

THE MESSIAH

Vs.

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR

For: Prof. Richard Vaggione, OHC

Divine Oracles – Exegesis in the Early Church

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Handel's Oratorio, *The Messiah*, and Andrew Lloyd Webbers's Rock Opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, present two very different portraits of Jesus Christ. Frank Garlock, a minister and Chair of Music Theory at Bob Jones University rankled at comparisons between the two, saying "This comparison is so ludicrous that it is absurd. The opera is certainly not talking about the Lord Jesus Christ in honor of whom Handel composed the Messiah and for whose glory Bach composed some of the greatest music known to man." Others, such as Derek Jewel of the London Sunday Times, found *Superstar* "Every bit as valid as (and . . . often more moving than) Handel's Messiah." The two worlds of classic opera and rock music are polar opposites - the former representing highbrow, conservative taste and the other an "in your face" protest against conventionality.¹ It is not just the musical genre that is in opposition, it is the depiction of Jesus, and the use of the Biblical information.

Charles Jennings, the author of the *Messiah* libretto, wrote in the mid-eighteenth century. Religious debate was not only a major element of intellectual life; but religious belief and morality had significant impact on both the culture and the works of art it produced.² Jennen's libretto illustrates his views on major issues of his day – a time of intense argument concerning the Old Testament, the divinity of Jesus and growing debate about the spread of irreligion. To limit the power of Christianity to compel obedience, deists attempted to undermine it by questioning the concept of the Trinity through challenging the claims for Jesus as Messiah. To do so, they attacked one of the justifications for these claims, the miracles performed by Old Testament figures traditionally regarded as forerunners of Christ.

Jennens's libretto took up the challenge, and the cause of biblical prophecy, comparing what was *foretold* with the consequences and following *events*. He paralleled Old Testament prophecy with New Testament fulfillment and illustrated the 'harmony of

¹ Carol Gale, *Jesus Christ Superstar | The Portrayal of Jesus as a Rock Star Phenomenon*, in *Drama for Students*, 2000, (www.e.notes.com/jesus-christ/20072)

² Tim Slover, *Joyful Noise: A Study Guide*, (BYU Theatre & Media Arts, 1998), 2-3

the gospels' with each other; together with the actual verbal correspondence between Old and New Testament texts³, taken directly from the King James Bible without modification.

Messiah is not a number of scenes from the Life of Jesus linked together to form a dramatic whole, but a representation of the fulfillment of Redemption through the Redeemer. It is divided into three parts: I. The prophecy and realization of God's Plan to redeem mankind by the coming of the Messiah; II. The accomplishment of redemption by the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind's rejection of God's offer and utter defeat when trying to oppose the power of the Almighty; III. A Hymn of Thanksgiving for the final overthrow of Death. Much of the text consists of prophetic utterances. The life of Christ is presented almost entirely through *allusion*.⁴

In Part One we are presented a majestic, interwoven tapestry of Old Testament texts – Isaiah and Malachi – that moves through the Messiah in prophecy into the birth story from Luke, and then alternates between the Old Testament - Zechariah, and Isaiah- and the New – Matthew – to illustrate the nature of the promise fulfilled in the Christ child. Part Two begins by establishing the analogy of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb in the words of John 1:29. This image is developed primarily with reference to Old Testament texts – Isaiah, Psalms, and Lamentations – to establish the links with prophecy and then juxtaposes the 'world' – Hebrews and Romans – with both prophecy, and the divine nature of Jesus, through quotations from Psalms. It concludes with an allegory of resurrection in the Halleljah Chorus, the texts taken directly from Revelation. Part three goes beyond the scope of *Superstar*, and is therefore not commented upon here.

Scholars believe that Jennens inspiration for the general plan of *Messiah* was not the Bible itself, but the Prayer Book. The passages from Isaiah and the Gospels are in part from the Christmas service for the Church of England, while Part II uses the services from Holy Week, Easter, Ascensiontide and Whitsunday. Part III comes in large measure from the Burial Service.⁵

³ Slover, 3

⁴ Ibid., 4

⁵ Ibid.

