

“Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ” BWV 91

**1. Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ,
Dass du Mensch geboren bist,
Von einer Jungfrau, das ist wahr,
Des freuet sich der Engel Schar.
Kyrie eleis!**

**1. May you be praised, Jesus Christ,
Because you were born a human being,
From a virgin—that is true;
At this, the throng of angels rejoices.¹
Lord, have mercy.**

2. Der Glanz der Höchsten² Herrlichkeit,
Das Ebenbild von Gottes Wesen,
Hat in bestimmter Zeit
Sich einen Wohnplatz auserlesen.
Des ewgen Vaters einigs Kind,
Das ewge Licht von Licht geboren,
Itzt man in der Krippe findt.
O Menschen, schauet an,
Was hier der Liebe Kraft getan!
In unser armes Fleisch und Blut,

2. The radiance of [God] the Most High’s³ glory,
The very image of God’s essence,⁴
At [God’s]⁵ appointed time,
Has selected itself a dwelling place [on earth, in the body of
Jesus].
[God] the eternal father’s only-[begotten] child,⁶
The eternal light begotten⁷ from light,⁸
Is now found in the manger [in Bethlehem].⁹
O humankind, behold,
What the power of love has done here.

GENERAL NOTE: Movements 1 and 6 take their texts verbatim from the outer stanzas of the hymn “Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ.” Movement 2 quotes stanza 2 and adds interspersed commentary. The remaining movements paraphrase the content of the inner stanzas.

¹Angels are depicted as rejoicing at Jesus’s birth in Luke 2:13 (which is within the gospel portion chanted at the liturgical occasion that this cantata was designed for).

²Modern printings of the libretto here read “höchsten” (“highest”), but in Bach’s own score this word is spelled with a capital “H.” The line is thus clearly speaking not of “the highest glory” but of “the glory of the Most High [God].”

³See fn. 2, above.

⁴Lines 1–2 derive their sense from Hebrews 1:3, “er ist der Glanz seiner Herrlichkeit und das Ebenbild seines Wesens” (“he [Jesus] is the radiance of his [God the father’s] glory and the very image of his [the father’s] essence”).

⁵As expressed in Galatians 4:2.

⁶This expression is adapted from the trinitarian expression “Gottes einigen Sohn” (“God’s one-and-only son”) in the Nicene Creed; see fn. 8, below.

⁷The word “geboren” can be somewhat ambiguous, in the same ways that the various biblical terms underlying it are ambiguous: they all can mean “born” (i.e., by the woman who gives birth) or “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.

⁸The sense of this line is derived from the Nicene Creed, the beginning of whose second paragraph reads, in the Lutheran liturgical books of Bach’s day (as translated by Luther), “Ich glaube ... an einen einigen Herrn Jesum Christum, Gottes einigen Sohn, der vom Vater geboren ist vor der ganzen Welt, Gott von Gott, Licht von Licht” (“I believe in a one-and-only Lord Jesus Christ, God’s one-and-only son, who was begotten from [God] the father before the entire [existence of the] world, God [begotten] from God, light [begotten] from light”).

⁹As depicted in Luke 2:7-16.

(Und war denn dieses nicht
Verflucht, verdammt, verloren?)
Verkleidet sich das ewge Gut.
So wird es ja zum Segen auserkoren.

3. Gott, dem der Erden Kreis zu klein,
Den weder Welt noch Himmel fassen,
Will in der engen Krippe sein.
Erscheinet uns dies ewge Licht,
So wird hinfüro Gott uns nicht
Als dieses Lichtes Kinder hassen.

4. O Christenheit! Wohlan, so mache dich¹⁷ bereit,
Bei dir den Schöpfer zu empfangen.
Der grosse Gottessohn
Kömmt als ein Gast zu dir gegangen.
Ach, lass dein Herz durch diese Liebe rühren;

In our wretched flesh and blood
(And so was this [flesh and blood] not
Cursed, condemned, lost?)
The “eternal good” [God’s salvation]¹⁰ clothes itself.
Thus it [this child in the lowly manger]¹¹ is chosen [by God]¹²
indeed for a blessing.

3. God, to whom the earthly globe¹³ [is] too small,
Whom neither world nor heaven encompasses,¹⁴
Is willing to be [encompassed] in the cramped manger.
If this eternal light [the Lord, Jesus,]¹⁵ appears to us,
Then henceforth God will not hate us
[Inasmuch] as [we are] the children of this light.¹⁶

4. O Christendom; well then, thus make yourself ready
To receive [Jesus]¹⁸ the creator among you.
The great son of God
Comes to you [on earth] as a guest¹⁹ proceeded [from heaven].
Ah, through this love let your heart be moved;

¹⁰“Das ewige Gut” is a technical expression, from the Latin “aeternum bonum” (“eternal good”), referring to a spiritual gift of grace that conveys eternal salvation.

