The Early Enlightenment, Jews, and Bach: Further Considerations*

RAYMOND ERICKSON

The question of possible anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism in the music of Bach has been a sensitive issue in Bach scholarship in recent years, especially in the US. I, like many who are conscious of the long tradition of Christian persecution of Jews and the enormity of the Holocaust, was first drawn to this subject by disturbingly powerful performances of the choruses of the St John Passion. But now, without denying history in any way, and without forgetting the antagonisms towards, and oppression of, Jews in Bach’s milieu, but also recognising that without explicit information from Bach himself we cannot really know what he thought in his heart of hearts, I have come to believe that the case for anti-Judaic attacks in the music of Bach remains unproven. At the same time, it is self-evident that all Christian texts are perforce anti-Judaic, since belief in Christ as Messiah involves a rejection of Judaism. But what is at issue here is whether or not works by J. S. Bach contain specific and intentional assaults on Jews beyond simple disagreements on matters of belief.

The evidence for this is both positive and negative, and can only be summarily cited here. On the positive side, we have Bach’s marginal comments in his Calov Bible indicating that he saw the ancient Jewish musicians as models for himself and founders of a tradition he, as a church musician, sought to further in his own career.1 But evidence is stronger on the negative side, such as no documented utterances by Bach against Jews, a lack of explicit anti-Judaic texts in the surviving cantatas and passions (whereas explicit anti-Catholic and anti-Muslim

* This research has been supported from an Emeritus Professor Research Fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In addition to funding two study trips to Germany and Poland, the award has enabled me to engage as research assistants and translators the classicists Cameron Pearson and Emanuele Di Blase as also the native Polish speaker and doctoral musicology student Paulina Piędzia Colon. Finally, I wish to thank Olga Bialer of Warsaw for her excellent instruction in Polish grammar. All have contributed importantly to this continuing study.

1 For example, at 1 Chronicles 25, Bach writes in the margin of his Bible ‘NB Diese Capitel ist das wahre Fundament aller gottgefälliger Kirchen Music, usw’ (Note Well: This chapter is the true foundation for all church music pleasing to God, and so on). A reproduction of the page with this comment is found in Howard H. Cox (ed.), The Calov Bible of J. S. Bach (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), facsimile 110; see also p. 418.
formulations occur in two Cantata texts), an absence in the arias and chorales of the Passions (over which Bach had some control, unlike the canonical, anti-Judaic Scriptural accounts of the passion) of characterisations of the Jews as Christ killers. To be sure, there were books with anti-Judaic themes in Bach’s library, yet we do not know when he acquired them or whether he even read them.

For these and other reasons, then, I came to ask the question: why is there so little anti-Judaism in Bach, who held Luther—who turned viciously against the Jews in his later years—in such high esteem and who lived in a city essentially antagonistic towards Jews? It must be remembered that Jews had long been banned from living in Saxony and were invited to participate in the Leipzig fairs only under strict regulation. A first attempt to look freshly at this issue resulted in an article published in 2011. Here, after a brief review of some of the themes treated in the article, I will discuss new evidence that would appear to support the preliminary conclusions offered there, although the research is still in progress and conclusions are therefore provisional.

***

This project was born several years ago when, preparing a pre-concert lecture for a New York Philharmonic performance of the St John Passion, I chanced upon an article by the Hamburg historian Arno Herzig, who described a Gutachten or learned opinion on the truth of the allegation that Jews needed the blood of Christian children, whom they therefore murdered, for Jewish rituals.

The Gutachten is remarkable in many ways, although it draws extensively on well-known historical information and past writings, most notably those by the

---

2 BWV 18/3 (libretto by Erdmann Neumeister) and BWV 126/1 (from a Luther chorale, whose title in English translation is ‘A children’s song to sing against the two archenemies of Christ and his holy church, the Pope and the Turk’. I accept that some of the Bach cantata texts have passages that can be interpreted as anti-Judaic, but the intent is what counts. Are these texts chosen or formulated simply to attack the Jews, or is their purpose to provide lessons to sinful Christians; in other words, were Bach and his librettists trying to stir up anti-Judaism or were they seeking to make the Lutheran churchgoers better Christians by learning from history as Lutheran theology understood it? It is important to consider the entire text of a cantata.


noted Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil (who himself draws on many previous sources). In the most informed and logically-argued way, the Leipzig theologians refute the various reasons offered for the Jewish need of Christian blood, criticise earlier historical writings by Christians, and attribute much anti-Semitism to simple jealousy on the part of Christians over Jewish wealth. The theologians also point out that popes, Holy Roman Emperors, Venetian doges, other high religious and secular authorities, and even noted anti-Jewish writers had condemned what is generally referred to today as the ‘blood libel’; the Leipzig scholars dismiss the allegation as ‘a tragic monk’s fable’ dating back to the Middle Ages. These ideas were not new, but what is surprising is that the theologians say not a word about conversion of the Jews to Christianity, which is the raison d’être of earlier so-called philo-Judaic writings, such as those by Wagenseil. In fact, the theologians do not criticise Judaism in any way. Although the Gutachten does not explicitly advocate religious tolerance, it does state that all persons deserve equal and fair treatment before the law and that entire communities should not be punished for the transgressions of a single member.

