

Spring 2018

“Is redemption of all the world here?”

Samantha Cobb
Whitworth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cobb, Samantha, ““Is redemption of all the world here?”” Whitworth University (2018). *History of Christianity II: TH 314*. Paper 24. <https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h/24>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](#).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of Christianity II: TH 314 by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

“Is redemption of all the world here?”

In the spring of 1995, three Jewish students of the Swarthmore College Chorus refused to sing in their April concert, which was to present Bach’s *St. John Passion*.¹ Their reason: this musical depiction of the Passion held anti-Semitic undertones, representing the ways in which the narrative of Christ’s crucifixion has been used against Jews in the past. The action of these three students sparked a campus-wide debate over the issue of how Jews were perceived in both Bach’s music and in modern culture. The discussion over anti-Semitism in Bach’s music, and in Christian theology in general, is not new. The unfortunate reality remains that historically, Christians have all too often held a negative, or even demonizing, posture towards the Jewish people. In light of such horrific events as the Holocaust (or Shoah, as it is called by many Jews), anti-Jewish language and ideologies is an issue that can no longer be ignored, particularly when looking at such important cultural relics as Bach’s music. In a careful analysis of Bach’s compositions, one can see that the anti-Semitic undertones which have plagued the Christian Church from early on, found their way into Bach’s music, but only at acceptable times as dictated by the liturgical calendar.



Allegory of the Salvation of Mankind c. 1586 by Hieronymus (Jerome) Wierix. From The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). Representative of the largely anti-Jewish culture within Christianity at the time. Moses is depicted on the left in a demon-like manner, accompanied by the Law and death. Jesus sits triumphantly on the right with the Gospels and life.

First, it must be noted that there is one particularly tricky aspect in studying anti-Semitism, and that is determining a definition. Due to the complex nature of the issue itself, and how the persecution of the Jewish people is wrapped in historical, cultural, ethnic, and racial settings, a wide variety of proposed definitions have developed amongst scholars. However, for the purpose of this essay, the explanation as found in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* will be used to define anti-Semitism at its core as “hatred of the Jews, or the projection of stereotypes on the Jewish people as a whole that portray them as essentially evil.”²

In order to fully understand the emergence of anti-Jewish sentiments in some of Bach’s works, the story and reasoning behind these sentiments within Christianity must first be discussed. The Old Testament depicts many situations in which the Jewish people were oppressed, leading up to the Roman Empire. However, it is the depiction of a certain animosity between Jesus and Jewish leaders in particular New Testament passages that unfortunately became the grounds for hatred against Jews to bubble up. The Gospel of Matthew describes a

¹ Christopher Shea, “The Passion at Swarthmore: 3 Jewish members of chorus refuse to sing Bach work on Christ’s crucifixion.” *Chronicle Of Higher Education* 41, (March 3, 1995): A33.

² *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Jewish crowd calling for Jesus' crucifixion, saying "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). Jesus tells the Jews in the Gospel of John that "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (8:44). In Acts of the Apostles, Peter in his first sermon tells the mostly Jewish audience that they "crucified and killed" Jesus (2:23), while the first martyr Stephen tells Jewish authorities before he is killed, "You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to" (7:51). While scholars can debate whether the books of the New Testament are inherently anti-Jewish or not, the unfortunate reality is that these passages and others were used by early church fathers, such as Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, and John Chrysostom, to support anti-Jewish ideology within the Church.³ This animosity towards Jews, rooted in the idea that they were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, continued to proliferate and be passed down to the time of Martin Luther.

Martin Luther, father of the Lutheran tradition that eventually produced Bach, made little effort to hide his opinions about the Jewish people. Already, medieval thought coupled with superstition had produced a culture of serious animosity towards Jews. Judaism was associated with sorcery, and thus was believed to come straight from Satan. Such ridiculous rumors as Jews reenacting the killing of Jesus through the murder of children and use of their blood in rituals became very popular.⁴ Jews were condemned as murderers, children of Satan, and usurers. By the time of the Reformation, most Jews in Europe had been forced to convert, driven out, or killed.⁵

This did not stop Luther from voicing his own warnings against the "enemies of Christ."⁶ Although when it comes to this issue Luther is probably most remembered for publishing "On the Jews and Their Lies," that writing is a rather terrifying culmination of anti-Jewish sentiments that began very early in his ministry. Besides perhaps being influenced by medieval culture, the basis for Luther's anti-Jewish viewpoint comes from his extreme Christological reading of the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. To Luther, each Old Testament story points directly to Christ and the Church, leading him to separate between "faithful Israel" with its hope of the coming Messiah, and later "anti-Jesus" Judaism with its rejection of the Messiah.⁷ It is the people of this later Judaism that not only killed Jesus, but in Luther's eyes continually refuses to give up the Law in favor of the grace of Christ. Here, Luther's deep commitment to distinguishing between law and grace - old and new covenant - shows through. Perhaps then, it should be less surprising that Luther would despise Judaism so much. To him, they represented what kept him in bondage for so long - the Law, that which to Luther only leads to death.

