

“Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes” BWV 76

Erster Teil

1. *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes, und die Feste verkündigen¹ seiner Hände Werk. Es ist keine Sprache noch Rede, da man nicht ihre Stimme höre.²*

2. So lässt sich Gott nicht unbezeugt!
Natur und Gnade redt alle Menschen an:
Dies alles hat ja Gott getan,
Dass sich die Himmel regen
Und Geist und Körper sich bewegen.
Gott selbst hat sich zu euch geneigt
Und ruft durch Boten ohne Zahl:
Auf, kommt zu meinem Liebesmahl!

3. Hört, ihr Völker, Gottes Stimme,
Eilt zu seinem Gnadenthron!

Part 1

1. *The heavens recount the honor of God, and the firmaments³ make known the work of his hands. There is no language or speech where their voice may not be heard.⁴*

2. Thus God does not leave himself untestified to!⁵
Nature and grace addresses all human beings:
“All this has God indeed done,
That the heavens may stir
And spirit and body may move about.”
God himself has inclined to you
And calls [to you] through messengers without number:
“Up, come to my love-feast.”⁶

3. Hear, you peoples, God’s voice;
Hurry to his throne of grace.⁷

GENERAL NOTE: Bach evidently on some liturgical occasions performed movements 1–7 of BWV 76 as a “work,” and on others performed movements 8–14 of BWV 76 as a seven-movement “work.”

¹Modern editions here read “die Feste verkündiget” (“the firmament makes known”), which is the most common German wording of this biblical text. Bach’s own score and original performing parts, however, read “die Veste verkündigen” (“the firmaments make known”); i.e., “Veste” was an old-fashioned spelling of “Feste,” and in Bach’s day either spelling would usually but not always add an “n” for its plural. The underlying Hebrew here is in the singular, as one would expect for the concept of “the firmament,” but the sporadic introducing of the plural in German and other languages did not render the passage nonsensical, as the one vault of the visible sky was sometimes spoken of as two firmaments, namely the “day firmament” (illuminated by the sun) and the “night firmament” (illuminated by the stars). Several prominent modern English Bibles give this phrase as “the *skies* proclaim the work of his hands.”

²Psalm 19:2, 19:4.

³On “firmaments” instead of “firmament” here, see fn. 1, above.

⁴That is, all people, no matter what language they speak, can hear that the heavens and the firmament give testimony of God’s glory, as they speak a language intelligible to everyone. (This is essentially how this verse was understood in the Lutheranism of Bach’s day.) The underlying Hebrew text grammatically admits several quite different meanings. Previously published English-language renderings of the cantata text here differ strikingly from one another, and none of them takes into account the cantata’s use of the subjunctive at “[man nicht] höre.”

⁵The language here is derived from Acts 14:17, which is the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “und zwar hat er sich selbst nicht unbezeugt gelassen” (“he [God] did not in fact leave himself untestified to”).

⁶At the time of the early church, the “love-feast” was a communal meal meant to foster and preserve love within the Christian community. The meal was connected with the “Lord’s supper” (the eucharist) in ways that are now not entirely clear. Jude 1:12 mentions the “love-feast” (in Greek, given with the dative plural “agapais,” a meal that the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day and earlier had rendered as “Almosen,” but which eighteenth-century theological books and post-eighteenth-century German Bibles have given as “Liebesmahlen”).

⁷The “throne of grace,” here, is a metaphor for Jesus, God’s only-begotten son. In the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exodus 25:17-20; 2 Kings 19:15), the invisible God of Israel sits on a throne—usually rendered in English as “the

Aller Dinge Grund und Ende
Ist sein eingeborner Sohn,
Dass sich alles zu ihm wende.

The cause and end of all things
Is his only-begotten⁸ son,
That everything may turn toward him [God].⁹

4. Wer aber hört,
Da sich der grösste Haufen
Zu andern Göttern kehrt?
Der älteste Götze, eigner Lust,
Beherrscht der Menschen Brust.
Die Weisen brüten Torheit aus,
Und Belial sitzt wohl in Gottes Haus,
Weil auch die Christen selbst von Christo laufen.

