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The Material of the Servant:

Theology and Hermeneutics in Handel's *Samson*

Sara Eckerson

George Frideric Handel's *Samson* oratorio (HWV 57, 1743) is often criticized because of its libretto.¹ Much of this criticism has to do with the fact that Handel's librettist, Newburgh Hamilton, based the text on John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and other Miltonic poems. Critical commentary points to faults in Hamilton's libretto, which range from specific arguments—that Samson is extraordinarily “passive”² and that Hamilton omitted “the passages of debate, judgment

and choice that form the sinews of *Samson Agonistes*”³—to more general disdain toward the libretto's corrupted version of *Samson Agonistes*.⁴ Hamilton adapted *Samson Agonistes* in such a way that certain parts are recognizably Miltonic, while others reveal themselves to be Hamilton's invention. In the background of this duality, moreover, is the story of Samson from Judges 13:3–16:31. Despite the criticism, Handel's oratorio presents a unique interpretation of *Samson Agonistes*, as well as insights into the Samson narrative, and it is valuable to understand what the oratorio brings to the table from this standpoint. One crucial thesis in what will follow is the way in which arguments pass through multiple voices in the oratorio. This kind of deliberation is markedly different from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, where deliberation is centralized on one individual. To illustrate this point, the present article will examine how the oratorio treats a theological argument related to the material of the body and the way in which the perspective moves from Samson, to Micah, and finally to the Chorus of Israelites to bring home a particular theological conclusion. The aim is to shed light on the theological ideas expressed in the music and libretto within this excerpt, the detail of these differing perspectives, and to

¹ Many contemporary accounts are similar to those of Dr. John Brown: “The *Oratorio* of SAMSON is properly *dramatic*. But the Poem is so much changed in the Attempt towards accommodating it to Music, that it can hardly be regarded a Work of MILTON.” Dr. John Brown, *A Dissertation on the Rise, Union, and Power, the Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music* (London: L. Davis, 1763), 218 (note [d]). More recent virulent critics include Sir Donald Francis Tovey, who calls *Samson* “mutilated Milton” in *The Forms of Music* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 159; and Robert Manson Myers, who calls the libretto an “audacious patchwork” in *Handel, Dryden, Milton* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1956), 65. Ruth Smith offers more positive criticism: “Hamilton's libretto was no mere abridgement, but a minutely detailed, lapidary, scissors-and-paste amalgamation of *Samson Agonistes* and other texts by Milton, with some additions—texts as yet unsourced and perhaps wholly his own.” Ruth Smith, “Milton Modulated for Handel's Music,” in *Milton in the Long Restoration*, ed. Blair Hoxby and Ann Baynes Coiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 171.

² Miranda Stanyon, “*The Changes, or Plus ça change?*” Newburgh Hamilton's Early Writings and the Politics of Handel's Librettos,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 142/2 (2017): 221–55, at 249; and Ruth Smith, “Intellectual Contexts of Handel's English Oratorios,” in *Music in Eighteenth-Century England: Essays in Memory of Charles Cudworth*, ed. Christopher Hogwood and Richard Lockett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 116.

³ Smith, “Intellectual Contexts,” 117.

⁴ Percy M. Young, *The Oratorios of Handel* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1959), 120–21.

explore the allusions to scripture that are less frequently pursued in Handel studies.⁵

Our case study begins with the “Total Eclipse!” air and works through the 1743 (A) wordbook⁶ to the chorus “O first created Beam!” from act 1, scene 2 (a sequence that corresponds to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 80–97). “Total Eclipse!” is crucial in Handel’s *Samson*, because it establishes a starting point for Samson’s spiritual growth in the course of the oratorio. This sequence is also important for establishing one of the symbolic motifs of the oratorio – namely, the “progression from darkness to light, from the eclipsed to the rising sun” that is meant to symbolize Samson’s “spiritual development.”⁷

⁵ Alexander Shapiro describes the relation between Handel’s English oratorio style and church music; Shapiro also defends the important role of religion in eighteenth-century English culture; see Alexander H. Shapiro “‘Drama of an Infinitely Superior Nature’: Handel’s Early English Oratorios and the Religious Sublime,” *Music & Letters* 74/2 (May 1993): 215–45. Specifically related to contemporary accounts of the choruses, in relation to *Samson*: “Theatre-goers also came to regard oratorios as great successes in the cause of church music,” *ibid.*, 238. See also Ruth Smith: “the dominant influences on mid-eighteenth century English thought were religion and politics. They permeated life and art . . . [R]eligious belief and the morality taught by religion informed perceptions for the content of the works of art and the works themselves . . . religious debate was a major element of intellectual life.” Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

⁶ The libretto indication follows Winton Dean’s order of Handel’s *Samson* librettos, of the Convent Garden librettos, and of other librettos from 1743 to 1758; see Winton Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 359–61.

⁷ “The principal theme of the libretto is the spiritual development of Samson, from his deep remorse for his past sins and resentment for his degradation as a blinded captive to his fulfillment as an instrument of divine will; yet his triumph is at once his tragedy. . . . The spiritual development is symbolized by Hamilton as a progression from darkness to light, from the eclipsed to the rising sun, from Samson’s aria ‘Total eclipse’ . . . ; the symbolism is also suggested by the

Samson’s ultimate sacrifice at the conclusion of the oratorio depicts a considerable psychological distance from the dejected state the hero highlights in “Total Eclipse!” It is important to note the focus on Samson’s loss of sight (and the suffering this causes him) because it is despite this material debilitation that he is able to destroy the Philistines and their temple to Dagon. The theological ideas behind the notion of the material body, and the identity of the “dark servant” in “O first created Beam!” come to the forefront in a dovetail movement in the libretto that joins earlier lines from Milton’s poem (which served as the basis for the “Total Eclipse!” air) with new content by Hamilton. The study’s interdisciplinary methodology combines literary hermeneutics with musical aesthetics to show the relevance of the oratorio’s commentary. My main theological argument rests on Augustine’s hermeneutic principle positing that the material world can be used to offer insight into scripture. Ultimately this will show that Samson’s lament of his particular suffering is transformed in the chorus’s presentation of the creation narrative; the chorus illustrates how Providence, in light of the material body, reveals the purpose of the individual (and all created life) as the servant of God and also foreshadows the conclusion of Samson’s narrative.

chorus ‘O first created beam’ of act I.” Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, vol. 2: *The Oratorio in the Baroque Era: Protestant Germany and England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 272.

The 1743 (A) Wordbook and Hamilton's Preface

Hamilton wrote the libretto for *Samson*, with Handel's collaboration,⁸ utilizing a method that closely follows the formula used for Handel's other musical works based on great British literature—*Alexander's Feast; or The Power of Musick* (HWV 75, 1736), based on John Dryden's poem by the same name (1697); *Song for St Cecilia's Day* (HWV 76, 1739), based on Dryden's *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* (1687); and *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (HWV 55, 1740), based on Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (ca. 1632).⁹ In the preface to the 1743 (A) wordbook, Hamilton comments on the success of the stage versions of Milton's two poems (that is, Handel's *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*). In view of this, Hamilton imagines that *Samson Agonistes* will have greater "propriety or applause" than any other work by Milton if brought to the stage.¹⁰ He finds the oratorio

⁸ Although Jennens composed the critically successful libretto *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* based on Milton's poems, it has been suggested that Handel preferred to work with Newburgh Hamilton on this project because Handel would "again have to fear for his artistic autonomy. . . . Handel may have originally thought that he could carry out the necessary shortening of Milton's text himself, but without modifications to the structure of the lines such a task would have been impossible; he needed someone who could 'assist him in adjusting words,' and for this task Hamilton was a skillful and flexible collaborator." G. F. Handel, *Samson*, ed. H. D. Clausen, Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, ser. I, vol. 18 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2011), Teilband 1, xx; quotation from the first codicil of Handel's will embedded.

⁹ See Matthew Gardner, "Seventeenth-Century Literary Classics as Eighteenth-Century Libretto Sources: Congreve, Dryden and Milton in the 1730's and '40's," in *Music in the London Theatre from Purcell to Handel*, ed. Colin Timms and Bruce Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 157–74, at 173.

¹⁰ [Newburgh Hamilton], *Samson. An Oratorio. As it is Perform'd at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden. Alter'd and adapted to the Stage from the Samson Agonistes of John*

form particularly well suited to *Samson Agonistes* because of the narrative's origin in sacred literature: "as Mr. Handel had so happily introduc'd here *Oratorios*, a musical Drama, whose Subject must be Scriptural, and in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage: It would have been an irretrievable Loss to have neglected the Opportunity to that great Master's doing Justice to this Work."¹¹ The interplay between sacred music and elements of secular theater also seems to favor the Samson narrative in the oratorio. As Ruth Smith describes: "Beyond *Samson Agonistes* lies the Bible, and Hamilton made more use of the Book of Judges than Milton did. But though his Samson is (like that of Judges and unlike that of Milton) closely identified with his nation, he is also (very unlike the biblical hero) moral and humane."¹² This balance of sacred and secular, deeply rooted in Hamilton's integration of Psalms and allusions to other passages of scripture, in addition to the condensation of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*,¹³ brings to the foreground a relatable "humane" Samson, who is softened through Milton's portrayal of an older, flawed, and tragic hero.¹⁴ F. Michael Krouse argues that Milton's poem presents Samson far from his earlier days, described in the Book of Judges, which are characterized by the story of the foxes¹⁵ of the

Milton. Set to Music by George Frederick Handel, by George Frederick Handel (London: J. and R. Tonson in the Strand, 1743), iii. Hamilton cites Milton's poems as "Penseroso" and "Allegro," iii.

