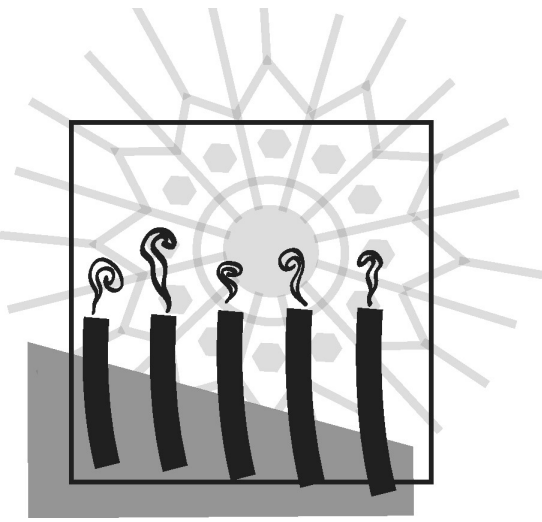


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ON THE JEWS AND THEIR SO-CALLED LIES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL AND BACH'S *ST. JOHN PASSION*

Michael Marissen



Bach's *St. John Passion* was written to serve as an extensive second sermon at Good Friday Vespers in the principal Lutheran churches of eighteenth-century Leipzig. It was first performed on April 7, 1724. The performance of Part One took place shortly before the pastor's hour-long homily, and Part Two shortly afterward. What the congregation heard was a forty-minute recitation of the Fourth Gospel's narrative of the death of Jesus from John 18:1 through John 19:42, surrounded and interspersed with seventy minutes of post-Reformation Lutheran commentary and reflection. The story was told in the somewhat archaic prose of Martin Luther's translation of John's Gospel. Bach set its narration and the direct speech of individual characters as simple speaking recitatives. He set group utterances as highly animated choruses, which today are often called *turbae*, i.e., crowd choruses, even though there is no mention of a crowd in the Johannine passion narrative.

Much of the commentary appeared in the contemporary rhymed and accented verse of eighteenth-century Lutheran poets. Bach set this commentary in the form of emotionally charged solo and choral arias, a type of song within which instrumental ensembles in turn perform episodes with the singers; and ritornellos (nonverbal refrains) on their own. Music lovers generally focus on these marvelous numbers, and it is not surprising that the few excerpts from the *St. John Passion* included on Bach's Greatest Hits albums take their material from this category alone. The remaining commentary was derived from the slightly antiquated rhymed and accented poetry of Lutheran hymn writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Bach arranged these old texts with their traditional melodies as relatively sedate chorales in four-part harmony for the entire ensemble of singers and instrumentalists. Here was the very sound of the church.

Sin in Bach's Passion and the Fourth Gospel

It was of paramount devotional importance for Bach's audiences to receive admonition and comfort in the face of original sin, the doctrine (in Western Christian understanding) that human nature is in its essence wholly corrupted through the Fall. Burdened by guilt, and in every respect at fault, humanity has incurred an infinitely crushing debt. The German word *Schuld*, employed markedly in Bach's *St. Matthew* and *St. John Passions*, carries all three of these meanings. Only God possesses the power to reconcile humans to Himself, and it was for this purpose that Jesus—the Messiah and divine Son of God—died sacrificially, as the Lamb of God on the cross. In the context of Bach's liturgical music, the moral shortcomings and sinful acts of humans are emphatically the byproducts of a root problem, original sin.

The word *sin* crops up only once in the narrative of Bach's *St. John Passion*, namely at movement 21g, when Jesus says to Pilate, the Roman procurator interrogating him for possible rabblousing, "You would have no power over me, if it were not handed down to you from on high [i.e., from God]; therefore, the one who has handed me over to you, he has the greater sin."

In his writings on John's passion narrative, Luther, like many interpreters, advised that often in the Bible the grammatically singular "one" should be understood as a plural.¹ And indeed the ones who hand Jesus over to Pilate, according to John, are "the Jews" and "the chief priests [of the Jews]." Here it is crucial to bear in mind that Bach conceived his *St. John Passion* with the assumption that listeners would be familiar not only with the evangelist's passion narrative but also with the rest of the Fourth Gospel. John 14:6 states that Jesus, sent by God the Father, is "the way and the truth and the life."² Indeed, eter-

nal truth and life are leading concepts in John—to “not believe” in their embodiment, Jesus, is a fundamental sin (John 16:9). Accordingly, even though Pilate has been given power by God to judge the purported evildoer Jesus, the procurator does not escape sin, because he is not aligned with the truth and the life via belief in Jesus. On this account, the “greater sin” belongs to “the Jews.”