4. But who hears [God's voice],
When the greatest throng¹⁰
Turns to other gods?
The ancient idol, one's own desire,¹¹
Rules the breast of human beings.
The wise hatch foolishness;
And in God's house, Belial [Satan]¹² sits pretty,
Because even Christians themselves run from Christ.

5. Fahr hin, abgöttische Zunft!
Sollt sich die Welt gleich verkehren,

5. Go there [to your grave],¹³ idolatrous lot!
Should, in an instant, the world turn upside down,

mercy seat"—above two winged composite creatures called "cherubim," who serve as guardians. The Luther Bibles rendered this divine seat "der Gnadenstuhl" ("the throne of grace"). In Luther's idiosyncratic translation of Romans 3:25, however, Jesus himself is called "a throne of grace: "... welchen Gott hat vorgestellt zu einem Gnadenstuhl durch den Glauben in seinem Blut" ("[Christ Jesus,] whom God has set forth as a throne of grace through faith in his [sacrificial] blood [on the cross]").

⁸The word "eingeborne" can be somewhat ambiguous, in the same ways that the various biblical terms underlying it are ambiguous: they all can mean "only-born" (that is, by the woman who gives birth) or "only-begotten" (of the human couple, or of the woman, or of the human male). Thus, English translators have traditionally rendered the biblical terms behind Luther's various grammatical forms of "gebären" as "to beget" when a male progenitor is the subject, and as "to bear" or "to give birth to" when a female progenitor is the subject. As God's "only-begotten son," Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is singular in his manner of existence: in traditional Christian doctrine, he is proclaimed as eternally "begotten" of God the father, not temporally made or created.

⁹Alluding to Isaiah 45:22, "Wendet euch zu mir, so werdet ihr selig, aller Welt Ende; denn ich bin Gott" ("Turn toward me, so [that] you, the ends of all the world, will become blessed [with salvation]; for I am God").

¹⁰In older German, the nominative singular "der Haufe" was often given as "der Haufen."

¹¹This language is derived from James 1:14, "ein jeglicher wird versucht, wenn er von seiner eigenen Lust gereizt und gelockt wird" ("each one is tempted when he is allured and enticed by his own desire"). This propensity to sin is taken to go back to the original sin of Adam and Eve, who were enticed, by their own desire, to eat of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, described in Genesis 3:6, in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, as "ein lustiger Baum, weil er klug machte" ("a desirable tree, because [eating the fruit from] it made [one] knowledgable/wise"). The comma in the German text after "eigner Lust," essential to the meaning, is original (though it is often omitted in modern transcriptions of the cantata text); the comma after "Götze" is missing but implied by the grammar.

¹²"Belial" is a name of Satan, employed by the Luther Bibles of Bach's day in 2 Corinthians 6:15. This name is given as "Beliar" in later German (and other) Bibles.

¹³"Hinfahren" might simply be a synonym for "weggehen" ("to go away"), but it sometimes, as apparently here, can carry additionally the senses of "untergehen" ("to be ruined") and "sterben" ("to die," i.e., "to go 'there' [to the grave / heaven / hell]"). This movement is probably drawing on the sentiments of Ecclesiastes 9:10, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "In der Hölle, da du hinfährst, ist weder Werk, Kunst, Vernunft, noch Weisheit" ("In the grave, where you are going to, there is neither work, artistry, reason, nor wisdom").

Will ich doch Christum verehren,
Er ist das Licht der Vernunft.

I will still pay honor to Christ;
He is the light of reason [illuminating its darkness].¹⁴

6. Du hast uns, Herr, von allen Strassen
Zu dir geruft¹⁵
Als wir im¹⁶ Finsternis der Heiden sassen,
Und, wie das Licht die Luft
Belebet und erquickt,
Uns auch erleuchtet und belebet,
Ja mit dir selbst gespeiset und getränkt
Und deinen Geist geschenkt,
Der stets in unserm Geiste schwebet.
Drum sei dir dies Gebet demütigst zugeschickt:

