

A Guide to the Original Source Texts for Handel's *Messiah*

by Martin Dicke

The libretto of Handel's *Messiah* comes directly from the Bible and was assembled by Rev. Charles Jennens, an English aristocrat who collaborated with Handel on several other oratorios. In assembling the *Messiah* libretto, Jennens may have consulted some references for ideas and inspiration but ultimately, he was responsible for the final form of the libretto. His primary source was the King James Version (1611). For all but one of the Psalm texts, however, he used the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.¹ Altogether, the libretto is taken from 81 Bible verses that come from 14 different books of the Bible. Of these books, Isaiah is quoted the most frequently (21 verses) followed by the Book of Psalms (15 verses) and 1 Corinthians (10 verses).² It is interesting and significant to note that all the passages from 1 Corinthians come from 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter that I like to call the "Resurrection Chapter" because of its focus on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and its meaning for us.

For contextualization and a deeper understanding of the libretto, this document provides the original source texts for the *Messiah* libretto in their entirety and indicates what part of those texts were selected for use by Jennens. Unless noted otherwise, all passages come from the Standard (Pure Cambridge) King James Version of the Bible.³ The text that makes up the *Messiah* libretto is highlighted. Yellow indicates words sung by soloists, blue indicates words

¹ The text for the Air #53 "Thou Shalt Break Them" (Psalm 2:9) is taken from the King James Bible. Otherwise, all the other Psalm texts are from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. See *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662): As printed by John Baskerville (<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1662/baskerville.htm>), accessed 12 December 2013. The first edition of the Book of Common Prayer appeared in 1549. The Biblical texts were taken from *The Great Bible* (1539), the first translation of the Bible into English that was authorized by the King of England for use in the Anglican Church.

² The books from which the *Messiah* libretto is taken and the number of verses used from each are as follows: Isaiah – 21; Psalms – 15; 1 Corinthians – 10; Revelation – 7; Luke – 6; Romans – 5; Matthew – 4; Malachi – 3; Haggai – 2; Job – 2; Zechariah – 2; Hebrews – 2; Lamentations – 1; and John – 1.

³ See *The Official King James Bible Online* (<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>), accessed 12 December 2013.

sung by the chorus, and green indicates words that are sung by both. The Scripture references are hyperlinks that lead to the Biblical passage in question. You will note that in some cases certain words or phrases of the original text are left out of the libretto. These omissions may have been made by Jennens for textual reasons. Other omissions may have been made by Handel for musical reasons (i.e. to provide a concise libretto that lends itself to a particular musical motive and a spirited musical setting). In all cases, however, the primary argument and thrust of the libretto was not altered.

The headings used in this document come from a wordbook published for a 1743 performance of *Messiah*.⁴ There is evidence that Jennens had a hand in the publication of this wordbook. In this wordbook the three parts (or acts) of the oratorio are divided into 16 scenes: five for Part One, seven for Part Two, and four for Part Three. Another 1743 wordbook was discovered by a Massachusetts bookseller in the 1970s. It also includes scene divisions marked by Roman numerals, although it does not provide titles for the parts or subtitles for the scenes. The scene divisions are identical except at the end of Part Two where Scene VII consists of Movements 42-43 and the Hallelujah Chorus is marked as Scene VIII.⁵ In that wordbook there are 17 scenes: five for part One, eight for Part Two, and four for Part Three.

⁴ See David Vickers, "Messiah (HWV 56) 'A Sacred Oratorio'" archived from the original on 8 September 2012 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120908030611/http://gfhandel.org/messiah.html>) and retrieved 12 September 23. See also "Structure of Handel's 'Messiah'" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structure_of_Handel%27s_Messiah), accessed 12 September 2023.

⁵ Charles Jennens, *MESSIAH, a facsimile of the 1743 wordbook* (Boston, MA: Handel & Haydn Society, 1995).

MESSIAH

A Sacred Oratorio

Majora canamus.⁶ (Virgil, *Eclogue IV*)

And without controversy, great is the Mystery of Godliness: God was manifested in the Flesh, justified by the Spirit, seen of Angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the World, received up in Glory (1 Timothy 3:16)

In whom are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge (Colossians 2:3)

PART ONE :

The prophesy and realization of God's plan to redeem mankind by the coming of the Messiah

(i) *The prophecy of Salvation*

1. Overture

2. Accompagnato – Comfort Ye

[Isaiah 40:1-3](#)

¹ Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

² Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.

