

♪ Worship Notes ♪

THEME: Messiah!

Handel's *MESSIAH*

**A Brief Commentary on
the Biblical Texts of Part 1
(the "Christmas" portion)**

by Dr. James E. Allman
Professor of Bible Exposition
Dallas Theological Seminary

PART I: THE PROPHECY OF GOD'S PLAN TO REDEEM MANKIND BY THE COMING OF MESSIAH

Isaiah 40.1-3, 4, 5 "Comfort Ye My People"; "Every Valley"; "And the Glory"

The opening aria of Händel's great work takes his words from the prophet Isaiah. In the previous sections of his book the prophet had announced coming judgment. Now, looking past the disaster, he announces the coming of God to bring salvation to Israel and Jerusalem. The identity of the crying voice is given in the Gospels as the prophet John the Baptist. He served as the forerunner of Jesus, preparing the way of the LORD, with whom this prophecy identifies Jesus. The forerunner aims to prepare Israel for the revelation of God's glory, not only in Israel, but for all humanity, as the fulfillment of God's sure promise of forgiveness, the remission of the penalty imposed for sin.

Haggai 2.6-7; Malachi 3.1 "Thus Saith the Lord"

God's saving work comes soon when He will shake the nations bringing what is most glorious to Jerusalem's temple. For centuries Christians have interpreted Haggai's prophecy as referring to Jesus coming to the temple. Händel couples this prophecy with one from Malachi. The latter predicts the Messenger of the Covenant, surely here Jesus, who will come to cleanse the temple.

Malachi 3.2 "But Who May Abide"

The coming of the Messenger, so long anticipated, however, will confront the temple with judgment. He comes as a refiner to purify His, inexorably judging what is impure. This prophecy finds fulfillment in Jesus' ministry. Matthew alludes to Malachi's prophecy. He records that John the Baptist warned his listeners that the One who would follow him would baptize them with fire (3.10-12). Jesus did, in fact, purify the temple, twice, once recorded in John 2.13-22, and at the end of His ministry, in Matthew 21.12-17. These cleansings angered the temple leaders. The two events became grounds on which the leaders would later seek to have Jesus crucified.

Malachi 3.3 "And He Shall Purify"

Yet, though His own people would seek Jesus' death, the ultimate goal of His work is their purification and salvation. Thus, Händel continues in Malachi's prophecy revealing the purpose of the Messenger's work, the cleansing of the sons of Levi to offer pure sacrifices.

Isaiah 7.14; Matthew 1.23 "Behold! A Virgin Shall Conceive"

Returning to the prophet Isaiah, Händel alerts us to a new dimension for our understanding of the coming One. In a prophecy aimed at stimulating faith among Jerusalem's leaders, Isaiah declares that a sign of coming deliverance would be the birth of a son to a virgin. Matthew picked up the prophecy to interpret the conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin, His mother Mary. The Evangelist reveals that event as the fulfillment of Isaiah's word. Händel continues, thus, to build his case that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, the promised Savior and Judge for Israel and the nations, since He is "God-with-us" (Immanuel).

Isaiah 40.9; 60.1 "O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion"

Isaiah 40 is important to Händel, and more significantly, to the New Testament. Quotations or allusions to it occur by one count thirty times. Thus it is right that Händel revisit the passage. Verses 1-11 form an introduction to a major unit of the book, and verse nine opens the fourth section of the introduction. Here he calls for heralds to go through the land announcing, "Behold your God." It is of some interest that God appears in verses 9-11 as a

shepherd leading His flock. With this verse Händel couples Isaiah 60.1, from the climactic section of the book. Chapter 59 ends with an oracle declaring God's intention single-handedly to bring His judgment and salvation, on behalf of Zion. Then 60.1 calls upon Zion to rejoice in the salvation thus accomplished. The context of the Messiah in which Händel places these verses links them powerfully with Jesus the Savior and Judge. Coming to Zion, then, He might expect His people to recognize Him.

