# Some Thoughts on Bach’s Passion According To Saint John

Exactly three hundred years ago last month, Johann Sebastian Bach, barely ten months into what would become his twenty-seven-year tenure as the Cantor of the *Thomaskirche* in Leipzig, had a problem. It was February 20, 1724—Ash Wednesday—and he was about to enjoy the second *tempus clausum* of his Leipzig years: that period when he and his musicians were *not* required to provide a weekly cantata for services at the *Thomas*- and *Nikolaikirchen*. (The first had been the four-week season of Advent 1723.) For the six weeks of Lent—save for the celebration of the Annunciation on March 25—he could concentrate on the music he would present to the good citizens of the town on the liturgical and theological highpoints of the Christian year: Good Friday and Easter, which fell on April 7 and 9 that year—three hundred years ago next week.

What was keeping the Cantor up at night? The Good Friday Vespers service would require a full setting of one of the Passion narratives for soloists, choir and orchestra. The experts think Bach may well have composed a now-lost Passion setting during his years as *Kapellmeister* in Weimar (it might have been performed in nearby Gotha in 1717), but it is quite possible that that work was what is called a “Passion oratorio”—a setting of a versified *paraphrase* of the Passion narrative—and not an “oratorio Passion”—a setting which utilized, *verbatim*, one of the four actual Passion narratives, as was required by the more conservative church authorities in Leipzig. In any event, Bach—who turned thirty-nine during this Lenten period—decided that for his first Good Friday in Leipzig, he wanted to present a new work, indeed, a work like no other that his audience had ever heard. That work was to be the **Passion according to Saint John**.

The tradition of a sung Passion is very ancient—and perfectly understandable. After all, the dramatic narrative of the Jesus’ final days is a—perhaps *the*—central focus of all four Gospels, and simply cries out to be “acted.” In the 1200’s and afterwards, plainchant versions of the Passion narratives began to come into common usage, and over the intervening centuries their format became regularized: a clergyman (usually a bass) took the rôle of Jesus, another (a tenor) the rôle of the narrator, called the “Evangelist,” and a third that of all the other characters—Peter, Judas, the various Jewish authorities, Pilate and so forth, as well as that of the crowd, or *turba* as it was called in Latin. As the services became more elaborate, and as the musical means available developed to a more sophisticated level, the *turba* parts were often given polyphonic choral settings, and more differentiation was made in the rôles of the lesser soloists. Nearer to Bach’s time, as has been noted, the “opera-ization” of the Passion led to the creation of those Passion paraphrases—often based on a “harmonization” of the Gospels, a then widely-practiced but now uniformly discredited process by which well-meaning scholars attempted to shoe- horn the four Gospels’ quite varied versions of Jesus’ final days into one homogenized text.

Leipzig, although it had enjoyed a period of flirtation with opera—it had come to an end some years before Bach’s arrival—remained a conservative town, and its church authorities, unlike those of, say, Hamburg, frowned upon such fripperies: for them the old Passions were quite enough, thank you very much, as was their hallowed Holy Week rota—Saint Matthew’s version to be performed at the *Hauptgottesdienst* on Palm Sunday, Saint Mark’s and Saint Luke’s during the week, and Saint John’s on Good Friday. These were sung in the austere settings made in the early 1500’s by Johann Walther, Luther’s musical collaborator. The texts of these were to be found in the prayer-books commonly used in Leipzig at this time.

It was only in 1721 that a *musiciret* Passion — one of those settings for soloists, choir and orchestra — had been performed at the *Thomaskirche*, and then not at the morning service but rather at the Good Friday Vespers service. There had always been a Vespers service with a sung Passion on Good Friday afternoon in the churches in Leipzig. But whatever Passion narrative would have been sung would presumably have utilized one of Walther’s two-century-old settings, just like the ones heard on Palm Sunday and Good Friday morning. On March 26, Good Friday in 1717, however, Leipzig’s more adventurous *Neue Kirche* had featured one of the new-fangled Passions. It was probably by its erstwhile organist, Georg Philipp Telemann, by that time a leading musician in Frankfurt-am-Main. It took Johann Kuhnau, Bach’s predecessor at the Thomaskirche (who had been quite jealous of Telemann when the latter had been active in Leipzig) four more years to persuade his supervisors to allow him to perform a similar work. His setting of the Passion according to Saint Mark was finally heard on April 11, 1721. Something comparable had been presented at Good Friday Vespers 1722 and, one supposes, the following year as well. Kuhnau had died in June 1722 and Bach was not to sign his Leipzig contract until May 1723, so just who would have been in charge on Good Friday 1723 remains unclear. The once firmly held belief that the **Saint John Passion** was composed by Bach *before* his arrival in Leipzig and performed there in 1723 as a kind of elaborate “test piece” has long since been discredited.

