

“Gott ist mein König” BWV 71

1. *Gott ist mein König von Alters her, der alle Hilfe tut, so auf Erden geschicht.*¹

2. *Ich bin nun achtzig Jahr,⁴ warum soll dein Knecht sich mehr beschweren?⁵ Ich will umkehren,⁶ dass ich sterbe in meiner Stadt, bei meines Vaters und meiner Mutter Grab.⁷*

**Soll ich auf dieser Welt
Mein Leben höher bringen,
Durch manchen sauren Tritt
Hindurch ins Alter dringen,**

1. *God is my king from of old, who works all salvation² that comes about on earth.³*

2. *I am now eighty years [of age];⁹ why shall your servant burden himself¹⁰ more? I want to turn back, that I may die in my city, near my father's and my mother's grave.*

**If I shall bring higher [the years of]¹¹
My life in this world,
[If] by many an arduous¹² step
[I] press through [further] into old age,**

¹Psalm 74:12. The multiple verses of this psalm in the cantata were probably intended to point to its language (in verses not used in the libretto) of destruction of houses of worship by fire; Mühlhausen, for which this cantata was written, had recently experienced a devastating fire that had destroyed or damaged three churches in the city.

²“Hilfe” in Luther’s biblical German can mean “help” or “salvation,” or both. Luther read Psalm 74 as a prefiguration of God’s bringing Christian salvation.

³The verb “geschichten” (“to occur by higher influence”) is used in older German as a intensified form of “geschehen” (“to happen” or “to occur”).

⁴An adaptation of 2 Samuel 19:35a, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Ich bin heut achtzig Jahr alt” (“I am today eighty years old”).

⁵An adaptation of 2 Samuel 19:35b, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Warum sollt dein Knecht meinen Herrn König fürder beschweren?” (“Why should your servant, in future, burden my lord the King?”).

⁶This is the text found in Bach’s manuscript score and in the 1708 publication of this cantata. The libretto was also printed by itself, separately from the printed music, and it reads “Lass mich umkehren” (“let me turn back”).

⁷An adaptation of 2 Samuel 19:37a, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Lass deinen Knecht umkehren, dass ich sterbe in meiner Stadt bei meines Vaters und meiner Mutter Grabe” (“Let your servant turn back, that I may die in my [own] city near the grave of my father and my mother”).

⁹This is the language of Barzillai the Gileadite, who (as related in 2 Samuel 19) was invited by King David of Israel to become part of the court at Jerusalem but refused the honor on account of his advanced age of eighty years. The present cantata was designed to celebrate the change of town council in Mühlhausen in 1708; its libretto adapts and applies the words of Barzillai’s speech to the situation, it seems, of Adolph Strecker (1624–1708), who was installed once again as Mühlhausen’s mayor in 1708, when he was likewise in his eighties and probably visibly ill.

¹⁰“Sich beschweren” can mean “to attach blame,” or “to burden oneself,” or “to complain.” Here, in context (see also fn. 5 and fn. 9, above), it most probably means “to burden oneself.”

¹¹Keeping God’s commandments is said to bring a longer and better life. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Proverbs 3:2 reads “sie werden dir langes Leben, und gute Jahre, und Frieden bringen” (“they [God’s commandments] will bring you long life, and good years, and peace”).

¹²“Saur” in older German was used variously, including as a synonym for “beschwerlich” (“arduous”); see also fn. 10, above.

**So gib Geduld, für Sünd
Und Schanden mich bewahr,
Auf dass ich tragen mag
Mit Ehren graues Haar.⁸**

**Then give [me] patience; keep me
From sin and shame,
So that I may wear
Gray hair with honor.**

3. *Dein Alter sei wie deine Jugend,¹³ und Gott ist mit dir in allem, das du tust.¹⁴*

3. *May your old age be like your youth, and God is with you in everything that you do.*

4. *Tag und Nacht ist dein. Du machest, dass beide Sonn und Gestirn ihren gewissen Lauf haben. Du setzest einem jeglichen Lande seine Grenze.¹⁵*

4. *Day and night is yours [God's]. You make both sun and stars have their certain course. You set to each land its border.*

5. Durch mächtige Kraft
Erhältst du unsre Grenzen,
Hier muss der Friede glänzen,
Wenn Mord und Kriegessturm
Sich aller Ort erhebt.
Wenn Kron und Zepter bebt,
Hast du das Heil geschafft
Durch mächtige Kraft.

5. By mighty power,
You [God]¹⁶ uphold our borders;
Here [not sword but] peace must glitter¹⁷
When murder and the storm of war
Rises everywhere.
When [enemy] crown and scepter instills trembling,¹⁸
You have wrought salvation
By mighty power.

⁸A stanza of "O Gott, du frommer Gott."

