

Bach's *St. John Passion* and the Jews

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Among Martin Luther's best-known writings today is his screed "On the Jews and Their Lies," from 1543. There Luther suggested sanctions for Jews who would not embrace his Christianity: burn their places of worship, destroy their homes, seize their prayer books and Talmudic writings, and finally expel them from areas of Europe. (Lutheran church bodies have officially repudiated Luther's anti-Jewish writings.) Now that Bach's indebtedness to Luther has come to be widely acknowledged, listeners can easily assume that Bach harbored hostility to Jews, and, accordingly, that his music projects such hostility. Throw in his engagement with the Gospel according to John, with its continual harping on "the Jews" as inimical to Jesus, his followers, and truth in general, and one may reasonably wonder whether there is even room for discussion. Indeed, the debate surrounding Bach's *St. John Passion* has grown more heated in recent years: witness the media frenzy surrounding student objections to performances at Swarthmore College in 1995, and the picketing of the concert in which Helmuth Rilling and the Oregon Bach Festival scheduled the work, also in 1995.

Many music lovers maintain that Bach's librettos can simply be ignored, that his vocal music is to be valued for its timeless, purely musical qualities. These qualities do in fact largely account for the repertory's wildly successful migration from the church to the concert hall. Devotees often go on to insist that Bach himself would have agreed with the notion that great music is best heard for its own sake.

Bach's job in Leipzig was to be a "musical preacher" for the city's main Lutheran churches. Before taking up his duties in 1723, he easily passed grueling examinations on theology and the Bible, administered by church authorities and the theological faculty of the University of Leipzig. It is worth noting in this connection that we have an estate list of titles from Bach's large personal library of Bible commentaries and sermons; Bach's own copy of the Calov Bible Commentary, with the composer's many handwritten entries, also survives. So we can be sure that in preparing his musical setting Bach had a thorough knowledge of the Gospel according to John and its Lutheran interpretation. His *St. John Passion* libretto consists of the Luther Bible's literal translation (from Greek into German) of John 18-19 in the form of recitatives and choruses, along with extensive commentary in the form of interspersed arias and hymns.

John contains many references to "the Jews," and no attentive reader can fail to notice that they are overwhelmingly negative. In this Gospel the cosmos is engaged in a battle. On one side are God the Father, good, heaven, light, and Jesus and his followers, while on the other are Satan, evil, the world, darkness and "the Jews" (the usual translation for John's "hoi Ioudaioi"). Many dualisms of this sort are found in other contemporary religious writings, like the Dead Sea Scrolls. The puzzling thing, from a historical point of view, is why John calls Jesus' opponents "the Jews" when he knows that Jesus was a Jew (4:9, 4:20-22), as were his disciples (20:19, where they are seen to observe the Sabbath). Furthermore, John's fundamental statement concerning Jesus as God incarnate (1:1-18) is modeled on the Jewish understanding of wisdom, and his Jesus is pictured as the apocalyptic Passover lamb, securing freedom from the bondage of evil by being "lifted up." This is a characteristic pun in John's Greek, where the concept is employed for both the crucifixion and the exaltation of Jesus. Jesus' "exaltation" on the cross, that is to say, becomes the very means by which he is lifted up to rule in glory with God the Father in heaven, as attested in a Christian reading of Isaiah 52:13 and Psalm 110:1.

In another significant bit of wordplay by John, the Jewish high priest Caiaphas unwittingly prophesies when he provides the historically most plausible reason for “the Jews” to hand Jesus over to the Romans (18:14; 11:50-52): “It would be good that one man be put to death instead of the people.” This is because of the social unrest the one man, Jesus, would cause during the pilgrimage festival of Passover. The Gospel’s word for “instead of” also means “on behalf of,” “for the benefit of.” So John’s Jesus dies for “the people,” who, it is clear, are Jewish.

In spite of John’s notion that Jesus “is the lamb of God who takes away the world’s sin” (1:29), and in spite of the Gospel’s puns and their implications, the sad fact remains, as Samuel Sandmel observed in his book *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, that “in its utility for later Jew-haters, the Fourth Gospel is pre-eminent among the New Testament writings.”