All in all, the very modern style of argumentation in the 1714 Gutachten seem somehow counter to the conservatism for which the University of Leipzig was known. Indeed, there was a popular motto used to describe the intellectual sluggishness of the institution: Lipsia vult expectari (Leipzig likes to wait).

On the other hand, further investigation reveals that currents of the Early Enlightenment—a movement usually associated with western Europe, especially England and Holland—were running through Leipzig in the early eighteenth century and even before, and this is now a primary focus of my investigation. The university had been rocked in the late seventeenth century by the radical ideas of Christian Thomasius (1655–1728); these included (eventually) a tolerant attitude towards Jews (including a denunciation of the blood libel as ‘a pure lie’) and challenges to theological scholasticism. In the end Thomasius was forbidden to teach and publish, so left Leipzig in 1690, ultimately ending up in Halle as a founding member, in 1694, of the law faculty of what soon became the great modern German university. There he was a powerful magnet for students (including many from Leipzig) and he became one of the most influential philosophical minds in Germany and beyond.

Allison P. Coudert, ‘Seventeenth-Century Hebraists: Philosemites or Antisemites’, in A. P Coudert (ed.), Judaeo-Christian Intellectual Culture in the Seventeenth Century: A Celebration of the Library of Narcissus Marsh (1638–1713) (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1999), pp. 43–69, argues among other things that the term ‘philosemite’ is not appropriate for the Christian Hebraists who took a profound interest in Jewish traditions and writings, since their prime objective always was the conversion of the Jews. She also maintains that the frequently made distinction between ‘Antisemitism’ and ‘Anti-Judaism’ is a false one.

At the same time, Thomasius was not an advocate for Jews—he has been described as ‘indifferent’ towards them. He nonetheless defended them against injustices as a matter of principle, just as he did atheists, those accused of being witches, and even bigamists. See Max Fleischmann, ‘Christian Thomasius: Einführung’, in Max Fleischmann (ed.), Christian Thomasius: Leben und Lebenswerk (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1931), pp. 86–8, for a brief but authoritative discussion about Thomasius and Jews.
On the other hand, it seems that Leipzig was not closed to the new ideas emanating from the West. Two of the four tenured theologians who signed the Gutachten, Gottfried Olearius (1672–1715) and Friedrich Christian Boerner (1683–1753), had taken study tours to England and Holland, where they encountered Enlightenment thinking and thinkers. Most likely these included Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) and maybe even John Locke (1632–1704), since Olearius later published translations of Locke’s *Essay concerning Education* and possibly his *Letter on Tolerance*. This takes on greater significance when one realises that Olearius, as Dean of the theological faculty at the time, was responsible for drafting the 1714 Gutachten, which was later published by Boerner in 1751 in a varied collection of theological opinions (see note 5). Let it also be noted that Boerner was the senior theologian at the university during Bach’s entire tenure in Leipzig.

But it was not only the theologians who advocated fairer treatment of the Jews, and from this point most of my information is new. In 1734 there was published in Leipzig a Latin legal disputation presided over by Professor Traugott Thomasius (1709–1775), a nephew of Christian Thomasius who had studied in Halle (c.1729) as well as in Leipzig. The disputation deals with the question of whether the opinion of two Jews is needed to balance that of one Christian in a court of law. It opens with seventeen reasons why Jews are not to be trusted, but this appears to be a rhetorical parade of paper tigers, for the bulk of what follows systematically dismantles the allegations, often using traditional arguments and sources given in the theological Gutachten of 1714. Thus, for example, addressing the accusation that Jews hate Christians, the respondent asserts that ‘one sees very easily that the mutual and internal hatred which thrives among Jews and Christians originates mostly from the Christians themselves’, and goes on to cite several examples. Moreover, in the matter of the ritual murders of which Jews have been accused, the respondent cites specific passages by many sources also used by the Leipzig theologians to deny the truth of such allegations. He also gives a recent example which occurred in 1733 in Poland, saying that ‘it is nothing but a fabrication, derived from the hatred of the Jews’. And to the assertion that Christians have a higher standard of honesty and truth than Jews, the question is raised:

Do you really believe that no trust can be ascribed to someone in court unless he believes in Christ? If this were true, it would follow from an empty premise that no Christian could be a liar, yet, alas!, this is contradicted by daily experience.