Regretfully, it is this ideology of a Jewish people that both rejects the grace of God and is consequently rejected by God that led Luther down a vengeful path toward the end of his days. His last writings are concerned with the many dangers of the Jews, even going so far as to say

³ Robert Michael, "Anti-Semitism and the Church Fathers," in Perry and Schweitzer, eds. *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries*, p. 104 - 115.

⁴ Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism : Against His Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 20.

⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

“They have been blood-thirsty bloodhounds and murderers of all Christendom for more than fourteen hundred years in their intentions, and would undoubtedly prefer to be such in their deeds”⁸ and “we are even at fault for not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord...”.⁹ While these words were largely ignored during Luther’s life and immediately following his death, they were picked up with a vengeance at the end of the 16th century.¹⁰ The Pietism movement brought considerable tolerance to the end of the 17th century and early in the 18th century, even expounding on some of Luther’s more tolerant comments to promote better attitudes towards Jews.¹¹ However, the second half of the 18th century brought another resurgence in anti-Jewish thought. In Germany, the pastor Erdmann Neumeister in particular used inflammatory language against the Jews, reviving the old medieval superstitions of murderous rituals.¹² Interestingly enough, it is this same Neumeister whose poems Bach adapts for several of his cantatas.¹³ It was in this setting, amidst differing views of the relationship between Christians and Jews, that Bach composed his works.

Although Bach was a prolific composer who was known to churn out a full cantata per week, he wrote next to nothing about his own life or personal thoughts. Thus, very little can be confirmed beyond speculation on his personal theological views. Nonetheless, as the church musician, Bach would have been trained in Lutheran theology, and his music would have been expected to provide reflections on particular texts, much like a sermon.¹⁴ With all this in mind, the second part of this article will not make any claims towards Bach’s personal beliefs regarding Jewish-Christian relationships, but instead will endeavor to uncover the theological point of view Bach’s music reflects towards Judaism.

One particular piece of music Bach composed that deals with Judaism is the lesser known cantata “*Schauet doch und sheet, ob irgendein Schmerz sei wie mein Schmerz*” (BWV 46). Written for the tenth Sunday after Trinity, this day on the Lutheran liturgical calendar focused around the Biblical passage of Luke 19:41-48 and dealt with the destruction of Jerusalem and punishment of God.¹⁵ The cantata begins with a lament over Jerusalem’s destruction, as foretold by Jesus. The lyrics are very clear on why God brought this destruction to the Jews, saying “You do not heed Jesus’ tears, so heed now the flood-waves of jealous fury that you yourself have drawn over you...”¹⁶ Lines such as “irreparable loss of the Most High’s favor” and “God...breaks the staff in judgement” signal a sense of eternal judgement against Jerusalem.¹⁷

⁸ Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism*, 85.

⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁰ Johannes Wallmann. “The Reception of Luther’s Writings on the Jews from the Reformation to the End of the 19th Century.” In Ditmanson, ed., *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relations*, 126.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 129.

¹² *Ibid*, 131.

¹³ Richard Taruskin, “Chapter 7 Class of 1685 (II).” In *Music In The Seventeenth And Eighteenth Centuries*, (Oxford University Press: New York, USA, n.d.)

¹⁴ Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music : Principles and Implications* (Lutheran Quarterly Books. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 281.

¹⁵ Michael Marissen. *Bach & God*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 118.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 98, 118.

The musical setting accompanying these lyrics is in a minor key and lower octave, with a complexly layered melodic line. The music then shifts, in both instrumentation and lyrics, to bring focus on the contemporary church. The words warn of God's punishment for unrepentant sinners, but also give hope that God wishes to rescue believers. The instrumentation plays in a higher octave, directly contrasting the previous section.¹⁸ While the cantata may not explicitly condemn Jews like many theologians of Bach's day, the contrast of lighter and darker instrumentation along with an association of eternal wrath with the sins of the Jewish people promotes a distinctly negative view towards Judaism.

