

# INTRODUCTION

*Messiah* is a work on the grand scale. It sets out to do nothing less than tell the story of the redemption of the human race. It is panoramic, beginning with the voice of God promising salvation and ending with the chorus of angels celebrating its completion. While it tells the story of Jesus—though scarcely at all in the language of the Gospel narratives—it is much more than that. It is the story of the Messiah. In other words, it is a declaration of the purposes of God in history.

The work is, of course, very popular and highly familiar to many people. But the problem with familiarity is that it can breed, if not contempt, then at least carelessness. We take familiar words for granted, no matter how grand and awesome they are. So for many of us *Messiah* is about good tunes, rousing choruses and haunting solos, rather than the infinite purposes of God. This book is an attempt to redress the balance. In this case, the words do matter!

For example, people often speak of 'Jesus Christ', rather as though 'Jesus' was his given name (which it was) and 'Christ' his surname (which it wasn't). To his family he was 'Jesus', one of the most common Jewish male names at the time. It's a variant of 'Joshua', and means 'saviour', 'deliverer'. To his disciples and to the crowds in Galilee and Jerusalem he was 'Rabbi', 'Teacher'. As his authority grew, many began to call him *Kyrios*, 'Lord'—one who should be respected and honoured.

But it was only with painful slowness, if we are to believe the Gospel records, that even his closest followers came to recognize that he was 'the Christ'—'the Messiah'. Both titles mean 'Anointed One', the first in Greek, the second in Hebrew. For the Twelve, it would seem that the moment of recognition was somewhere on the road to Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked them who they would say that he was. Peter spoke for them all: 'The Christ [Messiah] of God', he replied (Luke 9:20). It was a defining moment, both for them and for Jesus. From then on his ministry shifted its emphasis. Now there were fewer miracles, less time spent teaching the crowds. Instead, he concentrated on the little group of disciples, setting out for them the path that lay ahead of him: rejection, death, resurrection.

They found it hard to comprehend. Although such a messiah

was described in the writings of Isaiah, it was not an image that they found either familiar or appealing. They were looking for a king in the Davidic mould, a conqueror and liberator, not a Suffering Servant who would die for the people. They failed fully to comprehend the very scriptures which they knew so well.

Handel, and his librettist, Charles Jennens, came to the vast story of our redemption with seventeen centuries of Christian history behind them. For them, the story was neither unfamiliar nor unappealing. Yet as they began to unfold the scriptures, especially the writings of the great Hebrew prophets, I think they found its dimensions quite overwhelming. For what they had set themselves to do was to stretch out before their audiences the vast story of God and the human race. Only the words of scripture itself, and only truly inspired music, could even begin to do justice to a theme of such magnificence.

That is what *Messiah* offers us—the story of God’s purpose in sending his ‘Anointed One’ to the rescue of a lost and enslaved people. It is the story of our sin, and God’s grace. It is the story of the triumph of love over all the powers of evil.

### Author’s note

This book can be read in sections, or as daily reflections. Obviously it will be most effective if the reading can be accompanied by the music, either before or after reading. To help with this, a cassette of extracts from *Messiah* has been produced, specifically for use with this book. The performance, by members of the choir of St Margaret’s, Westminster, is designed to aid reflection on the words and themes of the work. The text of *Messiah* is a finely constructed piece of biblical interpretation, bringing together prophecy, narrative, worship and praise to create an integrated picture of the whole scheme of redemption. I hope you enjoy giving it the attention it deserves!

This book is based on the libretto of *Messiah*, which is drawn, and in some cases slightly adapted, from the Authorized Version of the Bible or the Psalter of the Book of Common Prayer. Each chapter sets out the relevant part of the libretto.

After the biblical quotations, in each chapter there is a paragraph in bold type. This is an introductory thought or ‘way in’ to the theme of the reflection, summing up the main point, and acting as a ‘hook’ on which to ‘hang’ your understanding of the chapter.

