EVERY VALLEY

Advent with the Scriptures of Handel's *Messiah*

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CONTENTS

PART 3: CHRIST'S ETERNAL REIGN

FOREWORD

"What did the Holy Spirit do," St. Basil asked in the fourth century, "seeing that the human race was not easily led to virtue?" He answers, "The Spirit mixed doctrine with gladdening song, so that when hearing its agreeable and attractive eloquence we might unwittingly learn things beneficial."* So it happened to me as a boy, sixteen centuries after Basil. From Handel's musical settings I unwittingly learned words of the prophets and psalms of Hebrew Scripture, from which *Messiah* takes three-quarters of its texts. In fact I learned from Handel all too well. I was in college before I discovered that the worth of biblical prophecy far exceeds the single dimension presupposed by Handel and his librettist—namely, predicting Jesus as God's Messiah.

The forty reflections in this volume help us appreciate multiple dimensions of *Messiah*'s texts. Biblical prophets looked forward, yes, but the events they anticipated were usually not distant but imminent: Babylonian threat or return from exile (see chap. 1). The prophets observed laterally as well. They examined their contemporary cultures, and with their resounding prefix "Thus saith the Lord!"

* Saint Basil of Caesarea, *Sermon on Psalm 30* (Psalm 29, Septuagint) in *Sancti Patris Nostri Basilii Caesareae Cappadociae...Opera Omnia quae Exstant* (Paris: Apud Gaume Fratres, 1839),1:127. My translation from the Greek. See James W. McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 65.

they rebuked and warned, corrected and encouraged (see chap. 2). The prophets also steered from behind. Repeatedly in the Gospels we see that the prophets were rudders for the course of Jesus' life, as with the words from Isaiah that Jesus quotes in his self-description: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matt. 11:2–5; see chap. 14).

And with perennial timeliness, prophetic words permeate Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition, directing and inspiring the faithful of every age. The reflections in this collection help us comprehend biblical prophecy in its theological, historical, and pastoral dimensions.

Likewise these Advent reflections illumine the New Testament texts of Handel's *Messiah*. The themes of Advent span from preparation for Christ's coming to preparation for Christ's second coming. So also the themes of *Messiah*, which opens with prophecies of Isaiah and ends with the book of Revelation. The season of Advent begins the church's new year, and these reflections on the complete *Messiah* offer us opportunities for contemplating liturgical themes for the twelve months ahead.

All these biblical texts are wonderfully highlighted by Handel's musical settings. His music brings us pleasure and at the same time renders the words indelible in our memories. Sir Kenneth Clark has said that Handel's *Messiah* "is, like Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, one of those rare works that appeal immediately to everyone, and yet is indisputably a masterpiece of the highest order."* Many ingredients contribute to *Messiah*'s immediate appeal. The

* Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 231.

melodies are clear, distinctive, and various. Almost always the texts are presented by a solo voice or a four-part chorus. Handel does not employ vocal duets or quartets where denser textures would tend to obscure the words, and I marvel at the textual transparency of his choral writing. His orchestral accompaniments do not dominate or compete with their texts. (The one exception is movement 48, "The Trumpet Shall Sound," where Handel yields to the inevitability of flourishes from a solo trumpet.)

Another significant feature of Handel's music is less apparent, though once recognized it can heighten *Messiah's* appeal. This ingredient is Handel's skill at "tonal painting"—writing music that echoes the literal meaning of a theme or text. We hear numerous examples in movements 1–3. The instrumental overture that opens *Messiah* closes on a somber chord in E-minor; then movement 2 opens in E-major. The minor-to-major change is like a freshening breeze. Repeating chords played by the strings are tender and welcoming. Handel is painting a tonal background for the words from Isaiah that the tenor is about to sing: "Comfort ye my people."