Jesus Christ Superstar is a creative reworking of the story of the last seven days of Jesus' life, based on a creative expansion of material from the canonical Gospels.⁶ It places him in a context with overtones of the culture of the early 1970s. As a vehicle to understanding, Jesus is depicted as a pop-idol, complete with adoring groupies among whom he struggles, out of context, in an alien culture that ultimately crushes, crucifies, and forgets him.

The author of the libretto, Timothy Rice, rejected the persona of Jesus familiar in the Bible stories. In an interview he admitted his fascination with Judas, without whom, he said, there would be no Christianity. It was Judas who directly caused Christ's martyrdom, creating a tragic heroic figure around whom a whole religion would coalesce. To make his Judas come to life, he portrayed a different kind of Christ; an imperfect flesh and blood martyr. In fact, in materials sent to radio stations in both recorded and printed form with the original album of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he said "The idea of the whole opera is to have Christ seen through the eyes of Judas, and Christ as a man, not as a God. And the fact that Christ himself is just as mixed up and unaware of exactly what he is, as Judas is."⁷ Therefore, Rice created Jesus as a fallible human.

The First Act of *Superstar* begins and ends with Judas, who moves steadily from anxiety over the direction of Jesus' ministry ('Heaven on Their Minds') to the sealing of his fate ('Blood Money'). In between, Jesus is comforted by Mary Magdalene ('Everything's Alright'), praised by Simon Zealotes ('Simon Zealotes'), and criticized by Annas and Caiaphas ('Then We Are Decided'; 'This Jesus Must Die'). The Second Act covers the last twenty-four hours of Jesus' life, from The Last Supper to the Burial (John 19:41).

Events from different gospels are harmonized in a way that has been described, as "breathtaking to any biblical scholar with sensitivities to the synoptic problem."⁸ Rice takes elements from each version, and supplements them with material from other stories and his own imagination. For example, in 'Trial before Pilate', he uses the trial before

⁶ Mark Goodacre, Do You Think You're What They Say You Are, (Journal of Religion and Film, Vol.3, No.2, October 1999), 7

⁷ Faith Free Presbyterian Church, This Musical is Controversial...", on JesusChristSuperstar@groups.msn.com, (<http://groups.msn.com/JesusChristSuperstar/opposition.msnw>)

⁸ Goodacre, 17

Herod from Luke 23:6-12; the crowd crying 'We have no king but Caesar' from, John 19:15); and Pilate washing his hands of the whole affair from Matthew 27:24.⁹ Similarly, the several stories of the anointing of Jesus (Matt. 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, and John 12:1-8) are rolled into one in the number 'Everything's Alright'. However, unlike the Gospels, it is Mary Magdalene who anoints Jesus. His reply to Judas' criticism of her uses yet another story, the Woman Taken in Adultery from John 8:1-11.¹⁰

Rice portrays Jesus as a charismatic leader, who draws to him an immense and loyal crowd. He is the Messiah, the saviour whose coming was prophesied in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible; but who nevertheless grapples with human faults. Therefore Rice also depicts him running out of patience with the endless demands of the sick and poor, "Oh, there's too many of you, don't push me ... Heal yourselves! (The Temple). Mary Magdalene wonders about falling in love with him (I Don't Know How to Love Him). He regrets having accomplished little in his life, and feels paralyzing doubt when confronted with his imminent death. He can only motivate himself through spite and anger, "Alright, I'll die! See how I die!" (I Only Want to Say). A flawed Jesus, raises the possibility that he is yet another false messiah, and will lead the Jews to destruction, not heaven. In this way Rice's version provides Judas with a clear and defensible motive for betrayal, to avert the wrath of the Romans from the Jewish people.¹¹

In contrast to *Messiah's* triumphant Hallelujah chorus, *Superstar* leaves us with the crucifixion, followed by the bleak image of burial without any hint of resurrection through the words of John 19:41. We are left with the image that Jesus was just a man, and with the words of the theme running through our minds:

Jesus Christ

Superstar

Do you think you're what they say you are?

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⁹ Goodacre.

¹⁰ Ibid, 18.

¹¹ Gale

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