiam*, l. 1392), and in an echo of the chorus's words he calls her a 'girl of manly spirit' (*animi virilis . . . puella*, l. 1410). The messenger's account of the sacrifice also emphasizes Iphis's amazing bravery and self-control,[28] in contrast to those around her, who are all weeping and trembling—including Jephthah and the priest who is to perform the sacrifice (ll. 1378–92, 1400–4, 1410–34). So in her death, whilst physically remaining a young girl (ll. 1393–9), spiritually speaking Iphis exchanges maidenhood for manhood.[29] As if to highlight this conceptual sex change, Buchanan omits all mention of the

[27] In Buchanan's Euripidean model, Iphigenia pleads with her father Agamemnon not to sacrifice her, but Agamemnon remains resolute and leaves her alone with her mother Clytemnestra. The warrior Achilles enters and reports that the Greek army is demanding Iphigenia as a sacrifice, but that he plans to save her by single-handedly fighting them off. At the sight of Achilles preparing to fight for her, Iphigenia says that she has changed her mind and is ready to die in order to secure the success of the expedition and resulting security of Greece. Both Achilles and Clytemnestra try and dissuade her, but she reiterates her decision to die, and tells Clytemnestra not to weaken her resolve by tears or words. Buchanan has obviously borrowed from this set of exchanges for his depiction of Iphis.

[28] Once again, a similar motif appears in *Iphigenia at Aulis*; the messenger reports to Clytemnestra that *πᾶς δ' ἐθάμβησεν κλύων εὐψυχίαν τε κἀρετὴν τῆς παρθένου* ('All were amazed when they heard the maiden's courage and excellence'; 1561–2).

[29] Walsh, 'Buchanan and Classical Drama', 109, notes that Buchanan borrowed the image of the warrior girl from Erasmus's translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and suggests that Buchanan has in mind at this point Joan of Arc, 'another virgin patriot', who put on her male clothes before being burned at the stake.

biblical statement that the girl bewailed her virginity for two months prior to the sacrifice; indeed, once Iphis has made up her mind to die, she urges that the deed be done as soon as possible (ll. 1320–3).[30]

Alongside this conceptual sex change, the significance of the sacrifice is altered from its significance in the biblical narrative. There, as argued earlier, the vow was presented implicitly as a dedication of spoil to the victorious deity, so that the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter could be viewed as the equivalent of her sexual union with the deity. Here, however, the sacrifice is described explicitly as atonement for the slaughter of the Ammonites (ll. 1294–6), and as expiation for Israel's apostasy (ll. 1416–19). So instead of fulfilling her womanhood by being united with the deity in the quasi-sexual rite of sacrifice, Iphis the manly maiden transcends her womanly identity to become a kind of warrior, in that she lays down her life as part of the campaign to secure her country from the Ammonites.[31] In this version of events, therefore, death replaces sex instead of becoming a metaphor for it.

In the biblical version, then, the narrative shows the death of Jephthah's daughter as part of his own tragedy of isolation, and the daughter's sex both determines her sacrificeability and the significance of the sacrifice. In Buchanan's presentation, however, Iphis's sacrifice is part of Jephthah's tragedy, but it is primarily intended by God to humble Jephthah, not to cut off his line of descent. No longer is it acceptable to sacrifice human beings at all, and so in place of the ready acceptance of the demand to sacrifice there is an extended moral debate over whether the sacrifice should be carried out. Finally, there are quite different sexual overtones to the sacrifice; instead of being virgin spoil who is dedicated to God in a rite that substitutes for sex, Iphis transcends her womanly body by means of her manly spirit, and dies as a warrior on behalf of her country in a sacrifice of atonement.

The question now is therefore how Morell's treatment of the Jephthah narrative, and particularly of the daugher's sacrifice, compares to both the biblical text and Buchanan's play, and to what effect.

[30] The telescoped action in comparison with the biblical narrative is probably a result of Buchanan adhering to the classical demand for unity of time, which means that all the action of the play has to take place within the space of a single day (so Klaas Spronk, 'The Daughter of Jephthah: Changing Views on God, Man, and Violence in Plays and Oratorios since George Buchanan', in Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (eds.), *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, JSOTSup, 400/BTC, 3 (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 10–21 (14)). However, the telescoping has the effect of underlining the conceptual sex change, because it removes features which in the biblical account emphasize Iphis's femininity, namely, her female friends and the bewailing of her virginity.

