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Jordan Lehto

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Aaron Escamilla

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Eden H. Nimietz

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Lost in Translation: A Critical Analysis of the Libretto in Handel's *Messiah*

Aaron Escamilla
Jordan Lehto
Eden Nimietz

Augustana College
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Abstract

Handel's *Messiah* is renowned for its lush sound and richly developed message regarding the rejoicing of Christians and the celebration of religion through their faith in a divine savior. Not only is the full oratorio performed by countless ensembles every year, but many scholars have spent months, and even years, poring over its libretto. The conclusions they have come up with regarding the intentions of the librettist, Charles Jennens, have sparked much controversy over the years. Because of Jennens' personal, religious beliefs, many scholars are concerned that much of his libretto is designed to discredit all other religions and proclaim Christianity as the only viable declaration of faith. The evidence for this is littered throughout the libretto of the *Messiah* from the language he chose to use, verses he decided to combine, and the resources he may have referenced. Some believe that Jennens simply took the scriptures and weaponized them against any religion opposed to Christianity. Others oppose this school of thought, believing that he did not intend to erase other religious points of view, but merely set out to affirm his own. Unfortunately, no records exist detailing his personal beliefs on other religions. The question of whether his personal beliefs and intentions should color the public's view of the *Messiah* as a whole is still up to them to decide.

The *Messiah* has had a profound impact throughout the culture of Western music, continuing to be a staple around the holidays of the Advent and Christmas season. Not only is the music itself written to be incredibly uplifting, the libretto alone can leave people speechless. Handel's librettist, Charles Jennens, dedicated much time and effort when crafting the libretto for this leviathan of a piece. Despite its mighty reputation, those who have scrutinized his libretto have found alarming themes embedded within its words. Based on evidence found within and outside the libretto, some believe that Jennens weaponized the scriptures against every religion in seeming opposition to Christianity, especially those other Abrahamic faiths with fundamentally different beliefs such as Judaism. Since no records exist detailing Jennens' personal beliefs on other religions, one must piece together the evidence left within his libretto to uncover his intentions.

The relationship between composer, librettist, and libretto is variable. A libretto refers to the text of a work.¹ Libretti are gathered by librettists who are often overshadowed by the composer. This occurs due to the popular belief that the composer is the real dramatist, not the librettist. In a sense, the text of a libretto is not given true value until a composer decides to set music to it. Some even believe a libretto should not and cannot be studied appropriately until it is set to music.² This discourse may inconspicuously negatively affect the relationship between librettist and composer, yet librettists sometimes have close relationships with composers and end up working together for years. Handel had worked with multiple librettists throughout his life, sometimes more than once with the same librettist. Jennens was one of Handel's more influential, and certainly more fascinating, partners.

¹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "libretto,"

² Weisstein, Ulrich. "The Libretto as Literature." Books Abroad 35, no. 1 (1961): 16-22.

Born the son of a very wealthy iron manufacturer in 1700 C.E., Jennens was immediately accepted into the world of high class and music. By the time he was 15, he was a member of the Oxford Music Club, participating as a paying yet non-performing member. However, evidence suggests that by January 1718, he was musically proficient, having strong affinities towards Catholic music. His obsession with Handel started young, as he pieced together the bass line for all of Handel's music on his harpsichord when he was just 18. As further evidence of his devotion to Handel, he had several subscriptions to all of Handel's published works such as *Alexander's Feast*, of which he ordered 6 copies. Furthermore, he had copies made of every note Handel wrote, including fragments and items omitted from performances.³ Jennens' devotion to Handel must have curated a close and trustful relationship between the two. One reason for this was because Jennens was one of the first people in Handel's circle to have realized all the potential there was in oratorios. Jennens argued the complexity of oratorios, both in regards to the text and the music, allowed for greater dramatic potential. This shift in focus to oratorios was especially well timed, as Handel's operas had been seeing a decline in favorability and popularity.⁴ Oratorios allowed Handel to carry something invigorating to the scene. Jennens' supplement of libretti was critical to the success of Handel's oratorios. The first "new" oratorios Handel had composed were *Saul and Israel in Egypt*. Both were generally well received, but because of the novelty of oratorios, some people, especially fans of Italian opera, were taken back by the heavy orchestration seen in the two works.⁵

³ Ruth Smith, "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700-1773)," *Music & Letters* 70, no.1 (1989): 161-190. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/736884.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A37dd36f559068793bc8a1373f53087d2.

