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Siobhán Dowling Long

Metastasio's Old Testament Dramas

Biblical Stories in Eighteenth Century Oratorio

Pietro Metastasio's five Old Testament oratorio libretti—based on the dramatic stories of Cain and Abel, Joseph, Judith, Joash, and Abraham and Isaac—reveal the influence of the Counter-Reformation, of seventeenth-century French literary criticism, and of eighteenth-century biblical interpretation. Reflecting a traditional christological interpretation, all five shed light on the emotional lives of their protagonists, while providing moral instruction for the edification of eighteenth-century Catholic audiences. I conclude with a brief discussion of the oratorio *Abramo ed Isacco* by Josef Mysliveček, based on a Metastasian libretto *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1740), and illustrate by way of musical examples the reception of Genesis 22 in music.

Pietro Antonio Domenico Trapassi, otherwise known as Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), was renowned as court poet to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1685–1740), and as one of the most prolific writers of *opere*

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serie and oratorio libretti during the eighteenth century. His texts were set to music, often repeatedly, for Lenten performances by leading composers of the day across the Holy Roman Empire and as far afield as Ireland and England.[1] Of the seven oratorio libretti written for Holy Week (1730–40) five are based on Old Testament narratives—*La Morte d'Abel* (1732), *Il Giuseppe Riconosciuto* (1733), *La Betulia Liberata* (1734), *Gioas re di Giuda* (1735) and *Isacco, figura del Redentore* (1740)—one on the New Testament account of Christ's Passion—*La Passione di Gesù Cristo Signor Nostro* (1730)—and another, *Sant'Elena al Calvario* (1731), on the hagiographical story of St Helen's search for Christ's tomb. Interpreted in the light of the New Testament, each biblical story was appropriated to endorse the political agenda and religious devotion of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VI, and written in the manner of a sermon to instruct the Catholic faithful to lead a virtuous life of faithful obedience.

From the reign of Emperor Ferdinand III (1637–1657) to the end of Charles VI's (1740), the Habsburg Court sponsored the Lenten performances of Italian oratorios in the *Hofburgkapelle* as a way of evangelising the faithful through music. Set against the background of the Counter-Reformation, an audience attending a Lenten service in the *Hofburgkapelle* heard a performance of a biblical text, i.e., an oratorio based upon the moral actions of a virtuous Old Testament character, followed by a sermon given by a Jesuit priest based on the biblical text performed.[2] Through a pleasurable musical experience, it was hoped that the dramatic text and music of the oratorio would move congregants to emulate the moral lives of biblical characters whose suffering and sacrifice prefigured the sacrifice and redemption of Christ in the New Testament. Within this context, Metastasio developed a two-act genre

[1] In England, musical settings of Metastasio's libretti were performed at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, the Little Theatre, Haymarket, the English Opera House (Lyceum Theatre), and the Great Room, Dean Street, Soho, among many more. In Ireland, they were performed in Crow Street Theatre and Smock Alley Theatre, both in Dublin. For a more comprehensive list see Michael Burden, *Metastasio on the London Stage, 1728–1840: A Catalogue*, RMA Research Chronicle 39 (London: Royal Musical Association, 2006).

[2] The oratory of the church became the venue for the informal religious services, or more specifically for the Spiritual Exercises which were put to music and led by St. Philip Neri. In Rome the performance of the Spiritual Exercises later became the context for oratorio performances at the oratories of the *Chiesa Nuova* and the *San Girolamo della Carità* churches; this context later became the norm for the performance of oratorios throughout Italy, and afterwards throughout Europe.

of oratorio with a closing chorus at the end of each act, involving a moral dilemma that was resolved with a *lieto fine* (happy ending). For the Emperor, according to Charles Burney (1726–1814), liked happy endings, and wished always to send the audience home in good humour.[3]

Metastasio composed his dramas for four to six characters who were of royal or noble birth, and a chorus represented by a crowd who articulated the moral or christological significance of a given biblical story. He embellished the biblical text with additional scenes, dialogues, speeches, extra-biblical and non-biblical characters, and increased the dramatic tension of the plot with imaginary details of characters' emotional responses to events sparsely narrated by the biblical narrator. In Part Two of each libretto, the climactic details of any given biblical story, such as the beheading of Holofernes or the near-sacrifice of Isaac, were never enacted but always narrated in the past tense. In this way, the protagonist drew an audience into the story with a dramatic speech which enabled listeners to imagine themselves as bystanders watching and listening to the drama unfolding before their very eyes and ears.

Metastasio sourced his subject matter for each drama in the Clementine Latin Vulgate, the authorized version of the Bible decreed by the Council of Trent at its fourth session (1546), and embellished this text in prosaic Italian. Figure 1 presents a summary of the biblical libretti, along with details of the date of composition, the number of settings, and the name of the first composer who in each case was the *Kappellmeister* of the day. Following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Apostolo Zeno (1669–1750), Metastasio omitted God or God's voice from the drama and replaced it with either the voice of an angel, a chorus of angels, or the voice of God heard only by the protagonist.

Footnotes

There are approximately fifty footnotes attached to the text of each libretto with detailed references to numerous sources including the biblical narrative, other relevant passages from the Old and New Testaments, the writings of the Church Fathers, and well-known biblical commentators of the day. Perhaps

[3] Charles Burney, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio, including Translations of his Principal Letters* (1796; New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 381. Charles Burney was an eminent eighteenth-century musical historian.