[31] This 'conceptual sex change' along with the atoning nature of the sacrifice in Buchanan is extremely interesting in the light of the observation that Jephthah's daughter is seen in the biblical commentary tradition as a precursor of Christ. See James H. McGregor, 'The Sense of Tragedy in George Buchanan's Jephthes', *Humanistica Lovaniensia: Journal of Neo-Latin Studies*, 31 (1982), 120–40 (134). See also note 46 below. Indeed, Shuger, *Renaissance Bible*, 147–8, argues that Buchanan's Iphis is the first female type of Christ in Christian literature.

THOMAS MORELL AND THE LIBRETTO FOR HANDEL'S *JEPHTHA*

As remarked earlier, in writing the libretto for *Jephtha* Morell was clearly dependent upon Buchanan for many of the details in his presentation.[32] Like Buchanan, he included a number of characters not present in the biblical narrative, and the characters themselves are very similar to those in Buchanan's play. Thus, Jephtha's daughter is named Iphis, and she is given a mother whose name is Storge. As a classical scholar,[33] Morell would have been well aware of the resonances of both these names. A third character that Morell introduces is Hamor, Iphis's fiancé and one of Jephtha's soldiers. The idea of including Iphis's fiancé may have been inspired by Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, where in order to persuade Iphigenia to come to the Greeks' camp at Aulis for sacrifice, the girl is told that she is to be engaged to the warrior Achilles from her father's army. In terms of oratorio conventions, too, the inclusion of a fiancé for Iphis has several advantages: it gives the plot a love-interest, creates the opportunity for a duet between the happy couple, and provides a role for a castrato. Finally, Morell replaces Buchanan's character Symmachus with one of his own named Zebul, who is Jephtha's brother, fellow-soldier, and confidante. As well as similarities in the *dramatis personae*, there are also similarities of plot between Morell and Buchanan. These are particularly noticeable in Morell's libretto from the middle of Part I[34] to the end of Part II, which looks like a potted version of Buchanan's lengthy series of debates over the rights and wrongs of sacrificing Iphis.

However, where Morell departs strikingly from both Buchanan and the biblical text is in the way he handles the fulfilment of Jephthah's vow. The biblical story is one that has generated an enormous amount of commentary from antiquity onwards,[35] and the eighteenth century produced its fair share of this commentary, centring around the story's primitive portrayal of an angry and cruel God who was willing to accept the sacrifice of children.[36] Indeed, by the time Morell was producing his libretto a number of scholars had preached and published material

[32] An English translation of Buchanan's play by William Tait had been published in 1750. See Kenneth Nott, '"Heroick Vertue": Handel and Morell's "Jephtha" in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources', *M & L*, 77 (1996), 194–208 (196).

[33] In 1748 Morell himself had produced an edition of four Euripidean plays (*Hecuba*, *Orestes*, *Phoenissae*, and *Alcestis*) for use at Eton, for the first three giving the Greek text and ancient scholastic notes together with a Latin translation of the main text as published by John King in the 1720s, and for the fourth giving his own edition and translation; and in 1749 he published an English translation of *Hecuba*. Although Morell apparently did not produce an edition of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, he was clearly familiar with the Euripidean tragedies, and would no doubt have recognized Buchanan's allusions to them.

[34] Specifically, from I.5, where Storge speaks of the dreams that have terrified her and filled her with foreboding.

[35] For a survey of the wide range of views on the story that existed prior to the eighteenth century, see John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 100–78; David M. Gunn, *Judges*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 133–50.

[36] See Nott, '"Heroick Vertue"', 199; Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 338, 434 n. 10.

on the story in an attempt to show, by a combination of logic and philology, that Jephthah did not sacrifice his daughter, and never intended to sacrifice any human who came out to meet him on his return from battle.[37] The arguments were not new, nor were they confined to the Christian exegetical tradition; but they were pressed into service with great vigour in an age when it was becoming increasingly necessary for churchmen to defend the rationality of biblical faith and show God as an Enlightenment gentleman intellectual rather than as a primitive vengeful tyrant.[38] The central plank in this apologetic tradition used an interpretation first

