

“Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam” BWV 7

**1. Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam
Nach seines Vaters Willen,
Von Sankt Johannis die Taufe nahm,
Sein Werk und Amt zu erfüllen;
Da wollt er stiften uns ein Bad,
Zu waschen uns von Sünden,
Ersäufen auch den bittern Tod
Durch sein selbst¹ Blut und Wunden;
Es galt ein neues Leben.**

**1. Christ our Lord came to the [river] Jordan
In accordance with [God] his father’s will
[And] accepted² baptism from St. John
To fulfill his [Jesus’s] work and ministry;
There [at the Jordan] he wanted to inaugurate³ a [sacramental]
bathing⁴ for us
To wash us from [our] sins,
[And, with baptism’s blood-tinged water,]⁵ also to drown bitter
death
Through his own blood and [his] wounds [from the cross];
It⁶ [the bathing] brought⁷ newness of life [for us].⁸**

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 7 take their texts verbatim from the outer stanzas of the hymn “Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam.” The remaining movements paraphrase the internal stanzas.

¹Here “selbst” is apparently a poetically clipped form of “selbstig,” as a one-syllable synonym for the adjective “eigenes” (“own”). This phrase, “through his own blood,” poetically unclipped, would have been “durch sein selbstiges Blut” or, better, “durch sein eigenes Blut.”

²The verb “nehmen” here is a clipped form of “annehmen” (“to accept,” or “to take on”). John (known as “the Baptist”) was said in the gospels (explicitly in Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3; implicitly in Matthew 3:8) to have preached “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” In this context, John’s baptizing of Jesus was considered theologically somewhat troubling, as Jesus was proclaimed to be without sin (e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, 1 John 3:5). Matthew 3:14-15 addresses this challenge by proclaiming that Jesus was baptized not because he “needed” to be, but only because he accepted it from John, by declaring “es gebührt uns, alle Gerechtigkeit zu erfüllen” (“it befits us [for me to be baptized], to fulfill all righteousness”).

³“Er wollte uns ein Bad stiften” does not mean “he wanted to draw/run a bath for us”; in Bach’s day, that would have been “er wollte uns ein Bad zureichten.”

⁴As proclaimed, with similar language, in Titus 3:4-6, “Da aber erschien die Freundlichkeit und Leutseligkeit Gottes, unsers Heilandes, nicht um der Werke willen der Gerechtigkeit, die wir getan hatten, sondern nach seiner Barmherzigkeit machte er uns selig, durch das Bad der Wiedergeburt und Erneuerung des heiligen Geistes, welchen er ausgegossen hat über uns reichlich durch Jesum Christum, unsern Heiland” (“When, however, [in the gospel] the kindness and love for humankind of God our Savior appeared—not on account of the works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—he made us [to be] blessed [with salvation], through the [ritual] bathing of rebirth [i.e., by baptism] and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out over us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior”). “Leutseligkeit (literally, “blessedness of/toward people”) is Luther’s biblical rendering of the New Testament’s term “philanthropia”; in his commentary on Titus, Luther gave “Menschen-Liebe” (“love of/for humans”) as another rendering.

⁵Luther connected baptismal water with the blood shed by Jesus on the cross. In his commentary on 1 John 5:6, he wrote: “Christus kommt also nicht durch Wasser allein, sondern durch Wasser, welches mit dem Blute verbunden ist, d.i. durch die Taufe, welche mit Blut gefärbt ist” (“So Christ does not come through water alone, but through water which is connected with the blood [of the cross], i.e., through baptism, which is tinged with blood”). In this sense the water of Lutheran baptism was understood to be “blood-tinged” and thus all the more salvific.

⁶That is, the antecedent of “es (“it”) is “[das] Bad” (“the bath/bathing [that becomes the sacrament of baptism]”).

⁷“Gelten” is used here in one of its older-German senses, as a synonym for “einbringen” (“to yield,” or “to bring”).

⁸“Ein neues Leben” is Luther’s rendering of an expression of the apostle Paul’s that is traditionally rendered in English as “newness of life.” Romans 6:4, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, reads “So sind wir ja mit ihm begraben durch die Taufe in den Tod, auf dass, gleich wie Christus ist auferweckt von den Toten durch die Herrlichkeit des Vaters, also sollen auch wir in einem neuen Leben wandeln” (“Thus we [followers] are buried with him [Jesus] through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of [God] the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life”).

2. Merkt und hört, ihr Menschenkinder,
Was Gott selbst die Taufe heisst.
Es muss zwar hier Wasser sein,
Doch schlecht Wasser nicht allein.
Gottes Wort und Gottes Geist
Tauft und reiniget die Sünder.

2. Mark and hear, you children of humankind,
What God himself calls baptism.
There must indeed be water here,
Yet not plain⁹ water alone.
God's word and God's spirit [with and alongside the water]
Baptizes and cleanses sinners.

