

“Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen” BWV 56

1. Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen,  
Er kömmt von Gottes lieber Hand.  
Der führet mich nach meinen Plagen  
Zu Gott in das gelobte Land.  
Da leg ich den Kummer auf einmal ins Grab,  
Da wischt mir die Tränen mein Heiland selbst ab.

1. I will gladly bear the cross-staff;<sup>1</sup>  
It comes from God's dear hand.  
[The cross-staff] leads me after my plagues<sup>2</sup> [on earth]  
Into the Promised Land, to God [in heaven].  
Then, at once, I will lay my sorrow into the grave [of Christ];<sup>3</sup>  
Then my savior himself will wipe away my tears.

2. Mein Wandel auf der Welt  
Ist einer Schiffahrt gleich:  
Betrübnis, Kreuz und Not  
Sind Wellen, welche mich bedecken  
Und auf den Tod  
Mich täglich schrecken;  
Mein Anker aber, der mich hält,  
Ist die Barmherzigkeit,  
Womit mein Gott mich oft erfreut.  
Der rufet so zu mir:  
Ich bin bei dir,  
Ich will dich nicht verlassen noch versäumen!  
Und wenn das Wüten volle Schäumen  
Sein Ende hat,  
So tret ich aus dem Schiff in meine Stadt,  
Die ist das Himmelreich,  
Wohin ich mit den Frommen  
Aus vielen<sup>4</sup> Trübsal werde kommen.

2. My course of life in the world  
Is like a ship voyage:  
Distress, cross-bearing,<sup>5</sup> and hardship  
Are waves that cover me  
And daily scare me  
To death;  
But my anchor that holds me  
Is the mercy  
Whereby my God often gladdens me.  
He calls to me in this way:  
I am with you;  
I will not abandon nor fail you!  
And when the rageful foaming [of the waves]  
Has its finish,  
Then I will step out of the ship into my city,  
Which is the kingdom of heaven,  
Where I, with the devout,

<sup>1</sup>The “cross-staff” was an instrument used for taking the altitude of the sun or a star. The cantata’s “gladly bear the cross-staff,” however, suggests that what will navigate believers to God in heaven is a metaphorical astrolabe, the cross of Jesus; see also fn. 5, below. In the original Bach manuscripts of Cantata 56, the “cross-staff” is written as either “Xstab” or “Creutzstab.” The “X” is an abbreviation for “cross,” but it can also be an abbreviation for “Christ” (because the Greek letter “chi” [“X”] is the first letter in the New Testament’s Greek word “Christos”), and the “X” is often employed in this latter way in Bach’s manuscripts. Thus Bach’s “Xstab” could additionally be read (but not sung) as the “Christi-Stab” (“staff of Christ”), understood to be in contrast with the “Mosi-Stab” (“the staff of Moses”); see also fn. 2, below.

<sup>2</sup>“My plagues” are a metaphor, referring to the Ten Plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7–12). The Israelites were brought out of slavery by Moses, leading them with a miracles-performing “Stab” (“staff/rod”), into Canaan, the Promised Land. The Egyptian/Israelite plagues were held to prefigure Christian suffering; Israelite freedom from slavery was held to prefigure Christian freedom from the bondage of sin, the staff of Moses to prefigure the cross of Jesus, and the Promised Land to prefigure heaven. The song “Gib uns zufrieden und sei stille” (a setting of which appears as BWV 460), like Cantata 56, speaks of metaphorical “plagues [of Moses]” for Christians and of the “staff [of Christ].” A stanza of that song includes the lines “Des Kreuzes Stab / Schlägt unsre Lenden / Bis in das Grab, / Da wird sichs enden” (“The staff of the cross [of Christ] strikes our loins up until the grave, where it will end”).

<sup>3</sup>In the conventional Lutheran discourse of Bach’s day, it was said that through faith a believer’s sin and sorrow is wiped away and cast into the grave of Christ.

<sup>4</sup>The word “Trübsal” in modern German is feminine, but in older German it could be feminine, masculine, or neuter. Modern editions of the cantata sometimes give “vielen” (singular, with masculine/neuter dative ending) or “vieler” (singular, feminine dative), but Bach’s original materials read “vielen” (plural, dative).

<sup>5</sup>“Kreuz” here means the suffering of metaphorically bearing/enduring the cross, as Jesus did literally. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Jesus says in Luke 14:27, “Wer nicht sein Kreuz trägt und mir nachfolget, der kann nicht mein Jünger sein” (“Whoever

Will [have] come out of many tribulations.<sup>6</sup>

3. Endlich, endlich wird mein Joch  
Wieder von mir weichen müssen.  
Da krieg ich in dem Herren Kraft,  
Da hab ich Adlers Eigenschaft,  
Da fahr ich auf von dieser Erden  
Und laufe sonder matt zu werden.  
O gescheh es heute noch!

3. Finally, finally my yoke  
Will once again have to give way from me.<sup>7</sup>  
Then I will obtain strength in the Lord,  
Then I will have the eagle's nature,  
Then I will ascend from this earth  
And run without becoming faint.<sup>8</sup>  
Oh may it happen this very day!

4. Ich stehe fertig und bereit,  
Das Erbe meiner Seligkeit  
Mit Sehnen und Verlangen  
Von Jesus Händen zu empfangen.  
Wie wohl wird mir geschehn,  
Wenn ich den Port der Ruhe werde sehn:  
Da leg ich den Kummer auf einmal ins Grab,  
Da wischt mir die Tränen mein Heiland selbst ab.