Tonal painting that pertains to specific words or phrases is often called "word painting." Movements 2 and 3 provide a rich sampler. "Comfort ye": the tenor sings these words on a gently descending phrase and on a third iteration calmly prolongs the first syllable over complete stillness in the orchestra. "And cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished": here the tenor leaps upward an octave for "cry" and sings "accomplished" on a definitive downward close or cadence. "Every valley shall be exalted": the tenor sings "exalted," in the second iteration of that word, on a swirling, continually ascending pattern that encompasses an astonishing forty-eight notes. "And every mountain and hill made low": in the first iteration of this phrase "mountain

and hill" are twin melodic summits—one higher and peaked alongside one lower and rounded. And "low" is low.

Descriptions such as this can make word painting seem fussy and distracting. Handel's word painting is so unforced, however, that his music can captivate listeners apart from any awareness of tonal painting. *Messiah* engaged me for years before I became fascinated by Handel's mastery of this musical skill.

We should not expect all of *Messiah* to be as chockfull of word painting as the three opening movements. For one thing the texts of some later movements are more theological and offer less vivid imagery than we find in the words of prophets and psalms. How, for example, might a composer be supposed to paint the text of movement 52: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Where word painting is ill-suited, tonal painting can nonetheless come into play. The meaning of movement 52 resonates not with musical settings of particular words but with the music's overall mood of sincere graciousness and reverence.

In a letter of 1780 a friend of Handel reported Lord Kinnoull's recollection that upon being congratulated for *Messiah* as a "noble entertainment" for his listeners Handel had replied: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them, I wish to make them better."* The knowing insights of these Advent reflections, combined with the less-witting benefits of what St. Basil calls "gladdening song," help us share in fulfilling that wish for Handel's masterpiece.

Albert L. Blackwell
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* Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954), 855.

EDITOR'S NOTE

For one month a year, at most, the birth of Jesus is placed front and center. Incarnation is singled out for celebration. In contrast, from its earliest days the church made it (at least) a weekly habit to remember the death of Christ. Learning to behold the face of a newborn comes naturally. It takes a lot more practice to take in the full meaning of suffering, death, and eschatological victory.

Reading texts from throughout Christ's story as Christmas approaches helps us to see the full meaning of the incarnation. Special as this season is, liturgically and culturally, Christ's birth must never stand apart from the larger and long story of all that is disclosed to us in Christ—in birth, life, death, atonement, resurrection, and glorification. Though it is typically associated with the Christmas season, Handel's *Messiah* tells the story of Christ through all these phases, with only twenty of fifty-three movements containing traditionally Advent-related themes and texts. But the resurrection focus of the "Hallelujah Chorus" need not render it irrelevant for the Christmas Eve performances we enjoy. In fact, our contemporary celebrations of Christmas, diluted as they can be by commercial hype and the inevitable post-holiday letdown, might be reinvigorated by reflection on the meaning of Christ's advent beyond the manger.

This book offers forty reflections on the Scriptures that comprise the libretto of Handel's *Messiah*. The libretto was written by Charles Jennens, a patron, friend, and collaborator of George Fridric Handel, though for simplicity's sake, only Handel will be referenced in these reflections. Jennens's libretto, taken primarily from the King James text of fourteen books of the Bible, makes *Messiah* a rich source for Bible study and devotion.

Forty, besides being a pleasantly biblical number, just happens to be the maximum number of days there can be in the Advent and Christmas seasons combined. So this book can be used for daily meditation from the start of Advent through the twelfth day of Christmas if the reader so chooses. Alternately, the reader may wish to read each chapter immediately before or after listening to a recording or live performance of *Messiah.*

The entire libretto is covered in this book, with reflections covering as little as part of a movement (if multiple Scriptures are combined in a movement) and as many as three movements (as in chap. 1, which discusses the section of Isaiah 40 from which movements 2–4 are drawn). Each chapter provides a portion of libretto and the same text from the New Revised Standard Version, expanded for context when appropriate, followed by a reflection on the text's historical or theological significance and its potential meaning for the reader's faith and discipleship.

Our hope is that by exploring the Scriptures that make up this beloved oratorio, your experience of Advent, the Bible, and Handel's *Messiah* are all enhanced and that your year-round faith is deepened as a result.