[37] An elaborate defence of the Jephthah story along these lines is given in a sermon preached by W. Romaine, and later published, entitled *Jepthah's Vow fulfilled, and his Daughter not Sacrificed, Proved in a Sermon Preached before the University, at St Mary's in Oxford* (London, 1744). Romaine's remarks well illustrate how problematic the story was in the contemporary intellectual climate. Of Jephthah's vow, he says, 'This Vow has been the Subject of much Ridicule; it has been represented as rashly made and immorally executed, and the Scripture itself has suffered through the Character of Jepthah' (1). Commenting on the idea that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in fulfilment of the vow, he says that such an act is 'so contrary to the Laws of GOD and Man, . . . that it is not easy to conceive, how it came to pass, that such an Opinion was ever entertained at all, much less how it became so general; especially as no historical Passage of Scripture has laid more open to the wanton Jests of the Infidel, or is more difficult to be explained by the sober Believer' (3). See also Nott's discussion of the commentaries of Simon Patrick and Samuel Humphreys ('"Heroick Vertue"', 195–200). Arguments against supposing that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter appear in a number of other contemporary commentaries, both learned and popular. See Thomas Ellwood, *Sacred History: or, The Historical Part of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament*, 2nd edn. (London, 1720), 212–14; Edward Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: being the Books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth* (Oxford, 1725), 55–6; Thomas Pyle, *A Paraphrase with Short and Useful Notes on the Books of the Old Testament. Vol. III* (London, 1725), 190–3; William Wall, *Critical Notes on the Old Testament, Volume I* (London, 1734), 171–2. Not all commentators, however, thought that Jephthah's daughter was spared. Samuel Smith, *The Family Companion: or, Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (London, 1739), in 'Dissertation III' following his comments on Judges, and Thomas Stackhouse, *A New History of the Holy Bible, from the Beginning of the World, to the Establishment of Christianity*, 2nd edn. (London, 1742), 614–19, conclude that Jephthah did in fact sacrifice his daughter, but that (in Stackhouse's words) it was a wicked and abominable act that was in no way acceptable to God, even if it did proceed from a mistaken principle of religion (617). A more sympathetic reading of Jephthah's act in sacrificing his daughter is offered by John Marchant, *An Exposition on the Books of the Old Testament, Extracted from the Writings of the Best Authors, Antient and Modern; in which difficult Texts are explained, many Mis-translations rectify'd, and seeming Contradictions reconcil'd* (London, 1745). Marchant (344–6) gives a detailed review of the arguments on both sides of the question, and concludes that Jephthah did in fact sacrifice the girl, but that 'how great soever this sin of Jepthah's was, yet, properly speaking, it was the Sin of Ignorance and the Effect of a misguided Conscience. . . . Nothing less, than a mistaken Opinion of the indispensible Obligation of his Vow, could prevail with him, thus to over-rule the strong Motives of Interest and Inclination, and a Mistake which took its Rise from so good a Principle, must, without Question, at least extenuate the Guilt in the Judgment both of good-natured Men, and of an all-merciful God' (346). Marchant here is quoting from pp. 227–8 of an earlier published sermon by George Smalridge ('Jephthah's Vow', in *Sixty sermons preach'd on several occasions* (London, 2nd edn., 1727), 220–30), in which Smalridge debunks the arguments against the idea that the daughter was sacrificed, saying that they were 'first started by some fanciful Rabbins of a later age, and afterwards greedily laid hold of by some Popish writers, to favour their new doctrine concerning vows of a monastick and single life' (223). Smalridge concludes therefore that Jephthah did in fact sacrifice his daughter, and then goes on to draw lessons from it about proper conduct in making and paying vows and in the treatment of one's children.

[38] W. Neil poses the dilemma of orthodoxy in the face of deist criticism thus: 'How could the essentially time-conditioned figure of Jehovah, as presented in the Bible, at worst a Jewish tribal deity, at best the creator and ruler of a midget globe, be reconciled with the God of the philosophers?' ('The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible, 1700–1950', in S. L. Greenslade (ed.), *The Cambridge*

introduced by the renowned mediaeval rabbinic commentator David Kimchi (1160–1235),[39] to argue that those who thought that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter had misinterpreted his vow. The standard interpretation of the vow was, '. . . whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me . . . shall surely be the Lord's, *and* I will offer it up as a burnt offering'. However, Kimchi argued, the Hebrew conjunction וְ[*w*^{e}] that is translated 'and' in the phrase '*and* I will offer it up as a burnt offering' can also be translated 'or'; so what Jephthah meant was, '. . . whatever comes out . . . shall surely be the Lord's, *or* I shall offer it up as a burnt offering'. The point is, Jephthah could not know who or what was likely to come out, and as generations of exegetes prior to Kimchi had pointed out it could very easily be something (or someone) unacceptable under the Jewish Law as a sacrificial victim, such as a dog or an ass,[40] or indeed, a human being. So Jephthah cannily hedges his bets, and says, 'If whatever comes out is not suitable for sacrifice, then it shall be dedicated to the Lord, but if it is suitable, then it shall be sacrificed.' Hence, when Jephthah's daughter comes out to meet him, because she is not suitable for sacrifice she is dedicated to the Lord in some other way, and this, according to Kimchi, meant that she became a celibate recluse. He deduces this both from the statement in Judg. 11.37 that the daughter asks for time to bewail not her life but her virginity, and from the fact that the text does not actually state that Jephthah killed her.

