

“Meine Seel erhebt den Herren” BWV 10

1. *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren, und mein Geist freuet sich Gottes, meines Heilandes. Denn er hat seine elende Magd angesehen. Siehe, von nun an werden mich selig preisen alle Kindeskind.*¹

2. Herr, der du stark und mächtig bist,
Gott, dessen Name heilig ist,
Wie wunderbar sind deine Werke!
Du siehest mich Elenden an,
Du hast an mir so viel getan,
Dass ich nicht alles zähl und merke.

3. Des Höchsten Güt und Treu
Wird alle Morgen neu
Und währet immer für und für

1. *My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. For he has looked upon his wretched maidservant.² Look, from now on all posterity³ will proclaim me blessed.*

2. Lord, you who are strong and powerful [in battle],⁴
God, whose name is holy,
How wondrous are your works [against the enemy]!⁵
You look upon me, [a] wretch;
You have done so much for⁶ me
That I would not [be able to] tell of and note it all.

3. The goodness and faithfulness of [God] the Most High
Becomes new each morning⁸
And continues at all times, ever and ever,

GENERAL NOTE: This cantata is from Bach's 1724-25 cycle based on hymns, but rather than being based on the usual sort of chorale, it uses the harmonized intonation of Mary's canticle known as the *Magnificat* from Luke 1, in Martin Luther's German translation. With its identical musical setting of each (prose) scriptural line, this setting resembled a strophic hymn. Characteristically for the cantata cycle, Bach retains the original text and melody of the first and last "stanzas" (the latter here a formula of praise known as the "Lesser Doxology," a postbiblical hymn that was traditionally added to psalms and to other biblical poems, such as the Magnificat, when used liturgically, to make their acclamation of the universal God of Israel explicitly Trinitarian); inner verses (except movement 5, quoted literally) are paraphrased into poetry designed to be set as recitatives and arias.

¹Luke 1:46b-47. Some Luther Bibles of Bach's day read as in movement 1 of this cantata; others in verse 48a read variously "Er hat die Elend/Niedrigkeit seiner Magd angesehen" ("He [God] has looked upon the wretchedness/low-estate of his maid").

²The word "Magd" (like the English word "maid") had a wide variety of meanings, including, e.g., "virgin," "young (unmarried) woman," and "female servant"; the underlying word from the original Greek of the New Testament means "female servant."

³The somewhat curious "alle Kindeskind" (i.e., a grammatically singular noun, with plural adjective) is the wording in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day. Later Bibles read "alle Kindeskind" ("all generations [of people]"; literally, "every child's children [i.e., in an unending series]"). Luther evidently employed "Kindeskind" as if it were a mass noun, namely as a synonym for "die Nachkommenschaft" ("posterity").

⁴A quotation of Psalm 24:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Wer ist derselbe König der Ehren? Es ist der HERR stark und mächtig, der HERR mächtig im Streit" ("Who is this same king of honor? It is the LORD strong and powerful, the LORD powerful in battle").

⁵A quotation of Psalm 66:3, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Sprechet zu Gott: Wie wunderbar sind deine Werke! Es wird deinen Feinden fehlen für deiner grossen Macht" ("Declare to God: 'How wonderful are your works! Your enemies will give way in the face of your great power'"). The verb "fehlen," more generally meaning "to fail," is employed here in its specific, older-German sense of "den Gegner im Kampf nicht treffen" ("not hitting the opponent in combat").

⁶"An mir getan," a common expression in the Luther Bibles, means not "done in me" but "done for/to/unto me."

⁸The language of these lines is derived from Lamentations 3:22-23, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "Die Güte des HERRN ists, dass wir nicht gar aus sind; seine Barmherzigkeit hat noch kein Ende, sondern sie ist alle Morgen neu, und deine Treue ist gross." ("It is [through] the benevolence of the LORD that we are not completely done for; his mercifulness, if anything, has no end; but it is new every morning, and great is your [i.e., God's] faithfulness").

Bei denen, die allhier
Auf seine Hilfe schau'n
Und ihm in wahrer Furcht vertraun.
Hingegen übt er auch Gewalt
Mit seinem Arm
An denen, welche weder kalt
Noch warm
Im Glauben und in Liebe⁷ sein;
Die nacket, bloss und blind,
Die voller Stolz und Hoffart sind,
Will seine Hand wie Spreu zerstreun.

For those who here [on earth]
Look to his help/salvation
And trust him in true [godly] fear.
However, he also exercises might
With his arm
Against those who are neither cold
Nor warm
In faith and [hence]⁹ in [their] love [of God and neighbor];¹⁰
Those who [claim to require nothing but] are naked, bare, and
blind,¹¹
[These] who are full of pride and haughtiness,
His hand will scatter like chaff.

4. Gewaltige stösst Gott vom Stuhl
Hinunter in den Schwefelpfuhl;

4. God pushes¹² mighty ones from the throne
Down into [hell's fiery eternal] pool of brimstone;¹³

⁷Bach's composing score reads "in Liebe" ("[those who are neither cold nor warm] in [their] love [of God and neighbor]"), whereas the original performing part, copied by an assistant, reads "im Lieben" ("[those who are neither cold nor warm] in [their] loving [of God and neighbor]"). Modern editions give the latter; there is no significant difference in meaning. Bach's language more closely corresponds with the biblical passage discussed in fn. 9, below.

