

“Es erhuh sich ein Streit” BWV 19

1. Es erhuh¹ sich ein Streit.
Die rasende Schlange, der höllische Drache
Stürmt wider den Himmel mit wütender Rache.
Aber Michael bezwingt,
Und die Schar, die ihn umringt,
Stürzt des Satans Grausamkeit.²
Es erhuh sich ein Streit.

1. A battle arose.
[Satan] the raging serpent, [Satan] the hellish dragon,³
Storms against heaven with furious vengeance.
But [the angel] Michael⁴ conquers,
And the legion that rallies around him
Overthrows Satan’s barbarity.
A battle arose.

2. Gottlob! der Drache liegt.
Der unerschaffne Michael
Und seiner Engel Heer hat ihn besiegt.
Dort liegt er in der Finsternis
Mit Ketten angebunden,
Und seine Stätte wird nicht mehr
Im Himmelreich gefunden.

2. Praise God! The dragon [Satan] lies [in the abyss].⁵
The uncreated “Michael” [Jesus]⁶
And his army of angels has vanquished him.
He [Satan] lies there in the darkness,
Tied up with chains,⁷
And his place is
Found in the kingdom of heaven no more.

GENERAL NOTE: In Bach’s original performing parts, movements 4–5 are bracketed, suggesting that Bach on at least one occasion performed only movements 1–3 with 6–7 as a discrete cantata.

¹In older German, “erhuben” or “erhaben” was used as the past tense for “erheben”; modern German would use “erhoben.”

²Movements 1–2 are a poetic paraphrase of Revelation 12:7-9, read in place of an epistle on the liturgical occasion for which this cantata was composed. The phrase “Es erhuh sich ein Streit,” however, is a verbatim quotation of the beginning of Revelation 12:7. In the biblical telling, this cosmic battle of good and evil is a recalled vision of the end time, described consistently in the past tense. In this cantata libretto, however, the narration alternates between past tense and the more dramatic “historical present” tense.

³Satan is called both an “[ancient] serpent” (with echoes of Genesis 3:1-7) and a “[great] dragon” in Revelation 12:9 (and 20:2).

⁴This is God’s chief warrior angel, called “Michael the great prince [at the end time]” in Daniel 12:1; he is traditionally identified with “Michael the archangel” of Jude 1:9 and “Michael and his angels” of Revelation 12:7.

⁵As specified (for 1000 years) in Revelation 20:2.

⁶The idea here is that God’s chief military angel Michael’s conquering of Satan is in essence the work of God’s divine son and messiah, Jesus. The divine son of God is said in the Nicene Creed (the central belief-statement of traditional Christianity) to be begotten eternally—i.e., generated “at all times” so to speak, though eternity is understood to be outside of time—of God the father, and “not made [i.e., not created]” temporally; this eternally ever-existing son is equated with the “word” of God that “became flesh” in Jesus of Nazareth according to the gospel of John. The Hebrew “micha-El” means “who-is-like-God,” ordinarily understood as a question (Who is like God?). The one human being “who is [truly, in essence] like God” is Jesus, God’s word and divine son. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lutheranism, Jesus was often called “der unerschaffene Engel” (“the uncreated angel/messenger”), who was sent into the world by God the father as messenger of the gospel, and who was also identified with several appearances in the Hebrew Bible of messengers/angels in other physical forms.

⁷As specified in Revelation 20:1, the dragon Satan is tied up by “einen Engel . . . der hatte eine grosse Kette in seiner Hand” (“an angel . . . who had a great chain in his hand”). In the commentary on this verse in the Calov Study Bible (which Bach owned), this angel is called “der unerschaffene Engel, der Sohn Gottes” (“the uncreated angel/messenger, [Jesus] the son of God”); see also fn. 6, above.

Wir stehen sicher und gewiss,
Und wenn uns gleich sein Brüllen schreckt,
So wird doch unser Leib und Seel
Mit Engeln zugedecket.

We stand secure and confident,⁸
And even if his roaring frightens us,
Our body and soul will nevertheless be
Shrouded by angels.

3. Gott schickt uns Mahanaim zu;⁹
Wir stehen oder gehen,
So können wir in sichrer Ruh
Vor unsern Feinden stehen.
Es lagert sich, so nah als fern,
Um uns der Engel unsers Herrn
Mit Feuer, Ross und Wagen.