¹¹ Ibid., iv.

¹² Smith, "Intellectual Contexts," 125.

¹³ See Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 1, xxxv–lxvii.

¹⁴ See F. Michael Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 83.

¹⁵ Judges 15:4–6 (AV).

lion Samson tore apart with his hands,¹⁶ and by riddles.¹⁷ Against the backdrop of the resignation and failure Samson experiences at the start of *Samson Agonistes*, “Milton not only depicted his hero as one sent to deliver Israel from bondage and strengthened for that purpose by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; he also accepted explicitly the time-honored conception of Samson as God’s agent and champion.”¹⁸ The notion of Samson as a suffering hero¹⁹ can be found in the oratorio through reflection on the description of Samson’s deeds that Hamilton integrated from Milton and that are important for identifying the theological significance of Samson’s narrative.²⁰

Despite evidence of a theological foundation behind the Samson narrative, many eighteenth-century commentators accentuate the pathos in *Samson Agonistes*, “avoid grappling with its religious philosophy, which they regard as a weakening intrusion,

and ignore Milton’s continuous measuring of the hero’s spiritual achievement.”²¹ There are examples of reception, nevertheless, where the “religious philosophy” within Handel’s *Samson* may be noted, even if they are not explicitly articulated. For example, Miss Catherine Talbot relates a religious mood in the music after attending a performance of Handel’s *Samson*:

I will own the having been highly delighted with several songs in Sampson, and especially with the choruses. . . . And having never heard any oratorio before, I was extremely struck with such a kind of harmony as seems the only language adapted to devotion. I really cannot help thinking this kind of entertainment must necessarily have some effect in correcting or moderating at least the levity of the age.²²

The blend of religion and theater for the sake of entertainment sometimes proved controversial for contemporary audiences. As the critic who signed himself Philaethes famously wrote in the *Universal Spectator*, “I am also a great Admirer of *Church Musick*, and think no other equal to it, nor any Person so capable to compose it, as Mr. *Handel*. . . . an *Oratorio* either is an *Act of Religion*, or it is not; if it is, I ask if the *Playhouse* is a fit *Temple* to perform it in, or a *Company of Players* fit *Ministers of God’s Word*.”²³ Philaethes continues this idea in the conclusion of his letter:

¹⁶ Judges 14:5–8 (AV).

¹⁷ Judges 14:12–18 (AV); Krouse, *Milton’s Samson*, 87–88.

¹⁸ Krouse, *Milton’s Samson*, 95.

¹⁹ “Nur der leidende Held, wie schon Milton ihn geschildert hatte, kommt hier zur Darstellung, und es ist wunderbar, welche Activität und Lebendigkeit der Bewegung in diesem anscheinend passiven Zustande durch die Musik hervor gezaubert wird.” Friedrich Chrysander, *Händel’s biblische Oratorien in geschichtlicher Betrachtung* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1906), 18.

²⁰ Notably in Micah’s recitative in act 1, scene 2, “O change beyond Report, Thought, or / Belief!” (act 1, scene 2, p. 3 of 1743 [A] wordbook; a direct quotation of *Samson Agonistes*, l. 117, at p. 78 [1725 ed.]). Later in Micah’s recitative we find: “Can this be he? / Heroick *Samson*? whom no Strength of Man, / Nor Fury of the fiercest Beast cou’d quell? Who tore the Lion, as the Lion tears the Kid” (act 1, scene 2, p. 3 of 1743 [A] wordbook, “Who tore the Lion, as the Lion tears the Kid,” a direct quotation of *Samson Agonistes*, l. 128, at p. 79 [1725 ed.]). And see Samson’s recitative “Why by an Angel was my Birth foretold . . . / Why was my Nurture order’d and prescrib’d / As of a Person separate to God?” (act 1, scene 1, p. 2 of 1743 [A] wordbook).

²¹ Smith, “Intellectual Contexts,” 122.

²² In a letter dated Dec. 27, 1743, addressed to Mrs. Elizabeth Carter; in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955), 577.

²³ *Universal Spectator*, March 19, 1743; the letter is addressed “To the Author of the Universal Spectator.” See Deutsch, *Handel*, 563–65, at 564. The letter appeared soon after the *Samson* premiere on Feb. 18, 1743.

How will this appear to After-Ages when it shall be read in History, that in such an Age the People of England were arriv'd to such a Height of *Impiety* and *Prophaneness*, that the most *sacred Things* were suffer'd to be us'd as *publick Diversions*, and that in a *Place*, and by *Persons* appropriated to the Performance not only of *light and vain*, but *too often prophane* and *dissolute Pieces*?²⁴

Additional contemporary accounts record the presence of well-known theater actors in the performance of *Samson*. Horace Walpole writes in a letter to Horace Mann: “Handel has set up an Oratorio against the Operas, and succeeds. He has hired all the goddesses from farces and the singers of *Roast Beef* from between the acts at both theatres, with a man with one note in his voice, and a girl without ever an one; and so they sing, and make brave hallelujahs.”²⁵ According to Walpole, many of these actors appear not to have been gifted singers, and their association with the Samson narrative may have brought forward a lighter interpretation of its theological content. This kind of criticism, founded on the association of sacred themes with a secular environment, can also be found in the early twentieth century, when it was argued that Handel chose actresses from the theater for the premiere of *Samson* in order to attract audiences for a work based on a sacred theme and performed at the Covent Garden Theatre—notably, Mrs. Katherine Clive, who was known as a comic actress, and Mrs. Susannah Maria Cibber, “who amused the town by contending publicly against Mrs. Clive for the part of Polly in *The Beggar’s Opera*.”²⁶

For our purposes, it is important to note that the *recitativo accompagnato* (accompanied recitative) “Since Light so necessary is to Life,” sandwiched between “Total Eclipse!” and “O first created Beam!,” exemplifies some of the issues raised by criticism of the oratorio form cited above. First, as discussed below, the *accompagnato* was originally planned as a *recitativo secco* (with continuo accompaniment), before Mrs. Cibber was engaged to play the role of Micah in the first performance on February 18, 1743.²⁷ Second, the text has a deeply Miltonic tone (described in detail below) and expresses complex theological notions that shed light on the meaning of both the air and the chorus. Third, due to the length of the oratorio, Handel frequently cut this *accompagnato* from performances. Hamilton, however, foresaw the future necessity of cuts and mentions this in the 1743 preface:

[I]n adapting this Poem to the Stage, the Recitative is taken almost wholly from *Milton*, making use only of those Parts in his long Work most necessary to preserve the Spirit of the Subject, and justly connect it. . . . Tho’ I reduc’d the Original to so short an Entertainment, yet being thought too long for the proper Time of a Representation, some Recitative must be left out in the Performance but printed in its Place and mark’d to distinguish it.²⁸

It is telling that Hamilton both underscored that the recitatives would be printed in the wordbook and also highlighted their Miltonic provenance. By interlacing Handel’s genius with Milton’s, Hamilton’s preface sets the tone for understanding the wordbook. In this vein, it is useful to consider the relevance of

²⁴ Deutsch, *Handel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955), 563–65, at 564.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 560.

²⁶ Alwin Thaler, “Milton in the Theatre,” *Studies in Philology* 17/3 (July 1920): 269–308, at 279; see also 278–79.

²⁷ The alteration took place during the Micah revision of 1742; Hans Dieter Clausen, “Lässt sich die Urfassung von Händels Oratorium *Samson* Rekonstruieren?,” in *Händel-Jahrbuch* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2006), 49–70, at 57–58 and 62–63.

²⁸ [Hamilton], *Samson*, iii–iv.

the recitatives, even if they were frequently cut.²⁹ The “Since Light” *accompagnato* is important for understanding the theological ideas regarding the material body discussed in this case study. This consideration, in turn, sheds new light on Samson’s pathos and the commencement of his spiritual progress.

“Total Eclipse!”

The narrative of Handel’s *Samson*, as played out in *Samson Agonistes*, would have been familiar to many of those who heard the oratorio in 1743.³⁰ The oratorio opens in the same way as Milton’s poem, where Samson is in a degraded state at a prison house in Gaza—betrayed by his wife Dalila, his head shaved, and his eyes already “put out” by the Philistines.³¹ Over the course of the oratorio, different characters serve as interlocutors for Samson to discuss what has transpired and what to do next, including his friend Micah, his father Manoa, the giant Harapha, Dalila, the Chorus of Israelites, and the Chorus of the Priests of Dagon. The oratorio concludes with Samson sacrificing himself to destroy the

Philistines and their temple to Dagon.³² An officer describes Samson’s death in act 3, telling how he used his great strength to pull the Temple of Dagon down upon the Philistines: “at once he did destroy, and was destroy’d.”³³ This deed stands as the culmination of Samson’s spiritual progress, and the hero carried it out (so it is presumed from the wordbook) with the intent to “make Jehovah’s Glory known.”³⁴ The “Total Eclipse!” air powerfully expresses Samson’s pathos and suffering and serves as a memorable starting point³⁵ for the hero’s spiritual journey until his death.

Scholars frequently mention “Total Eclipse!” in the Handelian literature on *Samson* because of how successful it is musically and how well it expresses Samson’s pathos.³⁶ Samson’s second air in the oratorio (act 1, scene 2), it conveys a moment when his earlier narrative confronts his present situation. Note that the “earlier narrative” does not refer to Samson’s feats of strength in his youth, but to something more relatable: “Total Eclipse!”

