

“O ewiges Feuer, o Ursprung der Liebe” BWV 34

1. O ewiges Feuer, o Ursprung der Liebe,
Entzünde die Herzen und weihe sie ein.

Lass himmlische Flammen durchdringen und wallen,
Wir wünschen, o Höchster, dein Tempel zu sein,
Ach, lass dir die Seelen im Glauben gefallen.

2. Herr, unsre Herzen halten dir
Dein Wort der Wahrheit für:
Du willst bei Menschen gerne sein,
Drum sei das Herze dein;
Herr, ziehe gnädig ein.
Ein solch erwähltes Heiligtum
Hat selbst den grössten Ruhm.

1. Oh eternal fire [of God's altar],¹ oh source of [the Spirit's]²
love, [Jesus,]³

Enkindle our hearts [with love] and consecrate them [to God].
Let heavenly flames penetrate and stir⁴ [our hearts];
We wish, oh Most High [God], [for our bodies] to be your
temple;⁵
Ah, let our souls, in faith, be pleasing to you.⁶

2. Lord, our hearts speak of⁷
Your word of truth:⁸
You will gladly be with humankind,
So let our heart be yours;
Lord, enter [our hearts] with [your divine] grace.
Such a chosen [dwelling place of] that which is holy⁹
Has indeed the greatest glory.

¹“Ewiges Feuer” (literally, “eternal fire”) does not mean “light everlasting.” And it refers not to the “eternal fire” of hell that is mentioned, e.g., in Matthew 3:12 and 25:41, but to the fire that was to be kept going “eternally” on the altar in God's Tabernacle/Temple—Leviticus 6:13 states, “Ewig soll das Feuer auf dem Altar brennen, und nimmer verlöschen” (“The fire [that came from God above] on the altar [in the Tabernacle/Temple] is to burn eternally, and never go out”). Lutheran biblical interpretation taught that this eternal fire was a foreshadowing of what the Luther Bibles of Bach's day called the Holy Spirit's “feurig” (“fiery/flamy”) descending from heaven upon the central disciples of Jesus at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-13 (which was chanted for the epistle portion on the liturgical occasion of this cantata's original performances). Jesus's “love,” in turn, likewise said to be “fiery” (Song of Songs 8:6 says, “Liebe ... ist feurig, und eine Flamme des HERRN” [“Love ... is fiery, and a flame of the LORD (prophetically, in Christian reading, Jesus)"]), was understood to have reached its height in the crucifixion, a metaphorical “burnt offering,” as famously expressed in the Lutheran hymn “Christ lag in Todes Banden” (whose fifth verse proclaims “Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm, ... / Das ist hoch an des Kreuzes Stamm / In heisser Lieb gebraten” [“Here is (Jesus) the proper Easter lamb ... / Which is, up on the cross's trunk, / Roasted in ardent love”])).

²With regard to the Holy Spirit's descent upon the central disciples of Jesus being “fiery,” see fn. 1, above.

³With regard to Jesus (on the cross) being the source of (God's) love for his followers, see fn. 1, above.

⁴“Wallen” here does not mean “to go on a pilgrimage.”

⁵“Tempel” here does not mean “synagogue.” This line draws on the language of 1 Corinthians 6:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Wisset ihr nicht, dass euer Leib ein Tempel des Heiligen Geistes ist, der in euch ist, welchen ihr habt von Gott” (“Do you [followers of Jesus] not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God”).

⁶The sense of this line is derived from Hebrews 11:6, “ohne Glauben ist unmöglich, Gott zu gefallen” (“without [our accepting the unmerited gift of] faith it is impossible [for us] to please God”).

⁷The expression “dir fürhalten” draws on an older German usage of “fürhalten/vorhalten” as “to make known by speaking aloud.”

⁸The “word of truth,” paraphrased in the next lines of this movement, that the Christian hearts speak of, is John 14:23 (which is from the gospel portion that was chanted on the liturgical occasion of this cantata's original performances): “Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten, und mein Vater wird ihn lieben, und wir werden zu ihm kommen und Wohnung bei ihm machen” (“Whoever loves me [Jesus], he will keep my word, and [God] my father will love him, and we [God the father and I] will come to him and make [our] dwelling place with him [i.e., in his heart]”).

⁹“Heiligtum” often means “sanctuary,” but here it apparently is used in the sense of “a holy/godly matter in general,” the way it is employed, e.g., in Matthew 7:6, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Ihr sollt das Heiligtum nicht den Hunden geben, und eure Perlen sollt ihr nicht für die Säue werfen” (“You are not to give that which is holy to dogs, and your pearls you are not to cast before swine”).

3. Wohl euch, ihr auserwählten Seelen,
Die Gott zur Wohnung ausersehn!
Wer kann ein grösser Heil erwählen?
Wer kann des Segens Menge zählen?
Und dieses ist vom Herrn geschehn.

4. Erwählt sich Gott die heiligen Hütten,
Die er mit Heil bewohnt,
So muss er auch den Segen auf sie schütten,
So wird der Sitz des Heiligtums belohnt!
Der Herr ruft über sein geweihtes Haus
Das Wort des Segens aus:

5. *Friede über Israel.*¹⁵
Dankt den höchsten Wunderhänden,
Dankt, Gott hat an euch gedacht.
Ja, sein Segen wirkt mit Macht,
Friede über Israel,
Friede über euch zu senden,
Friede über Israel.

3. Well for you, you souls chosen [for salvation],
Whom God has appointed as [his] dwelling place.¹⁰
Who can choose a greater salvation?
Who can count the abundance of blessing?
And this was the Lord's doing.¹¹

4. If God chooses for himself the holy tabernacles [you
Christians]¹²
That he imbues¹³ with [eternal] salvation,
Then he must also pour [temporal] blessing upon them;
Thus the domicile of that which is holy [you band of Christians]
is rewarded!¹⁴
The Lord proclaims upon his consecrated house
The word of blessing:

5. *Peace upon* [spiritual] *Israel* [Christianity].¹⁶
Give thanks to the highest wonder[-working] hands;
Give thanks [that] God has been mindful of you.
Yes, his blessing acts with might
—*Peace upon Israel*—
To send peace upon you,
Peace upon Israel.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV34> for an annotated translation

¹⁰See the quotation of John 14:23 in fn. 8, above.

¹¹A quotation of Psalm 118:23, “Das ist vom HERRN geschehen” (“That was the LORD’s doing”).

¹²The poet employs “tabernacles” (German, “Hütten”) in place of “temples” (“Tempel”) to accommodate the rhyme with “schütten” (“to pour”). Here “tabernacles” is used figuratively to refer to the Christian believer as God’s chosen place of dwelling.

¹³“Bewohnen mit” is used here in one of its older senses, as a synonym for “erfüllen mit” in its sense of “to imbue with.”

¹⁴“Der Sitz des Heiligtums” does not mean “the site of the sacrament,” and here it probably does not mean “the seat of the sanctuary”; with regard to the use of “Heiligtum” in its sense of “that which is holy” elsewhere in this cantata, see fn. 9, above.

¹⁵Psalm 128:6.

¹⁶Some modern commentators have taken the word “Israel” here essentially to mean “Judaism” and thus conclude that this chorus is an expression of Bach’s and his intended audiences’ ecumenical tolerance for Christianity’s sibling religion. Bach and his Lutheran contemporaries, however, took Judaism to be “Old Israel” or “carnal Israel,” condemned by God for not accepting Jesus as messiah, and they took Christianity to be “New Israel” or “spiritual Israel,” delighted in as “the true Israel”; to Christians in Bach’s day, the idea that Israel might ever again become a political state was radically unthinkable.