

“Christen, ätzt diesen Tag” BWV 63

1. Christen, ätzt diesen Tag

In Metall und Marmorsteine!

Kommt und eilt mit mir zur Krippe
Und erweist mit frohen Lippen
Euren Dank und eure Pflicht;
Denn der Strahl, so da einbricht,
Zeigt sich euch zum Gnadenscheine.

2. O selger Tag! o ungemeines Heute,
An dem das Heil der Welt,

Der Schilo, den Gott schon im Paradies
Dem menschlichen Geschlecht verhieß,
Nunmehr sich vollkommen dargestellt
Und suchet Israel von der Gefangenschaft und
Sklavenketten
Des Satans zu erretten.
Du liebster Gott, was sind wir arme doch?
Ein abgefallnes Volk, so dich verlassen;
Und dennoch willst du uns nicht hassen;
Denn eh wir sollen noch nach dem Verdienst zu Boden
liegen,
Eh muss die Gottheit sich bequemen,
Die menschliche Natur an sich zu nehmen
Und auf der Erden
Im Hirtenstall zu einem Kinde werden.

1. Christians, engrave [for eternal remembrance]¹ this day
[Of Christ's birth] in metal and marble.

Come and hurry with me to the manger
And demonstrate your thanks and your duty
With joyous lips;
For the stream [of wisdom's glory]² that breaks forth there
Reveals itself to you as the light of grace.

2. Oh blessed day! Oh rare, this day,
On which the salvation of the world,

The “Shiloh” [messiah],³ whom God promised to the human
race
Already in paradise,⁴
Now has presented himself [as] perfect⁵
And seeks to rescue Israel
From the captivity and the slave's chains of Satan.
You dear God, what are we wretched [ones], though?
A backsliding⁶ people who abandon you;
And nonetheless you do not want to hate us.
For before we should else, by merit, lie [defeated] on the
ground,
The deity must, before [that], condescend
To take human nature upon himself,
And on earth,
In the shepherd's stall, become a child.

¹Lines 1–2 draw for their sense on the sentiments of Job 19:23-24, “Ach dass meine Reden ... mit einem eisern Griffel auf Blei und zum ewigen Gedächtnis in einem Fels gehauen würden!” (“Ah that my utterances ... were incised with an iron stylus on lead and, for eternal remembrance, in a rock”).

²The sense of this line draws on Wisdom 7:24-25, “die Weisheit ist ... ein Strahl der Herrlichkeit des Allmächtigen” (“the [spirit/personification] of wisdom is ... a stream of the glory of the Almighty [God]”).

³“Schilo” is a German transliteration of the Hebrew word “shiyloh” as employed in Genesis 49:10, a passage the meanings of whose Hebrew text is now unknown and much contested, and which in the German of the Luther Bibles in Bach's day reads “Es wird das Scepter von Juda nicht entwendet werden ... bis dass der Held [‘Schilo’] komme [or, in some Luther Bibles of Bach's day, instead of the subjunctive, the indicative: ‘kommt’]” (“The scepter will not be taken away from [the lineage of] Judah ... until the [peace-instituting] hero come [or: ‘comes’]”). In Christian interpretation, this “shiyloh” has traditionally been taken to refer to God's messiah, Jesus.

⁴This promise is narrated in Genesis 3, where the first humans, Adam and Eve, disobey God in “paradise” (the garden of Eden) by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When confronted by God, Adam says Eve gave him to eat, and Eve says that she was duped by a serpent into eating. In 3:15, God then says to the serpent, in the rendering of the Luther's Bibles of Bach's day, “Ich will Feindschaft setzen zwischen dir und dem Weibe und zwischen deinem Samen und ihrem Samen. Derselbige soll dir den Kopf zertreten, und du wirst ihn in die Fersen stechen” (“I will put enmity between you and the woman [Eve] and between your seed and her seed. This same [seed] shall trample your head, and you will sting him in the heels”). In traditional Christian reading, the serpent is the devil/Satan. In Lutheran reading, the seed of Eve who tramples Satan's head is God's messiah, Jesus (the “hero”/“Shiloh”), and the stinging of the seed's heels refers to Satan's persecuting Christ and his followers.

⁵This line derives its sense from Colossians 1:28, “auf dass wir darstellen einen jeglichen Menschen vollkommen in Christo Jesu” (“[We preach about Christ] so that we may present every person [as] perfect in Christ Jesus”).

⁶The expression “ein abgefallenes Volk” here apparently means not “a fallen people” in the sense of “a people who have fallen from a state of grace and yielded to sin” but “a fallen-off people” in the sense of “a rebellious/backsliding people.” The word “abgefallen” is often used with this latter sense in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day.

O unbegreifliches, doch seliges Verfügen!

3. Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget,
Was uns itzo widerfährt.
Drum lasst uns auf ihn stets trauen
Und auf seine Gnade bauen,
Denn er hat uns dies beschert,
Was uns ewig nun vergnüget.

4. So kehret sich nun heut
Das bange Leid,
Mit welchem Israel geängstet und beladen,
In lauter Heil und Gnaden!
Der Löw aus Davids Stamme ist erschienen,
Sein Bogen ist gespannt, das Schwert ist schon gewetzt,
Womit er uns in vor'ge Freiheit setzt.

5. Ruft und fleht den Himmel an,
Kommt, ihr Christen, kommt zum Reihem,
Ihr sollt euch ob dem erfreuen,
Was Gott hat anheut getan!
Da uns seine Huld verpfleget
Und mit so viel Heil beleget,
Dass man nicht g'nug danken kann.

6. Verdoppelt euch demnach, ihr heissen
Andachtsflammen,
Und schlagt in Demut brünstiglich zusammen!
Steigt fröhlich himmeln

Oh incomprehensible yet blessed ordinance⁷ [of God's]!

3. God, you have well ordained this
That now befalls us.
Thus let us always trust in him
And rely on his grace,
For he has bestowed on us
This that now delights us eternally.

4. So let the anxious sorrow
With which Israel [has been] made afraid and burdened
Now today turn itself
Into none other than [salvational] well-being and grace.
The Lion [of Judah, Jesus],⁸ from David's lineage, has
appeared;
His [i.e., Jesus's] bow is drawn,⁹ his sword is already
sharpened¹⁰ [to conquer death,]
Whereby he restores¹¹ us to our former¹² freedom [from sin,
as before the Fall].

5. Call to and entreat heaven;
Come, you Christians, come to the ring-dancing;¹³
You shall rejoice on account
Of what God has done today.
For his favor sustains us
And supports [us] with so much [salvational] well-being
That one cannot sufficiently thank [him].

6. So redouble yourselves, you ardent flames of devotion,

⁷“[Das] Verfügen” (literally, “[the] ordaining”) is evidently employed here for “die Verfügung” (“the ordinance/provision”).

⁸The “lion” here is “the Lion of Judah,” a messianic title that is understood to refer to Jesus in Revelation 5:5, “Siehe, es hat überwunden der Löwe, der da ist vom Geschlecht Juda, die Wurzel Davids” (“Look, [Jesus] the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered [death]”).

⁹“Sein Bogen ist gespannt” does not mean “His rainbow has arched”—see in fn. 10, below, the phrase's derivation from Psalm 7:13.

¹⁰The sense of this line is derived from Psalm 7:13 in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day, “Will man sich nicht bekehren, so hat er sein Schwert gewetzt, und seinen Bogen gespannt, und ziele” (“If [a wicked] one does not want to turn himself [to God], then he [God] has sharpened his sword, and tautened/drawn his bow, and taken aim”). The cantata librettist applies these sentiments to the baby Jesus, the son who is understood to be of the same essence as God the father of the previous movement, and who will conquer death and restore humanity to its prelapsarian state.

¹¹The verb “setzen” is apparently used here in its sense of “zurücksetzen” (“restore”).

¹²The word “vor'ge” means not “future” but “previous” or “former.”

¹³“Reihen” was usually given as “Reigen” in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day (both words mean “ring-dancing”), but Bach also gives “Reihen,” e.g., in his setting of Psalm 149:3 in the motet “Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied” BWV 225, at the phrase “sie sollen loben seinen Namen in Reihen” (“they [the saints of God] shall praise his name in ring-dancing”). In the Lutheran churches of Bach's day this ring-dancing could be associated with a manger procession in the Christmas liturgy.

Und danket Gott vor dies, was er getan!

7. Höchster, schau in Gnaden an
Diese Glut gebückter Seelen!
Lass den Dank, den wir dir bringen,
Angenehme vor dir klingen,
Lass uns stets in Segen gehn,
Aber niemals nicht geschehn,
Dass uns der Satan möge quälen.

And in humility fervently light up¹⁴ [your ardor].
Climb joyfully heavenward
And thank God for this that he has done.

7. Most High [God], look in grace upon
This fervor of the souls bowed down [before you].
Let the thanks that we bring you
Sound acceptably before you;
Let us always walk in blessing,
But [let it] never, no never come to pass
That Satan might torment us.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV63> for an annotated translation

¹⁴The separable verb “zusammenschlagen” would be rendered literally “to strike together,” and if this verb were used in connection with fire, it would ordinarily be within something along the lines of “Stahl und einen Feuerstein zusammenschlagen um Feuer zu fangen” (“to strike steel with a flint to catch fire”). But in this cantata it is the flames themselves that “strike together,” i.e., to produce an intense light. In older German, the expression “Das Feuer schlägt zusammen” was sometimes employed to refer to a “helles Aufleuchten des Feuers” (“bright flash/illumination of fire”).