

Handel scandal: Anti-Judaic themes

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

I have never given much thought to Titus, Roman destroyer of Jerusalem in the year 70, or seen reason to rejoice in the destruction of the Second Temple and the defeat of Israel. Yet once or twice a year I'm celebrating that destruction and what it did to Jews when I sing in sing-along *Messiahs*, sometimes standing next to Jews who love the music of Handel. We think of them as good neighbors who generously stand up with their Christian and "other" friends during the "Hallelujah Chorus."

Now I find that I've been ignorant: Handel's *Messiah* is full of unnecessarily anti-Judaic themes. Since the Advent cycle is a half year away, we can take up the subject with some dispassion.

I am not a Handel expert, and the *Messiah* is not at the top of the list in my Christian hit parade. I have to depend on Michael Marissen of Swarthmore, who says that Handel's friend Charles Jennens, who did the libretto, picked biblical texts that he thought would help fight off deists. Bizarrely, he viewed deists as plotting with Jews to attack Christ's deity. Evidently he depended on a tome by Richard Kidder, *A Demonstration of the Messias, In which the Truth of the Christian Religion is Proved, Against All the Enemies Thereof; but Especially Against the Jews*. Jennens also drew upon Henry Hammond, who translated Psalm 2 not with the King James folk as "Why do the heathen rage," but as "Why do the nations rage?" Jews were not heathen to Hammond or Kidder or Jennens or Handel: they were a nation. Marissen shows how Handel's music has that nation raging.

Kidder's tome made clear that "either we or the Jews must be in a state of damnation." Guess who was? And in this context the "Hallelujah Chorus" made the point. I tried to think of a number of responses to this revelation.

First, "Say it isn't so!" Sorry. Marissen is a fair-minded analyst. I like to turn to him for reliable and dispassionate guidance through Bach's *Passions*.

Then I tried: "Maybe Marissen gets it wrong." Not likely. Or perhaps Marissen is too p.c., too eager to show his at-home-ness with multiculturalism by not offending

anyone, especially Jews. Wrong.

We could say: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That's true of most of us singers and hearers of the *Messiah*, but not of Jennens and Kidder and Hammond and maybe Handel. They were knowingly combining ancient prejudices with contemporary critiques of deists and Jews. Their version of the text from Psalm 2 gave this prejudice a biblical base.

Here's another try: "Origins do not explain present development." That is the first suggestion that comes close to being helpful. Many things cultural that were born in iniquity get transmuted into something harmless or beneficent.

And another: "Ignorance is bliss"; let's not let the knowledge of this origin blot out all the brighter connotations of the chorus.

And finally, as a last resort: read this column quickly or, if you did read it, try to forget it.

We try to be sensitive to critiques of supersessionism that complain, for example, that the accounts in the *Messiah* are based on notions of Christian replacements, erasures and distortions of the faith of Israel. Sensitive, yes; alert, yes; but not tongue-tied. In historic religions, including within Judaism, almost everything implicitly and sometimes explicitly distorts other faiths.

So let's forgive one another for doing violence to one another's texts and then sing lustily. While I can never again hear the "Hallelujah Chorus" without remembering that it was written to wound the displaceable "nation" called the Jews, with others I'll sing and rejoice: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."