⁴ Anthony Hicks, "Handel [Händel, Hende!], George Frideric," Grove Music Online, 2001, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000040060>.

⁵ Ibid.,.

While Handel was an immense part of Jennens' life, driving him to worship everything the composer did, Handel was not the only entity Jennens worshipped.

Jennens was known to have strong political and religious beliefs, both of which were an influence on the text of his libretti. While growing up in a strictly Christian household, Jennens' relationship to Christian church doctrine was extraordinarily strong, as indicated by the evidence which lies in the several pieces of art he had commissioned. The monument he dedicated to his friend, his own tomb, and another stone statue all bear traditional Christian symbolism tactfully balanced with other classical ideas. Each proclaims, in no uncertain terms, the legitimacy of Jesus as the true Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament.⁶ With *Messiah*, Jennens received another chance to display his commitment to Christian doctrine, specifically the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.⁷ It is possible that Jennens used the *Messiah* as a proclamation of his firm beliefs, but it is also possible that his passion for his religion ran deeper because of a certain tragedy plaguing him at a very young age.

During the rise of the Deist controversy within England, many devout Christians were required to face differing ideas, sowing doubt deep within the community. When the librettist was in his late twenties, the number of publications containing Deist perspectives had increased tremendously. It had gotten to the point where no educated Englishmen could be unaware of this sudden change in perspectives. When Jennens turned 28, his younger brother, Robert, started corresponding with a newly converted Deist. During this correspondence, the Deist desperately tried to convert Robert and turn him away from Christianity. Confused, filled with doubt, and

⁶ Ruth Smith, "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700-1773)," *Music & Letters* 70, no.1 (1989): 161-190.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/736884.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A37dd36f559068793bc8a1373f53087d2.

⁷ Anthony Hicks, "Handel [Händel, Hendel], George Frideric," *Grove Music Online*, 2001,
<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000040060>.

probably suffering from bouts of depression similar to Charles, Robert killed himself.⁸ When considering this backstory, it is not hard to imagine the *Messiah* as Jennens' struggle against the very religion that stole his brother away from him. This may have been the point when Jennens' tolerance for other religions turned to contempt as he blamed them for his brother's tragedy.

While this oratorio is famed across the world for its joyous affirmation of belief in a Messiah, there remains a caveat: the pervasive culture of a Christian norm present in the time the piece was composed, and which continues to this day has the implication of being subtly antisemitic. Jennens' word choice throughout the libretto is argued by Marissen to be littered with subliminal antisemitic code which is altered from the source material - textual evidence like the word "heathens," for example, is replaced with "nations" to signify the nation of Judea, i.e. the Jewish kingdoms. This alteration was uncommon in the context of the society in which Jennens and Handel lived; most Christians would have differentiated between heathen nations and the nation of Judea.⁹ Furthermore, Jennens appropriates terms such as "goy(im)" to describe non-Christians who rejected Jesus as Messiah. This term is stolen from the Yiddish language and Jewish communities in that "goy(im/ische)" refers to being a gentile, or non-Jewish person - so when a Christian uses the term to mean a non-Christian, they are affirming Christianity as reigning supreme and Judaism as a proto-Christianity with no place in a post-Christian, modern world. Language such as "sons of Levi" is used to reference the Jewish people, and the libretto states that these people must first be 'purified' or converted to be spared.¹⁰

⁸ Ruth Smith, "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700-1773)," *Music & Letters* 70, no.1 (1989): 161-190.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/736884.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A37dd36f559068793bc8a1373f53087d2.

⁹ Michael Marissen, "Rejoicing Against Judaism in Handel's *Messiah*," in *Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah: The unsettling History of the World's Most Beloved Choral Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 23-24.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 26-27.