Oratorio	Year	Main texts	No. of settings	First composer	Characters	Chorus	Setting
La Passione di Gesù Cristo Signor Nostro	1730	Matt 26–27 Luke 23 John 19 Acts 17	19	Antonio Caldara	Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea	Narrating Chorus	On a Road
La Morte d'Abel	1732	Gen 4	22	Georg Reutter	Abel, Cain, Adam, Eve, Angel	Angels	Home of Adam and Eve
Il Giuseppe Riconosciuto	1733	Gen 30, 35, 37, 39, 41–45	25	Giuseppe Porsile	Giuseppe, Beniamino, Simeone, Giuda, Tanete, Aseneta	Joseph's Brothers	Royal Court in Memphis
La Betulia Liberata	1734	Jdt 4–8, 10	33	Georg Reutter	Judith, Ozia, Carmi, Achior, Cabri, Amital	Inhabitants of Bethulia	City of Bethulia
Gioas re di Giuda	1735	2 Kgs 11–12 2 Chr 22–24	24	Georg Reutter	Joash, Athalia, Jehoiada, Mattan, Ismaele, Sibia	Hebrew Virgins; Levites	Jerusalem: near Solomon's Temple
Isacco, figura del Redentore	1740	Gen 22:1–19	27	Luca Antonio Predieri	Abramo, Isacco, Angel, Gamari, Sara	Shepherds; Narrating Chorus	Beersheba: the Abrahamic home

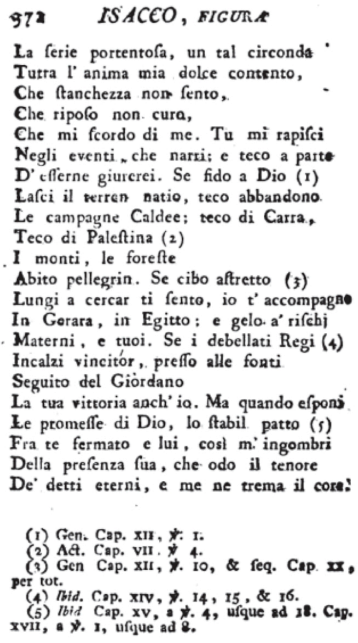
FIGURE 1. METASTASIO'S BIBLICAL ORATORIOS

influenced by the Pulpit Orators who had written seminal treatises on the art of sermon writing in the seventeenth century,[4] Metastasio attached copious footnotes and glossed his text for the benefit of audiences following the libretto during the performance. François Fenélon set out the rules for composing a perfect sermon, one of which required preachers to footnote their sermons with details of their primary sources. Fenélon stated that after the scriptures, knowledge of the Fathers was of paramount importance in helping a preacher to compose a good sermon. Most preachers, in his opinion, argued weakly because they failed either to instruct people sufficiently or to trace significant points back to the sources.[5] In *Isacco*, for example, Metastasio attached footnotes with references to a variety of sources including Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth-sixth centuries), Tertullian (d. after 200), Gregory of Nyssa (d. after 385/6), Ambrose (d. 397), Jerome (c.347–420), and Augustine (354–430). There are further references to the rhetorician Procopius of Gaza (c.475–c.538), to the Moralia of Job by Gregory the Great (c.540–604), to sermons by the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), and to the Franciscan missionary Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444).

The footnotes also reveal that Metastasio consulted two commentaries on Gen 22 by the eighteenth-century French biblical commentator Dom Augustin Calmet, and the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit philosopher, theologian, and exegete Benedict Pereira of Valencia (1535–1610). As well as references to the writings of the Church Fathers, there are footnotes with references to Gen 22:1–18 which provide readers with background details of the story, including references to Gen 12:1–3, 5, 7, 10ff.; 13:14–18; 14:14–16; 15:4–18; 17:1–8; 18:1–8, 10–11, 13; 20. There are also biblical references not directly related to the story of Isaac's sacrifice, but which reinforce a point from another Old Testament reference, including 1 Kgs 15:22, Lam 1:1–2, 4, 17, 20; 2:11; 5:15, and Prov 1:7. Footnotes with references to the New Testament—John 8:50, 56; 9:21; 13:23; 14:1, 3, 18, 27–28; 20:21, 26; Mark 14:27; Luke 24:36; Acts 7:4; Heb 6:13, 17—point to a christological understanding of Gen 22. An example taken from the second page of *Isacco* (Figure 2) illustrates Metastasio's use of footnotes in the libretto.

[4] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon (1651–1715), and Blaise Gisbert (1657–1731) were notable Pulpit Orators.

[5] Don Neville, "Metastasio: Poet and Preacher in Vienna," in *Pietro Metastasio, uomo universale (1698–1782)*, ed. Elizabeth Hilscher and Andrea Sommer-Mattis (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 56.



372 *ISACCO, FIGURA*

La ſerie portentoſa, un tal circonda
Tutta l' anima mia dolce contento,
Che ſtanchezza non ſento,
Che ripoſo non cura,
Che mi ſcordo di me. Tu mi rapiſci
Negli eventi, che narri: e teco a parte
D' eſſerne giurerei. Se fido a Dio (1)
Laſci il terren natio, teco abbandono
Le campagne Caldee; teco di Carra,
Teco di Paleſtina (2)
I monti, le foreſte
Abito pellegrin. Se cibo aſtretto (3)
Lungi a cercar ti ſento, io t' accompagno
In Gerara, in Egitto; e gelo a' riſchj
Materni, e tuoi. Se i debellati Regi (4)
Incalzi vincitor, preſſo alle fonti
Seguito del Giordano
La tua vittoria anch' io. Ma quando eſpone
Le promeſſe di Dio, lo ſtabil patto (5)
Fra te fermato e lui, così m' ingombri
Della preſenza ſua, che odo il tenore
De' detti eterni, e me ne trema il core.

(1) Gen. Cap. XII, ℣. 1.
(2) Act. Cap. VII. ℣ 4.
(3) Gen Cap. XII, ℣. 10, & ſeq. Cap. XX, per tot.
(4) *Ibid.* Cap. XIV, ℣. 14, 15, & 16.
(5) *Ibid* Cap. XV, a ℣. 4, uſque ad 18. Cap. XVII, a ℣. 1, uſque ad 8.