Isaiah 60.2-3 "For, Behold, Darkness Shall Cover the Earth"

Recalling the plague of darkness in Egypt, Isaiah continues his prophecy with the expectation of darkness for the nations but light for Zion. It is, indeed Zion's light that, in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12.3) brings blessing to the nations. These prophecies move well beyond the first coming of Jesus and anticipate that great coming day when all nations shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Isaiah 9.2, 6 "The People that Walked in Darkness"; "For Unto Us"

The people that sit in darkness have seen the great light. With these words Isaiah introduces a high point in chapters 7–12, the Book of Immanuel. The immediate context refers to the failure of Israel's monarchy to save from enemy aggression. Therefore, God will raise up for Israel a child, a son, anticipated in 7.14, now revealed as a monarch with His throne names, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Again, Matthew 4.16 applies this to Jesus who comes in Galilee of the nations preaching ("Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," v. 17; cp. also Matthew 5–7) and doing the signs of the Messiah (Matthew 8–9). What awaits a worldwide future fulfillment has in seed form already occurred in Jesus' ministry.

[Pastoral Symphony]

Luke 2.8, 9, 10-11, 13, 14 "There Were Shepherds"; "And Lo! the Angel of the Lord"; "And Suddenly"; "Glory to God"

Händel moves now from prophetic hope to the outworking of that hope in history. In a series of five pieces, he presents the angelic proclamation of Jesus' birth to those who sit in darkness, shepherds in the fields at night. In fields only a few miles south of Jerusalem, the glory of the Lord overwhelmed them as the angel choir appeared to proclaim Jesus' birth: Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, goodwill to men." Accompanying the heavenly song was a message particularly for the shepherds, good tidings of great joy, the birth of Christ the Lord. Yet He was a new born (wrapped in swaddling clothes) and in questionable but significant circumstances (lying in a cattle trough).

Zechariah 9.9-10 "Rejoice Greatly, O Daughter of Zion!"

The final five pieces of Part I summarize the earthly career of Jesus: acclamation here, then His healing ministry, His role as the divine shepherd, and His offer of rest. Händel records the acclamation in words taken from Zechariah. As God works to subdue the nations in His saving work, He brings His king to Jerusalem. The prophet foresees the city's rejoicing as the king comes, in royal humility, riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will speak peace to the nations as His dominion reaches from sea to sea. Once more, Matthew shows Jesus' fulfillment of the prophecy (Matthew 21.1-11) as He rode into Jerusalem, in the week leading up to a fateful Passover.

Isaiah 35.5-6 "Then Shall the Eyes"

The healing ministry of Jesus comes to us summarized in two verses from Isaiah. He speaks peace, brings wholeness and life by His works. The great works gathered in Matthew 8 and 9, and repeated by His disciples in Matthew 10, become the evidence to assure the wavering Baptizer's faith in Matthew 11 where the Evangelist alludes to this passage. Jesus does the works of the kingdom. The hands of a king are the hands of a healer!

Isaiah 40.11 "He Shall Feed His Flock"

This beautiful aria is taken from Isaiah 40.11. In Isaiah the promise is of God's coming to deliver. In Jesus, God the good Shepherd has come, leading His sheep to find pasture. The Evangelist John records Jesus' discourse of the good shepherd in chapter 10. As we make this connection, though, we should see that John takes the imagery in a new direction. In Isaiah the shepherd has already accomplished salvation. In John, the shepherd, who is one with the Father, lays down His own life for the sheep. The hirelings, Jerusalem's leaders, will slaughter the sheep, will run leaving their sheep to die among their enemies (John 11.47-53, 57). The good shepherd gives His life for His friends (John 15.12-17).

Matthew 11.28-29 (He Shall Feed His Flock" (continued)

As a crowning expression of Jesus' role of divine shepherd Messiah, Händel takes us to Matthew 11. That chapter plays an important role in the book. One of the two major conflicts in Matthew begins in chapter 12. Chapter 11 is, as it were, the last quiet moment in Jesus' ministry before the storm clouds begin to gather, the storm that will lead to crucifixion (the burden of The Messiah's Part II). At the chapter's end, Jesus makes the great offer of rest: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls," speaking peace to the nations. The Messiah has come. It now remains for Him to accomplish the redemption of mankind.

Revelation 19.6; 11.15; 19.16—The Hallelujah Chorus

This is actually the final chorus of Part II, but is often sung at this point to complete the so-called "Christmas portion" of Messiah, in place of "His Yoke Is Easy." Händel draws from three verses of the Bible's final book, Revelation. Its opening comes from Revelation 19.6 where "a great sound was heard in heaven, like the sound of mighty waters or powerful thunder saying, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our almighty God reigns.'" The middle part of the chorus comes from 11.15: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of His Messiah" [an allusion to Psalm 2.1-3], and He shall reign forever and ever." The final section of the chorus is taken from Revelation 19.16, proclaiming Jesus, who rules with an iron scepter [an quotation from Psalm 2.9], King of kings and Lord of lords," the ruler of the kings of the earth (compare Psalm 89.27). Thus Händel has brought us to the final result of the work of Christ, the establishment of God's Kingdom. Jesus came not solely to die for humanity's sin, but also to reestablish the rule of God over the human race. The beauty and the glory of this chorus anticipate the rejoicing of heaven and the redeemed when Jesus finally exercises His great power over all the earth.

