

“Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen” BWV 65

1. *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen, Gold und Weihrauch bringen und des Herren Lob verkündigen.*¹

2. **Die Kön'ge aus Saba kamen dar, Gold, Weihrauch, Myrrhen⁵ brachten sie dar, Alleluja!**⁶

1. *They will all come from Sheba,² bring gold and frankincense,³ and herald⁴ the Lord's praise.*

2. **The kings came from Sheba⁷ there [to Bethlehem];⁸ [Gifts of] gold, frankincense, and myrrh⁹ they brought there.**¹⁰
Hallelujah.

¹Isaiah 60:6.

²“Sheba” is the Hebrew spelling of a southwestern Arabian area that was renowned for its wealth and exotic goods; modern German Luther Bibles consistently translate this “Sheba” as “Saba,” and modern English Bibles usually render it as “Sheba” but sometimes as “Saba”; the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, however, variously render references to the Hebrew “Sheba” as “Reich Arabia/Arabien” (“Imperial Arabia”), “Saba,” or “Scheba.” The place name “Sheba” is very often confused with “Seba,” either another southwestern Arabian, or possibly an Ethiopian area, which the Luther Bibles both of Bach’s and of our day consistently render as “Seba,” and which modern English Bibles usually render as “Seba” but sometimes as “Saba.” See also fn. 7, below.

³Regarding “frankincense,” see fn. 9, below.

⁴In older German, “verkündigen” has a range of meanings, including “to announce” in the sense of “to make known” or “to proclaim,” but also “to fore-announce” in the sense of “to prophesy.” Luther’s translation of Isaiah is presumably meant to project both senses, but with a greater emphasis on the latter, because Christian interpretation traditionally took Isaiah 60:6 to be a foreshadowing of the narrative in Matthew 2:1-12 about the gift-bearing “magi from the East” who travel to Bethlehem to worship the infant Jesus (i.e., who is prefigured as “the Lord” in Isaiah 60:6).

⁵In modern German, “Myrrhe” is the singular and “Myrrhen” the plural, but in older German “Myrrhen” could be used for both.

⁶A stanza of “Puer natus in Bethlehem” / “Ein Kind geboren zu Bethlehem.”

⁷“The ‘kings’ from Sheba” are the very same men referred to in line 3 of movement 3 as “the wise men.” Both designations refer, in turn, to those who are called “the magi” (i.e., “the astrologers,” which the Luther Bibles rendered as “die Weisen” [“the wise men”]) in Matthew 2:1 (see fn. 4, above). Reckoning the magi as “kings” is derived from Psalm 72:10-11, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “die Könige aus Reich Arabien und Seba werden Gaben zuführen; alle Könige werden ihn anbeten, alle Heiden werden ihm dienen” (“the kings from Imperial Arabia [i.e., which is “Sheba”; see fn. 2, above] and Seba [i.e., which is not “Sheba”; see fn. 2, above] will furnish gifts; all kings will worship him [i.e., worship “the king’s son,” which in Christian interpretation is taken to refer to Jesus], all gentiles will serve him”). Although this is not of great interpretive import, it is unclear whether the hymn’s author mistakenly used “Saba” to refer to “Seba,” or whether he knew that “Sheba” was the underlying word that Luther had rendered in this case as “Reich Arabien” rather than as “Saba.”

⁸Bach’s intended audience would have taken it for granted that this “dar” (“there”) referred to Bethlehem, given that the place is identified in the title of the hymn (see fn. 6, above) and, moreover, given that they would have been intimately familiar with the biblical passages mentioned in fn. 4, above.

⁹These are the gifts depicted in Matthew 2:11. Luther followed the traditional interpretation that these three inseparable gifts reflected the various roles that the adult Jesus would assume: the gold signifies that the (gentile) “wise men” or “kings” acknowledge Jesus will be a king; the frankincense (here, a particular kind of ritual incense), that he will be a priest; and the myrrh (here, a particular kind of incense used in embalming), that he will die for his followers.