3. God sends us “mahanaim” [legions of angels];¹⁰
Whether we stand or go,
We can stand in secure rest
Before our enemies.
The angel of our Lord¹¹
Encamps around us, both near and far,
With fire, horse, and chariot.¹²

4. Was ist der schnöde Mensch, das Erdenkind?
Ein Wurm, ein armer Sünder.
Schaut, wie ihn selbst der Herr so lieb gewinnt,
Dass er ihn nicht zu niedrig schätzt
Und ihm die Himmelskinder,
Der Seraphinen Heer,
Zu seiner Wacht und Gegenwehr,
Zu seinem Schutze setzt.

4. What is contemptible man, earth’s child?
A worm, a wretched sinner.
Behold how the Lord grows so fond of even him¹³
That he [the Lord] does not reckon him too lowly
And sets him heaven’s children,
The army of seraphim,¹⁴
As his guard and defense,
As his protection.

⁸The language of lines 8–9 is derived from 1 Peter 5:8-9, “der Teufel geht umher wie ein brüllender Löwe ... Dem widerstehet fest im Glauben” (“the devil walks about like a roaring lion ... Resist him steadfastly in the faith”).

⁹Some editions of the cantata modernize the text to “Gott schickt uns seine Heere zu” (“God sends us his armies”).

¹⁰This cryptic reference comes from contemporary Lutheran understanding of the idiosyncratic translation of Genesis 32:1-2 in their Luther Bibles, “Jacob aber zog seinen Weg, und es begneten ihm die Engel Gottes. Und da er sie sahe, sprach er: Es sind Gottes Heere, und hiess dieselbe Stätte Mahanaim” (“But Jacob [the father of the nation of Israel] went on his way, and the angels of God encountered him. And when he saw them, he said: ‘[They/Here] are God’s armies,’ and [he] named the selfsame place Mahanaim”). The Hebrew word “mahanaim” is generally understood today to mean “two [army] camps.” The Calov Study Bible (owned by Bach, who curiously quilled a now illegible notation into the commentary on Genesis 32:2) explains that “Mahanaim” means “die Engel Heerscharen” (“the legions of angels”) and goes on to say that Jacob was protected by “zwei Englische Heer” (“two angel-armies”) encamped around him, on the left and the right.

¹¹Here the “angel of the Lord” (from Psalm 34) is being associated and equated with the “uncreated angel/messenger Michael/Jesus” from line 2 in movement 2; see also fn. 6, above. As a miraculous divine figure, then, one angel could have encamped “[all] around us, both near and far.”

¹²This line draws on the language in 2 Kings 6:17, where the mountain is said to be “voll feuriger Rosse und Wagen um Elisa” (“full of fiery horses and chariots around Elisha”) as protection.

¹³The strange use of the formulation “so lieb gewinnt” (“to grow fond of”; or, “to fall in love”) is probably meant as a colloquial paraphrase of John 3:16, “Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt ...” (“For God so loved the world ...”).

¹⁴Seraphim are fiery celestial beings who in traditional Christian interpretation are held to be the highest form of angels. In Isaiah 6:1-7 they hover around the throne of God, singing praise, and they have traditionally been understood to function also as attendants or guards.

5. Bleibt, ihr Engel, bleibt bei mir!
Führet mich auf beiden Seiten,
Dass mein Fuss nicht möge gleiten!
Aber lernt mich auch allhier
Euer grosses Heilig singen
Und dem Höchsten Dank zu singen!¹⁵
Bleibt, ihr Engel, bleibt bei mir!

5. Abide, you angels, abide with me.
Guide me on both sides
So that my foot may not slip.
But teach me to sing also here [on earth]
Your great “Holy”¹⁶
And to sing thanks to the Most High.¹⁷
Abide, you angels, abide with me.

6. Lasst uns das Angesicht
Der frommen Engel lieben
Und sie mit unsern Sünden nicht
Vertreiben oder auch betrüben.
So sein sie, wenn der Herr gebeut,¹⁸
Der Welt Valet zu sagen,
Zu unsrer Seligkeit
Auch unser Himmelswagen.

6. Let us adore the constellation¹⁹
Of stalwart²⁰ angels
And not drive away or even aggrieve them
With our sins.
Then, when the Lord commands [us]
To say “farewell” to the world,
They [the angels] may, for our blessedness/salvation,
Be also our firmament-chariot.²¹

¹⁵Some modern editions balk at the clumsy scheme—which is found in Bach’s own score and original performing part—of rhyming “singen” with “singen,” and they suggest emending the closing line to “Und dem Höchsten Dank darbringen” (“And to bring thanks to the Most High”). A recently discovered 1728 printing of the libretto here reads “Und dem Lamme Dank zu bringen” (“And to bring thanks to the Lamb”); in Revelation 5:6, the “Lamb” is identified as God’s crucified messiah in risen, heavenly form.