Morell was obviously aware of these arguments, and would have understood them well; he was a clergyman as well as a classical scholar, and had a knowledge of Hebrew. So it is no surprise to find that he incorporates them into his oratorio libretto.[41] The first important move he makes is to show Jephtha's vow as being unequivocally inspired by the spirit of God:

History of the Bible. III. *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 238–93 (242).)

[39] Details of Kimchi's arguments are given in Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow*, 8, 17–18. Simon Patrick, in his discussion of Jephthah's vow, refers to 'the Kimchi's' (i.e. David and his father Joseph, to whom David attributed the argument) and cites their argument. See Patrick, *A Commentary upon the Historical Books of the Old Testament, Vol. II*, 3rd edn. (London, 1727), 146, 147.

[40] Detailed exploration of this point comes in *Genesis Rabbah* 60.3, where in a discussion arising from Gen. 24.13–14 about how to ask God for things in a proper way Jephthah is said to have asked God improperly, with the result that God responded improperly to his request. In making his vow, Jephthah took no cognizance of the possibility that an animal unfit for sacrifice might be the first thing to come out of the house, so God designated Jephthah's daughter to come out of the house and greet him. Jephthah could have redeemed his daughter by a monetary payment, but did not; Phinehas the priest could have released Jephthah from his vow, but both men were too proud to approach each other; the net result was that the daughter was sacrificed. Both men were, however, punished for this: Jephthah's limbs fell off one by one, and the Holy Spirit was taken away from Phinehas. See Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, II: 315–17. For a survey and discussion of Jewish post-biblical interpretations of the narrative, see Michaela Bauks, *Jephtas Tochter: Traditions-, religions- und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studien zu Richter 11,29–40*, FAT, 71 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 96–126. Mikael Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence: The Jephthah Narrative in Antiquity and Modernity*, The Bible in the Modern World, 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 72–118, discusses two other important early (*c*. first century CE) Jewish versions of the Jephthah narrative, in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and in *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*.

[41] In fact, Kimchi's interpretation of the vow in Judg. 11.31 was included in the KJV marginalia from 1611 onwards as an alternative translation of the Hebrew text, as was the concomitant alternative translation of Judg. 11.40 whereby the daughters of Israel would come year by year to talk to Jephthah's daughter (presumably to comfort her in her celibate isolation) rather than coming to lament her four

> What mean these doubtful Fancies of the Brain?
> Visions of Joy rise in my raptur'd Soul,
> There play awhile, and set in darksome Night.
> Strange Ardour fires my Breast; my Arms seem strung
> With tenfold Vigour, and my crested Helm
> To reach the Skies.—Be humble still, my Soul.—
> *It is the Spirit of God*; in whose great Name
> I offer up my Vow. (I.4, p. 5)

In doing this, Morell is removing the ambiguity of the biblical text, where although Jephthah offers his vow *after* having been endowed with the spirit of God, it is unclear whether or not he offers it *as a result of* being endowed with the spirit of God. Buchanan for his part makes no mention of the Spirit in connection with Jephthah making his vow, and shows Jephthah reiterating the vow after his victory over the Ammonites, in full possession of his faculties and influenced by nothing but his own thankful heart. But Morell's Jephtha clearly speaks his vow under the overwhelming influence of the Spirit; and the elimination of this ambiguity over the vow's motivation leads to the elimination of the ambiguity in its wording. Instead of leaving open the possibility that the vow might either have envisaged a human victim (as in the Hebrew text) or might accidentally be applied to one (as in Buchanan), Morell's version of the vow reflects the exegetical argument that the vow would cause a creature unsuitable for sacrifice to be dedicated instead to God's service:

> If, Lord, sustained by thy almighty Pow'r,
> *Ammon* I drive, and his insulting Bands,
> From these our long-uncultivated Lands,
> And safe return a glorious Conqueror;—
> What, or who-e'er shall first salute mine Eyes,
> Shall be for ever thine; or fall a Sacrifice.—
> 'Tis said.—Attend, ye Chiefs, and with one Voice,
> Invoke the holy Name of *Israel*'s God. (I.4, pp. 5–6)