²⁹ As Clausen notes, the *accompagnato* was “only performed in 1743 and possibly in 1745.” Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 1, 64. See also Mark W. Stahura, “The Publishing Copy Text of Handel’s *Samson*,” *Journal of Musicology* 4/2 (1985–86): 207–16, at 212.

³⁰ As Thaler notes: “By 1722 seven or more editions of *Samson Agonistes* had appeared, and it had won its way steadily, if not as rapidly as *Paradise Lost*.” Thaler, “Milton in the Theatre,” 274.

³¹ Judges 16:19–21 (AV). The character Dalila in Handel’s *Samson* and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* is rendered “Delilah” in AV. Handel’s *Samson* initially describes Samson’s physical state and the betrayal in Samson and Micah’s recitative “Whom have I to complain of?” (act 1, scene 2, directly before the “Total Eclipse!” air), both in the 1743 version and in the short version (see Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 1, pp. 60–62).

³² Samson was brought to the Temple of Dagon to give a public show of his strength; see recitative “More Trouble is behind,” where Harapha states: “we know, thy Strength, Surpasses Human race;—Come then & shew some publick Proof; to grace this solemn Feast” (act 3, scene 1).

³³ Officer’s recitative “Where shall I run” (act 3, scene 3).

³⁴ See Samson’s final *accompagnato*, “Then shall I make Jehovah’s Glory known” (act 3, scene 1).

³⁵ In a description of the plot of Handel’s *Samson*, Percy Young writes: “Samson passes from sight, singing his own threnode. ‘Total Eclipse’ ushered in the inspissation of physical darkness: ‘Thus when the sun’ points the compass towards light and repose and to a spiritual state of tranquility.” Young, *The Oratorios of Handel*, 124.

³⁶ Most notably by Young (*ibid.*, 121) and Winton Dean: “[Samson] is purified by suffering; and the two greatest of his airs, ‘Total Eclipse’ and ‘Thus when the Sun,’ happily symbolize the spiritual progress from darkness to light.” Dean, *Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 333.

describes blindness from the perspective of someone who had previously been able to see.³⁷ Samson mentions things that he seems to know by experience (for example, the sun, moon, and stars), and the fact that he can no longer see them causes him great distress. The theological idea related to the material of the body, which is rooted in Samson's blindness (and depicted in "Total Eclipse!" because in the narrative Samson no longer has eyes), becomes more explicit when we reflect on the oratorio in concert with Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.

At line 80, Milton breaks from blank verse and repeats the word "dark." In "Total Eclipse!" it becomes clear that darkness is the source of Samson's great anguish. Handel's music evokes ideas of darkness and eclipse through identifiable rhetorical devices (for example, the movement in pitch, the placement of rests, and sparse accompaniment for the voice).³⁸ It is clear from the start how little Hamilton's adaptation

resembles Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in this air;³⁹ the plainness of expression in the words and the rhetorical devices in the music, however, make the central idea immediately accessible. Winton Dean remarks that "the miracle of 'Total Eclipse' is its simplicity; the intensely emotional effect derives from Handel's impeccable treatment of such age-old devices as an unaccompanied vocal entry, the chord of the diminished seventh, and the shortened final ritornello (suggesting the blank hopelessness of Samson's future)."⁴⁰

The skeletal remnants of Milton's text in Hamilton's first line immediately establish Samson's pathos and his current emotional state. Moreover, the line "Total Eclipse! no Sun, no Moon!" lacks a verb. These words, in particular, put forward a pictorial image of an astronomical eclipse. Alternatively, the line describes blindness by remarking on what cannot be seen. Samson's individual plight already suggests an appeal to what is universal; Samson does not remark on the particular (for example, it is not his father's face he cannot see here), but on celestial bodies: the sun and the moon.

³⁷ We encounter Samson in the same situation in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. My treatment of Samson's blindness is focused on its appearance in the oratorio. There are additional psychological and biographical components to Samson's blindness here, beyond Samson's narrative from the Old Testament—for example, Milton's loss of sight (that he was blind when he composed *Samson Agonistes*) and the fact that Handel, later in life, became blind (anecdotes recount that he was unable to hear the "Total Eclipse!" air without tears in his eyes [Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 333]). Consideration of Milton's blindness begs the question whether we should read Samson's lament as derived directly from Milton's own experience. Scholars often read Milton's blindness as different from Samson's, but connected with it in some degree by the distress it causes. See Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward "Samson Agonistes": The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 19.

³⁸ Paul McMahon, "Darkness and Light: Handel's Rhetorical Vocal Writing in the English Oratorio *Samson*," *Journal of Music Research Online* 8 (2017): 1–28, <http://www.jmro.org.au/index.php/mca2/article/view/198/58>.

³⁹ Alwin Thaler cites this air as a prime example of the "poor results" of Hamilton's handiwork in the condensing of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*; this is not the only air Thaler refers to, but it is the first one discussed. Thaler, "Milton in the Theatre," 276; see also 277 and 278.

⁴⁰ Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 338.

<p>“Total Eclipse!”</p> <p>SAMSON</p> <p>Total Eclipse! no Sun, no Moon! All dark amidst the Blaze of Noon! O glorious Light! No chearing Ray To glad my Eyes with welcome Day: Why thus depriv’d thy prime Decree, Sun, Moon, and Stars are dark to me.</p>	<p><i>Samson Agonistes</i>, ll. 80–89</p> <p>O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, Irrecov’rably dark, total Eclipse Without all hope of day! O first created Beam, and thou great Word, Let there be light, and light was over all; Why am I thus bereav’d thy prime decree? The Sun to me is dark And silent as the Moon, When she deserts the night Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.</p>
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Figure 1: Comparison between George Frideric Handel, *Samson*, “Total Eclipse!”⁴¹ and John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (1671)⁴²

⁴¹ [Hamilton], *Samson*, p. 4. Capitalization and punctuation follow this version of the libretto.

⁴² John Milton, “*Samson Agonistes*, a Dramatick Poem,” in *Paradise Regain’d. A Poem. In Four Books. To which is added Samson Agonistes. And Poems upon several Occasions. With a Tractate of Education*, 6th ed. (London: Printed for J. Tonson, at Shakespear’s Head, over-against Catherine-Street in the Strand; and for M. Poulson, 1725), 67–131, at 77. The author has chosen an edition of *Samson Agonistes* contemporary with the 1743 (A) wordbook to maintain continuity with respect to eighteenth-century orthography.

Throughout the oratorio, Hamilton's words and Handel's setting present a specific interpretation of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and the Old Testament character of Samson. As we can observe in Figure 1, Hamilton greatly modifies Milton's language. His alterations highlight the interpretation we take away from Handel's oratorio, but initially seem to weaken Milton's theological argument. In the passage from *Samson Agonistes* shown in Figure 1, Milton refers to the creation narrative from Genesis 1:3–5 and John 1:1–5. It is a unique combination of the Old Testament and New Testament because Milton uses the term "Word" when speaking about the creation of light:

O first created Beam, and thou great Word,
Let there be light, and light was over all;
Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?

In Samson's air, Hamilton turns Milton's words toward a subjective interpretation with the first-person possessive case: "O, glorious Light! No chearing Ray / To glad my Eyes with welcome Day." Arguably this change is at least partially related to the narrative structure of the oratorio: Micah introduced the air in an earlier recitative by asking, "Which shall we first bewail, thy Bondage, or loss of Sight?"⁴³ In "Total Eclipse!" Samson sings of his eyes as though answering in the sequence of this conversation, and the line "Sun, Moon, and Stars are dark to me" determines the situation of the individual. Samson laments the condition of his own eyes, that is, the material of his own body, and not anyone else's. Moreover, Hamilton's "O

glorious Light!" takes on a personal significance as a recollection from Samson's own life. Samson remembers light as a "chearing Ray" that had the ability to change his mood from melancholic to joyful. Here the ray does not carry the full weight of reflection on the scripture, combined with a feeling of dejection as we find in Milton – where light is more often a symbol than it is the thing in itself.⁴⁴ The "Ray" in Handel's "Total Eclipse!" is a psychological stimulant and, as such, causes a change in mood. The description of sunlight as a "chearing Ray" gives the impression that Samson is seeking empathy in virtue of a universal sense of happiness associated with the sun.

The question Samson poses in the air—"Why thus depriv'd thy prime Decree"—recalls Milton's allusion to Genesis, but only in a fragmented way. As the air addresses Samson's subjective experience of blindness, this particular reference to the creation narrative sounds more rhetorical than Milton's explicit gloss on Genesis 1:3 in *Samson Agonistes* (ll. 83–85). Handel's setting

⁴⁴ Milton explicitly draws the reader's attention to the multiple meanings of "light" used throughout the poem. For example, Samson: "All otherwise to me my thoughts portend, / That these dark Orbs no more shall treat with light, / Nor th' other light of life continue long, / But yield to double darkness nigh at hand" (ll. 590–93, at p. 93 [1725 edition]). Winton Dean describes a similar thought, although with consideration of insights that are directly connected to the idiosyncrasy of the oratorio: "The pattern behind the whole oratorio emerges in terms of the twin images of the sun eclipsed and the sun rising, and is further extended in the last air and chorus, with Seraphims in burning row and endless blaze of light The counter-theme of spiritual lightening against physical darkness is due to Hamilton, who perhaps understood the profound significance of the heavenly bodies in Handel's imagination: neither 'Thus when the sun' nor the finale has any connection with *Samson Agonistes*." Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, 333.