Thus when Bach’s first Leipzig Good Friday rolled around in 1724, it would have only been the fourth time that the congregation at one of the two main churches of the town had experienced an “up to date” Passion setting. Indeed, what they were about to hear, in Martin Geck’s memorable phrase, “in its historic and aesthetic significance…suddenly appeared in the heavens like a new comet.”

# What Hath Bach Wrought

Bach had been hard at work during the six weeks of Lent 1724. (Bear in mind: he may well have composed, had copied, and readied the **Saint John** for its first performance in *just those six weeks*.) Indeed, Philipp Spitta, his great nineteenth-century biographer, sees signs of an overly rapid helter-skelter libretto preparation in the mixed bag of texts that make up the non-Biblical portions of the **Saint John Passion**. We do not know why he chose the Fourth Gospel as his text; it had, as mentioned above, already been sung in Walther’s sixteenth-century setting that Good Friday morning during the *Hauptgottesdienst* (just as it will be heard again here at Saint Peter’s, in spoken dramatic form during this evening’s final Good Friday liturgy).

But whatever the reason for his choice of text, Bach was clearly inspired by John’s words. And who can blame him? True, the last Gospel lacks both the transcendent scene of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper (in the chapters preceding those set by Bach, John alludes only to Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet) and the fuller description of the agony in the garden so poignantly delineated by Matthew, and, of course, some years after the premiere of the **Saint John**  **Passion,** by Bach in his beloved setting of that other Passion narrative. But it makes up for that in its theological single-mindedness, and especially in its extraordinarily dramatic retelling of the legal maneuverings that resulted in the condemnation of Jesus to death.

# The “Three Dimensions”

By the time Bach put pen to paper in 1724, the “oratorio Passion” had taken on its familiar “three dimensional” form (the apt description is Simon Heighes’).

*First* and foremost came the Gospel text itself, “narrated” by the Evangelist and fleshed out by soloists taking the parts of Jesus, Peter, Pilate, and a male and a female servant. Of course, the *turba* is much in evidence, especially in John’s Gospel, and plays a major—some would say *the* major— role in Bach’s setting. But one must dismiss the thought that the Evangelist’s music is some sort of desiccated *recitativo secco*, comparable to that which filled the scores of contemporary opera. As savvy a stage-director and playwright as Bertolt Brecht repeatedly pointed to Bach’s recitatives in this **Passion** as examples of brilliantly concise pictorialization—theatre at its best, in other words, a concept which would have horrified the cantor’s superiors, who in his job description had specifically warned him away from creating anything that smacked of the stage.

The *second* “dimension” is that of the communal interaction with the narrative: this is evidenced by Bach’s strategic placement of some twelve chorale melodies throughout the work. Eleven of these settings (including the one sung by the choir during the bass solo “Mein teurer Heiland”/*My precious savior*) were both musically and textually “bone of their bone” to the Leipzigers who heard the **Saint John Passion**; David Yearsley notes that these chorales were “so deeply imbedded in the congregation’s consciousness that their melodies were inseparable from their texts.” The twelfth, “Our freedom, son of God”/*Durch dein Gefängnis*, sets a non-chorale text to a familiar chorale tune, thus allowing the listener to attach a new meaning to a familiar melody, and, no doubt, to “interface” the text traditionally associated with that melody with the new text Bach selected. As has been said, the “wonderful commentary of [these] chorales” which express “the sentiments of the sympathetic onlooker…often seem like the sentiments of Bach himself.”

And yet, it is not unreasonable to wonder, absent a printed libretto that included the appropriate chorale verses (and which would require literacy to use), whether the congregation actually joined in the singing of these settings. Not only does Bach “fiddle” with some of their melodies, but he or his unknown librettist has carefully selected appropriate verses from *much* longer overall texts. “Jesu Leiden, Pein und Tod”/*Jesus I will ponder now*, for instance, which serves as the nearest thing the **Saint John Passion** can point to as a unifying chorale “theme” à la the Passion Chorale in the *Saint Matthew*—still in use as Hymn 345 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, published in 2006, where it accompanies the much shorter text “Jesus, I will ponder now”—is represented by just three of its 34 [!] stanzas: do we really believe the congregation would have been able to “pick up” on just which verse was being sung in time to join in? And that assumes they had all 34 verses by heart!

