

COLORADO BACH ENSEMBLE

A Theological Reflection on the Cantata
“O ewiges Feuer, Ursprung der Liebe”
(O Eternal Fire, O Source of Love, BWV 34)

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1. Chorus

O eternal fire, o source of love,
enkindle our hearts and consecrate them.
Make heavenly flames penetrate and flow
through us,
We wish, o most high Lord, to be your temple,
Ah, make our souls pleasing to you in faith.

2. Recitative

Lord, our hearts hold
your word to be the truth:
You want willingly to be among men;
therefore let my heart be yours;
Lord, may you graciously enter in.
Such a sanctuary chosen by you
has itself the greatest glory.

3. Aria

Happy are you, you chosen souls,
whom God has picked for his dwelling.
Who can choose a greater salvation?
Who can count the abundance of blessings?
And this is the work of God.

4. Recitative

If God chooses the sacred dwellings
that he inhabits with salvation,
then he must also pour his blessing on them,
then the seat of his sanctuary is rewarded.
The Lord proclaims over his consecrated house
the word of his blessing:

5. Chorus

Peace on Israel.
Give thanks, for the hands of the Most High that
work miracles,
Give thanks, that God has thought of you.
Yes, his blessing works with power,
to send peace on Israel
to send peace on you.

1. Chor

O ewiges Feuer, O Ursprung der Liebe
Entzünde die Herzen und weihe sie ein.
Laß himmlische Flammen durchdringen und wallen,
Wir
wünschen, o Höchster, dein Tempel zu sein.
Ach, laß dir die Seelen im Glauben gefallen!

2. Recitativo

Herr, unsre Herzen halten dir
Dein Wort der Wahrheit für:
Du willst bei Menschen gerne sein,
Drum sei das Herze dein;
Herr, ziehe gnädig ein.
Ein solch erwähltes Heiligtum
Hat selbst den größten Ruhm.

3. Alto

Wohl euch, ihr auserwählten Seelen,
Die Gott zur Wohnung ausersehn!
Wer kann ein größer Heil erwählen?
Wer kann des Segens Menge zählen?
Und dieses ist vom Herrn geschehn.

4. Recitativo

Erwählt sich Gott die heiligen Hütten,
Die er mit Heil bewohnt,
So muß er auch den Segen auf sie schütten,
So wird der Sitz des Heiligtums belohnt.
Der Herr ruft über sein geweihtes Haus
Das Wort des Segens aus:

5. Chor

“Friede über Israel!”
Dankt den höchsten Wunderhänden
Dankt,
Gott hat an euch gedacht!
Ja, sein Segen wirkt mit Macht,
Friede über Israel,
Friede über euch zu senden.

Our cantata is adapted from a wedding cantata from the Spring of 1726.

- imagery of “heavenly flames” (himmlische Flammen) dominates the lyrics and their musical interpretation in the introductory chorus
- mention of flames from heaven in the account of Pentecost in the Book of Acts, one of the assigned readings for Pentecost: “*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them*” (Acts 2:3–4).
- fire imagery in the original wedding cantata:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
*Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.*
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it. (Song of Songs 8:6–7a)

1. Chorus

- God is metaphorically envisaged as that “eternal fire” who—as such—is the ultimate cause and origin of love itself. We are dealing with a reification
- The metaphor evokes the scene where Moses encounters God as a burning bush that is not being consumed by the fire in Exodus 3:1–6
- the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt is an act of redemption that in the Christian imagination foreshadows the delivery of all humanity from evil and death
- appeal to God to
“enkindle our hearts and consecrate them/Entzünde die Herzen und weihe sie ein”

relates to

“*divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them*” (Acts 2:4).

- Metaphor of the human body as an architectural structure built for worship, the Temple.
- Audience transformed into a sacred place, a location that itself becomes the dwelling-place of God:

“We wish, o most high Lord, to be your temple/Wir wünschen, o Höchster, dein Tempel zu sein.”

- The image derives from

“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16).

2. Recitative

In the recitative of the cantata’s second movement, the lyrics continue to voice the prayers of the gathered community who enjoy the musical performance.

- key phrase from the Gospel text appointed for the Day of Pentecost, John 14:23–31:
“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23),
- the same imaginative word picture of humans as a dwelling-place for God.
- the opening phrase actualizes the words of Jesus:
“Lord, our hearts hold your word to be the truth/ Herr, unsre Herzen halten dir Dein Wort der Wahrheit für.”
- the words of the recitative now paraphrase that promise
“You want willingly to be among men/Du willst bei Menschen gerne sein”
- and in turn express the audience’s intention to indeed love and obey:
“therefore let my heart be yours/ Drum sei das Herze dein.”
- The movement culminates in a solemn yet joyful invitation:
“Lord, may you graciously enter in/ Herr, ziehe gnädig ein,”
- the recitative envisages this event as the greatest of privileges:
“Such a sanctuary...has...the greatest glory/ Ein solch erwähltes Heiligtum Hat selbst den größten Ruhm.”