³ The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

3. Air – Every Valley

[Isaiah 40:4](#)

⁴ Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:

4. Chorus – And the Glory of the Lord

[Isaiah 40:5](#)

⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see *it* together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.

(ii) *The prophecy of the coming of Messiah and the question, despite (i), of what this may portend for the World*

5. Accompagnato – Thus Saith the Lord

[Haggai 2:6-7](#); [Malachi 3:1](#)

⁶ For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land;

⁷ And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.

¹ Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.

⁶ This is a Latin phrase which means “Let us sing of great things.”

6. Air – But Who May Abide

[Malachi 3:2](#)

² But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he *is* like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:

7. Chorus – And He Shall Purify

[Malachi 3:3](#)

³ And he shall sit *as* a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.

(iii) *The prophecy of the Virgin Birth*

8. Recitative – Behold, a Virgin Shall Conceive

[Isaiah 7:14](#); [Matthew 1:23](#)

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

²³ Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

9. Air and Chorus – O Thou That Tellest

[Isaiah 40:9](#); [60:1](#)

⁹ O Zion, that bringest good tidings,⁷ get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings,⁸ lift up thy voice with strength; lift *it* up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!

¹ Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee.

10. Accompagnato – For Behold, Darkness Shall Cover the Earth

[Isaiah 60:2-3](#)

² For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.

³ And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

11. Air – The People that Walked in Darkness

[Isaiah 9:2](#)

² The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

12. Chorus – For Unto Us a Child is Born

[Isaiah 9:6](#)

⁶ For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

(iv) *The appearance of the Angels to the Shepherds*

13. Interlude: Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)

⁷ In the margin to the 1611 King James Version, an alternative translation is provided for this phrase: "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" (see http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-Chapter-40_Original-1611-KJV/). This phrase was chosen for the *Messiah* libretto.

⁸ In the margin to the 1611 King James Version, an alternative translation is provided for this phrase: "O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem" (see http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-Chapter-40_Original-1611-KJV/). This alternative translation was chosen for the *Messiah* libretto.

14a. Recitative – There Were Shepherds**Luke 2:8**

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

14b. Accompagnato – And, lo**Luke 2:9**

⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

15. Recitative – And the Angel Said Unto Them**Luke 2:10-11**

¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

16. Accompagnato – And Suddenly**Luke 2:13**

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

17. Chorus – Glory to God**Luke 2:14**

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

(v) Christ's redemptive miracles on earth

18. Air – Rejoice, Rejoice**Zechariah 9:9-10**

⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation;⁹ lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

¹⁰ And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth.

19. Recitative – Then the Eyes of the Blind**Isaiah 35:5-6**

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

⁶ Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

20. Air – He Shall Feed His Flock**Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28-29**

¹¹ He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

²⁸ Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.¹⁰

21. Chorus – His Yoke is Easy**Matthew 11:30**

³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.¹¹

⁹ For the *Messiah* libretto the phrase “he is just, and having salvation” is recast as “He is the righteous Saviour.”

¹⁰ For the libretto the point of view of these verses is changed to third person and “lowly in heart” is recast as “lowly of heart”.

¹¹ For the libretto the point of view of this verse is changed to third person.

PART TWO :

The accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind's rejection of God's offer, and mankind's utter defeat when trying to oppose the power of the Almighty

(i) *The redemptive sacrifice, the scourging and the agony on the cross*

22. Chorus – Behold, the Lamb of God

[John 1:29](#)

²⁹ The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, **Behold the Lamb of God, which¹² taketh away the sin of the world.**

23. Air – He Was Despised

[Isaiah 53:3; 50:6](#)

³ **He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief:**¹³ and we hid as it were *our* faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁶ **I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.**¹⁴

24. Chorus – Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs

[Isaiah 53:4-5a](#)

⁴ **Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows:** yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

⁵ **But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him;**

25. Chorus – And With His Stripes

[Isaiah 53:5b](#)

⁵ **and with his stripes we are healed.**

26. Chorus – All We Like Sheep

[Isaiah 53:6](#)

⁶ **All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

27. Accompagnato – All They That See Him

[Psalm 22:7](#)

⁷ **All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying,**¹⁵

28. Chorus – He Trusted in God

[Psalm 22:8](#)

⁸ **He trusted in God that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, if he will have him.**¹⁶

¹² For the libretto the word “which” is replaced with “that”.

