

A Night Out With Handel's Messiah

By Phyllis Chesler

I don't go out very much these days but friends finally managed to drag me to Lincoln Center to hear the New York Philharmonic perform George Friederic Handel's *Messiah*. Well, it was nothing less than magnificent, at least musically. The house was packed, the David Geffen Hall had the most comfortable seats, even for those of us who are disabled.



The music itself, the conductor, the individual singers, and the chorus were sublime. The rousing ovation which lasted at least three minutes, was deserved.

The sung text is based on sentences taken from both the Old and the New Testament, specifically from Isaiah, Malachi, Luke, Psalms, Hebrews, Romans, Revelation, and Corinthians.

Some of these lines are as extraordinary as they are familiar: "Comfort ye my people, saith the Lord" (Isaiah XL:1) and "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory"? (I Corinthians XV 55-56).

Ah, but Handel's librettist used the Hebrew Prophets out of context. With all due respect for the enchanting and mystical story of the Virgin Mary, her husband, Joseph, and their son, Jesus, please allow me to clarify the way the Hebrew prophets were used in order to support Christian beliefs. That's not really necessary, is it?

By the way, talking about Mary: I saw Fiona Shaw play Mary on Broadway some time ago. It was deeply moving and very funny. She played Mother Mary with an Irish accent, but also as a complaining, Jewish mother who felt that her son was hanging around with the wrong company and that he might just get himself killed.

In Handel's masterwork, a counter-tenor sings: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God is with us." (Isaiah VII: 14).

In the Hebrew, there is no mention of a virgin only of a young woman, "ha-alma," one who is of marriageable age. In Hebrew, a virgin is "a betulah." We do not know who the young woman might be. According to any number of Jewish scholars, there is nothing that ties this young woman and her son to anyone who lived 700 years later.

The Chorus sings: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." (Isaiah IX:6).

According to Isaiah, and to all those who mastered his extraordinarily difficult Hebrew, this child is understood to be the "son of Ahaz, viz Hezekiah; and the name of this child is Pele-Joez. And this strange and exotic name in Hebrew, means 'Wonderful in counsel is God the Mighty, the Everlasting Father, the Ruler of Peace.' According to Abarbanel, "the child will bear these significant names in order to recall to

the people the message which they embodied.” And what about peace? The “peace referred to concerns that “upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom.”

Isaiah’s vision is far above my paygrade, but I have studied him a wee bit and knew that his words had been taken out of context. When I got home, I checked it by looking at an edition of this prophet’s words, edited by Rev. Dr. A. Cohen; the Rev. Dr. I. W.Slotki, as revised by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg and published by The Soncino Press. The list of the Authorities Consulted or Quoted comes to at least 44 such experts, including Abarbanel, Horodotus, Josephus Flavius, Ibn Ezra, Rashi, as well as the Torah and the Talmud.

These days, God bless them, American Christians are the greatest allies of Jews, of Israel-under-seige and of the West. I recognize this and view it as something of a miracle. I wonder why Christian theologians needed to borrow from an earlier monotheism in order to make their own case? Why indeed! Your thoughts?

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