3. Dies hat Gott klar
Mit Worten und mit Bildern dargetan,
Am Jordan liess der Vater offenbar
Die Stimme bei der Taufe Christi hören;
Er sprach: Dies ist mein lieber Sohn,
An diesem hab ich Wohlgefallen.¹⁰
Er ist vom hohen Himmelsthron
Der Welt zugut
In niedriger Gestalt gekommen,
Und hat das Fleisch und Blut
Der Menschenkinder angenommen;
Den nehmet nun als euren Heiland an
Und höret seine teuren Lehren!

3. God has clearly displayed [proof of] this
With words and with imagery;
At the Jordan, [God] the Father manifestly
Let his voice be heard during the baptism of Christ;
He declared: "This is my beloved Son;
In this [man] I am well pleased."
He has come from heaven's high throne
For the benefit of the world,
In lowly form,
And has accepted [incarnation with] the flesh and blood
Of the children of humankind;
Now [then,] accept him as your savior
And hear his precious teachings.

4. Des Vaters Stimme liess sich hören,
Der Sohn, der uns mit Blut erkaufte,
Ward als ein wahrer Mensch getauft.
Der Geist erschien im Bild der Tauben,
Damit wir ohne Zweifel glauben,
Es habe die Dreifaltigkeit
Uns selbst die Taufe zubereit.

4. [God] the Father's voice [has] let itself be heard;
The [divine] Son, who purchased us with [his] blood [on the cross],¹¹
Was baptized as a true human being.
The [Holy] Spirit appeared [at the Son's baptism]¹² in the imagery of the
dove,
Whereby we might believe, without doubts,
That the Trinity itself
Had prepared [the sacrament of] baptism for us.

5. Als Jesus dort nach seinen Leiden
Und nach dem Auferstehn
Aus dieser Welt zum Vater wollte gehn,
Sprach er zu seinen Jüngern:
Geht hin in alle Welt und lehret alle
Heiden,

5. When Jesus, after his suffering [on the cross]
And after [his] resurrection,
Wanted to go from this world [back] there, to the Father [in heaven],
He declared to his disciples:
"Go forth into all the world and teach all the gentiles,¹³
'Whoever on earth believes [in Jesus] and is baptized,

⁹"Schlecht" is used here in the older German sense of "schlicht" ("plain and simple").

¹⁰Adapted from Matthew 3:17, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Und siehe, eine Stimme vom Himmel herab sprach: Dies ist mein lieber Sohn, an welchem ich Wohlgefallen habe" ("And look, down from heaven a voice declared: 'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased'"). The corresponding lines in the hymn read "Er sprach: Das ist mein lieber Sohn; / An dem ich hab Gefallen" ("He [God] declared: 'That is my beloved son; / In him I am pleased'").

¹¹The language and sense of this line is derived from Revelation 5:9, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day usually reads "du ... hast uns erkaufte mit deinem Blut" ("you [the Lamb of God, Jesus] have purchased [for God] us [Christian sinners] with your blood [on the cross]"); some Luther Bibles of Bach's day do read "du ... hast uns [für] Gott erkaufte mit deinem Blut" ("you have purchased us *for God* with your blood"). Whatever the reading, the image here is Jesus's purchasing of forgiveness/salvation for the sinner both from and for God.

¹²As narrated in Mark 1:10 ("the spirit/Spirit), Matthew 3:16 ("the spirit/Spirit of God"), and Luke 3:22 ("the holy/Holy spirit/Spirit").

¹³The biblical wording, in Matthew 28:19, is "lehret alle Völker" ("teach all the peoples [of the earth]").

Wer glaubet und getauft wird auf Erden,
Der soll gerecht und selig werden.

He shall be justified¹⁴ and blessed [with salvation in heaven]’.”¹⁵

6. Menschen, glaubt doch dieser Gnade,
Dass ihr nicht in Sünden sterbt,
Noch im Höllenpfluß verderbt!
Menschenwerk und -heiligkeit
Gilt vor Gott zu keiner Zeit.
Sünden sind uns angeboren,
Wir sind von Natur verloren;
Glaub und Taufe¹⁶ macht sie rein,
Dass sie nicht verdammlich sein.

6. Humankind, believe yet this grace [of God in which you stand],¹⁷
So that you do not die in [your] sins,¹⁸
Nor rot in hell’s [sulfurous] pool.¹⁹
[Righteous] human action²⁰ and human sanctity
Will at no time be valid before God [in justifying eternal salvation].
Sins are innate to us;
We are, by nature, lost [from salvation];
Faith and baptism makes them [our sins] cleansed,
So that they [the sins] are not subject to [God’s eternal] condemnation.

