

## Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's *St. John Passion*

I have my brothers among the Turks, Papists, Jews, and all peoples. Not that they are Turks, Jews, Papists, and Sectaries or will remain so; in the evening they will be called into the vineyard and given the same wage as we. (Sebastian Franck, 16th century)

Although the bibliographies on Bach and on Judaica have grown enormously since World War II, there has been very little work on relationships between these two areas. It is not difficult to account for this. History, religion, and sociology scholars who focus on issues of antisemitism often lack musical training and are, in any event, quite reasonably interested in even more pressing social and political manifestations. Bach scholars, on the other hand, have largely pursued more narrowly musical topics such as notation, form, style, attribution, and chronology. A small branch has concerned itself with Bach and Lutheran theology, but its practitioners have generally centered on the librettos without paying much attention to the ways that the words are set musically. Strangely, almost no scholarly attention has been given to relationships between Lutheranism and the religion of Judaism as they affect Bach's most problematic work in this respect, the *St. John Passion*. The only studies are in German, and, although each makes far-reaching observations about Luther, none of them adequately engages Bach's music.<sup>1</sup>

Luther's scathingly polemic writings are fairly well known today.<sup>2</sup> Because Bach's indebtedness to Luther has come to be more widely acknowledged, listeners can easily assume that Bach harbored hostility to Jews and, accordingly, that his music probably projects such hostility. Many other listeners, however, believe Bach produced great music which transcends any sort of verbally specifiable meaning. Interpretive Bach research might reasonably be expected to have engaged these difficult issues more fully by now. Through a reappraisal of Bach's work and its contexts, I do not so much aim to provide definitive answers as to present information and

1. Hoffmann-Axthelm, "Bach und die *perfidia Iudaica*"; Steiger, "Wir haben keinen König"; Walter, "Die Bibel, Bach, die Juden."

2. Especially his "On the Jews and their Lies" of 1543. One should not assume that Lutheranism at any given time and place would necessarily replicate Luther's views on a given subject; see, e.g., Wallmann, "Reception of Luther's Writings on the Jews." Luther had written more positive things about Jews in his earlier writings (e.g., in "That Jesus Christ was born a Jew" of 1523). But even though Luther expressed extreme contempt only in his later writings, he never saw Judaism as a legitimate system of beliefs and practices. He had imagined that more Jews would embrace a reformed Christianity than did. See also the discussion here at pp. 23–27.

interpretive commentary that could serve as a basis for more informed and sensitive discussion.

The discussion here will center first on what I gather are the principal messages of Bach's *St. John Passion*: Jesus' identity and work, and the effect of these on the lives of his followers. Further discussion of these principal messages will bring us to the issue of the gospel of John and hostility to Jews. I will suggest that fostering hostility to Jews is not the subject or purpose of Bach's interpretation of the gospel's passion narrative. In so structuring the discussion, I do not mean to suggest that whatever one makes of questions raised in the first half of the essay must necessarily affect what one concludes about those addressed only in the second.

### Issues of Method

What are the messages of Bach's *St. John Passion*? We will consider some background information on how the work came into being, on what the piece seems to be saying, and how it could have been understood by its original listeners. The approach adopted here will not by any means exhaust the work's meanings. I have operated on the assumption that responsible modern interpretation will give serious attention to historical contexts, and that this ought to affect whatever else we might bring to the work. In other words, I am viewing this in terms of classical hermeneutics, familiar from several centuries of biblical interpretation. The task is to figure out not only what Bach's music probably meant to its first audiences, but also how we can attempt to reconcile their historical and our modern concerns. In this view, each must affect the other to interpret with ethical intelligence.

Some people are exclusively interested in the first pole — what original meanings are likely to have been — and thus, it could be argued, are essentially antiquarians. On the other hand, many people swing to the other side of the continuum and perhaps over-emphasize the second pole: present interests. It seems to me that if we focus exclusively or too prominently on our own concerns and conceptions, we end up simply appropriating the past and do not allow ourselves truly to learn anything.

