"Exploring Core Narratives: Communal Meanings in the St. John Passion"
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There is an important school of religious methodology that is called "Narrative Theology." A narrative theologian is one who seeks to discover people's belief system--their theologies--through the stories they tell about themselves, about the groups to which they belong, and about the world. It has been long understood by sociologists of religion that one can learn about a person's self concept by hearing how they conceive of God. Narrative Theology would agree, but hold that a narrative provides more useful information about people's understanding of the world and their place in it, than does a didactic description of one's theology.

The narrative of the Jewish people is created through a process called "Midrash." If the Hebrew Bible is the "foundation" of Jewish civilization, which is to say, the textual source that helps define who the Jewish people are, the Midrash consists of all of the stories told about those earlier narratives. I prefer this Hebrew word to the more familiar term "commentary," for it conveys the notion of story telling rather than the more academic sounding enterprises of interpretation and explication.

By means of midrash on a text, one tells a new story about that text. Through that process, what emerges is not only a new level of meaning by which the original text may be understood, but an entirely new story which sheds light on the voice of the commentator, thus creating a new, layer of text.

The original text and its subsequent glosses together form a composite text, which functions on a poetic, imaginative plane, and not bounded by time and space, or normal conventions of authorship. The composite text may be titled a particular people's textual "tradition." When I ask young children to tell the story of a biblical character, Abraham, for example, what I usually hear are these composite texts. Abraham the iconoclast who breaks his father's idols is the product of story telling hundreds of years later than the original biblical source. Abraham, as we know him, is a composite of a millennium of midrash. Most people do not even realize that most of what they know about him doesn't appear in the Bible.

By telling stories, be they the most ancient sources or evolving midrash/gloss/retellings, deeper structures of meaning emerge that shed light on the values structure of the tradition. Story telling helps us discover who we are, how we are connected to our ancestors, and who we can become. It is through our stories that our values are taught. We learn about the value of hospitality, for example, through the many midrashim about two adjacent biblical narratives: Abraham's welcome of guests to his tent, and the counter example of how the people of Sodom treated visitors abusively. By telling these stories, we pass along our values and perpetuate our culture. Truly, Midrash is the rabbinic mode of hermeneutics--the exploration of meaning.

When families celebrate the holidays of their religious tradition by standing or sitting around a sacred object and telling stories about it, they too take part in midrash--an act of self-identification, and identification with their tradition, and they implicitly ponder the relevance and meaning of the story to their own lives. Previous holiday experiences come to mind, along with memories of the generations that came before them, as possibly they themselves celebrated. In this way, emotional linkages are affirmed and sustained across time and place. This is equally true for Jews at Passover Seder as it is for Christians gathering around the Christmas tree. In both cases, families join together in a statement of identity, an expression of membership in their own family and people, and symbolically affirm the basic values of their tradition.
I have attended many seders where, at some point during the evening, participants find themselves telling stories about their own ancestors who first came to this country. The content of such reflections may include personal recollections, but often include comments about the struggles these people endured in the "Old Country" and how their lives were transformed once they became "Yankees." Jews have told such stories in countless ages prior to our time, regarding their emigration from, or immigration to beloved places.

These kinds of stories form glosses, midrashim if you will, upon the Exodus story told formally at the Seder. It is the participation in this midrashic process, the creation of composite stories that helps situate the individual within the larger collective of the Jewish people, as they affirm freedom as a core value.

This act of identification with and involvement in the narrative is central to our discussion today. In his book "Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight," narrative theologian Michael Goldberg offers the term "master story" to describe a tradition's central narrative. This is the narrative that holds the power to elicit feelings of connection, loyalty and involvement on the part of a member of that tradition.

In my presentation today, I will posit that the musical work before us, the St. John Passion, is one midrash in a long chain of midrashim. The lineage begins with the Hebrew Bible's story of the Exodus. The first midrash in this lineage, the New Testament's St. John Gospel, represents the defining moment in the creation of a segment of the Christian Gospel tradition. Bach's work represents a link in a chain that continues today. Between St. John and Bach are a series of glosses, including those of Martin Luther and of composers who precede Bach.

The meaning of each midrash shifts within the context of its time and place. The community within which each midrash is created clearly shapes the nature of that midrash. And the product, in turn, shapes how that community understands its place in the world.

Each of these Christian midrashim also function in relationship to another community, the Jewish people. A sub-narrative is created by each midrash as it serves to define this second group as "other." They do so by playing on a symbolic, notably dark characterization that Christianity historically associated with the Jews, in an act of self-definition.

