

A CONCERT OF RECOGNITION SCENES

The Boston Athenaeum 11/16/95: "From Jerusalem to Boston: Songs of Praise"

Good evening. I am Norman Janis, and this is a JUBAL'S LYRE concert.

The name Jubal [*Yuval* in Hebrew] comes from the Book of Genesis. In chapter 4 of that book, Jubal is named, among the descendants of Adam & Eve--in the 7th generation to be precise--as the father of all those who play the lyre and the pipe--in other words, as the father of music. This performing ensemble JUBAL'S LYRE is dedicated to bringing together and performing some of the incredibly rich and diverse music for which the Hebrew Bible has provided the texts in the many generations that have succeeded Jubal's among the sons and daughters of Adam & Eve.

Our concert tonight is called "From Jerusalem to Boston: Songs of Praise". The significance of that title may or may not be clear to you at first, without some explanation. But before I attempt to clarify it, I would like to attempt an age-old time-honored rhetorical trick. The trick is to begin at first by increasing the complexity and obscurity of that which is to be explained. The aim, of course, is to make the eventual clarification all the more interesting.

So instead of talking about what Jerusalem and Boston may mean to each other, I will start by throwing some other bits of geography into the mixture. In particular, I will start with some place-names from my own personal history.

I have lived in and around Boston most of my life, ever since I came to Harvard in 1958. But I was born in Flatbush and grew up in Far Rockaway, the grandson of Jews who arrived at Ellis Island around the turn of this century. My grandparents were immigrants from the Carpathian Mountains and from the shores of the Black Sea.

I was the first person in my extended family to cross the Atlantic Ocean in the other direction -- from West to East. Of course, I went back across the ocean in a plane, not in the hold of a ship. But another difference is that I was not headed for Odessa nor for the Carpathian village of Pieczenizyn and not for Jerusalem -- but for Athens! It was the summer after my junior year. I was a Greek major at Harvard, a student of Homer and Plato and of John Finley. And my imagination had been stirred by the idea of Hellas, by the ideal of *kalos-k'agathos* [the unity of the beautiful and the good]. I was drawn to the clear outlines of the Greek landscape.

In Athens, I went to the amphitheatre, rebuilt on an ancient site, and saw and heard a play by Euripides, one of the few with a happy ending. The play was "Iphigenia in Tauris". In this version of the saga of the House of Atreus, Iphigenia, Agammemnon's daughter, who has supposedly been offered up as a sacrifice to the sea-god Poseidon, has in reality been wafted off to the shores of the Black Sea -- to Tauris -- where she serves in the temple of Artemis, the goddess of purity and chastity. In accordance with the local custom, Iphigenia's job as servant of Artemis is to superintend the sacrifice to the goddess

of all strangers caught in the country -- a kind of priestess of xenophobia, you might say. But then in wanders Orestes, Iphigenia's brother. He is in flight from the Furies who have pursued him since he avenged their father Agammemnon by murdering their mother Klytemnestra, who, as you will recall, killed Agammemnon in his bath, at least partly because he had sacrificed Iphigenia. Will Iphigenia unknowingly oversee the sacrifice of her brother?

It's all quite grisly and messy and dark, much more so I think than the soap operas that rivet the attention of TV viewers. At the amphitheatre of Herodas Atticus, the people in the audience, listening to the Modern Greek translation of Euripides that the actors were declaiming, were already sitting on the edges of their benches. And then the great recognition scene arrived: Iphigenia realizes who the stranger is, it is her brother. She cries out: "*Oresti mu!*" -- my Orestes! and the audience broke into cheers and applause and many chills went down many spines. For what could be more thrilling? In a remote place, two people, deeply connected but unknown to each other, far from their homelands, in perilous circumstances, their original identities seemingly lost -- at last they recognize each other and are re-united and saved.

And now for my second rhetorical maneuver -- a quick cut to the early 1700's in Massachusetts. Can you name the first book published in the land that was to become the United States? Well, it was the Bay Psalm Book, an edition of the poems that legend attributes to King David. It was published right here -- or just across the river, at any rate, in Cambridge -- in 1640, four years after the founding of Harvard. It was the first book published, we may assume, because it was the book that the residents of the Massachusetts Bay Colony felt they urgently needed -- to study, to pray, to sing, to congregate around. Naturally it included Psalm 30, which you have just heard in Hebrew and in Latin.