⁹An implied "hence" is presumably intended here, in light of Galatians 5:6, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Denn in Christo Jesu gilt weder Beschneidung noch Vorhaut etwas, sondern der Glaube, der durch die Liebe tätig ist" ("For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision [i.e., being a Jew] nor foreskin [i.e., being a gentile] counts for anything; rather [what counts for being justified in God's sight is the unmerited gift of] faith that is active through love [of God and neighbor]").

¹⁰It may appear puzzling that the poet should seem to suggest that God would look favorably on people whose faith in God, and whose love for God and neighbor, is "cold," but this is explained by the contemporaneous Lutheran interpretation of the specific biblical sentiments these lines are drawing upon. The biblical idea here, apparently, is that it is even worse to be "lukewarm" (i.e., indifferent, hypocritical) than to be "cold." In Revelation 3:15-16, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, the risen Jesus says of his followers in Laodicea, "Ich weiss deine Werk, dass du weder kalt noch warm bist; ach, dass du kalt oder warm wärest! Weil du aber lau bist und weder kalt noch warm, werde ich dich ausspeien aus meinem Munde" ("I know your works, that you are neither cold nor warm; oh that you [rather] were cold or warm!; but because you are tepid/half-hearted [in doing good works], I may spit you out of my mouth [i.e., become faint with nausea—physicians made use of lukewarm water to induce vomiting]"). Lutheran interpretation was quick and keen to supplement and even supplant this notion of Jesus's despising lukewarm deeds by his despising lukewarm faith. The Lutheran commentary in the Calov Bible, which Bach owned, reads at Revelation 3:16, "[Ach, dass du kalt oder warm wärest] im Glauben—die Ketzer sind kalt, die Rechtgläubigen aber warm—... und [dass du] nicht ein Heuchler wärest" ("[Oh, [rather] that you were cold or warm] in [your] having faith—heretics are cold; proper believers, however, [are] warm—... and [that, as such, you] were not a [spiritual] hypocrite").

¹¹The sense of this line derives from Revelation 3:17 (on 3:16, see fn. 10, above), "Du sprichst: Ich bin reich, und habe gar satt, und [be]darf nichts, und weisst nicht, dass du bist elend und jämmerlich, arm, blind und bloss" ("You [spiritual hypocrites do arrogantly] declare: 'I am rich, and have totally enough, and require nothing,' and [you] do not know that you are wretched and pitiful, poor, blind, and bare").

¹²The separable verb "hinunterstossen" is a synonym for the more common separable verb "herabstossen" ("to push down").

¹³The term "Schwefelpfuhl" ("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 Pfuhl; 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']").

Die Niedern pflegt Gott zu erhöhen,
Dass sie wie Stern am Himmel stehen.
Die Reichen lässt Gott bloss und leer,
Die Hungrigen füllt er mit Gaben,
Dass sie auf seinem Gnadenmeer
Stets Reichtum und die Fülle haben.

God is wont to elevate the lowly
So that they stand [as innumerable] as stars¹⁴ in the sky.
God leaves the rich bare and empty;
The hungry he fills with gifts
So that, [in life's journey] on his sea of grace,¹⁵
They always have riches and plenty.

5. *Er denkt der Barmherzigkeit und hilft seinem
Diener Israel auf.*¹⁶

5. *He is mindful of [his] mercy, and helps his servant Israel
up.*¹⁷

6. Was Gott den Vätern alter Zeiten
Geredet und verheissen hat,
Erfüllt er auch im Werk und in der Tat.
Was Gott dem Abraham,
Als er zu ihm in seine Hütten kam,
Versprochen und geschworen,
Ist, da die Zeit erfüllet war, geschehen.
Sein Same musste sich so sehr
Wie Sand am Meer

6. What God spoke and promised
To the fathers in ancient times
He does also fulfill, in the work [of faith]¹⁸ and in deed.
What God pledged and swore
To Abraham
While he [God] came to him, into his tents,
Has, when the time was fulfilled, come to pass:
His [Abraham's] seed was decreed [by God]¹⁹ to increase²⁰
As greatly [in number] as [the] sand on the [shore of the] sea²¹

¹⁴“Stern” (“star”) here is a poetically clipped use of “Sterne” (“stars”). This line anticipates the subject matter of movement 6, God’s promises to Abraham, the father of God’s people. Its language comes from Genesis 22:17, “ich deinen Samen segnen und mehren will, wie die Sterne am Himmel” (“I will bless your seed/descendants and increase [them] in number as the stars in the sky”), a passage that in Hebrews 11:12 is applied to the followers of Jesus as heirs of God’s promises, not by birth but by faith.

¹⁵The notion of God’s “sea of grace” goes back to early Christian interpretation of Micah 7:19-20 (a passage, incidentally, whose commentary Bach highlighted in his Calov Bible), which speaks of God’s mercy to Jacob, Abraham, and their descendants in casting all of his people’s sins into the depths of the sea; this “sea” was taken to be a foreshadowing of “das rote Gnadenmeer” (“the red sea of grace”) of the sin-purifying blood of Jesus that is “poured” upon his followers.