Quite clearly, Morell is operating with the conviction that God would never inspire anyone to make a vow that it would be sinful to honour, and certainly not one that left its offerer open to the possibility of having to make a human

days in the year. To that extent, therefore, the interpretation adopted by Morell for the ending to his libretto was publicly available to anyone who had an edition of the KJV with marginalia, although the reader with no Hebrew would not understand the basis for the alternative translation. This makes Morell's treatment of the narrative less startling, since instead of presenting an interpretation that would only have been known to scholars he was effectively recommending an interpretation that was in public circulation even if it was overlooked by many readers. Indeed, attention is drawn to the marginal reading by Charles Le Cène, in *An essay for a new translation of the Bible*, 2nd edn. (London, 1727). The Jephthah passage is one that he discusses as evidence for the need of a new translation (69–75), because the present translation to the effect that Jephthah sacrificed his daughter is completely contrary to the dictates of religion, and yet it is obvious from the marginal notes on Judg. 11.31 and 11.40 that the translators knew of the alternative tradition by which the daughter was not sacrificed (69). In the 'Essay to the Reader' with which the book begins, the author claims that his aim is to 'remove all the Cavils and Exceptions of Atheists, Deists, and others against the Scriptures, and to shew that what they think ridiculous, is only said by the Translators' (third page).

sacrifice. However, Morell's concern to exonerate the deity spoils the plot of the libretto by making Jephtha's subsequent agonizing over the prospect of sacrificing his daughter redundant and rather forced. If Jephtha has vowed to dedicate *or* to sacrifice whatever meets him, there is no reason for him to make such a fuss about *having* to *sacrifice* his daughter. It might be argued that since he made his vow under the influence of the Spirit, he did not really know what he was saying; but he knows enough to be aware that he vowed to make a sacrifice, so he surely ought to know that he was not *bound* to *sacrifice* whatever it was that met him if it would constitute an inappropriate sacrifice. Morell's answer to this problem, as becomes clear in the final act in the libretto, is to follow an interpretation that appears in at least one contemporary commentator and portray Jephtha as having been mistaken in his understanding of the vow,[42] but this seems rather weak as an explanation, and smacks of the desire to reconcile the irreconcilable.

The final and most dramatic move that Morell makes in his re-presentation of the vow is to introduce an *angelus ex machina* at the end, who intervenes at the moment of sacrifice to prevent the priests from killing Iphis, and explains that Jephtha has misunderstood the vow. The intention, says the angel, was never that Iphis should die but rather that she should be consecrated to a life of celibacy:

> Rise, *Jephtha*,—And, ye reverend Priests, withhold
> The slaughtrous Hand.—No Vow can disannul
> The Law of God.—Nor such was its Intent
> When rightly scann'd;—and yet shall be fulfill'd.—
> Thy Daughter, *Jephtha*, thou must dedicate
> To God, in pure and Virgin-state for ever,
> As not an Object meet for Sacrifice,
> Else had she faln an Holocaust to God.
> The Holy Spirit, that dictated thy Vow,
> Bade thus explain it, and approves your Faith. (III.1, p. 17)

This of course is the natural correlative of Morell's version of the vow, and results in great rejoicing among those who are watching. It seems to have escaped Morell's notice that if this is indeed the correct interpretation of the Hebrew text of Judg. 11.31, then Jephthah's response to it in Judg. 11.35 is hardly one of rejoicing; so in the light of the biblical text Morell's ending might be thought inappropriate. However, in the context of the libretto, the joyful reaction can be interpreted as relief that Iphis is spared death, rather than as joy at the specific outcome of perpetual celibacy.[43]

[42] Patrick, *A Commentary, Vol. II*, 147, 148, argues that Jephthah was mistaken in his understanding of the vow, and that he did not need either to sacrifice his daughter or to dedicate her to celibacy, because under the Jewish Law she could have been redeemed with money, or indeed, according to one Jewish interpreter (i.e. in *Gen. Rab.* 60.3), simply allowed to go free because she was so clearly unsuitable for sacrifice. Patrick's interpretation makes sense in the context of his overall interpretation, namely, that Jephthah needlessly dedicated his daughter to a life of celibacy; but it does not make sense in the context of Morell's view that the daughter's dedication to celibacy was the appropriate outcome of the vow.

[43] Nott, '"Heroick Vertue"', 194 n. 3, comments that so-called 'happy endings' of this type are relatively happy rather than absolutely happy.