Bach’s choice of chorale melodies and texts is interesting. Seven come from the much more “personal” repertoire of seventeenth century texts, including two stanzas of the familiar Passion Chorale text of Paul Gerhardt, and three from Johann Heermann’s magisterial “Ah, holy Jesus”/*Herzliebster Jesu*, the first of which (“O wondrous love”/*O grosse Lieb*) is the very first chorale sung this afternoon. Four texts and tunes come from the 1500’s—but that includes the source of the **Passion**’s final movement, the stunning “Lord, Thee I love with all my heart”/*Herzlich lieb* from the 1570’s, which is much closer in feel to its seventeenth century successors than, for instance, to Luther’s paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer, the fourth stanza of which (“Thy will must all creation do”/*Dein Will gescheh*) is tellingly heard just after Jesus tells his disciples that He must drink the cup His Father has given him. It is interesting that this recitative represents one of the very few times in the **Saint John Passion** where Bach actually allows a character to sing a line drawn from the Gospel text twice: “Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given me, *the cup which my Father has given me*?”

The *third* dimension of the **Passion** is made up of individual responses to its narrative as limned by the eight arias and two ariosos allotted to the soloists. Familiar as many of us are with the *Saint Matthew*, it comes as a surprise that there are far fewer such “meditations” in the **Saint John**. And the standard recitative-arioso-aria pattern found in the longer work (experts describe it as an “exposition-meditation-prayer” matrix) is found only twice here.

There is a good reason for that. It had become standard for these ruminations to be attached to specific points in the story, and several of those points are simply lacking in the John narrative. For instance, Bach had to interpolate two crucial passages from Saint Matthew’s version of the passion story in order to give himself the opportunity to insert the by-now standard “commentaries” on them: the fact that Peter “wept bitterly” after the cock crew (John simply announces, in the King James Version, “Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew”); and the dramatic description of the aftermath of Jesus’ death—“And, behold, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain…”—also unmentioned by John. In Bach’s setting, the first interpolation is represented by an aria of “remorse”—the tenor’s “Ach, mein Sinn”/*Alas, my soul*, and the latter by an episode of “lamentation,” the tenor arioso/soprano aria pairing “Mein Herz, indem die ganze Welt”/*My heart—while the entire world* and “Zerfliesse, mein Herze”/*Dissolve, my heart*.

At five other times Bach is able to both comply with the “commentary” tradition and yet not interrupt the flow of John’s narrative:

+ Jesus’ arrest: the alto aria “Von den Stricken”/*To untie me*;

+ His scourging: the other pairing of arioso and aria—the bass “Betrachte, meine Seel”/*Contemplate, my soul* and the tenor “Erwäge, wie sein blutgefärbter Rücken”/*Consider, how his blood-stained back*;

+ His crucifixion: the bass aria with chorus “Eilt, ihr angefochtnen Seelen”/*Hurry, you tempted souls*;

+ His final “It is accomplished”: the magnificent alto aria “Es ist vollbracht!”/*It is finished!*; and

+ His death: the bass aria with chorale “Mein teurer Heiland”/*My precious Savior*, referred to earlier.

We know that when he set to writing the *Passion according to Saint Matthew* several years later, Bach had the able assistance of a skillful librettist, Christian Henrici, who wrote under the pen name “Picander.” And Henrici may well have helped Bach in the compilation of the non-Biblical portions of the **Saint John** libretto as well: we cannot be sure. What we do know is that the ten solo movements mentioned above have quite varied backgrounds, as over against “Picander”’s more unified Saint Matthew texts. Even the experts, try as they might, can’t find sources for several of them: the soprano aria, “Ich folge dir gleichfalls”/*I follow you likewise*, for one, and the alto’s “Es ist vollbracht!”/*It is finished!*, for another, although Alfred Dürr (among others) finds connections between the latter and the “passion oratorio” of Christian Heinrich Postel, which may also have provided the “chorale” text “Durch dein Gefängnis”/*Our freedom, son of God* referred to earlier. “Ich folge dir gleichfalls”/*I follow you likewise*, by the way, comes at an odd moment in the story, halfway through the fifteenth verse of the gospel’s Chapter 17: “And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple…” One senses that Bach simply *needed* to insert a comment here, despite the fact that the alto aria “Von den Stricken”/*To untie me* had ended only moments before. The soprano aria also provides a salutary “up” moment for Peter, whose Denial of Christ is soon to bring Part 1 of the **Passion** to a close.