¹⁰In older German, “darbringen” was often a synonym for “herbringen” (“to bring there”), but could also carry the sense of “offer” in the ritual sense. In this hymn stanza, it parallels the verb “darkommen” (“to come there”).

3. Was dort Jesaias vorhergesehen,
 Das ist zu Bethlehem geschehn.
 Hier stellen sich die Weisen
 Bei Jesu Krippe ein
 Und wollen ihn als ihren König preisen.
 Gold, Weihrauch, Myrrhen sind
 Die köstlichen Geschenke,
 Womit sie dieses Jesuskind
 Zu Bethlehem im Stall beehren.
 Mein Jesu, wenn ich itzt an meine Pflicht gedenke,
 Muss ich mich auch zu deiner Krippe kehren
 Und gleichfalls dankbar sein:
 Denn dieser Tag ist mir ein Tag der Freuden,
 Da du, o Lebensfürst,
 Das Licht der Heiden
 Und ihr Erlöser wirst.
 Was aber bring ich wohl, du Himmelskönig?
 Ist dir mein Herze nicht zu wenig,
 So nimm es gnädig an,
 Weil ich nichts Edlers bringen kann.

3. What Isaiah had foreseen there [in Jerusalem],¹¹
 That has come to pass in Bethlehem.
 Here the wise men appear
 At Jesus's manger
 And wish to extol him as their king.
 Gold, frankincense, and myrrh¹² are
 The lavish¹³ presents
 By which they honor
 This infant Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem.
 My Jesus, when I now reflect upon my duty,
 I too must direct myself to your manger,
 And be likewise [with the wise men] thankful,
 For this day [of your epiphany]¹⁴ is to me a day of joy,
 When you, O prince of life,¹⁵
 Become the light of the gentiles¹⁶
 and their redeemer.
 But what might I well bring, you king of heaven?¹⁷
 If, to you, my heart is not too paltry,
 Then accept it mercifully,
 For I am able to bring nothing finer.¹⁸

¹¹That is, "there" in ancient Jerusalem, where the prophet Isaiah proclaimed to the Israelite nation the words in Isaiah 60:6, the text of the first movement of the cantata.

¹²See fn. 5 and fn. 9, above.

¹³In older and especially in biblical German, "köstlich" is often used as a synonym for "kostbar" in its sense of "valuable" or "lavish."

¹⁴"Epiphany" is the name of the liturgical occasion that this cantata was designed for. Observed each year on January 6, it commemorates the visit of the magi to the Christ child, and thus the physical manifestation of God's messiah to the gentiles.

¹⁵"Lebensfürst" is a version of Luther's rendering of the title "originator/author/founder/prince/leader of life" that is employed in Acts 3:15, "[Ihr Männer von Israel,] ... den Fürsten des Lebens habt ihr getötet; den hat Gott auferweckt von den Toten, des sind wir Zeugen" ("[You men of ['old'] Israel:] you have killed [Jesus,] the prince of life; God has raised him from the dead, of this we [followers of Jesus] are witnesses").

¹⁶"Licht der Heiden" ("light of the gentiles") is a phrase found in Luther's renderings of Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6, passages that were taken in Christian interpretation to point to Jesus. The more well-known phrase "Licht den Heiden" ("light to the gentiles"), proclaimed directly of Jesus, appears in Acts 26:23.

¹⁷In older German, "Himmelskönig" ("king of heaven") is a standard title for Jesus, God's royal messiah.

¹⁸Not suggesting that the speaker's heart is "fine," but rather expressing regret that the speaker has nothing better to offer.

4. Gold aus¹⁹ Ophir ist zu schlecht,
Weg, nur weg mit eitlen Gaben,
Die ihr aus der Erde brecht!
Jesus will das Herz haben.
Schenke dies, o Christenschar,
Jesu zu dem neuen Jahr!