6. From all the streets, Lord, you have called us
To you,
As we sat in the darkness of the heathens;
And, in the same way the light [of a new day]
Enlivens and refreshes the skies,¹⁷
[You have] also illuminated and enlivened us;
Indeed, with you yourself [in the eucharist],¹⁸ provided us
food and drink
And bestowed on us your spirit,
Who constantly hovers in our spirit.¹⁹
Therefore let this prayer be most humbly sent to you:

**7. Es woll uns Gott genädig sein
Und seinen Segen geben;
Sein Antlitz uns mit hellem Schein
Erleucht zum ewgen Leben,
Dass wir erkennen seine Werk
Und was ihm lieb auf Erden,
Und Jesus Christus Heil und Stärk
Bekannt den Heiden werden**

**7. May God desire to be merciful to us
And give his blessing;
May his countenance illuminate us
With bright radiance, to eternal life,
That we may acknowledge his works
And what [is] dear to him on earth,
And [so that] Jesus Christ's salvation and strength
may
Become known to the heathens**

¹⁴According to orthodox Lutherans of Bach's day, all the aspects that are intrinsic to human nature, among which they included reason, were "corrupted" through the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, and thus, humans, on their own, are incapable of being truly reasonable. As a result of the fall, human reason became "dark." Only God can illuminate it. In Luther's famous formulation, "die Vernunft des Teufels Hure ist" ("reason is the devil's whore").

¹⁵To accommodate a rhyme with "Luft," the poet wrote "du hast geruft"; by the standards of stricter grammarians, the proper expression should be "du hast gerufen."

¹⁶Some editors emend "im" to "in" here, because in modern German "Finsternis" is feminine (in which case, however, the emendation in this context should technically be "in der," something that would entail altering also Bach's musical setting). But in Bach's day and earlier, "Finsternis" could be feminine or (as here) neuter.

¹⁷"Luft" ("air") is apparently being used here as a synonym for "Luftraum/Lufträume" ("sky/skies").

¹⁸That is, in the sense of John 6:55, where Jesus says, "Mein Fleisch ist die rechte Speise, und mein Blut ist der rechte Trank" ("My flesh is the proper food, and my blood is the proper drink"). This was understood as a reference to the Christian sacrament of communion, where, in Lutheran teaching, the body and blood of Christ was said to be physically present "in, mit und unter" ("in, with, and among/under") the bread and wine.

¹⁹These lines apparently borrow language from Genesis 1:2, which says that at creation "der Geist Gottes schwebte auf dem Wasser" ("the spirit of God hovered on the water"). The "spirit of Christ" was understood in Bach's Lutheranism to be the "Holy Spirit," the third person of the Trinity. This 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]"). The "schweben" ("hovering") of the spirit from Genesis and the "wohnen" ("indwelling") of the spirit from Romans appear linked in the cantata libretto.

Und sie zu Gott bekehren!²⁰

Zweiter Teil

8. Sinfonia

9. Gott segne noch die treue Schar,
Damit sie seine Ehre
Durch Glauben, Liebe, Heiligkeit
Erweise und vermehre.
Sie ist der Himmel auf der Erden
Und muss durch steten Streit
Mit Hass und mit Gefahr
In dieser Welt gereinigt werden.

10. Hasse nur, hasse mich recht,
Feindlichs Geschlecht!
Christum gläubig zu umfassen,
Will ich alle Freude lassen.

11. Ich fühle schon im Geist,
Wie Christus mir
Der Liebe Süßigkeit erweist
Und mich mit Manna speist,

And may convert them to God.

Part 2

8. Sinfonia

9. May God continue to bless the faithful flock
So that it may—
Through belief, love, holiness—
Demonstrate and increase his honor.
It [the faithful flock] is the [likeness of] heaven on earth²¹
And [therefore] must through constant battle
With hatred and with danger
Be purified in this world.

10. Just hate, really hate me,
Hostile kindred.²²
To embrace Christ in firm belief,²³
I will leave off all pleasure.²⁴

11. I feel already in my spirit
How Christ demonstrates to me
Love's sweetness
And feeds me with manna,²⁶

²⁰The first stanza of this hymn.

²¹That is, the faithful flock is a heavenly model on earth to demonstrate God's honor to the heathens.