**7. Das Aug allein das Wasser sieht,
Wie Menschen Wasser giessen,
Der Glaub allein die Kraft versteht
Des Blutes Jesu Christi,**

**7. The eye [without faith] sees [in baptism] the water alone,
As humans pouring water;**

¹⁴This understanding of the word “gerecht” as “justification” (that is, the basis for the granting of eternal salvation) is derived from Luther’s famous and much-disputed rendering of Romans 3:28. The original Greek texts read “Logizometha gar dikaiousthai pistei anthropon choris ergon nomou” (“We therefore reckon a/the person to be righteous/justified [in God’s eyes] by [Christian] faith, without [necessarily having successfully carried out the] works of the law [of Moses]”). Luther’s (final) translation—the one in use in Bach’s day—reads “So halten wir es nun, dass der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werk, allein durch den Glauben” (“Now therefore we hold it [to be true] that the person may [turn out to] be justified [in God’s eyes for eternal salvation] without the work/achievement/agency of the law [of Moses], by [Christian] faith alone”). Modern Luther Bibles and other German Bibles have updated Luther’s renderings of this key passage, either lightly or heavily.

¹⁵A conflation of the sentiments in Mark 16:16, “Wer da gläubet und getauft wird, der wird selig werden” (“Whoever does believe [in Jesus] and is baptized, he [that follower of Christ] will become blessed [with eternal salvation]”); and Romans 10:4, “Wer an den glaubt, der ist gerecht” (“Whoever believes in [Christ], he [that follower of Christ] is justified [for eternal salvation]”).

¹⁶Bach’s own materials give both “Glaub und Taufe” (“faith and baptism”) and “Glaub und Liebe” (“faith and [God’s] love”).

¹⁷The line is loosely based on the language and sentiments of Romans 5:1-2, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Nun wir denn sind gerecht worden durch den Glauben, so haben wir Friede mit Gott, durch unsern HERRN Jesum Christ, durch welchen wir auch einen Zugang haben im Glauben zu dieser Gnade, darinnen wir stehen” (“Now because we are justified [for salvation] through faith, we thus have peace with God, through our LORD Jesus Christ, through whom in faith we also have an access to this grace in which we stand”).

¹⁸Using the language of John 8:24, “so ihr nicht glaubt, dass ichs sei, so werdet ihr sterben in euren Sünden” (“if you do not believe that I am the one [sent from above by God the Father], then you will die in your sins”).

¹⁹The “Höllenspfluß” (“hell’s pool”), or “Schwefelpfluß” (“pool of brimstone”), was associated in Lutheranism with the “hell” that is understood to be the place where unbelievers, having died their “first death” (i.e., the temporal, “earthly death”), await the ignominious resurrection of their bodies and the perfect realization of eternal damnation. This understanding was based on Lutheran interpretation of Luther’s rendering of Revelation 20:14, “Der Tod und die Hölle wurden geworfen in den feurigen Pfluß; das ist der ander Tod” (“Death and hell were thrown into the fiery pool [which burns with brimstone/sulfur, according to Revelation 19:20, 20:10, and 21:8]; this is the ‘second death’ [i.e., the eternal, ‘spiritual death’]”).

²⁰“Menschenwerk,” a word employed in Luther’s rendering of Psalm 17:4, was defined in the leading eighteenth-century dictionary as “das Werk, und in weiterer Bedeutung, das Tun und Lassen der Menschen” (“the work, and in a broader sense, the actions and omissions of persons”).

**Und ist für ihm ein rote Flut
Von Christi Blut gefärbet,
Die allen Schaden heilet gut
Von Adam her geerbet,
Auch von uns selbst begangen.**

**Faith alone²¹ understands the power
Of the blood of Jesus Christ,
And [in baptism,²² there] is before²³ it [faith] a red flood
[Of water] tinged by Christ's blood,
[A flood] that well heals [not only] all the wounds [of the condition of
sin]
Inherited [by all people] from Adam, onward,
[But] also [the actual wounds/sins] perpetrated by us ourselves.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV7> for an annotated translation

²¹“Der Glaub *allein* die Kraft versteht” (“Faith *alone* understands the power”) is a contemporary variant reading from what Luther, the author of the hymn, had written: “Der Glaub *im Geist* die Kraft versteht” (“*In the [Holy] Spirit*, faith understands the power”). The variant reading in the cantata appears to create an unfortunate false parallel between lines 1 and 3. Line 1 says that the eye sees “water alone” (that is, sees only water), but line 3 does not mean that faith understands “power alone” (only power). Rather, the sense here is “Faith alone (only faith) understands the power,” a common Lutheran sentiment.

²²On blood in the water of baptism see fn. 5 above.

²³“Für” here means not “for” but “before” (in the spacial sense of “in front of”), as dictated by the (dative) “ihm” in “für ihm”; “for him/it” would have used the (accusative) “ihn,” in “für/vor ihn.”