This commentary was originally produced as a series of program notes for a performance of Messiah by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and Chorus benefitting Orphanos Foundation (www.orphanos.org), and is reproduced with the author's and with Orphanos' permission.

COMING EVENT

March 5, 2011

details forthcoming



WORLDWIDE WORSHIP: AN INVITATION

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Ministers of Church, Youth, and Music Ministry!

We invite you to participate in the Summit for Music Directors of the Churches of the Evangelical-Christian Baptist Churches of Europe, the CIS, and America!

- ❖ **Dates and location of summit: January 27–30 2011, Riga, Latvia, St. Matthew's Baptist Church**
 - Church Address: Rigas Mateja draudze
Matīsa iela 50b
Rīga, LV-1009
 - Church Website: www.matejs.lv
 - Church Phone: +371 675 06 050
- ❖ **Invited participants**—Include church leaders involved in music ministry (pastors, directors, composers, music educators, conductors of music groups and orchestras, university and seminary music students).
- ❖ **Goal of the Summit**—To foster interaction between church music leaders, for the sake of developing our ministry for the Lord in our modern context, through mutual cooperation and the exchange of experience and training.
- ❖ **Expected participants include church leaders and ministers**
 - from the countries of Europe: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary
 - from the countries of the CIS: Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaidzjan
 - from the Republic of Georgia, the USA, and Canada
- ❖ **Language of the Summit:** Russian, English, and Latvian
- ❖ **Cost for Participation**
 - **Registration fees: 10 Euros**, Food (for all three days): **30 Euros**
 - **Housing:** This will depend on location (this will primarily be homestays with local Christian families). Plan for **10–15 Euros** (approximately 13–20 USD) per day. If visitors from the US and Canada would prefer local hotel accommodations, several options are available within walking distance of the church, including the Ramada Riga City Centre, the Viktorija Hotel, and the A1 Hotel. Cost is approximately \$60–70 per day. Reservations should be made directly with the hotels (see Expedia or Trip Advisor for specific details)
 - **For those coming from Ukraine:** Shengen Zone Visa: **35 Euros**, Travel: **100 Euros** (traveling together in one bus)
 - **Please confirm your attendance** (including arrival and departure times) with the conference committee at riga.sammit2011@gmail.com.
- ❖ **About the Conference Program**
 - **Thursday**—Arrival, Assignment to Homestays, Conference begins at 17.00 (5:00 pm) with dinner, fellowship, and the evening program with the participation of the youth choir and orchestra from the Russian- and Latvian-speaking churches in Riga.
 - **Friday–Saturday**—Seminars (joint worship service, ministry, training), presentations by our participants, learning about new resources, concert participation
 - **Sunday**—Participation in the Russian- and Latvian-speaking churches in the Riga area
- ❖ **Donations**—We anticipate that some of the conference costs will be covered by freewill donations from churches, choir members, music ministers, and other sponsors. (Those interested in helping to support the needs of those who aren't able to cover their full conference costs may send donations through the US, Germany, Latvia, Ukraine, and Russia; please contact us for details.)
- ❖ **In order to receive an invitation to obtain a visa please send us the first page of your international passport** (ASAP, before December 10). Note: Visas are not required for visitors from the US, Canada, or countries of the European Union/Shengen Zone.
- ❖ **Prayer Requests:** We ask that you pray for God's direction and for spiritual blessing for all of the preparations related to holding this summit, and for safe travel for all of the participants.

With respect, from the Conference Committee
rigasammit2011@gmail.com

WORSHIP NOTES is a free monthly online digest of reflections, views, news and reviews concerning biblical worship. It is produced by Ron Man as a publication of **Worship Resources International**, a ministry devoted to “strengthening the body of Christ in the U.S. and around the world by promoting the priority, understanding and practice of God-centered, Christ-exalting, Biblically-based worship.” To subscribe, please go to www.worr.org and click on “Worship Notes” at the top; all back issues can be accessed there as well. There are many other free resources on the website also. You also might want to check out the worship quote blog, Quotables (worr.wordpress.com).