Figure 2. An example of footnotes from *Isacco, figura del Redentore*

Christological Interpretation

There are no footnoted references to the New Testament in *Gioas*, and there are relatively few in *Giuseppe* and *Betulia*. That being said, in the second part of *Giuseppe*, Asenath, Joseph's wife, points to her husband as a type of Christ transfigured (Matt 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–9; Luke 9:28–36), and at the end of the drama, Joseph declares his identity as a type of Christ: "Some great work is maturing in Heaven of which Joseph is perhaps the shadow and the figure."[6] Specific references to typology point readers to John Chrysostom's Homily 61 on Gen 37, to the christological significance of Joseph's character. Despite the absence or otherwise of New Testament references, Metastasio represents the protagonists of *Gioas* and *Giuseppe* as types of Christ whose identity remains concealed, by a pseudonym given to Joash by Jehoiada, and

[6] Boccherini, *Giuseppe Riconosciuto*, Bongiovanni 2298–9, 2001, compact disc, liner notes.

in *Giuseppe* by the brothers' failure to recognize Joseph, until the end when both characters reveal their true identities to everyone. In the drama of *Abel*, Metastasio represents the character of Abel as a type of Christ throughout the story,[7] and particularly at the end of Part Two when the angel reveals the christological significance of Abel's sacrifice to Eve:

> **Abel:** Your son's a type of mercies yet in store. This comfort for your griefs th' Almighty sends: His only, his belov'd son will come, upon the earth, veil'd in the flesh of man, And with his precious blood redeem mankind. Happy your children in that distant age! When God's profound decrees shall be reveal'd![8]

Similarly, at the end of *Isacco*, Abraham understands the reason for God's test when he sees a future vision of Christ's sacrifice on the cross:

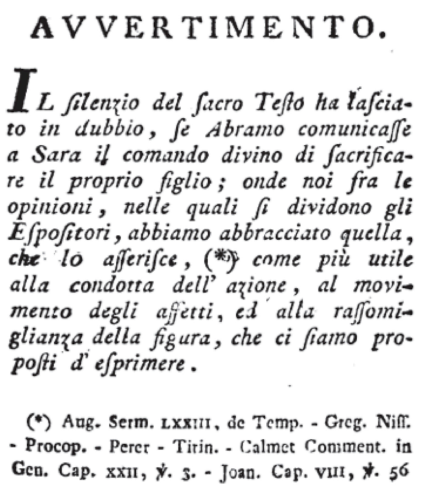
> Another son, I see bowing his head meekly, unto his father's hand commend his spirit. The hills shake! The graves are opened! And the thick blackness of profoundest night covers all heaven! I read the mystery! Thanks, thanks, redeeming God! This is that day, I have desired to see.[9]

Of all the oratorio libretti, *Isacco* includes more christological references than any other Metastasian drama. For example, on Isaac's return to the Abrahamic household, specific footnotes attached to the text of Isaac's conversation with his mother direct readers' attention to Christ's resurrection appearance to the disciples in the upper room (John 20:21, 26; Luke 24:36). But despite Isaac's significant role as a Christ-like figure, he recedes into the background at the end of the drama as he does in Gen 22, and to emphasize Abraham's superiority, Sarah and Gamari laud his perfect obedience. Metastasio represented the entire Abrahamic family as a type of the Holy family, with Gamari, Isaac's friend, represented as a type of John, i.e., Christ's beloved disciple, Sarah as a type of Mary, and Abraham as a type of God the Father. In the *Avvertimento* at the beginning of *Isacco*, Metastasio drew upon the writings of Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Procopius of Gaza, Calmet, and

[7] This type, which is present in Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, was well known in the Counter-Reformation. See Augustine, *Civ.* 15.7 (PL 41:445).

[8] Pietro Metastasio, *The Death of Abel: An Oratorio from the Italian of Metastasio and the Morning Hymn from Milton's Paradise*, 22.

[9] Josef Myslivecek, *Abramo ed Isacco*, Supraphon 3209, 1996, compact disc, liner notes.



AVVERTIMENTO.

IL ſilenzio del ſacro Teſto ha laſciato in dubbio, ſe Abramo comunicaſſe a Sara il comando divino di ſacrificare il proprio figlio; onde noi fra le opinioni, nelle quali ſi dividono gli Eſpoſitori, abbiamo abbracciato quella, che lo aſſeriſce, (*) come più utile alla condotta dell' azione, al movimento degli affetti, ed alla raſſomiglianza della figura, che ci ſiamo propoſti d' eſprimere.

(*) Aug. Serm. LXXIII, de Temp. - Greg. Niſſ. - Procop. - Perer - Tirin. - Calmet Comment. in Gen. Cap. XXII, ℣. 3. - Joan. Cap. VIII, ℣. 56

Figure 3. *Avvertimento, Isacco, figura del Redentore*

others who believed Sarah played a significant role in the biblical story. Theologically, he was of the opinion that despite the silence of the biblical text, Sarah played a pivotal role in the sacrifice; typologically, she was a type of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ; and dramatically, her involvement in the narrative increased the emotional and psychological tension of the action for the audience.

The Cult of Mary

In the Habsburg Empire, the cult of the Virgin Mary provided successive Holy Roman Emperors with a sense of comfort during the religious upheavals of the Reformation.[10] The armour worn by Emperor Charles V (1500–58) at the Battle of Mühlberg (April 24, 1547),[11] for example, bore an image of the Madonna standing on a sickle moon. Similarly, Emperor Ferdinand III (1608–57) placed his territories under the Virgin's protection after a Swedish

[10] Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500–1648* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 194.