¹³Deuteronomy 33:25.

¹⁴Genesis 21:22.

¹⁵Psalm 74:16-17. Some Luther Bibles of Bach's day read "jeglichen" while others read "jeglichem." Bach's manuscript score and the 1708 printed libretto give "jeglichen," while the 1708 printed score and Bach's manuscript performing part give "jeglichem." The meaning is in any event the same.

¹⁶According to Psalm 147:14, "Er schafft deinen Grenzen Friede" ("He [God] establishes the peace of your border"); consider also the language of Ephesians 3:7, "... nach der Gabe aus der Gnade Gottes, die mir nach seiner mächtigen Kraft gegeben ist" ("according to the gift out of God's grace that is given to me according to his mighty power"). Mühlhausen, for which this cantata was written, had reason in 1708 to fear for its borders in the face of the military aggression of France.

¹⁷The notion that "peace must glitter" may sound strange, and this is apparently the intention here, namely to present a rhetorical inversion: it is the swords and shields of war that glitter. Thus the verb "glänzen" is sometimes used in the Luther Bibles in connection with weapons. For example, Job 39:23b reads "glänzet beide Spiess und Lantzen" ("[against the side of the horse] glitters both spear and lance").

¹⁸Here "beben" is probably intended in its old transitive usage "to instill trembling," here implying threatening.

6. Du wollest dem Feinde nicht geben die Seele
deiner Turteltauben.¹⁹

6. May you²⁰ [God] not give the soul of your
turtledove²¹ to the enemy.²²

7. Das neue Regiment
Auf jeglichen Wegen,
Bekröne mit²³ Segen!
Friede, Ruh und Wohlergehen
Müsse stets zur Seite stehen
Dem neuen Regiment.

7. [God,] crown the new government²⁵
With blessing,
On [its] every path.
May peace, tranquility, and wellbeing
Always stand alongside
The new government.

Glück, Heil und grosser Sieg
Muss täglich von neuen²⁴
Dich, Joseph, erfreuen,
Dass an allen Ort und Landen
Ganz beständig sei vorhanden
Glück, Heil und grosser Sieg.

Fortune, salvation, and great victory
Must daily anew
Gladden you, [Emperor] Joseph,²⁶
So that, in all places and lands²⁷
There may be at hand, all abidingly
Fortune, salvation, and great victory.

¹⁹An adaptation of Psalm 74:19, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day variously reads "Du wollest/wolltest nicht dem Tier geben die Seele deiner Turteltaube/Turteltauben, und deiner elenden Tier/Tiere nicht so gar vergessen" ("May/Might you [I pray] not give to the [wild] animal the soul of your turtledove and completely forget your miserable animal [the pure, innocent turtledove]"). All the "animal" words are given in the singular in the underlying Hebrew text, and where "Tier" is here rendered in German with an "e"-ending, and "Turteltaube" with an "n"-ending, this is simply old-fashioned orthography for a genitive in the singular.

²⁰The expression "du wollest" with complementary infinitive was often employed in prayers and requests, and accordingly "Du wollest nicht geben" is not a statement but a plea; it means "May you not give," not "You may not want to give" or "You would not give."

²¹In the Hebrew Bible, the turtledove was a sacrificial animal of the poor (Leviticus 5:7), used as a metaphor in Psalm 74 for those who had been slain like sacrificial animals by Israel's enemies. In the world of Bach's cantata, this "turtledove" would be interpreted as foreshadowing the innocent church that calls to God for salvation from its enemy.

²²Biblically, this enemy is "der Feind den HERREN schmähet" ("the enemy [who] reviles the LORD") of Psalm 74:18. Bach's audience will have understood the Psalm's "enemy" as a foreshadowing of the godless who revile the church.

²³The printed libretto of 1708 and some modern editions give "Das neue Regiment ... bekröne *der* Segen" ("May blessing crown the new government").

²⁴The printed libretto of 1708 and some modern editions give "von neuem," which is grammatically better than "von neuen." But all the other original sources give "neuen," doubtless to accommodate the need to rhyme with "erfreuen" in the next line.

²⁵That is, the town council of Mühlhausen.

²⁶Joseph I, the Holy Roman Emperor and ruler of the Austrian Habsburg Monarchy from 1705 until his death in 1711. A "free imperial city," like Mühlhausen, was subordinate only to the emperor; a "territorial city," by contrast, was subordinate to a territorial prince. The elaborate printed libretto and extraordinary printed set of musical performing parts were certainly intended as emblems of tiny Mühlhausen's allegiance.

²⁷The more common plural for "Land" is "Länder," but an additional, older German nominative plural is "Lande"; its dative is "Landen." The second syllable of the plural of "Ort" was clipped in this line to accommodate the scansion.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



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