4. I stand ready and prepared  
To receive the inheritance of my blessedness/salvation,<sup>9</sup>  
With yearning and longing,  
From Jesus' hands.  
How well it will befall me  
When I will see the harbor of rest:  
Then, at once, I will lay my sorrow into the grave [of Christ];<sup>10</sup>  
Then my savior himself will wipe away my tears.

does not bear his cross and follow me, he cannot be my disciple"). This cross-bearing—like the “bearing” of the cross-staff that is spoken of at line 1 in movement 1—is believed to lead one into a blessed afterlife.

<sup>6</sup>This line of poetry is derived from Revelation 7:14, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's days reads “Diese sinds, die kommen sind aus grossem Trübsal” (“These [martyrs and the other believers in Jesus] are the ones who are come out of great tribulation [to be before the throne of God]”). The librettist presumably employed “*many* tribulations” instead of “*great* tribulation” on account of another famous passage, Acts 14:22, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Und [Paulus] ermahneten sie, ... dass wir durch viel Trübsal müssen in das Reich Gottes gehen” (“and [the Apostle Paul] exhorted them [the new followers of Jesus] ... that we must through much tribulation go into the kingdom of God”).

<sup>7</sup>“Give way” in the sense that the law of Moses is said to be superceded by the gospel of Jesus. This understanding stems from the highly idiosyncratic rendering of Isaiah 10:26-27 in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day: “Alsdenn wird der HERR Zebaoth ... seinen Stab, den er am Meer brauchte, aufheben wie in Egypten; zu der Zeit wird seine Last von deiner Schulter weichen müssen, und sein Joch von deinem Halse, denn das Joch wird verfaulen für der Fette” (“Thereupon the Lord Sabaoth will ... lift up, as in Egypt, his staff which he used at the [Red] Sea [in Exodus 14]; at that time his burden will have to give way from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, for the yoke will rot in the face of the [oil from the] fat”). Regarding this “fat,” the gloss in Bach's Calov Bible reads “Ebr. von wegen des Oeles damit Christus gesalbet ist” (“[a] Hebrew [expression: i.e., the yoke will rot] because of the oil with which Christ is anointed”); that is to say, the burden of old Israel's Law of Moses will have to give way to the liberation of the gospel of Jesus, God's messiah. The Lutheran understanding Calov reports would, in turn, be reinforced by Acts 15:10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Was versucht ihr denn nun GOTT mit auflegen des Jochs auf der Jünger Hälse, welches weder unsere Väter noch wir haben mügen tragen?” (“Now why then do you [apostles] tempt God with laying of the yoke [of the Law of Moses] upon the neck of the [gentile] disciples [of Jesus], which neither our fathers [old Israel] nor we have been able to bear?”); note that “mügen” is employed as a synonym for the more elevated word “vermögen” (“to be able to”).

<sup>8</sup>Lines 3–6 of this movement are heavily indebted to the rendering of Isaiah 40:31 in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day: “Die auf den HERRN harren, kriegen neue Kraft, dass sie auffahren mit Flügeln wie Adeler, dass sie laufen und nicht matt werden, dass sie wandeln und nicht müde werden” (“Those who await the Lord get new strength, that they ascend with wings like eagles, that they run and do not become faint, that they walk and do not become tired”).

<sup>9</sup>In Lutheranism, “Seligkeit” was a standard term specifically for the blessedness of eternal salvation.

<sup>10</sup>See fn. 3, above.

5. Komm, o Tod, du Schlafes Bruder,  
Komm und führe mich nur fort;  
Löse meines Schiffleins Ruder,  
Bringe mich an sichern Port!  
Es mag, wer da will, dich scheuen,  
Du kannst mich vielmehr erfreuen;  
Denn durch dich komm ich herein  
Zu dem schönsten Jesulein.<sup>11</sup>

5. Come, oh death, you brother of sleep;  
Come and but lead me forth [to heaven];  
Free the rudder of my little ship;  
Bring me to safe harbor.  
Whosoever wishes may shy away from you [death];  
You can, rather, gladden me,  
For through you I enter [into paradise]  
To the most beautiful<sup>12</sup> darling Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV56> for an annotated translation

<sup>11</sup>A stanza of “Du, o schönes Weltgebäude.”

<sup>12</sup>An allusion to the royal bridegroom of Psalm 45:2, rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day as “der Schönste unter den Menschen Kindern” (“the Most-Beautiful among the children of men”), whom Lutheranism held to be Jesus himself. Luther commented, further, that the Psalm speaks not of Christ’s natural beauty but his spiritual beauty.

<sup>13</sup>The “-lein” in “Jesulein” is a diminutive of size or affection, or both. While it might make sense to render “Jesulein” as “little Jesus” in the case of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio libretto, it clearly does not work here. In the hymnbooks of Bach’s day, all the other stanzas of “Du, o schönes Weltgebäude” ended with either “Allerschönstes Jesulein” (“most-beautiful-of-all, darling Jesus”) or “Allerliebstes Jesulein” (“most-dear/beloved-of-all, darling Jesus”), thus accommodating rhymes with “allein,” “sein,” and “schein.” Apparently embarrassed by the hymn’s language for the heavenly Jesus, later hymn books changed the last line of the stanza employed in our cantata to “zu dem lieben Heiland mein” (“to the dear savior of mine”), and changed the ending of the other stanzas to “lieber Herr und Heiland mein” (“dear Lord and savior of mine”).