5. Verschmähe nicht,
Du, meiner Seelen Licht,
Mein Herz, das ich in Demut zu dir bringe;
Es schliesst ja solche Dinge
In sich zugleich mit ein,
Die deines Geistes Früchte sein.
Des Glaubens Gold, der Weihrauch des Gebets,
Die Myrrhen der Geduld sind meine Gaben,
Die sollst du, Jesu, für und für
Zum Eigentum und zum Geschenke haben.
Gib aber dich auch selber mir,
So machst du mich zum Reichsten auf der Erden;
Denn, hab ich dich, so muss
Des grössten Reichtums Überfluss
Mir dermaleinst im Himmel werden.

4. Gold from Ophir²⁰ is too plain [an offering];²¹
Away, just away with empty²² gifts
That you mine from the earth;
Jesus wishes to have your heart.
Make a present of this [your heart], O Christian flock,
To Jesus at [Epiphany,] the [High] New Year.²³

5. Do not spurn—
You [Jesus], the light of my soul—
My heart, which in humility I bring to you;
It [my heart] includes within itself,
All together, indeed such things [as these pleasing gifts]
That are the fruits of your spirit.²⁴
The gold of faith, the frankincense of prayer,
The myrrh of patience are my gifts
That you, Jesus, ever and ever
Shall have as possessions and as presents.
But do also give yourself to me;
Thus you will make me the richest person on earth,
For if I have you [here and now], then
The greatest abundance of riches
Must one day become mine in heaven.

¹⁹Some modern editions have mistranscribed this line as “Gold und Ophir” (“Gold and Ophir”). See also fn. 20, below.

²⁰According to 1 Kings 9 and 10, vast quantities of “Gold aus Ophir” (“gold from [the land of] Ophir”) were used by King Solomon of ancient Israel in building the Jerusalem Temple.

²¹In older German, “schlecht” did not usually mean “of a low or inferior quality or standard”; it usually meant “plain” or “simple” or “frugal” (i.e., corresponding to the way the word “schlicht” is used in modern German). Either way (“schlecht” or “schlicht”), line 1 of this cantata movement may on the face of it give the impression that one ought to seek finer gold, i.e., gold from somewhere other than the land of Ophir. The idea, however, is that the king Jesus wishes to receive something “better than gold” altogether, namely the Christian’s heart. This sentiment is related to what is proclaimed in Psalm 51:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Die Opfer, die Gott gefallen, sind ein geängster Geist: ein geängstes und zuschlagen Herz wirst du, Gott, nicht verachten” (“The offerings that please God are [not burnt animal sacrifices but] a distressed spirit: a distressed and shattered heart, God, you will not despise”).

²²In older German, “eitel” was often a synonym for “leer” (“empty,” in its sense of “without purpose”).

²³“Das Hohe Neu-Jahr” (“the High New Year”) was a synonym for “das Epiphaniensfest” (“the Feast of Epiphany”), the liturgical occasion that this cantata was designed for.

²⁴This line and the following lines draw on the language of Galatians 5:22, “Die Frucht aber des Geistes ist Liebe, Freude, Friede, Geduld, Freundlichkeit, Gütigkeit, Glaube, Sanftmut, Keuschheit” (“But the fruit of the [Holy] Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, charitableness, faith/belief, meekness, chasteness”). From this catalog of virtues, the cantata poet singles out patience and faith for association with two of the three gifts that the wise men brought to the infant Jesus. In agreement with Lutheran teaching, the poet doubtless takes for granted that his phrase “your spirit/Spirit” (i.e., the “spirit of Christ”) will be understood as the “Holy Spirit,” the third person of the Trinity. The expression “spirit of Christ” comes mainly from Romans 8:9, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich, sondern geistlich, so anders Gottes Geist in euch wohnt; wer aber Christus Geist nicht hat, der ist nicht sein” (“You [plural], however, are not fleshly, but spiritual, if then the spirit of God dwells in you; but whoever does not have the spirit of Christ [dwelling in him], he [that person] is not his [Christ’s]”).