Other antisemitic evidence located within the libretto itself is how Jennens decides to combine and use the scriptures, containing anti-Judaic apologetics. The first example of combined verses that oppose Jewish teaching was Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. The resulting phrases, "Behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name, *Emmanuel*, GOD WITH US," confirm Jesus as the Messiah, which is in direct contradiction to Jewish beliefs.¹¹ Many have taken this as Jennens' direct objection to Judaism. A similar example occurs later in the libretto, when Jennens combines Haggai 2:6-7 and Malachi 3:1 to say,

[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; 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.] [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.¹²

These verses have often been pointed to by Christian scholars as proof that Jesus was the Messiah because the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE and the Messiah had to come before then. Many believe that Jennens put this in his libretto knowing the audience would understand it and react to it in an antisemitic way. Another example often pointed to is Jennens' addition of Matthew 11:28-30. Depending on how these verses are interpreted, the inclusion of them is a specific sign of contempt for Judaism that goes beyond a simple disagreement. These verses read,

He shall feed his flock like a Shepherd: He shall gather the Lambs with his Arms, and carry them into his Bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. Come unto Him all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and He will give you Rest. Take this Yoke upon you, and learn of Him; for he is meek and lowly in Heart: and ye shall find Rest unto your Souls. For his Yoke is easy, and his Burden is light.¹³

¹¹ John H. Roberts, "False Messiah," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97, doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Ibid.,

These verses have been interpreted as a proclamation that the Gospel of Christ supersedes the heavier yoke of the Law of Moses. Therefore, this is Jennens' attack on Judaism as he proclaims Christianity's superiority. However, the evidence does not just exist within the libretto's words but also the references Jennens potentially used.

In addition to the modification of source material, Jennens owned virulently antisemitic books, such as Richard Kidder's *A Demonstration of the Messiahs*. Kidder's writings have largely been barred from the public eye for their hateful and antisemitic content; while many scholars allude to the text being quite despicable, in recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to locate a copy of the book with which to consult. Noting the stunning similarities between Kidder's writings and Jennens' libretto, some scholars have theorized that Jennens used it as a reference. Out of the 80 scriptural references in the *Messiah*, 40 were also used in Kidder's writings. None of these scriptures came from the book of Daniel, further suggesting Jennens' adherence to Kidder's format who also avoided scripture from the book of Daniel. These pieces of evidence led scholars to believe that Jennens used Kidder's *Demonstration* as a reference tool when writing the libretto, imbuing it with the same antisemitic interpretations Kidder believed.¹⁴ Therefore, the libretto may function as a rejoicing at the death of Judaism and subsequent worldly dominion of the sole 'true' religion of Christianity.¹⁵

Scholars claim that Jennens' addition of several verses in Haggai and Malachi were intended to highlight the destruction of the Second Temple, a trauma of sorts for the legacy of the Jewish people. According to many Christians of this time, heathen Romans alongside Jewish people were to blame for maliciously enacting violence against Jesus to the point of crucifixion and

¹⁴ John H. Roberts, "False Messiah," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97, doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

¹⁵ Michael Marissen, "Rejoicing Against Judaism in Handel's *Messiah*," in *Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah: The unsettling History of the World's Most Beloved Choral Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 32-33.

death; therefore, the Jewish people would be condemned through the destruction of the Second Temple until judgement day.¹⁶ By including Haggai 2:6-7 and Malachi 3:1-3 in one recitative, Jennens' was compelling the audience to think about the destruction of the temple in an antisemitic way. A book in Jennens' library, by Edward Pococke, writes a great deal on the interpretations of these verses, detailing this antisemitic interpretation specifically.¹⁷ Despite all the evidence both inside and outside the text, there are some scholars who argue that Jennens was simply proclaiming his own beliefs not attempting to eradicate others'.