3. Aria

- develops the joy only anticipated in the second movement:
“Happy are you, you chosen souls, whom God has picked for his dwelling/Wohl euch, ihr auserwählten Seelen, Die Gott zur Wohnung ausersehn!”
- Two rhetorical questions engage the worshipping audience in mental state reasoning:
“Who can choose a greater salvation?/Wer kann ein größer Heil erwählen?” and
“Who can count the abundance of blessings?/Wer kann des Segens Menge zählen?”
- The aria culminates in a quotation from Psalm 11:23:
“And this is the work of God/Und dieses ist vom Herrn geschehn,”

4. Recitative

- the lyrics reflect the perfect contentment that the music and the lyrics of the previous movement had expressed so serenely:
“If God chooses the sacred dwellings..., then he must also pour his blessing on them/ Erwählt sich Gott die heiligen Hütten..., So muß er auch den Segen auf sie schütten.”
- Where God physically dwells, evil and death cannot prevail:
“[the sacred dwellings] that he inhabits with salvation/Die er mit Heil bewohnt.”
- The final phrases of this movement introduce an intriguing twist on the metaphorical theme of the human body as an architectural structure built for worship
“The Lord proclaims over his consecrated house the word of his blessing/Der Herr ruft über sein geweihtes Haus Das Wort des Segens aus.”

5. Chorus

- the closing chorus is as rousing and festive as the first movement, beginning with the sparkling speech act that opens it:
“Peace on Israel/Friede über Israel!”
- speech acts are language events where the pronouncement of certain words calls into existence what is being expressed
- when God proclaims “Peace on Israel,” that peace is indeed thereby conferred upon God’s people, as in the original Psalm 128 that the cantata quotes
- The Psalm begins with the words
“Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you” (128:1–2).
- And it ends with the words of our cantata:
“Peace be upon Israel” (Psalm 128:6).
- the citation of the psalm’s final words in the cantata evoke the theme of happiness that pervades the entire psalm and import all of its promises of bliss
- The natural response to such bliss is thankfulness
“Give thanks, for the hands of the Most High that work miracles/Dankt den höchsten Wunderhänden,”
“Give thanks, that God has thought of you/Dankt, Gott hat an euch gedacht!”
- The celebratory mood of the music underlines the confident celebration of God’s mighty intervention:
“Yes, his blessing works with power/Ja, sein Segen wirkt mit Macht.”
- the lyrics evoke a vision of peace and prosperity, drawing on the Israelite concept of **shalom**

- The divine purpose behind the indwelling of the Triune God in humans at Pentecost that our cantata celebrates is the dissemination of this comprehensive harmony and goodwill upon God's people as a whole:
“to send peace on Israel, to send peace on you/Friede über Israel, Friede über euch zu senden
- Jesus speaks of that otherworldly peace in the assigned Gospel reading for Pentecost:
“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27).
- Cause for celebration indeed.

Our cantata is adapted from a wedding cantata from the Spring of 1726. Bach may have been motivated to re-use this original wedding cantata for the celebration of Pentecost because of the imagery of “heavenly flames” (himmlische Flammen) that dominates the lyrics and their musical interpretation in the introductory chorus.¹ The connection to the biblical texts on Pentecost Sunday lies in the mention of flames from heaven in the account of Pentecost in the Book of Acts, one of the assigned readings for Pentecost: “*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them*” (Acts 2:3–4).

This does not, however, explain the use of fire imagery in the original wedding cantata, where Pentecost did not play a role at all. It is likely, therefore, that the choice of fire imagery in the original wedding cantata has its source in another biblical text, namely the Song of Songs, which is an extended collection of love poetry in the Bible. Celebrating the physical intimacy between a man and a woman throughout its eight chapters, the anthology of love poems in the form of an extended dialogue between a lover and her beloved climaxes on the female lover’s appeal to her beloved:

“Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
*Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.*
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it. (Song of Songs 8:6–7a)

Ideal human love expressed through physical intimacy is an eternal fire indeed, and its consummation in the celebration of a wedding reveals the true source of love, God who inspired it.²

1. Chorus

The glorious opening chorus in the cantata’s first movement is rousing and festive, accompanied by energetic strings, oboes, trumpets, timpani, and continuo, as is appropriate for the celebration of Pentecost, one of the three main feasts in the Church calendar alongside Christmas and Easter.

