

“Jesus schläft, was soll ich hoffen?” BWV 81

1. Jesus schläft, was soll ich hoffen?

Seh ich nicht

Mit erblasstem Angesicht

Schon des Todes Abgrund offen?

1. Jesus sleeps [during a great sea tempest];¹ what am I to hope?

Do I not see,

With [my] blanched countenance,

The abyss of death already agape?

2. Herr! warum trittest² du so ferne?

Warum verbirgst du dich zur Zeit der Not,

Da alles mir ein kläglich Ende droht?

Ach, wird dein Auge nicht durch meine Not bewegt

So sonst nie zu schlummern pfleget?

Du wiesest ja mit einem Sterne

Vordem den neubekehrten Weisen,³

Den rechten Weg zu reisen.

Ach, leite mich durch deiner Augen Licht,

Weil dieser Weg nichts als Gefahr verspricht.

2. Lord! Why do you tread so far off?

Why do you conceal yourself at the time of my need,⁴

When everything threatens me [with] a piteous end?

Ah, is your eye, which otherwise [is] never wont to slumber,

Not moved by my need?

Indeed, in time past, with a star

You showed to the Wise Men, newly converted [to Christian worship],

The right path to travel [to find the Christ child].⁵

Ah, lead me [likewise] by the light of your eyes,⁶

Because this [right] path [to eternal life] promises nothing but [earthly] danger.⁷

3. Die schäumenden Wellen von Belials Bächen

Verdoppeln die Wut.

Ein Christ soll zwar wie Wellen⁸ stehn,

Wenn Trübsalswinde um ihn gehn,

3. The foaming waves of Belial's [deathly torrential] brooks⁹

Redouble their rage.

A Christian is indeed to stand like [piled-up inert] waves

[obeying God's command]¹⁰

¹As related in Matthew 8:23-27, which was the gospel portion chanted at the liturgical occasion that this cantata was designed for.

²Some modern editions emend this to “bleibest” (“remain”).

³Some modern editions emend lines 6–8 to “Du wiesest ja mit einem Sterne / Vordem die neubekehrten Weisen, / Den rechten Weg zu reisen” (“Indeed, in former times you showed, with a star, / The newly converted Wise Men / The right path to travel”).

⁴Lines 1–2 are a nearly verbatim quotation of Luther's rendering of Psalm 10:1, “HERR, warum trittest du so ferne? Verbirgst dich zur Zeit der Not?” (“LORD, why do you tread so far off? Do [you] conceal yourself at the time of my need?”).

⁵As related in Matthew 2:1-12.

⁶In Luther's rendering of Psalm 32:8, God declares “Ich will dich mit meinen Augen leiten” (“[On the path you are to go,] I will lead you with my eyes”).

⁷As proclaimed in Matthew 7:14, “die Pforte ist eng, und der Weg ist schmal, der zum Leben führt” (“the gate is narrow and the [earthly] path is strait [or, ‘constricted’] that leads to [eternal] life”).

⁸The notion of “standing (water) waves” has wrongly struck some modern editors as scientifically impossible, and therefore they have emended this line from “Ein Christ soll zwar wie *Wellen* stehn” (“A Christian is indeed to stand like *waves*”) to “Ein Christ soll zwar wie *Felsen* stehn” (“A Christian is indeed to stand like *rocks*”). In any event, for the biblical logic concerning inert brook, river, or sea water (i.e., something the cantata's intended audience would have been expected to know and accept), see fn. 10, below.

⁹The sense of lines 1–2 is derived from Psalm 18:5, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Es umfingen mich des Todes Bande, und die Bäche Belial erschreckten mich” (“Death's bonds beset me, and the [deathly torrential] brooks of Belial [Satan, according to 2 Corinthians 6:15] terrified me”).

¹⁰The sense of this line is derived from Exodus 15:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Durch dein Blasen täten sich die Wasser auf, und die Fluten stunden auf Haufen” (“[LORD,] by your blowing [upon the Red Sea when the Israelites were being pursued by Pharaoh's army] the waters opened themselves up, and the floods stood [motionless, piled up] in heaps”), such that the word “Fluten” (“floods”) from Exodus 15:8 is substituted with the word “Wellen” (“waves”) from Matthew 8:24. When Jesus calmed

Doch suchet die stürmende Flut
Die Kräfte des Glaubens zu schwächen.