The language of the Bay Psalm Book was English, of course -- one of the languages of the Protestant Reformation. For "reformation" meant, among other things, access to the Bible in the vernacular, in a language that one spoke and understood. The more learned members of the Colony knew certainly that the original language of the Psalms was Hebrew -- after all, Hebrew, along with Latin and Greek, the other great languages of antiquity, dead but revered, was at the heart of Harvard's curriculum in its early years. But I don't doubt that for users of the Bay Psalm Book, its language was the authentic language for the psalms. For when they sang from that book, they were a new Israel. Their trials in the New World -- the difficulties and perils that they faced -- were comparable to the trials of the ancient Israelites in the wilderness.

The Bay Psalm Book contained not only the English words of the psalms, but also melodies and harmonies by which those words could be sung -- music that the settlers brought with them too, Reformation music composed by Luther or by the Calvinist Goudimel in France, or by English composers, Dowland, for example. But before long, Massachusetts began to write its own psalm-music, though it took more than a century for the local music to challenge the imports in public esteem. Perhaps the first important flower of American music was William Billings, who, in the late 18th century, was

setting psalms and other Biblical texts right down the street from here, at King's Chapel, on the corner of Tremont and School Street, not long before the Boston Athenaeum was founded. He was acclaimed by some as America's answer to Handel.

There were a couple of Jews on Boston's tax rolls in Billings' time, but they did not arrive in great numbers until about a century later, a generation or two after this building in which you are sitting was built. The sight of their swarming multitudes was to cause distress to Henry James upon his return to Boston around the turn into this century. I love Henry James, but I have to admit he was something of a high priest of xenophobia. No doubt there were others too who were distressed. We can get a sense of the people that James was observing from the wonderful exhibition of photographs in the next room.

Many of these Jews in their dark clothes probably brought a little book with them. It was a prayerbook, a siddur, probably in many cases the only book they owned. It contained many psalms, including Psalm 30, which is a regular part of Jewish liturgy. Some of the more learned and thoughtful of these book-carriers, might, if pressed, be able to deduce that the contents of their book were in fact being read and sung in the churches around them. But it seems clear to me that such deductions were far from their minds when they opened their books, with long-accustomed feelings of being strangers in a strange land.

Times have changed. This evening, JUBAL'S LYRE is singing and playing under the joint auspices of the Boston Athenaeum and the Jewish Historical Society. America is a place which has traditionally encouraged its citizens to recognize and acknowledge one another.

For myself, it was a 20th century edition of the traditional Jewish prayerbook -- with English translations -- that, among other things, led me, as a grown man well out of college, to Jerusalem and to a knowledge of Hebrew. And a great moment of recognition occurred for me when I had just begun to be really immersed in Jewish liturgy and in the Hebrew Bible.

I was a member of Cantata Singers and we were preparing Bach's B Minor Mass for a concert. As a singer, I had of course sung masses before, but that was before I knew Hebrew and the prayerbook. As we worked on the great Sanctus movement of Bach's mass, I now realized with amazement -- with a wild surmise, I could say -- that the words we were singing -- Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus -- were a Latin translation of Isaiah's great vision of the heavenly host proclaiming Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh -- holy, holy, holy. This line is a regular, daily part of Jewish worship! As a Jew I had heard the Hebrew; as a singer and listener to classical music I had heard the Latin all my life; but I had never made the connection. *Orestis mu!* And this musical version of Isaiah's words that I was singing with Cantata Singers was perhaps as close to Isaiah's vision as music can be -- a recognition and acknowledgment from one medium to another, from one language to another, a different time and place responding to the message that came out of Jerusalem so many hundreds of years ago.

The word 'diaspora' has mostly been used in talking about Jewish history. But in fact there are many diasporas. Since the USA is famously described as a nation of immigrants, almost everyone here is part of some diaspora or other.

But there can also be diasporas of thought and of text. The Biblical Hebrew words that came out of Jerusalem have been translated into most of the languages of the world and set to many kinds of music over the centuries in many lands. Psalm 30 and The Song of Songs, which we are singing this evening, have come from Jerusalem to Boston not directly, but by way of Venice and Flanders and London and elsewhere. JUBAL'S LYRE presentations are intended as, so to speak, small re-unitings of musical compositions that are kindred by reason of their texts -- recognition scenes in the guise of concerts.