⁴³ Recitative "Whom have I to complain of?" act 1, scene 2 (Micah and Samson).

emphasizes the bleakness of Samson's current situation,⁴⁵ and the libretto portrays Samson as a person who feels isolated in their suffering due to a lack of reflection on a narrative other than their own.

The air ends with the line "Sun, Moon, and Stars are dark to me," which is reminiscent of the opening "no Sun, no Moon!" It is notable that at the air's conclusion, Hamilton adds stars to the sequence of things Samson cannot see. The simplicity of this line is deceiving; although Samson expresses his individual perspective in the air, there are hints in the direction of the creation narrative in this reference to the sun, moon, and stars.⁴⁶ This is not as explicit, however, as Milton's Samson, who recites "Let there be light"⁴⁷ because stars only come later in the creation narrative according to the book of Genesis.⁴⁸ The "individual" element of the air⁴⁹ is the overwhelming presence of

Samson's suffering in the libretto. This aspect, in turn, overshadows the connection between Samson's final words in the air and their association with scripture. The plainness of the phrase, where Samson mentions celestial bodies with reference to himself ("Sun, Moon, and Stars are dark to me"), deflects attention away from the fact that Samson (in the oratorio) may consider himself within the fabric of a universal narrative in the same vein as Milton's Samson (as evinced in *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 83–85). The movement toward an understanding of Samson's suffering beyond Samson's own perspective is then set in motion with Micah's *accompagnato*.

"Since Light so necessary is to Life"

As mentioned above, the "Since Light" *accompagnato* was often cut from performances due to time constraints. The words still appeared in the wordbooks, however, and members of the audience could follow along during performances⁵⁰ even for those recitatives that were not sung.⁵¹ The autograph score (Fig. 2) shows that "Since Light" was originally planned as a *recitativo secco*. The conversational aspect of a recitative at this point after the air also contributes to the idea behind Micah's character as a

⁴⁵ Arnold Stein argues that the section of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (ll. 80–109) is ultimately personal from Samson's perspective, with reference to the self. Samson changes tone from private to public: "after a formal transition by Samson, the style an impersonal, cultivated voice of high tragedy (like the one Samson used when he first heard the intruding sound of steps), he recognizes friends and speaks in still another voice, not the private one we heard, but a public one," which refers to the chorus's steps in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (l. 110). Arnold Stein, *Heroic Knowledge: An Interpretation of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), 142–44, at 144.

⁴⁶ Gen. 1:14–16 (AV): "And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: *he made* the stars also."

⁴⁷ Gen. 1:3 (AV).

⁴⁸ See Gen. 1:16 (AV).

⁴⁹ Following the familiar technique in Handel's oratorios, which Jens Peter Larsen describes: "In *Samson*, the chorus is used in typical fashion: it is the

whole people, the arias are individuals." Jens Peter Larsen, *Handel's Messiah: Origins, Composition, Sources*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990), 80.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 23. John Greenacombe, "Wordbooks," in *The Cambridge Handel Encyclopedia*, ed. Annette Landgraf and David Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 673–74. The audience could read the preface, and follow along with the music in real time, because the lights were left on in the theater (p. 673).

⁵¹ [Hamilton], *Samson*, iv–v; see also 3–4. For example, the *accompagnato* appears in the 1749 Oxford wordbook, although scholars suggest it was not performed (see Clausen, "Lässt sich die Urfassung," 64).

“compassionate friend and commentator.”⁵² Once Mrs. Cibber was chosen to play the part of Micah, Handel undertook a number of revisions, including scoring “Since Light” as a *recitativo accompagnato*.⁵³ Figures 3 and 4 suggest how frequently the recitative was cut: the folio has a prominent fold and was evidently sewn in this position.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, “Since Light” illustrates the general rule behind Handel’s inclusion of accompanied recitatives: because oratorios lacked staging and visual cues, an accompanied recitative could “heighten the emotional and religious experiences of the characters involved in them, and in this way was also clarifying these experiences for his audience.”⁵⁵ The *accompagnato* style also raises “the words from the level of mere conversation and gives them a special significance, more emphasis and a greater emotional effect.”⁵⁶

“Since Light” emphasizes a pathetic tone, expressing the sympathy for which Micah’s character is known.⁵⁷ It has small groupings of punctuated eighth notes in the strings and continuo in a pattern that mimics the orchestration of “Total Eclipse!” and suggests the *obbligato* style; nevertheless, a *sostenuto* style, with sustained chords held in the strings and continuo, predominates in the accompani-

ment at the beginning and end of the recitative. However, there is a noteworthy difference between these rhythmic figures in the two accompaniments: the tempo indication at the top of the page of “Since Light” is *Largo*, not *Largo e Staccato*,⁵⁸ as in “Total Eclipse!” In addition, Micah’s *accompagnato* mirrors the dramatic tone of the strings in the conclusion of Samson’s air (see Fig. 2, m. 1 of the second system; and Fig. 3, first system) through the rhythmic patterns in the strings and the strategic placement of rests in the accompaniment.

⁵² Clausen, “Lässt sich die Urfassung,” 61; translation is the responsibility of the author.

⁵³ On the “Micah-Revision,” see *ibid.*, 57–70.

⁵⁴ In reference to the conducting score: “In B wurde das eingefügte Blatt 38 einwärts geknickt und in dieser Position durch eine Naht fixiert” (Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 2, 461).

⁵⁵ Liam Gorry, “Accompanied Recitative and Characterisation,” in *Music in the London Theatre from Purcell to Handel*, ed. Colin Timms and Bruce Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 203–21, at 204.

⁵⁶ Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 1, xxvii.

⁵⁷ “Micah is not only a bystander, he is also a warmly sympathizing friend.” Smith, “Intellectual Contexts,” 118.

⁵⁸ The air is marked “Larghetto e Staccato” in the autograph; it is also “Largo e staccato” in the conducting score (although it seems Handel original wrote “Larghetto,” then crossed out the *b*, changed the *e* to an *o*, and blotted out *tto* so that the word would read “Largo”). See Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 1, 63 and Teilband 2, 461.

Figure 3: Accompagnato “Since light so necessary is to Life,” in G. F. Handel, *Samson* (conducting score). Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, M A/1048, Vol. I, folio 38r. Used with kind permission from the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.

Figure 4: Accompanato “Since light so necessary is to Life,” in G. F. Handel, *Samson*, (conducting score). Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, M A/1048, Vol. I, folio 38v. Used with kind permission from the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.

Micah frequently ends a line of text with a theologically relevant idea over an eighth rest in the strings and continuo—for example, “life” (Fig. 3, m. 3), “soul” (Fig. 3, m. 4), “life itself” (Fig. 3, mm. 4–5), “sight confined” (Fig. 3, mm. 6–7)—and this rest is immediately followed by a rhythmic pattern in the strings that emphasizes the statement. This orchestration calls to mind Percy Young’s parenthetical remark about “Total Eclipse!”: “This air—or is it not more truthfully a recitative?—carries within it the spirit of 100 lines of verse and it is difficult to believe that anything said by Milton is

omitted.”⁵⁹ Although the brief melodic themes in the accompaniment of Samson’s air (Fig. 2, final three bars of the second system) are absent from “Since Light,” the *accompagnato* makes a strong allusion to the dramatic effect of these themes through rhythmic gestures in the strings. The more complex Miltonic ideas (alluded to in “Total Eclipse!”) become evident as Micah’s *accompagnato* transitions to the following chorus.

The significance of Micah’s text, however, goes beyond the sympathy expressed in the words and the musical similarities between

⁵⁹ Young, *The Oratorios of Handel*, 121.

“Total Eclipse!” and “Since Light.” As a transition to the chorus “O first created Beam!,” the close of Micah’s *accompagnato*—with its Adagio tempo indication (Fig. 4, second system), sustained chords in the strings, and elegant melodic resolution—presents a stillness and eases the entrance of the powerful message in “O first created Beam!” (the stillness at the end of the *accompagnato* is markedly different from the agitation at the conclusion of “Total Eclipse!”). The text of “Since Light” presents significant theological arguments, selected from Milton, and it is meaningful that Hamilton and Handel chose this particular Miltonic passage and not a different one (considering how much of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* needed to be condensed and

adapted). Taken together, the text selection, placement of the recitative, and accompaniment suggest a possible aim that the text had more than a sympathetic—or conversational—purpose.

To delve deeper into what this passage of text means for the theological argument, Micah’s “Since Light” can be seen as a response to Samson’s “Total Eclipse!” Importantly, the *accompagnato* serves to transition from one individual’s experience to a general reflection on the imperfection of the human body in light of its material. The libretto follows the sequence of lines from *Samson Agonistes* (ll. 90–97), which Hamilton only slightly altered.

<p>“Since Light so necessary is to Life”</p> <p>MICAH</p> <p>Since Light so necessary is to Life, That in the Soul ‘tis almost Life itself, Why to the tender Eye is Sight confin’d? So obvious, and so easy to be quench’d; Why not, as Feeling, thro’ all Parts diffus’d, That we might look at will thro’ ev’ry Pore?</p>	<p><i>Samson Agonistes</i>, ll. 90–97</p> <p>Since light so necessary is to life, And almost life it self, if it be true That light is in the Soul, She all in ev’ry part; why was the sight To such a tender ball as th’ eye confin’d? So obvious and so easie to be quench’d, And not, as feeling, through all parts diffus’d, That she might look at will through ev’ry pore?</p>
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Figure 5: Comparison between George Frideric Handel, *Samson*, “Since Light so necessary is to Life”⁶⁰ and John Milton, *Samson Agonistes* (1671)⁶¹

⁶⁰ [Hamilton], *Samson*, pp. 77–78 (1725 ed.). Capitalization and punctuation follow this version of the libretto.