The tenor’s “Ach, mein Sinn”/*Ah, my soul*—a meditation on that very Denial—is another aria whose text-source confounds the experts. Dürr sees similarities to a hymn of Salomon Franck’s. It is a fact that Franck was the source of a number of Bach cantata texts, but the connections here are tenuous at best.

That leaves some four aria and both arioso texts. All six appear to be based on the most famous “passion oratorio” (i.e. paraphrase passion) of the era, the one first published by the Hamburg lawyer Barthold Heinrich Brockes in 1712, and issued in a revised edition the following year. This text—its full title was *Der für die Sünde der Welt Gemarterte und Sterbende Jesus*—*Jesus, tortured and dying for the sins of the world*— was such a hit that in 1719 no less than four settings of it were performed during the same Holy Week in Hamburg (one of them by Handel, as it happens).

Nowadays the High Baroque style of the Brockes contributions to the **Saint John Passion** do not suit everyone’s taste; indeed, the interjections of the chorus—“Wohin?”/*Where?*—in the bass aria “Eilt, ihr angefochtnen Seelen”/*Hurry, you tempted souls* drew criticism even in Bach’s day from the more “forward-looking” critics of the time. Bach and his anonymous librettist must have agreed, as they saw fit to alter many of these borrowed texts, often toning down their more excessive turns of phrase and eliminating their more obscure references, when they drew on them for the **Saint John Passion**. But clearly the Brockes was widely admired; one need only refer to the similar choral interjections in Henrici’s later *Saint Matthew* libretto (the “Come wheres?” found in the alto aria “Look ye, Jesus waiting stands,” in the translation formerly sung here at Saint Peter’s) for an example of its widespread influence.

In addition to these “three dimensions” Bach carefully frames the Passion with opening and penultimate choruses. The text of the first, “Herr, unser Herrscher”/*Lord, our Master*, is in part based on verses from Psalm 8 (verse 1, for instance: “O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!”), while that of the “lullaby chorus,” so closely paralleled in the *Saint Matthew*, “Ruht wohl”/*Rest well*, is, once again, derived from the Brockes Passion.

Bach’s masterstroke of actually closing the **Saint John Passion** with the chorale setting “Ach Herr, lass dein lieb Engelein”/*Lord, let at last thine angels come* is all his own, however.

**Can a structural pattern be found in the Saint John Passion?**

This is a question that has bedeviled thoughtful folk probably from that first April afternoon, some three centuries ago. And it no doubt presented Bach with a creative challenge too. When one considers the straightjacket in which the Gospel narrative imprisoned Bach, one can only admire the ingenuity with which he managed, despite the odds, to create that “comet” *Herr* Geck values so highly. John’s narrative, as we have seen, leaves little space for the expansive contemplative moments so characteristic of the *Saint Matthew* (Robert Schumann notes that the Saint Matthew is “not entirely free of lengthy passages” and, in his opinion, is “entirely too long”). No, the focus the fourth evangelist puts on the dramatic trial and condemnation of Jesus is a feature of the narrative Schumann praises as *gedrängt*—one translation reads “pressed for time”; others might be “compressed” or “terse” or “succinct”—thus giving the Saint John a quality he calls “quite brilliant, especially in the choral passages, and [crafted] with what great art!” But it is just this focus that does not allow for a more even distribution of the personal meditations—the arias and ariosos—throughout the **Passion**, bunching them towards the end: four of the ten come only after Jesus’ death.

