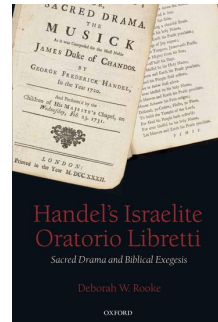


Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti: Sacred Drama and Biblical Exegesis, by Deborah W. Rooke

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I had already appreciated Handel from an aesthetic point of view: a fireplace, a glass of wine, and Handel passionately composing oratorios upon my music player. Each crescendo pushing and pulling at my dependence upon the melodic line. A moment of loss here. A moment of gain there. Disappointment. Release. There was much to appreciate and enjoy. Yet in my reverie, I risked overlooking something important. Deborah Rooke's *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti* fixed that by emphasizing a dimension of Handel's work that I had until recently neglected. The father of what is now the conservative Christian majestic choral rapture, Rooke explains, not only employed librettists who were biblical exegetes—how well versed is a different discussion—but was himself



a practicing biblical revisionist. In that spirit, Rooke's work moves under the direction of two "motifs" pushing, pulling, and finally embracing like melodies in a contrapuntal fugue: (1) an exegetical analysis of the biblical narrative, and (2) an analysis of how Handel and his changing chorus of librettists nuanced prevailing interpretations of biblical stories for current social-political sensitivities or expectations. Did Yahweh love Israel? Then, so the prevailing thought in eighteenth-century Britain went, he must also love the British monarchy and the Protestant Established Church's separation from the Holy See. Rational? Well, what is "rational," anyway?

In "To Laugh or Not to Laugh: the Question of Esther" (ch. 1), Rooke explores the symbolic transition of Esther, from Bible to oratorio, "from comedy through tragedy to national and royal propaganda" (31). This transition was eased by Jean Racine, whose play *Esther* dealt with many of the themes Handel wished to address (2). Consequently, Handel's version of Esther was freed from its biblical constraints (Racine took a number of liberties; 7–8) to be molded into a symbol fitting for the eighteenth-century London monarchy. The theme of God's salvation of the Jews in Esther takes on symbolically, for both Racine and Handel, various deliverances of the British people, including the deliverance of the British Protestant Established Church from popish extermination (24).

In 1733, Handel capitalized on the success of *Esther* by producing and performing two more oratorios, these in conjunction with the librettist Samuel Humphreys. The first was an adaption of Esther for the public stage. The second pursued the figure, and symbolic value, of *Deborah*, and this occupies the focus of Rooke's second chapter ("A Gender Agenda: Deborah in Holy Writ and Handel"). *Deborah* was, as Rooke interprets from the evidence, intended as flattery for the London royals (33). For note, "The assumption, then, is that in his libretto—with Handel's approval—Samuel Humphreys manipulated the biblical material on Deborah in order to convey a strong and positive political message about both Britain and its queen as the upholders of true religion" (35). The story of Deborah, Rooke argues, can be interpreted as a commentary on not only the waywardness of Israel—or, symbolically the divinely "favored" people—but also on the failings of men; certainly a theme that would have pleased Queen Caroline (52)!

The third chapter, "Jezebel, Joash, and Jesus Christ: *Aspects of Athalia*," analyzes Handel's (and Humphrey's) focus on the theme of a strong-willed woman. In this case, and in contrast to *Esther* and *Deborah*, *Athalia* emphasizes the role of the feminine anti-hero and the downfall of Athalia's reign

(53). The choice of subject, as Rooke notes was intriguing because the story of Athalia had symbolic associations with a recent political past that saw the Jacobians at odds with the Hanoverians, the latter with which Handel was aligned (54–55). In the end, however, Rooke can only speculate as to Handel’s reasoning for an oratorio on Athalia: “it is possible that this ambiguity was deliberate, enabling Handel to produce an oratorio that would satisfy the potentially hostile High Church and Jacobite factions in Oxford without being disloyal to his Hanoverian benefactors” (73).

Chapter 4 (“Saul: Tragedy, Treachery, and Theology”) identifies a shift in Handel’s focus from the feminine subject to the masculine one with Saul, the subject of an oratorio produced in collaboration with Charles Jennens in 1738. This collaboration was the first among several that would include works such as *Messiah* (1741), *Belshazzar* (1744), and 1738’s *Israel in Egypt* (74). Christian messianism, as a particular focus within an exploration of divine kingship, occupied a significant emphasis in this libretto (86). But note also, “Despite the oratorio being entitled *Saul*, the content of the libretto indicates that Jennens is not interested purely in Saul, but in Saul vis-à-vis David” (86–87), which may have symbolized the deposing of James II in 1688 and the installation of the Hanoverians instead of the Catholic Stuarts (96). Consequently, the libretto transforms Saul from a tragic figure into a wicked man who embodies evil in his pursuit of David (97).

“From Wild Man to War Hero: *The Story of Samson*” (ch. 5) continues to focus on the theme of the tortured male figure in Handel’s works. Handel’s oratorio on Samson, Rooke points out, was an adaption of John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (98), and was prepared by Newburgh Hamilton (111–20). There is a clear development, concludes Rooke, from the biblical portrayal of the character to Milton’s to Hamilton and Handel’s Samson. Moreover, “[Hamilton’s] portrayal embodies the characteristically British ideals of resistance to tyranny and defeat of idolatrous (Catholic) religion” (120).