## THE COMING MESSIAH: PROMISE AND WARNING

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*It’s early morning, and the city is just beginning business. The market traders are laying out their wares—cloths, wool, olive oil, sweet spices, oranges, lemons and grapes. The sun is casting sharp shadows in the narrow streets. There is noise—voices, cart-wheels, the harsh shriek of camels. All seems normal enough, and yet over the city of Jerusalem there is palpable fear. The Babylonians, who have already conquered the northern province of Israel, are now swarming over the surrounding countryside of Judah. Now and then, as you look from the walls towards the distant hills, you can catch the glint of sun on a helmet or a chariot. Slowly, irresistibly it seems, they are moving in on their prey...*

Eventually, it happened. The defenders of the city were powerless. Just as the great prophet Isaiah had foretold a century earlier, the temple was ransacked and thousands of able-bodied men and women were taken away into captivity in Babylon. For those left behind things were not much better. The Babylonians ruled the land, set the laws, plundered the harvest. If this was, as the prophet had said, God’s judgment on their past sin and disobedience, then a very heavy price was being exacted. Not for the first time, the people of Israel and Judah wondered whether being a ‘chosen’ people was such a privilege after all.

And where was the ‘messiah’? Where was the anointed servant of God who would restore the long-lost glory of Israel and once again rule from the throne of David? How long must his downtrodden people wait before the Lord heard their cries and came to their aid?

That, in brief, is the ‘story’ at the point where Handel’s *Messiah* begins. The prophet Isaiah had warned the kings and the people of Judah of inevitable disaster if they persisted in their idolatry and religious compromise. Chapter 39 of his book (usually seen as the end of what is called First Isaiah) ends with his stark warning to king Hezekiah, ‘Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house... shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord’. Those words would have been spoken in the early years of the seventh century before Christ. In between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40 there is a gap of perhaps a hundred years, years of

constant threat from the Assyrians and finally the all-conquering Babylonians, until Jerusalem was indeed conquered and ransacked and its people taken into slavery in 587BC. But God had not forgotten his people. He would send them a ‘second Isaiah’, another prophet of the same school, with a new message.

That is the background to the opening words of *Messiah*, which are taken from the first verse of chapter 40, the beginning of Second Isaiah—the story of the promise of God’s eventual deliverance of his people, the story of a yet more distant and more splendid hope too, in the coming of that long-promised, long-expected Messiah.

## Trials at an end

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her; that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.*

Isaiah 40:1–2

***Messiah begins and ends with a voice: the voice of God begins the story, and the voice of angels ends it with a song of triumph. But triumph is still a long way away from these opening words, which are the first hints of better days for the people of Jerusalem.***

It’s sixty years on from the day when the Babylonian troops arrived and captured Jerusalem. Again, it’s morning, and the city is rousing itself for business. After six decades of enemy occupation, they are losing hope that they will ever again be a free and independent people, or that their relatives who were marched off all those years ago to the slave camps of Babylon will ever return. They take little notice as the prophet makes his way to the stone steps—all that remains of the once magnificent temple of the Lord. He’s a disciple of the great prophet Isaiah of a previous generation, and has taken the same name. They’re used to his rantings and they know his message. ‘It’s all your fault. You ignored God, disobeyed his laws, turned to idols. It’s all turned out exactly as we warned you it would!’ Like the man on the modern street corner with the placard about ‘the End of the World’, they regard him as an irrelevance.

But today he surprises them. Usually his first word, shouted out above the noise of the market, is ‘Woe!’ Today—they can hardly believe their ears—it’s ‘Comfort!’ People stop, tell their neighbours to listen, and wait to find out if they heard him correctly. Until today, his message has been a great deal more stick than carrot. But now, it seems, he has a new message. There’s even a note of gentleness. At last, in all the despair and regret, there is hope.

God has told him, he says, to ‘comfort’ his people, to ‘speak comfortably’—or as we would say now, ‘tenderly’—to them. No one had spoken to them like that for sixty years—nothing but shouted commands from the occupiers and dire warnings from

the prophets. Now, can they bring themselves to listen to a voice of comfort?

It's as though he is calling to them through a swirling mist, the sort of mist that has hung around for what has seemed an endless winter. He's speaking to a people who have been under a foreign yoke for so long that few of them have ever known freedom. Many of them have at last reluctantly come to accept that their fate is the just penalty of past failure and sin, that their God had every right to have punished them. But is it all too late? Has he abandoned them for ever?