I will attempt to comment upon the positive narrative of Christianity represented in the evolution of the St. John Passion, as well as the negative narrative which relates to the image of the Jews. I will also comment upon the independent narrative of the Jewish people that is impacted by these midrashim, and finally offer alternatives regarding how I believe we should precede.

Let us begin by returning to the notion of the "master story" offered by Michael Goldberg. Goldberg defines the Exodus, the narrative that is retold at the Passover Seder as the Jewish master story. The message of this story is that liberation from the challenges of living in this world is possible. Important to discussion, liberation is a result of a partnership between God and a collectivity of people, and not a partnership between God and individuals. Humans are seen as inherently good, or at least benign, potentially powerful, albeit not totally independent, and fully themselves only when living as members of the group, not in isolation. God's goal is the realized collective life of the people Israel, living in their own land as free people, as examplar servants to God.
Goldberg offers the Passion-Resurrection as the Christian master story. Here, liberation is expressed through the acts of a God who chooses to lovingly reach out to humanity as an act of grace and caring for the plight of individual human beings who lack their own power to be saved from sin. One person, whose essence is divine, is persecuted and suffers on behalf of humanity so that people may be saved and God's kingdom realized.

Let me explain my assertion that the Gospels may be read as a midrash upon the Hebrew Bible. Midrash was, after all, the means by which most peoples in the Ancient Near East created their narratives. The Hebrew Bible may itself be viewed as a midrash upon previous Ancient Near Eastern traditions. Early Christianity viewed itself as the fulfillment of biblical prophesies. The new group saw itself as God's replacement for the nation of Israel.

The Prophetic mode of explaining why tragedy beset Israel--that they must have done something wrong against God--was adopted as a proof text for the idea that the covenant between God and Israel was over. This broken covenant was to be supplanted by belief in Jesus. The people Israel is replaced by the individual believer. It is not Israel who is the suffering servant of Deutero-Isaiah, but Jesus. Israel becomes like the biblical Pharaoh, the persecutor.

In this process, biblical language has radically changed its cultural and religious referents. The dynamic between humanity and God is substantially altered: human action is replaced by God's grace.

Goldberg, among others, points out the parallels between the two master stories. But rather than suggesting that they together form a Judeo-Christian tradition, he offers that we do best to understand each one as integral to a particular world view. In fact, our respective stories do share narratives that offer an explanation of how the cosmos, and eventually humanity came into being, but even here our traditions disagree greatly as to the basic message. Goldberg might add that when Jews and Christians join together to listen to a Christian text, clarity about symbolism and meaning is especially important. Both groups must consider each narrative tradition as having internal integrity, if understanding and dialog is to be possible.

In light of Goldberg's thesis about master stories, identity, and meaning, it is not surprising that the Passion stories may not find resonance with many Jews. Some Jews, choosing to identify with what they call universal truths, may experience the Passions differently than do most Jews. It is my contention that every tradition has its own particular lens on universal truths, and that it is a misstatement to say that one can access them without mediation.

By mediation, I simply mean that the way in which we understand reality is culturally bound. There is no way around this. One may identify oneself as a member of universal culture, but my experience is that when Jews say this, the content often sounds rather Christian. Sometimes, it can sound Buddhist or Native American. The nature of post-Modernism is that we believe that we individually choose our perceptual filters, but I think that we greatly overstate the case. Culture is critical to how we see the world. We simply are who we are.

Which returns us to the question of audience, identity and meaning. To conduct dialog between any two traditions and their master stories is already challenging. One could theoretically have a dispassionate dialog about the Exodus and the Passion. But Christian-Jewish dialog is profoundly colored by the two millennium legacy of antisemitism. Since this legacy begins with the St. John Gospel, we must address this legacy.
Religious antisemitism began as anti-Jewish polemic in the era coinciding with the creation of the St. John Gospel. Clearly, this period was a profoundly tense moment in time, as is any point of separation between groups. Every new group sees its ideology as a new paradigm. The founders expect the older group to actively embrace the new ideas and to cease to exist. Paul surely expected the Jews to convert, as he himself did, but he underestimated the power of group identity and the profound nature of the change in world view this would have required.

Unfortunately, the fierce polemics remain with us. They are documented in the St. John Gospel. A story that was intended to document the end of Jewish tradition took on a life of its own, as Judaism refused to yield to the hoped-for conversions. By the time of the St. John, the final of the four synoptic Gospels, the divide had already occurred between the groups, both of whom were subject to the divide and conquer tactic of the Romans. Ironically, it was the Roman empire, and not the Jews who would convert to Christianity little more than two centuries later.