6. Nimm mich dir zu eigen hin,
Nimm mein Herze zum Geschenke.
Alles, alles, was ich bin,
Was ich rede, tu und denke,
Soll, mein Heiland, nur allein
Dir zum Dienst gewidmet sein.

6. Take me up²⁵ as your own;
Take my heart as a present.
All, all that I am,
That I say, do, and think,
Shall, my savior,
Be dedicated in service only to you alone.

**7. Ei nun, mein Gott, so fall ich dir
Getrost in deine Hände.
Nimm mich und mach es so²⁶ mit mir
Bis an mein letztes Ende,
Wie du wohl weisst, dass meinem Geist
Dadurch sein Nutz²⁷ entstehe,
Und deine Ehr je mehr und mehr
Sich in mir²⁸ selbst erhöhe.²⁹**

**7. Ah, now, my God, thus to you I fall,
Into your hands, comforted.³⁰
Take me and make it so with me
Up until my final end,
The way you well know, so that thereby
The benefit to my spirit [of receiving salvation] may arise,³¹
And [so that] your honor, ever more and more,
May exalt itself in me.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

²⁵“Hinnehmen” can simply be a synonym for “annehmen” (“to accept”), but it can also mean “accept” in the more specific sense of “to tolerate” or “to put up with.” On the other hand, “hinnehmen” was also used in such expressions as “Gott hat ihn hingenommen” (“God has taken him [from this world] away/there/up [into heaven]”). We have rendered the ambiguous “Nimm mich dir zu eigen hin” with the similarly ambiguous wording “Take me up as your own.” The poet may, however, have intended the simple sense “accept me,” employing “nimm ... hin” rather than “nimm ... an” only to accommodate a rhyme with “bin,” in line 3.

²⁶Some contemporary hymnals give these three syllables of entreaty not as “mach es so” (“make it so”) but “mach es du” (“[O] you, [please do] make it”). Bach’s Cantata 92 gives “mache es” (“make it”).

²⁷Some modern editions here have mistranscribed “Nutz” (“benefit”) as “Weg” (“way,” or “path”); the two words can look somewhat similar in eighteenth-century German “Kurrent” script if the scribe neglects (as he did in the original surviving source of the text for this cantata movement—see fn. 29, below) to provide a “Bogen” (an inverted arch) as a clarifying mark over the “u” in “Nutz.”

²⁸Some modern editions here read not “in mir” (“in me”) but “in ihr” (“in it”). Contemporary hymnbooks read either “mir” or “ihr.” The one surviving original source (see fn. 29, below) for the present cantata gives “mir.” Bach’s Cantata 92, however, gives “ihr” (whose antecedent is “deine Ehre,” i.e., “[God’s] honor”).

²⁹A stanza of “Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn.” Bach’s score does not provide the verbal text for this movement. Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach, who inherited his father’s manuscript, later entered into this score the text that is printed above, apparently on the basis of the readings in the now-lost original performing parts. Some modern editors and performers have given a different hymn text here (e.g., the opening stanza of “Hier ist mein Herz, Herr, nimm es hin”), as they were given to understand that the text entered into Bach’s score was in Carl Friedrich Zelter’s handwriting and thus represented a nineteenth-century, conjectural solution.

³⁰To “fall into God’s hands/hand” was said variously in the Bible to be a frightening or comforting thing. Hebrews 10:31 proclaims, “Schrecklich ist, in die Hände des lebendigen Gottes zu fallen” (“It is fearful to fall into the hands of the living God”); but in 1 Chronicles 22:13 (1 Chronicles 21:13 in today’s Bibles and in some Bibles of Bach’s day), King David of Israel says, in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Ich will in die Hand des HERRN fallen, denn seine Barmherzigkeit ist sehr gross” (“I wish to fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercifulness is very great”).

³¹Lines 5–6 draw on 1 Corinthians 12:7, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “In einem jeglichen erzeigen sich die Gaben des Geistes zum gemeinen Nutz” (“In each man the gifts of the spirit disclose themselves for the common benefit”).



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