¹⁶In a vision of the heavenly court depicted in Isaiah 6:3, seraphim praise God by calling “Heilig, heilig, heilig ist der HERR Zebaoth (“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Sabaoth [‘the Lord of Armies/Hosts’]”). This heavenly threefold calling of “Holy” appears also in Revelation 4:8.

¹⁷“Most High” is a name used frequently in the Hebrew Bible for the Lord God of Israel. In the New Testament, God the father (but not Jesus, the son) is called “Most High.”

¹⁸In older German, “gebeut” is the third-person singular, present-tense form for the verb “gebieten” (“to command”). The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day use this spelling, most famously, in Deuteronomy 26:16.

¹⁹The word “Angesicht” is apparently being used here poetically in one of its figurative senses, as a synonym for “Sternbild” (“constellation”; as, e.g., in John Donne’s poetry: “Up, up, fair bride, and take thy rubies, pearls, and diamonds forth, and make thy self a constellation, of them all”).

²⁰The word “fromm” is apparently being used here in two of its older German senses simultaneously, both as a synonym for “rechtschaffen” (“virtuous”; ready and willing, in the face of opposition, to do one’s duty), and as a synonym for “tüchtig” (“stalwart”; strong and valiant in battle).

²¹The “Himmelswagen” (which is not plural) was a synonym for “Wagen am Himmel” (“chariot in the firmament”), the Luther Bible’s rendering for the first of the various bright-stars constellations mentioned in Job 9:9 (other Bibles render the now uncertain underlying Hebrew word variously as “Arcturus,” “the Bear,” “the Big Dipper,” “Ursa Major,” or “the Wains of Heaven”). In German biblical interpretation, the “Himmelswagen” and “Wagen am Himmel” came to be associated with the “feuriger Wagen” (“fiery chariot”; or, “chariot of fire”) that in 2 Kings 2:11 is said to have conveyed the prophet Elijah, alive, into heaven; see also line 2 of movement 7 in the cantata.

7. Lass dein Engel mit mir fahren
Auf Elias Wagen rot
Und mein Seele wohl bewahren,
Wie Lazrum nach seinem Tod.
Lass sie ruhn in deinem Schoss,
Erfüll sie mit Freud und Trost,
Bis der Leib kommt aus der Erde
Und mit ihr vereinigt werde.²²

7. [God,] let your angel[s]²³ travel with me [to heaven]
On Elijah's red chariot;²⁴
And [God, there]²⁵ well keep my soul,
Like [the soul of] Lazarus after his death.²⁶
Let it [my soul] rest in your bosom,
Fill it with joy and comfort,²⁷
Until the body comes out of the earth
And will have been united with it [the soul].

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV19 for an annotated translation

²²A stanza of “Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele.”

²³On strictly grammatical grounds, the clipped accusative formulation “dein Engel” could be singular (“dein[en] Engel”) or plural (“dein[e] Engel”). Traditional Christian understanding of death, however, taught that angels carry the believer’s soul to heaven, as the angels were said in Luke 16:22 to have done with Lazarus (who is mentioned in line 4 of this hymn); Luke says “der Arme ward getragen von den Engeln” (“the poor man [Lazarus] was carried by the angels [to heaven]”). On the other hand, in the specific context of the language of this cantata, “dein Engel” might instead (or additionally) be understood as singular, such that “dein Engel” would be Jesus, “the uncreated ‘Michael’,” who in heaven will “ward my soul,” as line 3 says, until the body is united with the soul in heaven at the end time; see also fn. 26, below.

²⁴“Red,” here, is a synonym for “fiery.” Regarding Elijah’s “chariot of fire,” see fn. 21, above.

²⁵God’s “angels” will travel with the soul to heaven, but God/Jesus/“the uncreated angel” will ward the soul in heaven; see also fn. 26, below.

²⁶In Lutheran understanding of the “parable of the [unnamed] rich man and [the poor man] Lazarus” in Luke 16:19-31, the souls of believers are conveyed to heaven and comforted there while they wait for the full enjoyment of eternal salvation, namely when in “the resurrection” at the end of time the formerly “sleeping” dead earthly body will become a transformed living spiritual body and will be united with the soul.

²⁷Luke 16:23-25 specifies that “[im] Schoss nun wird er getröstet” (“in the bosom [i.e., in heaven], he [Lazarus] is comforted now [before the resurrection at the end time]).