One way this latter problem often surfaces is for listeners to relegate any religious qualities to the past and to attend only to the aesthetic qualities of Bach's notes, rhythms, and tone colors. (I would say that Bach's music speaks powerfully to both aims; his works stand neither solely as religious nor solely as nonverbal aesthetic documents.) It is commonplace today to think of Bach's music as great art which is best listened to "for its own sake," and that this must have been the composer's intention too. But this

modern, cherished notion of art is certainly unhistorical for Bach.<sup>3</sup> In his teachings on keyboard playing, for example, Bach remarked, “[The basso continuo makes] a well-sounding harmony to the honor of God and to the sanctioned enjoyment of the spirit;<sup>4</sup> the aim and final reason, as of all music, so of the basso continuo, should be none else but the honor of God and the refreshing of the mind.”<sup>5</sup> Thinking that art should merely be beautiful or magnificent may help us to feel pleased by Bach's music, but it does not necessarily help much in understanding it. That is to say, there is no longer any point in questioning or discussing Bach's artistic greatness, something both widely accepted and exceedingly difficult to explain. Issues of meaning, however, cannot be dismissed by appealing to aesthetics.

Preferring the idea that the so-called extramusical aspects of the *St. John Passion* ought to be ignored is perhaps like the main character's pleasurable experiences of Italian and Russian in the movie *A Fish Called Wanda*: she is invariably stimulated by their sounds but shows no interest in learning the languages. My intent here, however, is not categorically to condemn listeners who wish to contemplate the *St. John Passion*'s great beauty or magnificence, but rather to ask why it is that such works are said in common parlance to have “pure beauty” (that is to say, verbally specifiable meanings, such as those involving religious or other agendas, are deemed foreign to the point of the work, and all textual or contextual matters are uncritically labelled “extramusical”). How is it, for example, that one can maintain a straight face while protesting the irruption of religion or religiosity into Bach's music when it was designed for religious purposes and, furthermore, when many of its religious sentiments, and whatever religious and social benefits or problems might attend them, have by no means passed into “history”? It is one thing to say that *Bach and religious sentiment* is a story we are not interested in, but another to say that *Bach and pure aesthetic contemplation* is a better and more authentic story.<sup>6</sup>

3. For an excellent general introduction to Bach's views of music, see Taruskin, “Facing Up,” 309–14.

4. Bach's words here are *zulässiger Ergötzung des Gemüths*. In modern German, *ergötzen* has largely taken on the meaning “to amuse,” or “to entertain,” but in eighteenth-century usage it meant “to bring about palpable joy.” See Adelung, *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch*, 1894, who provides several examples for its usage, mostly from the Bible, none of which has to do with entertainment or diversion. The word is used in this more edifying sense each time it appears in Bach's church cantatas.

5. Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, vol. 2, 916. These teachings are based on the writings of Friedrich Erhard Niedt. Some entries in the manuscript of Bach's version have recently been identified as the handwriting of one of Bach's students in Leipzig; see Schulze, *Studien zur Bach-Überlieferung*, 125–27.

6. See, e.g., Schulenberg, “Musical Allegory' Reconsidered,” 238: “As modern listeners attending to old music, we perform a sort of deconstruction of the work's official purpose, rediscovering [*sic*] that another purpose, perhaps even the most important purpose, of the

*Some Performance Considerations*

With the *St. John Passion's* range of hermeneutically plausible meanings being far from straightforward for the majority of today's listeners, it could be considered irresponsible to render the work without an accurate translation and informed program notes or spoken commentary and discussion of some sort. I am referring here primarily to recordings or concert performances at educational or cultural institutions. In these situations, listeners may or may not think about the work's messages or find themselves affected by them. There is no assumption that the performers or the audiences endorse the messages. But in any event, I would say that the messages should not be overlooked, and that performances ought to include critical commentary of some sort. Whether it is fair to assume that students are intellectually and emotionally prepared to perform in concert, as opposed to study only via recordings, challenging works of this sort should also be considered carefully.