8 See the online John Locke Bibliography compiled by John C. Attig, [www.libraries.psu.edu/tas/locke/bib](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/tas/locke/bib), entries 75, 75A, 601, and 601A (accessed 10 January 2014).


10 Ibid., p. 5. Draft translation of this and following excerpts by Cameron Pearson, lightly edited by the author.

11 Ibid., p. 7.

12 Ibid., p. 9.
Finally, it is asserted in this Leipzig legal disputation that:

in our age, more prudent priests no longer incite the masses against the Jews, nor do they sow hate; there is no doubt that the enmity among many has cooled down that which once blazed. For if Jews, from whose blood our Saviour is born, see themselves close to being loved by Christians, certainly they will be unable not to love us in return.13

This last statement is an unequivocal assertion that times have indeed changed and certainly suggests that attacks on the Jews, including in the churches through sermons and music, would be less likely than might have been the case in earlier times.

The theological Gutachten of 1714 and the legal Disputation of 1734 are not the only evidence of a new, if tentative, spirit of openness and fairness towards the Jews in Early Enlightenment Leipzig. No less an influential figure than Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–65) argued for more tolerant views and behaviour, and in literature both Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–69) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), writing in the late 1740s, portrayed Jews as honourable people for the first time in German literature.14

The existence of less prejudicial attitudes in the university (but not necessarily among the townspeople and civic authorities) having been established, the question necessarily arises about the attitude of August the Strong, Elector of Saxony (as Frederick August I) and King of Poland (as August II), towards the Enlightenment and towards the Jews. It is known that he sought to modernise the economy of Saxony and the curriculum of the Saxon universities in Leipzig and Wittenberg, and it was the Dresden court that sought to win Christian Thomasius back to Leipzig.15 Despite the negative opinions of past historians, one has the sense that August was genuinely interested in governing well both Saxony and the Polish Commonwealth, in improving their economies, and in settling disputes among different constituencies.

Nonetheless, as regards August II and the Jews, the record is mixed. The king did not lift the ban forbidding Jews to live in Saxony, although he gave special permission to the Munzjude Gerd Levi to live in Leipzig despite local objections, and richly rewarded the court Jew Behrend Lehmann for finding the money that

13 Ibid., p. 8.
14 For Gottsched and Lessing, see Erickson, ‘The Early Enlightenment, Jews, and Bach’, 529, 534, and 543, n. 47, and 546f., n. 70. On page 529 it is asserted that Lessing’s play Die Juden (1749) was the first instance in German literature of a Jew being treated as an honourable person. However, I have since learned that that distinction likely belongs to Christian Fürchtegott Gellert’s Leben der Schwedischen Gräfinn von G*** (Leipzig: Wendler, 1748). See Detlef Döring, ‘Der aufgeklärte Jude als aufgeklärte Deutscher. Aron Solomon Gumpertz, ein jüdischer “Liebhaber der Weisheit”, in Korrespondenz mit Johann Christoph Gottsched’, in S. Wendehorst (ed.), Bausteine einer jüdischen Geschichte der Universität Leipzig, Leipziger Beiträge zur jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur, 4 (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006), pp. 451–82 (see note 7 of the Döring’s article). I have not seen the publication, but Prof. Döring kindly gave me a typescript of his contribution.
enabled August to win the Polish crown. He often, but not always, acted in favour of the Jews against the Leipzig Town Council, motivated primarily, one suspects, by practical economic rather than high-minded philosophical considerations. There is, however, clearly more to be learned here; for example, I have yet to read closely the measures pertaining to Jews in Saxony as formulated in the *Codex Augusteus*, the comprehensive collection of laws of electoral Saxony first published in Leipzig in 1724.

In Poland it is much the same story, insofar as August was often, but not always, a friend of the Jews. Jews were able to have their own courts, were freed from certain types of taxation, and August, who spent most of his time in Poland rather than Saxony, often intervened on their side when disputes arose. On the other hand, he gave certain towns/cities the right to refuse Jews residency, sometimes ordered their expulsion, and was not above keeping a Jew captive until baptised. These and many other details of August’s interaction with Polish Jews are found in Jacek Krupa’s recent book, *Żydzi w Rzeczypospolitej w czasach Augusta II, 1697–1733* (Jews in the Polish Commonwealth in the Age of August II, 1697–1733).\(^{16}\)