⁶¹ Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, at pp. 77–78 (1725 ed.).

In Samson's passage from *Samson Agonistes*, Milton's poem approaches metaphysics. Samson arrives at a deeper question when he considers his experience and his understanding of the eye's frailty. When reflecting on the soul and the body (where Samson himself is implied as a reference, and his personal experience is a driving force), Samson states what looks like the first part of a conditional statement: "if it be true that light is in the soul." This statement, however, lacks a conclusion; it resembles free thought along the lines of philosophical discourse, and introduces a philosophical tone to the passage. On the surface, Milton's lines describe a hierarchy of the senses (where sight is more important than touch, but is more easily extinguished); in establishing this, Milton also puts forward a comparison of light to life that refers to Matthew 6:22–23⁶² and John 8:12.⁶³ When Samson considers the idea that the soul is in every part of the body, he takes this reflection one step further. His speculation addresses a sense of dualism we find in Aquinas when, in the *Summa*, Aquinas questions whether the soul is the human being.⁶⁴

⁶² Mt. 6:22–23 (AV): "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"

⁶³ Jn 8:12 (AV): "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me, shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

⁶⁴ See also 1.75.3 co.: "But Aristotle held that, among the soul's functions, only thinking is carried out without a bodily organ. Sensation, on the other hand, and the resulting operations of the sensory soul, clearly do occur with some transformation to the body: in seeing, for instance, the pupil is transformed by the species of a color." Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise on Human Nature: Summa Theologiae* 1a75-89, trans. Robert Pasnau (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2002), 8. Arnold Williams makes a similar point,

But any given thing is identified with what carries out the operations of that thing, and so a human being is identified with what carries out the operations of a human being. We have shown, however, that sensing is not the operation of the soul alone. Therefore, since sensing is one of the operations of a human being (even if not one unique to humans), it is clear that a human being is not a soul alone, but something composed of a soul and a body.⁶⁵

Following Aristotle, who argued that the soul is involved in our sense perception,⁶⁶ Milton combines a biological truism that light is necessary for life with a Christian sense of the intrinsic relation between light (as spiritual enlightenment and as God) and life, as expressed in John 8:12. This passage in *Samson Agonistes* can be read as a required expression

though drawing on different text by Aquinas, and briefly discusses a relation between Aquinas, Aristotle, and Milton in these lines. Arnold Williams, "A Note on *Samson Agonistes*, LL. 90–94," *Modern Language Notes* 63/8 (December 1948): 537–38, n. 3.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.75.4 co. (10). In 1.75.1 s.c. Aquinas cites Augustine, who in *De trinitate* VI (vi.8) wrote: "the soul is said to be simple relative to the body 'because it is not spread out in bulk over the space of some area.'" Although this embedded quotation may be a simplification of the idea: "[w]hen we come to a spiritual creature such as the soul, it is certainly found to be simple in comparison with the body; but apart from such a comparison it is multiple, not simple. The reason it is simpler than the body is that it has no mass spread out in space, but in any body it is whole in the whole and whole also in any part of the body. Thus when something happens even in some tiny little part of the body that the soul is aware of, the whole soul is aware of it because it does not escape the whole soul even though it does not happen in the whole body." Augustine, *The Trinity (De trinitate)*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), Book VI, vi.8 (pp. 211–12).

⁶⁶ See Aristotle, *De anima*, specifically on sense perception as being one of the "powers" of the soul: "The soul is the origin of the characteristics we have mentioned, and is defined by them, that is by the faculties of nutrition, sensation, thought and movement" (413b11–12). See also 414a29–33 in *Aristotle: On the Soul; Parva Naturalia; On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 77, 81.

of, or presupposition for, Milton's monism, where the soul is indivisible: "it is whole in the whole body and whole in every part of the body."⁶⁷ When Samson asks why he is unable to see through every pore, it suggests that Milton questions the core of Aquinas's Book I, Question 75, Articles 1 and 4.⁶⁸ This is because it seems that Samson attempts to sew the metaphysical notion of the soul back into the fabric of the body, *despite the imperfections of the material body*. Inasmuch as it is not an explicit declaration of monism, the passage points to a flaw in monistic theory. Samson appears to appeal to the idea that the soul is different from the body when he contrasts the weakness of the body (that is, the sense of sight is exclusive to a weak organ [the eyes]) with the capacities of the soul. This is something Samson finds should be the case according to monistic belief; he seems to ask that if the soul and the body were one whole, then the body should have additional capacities (or at least it should be different than it is).

In Handel's oratorio, the intricacies of Milton's thought are still present. Micah's *accompagnato* closely mirrors Milton's text. Hamilton's alterations to Milton's poem for "Since Light," however, shed a different light on the problem of the body by accentuating the materiality of the body. Micah as a character already introduces innovation before Milton's *Samson Agonistes* because Micah appears neither in Milton's poem nor in the

Samson narrative from Judges 13:3–16:31.⁶⁹ Percy Young's interpretation of Micah's character suggests a midway point between Samson and the chorus, where Micah's "observations are drawn among those of Milton's chorus and he may, therefore, be taken as the choragus."⁷⁰ Milton's Chorus of Danites does not say the words of the *accompagnato*, however, and this adds complexity to any determination of Micah as a character. The lines constitute the continuation of Samson's deliberation on blindness in the Miltonic context, thus enforcing the sense that, in the oratorio, multiple characters consider arguments that are restricted to Samson's deliberation in *Samson Agonistes*.

In the *accompagnato*, Micah takes the content of the lament in Samson's air and directs it toward general commentary on the body. In this move, Micah asks something similar to what we find in the passage from *Samson Agonistes* without a strong philosophical or metaphysical inclination. The question can be simplified as follows: if *feeling* (notice here that this is neither "light" nor "soul") is in every part of the body, then why is not sight, so that *we* (that is, the person and not explicitly the soul) can *see* through every pore of our skin? This statement expresses sympathy for Samson's suffering more than it appeals to Miltonic monism.

In this way, Micah reflects on feeling and the constitution of the senses in the human

⁶⁷ Williams, "A Note on *Samson Agonistes*, LL. 90–94," 537.

⁶⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.75.1: "Is the soul a body?"; 1.75.4: "Is the soul the human being, or is the human being rather something composed of soul and body?"

⁶⁹ Micah's narrative appears after Samson's death, and Micah does not interact with Samson. See Jgs. 17:1–18:31.

⁷⁰ Young, *The Oratorios of Handel*, 125. Young cites Micah's "Return, O Lord [*sic*] of hosts" and "The Holy One of Israel" as evidence for this remark, as examples where the soloist and chorus interact and combine with each other. Young also has a more pragmatic view of the character: "he is a convenience for the introduction of alto solos."

body. At the most basic level, this is a consideration of the material of the body. Micah's *accompagnato* thus lends itself to a more general question: Why was the human body created in the way it was? This is noticeably different from the Miltonic question: Why is it that the soul cannot see through every pore? In the final three lines of "Since Light," Micah seems baffled and unable to understand why the eye is "So obvious, and so easy to be quench'd." Building on Micah's focus on the material of the body, the underlying argument inquires into reasons for the location of the body's weaknesses as though in appeal to a divine explanation.

Reflections on the creation narrative in sacred literature, where reasons seem to be given for the occurrence of particular things, offer a model or tradition for Micah's inquiry: *visible creation*, when reflected upon, can offer spiritual insight and understanding.⁷¹ For example, the psalmist describes the purpose of certain aspects of creation in Psalm 104:10–11: "He sendeth the springs into the valleys, *which* run among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field."⁷² This idea is continued in Psalm 104:14: "He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth."⁷³ And perhaps even more relevant for the Samson narrative is Psalm 104:19–21: "He appointed the moon for seasons: the sun knoweth his going down. Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep *forth*. The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God."⁷⁴ Psalm 104:20 offers

an explanation for darkness in zoological and ecological terms, thus establishing a divine source of reasoning where created things are apparently *for* something.

In what has been described above, the psalmist puts forward observations that exhibit a one-to-one relation between a created thing and its purpose. Micah's spirit of inquiry, however, seems to look for an explanation for the eyes that does not avail itself of something that is easily observed in nature. The idea that "we might look at will through every pore" suggests a secondary meaning in relation to the material of the body.⁷⁵ Augustine's hermeneutic exposition on Psalm 104:11 establishes a foundation for the practice of Micah's investigation:

In our created world we see animals doing this, to be sure; we watch them drinking from streams and from the brooks that run between mountains. Yet God has willed to hide his wisdom under figurative interpretations of such common sights, not in order to conceal it from earnest seekers but to put off the careless and to open the door to those who knock. It has also pleased the Lord our God to exhort you through us to seek diligently. We must look for the latent spiritual meaning in statements made concerning the material, visible creation, and when we find it, rejoice.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ We call attention here that Hamilton changed the Miltonic line "That she might look at will through ev'ry pore?" to "That we might look at will thro' ev'ry Pore?" In Milton's text, "she" refers to the soul; Micah, instead, refers to *we* as individuals. Hamilton's alteration is exemplary of how Micah is not interested in exploring metaphysics (that is, the capacity of the soul and the body), but rather in observing the body.