[11] This battle was fought between the Catholic princes of the Holy Roman Empire led by Charles V and the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League of Protestant princes led by Elector John Frederick I of Saxony and Landgrave Philip I of Hesse.

threat (July 6, 1630), which followed shortly after the opening of the Diet of Regensburg.[12] Habsburg devotion to Mary, alongside devotions to the Eucharist and to the Cross, continued well into the eighteenth century where she served as a symbol of Catholic renewal and conquest. Metastasio reflected this devotion to Mary in his oratorio libretti, most notably in *Isacco* as discussed above, and in *Betulia* where he represents the character of Judith as a type of Mary, blessed above all other women (Jdt 13:23; Luke 1:28). This typology had its beginnings in Jerome's Vulgate, in his *Preface to the Book of Judith* (*Praefatio Hieronymi in Librum Judith*), in a letter to the virgin Eustochium (*Epist.* 22.21), and later, in depictions in mediaeval Christian art.[13] Metastasio's choice of text recounting the moral courage of Judith reflects an affirmation by the Council of Trent (fourth session, April 8, 1546) which defined the canon of scripture and included the Deuterocanonical books. The Council condemned "anyone who does not accept these books in their entirety with all their parts, according to the text usually read in the Catholic Church and as they are in the ancient Latin Vulgate."[14] In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the book of Judith inspired a vast output of musical settings and works of art by Catholic and Protestant composers.[15]

Unities of Time, Place, and Action

All five libretti conform to the doctrine known either as the Dramatic Unities, the Classical Unities, or the Aristotelian Unities of time, place, and action. Derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, the theory came to be known in the sixteenth century through a translation of the *Poetics* into Latin by Giorgio Valla in 1498. Aristotle's unity of action (*Poet.* 1450b) was later expanded by Italian humanists Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484–1558) and Lodovico Castelvetro (1505–71)[16] with the unities of time and place. The Classical Unities were debated in seventeenth-century literary treatises by French literary

[12] Heal, *Cult of the Virgin*, 196.

[13] For an in-depth discussion, see Elena Ciletti and Henrike Lähnemann, "Judith in Christian Tradition," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 153–68.

[14] Cited in Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 14.

[15] See Brine, Ciletti, and Lähnemann, *Sword of Judith*, 275–468.

[16] Bruce McConachie, "Theatre and Performance in Print Cultures, 1500–1900," in *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, ed. Phillip Zarilli et al. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 182–83.

critics François Hédelin and Abbé d'Aubignac (1604–76),[17] Charles de Marguetel de Saint Evermond (1610–1703), René Rapin (1621–78), and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711) among others. Of the three unities, action was the only one mentioned by Aristotle, and while there is no reference to the unity of place, the unity of time derives from a comment made in Book 5 (*Poet.* 1449b) stating that a "tragedy endeavours to keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that." French playwrights, most notably Pierre Corneille (1606–84), Molière (1622–73), and Jean Racine (1639–99), embraced the dramatic unities as a model for the perfect play. Hailed by Rousseau as the "Italian Racine," Metastasio too, employed the three unities in all five libretti.[18] According to the doctrine, only one action was permitted, in one location, and within the timeframe of one day. In *Abel* and in *Isacco*, for example, the dramatic action takes place in one location, in the households of Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah, respectively. In both cases, Eve and Sarah hear about the death and near-death of their sons from this location. Metastasio restricted the dramatic action for each biblical story to take place within the timeframe of a day despite the fact that the plot had unfolded over a number of days, according to the biblical narrator. In *Isacco*, for example, Metastasio compressed the timeframe of Abraham's journey to the Land of Moriah to one day instead of three.

Each drama opens *in medias res*, a literary technique coined by the Roman poet Horace of beginning the story in the middle or at a later point in the action (*Ars* 148). This technique later influenced literary French critic Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux who refers to it in his didactic treatise *L'Art Poétique* (1674).[19] Metastasio, too, set the action in the opening scene already in progress, with each drama opening with either a conversation or a speech that sets the context for the ensuing plot. In *Isacco*, for example, the drama opens in the Abrahamic home with a non-biblical scene; here Abraham is engaged in the tail-end of a conversation with Isaac, which details an account of Isaac's miraculous conception and birth. Similarly, in the libretto *Abel*, the opening scene takes place in the home of Adam and Eve, and here Abel

[17] Mervin A. Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 98–104.

[18] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de musique* (Amsterdam: M. M. Roy, 1779), 350, cited in Jeffrey O. Segrave, "Pietro Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* and the Survival of the Olympic Idea in the Eighteenth Century," *Olympika* 14, no. 1 (2005): 5.

[19] See Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux, *Oeuvres de Boileau-Despréaux*, ed. Claude Brossette, vol. 2 (Paris: chez les Libraires associés, 1772), 361.

sings a song of praise to God for accepting his sacrifice. Following the song, a dispute ensues between the brothers, with Eve intervening to support her favourite son, Abel.

Non-biblical Characters

Metastasio characterized each drama with the inclusion of non-biblical characters that either act as narrators or prefigure characters from the New Testament to emphasise the christological significance of a story. While their names, Gamari (*Isacco*), Amital (*Betulia*), and Tanete (*Giuseppe*) have no known significance, in *Isacco* Gamari is cast as Isaac's friend. His narration to Sarah of events on Mount Moriah increases the dramatic and psychological tension of the story for Sarah, and for the audience listening to the performance. In *Gioas*, Ismael, Chief of the Levites, narrates events leading up to the dramatic fall from power of Queen Athaliah. In *Betulia*, Amital is a noble woman and the head of a tribe of Israelites who expresses the Hebrew people's despair and loss of faith in God's power prior to Judith's triumphant slaughter of Holofernes. In *Giuseppe*, Tanete is Joseph's friend and unaware of Joseph's relationship with the band of shepherds who visited Memphis; his conversation at the beginning of the drama provides contextual details for the unfolding story.

The unnamed servants from two biblical narratives, the two servant boys from the Sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:3,5) and Judith's maidservant (Jdt 13:7–8), are included in the dramas but ascribed a lesser role than in the biblical story to focus the attention of the audience on the virtuous protagonist and his/her moral act in the face of grave danger. Glossing over the two servants in *Isacco* enabled Metastasio to highlight the servile status of Abraham and Isaac as they carried out their menial tasks in preparation for the sacrifice. Similarly, in *Betulia*, Metastasio focuses attention entirely on the personage of Judith and her moral courage.