²²According to 1 John 3:13 (which was part of the epistle reading on the occasion that this cantata was originally designed for), it is "the world" that "hates" followers of Jesus. The expression "hostile generation" here alludes to Mark 9:17-19, where (in Luther's idiosyncratic translation) "einer aus dem Volk" ("one from the people [of Israel]") asks Jesus to heal his demon-possessed son, and "er antwortete ihm ..., und sprach: O du ungläubiges Geschlecht, ... wie lange soll ich mich mit euch leiden" ("he [Jesus] answered him [the man], saying, O you [singular] unbelieving kindred/generation, how long shall I put up with you [plural]").

²³"Gläubig" is used here not in its sense of "glaubhaft" ("believably") or "verlässlich" ("authentically") but in its sense of "in festem Glauben" ("in firm [religious] belief/faith"); i.e., the implied speaker firmly believes in Jesus and loves his Christian brethren, as opposed to "the world," which, as a pleasure-seeking and hostile group, does not believe in Jesus (see fn. 22, above).

²⁴The general sense of lines 3–4 is presumably derived from Luke 14:33, where Jesus says "ein jeglicher unter euch, der nicht absagt allem, was er hat, kann nicht mein Jünger sein" ("any one among you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple"). "Freude" is being used in line 4 as a synonym for "Genuss" ("pleasure," "indulgence," "worldly joy"). A notable example of using "Freude" in its sense of "Genuss" is Ecclesiastes 7:5, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads "Das Herz der Weisen ist im Klaghause, und das Herz der Narren im Hause der Freuden" ("The heart of wise persons is in the house of mourning, and the heart of fools in the house of mirth/pleasure"); "Freude" with the "n" ending, here, is older-German dative singular, not plural.

²⁶"Manna" is a food that God in Exodus 16 provides as "bread from the skies/heavens" (Hebrew, "lechem min hashamayim") for Israel in the wilderness during their exodus from slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. In John 6:25-59, the term "manna" contrasts with "the *true* bread from heaven" (Greek, "arton ek tou ouranou ton alethinon") that Jesus provides, which is said to confer *eternal* life; in John 6:35 and 6:48, Jesus says "Ich bin das

Damit sich unter uns allhier
Die brüderliche Treue
Stets stärke und verneue.²⁵

So that, among us [Christians] here [on earth],
Brotherly faithfulness
May ever strengthen and renew itself.²⁷

12. Liebt, ihr Christen, in der Tat!
Jesus stirbet für die Brüder,
Und sie sterben für sich wieder,
Weil er sich²⁸ verbunden hat.

12. Love, you Christians, in [word and] deed.²⁹
Jesus dies for the brethren³⁰
And they die in turn for one another,
Because he has bound himself³¹ [to them by love].

13. So soll die Christenheit
Die Liebe Gottes preisen
Und sie an sich erweisen:
Bis in die Ewigkeit
Die himmelfrommen³² Seelen

13. Thus shall Christendom³³
Commend³⁴ God's love
And demonstrate it [God's love] in themselves:
Until into eternity,

Brot des Lebens" ("I am the bread of [eternal] life"). With regard to the apparent eucharistic application here, see also lines 7–9 of movement 6, and fn. 18 above.

²⁵Some modern editions give "erneue" here. Bach's own score reads "verneue," and his original performing part reads "erneue." There is, in any event, no difference in meaning. The spelling with a "v" was old-fashioned already in Bach's day. In today's German, the spelling here would be "erneuere."

²⁷Eating the bread ("manna"—see fn. 26, above) of the sacrament of communion, in which, according to Lutheran teaching, Christ is physically present, provides the context for this sentiment.

²⁸Some modern editions emend this reading, which is found in Bach's own score and original performing part, to "Weil er *sie* [aneinander] verbunden hat" ("Because he has bound them [to one another]"). The sense of the line, however, is apparently "Weil er *sich* [an sie] verbunden hat" ("Because he has bound himself [to them]").