PART 1

CHRIST'S BIRTH AND ITS FORETELLING

Chapter 1

COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE

(Isaiah 40:1–5)

1. Sinfonia [Overture]

2. Accompanied Recitative

Tenor

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,
and cry unto her,
that her warfare is accomplished,
that her iniquity is pardoned.
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.
(Isa. 40:1–3)

3. Air

Tenor

Ev'ry valley shall be exalted,
and ev'ry mountain and hill made low;
the crooked straight and the rough places plain.
(Isa. 40:4)

4. Chorus

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.
(Isa. 40:5)

Isaiah 40:1–5

[1]Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
[2]Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

[3]A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
[4]Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain."
[5]Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

*W*ho can think of this text without hearing "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people" or a precise "Ev'ry valley" from Handel's *Messiah* rendered in a crystal-clear tenor's voice? It may seem at first that this text has been worn so thin that

it sounds quaint, just another decoration for the holiday season. Closer study will show that it is a bold declaration about the character of God offered to a demoralized people.

Picture the scene. The God of Israel has assembled a heavenly host. This is no council of bickering gods but servants of the sovereign of the universe, whose compassion and regard for justice distinguish this God from other gods. At issue is the situation of God's children, the people of Israel, exiled in Babylon. We can hardly imagine their misery, unless we think of peoples of the earth in our own time who share their agony—refugees from war-torn lands or victims kidnapped and trafficked into modern-day slavery. Stripped of the institutional structures that shaped their lives, their temple destroyed, their homeland laid waste, the people of Israel languish under the thumb of Marduk, the Babylonian god.

God responds to such conditions by bringing together the council. He is prepared to announce a message that God intends for the people of Israel. In it, one can see into the very depths of the character of the one the church calls "Sovereign." God wills comfort and consolation to those in the very depths of despair and depends on human as well as divine agency to bring that message from God's royal realm.

We tend to think of ourselves only as the recipients of these words from on high. We like to cast ourselves as the shepherds who hear the choirs of angels broadcast the startling announcement of God's coming as warrior and shepherd. Surely we do need to hear these ancient words again and again, to be reassured that the God in whom we trust does indeed honor promises and covenants. As we enter the Advent season with various strains and burdens on our hearts, we find solace in tradition and in the timeless language of divine consolation.

But these words are not just for us to savor like food at a holiday feast. We are also in the situation of the celestial ones and the prophets in the text, trying to find a way to speak these words to others whom God loves. One of the questions that leaps up from the text is "What shall I cry?" Presumably it is the prophet's voice, as the prophet tries to understand how to formulate the message that God intends. The prophet uses the imagery and idioms of the time to proclaim that God's glory has been, is being, and will be revealed in the natural order and in the unfolding of human history, a dramatic display of God's certain compassion and care for those who receive it.

To those whose ears are not tuned to this divine doxology, the message is preposterous. It seems clear to some that this God being touted has been defeated by the stronger god of the reigning empire. How is one to take seriously the claim that this God will appear in glory?

Take a look at our own world, and see how preposterous the message we carry will sound. It does indeed seem that the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ has very little power in relation to the other "gods" that seem to reign in our "empire." Particularly during this time of year, approaching Christmas, consumerism demands more of our resources, and lust for oil and mobility threatens our environment. The conduct of war robs us of precious lives and international respect. Religious zealotry pits one image of God against another, leaving the human community fractured and cynical. How dare we speak of this God who promises to become present in a way that "all people shall see it together"?

That is precisely what the faithful people of God are being commissioned to do. In the face of derision and indifference, we are to speak of this God whose fierce compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the

other "gods" who seem to enjoy sovereignty in human relationships.

Advent is a time to hear the promises spoken or sung to the community of faith once again and then sit with them through the season. It is also a time for that community to find its own voice, overcome its objections, and speak words of comfort and assurance to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God so that God will arrive and will come in gentle power.