It was in John’s trial narrative, the section to which the traditional five-part break-down of the Passion story assigns the name “Pilatus,” that Bach found what the twentieth century expert Friedrich Smend called the *Herzstück*—the “heart-piece”— of the **Passion**, and in which Smend attempted to discover a kind of “chiastic”—“cross-shaped”—structure. He had a good deal to work with, given the fact that Bach often re-uses thematic material in the onrushing sequence of *turba* choruses, as the back-and-forth unfolds between Pilate, the leaders of the Jews (so described by John), the “crowd”—although that word is never actually used by John—and the Roman soldiers. As singers, the members of the choir can tell you pretty accurately which movements of this part of the **Passion** sound like which others: the two “Jesum von Nazareth”/*Jesus of Nazareth* moments are an obvious, pre-“Pilatus” example. But within the *Herzstück* there are subtler relationships, and speaking as one of that choir, this writer can attest that sometimes the connections are of the “now where did I hear that tune before?” variety—and this after working off and on with the **Passion** back in 2008-2010 and again in 2017 and 2019. Here are the linkages (quoting just the English translations here): “If this man were not an evil-doer” and “We may not put anyone to death”; the soldiers’ mocking “Hail to you, dear king of the Jews!” and, much later, the Chief Priests’ “Do not write: The King of the Jews”; “We have a law” and “If you let this man go”; and, most tellingly, “Crucify, crucify” and “Away, away with him, crucify him.”

Then again, another unifying tool is a quirky accompanying figure—Christoph Wolff calls it a “melodically jagged chain of sixteenth notes”—that appears no less than ten times. It accompanies, for example, five of the *turba* choruses: the two “Jesus of Nazareth” responses; “We may not put anyone to death”; and the somewhat similar interjections “Not this one, but Barabbas!” and “We have no king but Caesar.” One wonders just what Bach was thinking here: one possibility is that he was identifying “this man” and “him/anyone” with Jesus, and, more subtly, acknowledging that, yes, we *do* have another king, namely Christ.

But who, other than the composer himself, and later generations of musicologists (and note writers!) would notice— even better, would *hear*—this connection? Remember, in Bach’s day the singers would have only their own individual parts before them—as would the instrumentalists of that day, and of our own time—not a “piano-vocal score” showing all vocal parts and a reduction of the accompaniment. And we have no clue about Bach’s rehearsal processes. Perhaps the singers only heard the full accompaniment at the dress rehearsal? And what of the congregation? Could anyone actually be expected to pick up on these cross-references, on these similar musical ideas separated by measure after measure of other material?

It is for just these reasons that the more practical among the experts inject a note of caution in these architectonic musings. Herewith some of their warnings: we are not absolved “from the duty to ask whether Bach really intended to create a musically determined system of order that went beyond the unfolding of the **Passion** movement by movement, and if so, whether this was designed to exist without reference to the listener, or was to be perceived by him. If the former were true, then Bach was obviously convinced that an order that the listener cannot perceive is unconsciously felt to have artistic value….whereas if the latter were true, the order would have been created in the expectation that attentive listeners would be able to hear it…However, it is legitimate to ask which of the orders observed in the notated music of the **Saint John Passion** can in fact be perceived by the listener.” (*—Alfred Dürr*) “The unity of this work does not lie in the abstract bean-counting of its dimensions—rather it is to be found in the living unity depicted in its complete variety, as mastered by an artist with great power of both imagination and thought…it is more stimulating for the lovers of Bach, who do not pore over the score, but rather *listen*, to appreciate the wealth of musical ideas rather than track down possible organizing principles which must remain inaudible to an attentive ear.” (*—Martin Geck*) And, finally, “Whether, in all this, a ‘plan’ which the listener can, in fact, hear plays a part is not at all decisive. It is more important that the feeling of a gigantic *sense* of a plan is acknowledged, which undergirds the musical construct and which, in this way, mirrors something of the Eternal Order according to which the divine plan of salvation is accomplished.” (*—Joachim Kaiser*)

That “sense of a plan,” and its “inevitability” are perhaps of the essence here. The onrush of recitative, in which the Evangelist sometimes evolves from simple narrator to “witness” or “protester,” as Adélaïde de Place notes, as well as the interplay between Jesus and Pilate, and the choral interjections, all of which characterize the trial sequences of the **Passion**, do indeed incarnate the “relentlessness of the events; everything takes place almost with a clockwork precision, in direct and necessary fulfillment of the preordained…order,” in John Bull’s words. An order, one must note, that is alluded to very early on in the Passion, indeed, in its very first recitative, which, barely catching its breath, drops both performers and listeners directly into the hurly-burly of the Passion saga. The Evangelist describes Jesus’ preordained reaction to the arrival in the garden of Judas, the Roman soldiers and the servants of the Chief Priests and the Pharisees as follows: “Therefore Jesus, *knowing all things, that were to come upon Him*, went straightway forth and said unto them: ‘Whom seek ye here?’” [emphasis added.] The answer, just as inevitable, is “Jesus of Nazareth,” the first *turba* chorus.