Biblical Families

Metastasio's dramas include all personages of a given biblical family: parents, siblings, a grandparent, friends, loyal servants, and attendants. In general, he portrays biblical spouses in a positive light and omits any instances of immorality from his dramas. In *Isacco*, for example, Sarah is aware of God's command to sacrifice Isaac and consents, along with Abraham, to do God's

will; there is no suggestion of any marital dysfunction before or after this event. As the biblical narrator of *Gioas* (2 Kgs 12:2; 2 Chr 24:1), Metastasio assigns an active role to Zibiah of Beersheba and elevates her status by casting her as Ahaziah's widow, the mother of Joash, and later in the story, as a former queen. Of the widows, Judith and Zibiah remain faithful to their dead husbands with no account of Judith's deception or seduction of Holofernes (Jdt 12:18). To protect Judith's morally upright reputation, Metastasio granted Holofernes neither a voice to speak nor an appearance as a character in the drama. Asenath, Joseph's wife (Gen 41:50; 46:20) features in parts one and two of *Giuseppe* as the moral voice of the drama. In Part 1 she rouses feelings of pity for the prisoner, Judah, who has been incarcerated unjustly by Joseph. In Part 2 she calls for the incarceration of the shepherds (brothers), who have been implicated for stealing Joseph's sacred vessel, which in the drama enables Joseph to predict the future.

Biblical Mothers

Metastasio empowers three biblical mothers, Eve, Sarah, and Zibiah, by assigning them voices to verbalise their thoughts and feelings, and in two cases to mourn the passing of their sons. While he portrays Sarah and Zibiah as loving mothers, his portrayal of Adam and Eve's relationship with Cain is particularly interesting: before the murder, Eve intervenes in a family dispute between Adam and Cain, and advises her son to become less stubborn and to seek repentance for his evil ways. In her dialogue, she alludes to Adam's harsh treatment of Cain. At this point, Metastasio provides his audience with an imaginative insight into Cain's thoughts and feelings, and attributes Cain's murderous act primarily to sibling rivalry. Jealous of Abel's loving relationship with his mother, Cain could neither become her favourite son nor match Abel's perfection:

> **Cain:** Address these stern reproaches to that boy; he calls himself the favourite of Heav'n, and swells with pride that is not to be borne.
> **Adam:** Did I less know the temper of my sons, I might perhaps believe thee. Is Abel guilty, cause he's not like thee? Rather than envy, imitate his virtues.[20]

[20] *The Death of Abel: An Oratorio from the Italian of Metastasio and the Morning Hymn from Milton's Paradise Lost*, English Libretto (London: Sold at the Theatre, 1768), 12.

At the end of this tragedy, Eve disowns Cain and laments the death of her only beloved son, Abel.

Biblical Fathers

Metastasio's dramas highlight also the varied relationships between biblical fathers and their sons; the language of endearment, which Abraham uses to address his son Isaac, is indicative of the close relationship between the pair. Similarly, in *Joash*, Jehoiada lovingly refers to Joash as his "son," although in reality, Jehoiada is his uncle. In the biblical story of Joseph, sibling rivalry and consuming jealousy are at the heart of Joseph's abduction by his brothers. Metastasio fills in the gaps of the biblical story by commenting on the effects of Joseph's death on his aged father, Jacob. Judah's moving speech tells of his father's incessant grief and describes Jacob's pain as he looked at Benjamin's face and saw the resemblance to his beloved Rachel, and son, Joseph. The libretto tells that he grieved their passing every day of his life. But not all relationships between fathers and sons are portrayed as loving; in *Abel*, for example, Metastasio imaginatively highlights Adam's physical violence to Cain and the subsequent psychological damage inflicted upon his son, which resulted years later in the murder of his only brother.

> **Cain**: Now triumph Abel; all are set against me. My mother comes; try all your arts on her; too well I know that she is not my friend.
> **Eve:** My son, thou art thyself thy only foe.
> **Adam:** His soul is diseased, nor does he wish for health; But scorns the hand that would apply relief.
> **Eve:** Ah! cease to speak thus harshly; still I've hopes, he will repent, he will detest his guilt, and imitate his parent's penitence. Come Cain, my child, confirm thy mother's hopes; restore again thy brother to thy love.
> **Cain:** (It ne'er shall be).
> **Eve:** What do I see! Does stubborn Cain retire?
> **Cain:** Mother, no more; intreaties are in vain.
> **Eve:** Are my intreaties to my son in vain! And must thy parents hope so little from thee?[21]

[21] Ibid., 13.

At the end, Metastasio embellishes the biblical story with imaginative details of the discovery of Abel's body by Adam, and the *lieto fine* in this instance is the account of the return of the corpse to Eve.

❦

Metastasio composed his oratorio libretti as musical sermons with each one highlighting the great faith of the Hebrew people and their obedience to God's will in the face of grave danger. As noted before, it was intended that members of the audience would emulate the faith and obedience of biblical men, women and children to enable them to remain faithful and obedient not only to God the Father but also to the Holy Roman Emperor and to the Institution of the Catholic Church. The positive attributes of each Old Testament protagonist reflected the moral perfection of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles VI. In *Isacco*, for example, Metastasio equated the Holy Roman Emperor with the virtuous character of Abraham, and portrayed him as the friend of God, as superior to Luther, and as the one who would conquer Protestantism, as promised by God himself (Gen 22:17).[22] The appropriation of v. 17 by Metastasio ensured the drama was only set to music by Catholic composers, for, despite its popularity as an oratorio, there are no extant settings by Protestant composers.[23] Viewed as Catholic propaganda, Metastasio's reception of Gen 22 in the libretto became the version popularly known by eighteenth and early nineteenth century Catholic and Protestant audiences. Similarly, in *Gioas*, Metastasio parallels the "unbelief" of both Athaliah and Mattan with Luther, and the "faithfulness" of both Jehoiada and the young King Joash with Charles VI:

> **Joash:** I adore thee alone, my appeased God; and for thee alone,
> I desire to preserve constancy and love within my soul. Thou

[22] Cf. Charles Burney, who writes, "It seems as if the character and court of the Emperor Charles VI had directed the muse of Metastasio to choose a virtuous prince for the principal hero of most of the musical dramas that were represented in the Imperial Theatre. The emperor was a religious prince, and a rigid observer of decorum himself, which consequently kept licentiousness at a distance from his court. And the poet, naturally a friend to virtue and morality, seems to have established his own feelings by conforming to the serious sentiments of his imperial patron" (*Memoirs of Metastasio*, 158–59).