²⁹The language of this line is derived from 1 John 3:18 (which was part of the epistle reading on the occasion that this cantata was originally designed for), "lasst uns nicht lieben mit Worten noch mit der Zunge, sondern mit der Tat und mit der Wahrheit" ("let us not love [our brethren merely] with words or with tongue, rather [also] with deed and with truth"). Christians are exhorted to love their brethren in both word and deed, but Lutheranism would at the same time insist that good deeds will never justify a person in God's sight.

³⁰"Brothers" or "brethren" is the most frequently used word of address or self-designation in the New Testament, mainly for fellow believers in Jesus.

³¹See fn. 28, above.

³²Modern editors have emended this line either as "die Himmel frommen Seelen" ("the pious souls of heaven") or "die Himmel frommer Seelen" ("the heavens of pious souls"). Bach's own materials read "die himmel frommen Seelen," where "himmel frommen" (i.e., "himmelfrommen") is presumably the plural-inflected form of the uncommon word "himmelfromm" or "himmelsfromm," a synonym of "engelfromm" or "engelsfromm." The word "fromm" carried a very wide variety of meanings in older German, but when combined with "himmel[s]" ("heavenly") or with "engel[s]" ("angelic"), "fromm" was a synonym for "unschuldig" ("innocent," "guiltless").

³³In Bach's day, "Christenheit" was understood to mean "Christians collectively" or "all lands inhabited by Christians," i.e., as opposed to "Christentum," which was understood to mean "the Christian religion."

³⁴"Preisen" here is used in its sense as a synonym for "preisend empfehlen" ("extollingly recommend") or "anpreisen" ("commend"). Romans 5:8 uses the language of this line, but with "God's love" as object instead of subject: "... preiset Gott seine Liebe gegen uns, dass Christus für uns gestorben ist, da wir noch Sünder waren" ("God commends his love toward us, [in] that Christ died for us when we were yet sinners").

Gott und sein Lob erzählen.

**14. Es danke, Gott, und lobe dich
Das Volk in guten Taten;
Das Land bringt Frucht und bessert sich,
Dein Wort ist wohlgeraten.
Uns segne Vater und der Sohn,
Uns segne Gott der Heilge Geist,
Dem alle Welt die Ehre tu,
Für ihm sich fürchte allermeist
Und sprech von Herzen: Amen.³⁶**

The angelically guiltless³⁵ souls
Will [through their love] recount [the honor of] God and
his praise.

**14. May the people give thanks, God,
And praise you in good deeds;
The land [sowed with your word]³⁷ bears fruit and
repents,³⁸
Your word is prosperous [in bearing spiritual fruit].
May [the] Father and the Son bless us,
May God the Holy Spirit bless us;
May all the world show him honor;
Most of all, may it fear him
And may [it] say from the heart: Amen.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV76> for an annotated translation

³⁵See fn. 32, above.

³⁶The third and last stanza of “Es woll uns Gott genädig sein.” In the historical sources of Bach’s day and earlier, the last three lines of this stanza feature a dizzying array of variant grammatical forms of its nouns and verbs, which profoundly affects the plausible meanings of the poetry.

³⁷The sense of this line is derived from Luke 8:11-15, which interprets the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-8); Jesus explains, “Der Same ist das Wort Gottes ... Das aber auf dem guten Land: sind die das Wort hören und behalten in einem feinen guten Herzen, und bringen Frucht in Geduld” (“The seed [that is sown] is the word of God. ... But what [seed falls] on the good land: [these ‘seeds’] are those [people] who hear the word and maintain it in a noble, good heart, and bear ‘fruit’ in patience”).

³⁸In older German, “sich bessern” was sometimes used as a synonym for ‘Buss tun’ (“to repent”; or, “to do penitence”). In Lutheran teaching, “Buss tun” was emphatically taken to refer to more than making private confession to a priest. Penitence was a central subject of Luther’s “95 Theses,” Number 1 of which reads “Da unser Herr und Meister Jesus Christus spricht ‘Tut Busse’ ... hat er gewollt, dass das ganze Leben der Gläubigen Busse sein soll” (“When our Lord and master Jesus Christ says ‘Do penitence ... [Matthew 4:17], he wanted that the entire life of believers shall be [one of] penitence”).