But sanitizing the vow is not the only important modification in Morell's version of the narrative. There is also another change, which alters significantly the view of what is at stake in Jephtha's proposed sacrifice of his daughter. Part III of the libretto opens on the morning of the sacrifice, with Jephtha begging the sun to hide its beams, presumably so that the day of sacrifice will not dawn; and he then offers a prayer to the angels to receive Iphis:

> Waft her, Angels, through the Skies
> Far above yon azure Plain;
> Glorious there, like you, to rise,
> There, like you, for ever reign. (III.1, p. 16)

Iphis herself then appears, and urges the priests not to be afraid to carry out the sacrifice, telling them, 'the Call of Heav'n . . . / With humble Resignation I obey' (III.1, p. 16). With this she proceeds to say farewell to the world she knows:

> Farewel, ye limpid Springs and Floods,
> Ye flow'ry Meads, and mazy Woods;
> Farewel, thou busy World, where reign
> Short Hours of Joy, and Years of Pain.
> Brighter Scenes I seek above,
> In the Realms of Peace and Love. (III.1, p. 16)[44]

Thus, both Jephtha and Iphis are represented as believing in a better world to which Iphis has been summoned by God; so even if there is the sorrow of parting, there is not the finality of annihilation. The agony of Jephtha's—and Iphis's—predicament is relieved, because it can be viewed as a mercy; and indeed, Iphis's

[44] Compare Iphigenia's last words before she exits to be sacrificed (*Iphigenia at Aulis*, ll. 1505–9):

> ἰὼ ἰώ
> λαμπαδοῦχος ἁμέρα
> Διός τε φέγγος ἕτερον
> αἰῶνα καὶ μοῖραν οἰκήσομεν
> χαῖρέ μοι φίλον φάος
> [Ah, ah,
> daystar that lights our way,
> Zeus's sunlight, I shall take as ray dwelling
> another life, another lot!
> Farewell, dear light!]

(Text and translation from *Euripedes*. VI. Bacchae, *Iphigenia at Aulis, Rhesus*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs, LCL (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 330–1). Morell may have got the idea for Iphis's air from these words of Iphigenia, but its hopeful sentiments about going to a better place are clearly very different from the Euripidean precursor. On that score there is an interesting comparison between Iphis's air and words from Smalridge's sermon about how some parents by their failure to instil virtue and righteousness into their children are much more cruel to them than Jephthah was to his daughter: 'he depriv'd his daughter of some few years of a short and troublesome life; they do all in their power to defeat their children of the hopes of a blessed and glorious eternity' (Smalridge, 'Jephthah's Vow', 230). The antithesis between the 'short and troublesome life' of which the girl is deprived and the 'blessed and glorious eternity', of which other children are deprived but for which she is by implication destined, is reminiscent of Iphis's sentiments about leaving this pain-filled world for 'brighter scenes . . . in the realms of peace and love'.

impending death is presented as her entry to everlasting existence.[45] This is a strong contrast with the ethos of the biblical narrative, where the idea of an afterlife would not have been available to the society from which the narrative emerged, and where the girl's childless death is not simply her own final extinction but the extinction of those who might have relied upon her to continue their line. It is also a strong contrast with Buchanan, whose play offers no real hope of an

[45] Similar sentiments appear in *Theodora* (*Theodora. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Set to Musick by Mr. Handel* (London: J. Watts and B, Dod. 1750)). When Theodora is arrested for refusing to participate in pagan worship, and is condemned to be prostituted, she prays for death instead:

> Angels, ever bright, and fair,
> Take, O take me to your Care:
> Speed to your own Courts my Flight,
> Clad in Robes of Virgin white. (I.5; p. 7)

Later, alone in prison, pondering on her situation, she says,

> But why art thou disquieted, my Soul?—
> Hark! Heav'n invites thee in sweet rapt'rous Strains
> To join the ever-singing, ever-loving Choir
> Of Saints, and Angels in the Courts above.
> Oh, that I on Wings cou'd rise,
> Swiftly sailing through the Skies,
> As skims the silver Dove;
> That I might rest,
> Forever blest,
> With Harmony and Love. (II.2; p. 11)

Finally, when Theodora and Didymus, a Christian Roman soldier who loves her, are both condemned to death for refusing to observe the pagan rites, Didymus anticipates the blessed future of the faithful:

> Streams of Pleasure ever flowing,
> Fruits ambrosial ever growing,
> Golden Thrones,
> Starry Crowns,
> Are the Triumphs of the Blest.
> When from Life's dull Labours free,
> Clad with Immortality,
> They enjoy a lasting Rest. (III.6, p. 23)