¹ Alfred Dürr, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Die Kantaten*, 13 ed., *Bärenreiter Werkeinführungen* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1971, 2022), 403.

² Even though the cantata *O ewiges Feuer; o Ursprung der Liebe* derives from what is usually considered a “secular” cantata, the label “secular” is not quite appropriate, because the original cantata (BWV 34a) had been composed for the wedding of an ordained pastor, and it, too, had first been performed in the context of worship, namely a young couple’s wedding service.

There is a sequence of urgent appeals to God, who is metaphorically envisaged as that “eternal fire” who—as such—is the ultimate cause and origin of love itself. We are dealing with a reification—a type of metaphor that reduces an animate person to an inanimate object, in our case envisaging the complex persona of the Christian God as a burning fire. The metaphor evokes a biblical archetype, namely the scene where Moses encounters God as a burning bush that is not being consumed by the fire in Exodus 3:1–6.³

Here God reveals God-self as the origin of love for all oppressed human beings, inaugurating the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, an act of redemption that in the Christian imagination foreshadows the delivery of all humanity from evil and death.

The gathered community then entreats God to repeat in their own time at the Thomas Kirche in Leipzig what happened roughly 1,7000 years earlier in Jerusalem, namely to “enkindle our hearts and consecrate them/Entzünde die Herzen und weihe sie ein” and thereby let the Holy Spirit of God come upon them like the Spirit did back then, when “*divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them*” (Acts 2:4).

The final appeal then blends over into another archetypal metaphor, that of the human body as an architectural structure built for worship, the Temple. Now the combined voices of the chorus embody the community gathered to witness the cantata’s performance and entreat God to transform them into a sacred place, a location that itself becomes the dwelling-place of God: “We wish, o most high Lord, to be your temple/Wir wünschen, o Höchster, dein Tempel zu sein.” The image of human beings as the “temple” of God in turn finds its origin in an imaginative metaphor from the Apostle Paul in a letter to a first-century community of Christian believers in the ancient city of Corinth in Greece: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16).

2. Recitative

In the recitative of the cantata’s second movement, the lyrics continue to voice the prayers of the gathered community who enjoy the musical performance. The words focus on a key phrase from the Gospel text appointed for the Day of Pentecost, John 14:23–31: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23), which belongs to the same imaginative word picture of humans as a dwelling-place for God.

³ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of *the LORD* appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and *the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed*. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! *Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” *And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

The opening phrase actualizes the words of Jesus on the evening before his crucifixion, claiming them as valid for the audience of the cantata then and now: “Lord, our hearts hold your word to be the truth/ Herr, unsre Herzen halten dir Dein Wort der Wahrheit für.”

Since Jesus had promised that he and his Father, the first and the second person of the Trinity, will come to those who love and obey him, the words of the recitative now paraphrase that promise—“You want willingly to be among men/Du willst bei Menschen gerne sein” and in turn express the audience’s intention to indeed love and obey: “therefore let my heart be yours/ Drum sei das Herze dein.” The movement culminates in a solemn yet joyful invitation for a re-enactment of what happened on that original Day of Pentecost, namely for God the Father and God the Son to take possession of their new home in the receptive human heart through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit: “Lord, may you graciously enter in/ Herr, ziehe gnädig ein,” an event that the recitative envisages as the greatest of privileges: “Such a sanctuary...has...the greatest glory/ Ein solch erwähltes Heiligtum Hat selbst den größten Ruhm.”

3. Aria

The centerpiece alto aria, accompanied by two flutes and strings, is particularly sublime and contemplative. The aria in the cantata’s third movement develops the joy only anticipated in the second movement by painting a vivid picture of the newly experienced mental state of those who have received the Holy Spirit of God: “Happy are you, you chosen souls, whom God has picked for his dwelling/Wohl euch, ihr auserwählten Seelen, Die Gott zur Wohnung ausersehn!” Two rhetorical questions engage the worshipping audience in mental state reasoning about their own experience by driving home that their receptivity to the Holy Spirit rewards them with ultimate redemption and an abundance of blessings: “Who can choose a greater salvation?/Wer kann ein größer Heil erwählen?” and “Who can count the abundance of blessings?/Wer kann des Segens Menge zählen?” The aria culminates in a quotation from Psalm 0:0 that makes clear that even this reward comes from nowhere else but God’s own hand: “And this is the work of God/Und dieses ist vom Herrn geschehn,” a phrase that introduces the theological reflections in the next movement.

