

# The Bible in Opera Trivia Quiz

With endless stories full of love, violence and drama, the Bible has often been a source of inspiration and subject matter for composers and librettists. Take our quiz to see how much you know about these Bible-inspired operas.

*Scroll down for the answer key.*

1. Although Salome was a minor character in the Bible, Oscar Wilde found her character irresistible and greatly expanded on the original tale to craft his dramatic play, the basis for Strauss' opera. In ***Salome***, Jokanaan the prophet is based on which major biblical figure?

- a) St. Joseph
- b) St. John the Baptist
- c) St. John the Dwarf
- d) St. Julian

2. ***Samson and Delilah*** (*Samson et Dalila*) is a grand opera in three acts and four scenes by Camille Saint-Saëns to a French libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire. In this Biblical tale, what is the source of Samson's strength?

- a) His hair
- b) His love
- c) His sword
- d) His purity

3. Like *Salome*, ***Herodiade***, by Jules Massenet, is an opera about the tale of John the Baptist, Salome, Herod, and Herodias. Although it opened years before *Salome*, it is considered to be much less of a success and, in fact, the Paris Opera House refused to stage the work. In Massenet's opera, how does Salome die?

- a) She kills herself
- b) Herodias, her mother, kills her
- c) She dies accidentally
- d) Like in Strauss' opera, Herod orders her death

4. ***Moses in Egypt*** is a three-act opera by Gioachino Rossini that premiered in 1818. The production was a hit, even though the audience howled their derision at the clumsy execution of the parting of the sea. Which sea did Moses part in order for his people to escape Egypt?

- a) Arabian Sea
- b) Baltic Sea
- c) Aegean Sea
- d) Red Sea

5. ***Stiffelio***, by Guiseppi Verdi, elicited instant censorship in 1850 for its “racy” plotline involving a Protestant minister and his adulterous wife. What is the name of the remake of this opera?

- a) *Ronaldo*
- b) *Aroldo*
- c) *Alejandro*
- d) *Stefano*

6. In *Salome*, Jokanaan is a voice of morality in an otherwise morally bankrupt environment. What immoral act does he accuse Herodias of that earns him her wrath?

- a) Murder
- b) Theft
- c) Plagiarism
- d) Incest

7. The premiere performance of ***Samson and Delilah*** was sung in a different language than what it was written in. What language is it normally sung in?

- a) German
- b) Italian
- c) French
- d) Elvish

8. ***Nabucco***, by Giuseppe Verdi, follows the plight of the Jews as they are assaulted, conquered, and subsequently exiled from their homeland by the Babylonian King Nabucco. In which city does the opera open?

- a) Tel Aviv
- b) Hebron
- c) Tiberius
- d) Jerusalem

9. What is the most well known musical number from ***Nabucco***?

- a) The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves
- b) The Chorus of the Babylonians
- c) The Lament of Abigaille
- d) The Chorus of the Holy Rollers

10. The original audience at the premiere of *Salome* by the Metropolitan Opera in New York were scandalized by the graphic content of the production. This included the decapitation of Jokanaan, Salome's kiss of the severed head and an erotic dance that she performs for her uncle. What is the name of that dance?

- a) Dance of the Seven Layers
- b) Dance of the Seven Veils
- c) Dance of the Moon
- d) Dance of Salome's Revenge

## Answer Key

1. b) Jokanaan is based on St. John the Baptist. In the opera, this character represents the rising power of Christianity and the threat it poses to Herod and his kingdom.
2. a) Samson was said to get his strength from his long hair, a fact which Delilah revealed to the Philistines, his enemies, in a bitter betrayal of his trust. Strangely, this revelation happens offstage in the opera version of this tale.
3. a) In *Herodiade*, Salome kills herself in despair when Jean (John the Baptist) is put to death. The reason the Paris Opera House refused the work was because the libretto was weak. "I do like your music," the manager said to Massenet, "but as for the libretto, you badly need an author who knows how to build the skeleton of a play."
4. d) Moses parted the Red Sea to lead his people out of Egypt. Rossini put a spin on the tale by adding a love story to the plot, with the Pharaoh's son madly in love with one of the fleeing Israelites.
5. b) It was not until four years later that Verdi reworked *Stiffelio*, as the four-act opera, *Aroldo*, a more radical alteration, with the action transferred to thirteenth-century England, and with the final scene entirely replaced by a new fourth act.
6. d) Herodias is married to her late husband's brother, and Jokanaan calls the marriage incestuous and sinful. It's for these accusations that she demands he be put to death.
7. c) The premiere performance of ***Samson and Delilah*** was performed in a German translation at the Grossherzogliches Theater on December 2, 1877, but normally it is sung in French.
8. d) *Nabucco* opens with Act 1 set in Jerusalem, the holy city, in 587 BC. The opera was Verdi's third and both he and critics agreed it established him as a composer of note.
9. a) The most well known musical number from *Nabucco* is The Chorus of the Hebrew Slave which is most often given an encore when performed today. Until 2008 it was the only encore the Metropolitan Opera ever allowed, along with encores from *The Daughter of the Regiment*.
10. b) Salome performs the Dance of the Seven Veils, considered to be the most sensual eight minutes of music in opera.

## Opera Buffs Only

Think you know your stuff? Try your hand at these questions on lesser-known Bible-inspired operas.

1. ***Moses and Aaron*** (*Moses und Aron*) is considered to be Arnold Schoenberg's master work, even though he died before finishing the third and final act. In the story, what is Aaron's relationship to Moses?

- a) Old enemy
- b) Oldest friend
- c) Brother
- d) Servant

2. Composed by Karol Szymanowski, ***Hagith*** is based on the story of King David, his new young wife, Hagith, and his son. What is the name of King David's son?

- a) Emmanuel
- b) Solomon
- c) Simon
- d) Gabriel

3. ***Esther*** is an American opera by Hugo Weisgall, which received its premiere by the New York City Opera in October 1993. The opera is about Esther's struggle as she becomes queen, and her heroic act of triumphing over the evil Prime Minister Haman and his plot of exterminating the Jews. Where is the story set?

- a) Greece.
- b) Rome.
- c) Persia.
- d) Babylon.

4. Benjamin Britten's ***Noah's Flood*** (*Noye's Fludde*) premiered in 1958 and was intended by the composer to be performed in a church, not a theatre, and by a cast of mainly amateurs. In Britten's opera, which member of Noye's family initially refuses to board his ark?

- a) His wife, Mrs. Noye
- b) His son Ham
- c) His son Lem
- d) His son Jaffett

5. **David and Jonathan** (*Davide et Jonathas*) is an opera in five acts by Marc-Antoine Chapentier which premiered in 1688. It is based on the friendship between the two title characters. David starts the story as an enemy of the king and friend to the king's son, Jonathan. What is David's status at the end of the opera?

- a) Dead
- b) King of the Israelites
- c) Village idiot
- d) Jonathan's worst enemy

Answers:

1. c) Aaron is Moses' brother. Scholars believe that Schenberg, a deeply superstitious man, named him Aron rather than Aaron so that the title of the opera would have 12 letters rather than 13.
2. b) King David's son is Solomon, who – in Szymanowski's opera – falls in love with his father's young wife.
3. c) Esther is set in Persia, and Queen Esther is newly married to King Xerxes. The young queen must fight to save her people, the Jews, from extermination in the kingdom.
4. a) Mrs. Noye refuses to board the ark and in the end must be carried aboard by her sons. She slaps her husband on the face in her anger.
5. b) By the final act, David is the King of the Israelites, which is little consolation to him as he grieves over the death of Jonathan, who lies mortally wounded in his arms.