The Fourth Gospel and Judaism

Here we enter into significant scriptural material that has registered as emotionally and interpretively controversial only in recent times. Who exactly are the ones said by the Gospel of John to be guilty of “greater sin?” The original Greek text evidently does not mean for its phrase *hoi Ioudaioi* (“the Jews”—nowadays sometimes bowdlerized in translation to “the Judeans,” or “the Jewish leaders”) to include any active followers of Jesus, whatever their cultic or ethnic backgrounds. John identifies these followers of Jesus as “the believers” nearly a hundred times; “the disciples” around seventy times; and as “brothers” a couple of times.³ The Gospel never calls active believers in Jesus *Ioudaioi*.

The word *Ioudaioi* appears about seventy times in John, referring exclusively—and almost always negatively—to worshippers of the God of Israel (including native non-Judeans) who did not yet believe, or no longer believed, or simply did not and would not believe in Jesus. In this scheme of things, certainly some who are exclusively Old Testament worshippers of the God of Israel will come to be believers in Jesus. If they persevere in this belief, however, then they are no longer, and in a sense never had been, Jews. And if they abandon this belief permanently, then they

are no longer, and in a sense never had been, believers.

At John 8:44, another key passage, Jesus says to the Jews, in Luther’s rendering, “You are of the father the devil, and you want to act according to your father’s desire; he is a murderer from the beginning, and is not constituted in the truth, because the truth is not in him; if he speaks lies, then he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar, and a father of liars.”⁴ Consider also John 8:40, in which Jesus says to the Jews, “You are seeking to kill me—this person—I who have said the truth to you.”⁵ At John 8:55, Jesus reiterates that the Jews are liars; this passage appears within the Gospel portion that in Bach’s day was read and preached upon every year in the Lutheran churches on the fifth Sunday in Lent, shortly before Good Friday. Then in John 16:2, Jesus reiterates that the Jews are killers; this passage appears within the portion that was read and preached upon every year on the Sunday after Ascension Day.⁶

Some expositors of the doctrine of original sin famously insist that humans are not sinners because they sin—instead, they sin because humans are sinners by nature and volition.⁷ By a similar logic, the Gospel of John appears to maintain that Jews are not liars and murderers because they lie and murder—instead, they lie and murder because Jews are by nature (and volition) liars and murderers. As such, the Gospel would appear to move well beyond teaching simple disagreement and beyond imparting only prophetic critique—both of which are not ethically troubling—into the teaching of marked contempt, which *is* ethically troubling.

Luther took inspiration from John 8:44 for the title of his infamous screed *On the Jews and Their Lies*, first published in 1543.⁸ Bach

owned two printings of this treatise.⁹ The most fundamental of Jewish lies, in Luther’s reckoning, is that Jesus is neither the Messiah (i.e., God’s anointed king) nor the divine Son of God. It is precisely these two so-called fundamental lies of the Jews that come into focus within the narrative at choruses 21f and 23b of Bach’s *St. John Passion*. In 21f, “the Jews answered” Pilate that Jesus “*has made himself God’s Son*” (i.e., they proclaim that Jesus is not the divine Son of God). And in 23b, “the Jews shouted” to Pilate that Jesus “*makes himself king*” (i.e., they proclaim that Jesus is not the Messiah). Choruses 21f and 23b are correspondingly linked by matching musical settings.

These two movements are given further emphasis by the fact that they appear in the middle of a series of eight musically matched biblical chorus settings in the quasi-symmetrical layout *A/B, C, D to D, C, A/B*. The four choruses 23f/25b and 18b/21b figure at the outer edges of the pattern. Next in from these are choruses 23d and 21d, and choruses 23b and 21f appear in the middle of the series. This sequence of biblical choruses falls entirely within the portion of John’s narrative in which Pilate is on the scene in movements 16a through 25c, and it commences right at the moment that Pilate, on the first of three occasions (see 18a, 21c, and 21e), declares to the Jews about Jesus, “I find no fault in him.”

Bach’s biblical choruses project a ferocity and redoubled insistence that dwarf the settings of previous or contemporary composers. Consider especially the length and relentlessness of 23d, in which “the Jews” are shouting, “Away, away with him; crucify him!” and 21d, in which “the chief priests and the attendants” of the Jews are shouting, “Crucify, cru-



Title page of Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* ("On the Jews and their Lies"), 1543. Source: Wikimedia Commons

cify!" Bach arguably went far beyond the call of duty in depicting Jewish opposition to Jesus, and he is documented as having conducted this *Passion* a good number of times in Leipzig from the 1720s through the 1740s. Be that as it may, in its commentary movements Bach's *St. John Passion* does not meditate either positively or negatively on Jews and Judaism. So far as the commentary is concerned, the Jews are unobserved

and in effect forgotten.

Enlightenment in Leipzig?