A fully liturgical rendering of the work in church raises somewhat different issues. In a service, although some people might attend to listen to the music for its own sake, the expectation is that the congregation does accept all or most of the liturgy's messages. Here, fuller contextual commentary on the passion narrative will almost certainly happen as a matter of course (in the pastor's sermon). Although performances of the *St. John Passion* in concert and on recordings are fairly common, fully liturgical renderings in church services are exceedingly rare. Most churches nowadays, even assuming they could meet the considerable expenses, would not welcome the idea of extending a service to include a two-hour piece of music.

If the *St. John Passion* for some reason has to be performed without providing an educational context, I suggest that any passages easily running the risk of giving serious offence might be carefully excised or altered but acknowledged as such in the program in order to avoid accusations of censorship.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, I can also understand those who, whether or not they consider the original words offensive, might find any so-motivated altering of artworks intellectually and emotionally insulting. The best

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music may not be didactic or devotional but aesthetic: it aims to please, not to instruct or inspire, even if the latter is what Baroque ideology directed. . . . In modern terms, the works [of composers like Bach] are amoral and meaningless: above all, politically incorrect." Does it even make sense to say something can be politically incorrect *and* amoral and meaningless?

7. I agree with Richard Taruskin's recommendations on how to perform antisemitic music responsibly ("Text and Act," 357–58) but disagree with his passing observation that places Bach's *St. John Passion* on the list of artworks possibly embodying an inhumanity designed to reinforce antisemitism ("Text and Act," 358); see also Marty, "Art that Offends."

approach, I believe (from conviction and personal experience), is not to alter the work but to provide critical commentary.

Some listeners may find the sheer sound of the work repugnant: the phonemes of the German language seem menacing, no matter what words they form — the German language carries the sins of the Third Reich for many people still alive. Here there will be few easy solutions (e.g., performing the work in translation introduces a host of new difficulties). Nonetheless, educational commentary and discussion, even if unresolved, is the best way to go.

I do not claim, either, to have any sense of what is the right thing to do for listeners for whom no amount of contextual understanding of Bach's particular interpretation of John will prevent the gospel from being construed against the Jewish people any less forcefully now than ever. Granting that historians, theologians, and musicologists often have a startlingly naive optimism about the ability of scholarship to mediate in conflicts of opinion or belief, I have come to the conclusion that it would be better to engage the issues critically than to say nothing or to make vain pleas for an end to the performance of Bach's music and the proclamation of John's gospel.

In brief: to musical aesthetes — who would reduce Bach's powerful work to the artistry of its notes, rhythms, and tone colors — and also to listeners who find Bach's music deeply meaningful but may not have considered its attendant religious and cultural issues, I hope to show that interpreting the *St. John Passion* might be more problematic than they think. To those who assume the work essentially teaches hostility to Jews, I hope likewise to show that interpreting this work might be more problematic than they think.

### Bach's Duties

It was Bach's job as Cantor at the St. Thomas School of Leipzig to be a musical preacher for the city's main churches. Before taking up his duties in 1723 he was successfully tested on his knowledge of and commitment to Lutheran theology and the Bible by Johann Schmid (professor of theology at the University of Leipzig) and, separately, by Salomon Deyling (professor of theology at the University of Leipzig, superintendent of the Leipzig churches, and pastor at the St. Nicholas Church).<sup>8</sup> In this connection, it is worth noting that a list of titles from Bach's large personal library of Bible commentaries and sermons survives;<sup>9</sup> and his own copy of the Calov Bible

8. Neumann, *Bach-Dokumente II*, 99–101; some of this is translated in David, *Bach Reader*, 92–93.

9. Leaver, *Bachs Theologische Bibliothek*, 36–41.

Commentary, with Bach's many hand-penned entries, is now kept at the Concordia Seminary Library in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>10</sup>