Didymus and Theodora then sing a duet:

> Thither let our Hearts aspire.
> Objects pure of pure Desire,
> Still increasing,
> Ever pleasing,
> Wake the Song, and tune the Lyre,
> Of the blissful holy Choir. (III.6, pp. 23–4)

This all serves to mitigate the harshness of their dying by envisaging a blessed eternity for them after death, which is what would be expected in a Christian context. The striking thing about the appearance of such sentiments in *Jephtha*, though, is that it imposes these concepts upon a pre-Christian narrative where no such concepts exist.

afterlife for Iphis except in the fame that will carry her name round the world (ll. 1340–9).[46]

In place of the biblical picture of sacrificial death *as* sex, then, Morell presents a picture of the sacrificial death *of* sex. But this is not all. With the death of sex, the virgin Iphis is represented as entering the blessed deathless existence with the angels in the here and now, since her celibate state resembles theirs. Indeed, the angel who halts the sacrifice sings an air to Iphis that associates and almost confuses human virgins with angels:

> Happy, *Iphis*, shalt thou live;
> While to thee the Virgin Choir
> Tune their Harps of golden Wire,
> And their yearly Tribute give.[47]
> Happy, *Iphis*, all thy Days,
> (Pure, angelic, Virgin-state,)
> Shalt thou live; and Ages late
> Crown thee with immortal Praise. (III.1, p. 17)

The 'Virgin Choir' with 'Harps of golden Wire' could be either humans or angels, an ambivalence that is heightened by the fact that the 'harps of golden wire' appears to be an allusion to Milton's poem 'At a Solemn Music',[48] in which the heavenly host are described as touching 'their immortal harps of golden wires'. The description of the virgin state as 'pure' and 'angelic' is equally suggestive. Similarly Hamor, whilst clearly downcast at losing his fiancée, describes her in angelic terms:

> 'Tis Heav'n's all-ruling Pow'r
> That checks the rising Sigh;
> Yet let me still adore,
> And think an Angel by:
> While thus each Charm and beauteous Line
> With more than human Lustre shine. (III.2, p. 19)

Of course, this could just be lover's talk, but in the context of the other statements about angelic virginity it is very suggestive. For Iphis, it seems, the death of sex is really a transcendence of death altogether; she now embodies the angelic, deathless state, and is ready to be wafted through the skies to everlasting bliss.

[46] McGregor, 'The Sense of Tragedy', argues that this hope of worldwide, everlasting fame for Iphis in Buchanan's play is dependent upon her status in Christian tradition as a Messianic antetype; just as Iphis's fame will go round the world, so Christ, the hope of the Israelites, expands the limits of the chosen people to the ends of the earth (134). The thought is an interesting one, although it runs the risk of overinterpreting the material.

[47] This reflects the interpretation of Judg. 11.40 as meaning that the daughters of Israel would come year by year to visit Jephthah's daughter, either to converse with her, to bring her gifts, or to celebrate her selfless action. See Ellwood, *Sacred History*, 213; Patrick, *A Commentary, Vol. II*, 148; Samuel Humphreys, *The Sacred Books of the Old and New Testament, Recited at large* (London, 1735), 722; Romaine, *Jepthah's Vow fulfilled*, 16–19.

[48] Derek K. Alsop, 'Artful Anthology: The Use of Literary Sources for Handel's *Jephtha*', *The Musical Quarterly*, 86 (2002), 349–62 (359–60).

CONCLUSION

Morell's libretto, then, incorporates and transforms the sources upon which it draws, in order to present to its audience a reading of the Jephthah story that was not only true to the biblical text but also acceptable in a climate of increased scepticism about the text as a moral and spiritual resource. This transformation is particularly evident when Morell's treatment of the daughter's death is compared with that in the sources upon which he drew. In the biblical narrative, the daughter's death is a symbol of her own and her father's isolation and vulnerability, not least in the face of a distant yet demanding deity, and death replaces sex as the fulfilment of her womanhood by becoming a metaphor for her union with that deity. In Buchanan's play, Iphis's death is intended by a devious and domineering deity to humble Jephthah's pride by afflicting him with great grief, and in her death she transcends her womanly body by means of her manly spirit, dying as a warrior on behalf of her country in a sacrifice of atonement. In Morell's libretto, however, Jephtha has the inspiration and approval throughout of a benevolent God, and the deity's demand for Iphis's death is commuted to that for her celibacy, whereby she dies to sex and is thus transformed into a quasi-deathless being with a blessed existence. There is thus a movement from death as sex, through death as transcending sex, to the death of sex that signifies the death of death; and with that movement, the heathenish, death-dealing deity of the Old Testament story is transformed into the life-giving God of eighteenth-century orthodox Christianity.

