

"Wer sich selbst erhöhet" BWV 47

1. *Wer sich selbst erhöhet, der soll erniedriget werden, und wer sich selbst erniedriget, der soll erhöht werden.*¹

Whoever elevates himself will be abased, and whoever abases himself will be elevated.

2. Wer ein wahrer Christ will heissen,
Muss der Demut sich befeissen;
Demut stammt aus Jesu Reich.
Hoffart ist dem Teufel gleich;
Gott pflegt alle die zu hassen,
So den Stolz nicht fahrenlassen.

Whoever wishes to be called a true Christian
Must strive for humility;
Humility comes from Jesus' kingdom.²
Haughtiness is exactly like the devil;
God is wont to hate all those
Who do not abandon pride.

3. Der Mensch ist Kot, Staub,³ Asch und Erde;
Ist's möglich, dass vom Übermut,
Als einer Teufelsbrut,
Er noch bezaubert werde?
Ach Jesus, Gottes Sohn,
Der Schöpfer aller Dinge,
Ward unsretwegen niedrig und geringe,
Er duldte Schmach und Hohn;
Und du, du armer Wurm, suchst dich zu brüsten?
Gehört sich das vor einen Christen?
Geh, schäme dich, du stolze Kreatur,
Tu Buss und folge Christi Spur;

Humankind is dung,⁴ dust, ash, and earth;
Is it possible that by presumption,
It may yet be bewitched
As by a brood of devils?⁵
Ah, Jesus, God's son,
The creator of all things,⁶
Became base and small for our sake;
He endured dishonor and mockery;
And you, you paltry worm, seek to puff yourself up?
Is that proper for a Christian?
Go, for shame, you proud creature,
Do penitence⁷ and follow Christ's tracks;

¹Luke 14:11.

²"Kingdom" rather than "realm" or "empire." The New Testament Greek "Basileia" for the site of God/Heaven/Christ's rule is typically rendered in English as "the Kingdom of God," "the Kingdom of Heaven," and "the Kingdom of Christ" and in German as "das Reich Gottes," "Das Himmelreich," and "das Reich Christi." In German, the divine ruler of the basileia, however, is called not "Kaiser" ("emperor," corresponding to "Reich"), as might be expected, but rather "König" ("king"). Jesus' kingdom is said in Luther's rendering of Luke 22:26 to be marked by the kind of humility where "der grösste soll sein wie der jüngste, und der Fürnehmste wie ein Diener" ("the greatest one shall be like the youngest one, and the foremost one like a servant").

³A printed version of the cantata text, published before Bach composed BWV 47, here reads "Stank" ("stench"), not "Staub" ("dust"). Bach's own score likewise reads "Stank." The original performing part, copied by one of Bach's assistants, read "Stank" at first but was corrected by someone else to "Staub." A secondary score copied in the 1740s reads only "Staub." The strong emphasis on the fifth word in this line's musical setting could argue in favor of "Stank," but "Staub" does seem to be an intentional revision, even if not fully clear by whom.

⁴The word "Kot" can mean "clay" or "mud" or "dung," depending on context.

⁵The concept of bewitching by "devils" (plural) here is a reference to the "seduction" in 1 Timothy 4:1, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, "In den letzten Zeiten werden etliche von dem Glauben abtreten, und anhangen den verführischen Geistern und Lehren der Teufel" ("In the End Times, some will backslide from the faith, and cleave to the seducing spirits and teachings of devils").

⁶The image of Jesus as the creator refers to John 1:1-3, which reads in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day "Am Anfang war das Wort, ... Alle Dinge sind durch dasselbige gemacht" ("In the beginning was the Word, ... Through this same ['Word,' which 'became flesh' in Jesus], all things were made"). The phrase "In the beginning" of John 1:1 echoes Genesis 1:1.

⁷"Tu Buss" refers to more than making private confession to a priest. Penitence was a central subject of Luther's "95 Theses," Number 1 of which read "Da unser Herr und Meister Jesus Christus spricht 'Tut Busse' ... hat er gewollt, dass das ganze Leben der

Wirf dich vor Gott im Geiste gläubig nieder!
Zu seiner Zeit erhöht er dich auch wieder.

Cast yourself down in spirit, believing, before God.
In his time he will also elevate you again.

4. Jesu, beuge doch mein Herze
Unter deine starke Hand,
Dass ich nicht mein Heil verscherze
Wie der erste Höllenbrand.
Lass mich deine Demut suchen
Und den Hochmut ganz verfluchen;
Gib mir einen niedern Sinn,
Dass ich dir gefällig bin!

Jesus, do bend⁸ my heart
Under your strong hand,
So that I do not trifle⁹ with my salvation
Like the chief one who burns in hell [Satan].¹⁰
Let me seek your humility
And entirely curse arrogance;
Give me a lowly disposition,
So that I am pleasing to you.

**5. Der zeitlichen Ehrn will ich gern entbehren,
Du wollst mir nur das Ewge gewähren,
Das du erworben hast
Durch deinen herben, bitteren Tod.
Das bitt ich dich, mein Herr und Gott.¹¹**

**I will gladly dispense with temporal honors,
If only you would guarantee me that which is eternal,
That which you have purchased¹²
Through your harsh, bitter death.
I beg that of you, my Lord and God.**

Johann Friedrich Helbig

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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Gläubigen Busse sein soll” (“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says ‘Do penitence ... [Matthew 4:17], he had wanted that the entire life of believers shall be [one of] penitence”).

⁸“Bending” the heart means to knock down pride. Job 9:13, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, read “Er ist Gott, ... unter ihn müssen sich beugen die stolzen Herrn” (“He is God, ... under him proud lords must bend”).

⁹This is related to what is said of ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 32:15, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Er [ward] geil. ... Er hat den Fels seines Heils gering geachtet” (“He [Jacob/God’s people Israel became] lascivious. ... He has little esteemed the rock of his salvation”); at “He [Jacob/Israel],” other Bibles give “Jeshurun,” a poetic title for the people of Israel. Christian interpreters have often read Deuteronomy 32:15 as a prophecy of Old Israel’s trifling with its salvation in not accepting Jesus as God’s Messiah.

¹⁰The traditional notion that the evil one (Satan, the Devil) was an angel put out of heaven and cast into the fires of hell may lie behind the text of Luke 10:18, where Jesus says he saw Satan fall from heaven. Several consecutive stanzas of the hymn “Ihr lieben Christen, freut euch nun” speak of the various evils of Satan, and one stanza ends with the couplet, “Was uns beschert dein milde Hand, / Das nehm uns gern der Höllenbrand” (“What your generous hand bestows to us, / The [chief] one who burns in hell will gladly take from us”).

¹¹A stanza of “Warum betrübst du dich, mein Herz?”

¹²The idea behind this hymn stanza is that the “Lord and God” paid with his blood for the eternal life of the believer. Some language is borrowed from Acts 20:28, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day read “So habt nun acht ... zu weiden die Gemeinde Gottes, welche er durch sein eigen Blut erworben hat” (“So now pay attention ... to feeding the community/congregation of [believers in] God, which he [Jesus] has purchased through his own blood [in dying on the cross]”).