It's against that setting that these words ring out, as they do in Handel's opening solo. The word 'Comfort' seems to hang in the air, its repetition like a divine echo. 'Comfort ye my people.' Were they really still 'my people', the covenant people of the one true God?

Isaiah was speaking to a nation torn between two conflicting emotions: despair and faith. Their plight seemed desperate and inescapable, yet they had always been told that 'their God'—the God of their forefathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—would never abandon them completely. Not only that, but in his own good time he would send them a saviour to lead them into a new era of hope, peace and prosperity.

This promised deliverer was known by the title Messiah, the 'anointed one'. It was applied to their kings, chosen by God and anointed with oil by the high priest. Messiah would be a king, too, but not like the kings they had experienced in their recent history. He would truly be God's chosen one, a fitting successor to the eternal throne of David, and the agent of God's purpose for his people. That was their 'messianic' hope.

And so the people of Judah waited, despair and faith competing, as they so often do in the experience of all God's people, then and now. The dark mist still enveloped them. There was no light on the horizon. But there comes a point where being told it's all our fault is not enough. And that point had now been reached. Jerusalem's time of 'warfare' was accomplished; her 'iniquity'—deep and persistent disobedience—was 'pardoned'. Indeed, in the biblical text, 'she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins'. She had 'done her time', paid her debt. At last, her trials were at an end. God wanted to speak to her 'comfortably', 'tenderly'.

And that is always where true comfort lies. After all, we know about 'cold comfort' and 'false comfort', the voice that says 'it's all right now' when it clearly isn't. Real comfort is to receive strength

from another (that's the origin of the word in English) but to receive it tenderly. For me, comfort is the person who doesn't simply put steel into your backbone, but also puts an arm around your shoulders. That, at last, was what the people of Jerusalem were being offered, and that is what God offers to any of his children who turn to him in their moment of despair.

#### **A REFLECTION**

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*God's comfort is, literally, his strength with us. It's not a warm and cosy feeling, but the confidence that he keeps his word and fulfils his promises. That confidence will often struggle with despair, but it rests on two great truths: God loves us, and we are his people.*

## The voice in the wilderness

*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

Isaiah 40:3

**Lessons can be learnt in the wilderness that can never be learnt in the town. There different, quieter voices can be heard—voices that the rush of life drowns out.**

The people of God, long enslaved, are to hear a voice. But it won't ring out in the streets of the capital. This voice can only be heard in the 'wilderness', the desert land to the east of Jerusalem, and still today a place of awesome heat, a stone-strewn landscape that looks something like the surface of the moon. There are no distractions there! In that setting, they could hear the voice of promise. The Lord was coming!

As we hear these words, full of such dramatic impact in their original setting for a captive people long ago, can they mean anything to us in our own situations? After all, we are not the people of Jerusalem awaiting deliverance from oppression and exile. But we are the people of the new covenant, and sometimes we, too, feel oppressed and exiled, at the mercy of the unbelieving world and even (so it seems) abandoned by our God. In us, too, despair sometimes wrestles with faith, and faith does not automatically have the victory.

In that situation, the words of Isaiah can come echoing through the mist of doubt. The Lord has not forgotten his promises and he has not abandoned his people. We are still his, as they were. He never makes people exiles from his family. Our iniquity is to be pardoned; our 'warfare'—for that is what it often feels like—is 'accomplished'. The price has been paid. The battle is over, at least for now. 'Prepare a way for the Lord.'

Like many children of my generation, I had a father who was quite strict. Just occasionally he would even take the slipper to us. But all through my childhood I never doubted two things: that he loved me, and that I was his son. It is the relationship that makes the difference. That was the lesson the people of Judah needed to

learn. God might chide and correct them, but they must not doubt his love, or that they are his children.

But the voice of comfort is followed by the voice of warning. They are not incompatible, either for them or for us. If the Lord is to come to rescue us, then there is serious preparatory work to be done. The 'voice crying in the wilderness' says, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' Obstacles will have to be removed, devious bends in our lives straightened out, a path cleared into the sovereign realms of our hearts, if the Saviour-Messiah of God is to come to us as our rescuer. And that process will occur more readily in the 'wilderness' than in the rush and bustle of everyday life.