[23] For a more detailed discussion, see Siobhán Dowling Long, *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Reception of a Biblical Story in Music* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

> hast restored me to the throne; and the precious gift is so acceptable, and dear unto my mind, that the praises of thy name I will ever found about me.[24]

In all five dramas, Metastasio removes culpability from Old Testament protagonists for any acts of violence, killing, and/or murder. In *Betulia*, for example, Judith points out that God used her hand to kill Holofernes, and in *Isacco*, Abraham notes that God supported his spirit with an unknown strength, a mysterious gift, to enable him carry out the near-sacrifice of his son. In *Gioas*, a "faithful hand" kills Athaliah, and her idolatrous priest takes his own life on the altar of his gods; Metastasio points out that God, not Jehoiada, ensured Athaliah would die and that the offspring of David would reign upon the throne. This is another allusion to the opposition between Protestants and Catholics, with Luther represented by Athaliah and Catholics by the "offspring of David":

> **Joash:** God suffers the unrighteous to be prosperous for a while, and either out of mercy leaves them time to mend their lives, or makes use of their afflictions to preserve to him the good, till at last, divine wrath redoubles on the guilty.[25]

As noted, in *Abel*, Metastasio pointed to Adam and Eve's poor childrearing skills as the reason behind Cain's murder of Abel, thereby removing culpability from God for preferring Abel's sacrifice over that of Cain (Gen 4:4–5).

While the libretti are unified by their focus on the themes of killing and murder, the actual event of any such killing or attempted killing is not the focus of attention in any of the dramas as these events were treated "off-stage" to promote a reflective response in listeners' imaginations. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the rules of verisimilitude and good taste rejected the tragic endings of classical literature as unworthy of the civilised state. Death, if unavoidable, was to be handled with dignity and preferably offstage.[26] Therefore, the violence of a given biblical text is never enacted in Metastasian drama but always graphically narrated towards the end by the protagonist who exhibits moral courage and faithful obedience in the face of grave danger. This technique enables audiences to visualise the terrifying

[24] *Joash, King of Juda: an Oratorio*, English Libretto (London: Griffin, 1770), 29.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Marita P. McClymonds and Daniel Heartz, "Opera Seria," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1992), 698.

story in their imaginations, and leaves a forceful impression, which remains for some time after the performance. For example, in *Betulia*, Judith graphically describes the gory details of Holofernes' dying moments:

> The barbarian opened his eyes and still uncertain between sleep and death, felt the sword plunged in his throat. He attempted to arise and defend himself but his fettered hair prevented him. He resorted to cries but his voice found the way to his lips barred and was lost. I repeated the blow and the fearful head was cleft from his shoulders. The severed trunk quivered on the blood stained ground. I felt the half dead skull start beneath the hand that held it. I saw the face suddenly lose colour, those lips frame mute words, those eyes seeking all around, the light of the sun. I saw him die, threatening and I trembled.[27]

And Eve describes the sight of her son's dead body, mutilated by his own brother, in *Abel*:

> Alas, do I see Adam there? Oh heaven!
> What is this ghostly burden thou hast brought?
> Is that pale corpse, my dear, my slaughtered child.
> I scarce know him again.
> Thy lovely image, O my son,
> Is quite disfigured by the marks
> Of thy too savage brother's fury.
> Thy pale face hanging on thy breast,
> On which thy tears are intermixed
> With dust and sweat: these various livid marks,
> And this warm blood yet flowing from thy wound,
> Show me too plain the agonies
> Thou hast endured in thy cruel death.[28]

At his coronation, Joash calls to memory the bloody massacre of his brothers murdered by their grandmother Queen Athaliah:

> Ah cruel daughter! Ah thou perfidious, Athaliah! Does not some fell remorse devour thy wicked heart? Methinks I do

[27] "Betulia Liberata," in *Opere del signor abate Pietro Metastasio*, ed. Tomasso Masi, vol. 6 (London: Gio. Tommaso Masi, 1782–83), 341–42.

[28] *Death of Abel*, 22.

> behold e'en now those innocent creatures sweltering in their blood, I count their wounds. Where're I cast my eyes, I see them. Ah, striking fight! Most cruel slaughter! O fatal tragedy![29]

And in a speech to Joseph, Judah remembers the trauma of the abduction of his young brother before he was sold into a life of slavery, or so Joseph's brothers thought:

> It seems that I still see before me that unfortunate child sobbing, innocent, torn from the tender paternal bosom. I see his tears, I hear his cries: mournful images! Atrocious memories![30]

The chorus of each drama reinforced the christological significance of a given biblical story, and provided moral instruction for the edification of its Catholic audience, which was urged to maintain faith in the one true God, to seek penitence, and to offer sacrifices of the heart. The purpose of the chorus, according to Horace, was to promote the cause of morality and religion. In like manner, Metastasio's choruses, "side with the good, give friendly counsel, sway the angry and cherish the righteous"(Horace *Ars* 196–98). In *Betulia*, for example, Metastasio silences the enemy, i.e., the Assyrians and empowers the Bethulians with a choral voice to enable them to "praise wholesome justice, law, and peace" (Horace, *Ars*, 198–99). Along with the chorus, Metastasio assigned female biblical characters a voice to preach the moral lesson, and to instruct audiences on the necessity of living a good life. This is similar to a convention in Syriac tradition, most notably in the *Kontakia* by Romanos the Melodist (b. 5th century), where female voices are assigned the same task.[31] As a political sub-text, the libretti stress God's salvation of the Catholic faithful and his destruction of "the enemy"; in this way, Metastasio alluded to the Catholic doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.[32]

As mentioned at the outset, Metastasio's biblical dramas were set to music by leading eighteenth century composers whose compositions were disseminated and acclaimed across the Holy Roman Empire and beyond. Due

[29] *Joash, King of Juda*, 21.