Postlude

As fate would have it, *Jephtha* was not only Handel's last oratorio, but his last major composition of any kind. He had struggled to complete *Jephtha* because of problems with his eyesight; a note in the autograph manuscript shows how he had had to abandon its composition for a while in February 1751 because of 'relaxation' in his left eye. The situation had eased somewhat, allowing him to resume work rather laboriously after ten days or so, but the respite was only temporary. During the course of 1751 he lost the sight of his left eye altogether, and although he did eventually finish *Jephtha* in August 1751 and then produce it the following February,[1] his sight thereafter deteriorated steadily. Despite various kinds of medical intervention, one session of which gave rise to the hope that his sight had been permanently restored, by January 1753 Handel was effectively blind. He continued his musical activities as best he could with the help of others until his death in 1759, but with *Jephtha* the Handelian canon of creative compositions had been closed.[2]

It is appropriate that Handel's last major creative work in his adopted country should be an example of the genre that he had stumbled upon and developed in that country for its audiences as an indigenous equivalent of opera. There can be no doubt that despite the variable reception they sometimes enjoyed, the oratorios with their potent mix of operatic form and biblical content had struck a chord among the theatre-going public. To the extent that the oratorios succeeded, they did so by addressing issues that mattered to their audiences using a medium (biblical subject-matter) and a language (English) that the audiences could understand. In a culture of wide biblical literacy, where religious issues engendered both national and international strife because of their public and political implications, and Protestant Established Christianity was an integral part of loyal British identity, Israelite oratorio was uniquely engaging and affirming for British audiences. Topics such as the nature of monarchy (*Saul*; *Belshazzar*), legitimate and

[1] For details of the process of composition for *Jephtha*, see Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959, repr. 2000), 617; Donald Burrows, *Handel*, Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 349–53.

[2] The exception to prove this rule might be *The Triumph of Time and Truth* which Handel produced in 1757 with the help of Thomas Morell and John Christopher Smith the younger. However, this was an English version of Handel's Italian work *Il trionfo del tempo e della verità* (1737), itself a London version of Handel's 1707 oratorio *Il trionfo del tempo e del disinganno*, and although the English version has integrity as a work in its own right, it cannot really be regarded as a new composition. For details of Handel's musical activities during the last years of his life, see Burrows, *Handel*, 359–69.

illegitimate rulers (*Athalia*; *Solomon*), true and false religion (*Deborah*; *Samson*), the proper interpretation of scripture (*Joseph and his Brethren*; *Jephtha*), and British national identity (*Esther*; *Judas Macchabaeus*) were all addressed via the oratorios, together with more intimate and personal matters relating to morality (*Susanna*), social order (*Deborah*), and the nature of religious devotion (*Theodora*; *Jephtha*). However, the oratorios' topicality was in some sense also their weakness in terms of popular durability; as perceptions, issues, and cultures changed, the appeal of the sacred dramas faded. Only the scripture collection *Messiah*, associated with charitable performances at the Foundling Hospital and less overtly political than many of the dramas, continued to have a place—indeed, increased its place—in the British national consciousness, becoming for many the Christian credal statement par excellence, and the embodiment of Handelian oratorio. Thus the oratorio that was, ironically, the most controversial of them all when it premiered in London ended up by completely displacing the others in the affections and awareness of the British public.

But the sacred dramas remain as a fascinating example of biblical exegesis, providing insight into the world of early eighteenth-century biblical interpretation in Britain. They may not have been devotional works, but that does not take away from their seriousness of purpose or from the librettists' commitment to and respect for the biblical milieu. The stories used were modified to make them relevant to the moment, but they were not bowdlerized, and the modifications reflect the often deeply held theological ideas and understandings of their time. The oratorio libretti thus provide a rich field of study for those with interests beyond the musical sphere; studying the libretti's use of the Bible, which is essential for an informed appreciation of them, illuminates both the libretti themselves and the understandings of the Bible with which their creators worked. More than that, though, such a study challenges modern readers to consider their own relationship with sacred texts such as the Bible, and to be aware of how their own appropriation of such texts is just as culturally conditioned as was that of Handel's librettists. And if that can lead to less dogmatism and more ecumenism theologically, culturally, and musically speaking, so much the better.

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