One approach to dealing with the difficulties of John’s text has been scholarly. In this view, the anti-Jewish sentiments are to be understood in light of their historical origins. According to John 9:22, Jews in Jerusalem who acknowledged Jesus as messiah were expelled from the synagogue. Scholars argue that the Gospel’s hostility reflects a late first-century family dispute between rabbinical Jews and Christian Jews. John’s polemic presented a serious problem for Judaism only when it was canonized as sacred Scripture, and its gentile readers, in a subsequently Christianized Roman Empire, came to identify with Jesus as non-Jewish. John’s embattled community of Christian Jews would not have intended to issue a blanket indictment. The Gospel’s inveighing against “the Jews” can be seen as historically contingent and not normative, in the same way that many Christians today do not take as normative New Testament statements on slavery and the silence of women in worship gatherings.

Another suggestion has been to alter Gospel texts radically in new translations intended for use in public worship. This idea has met with little enthusiasm. (As anyone heading a worship committee can tell you, there is no sorrow like unto that of the liturgical reformer.)

Yet another approach, related to but more evocative and useful than the first, is to update the Gospel by leaving the text intact but interpreting it theologically, reading to some degree “against the text.” Whether or not they admit it, most if not all biblical interpreters do just this. (A striking current example is the argument that general biblical principles of love and inclusion should take priority over specific biblical passages apparently condemning homosexual activity.) When this third approach is taken—reading John theologically in light of the much greater emphasis on Christian sin and forgiveness that Luther found in Paul’s writings in the New Testament—Bach’s *St. John Passion* looks considerably less anti-Jewish than the Gospel text itself. I do not mean to suggest, however, that Bach’s musical output is philo-Semitic. (There are clearly anti-Jewish sentiments in his Cantatas nos. 42 and 46.) Rather, Bach seems simply to have thought that dwelling on Jews and Judaism detracted from the proper application of John’s narrative about Jesus’ sacrificial death.

Bach’s view can be inferred from the strong verbal and musical emphasis he places on an essential point of Lutheran theology: that all humans (except Jesus), tainted by original sin, are guilty and in need of redemption, German Lutherans most of all, for they have had the benefit of a restored Gospel in the vernacular and cannot claim ignorance. Bach sets John’s unaltered passion narrative to music that in no way palliates ugly aspects of the story. When “the Jews” shout out to Pilate, “Away, away with him, crucify him!” and when the Jewish leaders exclaim soon after, “We have no king but the emperor,” Bach delivers positively ferocious music.

For many composers, story elements like these occasioned still harsher commentary. Handel's "Brockes-Passion," for example, says concerning this episode (in which Jesus is taken away to be crucified): "Hurry, you besieged souls, leave Achshaph's dens of murder, come—where?—to Golgotha! Hurry toward faith's wings; fly—where?—to the skulls' hilltop; your welfare blossoms there!" (Achshaph was one of the cities the Israelites are depicted in the Bible as having wiped out in their conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan.) Brockes's apparent moral: "old Israel" should leave its murderousness behind and fly to Calvary. The version of this poetry found in Bach's *St. John Passion* provides as a commentary for the same narrative episode: "Hurry, you besieged souls, leave your dens of torment; hurry—where?—to Golgotha! Embrace faith's wings—" The concern here is not with "the Jews" at all but with Bach's fellow Christian listeners, encouraging them to leave inner spiritual turmoil for the peace of the cross.

Who, then, is held accountable for Jesus' crucifixion in Bach's *St. John Passion*? The commentary hymn following on Jesus' being struck by one of the attendants of "the Jews" expresses matters the most forcibly, its "I, I" referring to Bach's Lutheran congregants: "Who has struck you so? ... I, I and my sins, which are as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore; they have caused you the sorrow that strikes you and the grievous host of pain." Bach's *Passion*, in contrast to Handel's, takes the focus away from the perfidy of "the Jews" and onto the sins of Christian believers.

From our vantage point, it is easy to see that Bach's *St. John Passion* by no means comes to terms with all the inter-religious and socially troubling aspects of the Gospel's first-century text. Yet there are significant steps in the right direction. Crucial in this regard is the work's nonexclusivist commentary on John 19:30, the aria "Mein teurer Heiland." With extensive melismas on the word "redemption," the bass soloist asks, concerning Jesus' death, "is redemption of all the world here?" and proclaims the answer, "yes." A heightened awareness of and attentiveness to Bach's setting should give scope for seeing, in the words of the great religious scholar Jacob Neusner, "the 'St. John Passion' as occasion to identify and overcome anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism—a work of aesthetic refinement and deep religious sentiment."

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