¹³ For the libretto this phrase is changed to past tense.

¹⁴ For the libretto the point of view of this verse is changed to third person and “the hair” is recast as “his hair”.

¹⁵ This verse is from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. For the libretto the point of view is changed to third person.

¹⁶ This verse is from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. For the libretto the point of view is changed to third person and the last three words to “delight in him.”

29. Recitative – Thy Rebuke

[Psalm 69:20](#)

²⁰ Thy rebuke hath broken my heart; I am full of heaviness: I looked for some to take pity on me, but there was no man, neither found I any to comfort me.¹⁷

30. Arioso – Behold and See

[Lamentations 1:12](#)

¹² Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow,¹⁸ which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.

(ii) *His sacrificial death, His passage through Hell and Resurrection*

31. Accompagnato – He Was Cut Off

[Isaiah 53:8](#)

⁸ He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.¹⁹

32. Air – But Thou Didst Not Leave

[Psalm 16:10](#)

¹¹ For why? thou shalt not leave my soul in hell: neither shalt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.²⁰

(iii) *His Ascension*

33. Chorus – Lift Up Your Heads

[Psalm 24:7-10](#)

⁷ Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory shall come in.

⁸ Who is the King of glory?²¹ it is the Lord strong and mighty, even the Lord mighty in battle.

⁹ Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory shall come in.

¹⁰ Who is the King of glory?²² even the Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.²³

(iv) *God discloses his identity in Heaven*

34. Recitative – Unto Which of the Angels

[Hebrews 1:5](#)

⁵ For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?

35. Chorus – Let All the Angels

[Hebrews 1:6](#)

⁶ And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.

¹⁷ This verse is from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. For the libretto the point of view is changed to third person and “pity on me” to “pity on him”.

¹⁸ For the libretto the point of view of this phrase is changed to third person.

¹⁹ For the libretto the point of view of the last phrase of this verse is changed to third person.

²⁰ This verse is taken from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer where it is Psalm 16:11. The *Messiah* libretto places it in third person and recasts it as follows: “But thou didst not leave his soul in hell; nor didst thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.” St. Peter quotes this passage in his Pentecost Day sermon (see Acts 2:27).

²¹ The *Messiah* libretto recasts this statement of “the King of glory” as “this King of glory”.

²² Ibid.

²³ These verses are taken from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

(v) *Whitsun*,²⁴ *the gift of tongues, the beginning of evangelism*

36. Air – Thou Art Gone Up on High

[Psalm 68:18](#)

¹⁸ Thou art gone up on high, thou hast led captivity captive, and received gifts for men: yea, even for thine enemies, that the Lord God might dwell among them.²⁵

37. Chorus – The Lord Gave the Word

[Psalm 68:11](#)

¹¹ The Lord gave the word: great was the company of the preachers.²⁶

38. Air – How Beautiful Are the Feet

[Romans 10:15](#)

¹⁵ And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!²⁷

39. Chorus – Their Sound Is Gone Out

[Romans 10:18](#)

¹⁸ But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.²⁸

(vi) *The world and its rulers reject the Gospel*

40. Air – Why Do the Nations

[Psalm 2:1-2](#)

¹ Why do the heathen so furiously rage together; and why do the people imagine a vain thing?

² The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers take counsel together: against the Lord, and against his Anointed.²⁹

41. Chorus – Let Us Break Their Bands Asunder

[Psalm 2:3](#)

³ Let us break their bands asunder: and cast away their cords from us.³⁰

²⁴ Whitsun is the name used in the United Kingdom and among Anglicans and Methodists for the Day of Pentecost.

²⁵ This verse is taken from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The *Messiah* libretto recasts “even for thine enemies” as “even from thine enemies.”

²⁶ This verse is taken from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

²⁷ This quotation is from Isaiah 52:7.