When the winds of tribulation chop round him;
Yet the storming flood seeks
To weaken the powers of faith.

4. *Ihr Kleingläubigen, warum seid ihr so furchtsam?*¹¹

4. [In the storm, Jesus said to his disciples:] *You of little faith, why are you so fearful?*

5. Schweig, aufgetürmtes Meer!
Verstumme, Sturm und Wind!
Dir sei dein Ziel gesetzt,
Damit mein auserwähltes Kind
Kein Unfall je verletzt.

5. Be quiet, piled-up sea [commands Jesus]!
Fall silent, storm and wind!¹²
[O water,] may your limit be set¹³
So that no mishap
Ever harms my [Jesus's spiritual] child chosen [for salvation].

6. Wohl mir, mein Jesus spricht ein Wort,
Mein Helfer ist erwacht,
So muss der Wellen Sturm, des Unglücks Nacht
Und aller Kummer fort.

6. It is well for me; my Jesus declares a word [and the tempest clears].
My helper/savior has awakened;
Thus must the storm of waves, the night of misfortune,
And all distress [go] away.

**7. Unter deinen Schirmen
Bin ich für den Stürmen
Aller Feinde frei.
Lass den Satan wüttern,
Lass den Feind erbittern,
Mir steht Jesus bei.
Ob es itzt gleich kracht und blitzt,
Ob gleich Sünd und Hölle schrecken,
Jesus will mich decken.**¹⁴

**7. Under your protection
I am free from the storms/assaults
Of all enemies.
Let Satan bluster,¹⁵
Let the enemy provoke;¹⁶
Jesus stands by me.
Should [thunder and lightning] right now crack and flash,
Should sin and hell right now terrorize,
Jesus will cover me [with his protective wings].¹⁷**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

the sea, in Matthew 8:26, the people declared, in 8:27, “Was ist das für ein Mann, dass ihm Wind und Meer gehorsam ist” (“What sort of man is this, that wind-and-sea is obedient to him [as they are to God in the Exodus and other biblical narratives]”).

¹¹Matthew 8:26.

¹²The librettist here draws on the language specific to the parallel version of the story in Matthew 8:23-27 that is found in Mark 4:35-41; verse 39 reads “Und er stund auf, und bedräutehte den Wind, und sprach zu dem Meer: Schweig, und verstumme!” (“And he [Jesus] stood up, and rebuked the wind, and declared to the sea: ‘Be quiet, and fall silent’”). The text of this aria, then, is to be understood as spoken by Jesus; the “child” in its last line refers to the believer as his spiritual offspring.

¹³The sense of this line is derived from Proverbs 8:29, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “da er dem Meer das Ziel setzte und den Wassern, dass sie nicht überschreiten seinen Befehl” (“[I, ‘Wisdom’ (a personification of God’s wisdom,) was there, at creation,] when he [God] set the limit to the sea and to the waters, that they would not transgress his command”).

¹⁴A stanza of “Jesu, meine Freude.”

¹⁵“Wittern” (in modern editions of this cantata, however, given with Bach’s old-fashioned spelling, “wüttern”) is used here not in its sense of “to sniff [the air, for the scent of prey],” but in its older German sense as a synonym for “toben” in the sense of “to bluster.”

¹⁶“Erbittern” is apparently used here in its sense of “erzürnen” (“to [provoke to] anger”). A contemporary German-English dictionary lists a variety of meanings: “Erbittern (einen): to embitter, exasperate, incense or provoke one; to put him in a bitter, crabbed or angry temper.”

¹⁷The language of the last two lines is derived from Psalm 91:4-5, “Er wird dich mit seinen Fittichen decken ... dass du nicht erschrecken müssest” (“He [the LORD] will cover you with his pinions . . . so that you do not have to be terrified”).



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV81> for an annotated translation