

Sektion II/2

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Rejoicing against Whom? Charles Jennens, Michael Marissen, Zadok the Priest, and the Hallelujah Chorus

Michael Marissen's book on *Messiah* has reaped widespread attention. A google search yields thousands of hits covering nations on six continents, from Israel to Egypt, Brazil to Japan. Intrinsic merits aside, Marissen's argument has surely reaped all that attention because of his charge that this revered work – especially its most famous number, the Hallelujah Chorus – was partly meant as a “rejoicing against Judaism.” Marissen's charge is part of a more general cultural project, in which Western culture's most iconic figures and canonical works of art have been subjected to iconoclastic reassessment – interpreted not as transcendent masterpieces but as products, and agents, of historical struggle.

My own earlier scholarship has certainly abetted that larger project. Nevertheless, I must ask whether Marissen's charge rings as true for 18th century sensibilities as it does for our own, and in particular whether it applies to the “author” of the *Messiah* libretto, Charles Jennens. Along with other scholars, I would argue that it does not. Marissen is surely correct in emphasizing that what the Hallelujah Chorus celebrates is God's destruction of an evil nation and its corrupt rulers. What I am proposing here is that Jennens harbored a different animus, personally more urgent than anti-Judaism, and that this may help account for the dark materials celebrated in the Hallelujah Chorus. If Jennens was anti-Judaic, it was only in a casual and (in 18th century England) entirely conventional way. But for Jennens what was neither casual nor conventional was his public denial of the fundamental legitimacy of the royal dynasty that ruled his own nation. Jennens fervently held that the Stuarts remained Britain's rightful sovereigns, and he refused to swear loyalty to their Hanoverian usurpers, an act that seriously constricted his own career. Not only was Jennens a “non-juror,” he also provided generous financial support to his fellow non-jurors (including, dangerously, Roman Catholic Jacobites).

To support my argument, I shall make use of much of the same material that Marissen himself has carefully examined. This includes contemporaneous theological analyses of *Revelations*

11 and 19 (Jennens' source for the Hallelujah Chorus) and *Psalms* 2:1-4 and 9 (his source for the four preceding numbers, from "Why do the nations so furiously rage together?" through "Thou shalt break them").

I shall pay special attention to Jennens' decision, in "Why do the nations," to replace the word *heathen* (used in both the authorized King James Version and the *Book of Common Prayer*) with the unexpected word *nations*. While Marissen plausibly interpreted that change as allowing Jennens to apply that verse to the Jews, I believe its purpose was to allow him to apply it to the Hanoverian kings.

Jennens made an even smaller word change in the Hallelujah Chorus itself, in the phrase "the kingdom of this world," another change supporting the idea that he had a political purpose in mind: in the King James Bible, *kingdom* is rendered in the plural: *kingdoms*. Furthermore, an examination of the *Revelation* texts that comprise the Hallelujah Chorus as a whole suggests that it was the single most carefully devised number in the entire libretto. The chorus consists of three non-contiguous verses, more than in any other number. And they were mere fragmentary snippets, drained of their rather weird contextual significance and arrayed, moreover, in completely disjointed, non-Biblical order.

I have a theory that could explain why Jennens selected and arranged those snippets as he did – it's that he intended to use the Hallelujah Chorus as a coded rejoinder to an earlier chorus that Handel had composed, the 1727 anthem *Zadok the Priest*. First performed at the coronation of Hanoverian King George II, that anthem had won great popularity, receiving fully 49 performances by 1739, the same year that Jennens almost certainly worked on *Messiah*. But where *Zadok* had called for the King to "live for ever," the Hallelujah Chorus declared that Christ would reign "for ever and ever." Where *Zadok* glorified the British King, the Hallelujah Chorus rejoiced that Christ was the "King of Kings." Finally, the Hallelujah Chorus announced what amounted to a change of dynastic regimes: "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."

Reassessments of revered canonical works are necessary. But even as they helpfully problematize unexamined assumptions, they inevitably sometimes err by projecting contemporary sensibilities on to the past. I would respectfully propose that such is the case with Marissen's interpretation of the Hallelujah Chorus.