

# "Israel in Egypt" and the Jews of England

George Frideric Handel was a man who knew his audience. When the German-born composer arrived in England in 1710 he perceived and filled a demand. The concert-going audience of London was mad about Italian opera, and Handel gave them just what they wanted. In return, London made Handel rich and famous.

But tastes change. By the 1730s, Italian opera had lost its appeal in London, and Handel was quick to adapt to the new situation. Blending the structure of the Italian oratorio and the drama of opera with the immediacy of the English language, Handel created a new genre with a winning formula.

The new English oratorio portrayed stories from the Hebrew Bible, using solo voices in virtuoso arias, colorful orchestrations, and—most importantly—dramatic choral responses. Handel brought to life the heroes of ancient Israel in such works as *Belshazzar*, *Deborah*, *Esther*, *Israel in Egypt*, *Jephtha*, *Joseph and His Brethren*, *Judas Maccabaeus*, *Samson*, *Saul*, and *Solomon*. (*Messiah*, although the most popular of the oratorios, is an exceptional work, in that it is not dramatic, and its subject is not a hero from the "Old Testament.")

To the majority of Handel's audience, these works may have served as paeans to the British military exploits of the eighteenth century. But to the Jews of London, these were literal depictions of the glorious deeds of their ancestors. The historian Sir Newman Flower wrote, "A Jew on the stage as a hero rather than a reviled figure was a thing practically unknown in London, and Handel found himself possessed of a new public." Some have even suggested that the financial success of these works was due largely to the patronage of London Jewry.

*Israel in Egypt* was originally conceived as an anthem. Handel had composed a setting of the "Song of the Sea" (Exodus 15)—Moses' song of triumphant thanksgiving after Pharaoh's armies were drowned in the Red Sea. But the work was already bursting the bounds of an anthem and assuming the proportions of an oratorio. So the composer created a huge preface, depicting the enslavement of the Israelites and the miraculous plagues which afflicted the Egyptians. Here Handel was truly in his element. The depictions of the swarms of frogs and flies, the fiery hailstones, and the thick darkness are among his most vividly theatrical musical creations. From the opening "And the Children of Israel Sighed" to the closing "I Will Sing unto the Lord," one superb choral piece follows another. Indeed, *Israel in Egypt* is graced with more choral numbers than any other oratorio.

Temple Emanuel of Newton, continuing its renowned eleven-year concert series, will present Handel's *Israel in Egypt* on June 4. (Due to a Y2K glitch, the concert was postponed from December 24.) The performance will feature the Zamir Chorale of Boston and orchestra, with soloists Cantor Louise Treitman, Michela Macfarlane, Cantor Charles Osborne, James Deselms, Prof. Mark Aliopoulos and Cantor Scott Sokol. Prof. Joshua Jacobson will conduct. To order your tickets to this rare treat, call Temple Emanuel at (617) 558-8100, or visit Zamir's website, [zimir.org](http://zimir.org).

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