Although it is not known for certain who compiled the poetry for the *St. John Passion*,<sup>11</sup> it was in any event Bach's responsibility to submit copies of his proposed librettos to the superintendent of the Leipzig churches well in advance so that their theological and seasonal appropriateness could be confirmed and so that they could then be printed for distribution to churchgoers.<sup>12</sup> The *St. John Passion* libretto consists of Luther's translation of John's biblical narrative verbatim in the forms of recitatives and choruses, along with other writers' extensive poetic commentaries on it in the forms of chorales and arias. Bach's setting serves to amplify and deepen the verbal messages of the libretto and, at times, to suggest different meanings for the words than they might have if they were simply read. The words and the notes, then, together form a sort of polyphony, and it is this that I would prefer to call the "music." Bach's duties, to which he agreed in writing before assuming his post at Leipzig, were to compose music that "should thus be created so as not to appear *opera*-centered [e.g., reveling in vocal technique simply for its own sake, presenting music more for effect than edification], but, much more, to incite the listeners to devotion."<sup>13</sup>

The *St. John Passion* was not designed as a self-contained concert work but as part of a liturgical church service with other music, prayers, an extended sermon, and so on.<sup>14</sup> Some information about the contemporary Leipzig prayers and hymns is available,<sup>15</sup> but unfortunately the pastoral sermons preached along with them at Bach's churches are not.

For fuller explanation of the music's theological concerns, I will be drawing continually upon the two main Lutheran biblical commentaries in Bach's personal library, the massive volumes of Calov and Olearius.<sup>16</sup> This

10. Facsimiles of the pages with Bach's notations are found in Cox, *Calov Bible*, 108–393.

11. Several versions of Bach's *St. John Passion* survive. The libretto printed and discussed here is the one from the version put on the most often. The other versions are almost never rendered. Convenient guides through the bewilderingly complex information on the various versions can be found in Schulze, *Bach Compendium*, 985–93; and Dürr, *Johannes-Passion*, 13–26.

12. Petzoldt, *Texte zur Leipziger Kirchen-Musik*, 12–19.

13. Neumann, *Bach-Dokumente I*, 177: "die Music . . . auch also beschaffen seyn möge, damit sie nicht opernhafftig herauskommen, sondern die Zuhörer vielmehr zur Andacht aufmuntere." Secular material could be and was co-opted for liturgical use (witness Bach's continual resetting of his own secular cantatas with new liturgical texts); the point is that church music, however similar it might be to secular music, should be spiritually uplifting and not merely entertaining.

14. Leaver, *J. S. Bach*, 8–26.

15. Terry, *Joh. Seb. Bach: Cantata Texts*, 208–9.

16. Calov, *Die heilige Bibel*; Olearius, *Biblische Erklärung*. I claim in citing these writers not proof for my arguments but contextual plausibility. In discussing Bach's study of the

procedure should not be taken, however, to undercut the profundities of John's gospel itself or Bach's music. To readers who might be concerned that the present discussion will be overly theological, I should spell out that I am presenting merely what I gather is the projected theology of the *St. John Passion*. That is to say, I will not be weighing religious truth claims.

### Lutheranism and Theories of Atonement

The gospel of John and Bach's *St. John Passion* give expression to several Christian views of God's reconciliation with humanity. There has been a great deal of discussion in the history of Christian thought over which of these ideas of atonement works best, how the ideas are related to each other, who came up with them, who made which modifications to them, and so on. There is also currently no complete agreement on which views Luther and early Lutheranism most desired to promote. For our purposes, however, it will suffice simply to indicate briefly some features of these three standard ideas and how they appear to correspond to the sentiments expressed in the *St. John Passion*.

One of these views, often referred to as the *Christus Victor* or "classic" theory,<sup>17</sup> involves perhaps the greatest paradox in all theology and history: divine glory defined as deepest abasement; "the Word became flesh" to die on the cross. This paradox was important to Luther's development of the "theology of the cross," the notion that to humans God reveals himself only "hidden" in the lowliness of the crucifixion. In this theory of atonement, victory has been secured by Jesus in the cosmic battle between God and the demonic powers of evil. Followers of Jesus participate in the truth of this victory. As we shall see later (pp. 18–20), the *St. John Passion* gives especially powerful expression to the classic theory in its commentary on John 19:30a, the aria no. 30, "*Es ist vollbracht.*"