²⁸ The *Messiah* libretto recasts this verse as follows: “Their sound is gone out into all lands, and their words unto the ends of the world.” Compare with Psalm 19:4, which begins as follows: “Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

²⁹ These verses are taken from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The *Messiah* libretto replaces “heathen” with “nations” and “stand up” with “rise up”.

³⁰ This verse is identical in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible. The *Messiah* libretto replaces “cords” with “yokes”.

(vii) *God's triumph*³¹

42. Recitative – He That Dwelleth in Heaven

[Psalm 2:4](#)

⁴ He that dwelleth in the heaven shall laugh them to scorn: the Lord shall have them in derision.³²

43. Air – Thou Shalt Break Them

[Psalm 2:9](#)

⁹ Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

44. Chorus – Hallelujah

[Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16](#)

⁶ And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

¹⁵ And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become *the kingdoms* of our Lord,³³ and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.

¹⁶ And he hath on *his* vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

PART THREE :

A Hymn of Thanksgiving for the final overthrow of Death

(i) The promise of bodily resurrection and redemption from Adam's fall

45. Air – I Know That My Redeemer Liveth

[Job 19:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:20](#)

²⁵ For I know *that* my redeemer liveth, and *that* he shall stand at the latter *day* upon the earth:

²⁶ *And though* after my skin *worms* destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God:

²⁰ *But now* is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept.³⁴

46. Chorus – Since By Man Came Death

[1 Corinthians 15:21-22](#)

²¹ For *since* by man *came* death, by man *came* also the resurrection of the dead.

²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

(ii) The Day of Judgement and general Resurrection

47. Accompagnato – Behold, I Tell You a Mystery

[1 Corinthians 15:51-52a](#)

⁵¹ Behold, I shew³⁵ you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,

⁵² In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump:³⁶

³¹ In another 1743 wordbook found by a Massachusetts bookseller in the 1970s, Scene VII consists of Movements 42-43 and the Hallelujah Chorus is marked as Scene VIII. See Charles Jennens, *MESSIAH, a facsimile of the 1743 wordbook* (Boston, MA: Handel & Haydn Society, 1995), 27.

³² This verse is taken from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

³³ The *Messiah* libretto recasts this phrase as “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord”.

³⁴ The *Messiah* libretto replaces “But” with “For” and “slept” with “sleep”.

³⁵ The *Messiah* libretto replaces this “shew” with “tell”.

³⁶ The *Messiah* libretto replaces “trump” with “trumpet”.

48. Air – The Trumpet Shall Sound

[1 Corinthians 15:52b-53](#)

⁵² for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

⁵³ for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality.

(iii) *The victory over death and sin*

49. Recitative – Then Shall Be Brought to Pass

[1 Corinthians 15:54](#)

⁵⁴ So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, **then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.**

50. Duet – O Death, Where is Thy Sting?

[1 Corinthians 15:55-56](#)

⁵⁵ O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory?

⁵⁶ The sting of death *is* sin; and the strength of sin *is* the law.

51. Chorus – But Thanks Be to God

[1 Corinthians 15:57](#)

⁵⁷ But thanks *be* to God, which³⁷ giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

52. Air – If God Be For Us

[Romans 8:31-34](#)

³¹ What shall we then say to these things? **If God *be* for us, who *can be* against us?**

³² He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

³³ Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? ***It is* God that justifieth.**

³⁴ Who *is* he that condemneth? ***It is* Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh³⁸ intercession for us.**

(iv) *The glorification of the Messianic victim*

53. Chorus – Worthy is the Lamb

[Revelation 5:9-14](#)

⁹ And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, **and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood³⁹** out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

¹⁰ And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

¹¹ And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands;

¹² Saying with a loud voice, **Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.**

¹³ And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, **Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, *be* unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.**

¹⁴ And the four beasts said, **Amen.** And the four *and* twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

³⁷ The *Messiah* libretto replaces “which” with “who”.

³⁸ The *Messiah* libretto replaces “maketh” with “makes”.

³⁹ The *Messiah* libretto recasts this phrase as “and hath redeemed us to God by his blood” and inserts it in verse 12 after the word “slain”.