Oscar Wilde once observed that the English and the Americans were kept apart by a common language. As we approach the end of the second millennium of Christian history, it is striking to ponder how accurately that epigram applies to the relation between Jews and Christians, who have always been kept apart by a common Bible. At the Vatican scholars of various traditions met to ponder the longstanding anti-Semitic interpretation of several key passages in both the Old Testament and the New, including the chilling words of Matthew 27:25: "Then answered all the (Jewish) people, and said, 'His (Christ's) blood be on us, and on our children!" That verse appears in the Saint Matthew Passion of Bach, where performers and listeners over the years have had to deal with it.

But for modern performers and listeners, Handel's Messiah is a particularly striking case study of the Christian appropriation of the Jewish Scriptures: as one early Christian spokesman said to his Jewish opponent, "It is written in your Scriptures--or, rather, not yours, but ours!" Well, whose Bible is it anyway? I want to look at four passages as illustrations of some of the issues: The numbers refer to the sections of the Messiah.

"Since by man came death" (#46, 1 Corinthians 15) is a text about the series of covenants that God has made with the human race. It speaks about two of these, the one through Adam and the one through Christ. But there are also covenants made with humanity through Abraham and through Moses, and Christians have put each of these three into dialectical relation with the covenant through Christ: death through Adam, life through Christ; promise through Abraham, fulfillment through Christ; law through Moses, gospel through Christ. Yet the more deeply we study the Hebrew Scriptures, the more clearly we must recognize that this dialectic greatly over-simplifies the case. For there is also "life" through Adam by the sheer fact of our being human, "fulfillment" in Abraham "the father of all believers" for all who are his children, and "gospel" through Moses by the liberation from chaos that the law of the Torah confers.

"For unto us a Child is born" (#12, Isaiah 9) seems by now to be such a self-evident reference to the birth of Jesus Christ, yet this "messianic prophecy" is in fact not cited in the New Testament. On the other hand, there is a more striking parallel to Isaiah's words to be found in quite another document, nearly contemporary to our New Testament, the Eclogues of the Latin poet Vergil, a Roman pagan: "Now is come the last age; the great line of the centuries begins anew. Now the Virgin returns; now a new generation descents from heaven on high. Only do Thou smile on the birth of the Child. He shall have the gift of divine life, and shall sway a world to which his Father's virtues have brought peace." Many early Christians, including St. Augustine, believed that Virgil must have read Isaiah, but most modern scholars find that hypothesis unacceptable. What is acceptable, however, is that the messianic hope of Israel is universalized.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs" (#24, Isaiah 53) is applied here to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. But as has been said in reflection on the fate of Jews in the twentieth

century, "The nation of Christ has now become the Christ of nations." The words of Isaiah about the Suffering Servant seem to have referred originally to the people of Israel, whose sufferings then and now are declared to be redemptive. Thus the centrality of the Cross in Christian faith has its counterpart in the doctrine of vicarious suffering, which is articulated more fully in this passage of the "Old" Testament than in any passage of the "New" Testament.

"Hallelujah" (#44, Revelation 19) is, like "Sabbath" and "Amen," an untranslatable Hebrew word. Its final syllable also contains the divine Name, which is not only untranslatable but to Jewish piety unpronounceable. Christian history attests that when Christians lose a living contact with the Hebrew Bible–and with the community that has preserved it–that leads them to a fatal misunderstanding not only of the Jewish tradition, but of their own Christian tradition. And so the renewals within twentieth-century Judaism and twentieth-century Christianity will not be complete until they can also teach us how to sing "Hallelujah" together. For the central confession of the Jewish community, voiced in the Shema of the Book of Deuteronomy, declares: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one:" and the central Creed of the Church begins with the words "We believe in one God." But if the Lord God is indeed one, such a doxology as we hear in the Messiah should serve to remind Christians (and Jews) to "look unto the rock whence ye are hewn."

One God–the Maker of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is also the Father of Jesus Christ–has throughout the history of salvation formed a series of covenants, but has never broken any covenants or repudiated them, Such is the teaching of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and of the Second Vatican Council: Whose Bible is it? Well, ultimately it is God's Bible, graciously loaned to Handel and to us, both Jews and Christians. Listened to in that context, Handel's Messiah, including its appropriation of the Hebrew Bible, can become a celebration of the one God whose children all of us are.

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