4. Recitative

In the cantata’s fourth movement, the lyrics reflect on the perfect contentment that the music and the lyrics of the previous movement had expressed so serenely. The lyrics reflect on the causality between God’s powerful physical presence in the lives of the audience and the mental state of bliss that they experience: “If God chooses the sacred dwellings..., then he must also pour his blessing on them/Erwählt sich Gott die heiligen Hütten..., So muß er auch den Segen auf sie schütten.” Where God physically dwells, evil and death cannot prevail: “[the sacred dwellings] that he inhabits with salvation/Die er mit Heil bewohnt.”

The final phrases of this movement introduce an intriguing twist on the metaphorical theme of the human body as an architectural structure built for worship, which until now has envisaged each individual member of the gathered audience of worshippers as “God’s temple” (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:15, discussed earlier). The divine proclamation of blessing “over his consecrated house” now localizes the Thomas Kirche in Leipzig, the venue where the cantata was first

performed, as a “container” that holds the entire audience and thus represents at once each individual member of the audience and all of them together as God’s home in whom he delights, to the extent that God cannot but pour out his blessings, as a natural result of divine benevolence towards his redeemed creatures: “The Lord proclaims over his consecrated house the word of his blessing/Der Herr ruft über sein geweihtes Haus Das Wort des Segens aus.” The “house” has now become a corporate entity symbolizing all.

And as the cantata continues to be performed, as its beautiful sound echoes through the centuries all over the world across space and time, even we ourselves, the audience tonight who enjoy Bach’s beautiful music, are included both in the blissful enjoyment of beauty and artistic talent and in the enjoyment of divine providence. Such is the inspirational power of the fine arts, and of music in particular. And this brings us to the fifth and final movement of the cantata.

5. Chorus

Quite appropriately, the closing chorus is as rousing and festive as the first movement, celebrating divine benevolence with equally energetic strings, oboes, trumpets, timpani, and continuo. The fifth and final movement of the cantata *O Eternal Fire, O Source of Love* ends with an inspirational firework of symbolic meaning and spiritual significance, beginning with the sparkling speech act that opens it: *Peace on Israel/Friede über Israel!*” As the philosophers of language John Austin and John Searle remind us, speech acts are language events where the pronouncement of certain words calls into existence what is being expressed, as for example in the officiant’s words at a wedding. When he or she exclaims: “ I pronounce you husband and wife,” the couple do at that moment indeed become husband and wife, a married couple, simply through the action of proclaiming those words. And so, when God proclaims “Peace on Israel,” that peace is indeed thereby conferred upon God’s people, as in the original Psalm 128 that the words in our cantata quote. The Psalm begins with the words “Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways. You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you” (128:1–2). And it ends with the words of our cantata: “Peace be upon Israel” (Psalm 128:6). At the intertextual level of the quotation, the citation of the psalm’s final words in the cantata evoke the theme of happiness that pervades the entire psalm and import all of its promises of bliss into the joyful celebration of Bach’s masterpiece.

The natural response to such bliss is thankfulness, and so the lyrics give voice to this sentiment by encouraging all who hear it to express their gratitude for God’s miraculous intervention: “Give thanks, for the hands of the Most High that work miracles/Dankt den höchsten Wunderhänden,” repeating the joyful appeal, lest the audience take for granted God’s gracious intervention on their behalf: “Give thanks, that God has thought of you/Dankt, Gott hat an euch gedacht!” The celebratory mood of the music underlines the confident celebration of God’s mighty intervention: “Yes, his blessing works with power/Ja, sein Segen wirkt mit Macht.”

And as a consequence and final cause for celebration, the lyrics evoke a vision of peace and prosperity, drawing on the Israelite concept of shalom, which is so much more than just the absence of hostilities, but rather a mental state of contentment based on a comprehensive vision of human flourishing that encompasses material, social, and personal well-being through a

harmonious environment under the protection of the divine. The divine purpose behind the indwelling of the Triune God in humans at Pentecost that our cantata celebrates so beautifully is the dissemination of this comprehensive harmony and goodwill upon God's people as a whole, and upon each individual member of it: "to send peace on Israel, to send peace on you/Friede über Israel, Friede über euch zu senden, to help us, today, grasp something of that otherworldly peace of which Jesus also speaks in the assigned Gospel reading for Pentecost: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27). Cause for celebration indeed.

Select Bibliography

Dürr, Alfred. *Johann Sebastian Bach: Die Kantaten*. 13 ed. *Bärenreiter Werkeinführungen*. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2022.