¹¹The direct antecedent for the neuter “es” (“it”) would be “das ewige Gut” (“the eternal good”; about which, see fn. 10, above), but the “it” could also take in any combination of “das Ebenbild” (“the very image [of God]”), “das einigs Kind, in der Krippe” (“the only [begotten] child [of God], in the [lowly] manger”), and “das Licht von Licht” (“the light [begotten] from light”). All of these expressions are applied to Jesus, the savior. The least likely of these to be thought of, on the face of it, as a “blessing” would be the child in the manger, and this is perhaps what motivated the inclusion in this line of the word “ja” (“indeed”).

¹²This use of the word “auserkoren” (“chosen”) derives its sense from Lutheran christological interpretation of Luther’s idiosyncratic rendering of Song of Songs 5:10, “Mein Freund ist weiss und rot, auserkoren unter vielen Tausenden” (“My beloved one [understood as a foreshadowing of God’s messiah, Jesus] is white and ruddy, chosen [by God from] among many thousands”). Jesus is explicitly described as having been “selected/chosen” (Luther: “erwählt”) by God, as his servant, in Matthew 12:18.

¹³“Erden Kreis” does not mean “earth’s orbit”; it is a synonym for “Erdkugel” (“terrestrial/earthly globe”).

¹⁴The word “fassen” here is employed in the sense of “to hold,” not as “to grasp/fathom” but “to contain/encompass.”

¹⁵In Isaiah 60:19-20 it is proclaimed that “der HERR wird dein ewiges Licht sein” (“the LORD [in Christian interpretation, Jesus,] will be your eternal light”).

¹⁶In the New Testament, the followers of Jesus are called “children of light” (e.g., in John 12:36, Ephesians 5:9, and 1 Thessalonians 5:5).

¹⁷This is sometimes, erroneously, given as “die” (“them”) in modern printings of the libretto.

¹⁸It is declared in Colossians 1:16 that all things were created through God’s son, Jesus.

¹⁹This line probably derives its sense from Jeremiah 14:8, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “warum stellet du dich, als wärest du ein Gast im Lande” (“why do you [God] present yourself as if you were a guest in the land [of Israel]?”) The cantata text apparently appropriates Jeremiah’s negative language to speak in a positive manner of God’s earthly sojourn as “contained” in the human body of Jesus.

Er kömmt zu dir, um dich vor seinen Thron
Durch dieses Jammertal zu führen.

5. Die Armut, so Gott auf sich nimmt,
Hat uns²¹ ein ewig Heil bestimmt,
Den Überfluss an²² Himmelsschätzen.
Sein menschlich Wesen machet euch
Den Engelsherrlichkeiten gleich,
Euch zu der Engel Chor zu setzen.

**6. Das hat er alles uns getan,²⁴
Sein gross Lieb zu zeigen an;
Des freu sich alle Christenheit
Und dank ihm des in Ewigkeit.
Kyrie eleis!**

He comes to you to lead you before his [heavenly] throne,²⁰
Through this [earthly] vale of tears.

5. The poverty [of flesh and blood] that God takes upon himself
[in Jesus]
Has appointed for us an eternal salvation,
The abundance of heavenly treasures.
His [assuming a] human essence [in Jesus] makes you [humans]
Equal to the dominions²³ of angels,
Setting you with the choir of angels.

**6. All this he has done for us
To show his great love;
At this let all Christendom rejoice
And thus²⁵ thank him in eternity.
Lord, have mercy.**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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²⁰As declared in Revelation 3:20-21.

²¹A 1728 printed book of cantata librettos gives this word as “euch” (“[plural] you”).

²²A 1728 printed book of cantata librettos and Bach’s earlier version of the aria give this word as “von” (here, likewise “of”).

²³This idea comes from Luke 20:36, “sie sind den Engeln gleich” (“they [those who will be made worthy of obtaining the age to come] are equal to the angels”). “Engelsherrlichkeiten” apparently does not mean “angels’ splendors/glories,” however, not least because the word “Herrlichkeit” in the sense of “glory” and “splendor” was very rarely employed in the plural. “Herrlichkeiten” seems to be used here as a collective noun (like “a pride of lions,” “a murder of crows,” “a glory of bananaquits,” etc.), namely as a synonym for “Herrschaften” in its sense of “lordships/dominions,” such that “Engelsherrlichkeiten” is an alternative for the more common expression “Herrschaften der Engel” (“lordships/dominions of angels”); the biblical phrase “Herrschaften in dem Himmel” (Ephesians 3:10) was understood in the Lutheranism of Bach’s day to mean “lordships/dominions [of angels] in heaven.”

²⁴A 1728 printed book of cantata librettos gives this line as “Dies alles hat er uns getan” (which also means “All this he has done for us”).

²⁵“Des” here is employed here in its sense of “deshalb” (“thus”).