One scholar has recently suggested that there appears to have been in the Leipzig of Bach's day a maturing spirit of openness and fairness towards Jews, such that by the 1730s the times had indeed changed and that it certainly would have been unlikely for

example to encounter anti-Jewish reflection within the sermons and the choral music delivered in the city's churches.¹⁰ But a still little-noticed discovery had already created at least some inconvenience for this incompletely established picture of across-the-board progress in Leipzig. A copy of the printed libretto booklets that were made available to the congregants of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig for the 1734 Good Friday passion performance surfaced more than ten years ago in Russia, of all places.¹¹ Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel, *Kapellmeister* at the court in Gotha (about a hundred miles from Leipzig), wrote the text and the music for this work, entitled *Ein Lämmlein geht und trägt die Schuld*. His commentary expresses anti-Jewish sentiment that is a good deal more contemptuous than anything encountered in music known to have been performed in the Leipzig churches in earlier times.

At the eighth meditation in Stölzel's work, for example, the Believing Soul sings, upon Pilate's declaring Jesus to be innocent: "Hear, *dammned Jew*, what a *Gentile/heathen* says here. ... If you won't have Him as King, then He will one day be your stern judge; if His eternal kingdom should not nurture you, *then just go on to hell.*"¹² For whatever reason, the commentary movements in Bach's *Passion*, unlike in Stölzel's, communicate no interest in the supposed perfidy of the Jews. When all is said and done, the transgressors held most pointedly accountable for Jesus's crucifixion in the *St. John Passion* are Bach's intended Christian audiences.

The hymn meditating on Jesus's being struck in the face by one of the attendants of the Jews—movement 11—expresses matters the most forcibly, its "I" referring to Bach's fellow Lutheran congre-

gants: “Who has struck you so? . . . I, I and my sins, which are as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore; they have caused you the sorrow that strikes you and the grievous host of pain.” Such commentary may be a historically unexpected and welcome palliative, but surely it would be ethically careless to suppose that it erases any and all qualms about contemptuous anti-Judaism in Bach’s work. One hopes against hope that a heightened awareness of and attentiveness to Bach’s setting will give scope for seeing, in the words of the great religious scholar Jacob Neusner, “the *St. John Passion* as occasion to identify and overcome anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism — a work of aesthetic refinement and deep religious sentiment.”¹³ **L**

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Endnotes

1. Bach will have at some point encountered this from Luther’s *Sermons*

on the *Gospel of John*, as quoted in the commentary on John 19:11 in Abraham Calov, *Die heilige Bibel nach S. Herrn D. Martini Lutheri Deutscher Dolmetschung und Erklärung* (Wittenberg, 1681–1682), v: 937. Bach’s copy of this Bible (extensively marked with his own annotations) survives and is now housed at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, MO.

2. Bach set many restatements of this selfsame phrase to gorgeous double-choir music in his motet *Komm, Jesu, komm*, BWV 229.

3. Paul Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge, UK: The University Press, 2012), 53–54, 114–17.

4. Luther Bibles of Bach’s day: “Jesus sprach zu den Jüden, ‘Ihr seid von dem Vater dem Teufel, und nach eures Vaters Lust wollt ihr tun; derselbige ist ein Mörder von Anfang, und ist nicht bestanden in der Wahrheit; denn die Wahrheit ist nicht in ihm; wenn er die Lügen redet, so redet er von seinem eigen[en]; denn er ist ein Lügner, und ein Vater derselbigen.’”

5. Luther Bibles of Bach’s day: “Ihr suchet mich zu tödten, einen solchen Menschen, der ich euch die Wahrheit gesagt habe.”

6. The first chorus in Bach’s Cantata 44 is a powerful setting of this vehement text.

7. Augustine is the theologian most often associated with this view. Some of the Greek Fathers, however, did not hold it.

8. Martin Luther, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen—Neu bearbeitet und kommentiert von Matthias Morgenstern* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2016), *passim*.

9. Martin Luther, *Aller Deutschen Bücher und Schrifften* (Altenburg, 1661–1664), viii: 208–274; *Aller [Deutschen] Bücher und Schrifften* (Jena, 1555–1558; various reprints), viii: 54b–117b (in the reprints, viii: 49a–106a).

10. Raymond Erickson, “The Early Enlightenment, Jews, and Bach: Further Considerations,” *Understanding Bach* 9 (2014): 93–100, at 97; see also Erickson, “The Early Enlightenment, Jews, and Bach,” *Musical Quarterly* 94 (2011): 518–47.

11. Tatiana Shabalina, “‘Texte zur Music’ in Sankt Petersburg: Neue Quellen zur Leipziger Musikgeschichte sowie zur Kompositions- und Aufführungstätigkeit Johann Sebastian Bachs,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 94 (2008): 33–98.

12. Stölzel: “*Verdammtter Jüde* hör, was hier ein *Heide* spricht. / . . . Willst du ihm nicht zum König haben, / So wird er einst dein strenger Richter sein; / Soll dich sein ewges Reich nicht laben, / So geh nur in die *Höll hinein*.” This movement’s title is listed as “*Verdammtter Jüde* hör” in Shabalina, “Texte zur Music,” 81.

13. Neusner’s comment appeared within his long blurb for the dust jacket of Michael Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach’s St. John Passion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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