Chapter 2

I WILL SHAKE ALL NATIONS

(Haggai 2:1–9)

5. Accompanied Recitative (Part 1)

Bass

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts;
Yet once a little while and I will shake
the heavens and the earth,
the sea and the dry land.
And I will shake all nations;
and the desire of all nations shall come.
(Hag. 2:6–7)

Haggai 2:1–9

[1]In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: [2]Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, [3]Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? [4]Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD;

work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts,
5according to the promise that I made you when you
came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do
not fear. 6For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again,
in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth
and the sea and the dry land; 7and I will shake all the
nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come,
and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD
of hosts. 8The silver is mine, and the gold is mine,
says the LORD of hosts. 9The latter splendor of this
house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD
of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says
the LORD of hosts.

To think of the past as a better and perhaps more glorious time than the present seems to be a common human tendency. We may glorify the era in which we were children (of course it seemed like a simpler time!), or a particularly happy phase of life, or perhaps even a time before we were born. Prophet Haggai and his contemporaries apparently fell prey to this kind of thinking too.

The outcome of the work of restoring the temple in Jerusalem after returning from exile was quite disappointing, when not frustrating, to those of the small nation of Judah. Back in their land after decades in Babylon, the people were trying hard to bring back the presumed glories of their preexilic past, but nothing had gone as expected with the restoration work.

For Haggai's contemporaries, a less-than-perfect temple was nothing in comparison with their image of what the temple had looked like during those better times in the past. That "nothingness," the result of their current

efforts, was acknowledged by the prophet himself, but not without a bit of irony and surprise. "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory?" Haggai asks. (The expected answer is, of course, "Nobody," or at most only a few elderly members of the community.) "How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?" (2:3).

Humans generally look for someone to be responsible for a failure, someone to carry the blame for the rest of the group. In this regard, we are no better than our biblical predecessors. If we cannot find someone among us, then the next obvious candidate is God, as happens so often in the Scripture. After all, should not God know or fare better than we? If God does not do better than we do, then what does it mean to be God? Surely God knows well the people's frustration as well as their complaint.

It is to this context that Haggai declares that God is with them, even if it is not quite obvious, working with and through them, and that God will make himself known. This affirmation of God's presence and support alone should give them courage. It is God's promise to the people. Not even the most difficult circumstances for the most arduous task will persuade God to stay away. Actually, staying away or being unconcerned is not in the nature of this God. Whatever it takes to help the people out, God is able and willing to do, even if it means shaking "the heavens and the earth . . . the sea and the dry land; and . . . all the nations" (2:6–7).

God will provide what the people need for the task at hand. The resources they need to rebuild and restore the temple will come from other lands. It is another sign that God is God above all nations. The treasures of the earth, as well as the accumulated goods of other nations, fall under God's active rule. The spirit of God moves and

goes anywhere, abiding where God wants it to. This abiding spirit is the promise of divine presence and initiative among the people.

And this brings us to one of the basic tenets of Haggai's theological thinking: the presence of God is evident in the glory of God, which is where the real glory of Haggai's people lies as well (not in the former glory of the temple). Without the glory of the divine presence, all attempts at national rebuilding will come to naught. Never mind about how things look or do not look, Haggai says. Concern yourselves instead about whether God has decided to make God's presence felt among you. Either the spirit abides or the spirit does not abide. The spirit dwells where God decides it will.

The task ahead might be truly uphill, but God through the spirit will be with and for the rebuilders. The spirit will abide with the people so that the temple's—and hence the nation's—"latter splendor . . . shall be greater than the former." Within this concrete place, God will show what only God can do and wishes to accomplish. Divine presence is the glory of the people.

For a people who have been downtrodden for a long time and whose hopes have all but disappeared, the assurance of such divine presence is quite uplifting, to say the least. Here we have a small remnant of a nation, a people with almost no resources except for themselves and their faith. In the midst of utter despair, they can hear a gracious word of affirmation as a people from the one who matters the most: their God, the Lord of hosts. Now they have not only God's spirit but also God's word to go with them.