[30] Herbert Handt, *Giuseppe Riconosciuto*, 25.

[31] Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "2000 NAPS Presidential Address: Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2001): 124–25.

[32] See Cyprian, *Epist.* 73.

to poor literacy levels in Catholic countries at this time, Catholic access to the Bible was mediated primarily through the visual arts and music, and through readings and sermons at Catholic liturgical celebrations.[33] In the mid-eighteenth century, however, many oratorio performances which had originally taken place in churches now moved to the theatres, and for the majority who attended such performances the Metastasian version rather than the biblical version of the story was the one they knew. One such composer who brought the Metastasian story of the sacrifice of Isaac to the attention of the Catholic faithful was the Bohemian composer, Josef Mysliveček.

Abramo ed Isacco by Josef Mysliveček

Josef Mysliveček (1737–1781), known also as "Il Boemo," was the most prolific composer of *opere serie* in Europe during the period from 1765–80. He composed five oratorios on Old Testament themes: *Tobia* (1769), *La Betulia liberata* (1771), *Joseph* (1770), *Adam and Eve* (1771), the *Liberation of Israel* (1775) and *Abramo ed Isacco* (1776), and two on New Testament themes based on the Passion of Christ. His oratorio *Abramo ed Isacco* is perhaps his greatest work, and was falsely attributed on two occasions to Josef Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart respectively. In 1777–78 Maximilian III Joseph, Elector of Bavaria, invited Mysliveček to Munich to stage a production of *Isacco* in the *Residenz* Theatre; for this performance, he modified his original Florentine score to include textual and musical additions to the Metastasian libretto, *Isacco figura del Redentore*, and changed the name of the work to *Abramo ed Isacco*. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the practice of modifying Metastasian libretti was very common and composers generally substituted, deleted, or added arias and recitatives.

In line with this development, Mysliveček, too, modified the libretto, by incorporating a *terzetto* for Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac at the end of Part One, the scene of Abraham and Isaac's conversation in the present tense, and Isaac's near sacrifice based upon Gen 22:7–8 and 9–10 in Part Two. He added two instrumental numbers, an Overture in Part One, and a March in Part Two; in addition, he included an aria sung by Isaac, *Veggo O Dio*, and omitted the Shepherds Chorus, along with the scene recounting Sarah and Gamari's sight of Abraham in the distance holding a knife dripping with

[33] See Roger Chartier, "The Practical Impact of Writing," in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2008), 157–81.

blood. Mysliveček's account of the near sacrifice in the present tense brings the story more in line with its biblical counterpart.

Mysliveček assigned a variety of vocal registers to suit the age, profile, and status of various biblical characters in the drama. For example, he scored Isaac's vocal part for a high-pitched voice, which was sung by a castrato; nowadays, however, a soprano performs this role. In Mysliveček's rendition, Isaac is a youth and not a man of twenty-five years, as in the *Jewish Antiquities* (*Ant.* 1.227), or thirty-seven years, as in rabbinic tradition.[34] Since Gamari's vocal part is scored for a bass voice, it suggests he was an older male friend of Isaac. He assigned a tenor and a soprano voice to sing Abraham and Sarah's vocal parts. To reflect the heavenly high-pitched voice of an angel, he scored this part for a soprano.

He employed a wide-ranging variety of musical devices to illustrate the Metastasian libretto, from word-painting to dissonance, chromaticism, rhythmic variation, and modulation. He used these devices to good effect in arias and accompanied recitatives to provoke listener reflection on particular words of theological significance or to focus listeners' attention on the emotional state of a given character. In this oratorio, recitatives provide the medium for dialogic exchange, and are constructed around a one note syllabic recitation of the text. With two exceptions, arias are in ternary form (ABA), and usually begin with an orchestral *ritornello* for a number of measures before and after each vocal entry to set the mood and to introduce the melodic theme/s of a given aria.

Significance of Tonality

With two exceptions, Mysliveček set the entire oratorio in the major tonality to highlight Metastasio's christological understanding of Gen 22. Major tonalities sound hopeful, and point to the joyful news of Christ's resurrection, whereas minor tonalities, which are kept to a minimum in this work, signify either death or an emotion associated with death. Arias sharing a common dramatic idea are generally set in the same tonality; for example, the tonality of B-Flat is associated with the promises, of A with God's command and the virtue of obedience, and of C with Christ.[35] While no one

[34] *Tg. Ps.-J.* Gen 22:1; *Tg. Neof.* Exod 12:42; *Frg. Tg.* Exod 15:18 (P); *Gen. Rab.* 55:4; 56:8; *Tanh. B. Wayyera* 42; *Pirke R. El.* 31.

[35] Josef Mysliveček, *Isacco figura del Redentore*, ed. James A. Ackerman (1776; Madison: A-R Editions, 2000), 81.

tonality dominates the score, the oratorio opens with an overture in C-major and concludes with a chorus in C-major to highlight Christ as the Alpha and Omega (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). In the *Terzetto* at the end of Part One, Mysliveček scored the soprano (Isaac) to sing and sustain the note C for nineteen beats (mm. 57–61), which emphasizes musically Isaac's role as a type of Christ.