⁷⁶ See "Exposition 3 of Psalm 103. Third Sermon," in Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*), Part III—Homilies, vol. 19—Expositions of the Psalms 99–120, translation and notes by Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 139–66, at 139.

⁷¹ The term "visible creation" is borrowed from Augustine; see below.

⁷² AV.

⁷³ AV.

⁷⁴ AV.

These “common sights”—for example, the grass and the cattle in Psalm 104:14—present a picture similar to Micah’s question about the eye and it being a fragile organ. Following Augustine’s exposition on the way “the material, visible creation” conceals the wisdom of God, there are two levels of interpretation within Micah’s complaint about the eye as something “obvious” and “easy to be quench’d.” Initially, Micah’s comment comes across as a surface observation and sounds like sympathetic prosaicism related to Samson’s suffering. The first two lines of the *accompagnato*, however, include references to the soul and light and introduce a point of departure in sacred literature. “Since Light,” when viewed as a whole, suggests that Micah’s complaints about the eye’s constitution are not only about the material of the organ itself, but also about how the material body might reveal a “latent spiritual meaning” in accordance with Augustine. By pairing what is observable in the individual with the figurative use of the eye in sacred literature—for example, in Matthew 6:22—Micah prepares the entrance of the chorus’s commentary on the creation narrative.

“O first created Beam!”

As noted above, Hamilton leaves out an explicit reference to the creation narrative in the “Total Eclipse!” air. Nevertheless, in the chorus “O first created Beam!” he returns to the lines in *Samson Agonistes* that served as the basis for “Total Eclipse!” (see Fig. 6). The chorus (Fig. 7) thus creates a unique hermeneutic enclosure around *Samson Agonistes* (ll. 80–97) in virtue of the return to the same Miltonic material and the new interpretation put forward in the chorus. The explicit theological ideas in the new interpretation consequently comprehend

Samson’s particular narrative (and its lament for particular suffering) in light of a universal narrative.

The homorhythmic start and the compositional texture of the chorus suggest an ethos commonly associated with church music.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ See Jens Peter Larsen: “[O]ratorio acknowledges two masters, the church and the theatre; it draws on the traditions of both of them, notably in such matters as the place and function of the performance, the choice of subject and the form of the text, the construction of the music and its actual execution.” Larsen, *Handel’s Messiah: Origins, Composition, Sources*, 16. The ethos described above relates to Larsen’s account of the genesis of Handel’s oratorios: “[O]ratorio’s special position from the point of view of how it was to be performed was an important condition for the development of its own characteristics by other means—the choir—and for the retention of a particular ethos” (p. 20).

The explicit reference to scripture throughout substantiates the chorus's perspective as the voice of a community; in this case, it is the recitation of sacred ideas from scripture that cloaks the chorus in what Jens Peter Larsen determines to be the "quasi-liturgical character" of many of the choruses in *Samson*.⁸⁰ We hear the quotation of Genesis 1:3—"Let there be Light!"—that the altos, tenors, and basses sing in unison. Handel has pared down the musical setting of this line to these selected voices with continuo accompaniment, and this accentuates the significance of the words. Handel then contrasts this expression with an uplifting view of life when the full chorus sings the next line, "and Light was over all," accompanied by the orchestra in C major. It is also notable that Handel chose the sopranos in this first instance to add color to the line "and Light was over all." This orchestration can be metaphorical of the inclusion of all instruments and voices, to accentuate that light was over *all* in the sense of the musical direction *tutti*. The metaphorical lightness of the soprano's register rhetorically represents light.

The words of the first two lines of the chorus return to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (ll. 80–81) and explicitly call attention to the creation narrative that is latent in the "Total Eclipse!" air and Micah's *accompagnato*. The third line of the chorus, "One heav'nly Blaze shone round this earthly Ball," plays on

Milton's "To such a tender ball as th' eye confin'd?" (*Samson Agonistes*, l. 94). Hamilton's libretto jumps forward in Milton's poem to retrieve this idea, and it is important to note that the context of Milton's line is the passage that served as the basis for Micah's *accompagnato* discussed above. Hamilton uses Milton's reference to the eye as a "tender ball," but turns it outward to refer to the world itself in the chorus; it is this world that receives the "heav'nly Blaze" according to the story of Genesis. As mentioned above, Milton's line incorporates the sense of light in the eye from Matthew 6:22: "the light of the body is the eye."⁸¹ This motion transforms the image of the human eye into the universal narrative of the "earthly Ball." And beyond this exchange of the eye of the human body for a celestial body in this "earthly Ball," it is another way of speaking about the human eye in a biological sense—namely, an imperfect, material organ that is "earthly" and not divine.

In Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, however, the chorus does not speak these words; Samson says them when deliberating on his present condition. When Handel has the Chorus of Israelites sing these lines, the chorus can be imagined as the voice of a community. This change of perspective from one voice to many voices offers a new interpretation on the "prime Decree" mentioned in Samson's "Total Eclipse!" air. Furthermore, Milton's scriptural connotations become explicit through Handel's musical association of the words with sacred music. In the third line of the chorus, the point of view seems to be at a distance from the community Samson belongs to: the chorus describes the light that "shone round this earthly Ball," indicating the world as we know it, as though the chorus can see

⁸⁰ See Larsen: "In *Samson*, the chorus is used in typical oratorio fashion. . . . When Handel uses large-scale anthem-choruses as frame choruses, particularly as final choruses, these express in a concentrated form the ethical basis of the oratorio. Such choruses are associated with the action of the plot, yet they are at the same time of a more general, quasi-liturgical character allowing the audience to feel that they are taking part in the work by proxy." Ibid., 80.

⁸¹ AV.

the entire world and the light shining on it from afar. This gives a sense of reflection on the “prime Decree” Samson feels he is denied from God in “Total Eclipse!” because the chorus is able to see the world, the creation narrative, and Samson’s narrative from a critical distance.

The final line of the chorus, “To thy dark Servant Life by Light afford!” departs most from *Samson Agonistes* and presents an interesting interpretation of a theological theme.⁸² On the surface, it is assumed that this line refers to Samson, who is in darkness because he is blind. The meaning (or provenance) of the term “dark Servant” is not entirely clear, though it appears to be an elision of passages from scripture to produce a figure derived from sacred literature. The idea that the servant is “dark,” in the sense of being in darkness and not in light, alludes to Matthew 6:23.⁸³ The idea of a “servant” of God also appeals to many different passages of scripture, including Psalm 119:176.⁸⁴ Hamilton combines this image of a “dark

servant” with something the divine may give to the “servant”—that is, “life by light.” This notion also has additional scriptural associations—namely, that light offers eternal life.⁸⁵

The interpretation of the entire line becomes more complex when we consider its musical setting. Handel ends the chorus in the minor mode, with a brief fugue on the “To thy dark Servant Life by Light afford!” theme derived from a motet by the composer Giovanni Legrenzi.⁸⁶ The fugal section is darker and more severe in tone than the earlier part of the chorus, which is lighter in virtue of a fairly consistent homorhythm until the fugue,⁸⁷ the overarching major tonality, and the use of words related to light in each line—“Beam” in the first line, “Light” repeated twice in the second line, and “Blaze” in the third line. The fugue, especially in the way it emphasizes the figure of the “dark servant,” appears to take an antithetical position before the positive image of “light” expressed in the earlier part of the chorus and embodies the melancholy of Samson’s

⁸² Milton refers to Samson as a “public servant”; the term appears in the poem when the Messenger describes Samson’s death at the Feast of Dagon: “The Feast and Noon grew high, and Sacrifice / had fill’d thir hearts with mirth, high cheer and wine, / When to their sports they turn’d. Immediately / was *Samson* as a publick servant brought, / In their state Livery clad.” Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1614–18, at p. 126 (1725 ed.). Hamilton’s libretto describes Samson as a servant of God; in Milton this is implied, but Samson is considered a “public servant” under the rule of the Philistines.

⁸³ “If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great *is* that darkness!” (AV). And Milton: “Thou art become (O worst imprisonment!) / The Dungeon of thy self; thy Soul / (Which Men enjoying sight oft without cause complain’d) / Imprison’d now indeed, / In real darkness of the body dwells, / Shut up from outward light / T’ incorporate with gloomy night; / For inward light alas / Puts forth no visual beam.” (ll. 155–63, pp. 79–80 [1725 ed.]).

⁸⁴ “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments” (AV).

⁸⁵ Jn 3:14–16 (AV): “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

⁸⁶ As noted by Friedrich Chrysander, *G. F. Händel* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1858–67), vol. 1, 179, the theme is derived from *Intret in conspectus*, a motet by Giovanni Legrenzi (1626–1690). Dean also refers to the opening of the motet; see Dean, *Handel’s Oratorios and Masques*, Appendix E, p. 643. In this section we often discuss concepts that appear in the 1743 (A) wordbook, which can be observed in the autograph and conducting scores; thus when specifically quoting from the music examples, we follow Handel’s orthography.