¹⁶Luke 1:54.

¹⁷The original Greek text of Luke 1:54 simply says that God simply “helps” Israel. In Luther’s rendering, however, Israel has fallen (i.e., in yielding to sin) and can’t get up without God’s help. The standard Latin text of Luke 1:54, set as movement 10 in Bach’s *Magnificat* BWV 243, is partly similar to Luther’s German text: “Suscepit Israel puerum suum, recordatus misericordiae suae” (“He has taken up his child/servant Israel, mindful of his mercy”); the general sense of the Latin verb “suscipio” was “to take or catch up, to take upon one, to support, hold up, sustain.”

¹⁸“The work” here apparently refers specifically to God’s “work of faith” that is spoken of in 2 Thessalonians 1:11, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Beten wir auch allezeit für euch, dass unser Gott euch würdig mache des Berufs, und erfülle alles Wohlgefallen der Güte, und das Werk des Glaubens in der Kraft” (“We [Paul, Silas, and Timothy] also pray at all times for you [followers of Jesus], that our God may make you worthy of the calling [to his salvation], and may fulfill every good favor of benevolence, and the work of faith in power”).

¹⁹See fn. 14, above.

²⁰“Sich ausbreiten” is employed here in its sense as a synonym for “vermehren” (“to increase [in number]”), as opposed to its sense of “to spread itself out [geographically].”

²¹Technically, sand is not “on the sea” but “on the shore.” This line, “wie Sand am Meer,” is a clipped version of the expression “wie den Sand am Ufer des Meers” (“[I, God, will multiply Abraham’s descendants] like the sand on the shore of the sea”) in Genesis 22:17 (see also fn. 14, above). In this movement the librettist draws upon several divine promises to Abraham. The promise in his tent (technically, not “tents” as in line 5 of this movement; the poet’s plural was presumably drawn from Hebrews 11:9), narrated in Genesis 18:1-15, was that his wife Sarah would give birth to a son (who would be named “Isaac”). The promise in the story of the binding of Isaac, narrated in Genesis 22:1-19, was that all nations on earth would be blessed through Abraham’s numerous offspring.

Und Stern am Firmament ausbreiten,
Der Heiland ward geboren,
Das ewge Wort liess sich im Fleische sehen,
Das menschliche Geschlecht von Tod und allem
Bösen
Und von des Satans Sklaverei
Aus lauter Liebe zu erlösen;
Drum bleibts darbei,
Dass Gottes Wort voll Gnad und Wahrheit sei.

7. Lob und Preis sei Gott dem Vater und dem
Sohn und dem Heiligen Geiste, wie es war im
Anfang, itzt und immerdar und von Ewigkeit zu
Ewigkeit. Amen.

And stars²² in the firmament;
The savior was born,
The eternal word revealed itself in [temporal] flesh²³
To redeem the human race from death and all evil
And from Satan's slavery,
Out of pure love;
And so [for followers of Jesus] it remains [ever] close at hand²⁴
That God's word is full of grace and truth.²⁵

7. Acclamation and praise be to God the Father and the
Son and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, [is]
now and always, and [will be] from eternity to eternity.
Amen.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV10> for an annotated translation

²²“Stern” (“star”) here is a poetically clipped use of “Sterne” (“stars”).

²³“Sich sehen lassen” (literally, “lets itself be seen”) is employed here as a synonym for “offenbaren” (“to reveal”). This line draws for its sense on two key New Testament passages: 1 Timothy 3:16, “Kündlich gross ist das gottselige Geheimnis, Gott ist offenbaret im Fleische” (“Manifestly great is the godly mystery, [the divine] God is revealed in the [human] flesh [of Jesus]”); and John 1:14, “Das Wort ward Fleisch und wohnete unter uns, und wir sahen seine Herrlichkeit, ... voller Gnade und Wahrheit” (“The [eternal] Word [of God] became [the] flesh [of the body of Jesus] and dwelled [temporally] among us [humans here on earth], and we saw his glory, ... full of grace and truth”).

²⁴The separable verb “darbeibleiben” is used here in its sense of “in unmittelbarer Nähe bleiben” (“to remain close at hand”). 1 John 2:14 explains that if people have the word of God with them, then Satan is vanquished: “Ihr seid stark, und das Wort Gottes bleibt bei euch, und ihr habt den Bösewicht überwunden” (“You are strong, and the word of God remains with you, and [so] you have overcome the evil one [Satan]”).

²⁵The expression “voll Gnad und Wahrheit” comes from John 1:14 (see fn. 23, above); verses 16-17 immediately go on to say “Von seiner Fülle haben wir alle [an]genommen Gnade um Gnade; denn das Gesetz ist durch Mosen gegeben, die Gnade und Wahrheit ist durch Jesum Christum worden” (“Out of his [Jesus’s] fullness we [believers in him] have all received grace upon grace; for the law is given through Moses, [but] the grace and truth [of the gospel] is come about through Jesus Christ”).