For Handel and his collaborator, Charles Jennens, the connection with the coming of Jesus at the first Christmas was clear. They knew that John the Baptist was also 'a voice crying in the wilderness'—that same lonely and barren place above the Jordan valley. Just as Jerusalem had to prepare herself for the coming of God's salvation in Isaiah's day, so must the people of Judea 500 years later prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist used these very words, of course, as he called the people to get ready for the coming Saviour. Different places, different times, but one message: if the Lord is to come to us, we must prepare ourselves for his coming.

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### A REFLECTION

*Sometimes we need to create space and quiet if we are to hear the voice of the Lord. Jesus spent forty days in the 'wilderness' being prepared for his ministry. St Paul spent a long while in 'the desert of Arabia' preparing for his. If we are to hear God's voice, sometimes we must take steps to shut out all the others!*

## Preparing the way

*Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low: the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.*

Isaiah 40:4

**Before a highway of blessing can be built there is work to be done. The ground must be cleared. Things that have stood in the way in the past have to be removed. It is a consistent spiritual principle that repentance leads to blessing, and the refusal to repent is the biggest obstruction to it.**

When a conquering king was about to enter a newly enslaved kingdom it was customary to build a triumphal highway for his victory procession. Boulders and trees would be removed, hillocks flattened, wadis bridged, so that nothing would mar his moment of triumph. Eventually he would appear in his chariot, flanked by armed horsemen and ensign bearers, and with the miserable prisoners of war—and sometimes even the defeated king—bringing up the rear. It was a flamboyant display of the fruits of victory.

Here, the prophet uses the same imagery in relation to the arrival of the promised Messiah, God's conquering deliverer. If the Lord was to come, then things must be made ready. Boulders, trees, hills, valleys must not be allowed to delay his triumphal progress. What is 'crooked' must be made 'straight' and what is 'rough' must be made 'plain'.

The imagery is not hard to interpret. The people who had so signally failed to honour God in the past must change their ways if things were to be different in the future. If they expected the Lord to come and save them, then they must cooperate in his purpose. The Messiah would not need, of course, a triumphal highway like the tyrants of the ancient world, but he would require a 'highway' into their consciences and attitudes. The boulders of sin, the rocks of disobedience, the mountains of idolatry, the valleys of unbelief would all need to be eradicated. If the king were to come, then his subjects must make themselves ready.

The choice of this particular prophecy at the beginning of the 'story' of *Messiah* is very apt. After all, John the Baptist applied

these very words to himself (Mark 1:3). The one who prepared the way for the Messiah, Jesus, had a message very similar to Isaiah's. If you want to welcome the Messiah-Saviour, then do some inward preparation now. Remove the sins that have delayed his coming. Turn from disobedience, idolatry and unbelief. John's word was the unambiguous command, 'Repent!' It means, 'Have a complete change of attitude... start a new life... reject the sins that have brought you to your present condition... Turn back to God.'

Sadly, the people of Isaiah's day found this beyond them. God did, in his mercy, eventually deliver them from the Babylonians, but he used a heathen king, Cyrus, rather than a divine Messiah to achieve it. Their repentance was neither true enough nor deep enough to testify to a genuine change of heart. Consequently, the hope of a Messiah to restore the glory of Israel remained unfulfilled.

Indeed, when the Messiah eventually came—500 years and more after Judah and Jerusalem were eventually set free from the Babylonian yoke—the people of Israel were yet again in captivity, and had been so for no less than 300 years. First the Greeks and then the Romans had taken away their sovereignty and subjected them to Gentile laws and Gentile ways. The 'highway' had still not been properly prepared. The same spiritual obstacles remained, and still needed to be cleared away. It was John the Baptist's ministry to 'prepare the way', and that involved the same message of repentance and obedience that the great prophets of Israel had proclaimed, and which the people had chosen to reject.

In one sense, nothing changes. The path to blessing is still the way of repentance. The Saviour's approach is still obstructed by the debris of sin and disobedience. The call is still to 'prepare the way of the Lord'.

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### A REFLECTION

*John the Baptist's message of repentance and baptism prepared people for the coming of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, at a particular moment in history. But day by day he comes to us, too, along the same highway, and part of our discipleship is to keep it clear of obstructions.*