⁸⁷ The exceptions being mm. 8, 10, 19, 21, 24, and 26, where the rhythms exhibit a variance of an eighth note to a quarter note and are perhaps imperceptible to the average listener.

character in both Handel's and Milton's representations. In this way, the "O first created Beam!" chorus aptly exemplifies the "compound irony in the symbolism of light running through this oratorio about a blind man."⁸⁸

The fugal texture, which weaves together the words of the fourth line of the chorus, challenges a normative reading of the phrase "To thy dark Servant Life by Light afford" without music. First, this is because the word underlay for the subject of the fugue is: "To thy dark Servant, to thy dark Servant Life by Light afford." Second, in the sonorous experience of Handel's setting, emphasis falls on certain words due to their vowel pronunciation that makes them easier for tonal suspensions—for example, the words "afford," "life," and "light." The figure of the "dark servant," however, has the greatest prominence in the fugue because this image is repeated twice in the word underlay for the fugue's subject. The description of the "dark servant" is mysterious even when taken to denote Samson, and inspires inquiry into who, or what, the "dark servant" is. Intuitively, the meaning that is most readily suggested by this setting is that the "dark servant" (a human being [representative of all human beings], who can be a servant in a normative sense) is given life through light.⁸⁹

Due to the fact that there is no comma in the 1743 (A) wordbook, the line "To thy dark Servant Life by Light afford" evinces some amount of ambiguity indicative of a secondary meaning. This meaning becomes particularly salient when Handel places a comma in the

phrase after the word "life."⁹⁰ One example appears in the middle of the fugue, and the line in the bass reads: "to thy dark servant, to thy dark servant life, life by light afford" (see Fig. 8 [autograph score] and Fig. 9 [conducting score]). A second example appears in the fourth measure before the end of the chorus, and the line in the alto reads: "To thy dark servant life, life by . . ." in the autograph score (see Figs. 10 and 11 [autograph score and autograph detail, respectively]).

⁸⁸ Dean, *Handel's Oratorios and Masques*, 333. Dean refers to the final air and chorus "Let the bright Seraphims" and describes how this reflects the content of the line "One heav'nly Blaze shone round this earthly Ball," from the chorus "O first created Beam!"

⁸⁹ See Jn. 3:14–16, quoted above.

⁹⁰ This reading is suggested not only through Handel's use of a comma, but also by the sonority of the line in the fugal texture. From a performance perspective, commas in the score often help singers to identify themes and where to breathe within, or between, musical phrases. The comma discussed here merely points out this meaning in a significant way by calling our attention to the variant in the line's linguistic structure. The secondary meaning comes through the music first in virtue of the fugal texture and the word underlay, and second when we consider the punctuation.

Figure 8: “O first created Beam!” in G. F. Handel: *Samson* (oratorio by Newburgh Hamilton after texts by John Milton) (HWV 57); 1741, 1742. Autograph (R.M.20.f.6: 1741–1742), folio 28r © British Library Board, used with kind permission from the British Library (R.M.20.f.6, Royal Music Collection).

Figure 9: Chorus “O first created Beam!” in G. F. Handel, *Samson* (conducting score); note the corresponding passage in the bass in the third and fourth measures. Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, M A/1048, Vol. I, folio 43r. Used with kind permission from the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg.

Figure 10: “O first created Beam!” in G. F. Handel: *Samson* (oratorio by Newburgh Hamilton after texts by John Milton) (HWV 57); 1741, 1742. Autograph (R.M.20.f.6: 1741–1742), folio 29r © British Library Board, used with kind permission from the British Library (R.M.20.f.6, Royal Music Collection).

Figure 11: “O first created Beam!” in G. F. Handel: *Samson* (oratorio by Newburgh Hamilton after texts by John Milton) (HWV 57); 1741, 1742. Autograph (R.M.20.f.6: 1741–1742), folio 29r, detail © British Library Board, used with kind permission from the British Library (R.M.20.f.6, Royal Music Collection).

When the word “life” is connected with the word “servant” in this musical texture (thus the two words are not separated by an eighth rest, as they are in the subject of the fugue), it suggests that *life* is the servant. As an allusion to Psalm 119, “life” in this context not only refers to human beings; the secondary meaning also points to an all-encompassing sense of life—that is, all living things are the servants of God.⁹¹ In this way, the fugue can have a primary reference to the single individual (namely, Samson) and a secondary reference to a universal determination of all life. The appeal to the life of all things corresponds to the grandiosity of the line the chorus sings earlier, which is reminiscent of the first book of Genesis—“and light was over all.”⁹² The word “all” in this Miltonic phrase, following the quotation from Genesis 1:3, alludes to the creation narrative where living creatures (plants, animals, and human beings) were created (or given life) only after light was made.⁹³ Simply

put, the secondary meaning present in the fugue suggests a conditional statement based on the universal narrative in the oratorio: if all life is created by God, then all life is the servant of God. The theological idea that all life (or all of creation) is “the servant” completes the vision of solemnity, and ultimately melancholy in the case of Samson, who suffers in his position as God’s servant.

This secondary meaning might be regarded as suspect if the argument rested solely on the presence of commas in these examples. Moreover, Handel’s choral fugues often have problematic, or puzzling, word underlay and omissions.⁹⁴ In this particular case of *Samson*, the conducting score in the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg (M/A1048) shows very little punctuation in comparison with the autograph. As scholars

⁹¹ Ps. 119:90–91 (AV): “Thy faithfulness *is* unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth. They continue this day according to thine ordinances: for all *are* thy servants.”

⁹² We recall here that this is a fragment from *Samson Agonistes*, l. 84.

⁹³ Gen. 1:1–31.

⁹⁴ With relation to “And with his stripes we are healed” in the *Messiah* (HWV 56, 1741). John Roberts also describes a moment where Handel only provides a single word cue “and” for 25 measures for the tenors: “in the autograph, Handel soon dispensed with entering the vocal text, supplying nothing after measure 40 except one ‘and’ in the Bass at measure 76. In the rest of the chorus, a copyist added occasional cues, but these often conflict with the underlay in the conducting score.” John H. Roberts, “Handel’s Fugal Borrowing and the *Concerto madrigalesco* of Ercole Bernabei,” *Händel-Jahrbuch* 2018 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2018), 265–97, at 292; see also 293.

have pointed out, Handel is often erratic in word underlay from autograph scores to conducting scores.⁹⁵ Certainly his method does not seem to be systematic, as the word underlay problems that have been exposed in Handel's choral fugues (for example, by John Roberts in the *Messiah*, HWV 56)⁹⁶ are not the same as those found in this particular case. While many of Handel's choral fugues may warrant additional study of their own discrepancies and omissions, the punctuation in the autograph score of *Samson* suggests that Handel's word underlay method does not cause Hamilton's line "To thy dark Servant Life by Light Afford" to turn into a word salad because the words are perceptible and the underlay is linguistically coherent. On the one hand, the punctuation that is present facilitates these two complementary meanings. On the other hand, Handel may have included the comma in both examples above (Figs. 8, 9, 10, and 11) because of the repetition of the word "life." With these opposing arguments in mind, the word repetition in the fugue nevertheless calls attention to these particular commas, and the commas emphasize the word "life" paired with the prominent presence of the thematic figure of the "dark Servant."

It should also be noted that there are only three examples of punctuation for this chorus in the conducting score: the exclamation point in the first line, "O first created Beam!," for the first time this appears in the chorus in the alto and bass; the comma in the bass part of the fugue (Fig. 9), and a final period (or comma) in all vocal parts to mark the end of the chorus. The repeated word "life" shown in Figure 10 does not have a comma in the conducting score, despite the repetition. The

inclusion of the comma in the conducting score in the earlier part of the fugue in the bass arguably calls attention to the joining of the word "life" to the clause "to thy dark servant," where the dark servant is *life* that is granted "life by light."

In conclusion, the argumentative sequence of deliberation in Handel's oratorio from "Total Eclipse!" to "O first created Beam!" progresses in the following way: from the solitary individual whose narrative laments subjective suffering, to a sympathetic middle term that associates Samson's affliction with the weakness of the human body, to, finally, a universal narrative of creation that reflects on the imperfection of life—its darkness—and the servant (one person—who is symbolic of all people [and also all life]) whose life (and potentially eternal life) is granted by divine light.

The interpretation of the "dark Servant," derived from Hamilton's supplementary line "To thy dark Servant Life by Light afford!," appended to the hermeneutic enclosure around *Samson Agonistes*, lines 80–97, strengthens a notion of Providence behind Micah's inquiry into the constitution of the human body. The former focus on the material of the body falls away in the chorus as it presents a distanced version of the "prime decree" and insight into the identity of the servant. This is because, as argued above, the servant is both Samson (the individual) and an abstract idea of life. Providence offers a consideration that the material body and the material of life are united in life, light, and death as the servants of God.⁹⁷ It is thus in

⁹⁵ Ibid., 291.

⁹⁶ See *ibid.*, 291–92.

⁹⁷ Although the psalmist discusses differences—for example, the grass is for cattle (Ps. 104:14) and fir trees are for the stork to make her home (Ps. 104:17)—the diverse living things that are mentioned over the

the chorus that Handel reinforces the ideas of light and the servant by balancing the complex psychological condition of Samson (the individual) with reference to the universal idea of life and light. The universal narrative of creation as expressed in Psalm 104 nevertheless offers a sense of closure to Samson's pathos. And although Samson's narrative is anchored in a particular and universal sense of suffering, illustrated by Handel's use of the minor mode to color the "dark servant" as an idea, ultimately it appeals to sacred literature and an Augustinian search for meaning beyond the material.

A focus on the material of the body and the figure of the "servant" returns in memorable fashion in act 2 of the oratorio, in the air and chorus "Return, O God of Hosts!" (act 2, scene 1):

AIR.

Micah.

Return, O God of Hosts! behold
Thy Servant in Distress,
His mighty Griefs redress,
Nor by the Heathen be they told.