In response to the problematic scriptures Jennens uses within his libretto, it cannot be said that he was doing anything more than proclaiming his own belief that Jesus was the Messiah. By combining Isaiah 7:14 with Matthew 1:23 and Haggai 2:6-7 with Malachi 3:1, Jennens was upholding a central tenet of Christianity. The most that can be said about the addition of these verses is that Jennens was affirming something he believed and there is no sign he was attacking anyone. Also, if he did mean this as an attack, scholars would have to provide evidence for why this was not an attack against Deists who also do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Turning specifically to the combination of Haggai 2:6-7, and Malachi 3:1, Jennens was not trying to evoke the destruction of the temple in the minds of the audience. This is evident because he left out the part of Haggai that references the temple at all. If it is to be proven that Jennens had any malintent when stringing these verses together, it cannot be done by simply inferring the audiences' reactions. In response to claims of antisemitism associated with Jennens' inclusion of Matthew 11:28-30, it is important to consider Jennens' interpretation of these verses. Within his library, several books were found detailing different interpretations of this passage including one equating the lighter yoke as being

¹⁶ Michael Marissen, "Rejoicing Against Judaism in Handel's Messiah," in *Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah: The unsettling History of the World's Most Beloved Choral Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 50-52.

¹⁷ John H. Roberts, "False Messiah," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97, doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

free from sin not from the Law of Moses.¹⁸ Not knowing what Jennens truly believed makes it difficult to ascribe a malicious motive to his writings based on what was in them and what references he might have used.

Despite what some scholars have written, there is not enough evidence to suggest that Jennens used any antisemitic sources as reference for writing the *Messiah*. Jennens was known to be a collector of not only books but sculptures, paintings, and drawings. By 1766, his paintings and sculptures alone numbered to be over 500 items. As further proof of his expansive library, in a survey listing the twenty largest art collections in the country, Jennens was listed as having the largest collection simply counting the paintings.¹⁹ The idea that he not only read but also agreed with every single book he owned in his vast library is an unbased assumption. In response to the similarity in the selected verses, Kidder's *Demonstration* cited more than a thousand verses and both the *Messiah* and *Demonstration* had similar subject material, namely Jesus as the Messiah. Considering these points, it is not out of the realm of possibility for Jennens to accidentally select remarkably similar scriptures as the basis for his libretto. As for the common omission of the book of Daniel, Kidder clarifies his intentions through admitting it was a mistake in the third volume. Even in the *Demonstration*, Kidder references several prophecies in Daniel, confirming that the text never left Kidder's mind. Jennens' decision to leave Daniel out of the *Messiah* had nothing to do with Kidder.²⁰ In conclusion, just because the *Demonstration* was on Jennens' shelves, it does not

¹⁸ John H. Roberts, "False Messiah," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97, doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

¹⁹ Ruth Smith, "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700-1773)," *Music & Letters* 70, no.1 (1989): 161-190. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/736884.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A37dd36f559068793bc8a1373f53087d2.

²⁰ John H. Roberts, "False Messiah," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97, doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

mean that Kidder or his antisemitic views entered Jennens' mind while writing the *Messiah's* libretto.

As for the attention drawn to the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple, without knowing Jennens intentions, it is impossible to claim he wrote it with malice. As was written before, it cannot be assumed that Jennens agreed with all ideas in every one of the books within his library. Taking a closer look at Edward Pococke's writings on Malachi, he discusses several different interpretations that can be ascertained from the verses. Which interpretation Jennens subscribed to is unknown. Also, when considering the way Jennens uses these verses in the oratorio, there is a strong implication that he was merely trying to summarize the Old Testament vision of the Messiah to come, by providing the audience with two distinct images. By using these verses in Malachi, Jennens describes the Messiah as a savior who will bring comfort to all his people and as a judge who will come over all nations, purifying and refining his servants.²¹ Both of these images are found throughout the Old Testament and Jennens was merely trying to capture all of the different aspects of the Messiah.

Though the legitimacy of claims of the librettist and composer's antisemitic beliefs are contested, the fact remains that this oratorio has greatly influenced the compositions and performance choices found in Western society. One must not disregard the implications of prejudice towards and rejection of other ways of making sense of the world, given that it is impossible to know the truth of the matter. One must examine the contents of the literature around them with a critical lens. The *Messiah* has profoundly impacted the Western musical repertoire for the better, but nothing is ever completely good, nor completely bad. The meritocracy

²¹ John H. Roberts, "False Messiah," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97, doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

of the libretto and oratorio, therefore, are legitimate and can be celebrated for their collective impact and achievements, regardless of the author's intentions.