The situation that is most likely to have given rise to August’s commissioning of the 1714 Gutachten demonstrates the ambiguities of the King-Elector’s behaviour. This was probably instigated by a particularly famous and drawn-out legal process from 1710 to 1713 against a group of Polish Jews from Sandomierz, who were accused of ritual murder and who died horribly from torture or were executed. (The person behind the trials was the determined Father Stefan Żuchowski (1666–1716), whose writings still serve as one of the main sources of the history of ritual murder trials in Poland. It should be pointed out, however, that some secular officials, especially the governor (wojewoda) of Sandomierz province, defended the Jews and condemned Żuchowski, albeit in vain.) The diocesan library in Sandomierz contains extensive documentation on the trials and also on Fr. Żuchowski; these records are, incidentally, currently being digitalised. It seems likely that the commissioning of the Gutachten by August II, then in Poland, was a political response to the trials, since the Dresden copy of it discovered by Arno Herzig is preserved in the *Geheimes Kabinett* (privy council) archives. The original, now lost, would have been sent to August in Poland, where he might have shown it to religious and political leaders in an attempt to protect the Jews against further ritual murder accusations. To what degree the Gutachten had this effect is unclear, since it did not put a complete stop to the allegations—as the 1734 legal Disputation cited above shows. Indeed, in 1712, while the trials of the Sandomierz Jews were still in progress, August II ordered them to be expelled from Sandomierz and their synagogue burned. And yet these measures (and similar ones ordered elsewhere) were never carried out, leaving one to wonder why.\(^{17}\)

The final issue I would like to touch on is a reassessment of Barthold Heinrich Brockes, whose famous passion poem of 1712, *Der für die Sünden der Welt

---

\(^{16}\) Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2009.

\(^{17}\) Krupa, *Żydzi w Rzeczypospolitej w czasach Augusta II* (see note 16), p. 43.
gemarterte und sterbende Jesus, was such an important source for Bach that Daniel Melamed has characterised Bach’s *St John Passion* as ‘a Brockes setting using John’s narrative’.\(^{18}\) In my 2011 *Musical Quarterly* article I raised the possibility that the inference of Jews as Christ killers that some find in the poem may be the result of two editorial errors involving the use of the rubric ‘Kriegsknecht’ instead of ‘Knecht’.\(^ {19}\) This causes the Brockes Passion text to imply that Jews who heard Christ teaching in the temple included soldiers—Jewish soldiers—who later tortured and crucified Him. This is not what the scriptures say, however, either in the original Greek or in Luther’s German translation, and my suggested substitution, whether right or wrong, at least brings the poem into line with the biblical text.

But what can we know about Brockes’ attitude toward the Jews? My ongoing study has revealed that he was clearly a man of the Early Enlightenment. In his student years he travelled widely throughout Europe, not only in Germany but Italy and England. It is interesting that he visited the Leipzig fairs, but showed no interest in its university. Instead, he preferred to spend two years in nearby Halle, where he attended lectures in philosophy and law by Christian Thomasius and other liberal thinkers. His library catalogue is strong on newer philosophical works by Thomasius, Locke, Bayle, Christian Wolff, et al., but weak on religious works. Incredibly, there is nothing by Luther, for example, and there is a virtual absence of polemical religious writings.\(^ {20}\) I have found no references to Jews in those writings of his that I have looked at, including the twenty-three contributions to the progressive journal *Der Patriot*, a publication of the Patriot Society. This was an organisation of leading Hamburg citizens who sought to propagate the views of the just-mentioned Enlightenment thinkers. For this reason, *Der Patriot* was the object of attacks by orthodox Lutheran ministers like Erdmann Neumeister, who also denounced the presence in Hamburg of Jews and other religious minorities.

Brockes was a pious man, if one is to believe his autobiography, and his poetry is filled with sincere religious sentiment, but he seems to have been little interested in doctrine. In 1720 he became part of Hamburg’s secular ruling body, the Senate, which often found itself in opposition to Hamburg’s religious leaders; it is therefore notable that in 1710, two years before Brockes wrote his passion poem, the Hamburg Senate forbade the performance of a passion setting because of its ‘violent invectives and exclamations against Pilate, Judas, [and] the Jews’ which ‘can by no means be tolerated’.\(^ {21}\)


\(^ {19}\) Erickson, ‘The Early Enlightenment, Bach, and Jews’, 523–25.


Finally, Brockes supported the establishment of the first Masonic lodge in Hamburg in 1737, although apparently he did not join it.\(^\text{22}\) The Masons, in theory at least, advocated religious tolerance of Jews, and there were Masons, like Lorenz Christoph Mizler, in Bach’s circle in Leipzig. Mizler moved to Poland in the late 1740s to serve the court there. Moreover, Mary Greer has recently proposed that Bach himself may have been a Mason;\(^\text{23}\) this would have occurred long after he wrote the *St John Passion* and the great bulk of the cantatas, but, if true, it does suggest that Bach may have had a different relationship to the Enlightenment than we have up to now suspected.

\(^{22}\) Information from Mary Greer, who also kindly alerted me to the website [www.hamburg-geschichte.de](http://www.hamburg-geschichte.de), edited by Juergen Wenzel, which includes some information on Brockes and the Masons.