# The Real Herzstück

This brings us to the major issue that is always present nowadays at any performance of this extraordinary piece of music: what exactly is the message of John’s Gospel? and how do we as performers and listeners deal with that message and with the intensely dramatic setting that Bach has provided? And here we are talking about Smend’s *Herzstück* above all else.

Our pastoral staff has been assiduous in educating us here at Saint Peter’s on the historical background of this, the last Gospel to be written. They have repeatedly described the context of the bitter intrafamilial quarrels that John is describing in his text: how in his Passion narrative he is projecting backwards the contemporary disputes roiling the Jewish community of his time, stemming both from Christ’s life and death and from the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., onto the events of that fateful Passover week more than half a century before. The late Raymond Brown, the preeminent Johannine scholar of our time, clearly delineated these issues in a series of masterful analyses, including his own translation and discussion of the Gospel itself and his impressive *The Death of the Messiah*.

But the fact remains that John’s description of a family quarrel—intense and vehement though it was, it was still a *family* quarrel—morphed over the centuries into something “other,” something evil, something malignant. We all know what that “something” was: the last century exposed, once and for all, its horror. When the Jews of first century Palestine were transmogrified into the eternal “Other,” into “them,” the meaning of Christ’s presence here, which in John’s telling is summed up by the “accomplishment” He suffered on the cross once and for all, and for everyone, was defiled. We Christians, and especially we Lutheran Christians, share an enormous responsibility for this defilement. Here at Saint Peter’s we publicly confess this responsibility often; our annual service with our brothers and sisters of Central Synagogue in observance of Yom HaShoah (to be observed this year on Sunday May 5) is but one evidence of that continuing coming-to-terms with our past.

Where, then, does Bach’s **Passion according to Saint John** fit into this crucial dynamic? It is fascinating to observe the almost total silence of most musicologists on this topic. Lengthy analyses of all-but-inaudible structural frameworks? You bet! Careful delineation of the (at least four) different versions of the **Passion** Bach produced over the years (including one at the very end of his life, which basically sounded, they think, much like what we heard this afternoon)? Absolutely! Precise attribution of textual sources, discussion of vagaries of instrumentation, intense debates over just how many musicians Bach expected to have available for the various performances of the **Passion** during his lifetime? Rest assured. But a thoughtful discussion of what the Passion—more precisely *this* **Passion**—actually *means*? Well…

There are those, like Richard Taruskin, the well-known musicologist, who define this **Passion** as “anti-Semitic,” full-stop. And his suggested means of dealing with other works he defines similarly—the venerable Renaissance and Baroque tradition of *contrafactum*, defined as simply replacing one text with another, in this instance an offensive one with something more acceptable—is hardly an option here: just what would one suggest, for instance, as substitutions for the “Crucify!” choruses?

Michael Marissen, in his *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach’s* ***St. John Passion***, has perhaps given us the most thought-provoking analysis of this intensely difficult issue. In that brief but intensely reasoned work, he points out a number of important facts. Among them:

+ Lutheran theology emphasizes that it is we who nailed Jesus to the cross. Luther himself stated that each believer “is actually the one who, as we said, by the sin killed and crucified God’s son.” He later noted (even as he was composing some of his worst anti-Jewish polemics) “When [Christ] prays for those who crucify Him, he prays for us, the ‘we’ who with our sins give the reason for His cross and dying.” And, to top it all off, he acerbically notes that “because we [here he is referring to his followers] now have [the real] Christ to preach, there have come on earth no more wicked people to be remembered than we.”

+ As has been noted above, the presence of the chorales in the **Passion** are strong evidence of this theology: in them, repeatedly, the choir and congregation admit their corporate responsibility for Christ’s death, now seeing themselves as fellow members of the *turba* whose cries Bach so “dramatically” sets to wrenchingly unforgettable music. Indeed, a hymn text familiar to many here this afternoon, and sung to “Jesu Kreuz, Leiden und Pein,” that previously mentioned chorale melody featured in the **Saint John Passion**, voices these very sentiments: “Yet, O Lord, not thus alone make me see your Passion,/But its cause to me make known, and its termination./*For I also and my sin wrought your deep affliction;/ This the shameful cause has been of your crucifixion.”* [emphasis added]

+ Another example: in the **Passion**’s penultimate chorale, the tortuously harmonized “O Hilf, Christe, Gottes Sohn”/*Help, O Christ, thou son of God*—one of the work’s sixteenth century texts, it should be noted—it is important to emphasize that in the original German it is solely the existential “We” who are adjured to contemplate the meaning of the Savior’s death and its cause, and in response to offer a “thank-offering.”