Only two numbers are scored in the minor tonality and, significantly, they are scored for Abraham's parents: in Part 1 Abraham's accompanied recitative, *Eterno Dio*, in C-minor, and in Part 2 Sarah's aria, *Deh parlate che forse tacendo*. These two numbers emphasise the pair's mutual grief in coming to terms with God's command. The note 'c' in C-minor connects Abraham's grief to Isaac's representation as a type of Christ, represented by C-major. Significantly, Mysliveček scored Abraham's aria *Datti Pace* that follows *Eterno Dio* in C-major, to emphasise the connection between Abraham's grief and obedience and Isaac's representation as a type of Christ.

Abraham's Emotional Turmoil

Mysliveček expressed Abraham's emotional turmoil over God's command (Gen 22:2) in an accompanied recitative entitled *Eterno Dio*,[36] and through a variety of musical devices to convey Abraham's sense of disbelief, confusion, and fear. He conveys a mood of gloom through the minor tonality (C-minor), and tension and anxiety through a short and sharp motif based on a rising minor second. As the tension mounts, a haunting two bar motif played by the double basses materialises from the depths of the instruments' register to sound-paint Abraham's gloomy mood, while a four-note demi-semi quaver motif played on the violins paints his sense of agitation, confusion, and disbelief. After his words, "Eternal God! What a terrible command!," the music modulates to the tonality of G-minor and the double basses return to sound the haunting two-bar motif (Figure 4).

Mysliveček sound-painted Abraham's terrified reaction to God's command with tremolos and glissandi in the violins, along with a change in dynamic markings to *piano* and *dolce* to mark his terrified question to God. The return to C-major signifies Abraham's resignation and acceptance of God's will. For the very last phrase, the tonality returns to the minor mode as Abra-

[36] Mysliveček, *Isacco figura del Redentore*, 63–69.
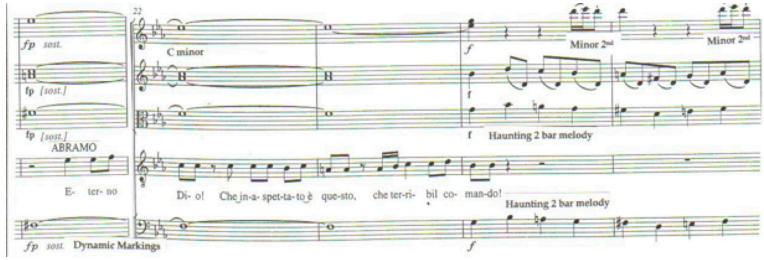


Figure 4. *Eterno Dio*

ham sings out in desperation, and at the top of his register that he is "only a man, a father, and the Lord knows that."

The parting scene between Sarah, Isaac, and Abraham, at the conclusion of Part 1, is a textual addition to the Metastasian libretto.[37] This section is intimate and based around the family unit as all three characters sing in a combination of trio and duet; it is significant for being the only place in the entire oratorio where all three characters sing together. On two occasions Isaac interjects, first, to comment on his parents' weeping (mm. 31–38; 120–26), and second, to make a theological point directed at the audience where he encourages them to have faith in God (mm. 87–91). Abraham and Sarah's mutual sadness is expressed in a duet, in parallel sixths at mm. 23–31, "O God, O God, the heart cannot resist such sorrow" (Figure 5), and mm. 39–48, "I still feel the blood solidify in each vein." This important passage highlights musically Abraham and Sarah's mutual consent to do God's will.
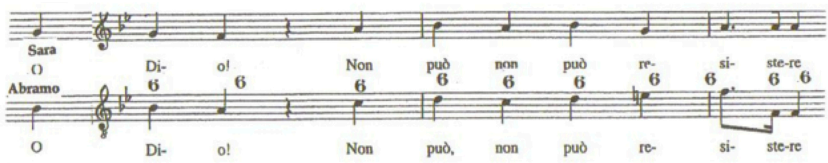


Figure 5. *O Dio, O Dio*

Isaac's devotion to his mother is expressed in the aria "Mother! Friend! Oh, do not weep!" Mysliveček scored this aria in the soothing tonality of

[37] Ibid., 154–64.

E-Flat major; by the end of section A (mm. 17–32), the tonality modulates to B-Flat major, the tonality of promise (Figure 6). Here Isaac comforts his mother and assures her of his safe return. Melismatic singing on *etornerò* suggests that Isaac will never leave nor abandon the one he loves. This device focuses listeners' attention on Isaac as a type of Christ who promises never to abandon His people.

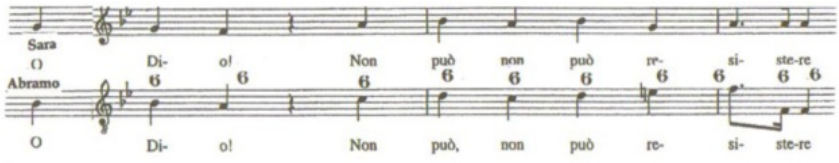


Figure 6. *Madre Amico, ah non piangete*

In section B of the aria, the tempo becomes more spirited, indicated by the marking *Allegretto*. The text alludes to Isaac's resting place when he dies, as the place where he will wait to be reunited with his mother Sarah; the music modulates to G-minor to reflect the bitterness of death before returning once again to the hopeful major tonality of Section A. At the very end of the oratorio, the *lieto fine* corresponds to Isaac's return home to his mother before she died in Hebron in the land of Canaan (Gen 23:1). But the Metastasian story does not recount this mournful event, and ends on a cheerful note with the chorus singing a joyful song inviting listeners of every age and historical period to praise and honour God's name.

Conclusion

This article has described Metastasio's reconstruction of five biblical stories during the eighteenth century and briefly examined one Metastasian libretto in the oratorio *Abramo ed Isacco* by the composer Josef Mysliveček. Such was the popularity of Metastasio's oratorio libretti that they were acclaimed internationally as literary and musical masterpieces by eighteenth-century theatre audiences and churchgoers alike. Despite their inherent propaganda, and overt christological focus, Metastasian oratorios continue to offer listeners today a different lens through which to view the biblical text.