Annotated Bibliography

Babington, Amanda. *Fontes Artis Musicae* 62, no. 2 (2015): 142-44. Accessed September 18, 2020.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24579463>.

This source is a book review of *Handel's Messiah: a Rhetorical Guide*. This source does a good job summarizing what is said about the libretto. By applying a modern perspective to the libretto, we are able to expand our foundational knowledge of the effects the libretto had on all kinds of people from all different eras. If more information about the libretto is needed, this book would be a good place to go to.

Hicks, Anthony. "Handel [Händel, Hendel], George Frideric." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 20 Sep. 2020.

<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000040060>.

The Grove reading on Handel gives an in-depth exploration of almost every known detail we know of Handel's life from the cities he visited, to the styles and descriptions of his works. The specific sections 9 and 10, give information about the details surrounding Handel's transition from operas to oratorios. It also provides information on librettist Charles Jennens, and how he influenced Handel. This article will be useful in supplying any information on various points of Handel's life.

Marissen, Michael. "Rejoicing Against Judaism in Handel's Messiah." Essay. In *Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah: the Unsettling History of the World's Most Beloved Choral Work*, 13-77. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

Marissen's book chapter on Handel's work *Messiah* describes the way Christians felt threatened by the persistence of the Jewish people and religion. The chapter outlines the

work as a declaration of Christian faith and a condemnation of Judaism, which allowed for antisemitism to fester and gain a stronger hold in European culture. In addition, Marissen discusses contemporary views on the literature of *Messiah*, describing many Christians' claims that Jewish people can find relevance in the work despite the lack of evidence for this argument. Because of the detailing of the historical, functional relevance of Handel's work as a tool to harm a population and the persistent hold it has today, this source is a sound one.

Roberts, John H. "False Messiah." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45-97. Accessed September 18, 2020. doi:10.1525/jams.2010.63.1.45.

This source acts as a direct rebuttal to other sources which were found that claim Handel's *Messiah* is filled with antisemitic language. It presents the argument in a noticeably clear way and then dives into the reasons why this is not the case. The source goes through the contested language, explaining the reasons why the language is not as hostile as some would think. Roberts presents an opposing argument to other sources, providing different contexts for the libretto.

Smith, Ruth. "Jennens, Charles." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 20 Sep. 2020.

<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000014259>.

This Grove reading on Charles Jennens gives a specific look into Jennens' life. It specifically details Jennens' impact on Handel and his devotion to Handel's work. Several other accomplishments are recorded in the reading, allowing us to broaden our views of Jennens as a person. This reading will prove useful in supplying more specific details on Jennens' life.

Smith, Ruth. "The Achievements of Charles Jennens (1700-1773)," *Music & Letters* 70, no. 1 (1989): 161-190. Accessed November 21, 2020.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/736884.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3A37dd36f559068793bc8a1373f53087d2.

The article goes into detail about Jennens' life and his personal history. It also describes conflicts he had with the people of the time. This source also specifically describes his proclivity for collecting all things Italian. Lastly, the source also informs us about Jennens' relationship with Handel, specifically how devoted he was to the composer and his work. The source also describes Jennens' interactions with Shakespeare's work, citing him as the first editor of Shakespeare that adequately gave textual criticisms. It also describes his religious and political conflicts that he was forced to deal with throughout his life. Information like this could be especially useful when trying to decide whether or not he was antisemitic.

Weisstein, Ulrich. "The Libretto as Literature." *Books Abroad* 35, no. 1 (1961): 16-22. Accessed September 13, 2020. doi:10.2307/40115290.

Weisstein argues that all libretto is just as important as the music itself. Through literary examples, the article shows the reader how to dissect libretto of operas. This source can be useful to support the investigation into the *Messiah's* libretto and to help guide us in our search through its libretto. Also, Ulrich makes a distinction between the composers and those who create the libretto. Handel became both. Using this source, we can dissect the different jobs that Handel took on that might have not been common during his time.

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