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Calov Bible, I do not mean to suggest that there was some sort of causal connection between his highlighting the various Lutheran commentaries and his composing the *St. John Passion* in 1724. For one thing, even if Bach indeed owned this Bible before 1733 (Herz, "J. S. Bach 1733," 255–63), he probably obtained it only after 1725 (Dürr, *Johannes-Passion*, 52); and for another thing, we do not know in many cases when Bach's underlinings and marginalia were entered. There are many apparent connections with Olearius in the *St. John Passion*, and, so far as I can tell, there is no reason to doubt that Bach owned or had access to this commentary before 1724 (see also the annotation for this entry in the list of Works Cited). On the importance of Olearius for the compilation of the *St. John Passion* libretto, see Franklin, "Libretto of Bach's John Passion."

17. See Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 17–96, 117–38. See also Pelikan, *Bach Among the Theologians*, 74–88, 102–15. For a fuller introduction to the standard Christian theories of atonement, see Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought*, 101–24.

Another view, often referred to as the "Latin" or "satisfaction" theory, takes Jesus' crucifixion to be the "perfect sacrifice." This sacrifice is called perfect because it was the voluntary offering of a sinless person. (Because he is divine, the man Jesus was sinless, and because, being sinless, he did not otherwise have to die, his sacrifice was voluntary.) Reparation for the sins of humankind has been made, and God the Father's mercy and wrath do not have to operate unrestrained. Images of sacrifice appear throughout the gospel of John, and some particulars of John's passion narrative differ from the other canonical gospels,<sup>18</sup> probably in part to promote the idea of Jesus as the "Passover lamb."<sup>19</sup> In Lutheranism, John 19:29 ("hyssop"<sup>20</sup>) and 19:36 ("break no bone"<sup>21</sup>) were taken as paschal lamb imagery, harking back to John 1:29 and 1:36. Luther understood something of the Hidden God to be at work here as well: although the crucified Jesus looks like a base criminal, he is in fact the divine (sinless) sacrificial "Lamb of God."<sup>22</sup> The *St. John Passion* employs explicit sacrificial language in its commentary on John 19:30b, the aria with chorale, "*Mein teurer Heiland*," no. 32 ("you, who made propitiation for me . . . Give me only what you have merited").

A third view, often called the "ethical" theory, takes the incarnation itself (God's entering human life in the person of Jesus) to express God's love for humanity. In this theory, Jesus' crucifixion frees humans from slavery to sin and thereby gives them the freedom to love each other. One of the central biblical texts is John 15:12–13, where Jesus is depicted as saying, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends." The *St. John Passion* employs this theory's language in nos. 3, 17, and perhaps 39 but

18. Luther, *Das 18. und 19. Kapitel*, 202–3: "But after Jesus had finished his prayer [John 17], he becomes the priest, and offers the proper offering, namely himself on the wood of the cross: this is the Passion [narrative], which St. John describes somewhat differently from the other gospel writers."

19. Technically, this incorporates the sacrificial lamb of Passover (which breaks the power of death; Exodus 12) and the sacrificial goat of the Day of Atonement (which takes away the sins of the people; Leviticus 16); cf. I Corinthians 5:7 and 15:3. This is not to say that the Exodus and Leviticus passages do fully support the satisfaction theory. See Sloyan, *Crucifixion of Jesus*, 61–62, 99–102.

20. See n. 71 in the Annotated Literal Translation.

21. See n. 81 in the Annotated Literal Translation.

22. Luther, *Das 18. und 19. Kapitel*, 388: "But what this passage [John 19:17], [stating] that Christ was killed outside the city at the Place of Skulls, has hidden [or, "has for a mystery" — *für ein Geheimnis hat*] is shown by the Epistle to the Hebrews at chap. 13 [vs. 11], with these words: 'animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are to be burned outside the camp' [vs. 12: 'Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood']. At p. 406, commenting on John 19:30, Luther combines language of victory and sacrifice (quoted in Calov, *Die heilige Bibel*, V, 947).



most prominently in its commentary on John 19:27a, the chorale stanza, "*Er nahm alles wohl in acht,*" no. 28 ("O humankind, set everything in order, love God and humankind, die afterwards without any woe").