Chapter 6 (“Joseph: Saint or Sinner?”) investigates the reaction to Apostolo Zeno’s libretto *Giuseppe* in the composition of *Joseph and His Brethren*. With *Joseph*, Handel, after a disagreement with Charles Jennens over the setting for *Messiah*, chose to work with librettist James Miller (121). Rooke investigates the cultural perceptions of Joseph during the eighteenth century and the influence of Zeno’s libretto *Giuseppe* with its positive emphasis upon Joseph and its defense of Joseph’s integrity (144). It was in defense of that integrity that Miller chose to portray Joseph as an unambitious character who persevered through his experiences by depending upon the Divine (143).

Handel's oratorio *Judas Macchabeus* took a more overt political turn than his previous works, and it is this to which Rook dedicates her seventh chapter. This oratorio, explains Rooke, was completed in the wake of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–46 as a compliment to William, Duke of Cumberland, who saw the rebellion put to rest (145). Handel worked with Thomas Morell on this libretto because of Jennens's sensitive political position (146). By drawing parallels between the Maccabean revolt, Handel and Jennens emphasized in their oratorio divine legitimation of the anti-Jacobite campaign, which sought to protect the interests of the Established Church (164–165).

"Solomon and His Women: A Handelian Triptych" (ch. 8) explores how the 1748 oratorio *Solomon* adapted the biblical text to celebrate King George II's reign and the "blessedness of the status quo that has been arrived at by defeating the Jacobite threat to the English throne" (167). That, as Rooke points out, however, was but the framework for a complex analysis of gender roles and privilege—a woman's role, according to the oratorio, was to reflect well upon and complement men. "Solomon's women reflect his glory; and in so doing, allow Solomon to reflect an equally glorious image of His Royal Highness King George II" (183).

Chapter 9 explores the 1749 oratorio *Susanna*, which Rooke argues should be seen as a complement to *Solomon*. Some of the liberties taken in this oratorio included a transformation of Susanna from being a passive figure (as she is portrayed in the biblical text) to an active one. According to Rooke, however, this may have been due more to utility than to any celebration of an active, liberated woman (cf. 193). An oratorio about Susanna, after all, needed its main character to speak and act. In fact, the oratorio emphasizes Susanna as an "example par excellence of wifely virtue" (206).

Rooke's final chapter, "Sex and Death, or, the Death of Sex: The Fate of Jephthah's Daughter," focuses on Handel's final oratorio, *Jephthah*. For this oratorio, Handel collaborated once again with Morell. Completed in 1751, and less firmly anchored to any political context than previous oratorios, this oratorio focused on Jephthah's internal deliberations about the vow he made to Yahweh to sacrifice his daughter; Jephthah is portrayed as being inspired by and acting under the approval of Yahweh. His daughter's death, then, was a celebration of celibacy. Or, as Rooke puts it, "There is ... movement from death as sex, through death as transcending sex, to the death of sex that signifies the death of death; and with that movement, the heathenish, death-dealing deity of the Old Testament story is transformed into the life-giving God of eighteenth-century orthodox Christianity" (226).

Rooke's narrative strategy is very much like a contrapuntal work: with each chapter, she explores the biblical contexts of the biblical characters in question before investigating how they were (re)interpreted as eighteenth-century cultural and political symbols portraying the struggles of the British monarchy and the Established Church. Throughout her work, I found myself disagreeing with little. In fact, I found myself repeating frequently "aha!" after a given explanation of the unique context that provided the social-political framework for a specific oratorio. As a reader, I found it quite intriguing to see that Handel took liberties with religious interpretation for the sake of political flattery—a different side to the composer often played in Christian churches here in the U.S.

All said, Deborah Rooke offers us an important work on the role that musical composition, as cultural production, can play in supporting or challenging the boundaries of biblical interpretation. For anyone interested in Handel or in classical music generally and biblical interpretation, this book should be on her bookshelf. This book offers a playful exposition of not only Handel's Israelite oratorio libretti but also of his, and his librettists', personal motivations in pleasing the established political power and the divine favor for the Established Church. And in this, Rooke's conclusion is apt, "[a study of this nature] challenges modern readers to consider their own relationship with sacred texts such as the Bible, and to be aware of how their own appropriation of such texts is just as culturally conditioned as that of Handel's librettists" (228). Toward that end, something I as a reader would have liked to have seen is a stronger application of prevailing critical, interpretive methods within the sections dealing with the biblical narratives themselves. Doing so would have clarified some of the interpretive directions toward and from the biblical passages taken by the librettists, as well as more clearly connected Rooke's two narrative strands or "motifs" applied throughout her work. To be fair, Rooke cites her necessary scholars here, but too often her discussion in this sections tended toward a superficial and abbreviated summary rather than a detailed analysis. But that said, Rooke's work has only increased my appreciation and understanding of Handel. I am still sitting by the fire, glass of wine in hand, and listening to the rapturous seduction of Handel's oeuvre.

Jeremiah W. Cataldo
Grand Valley State University