+ The **Passion**’s ten solo movements go into much more personal detail concerning the individual’s reaction to the sacred narrative, beginning with the soprano’s urging Christ to “draw me on, to push me, to urge me” to follow Him (the German for “draw” or “draw towards”—*ziehen*—is particularly important here: Christ, throughout John’s Gospel, is described as “drawing” all humankind to Him on the cross). Later the tenor despairingly dwells on Peter’s (and our) betrayal; the bass and tenor muse aloud—using distinctly High Baroque imagery—on the meaning of Christ’s scourging; and the bass asks the crucified Christ “Am I made free from death?/ Can I, through your pain and death/ inherit the kingdom of heaven?” These are intensely intimate, one-on-one reactions, and do not speak to any one group’s responsibility for the death of Jesus.

+Finally, on a more mundane level, we should never forget that while the **Passion**, in following John’s narrative, must needs often refer to “the Jews,” not all of the *turba* choruses’ texts are attributed to them.

All of Marissen’s observations are best summed up in his own words:

THE FOLLOWING PARAGRAPH SHOULD BE INDENTED

Bach’s **Saint John Passion** proclaims next to no interest in the historical question ‘Who killed Jesus?’, whether it was Jews, Romans, or Jews and Romans together. It is concerned with theological questions, not accountability for Jesus’ death. Bach’s efforts are predicated on the notion that, since the fall of Adam and Eve, all human beings (except Jesus) who have ever lived and ever will live are inherently sinful, no matter what their actual behavior is…In this view, *all humans are personally responsible for Jesus’ death* [emphasis added].

END OF INDENT

Marissen deserves our thanks for turning the spotlight on this crucial question. But as interesting and persuasive as his arguments may be…questions remain. What are we to make of the fact that along with the standard Biblical commentaries of the day (Abraham Calov’s on Luther’s translation of the Bible—in which Bach underlined “Christ’s Passion is the fulfillment of scripture and the accomplishment of salvation of humankind,” and Johann Olearius’ *Biblische Erklärung: Darinnen, nechst dem allgemeinen Haupt-Schlüssel der gantzen heiligen Schrift*—“Biblical Interpretation, in which is found a general key to all the Holy Scriptures”), we know Bach also owned Johann Müller’s anti-Jewish *Judaismus oder Judenthum— Das ist, Ausfuhrlicher Bericht von der Jüdischer Volcks Unglauben, Blindheit und Verstockung* (“Judaism or Jewishness—that is, a Detailed Report on the Jewish People’s Unbelief, Blindness and Obstinacy”)? Or that (and this may be guilt by association, it is true) Erdmann Neumeister, the eminent Lutheran divine, several of whose cantata libretti Bach set, was one of the most ferociously anti-Jewish figures of Bach’s era? Or that Bach himself, thanks to the fact that Leipzig was closed to Jews except during the three trade fairs held there every year, had (presumably) little personal acquaintanceship with individual Jews?

And yet: we also know that the Lutheran liturgy as used in Bach’s Leipzig contained no prayers referring to the “perfidious Jews” and that the standard liturgy manual used there (the *Leipziger Kirchen-Staat*) declared clearly “Oh our sins, our heavy and grievous sins, are the reason [for Christ’s crucifixion]; because of them you were struck and tormented by God.”

We cannot go back, of course. We cannot enter into Bach’s mind, or that of his singers, or that of the congregation that sat in the *Nikolaikirche*’s pews on that long-ago April afternoon, exactly three hundred years ago next Sunday. To paraphrase the Scriptures, between us and them “a great gulf is fixed,” and not just a great gulf of time and cultural evolution. No, we all know what took place over those centuries, and Marissen himself poignantly alludes to it when he baldly states: “the phonemes of the German language seem menacing, no matter what words they form—the German language carries the sins of the Third Reich for many people still alive.” But what we can do is delve deeply into the background of a work like the **Saint John Passion**. What we can do, as Saint Peter’s choir and congregation have done, is to think about the meaning(s) and context(s) of John’s Gospel, both at the time when it was written, in Bach’s time, and in our own. What we can do is *look at the texts* Bach chose as commentaries upon John’s narratives, *think about their meaning* and *put that meaning to work in our lives*.

—Watson Bosler