CHORUS.

To Dust his Glory they wou'd tread,
And number him amongst the Dead.⁹⁸

The metaphorical image of treading Samson's glory into dust, and imagining him dead, refers again to the notion that all life "returns

to dust" (Psalm 104:29). Micah refers to Samson as "thy servant" once more, suggesting a hermeneutic connection between the servant of "O first created Beam!" and this servant.

Samson eventually comes to terms with Providence and the role of the absolute in his own life when he decides to show his strength before the Philistines. This ultimately leads to Samson's sacrifice of his material body, which returns to dust in the same fashion that all life returns to dust, foreshadowed in the chorus "To Dust his Glory." In this way Samson's death reflects on his birth, in a move that unites the more explicit role of the absolute in his life (from his birth being foretold by an angel) to the role of the absolute in his death. This is perhaps clearer in Milton at the parallel moment in *Samson Agonistes*, but it is nevertheless included in the oratorio.⁹⁹ In act 3 of the oratorio, Samson makes a parenthetical remark that refers back to his early life, although not explicitly his birth. This occurs in the recitative "Be of good Courage" (act 3, scene 1), when Samson says to Micah: "Let but that Spirit, (which first rush'd on me in the Camp of *Dan*) inspire me at my Need."¹⁰⁰ Explicit reference to Samson's birth appears later in act 3, scene 1, in Micah's air "The Holy One of Isr'el be thy Guide":

AIR for Micah.

The Holy One of Isr'el be thy Guide,
The Angel of thy Birth stand by thy Side:
To Fame immortal go,

course of Psalm 104 all become dust when they die (thus their bodies are all the same in death). See Ps. 104:27–29 (AV): "These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give *them* their meat in due season. *That* thou givest them they gather: thou openest thine hand, they are filled with good. Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust."

⁹⁸ Clausen notes that this air and chorus are based on Psalms 86 and 7. Handel, *Samson*, ed. Clausen, Teilband 1, xlvii. This appears on p. 11 of the 1743 (A) wordbook.

⁹⁹ This is explicit in *Samson Agonistes* when the chorus states: "Send the Angel of thy Birth to stand / Fast by thy side, who from thy Father's field / Rode up in flames after his message told / Of thy conception, and be now a shield / Of fire; that Spirit that first rusht on thee / In the Camp of *Dan* / Be efficacious in thee now at need" (ll. 1431–37, at p. 120 [1725 ed.]).

¹⁰⁰ [Hamilton], *Samson*, p. 22 in 1743 (A) wordbook.

Heav'n bids thee strike the Blow:
The Holy One of Isr'el is thy Guide.

Chorus of Israelites.
To Fame immortal go,
Heav'n bids thee strike the Blow:
The Holy One of Isr'el is thy Guide.¹⁰¹

Thus in the crucial moment in *Samson Agonistes* when Samson decides to go with the Officer to the Temple of Dagon (and the Chorus assists with Samson's deliberation as Samson converses with the Officer [*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1310–1426, at pp. 115–19 of 1725 ed.]), the oratorio emphasizes Micah's interaction with Samson.¹⁰² This reflects the criticism the oratorio has historically received regarding Hamilton's removal of the passages of deliberation, thereby heightening Samson's passiveness. Samson's interaction with Micah, however, indicates one of the ways the oratorio makes the hero more "humane," likeable, and relatable as an individual.

In Milton, the Messenger who reports Samson's death lingers over the details of how it transpired. This highlights the individuality of Samson's character in Milton, and Samson's singular deliberation:

Messenger.
At length for intermission sake they led him
Between the Pillars; he his guide requested
(For so from such as nearer stood we heard)
As over-tir'd to let him lean a while
With both his arms on those two massie Pillars,
That to the arched roof gave main support.
He unsuspecting led him; which when *Samson*
Felt in his arms, with head a while inclin'd,
And eyes fast fixt he stood as one who pray'd,
Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd.
(*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1631–40, at p. 127 [1725 ed.])

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

¹⁰² Through Micah's prominence in act 3, scene 1; Micah participates in one air, three recitatives, and one accompagnato in this scene.

The oratorio does not include this passage of description of Samson's death, which not only suggests the physical appearance of Samson who seemed to be deep in thought, but also gave the impression that he was praying before his final deed. In the oratorio, the event of Samson's parting and his death involves additional characters – Micah and the Chorus—and these characters describe Samson as an example of the absolute acting within the material of the body.¹⁰³ This follows the Miltonic depiction of Samson: "it was not Samson who acted, but God who acted through him."¹⁰⁴ This passage from *Samson Agonistes* further alludes to one of the infamous theological problems found in Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, among other writers, regarding the location of Samson's strength (whether in his hair or elsewhere).¹⁰⁵ Augustine argues that Samson's strength is a question of nature versus grace, since it was granted by grace and not by nature: "And where did the secret of that tremendous strength lie, if not in the fact that *the Spirit of the Lord was accompanying him* (Jgs 13:25)? So that strength belonged to the Spirit of the

¹⁰³ As in the air and chorus "The Holy One of Isr'el be thy Guide" (act 3, scene 1).

¹⁰⁴ Krouse, *Milton's Samson*, 95.

¹⁰⁵ See *ibid.*, 94, notably Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa*: "Now knowledge is more proper to prophecy than is action; wherefore the lowest degree of prophecy is when a man, by an inward instinct, is moved to perform some outward action. Thus it is related of Samson (Jug. XV.14) that *the Spirit of the Lord came strongly upon him, and as the flax is wont to be consumed at the approach of fire, so the bands with which he was bound were broken and loosed.*" Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, ii, Q. 174, Art. 3. This passage is cited from *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas, Second Part of the Second Part, QQ. CLXXI–CLXXXIX*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1922), 53. The embedded passage from Judges 15:14 is integral to the episode when Samson slays the Philistines using the jawbone of an ass (see Judges 15:14–16).

Lord. In Samson we have a vessel, in the Spirit we have what fills it. A vessel can be filled and emptied; and every vessel gets its contents from elsewhere.”¹⁰⁶ Milton alludes to this notion of a vessel in *Samson Agonistes*—“My Vessel trusted to me from above” (l. 199, at p. 81 [1725 ed.])—and although metaphorical, the vessel in question can be understood to be the material body both in Augustine and in Handel’s oratorio.

The difference between Milton’s theological emphasis on the material of Samson’s body and how this is presented in Handel’s *Samson* becomes clearest at the conclusion of the oratorio with Samson’s death (having been foreshadowed in “O first created Beam!”). As mentioned above, Milton’s poem focuses greatly on divine inspiration -- that God acted through Samson’s body, and that Samson was a vessel for God’s will. However, in contrast to the oratorio, the emphasis on the singular Samson distances the individual from the rest of humanity as an extraordinary case. The idea of the material of the servant to encompass all life, which comes through Handel’s chorus “O first created Beam!,” turns the argument of *who* is granted life by light to apply to a greater number of individuals—to a community. Thereby the theological argument applies to all things and not only to a singular life. This is also highlighted in the way that deliberation in the oratorio is not for Samson alone, but is emphasized conversationally in recitatives. Moreover, this is why the “humane” aspect of Samson is so successful in the oratorio, as is apparent in his friendship with Micah, who, in

the case study explored here, softens Samson’s lament in “Since Light” and turns it toward a theological mood and what is then expressed in the chorus. The oratorio form, by offering a theatrical or lighter interpretation of a sacred theme with musical insight, affords more maneuverability around the thorny theological issues regarding the Samson narrative,¹⁰⁷ and thereby invites a broader interpretation of the themes presented in that narrative. The specific musical treatment in the chorus, especially in the fugue on “To thy dark Servant Life by Light afford,” sheds light on the theological argument and interpretation that Hamilton’s words alone are unable to provide. This is because the meaning of the “dark servant” is not stated through propositional means, but is illustrated through the musical and sonorous aspect of the word underlay in the fugue. The argument regarding the material of the servant—that is, the material of visible creation—becomes an important motif for showing the way that Handel is not treating Samson as an extraordinary case or unique vessel, as found in Milton. In the chorus “O first created Beam!,” and in Micah’s sympathy depicted in the *accompagnato* “Since Light” as a direct response to Samson’s “Total Eclipse!” air,

¹⁰⁷ Namely, the theme of suicide and whether it was God who acted through Samson even when it caused Samson’s own death; see Aquinas: “As Augustine says (*De Civ. Dei* i. 21), *not even Samson is to be excused that he crushed himself together with his enemies under the ruins of the house, except the Holy Ghost, Who had wrought many wonders through him, had secretly commanded him to do this*. He assigns the same reason in the case of certain holy women, who at the time of persecution took their own lives, and who are commemorated by the Church.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, ii, Q. 64, Art. 5, ad. 4. This passage is cited from *The “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Part II. (Second Part), Second Number (QQ. XLVII.–LXXIX.), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1929), 205. See also Krouse, *Milton’s Samson*, 96.

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, “Sermon 364—Sermon of Saint Augustine the Bishop on Samson,” in *Sermons 341–400*, vol. III/10, *On Liturgical Seasons*, translation and notes by Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 276–80, at 276.

there is a sense of community and Providence afforded to all things, all of visible creation, and all of life. This is not to say that Handel makes an argument that all life is like Samson, but that there is a provision for all life that is *like* that of Samson,¹⁰⁸ through the overarching grace of Providence, to be granted life by light.

¹⁰⁸ That is, visible creation that has an imperfect material body.