In looking at the implied anti-Jewish sentiments of cantata 46, how then is Bach's "St. John Passion" to be interpreted? It is, after all, primarily this work that garners the most attention and controversy around anti-Semitism. Many people, whether scholars or Jews, find the repeated references to "the Jews" in the account of Christ's crucifixion as offensive, and directly pointed against the Jewish people.¹⁹ Considering how the involvement of Jews in Jesus' death has been used in the past to support Jewish persecution, one can see how this might come across as anti-Semitic. However, other scholars argue that this language is taken from the Bible in John's gospel, and Bach actually shifts the focus away from the Jews by adapting and incorporating other pieces of poetry into the piece.²⁰ The clearest example of this is Bach's adaptation of Barthold Heinrich Brockes' poem, which at one point reads "Hurry, you besieged souls, leave Achsaph's dens of murder, come – where? - to Golgotha!" Since Achsaph was one of the Canaanite cities taken over by the Israelites, the line has a distinctive focus on the "murderous dens" of Israel. However, Bach changes this line in the Passion to read "Hurry, you besieged souls, leave your dens of torment..."²¹ The line now can include all besieged souls, whether Jew or Gentile. As a whole, the piece is no doubt hard to listen to. Bach's dark and dissonant musical setting throughout will put any listener on edge. However, in a season devoted to reconciliation, the piece nonetheless seems centered on the theme of redemption. Bach allows the bass soloist to bring this message through, asking in reference to Christ's death, "is redemption of all the world here?" to which the reply that follows is: "yes."²²

In the end, it can be tempting to simplify Bach's music into a simple category of "yes or no" in regards to the portrayed negative attitudes towards Judaism. A more critical review shows that in reality, the issue is more of a "both/and." Some of Bach's pieces, such as the Cantata BWV 46, present a rather negative view of Judaism. In contrast, Bach's "St. John Passion" appears to take much less interest in condemning Jews than it does in convicting all Christians, and calling for the redemption of all people. This still leaves the question of what to do with those compositions of Bach's that reflect an anti-Jewish attitude. Should they continue to be played for the sake of their musicality, or should they be put aside as relics of a backwards theology and culture? On the one hand, Bach's tight interweaving of the music with theological teachings makes the separating out of instrumentation and interpretation rather difficult. On the

¹⁸ Ibid, 109.

¹⁹ Christopher Shea, "The Passion at Swarthmore."

²⁰ Michael Marissen, *Bach & God*, 155.

²¹ Ibid, 156.

²² Ibid, 157.

other hand, is it right to ignore or hide all the ugly aspects of history, particularly within Christianity? These questions are at once challenging, personal, and not at all clear-cut. Still, they must be considered – carefully, honestly, and perhaps with the same goal in mind as Bach's Passions, that of reconciliation.

Bibliography

Gritsch, Eric W. *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism : Against His Better Judgment*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.

The Holy Bible, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2010.

Leaver, Robin A. *Luther's Liturgical Music : Principles and Implications*. Lutheran Quarterly Books. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.

Marissen, Michael. *Bach & God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Michael, Robert. "Anti-Semitism and the Church Fathers," in Perry and Schweitzer, eds., *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries*, 101-30.

Perry, Marvin and Frederick M. Schweitzer, Eds. *Jewish-Christian encounters over the centuries: symbiosis, prejudice, Holocaust, dialogue*. New York : P. Lang, 1994.

Shea, Christopher. "The Passion at Swarthmore: 3 Jewish members of chorus refuse to sing Bach work on Christ's crucifixion." *Chronicle Of Higher Education* 41, (March 3, 1995): A33.

Taruskin, Richard. "Chapter 7 Class of 1685 (II)." In *Music In The Seventeenth And Eighteenth Centuries*, Oxford University Press: New York, USA, n.d.. Retrieved 16 Jul. 2017, from <http://0-www.oxfordwesternmusic.com.library.juilliard.edu/view/Volume2/actrade-9780195384826-div1-07005.xml>

Wallmann, Johannes. "The Reception of Luther's Writings on the Jews from the Reformation to the End of the 19th Century." In Ditmanson, ed., *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relations*, 120 – 136. *The Lutheran Quarterly* (Spring 1987): 72-97.