The positive message in the St. John Gospel, of God's love and grace, is paralleled by a shadow message: that the Jews were rogue holdouts against accepting the truth. The vilification of the Jews in the Gospels, quintessentially stated in St. John, demonstrates that at this point in time, there was no longer any real expectation that the story would appeal to potential Jewish converts. Note that this theme is markedly attenuated in the earlier St. Matthew Gospel, the most "Jewish" of the Gospels. Matthew balances his blame of the Jews with a message of responsibility placed upon the disciples of Jesus, notably Judas and Peter.

Contrast this with John, who uses the word "Jew" almost like a generic term of opprobrium to refer to anyone who refuses to accept Jesus as messiah. Interestingly, the text does seem to show less ignorance about the Jewish legal entity, the Sanhedrin, than do the previous Gospels. In St. John, the Jewish leadership protests that they hold no power to inflict capital punishment. This is historically correct.

But the text then uses this disclaimer as a tool against the Jews who are depicted as making a wily attempt to displace responsibility onto the Romans for a murder that they desire. To quote St. John: "Pilate said, 'Take him away and try him by your own law.' The Jews answered, 'We are not allowed to put any man to death.'" Soon after, John continues, "The chief Priests and their henchmen saw him and shouted, the Jews are quoted as shouting: 'Crucify! Crucify!' 'Take him and crucify him yourselves,' said Pilate; 'for my part I find no case against him.' The Jews answered, 'We have a law; and by that law he ought to die, because he has claimed to be Son of God.'"[18:31-32, 19:6-7] Bach's text closely follows the original source.

The anti-Jewish sentiment found in this Gospel proved politically useful for both the Church and for temporal rulers. In earliest days, it helped define the community as Christian, as opposed to the shadow people, the Jews. In later years, popular dissatisfaction on nearly any issue was easily channeled away from responsible parties and against the Jews. This was true whether the events were the blood libels by which the Jews were blamed for the plague, the view of Gregory and subsequent Popes that the Jews should be humiliated yet continually enticed to convert, the attitude of Crusaders who encountered living "killers of Jesus" on their way to free the Holy Land from the Infidels, or numerous assorted persecutions and massacres.

Passion plays, reenactments of the Gospel, were popular entertainment, often times used to fan the flames against the local Jewish populace. Easter was a popular time for these plays, and the St. John Gospel was the liturgical text for this season. That Bach's St. John text
serves to heighten the anti-Jewish dynamics embedded in the drama is obviously problematic.

I do not hold St. John responsible for the historical antisemitism of the Church that postdates his time. But John's role in establishing groundwork for Christian antisemitism is unmistakable. This is the text upon which Bach's work is based.

We are a diverse audience. But much unifies us, for we are not only members of our respective religious traditions, but participants in American culture and people who come together because Bach speaks to us. Through Bach, we identify ourselves as members of a shared community of musical meaning. We, too, share our own narrative. There are some among us who have reflected on the dark side of the meaning of this text, and upon the implications of its recital. Others have not, some by conscious choice, some for no reason at all. Some of us are troubled by the St. John text and its setting, but feel profoundly moved by Bach's other Passion, the St. Matthew. There are some among us for whom St. John is central to their tradition and its master story. There are others for whom the text is anathema. But this evening, we will sit together.

I submit that like religious traditions, musical audiences, regardless of their diversity, may also be considered communities. On the most elemental level, an audience is a group of people brought together by a combination of chance and a common desire to experience something. Tonight, we at will least share an aural experience of hearing Bach, a joy in participating in the ritual of Western musical concert going, and a desire to feel connected to others.

But I choose to use the word "community," which implies more than happen stance and least common denominator commonalities. For one thing, our Bach Society audience is a group that returns again and again, specifically to hear Bach, and not just any music. A segment of us have made a commitment to seek a shared association by joining as members of the Berkshire Bach Society. Some, in fact, commit significant amounts of time to this join enterprise, as active volunteers in its efforts. The level of community in this group, transcending that of a simple audience is, in part, why this Society was able to make the decision to mount a performance that would stir controversy. The fact that we represent more than a typical concert-going audience is important to our discussion.

The language of narrative theology presents a challenge when defining a group like our own, who share a musical interest. Were our musical text comprised solely of words and experiences and not music, it would be easier to define the content of our narrative "text." Because our common medium, music, communicates through a non-verbal language based on imagination, sound associations, and abstract metaphor, it is extremely difficult to describe our "text" in words.

Because tonight's work makes use of highly charged metaphors, associations, and liturgical referents, this complexity grows several fold. There will be great differences between how each of us would describe our collective narrative. This is because there are great differences between us regarding core aspects of our individual identities which come into play as we experience the work. The sum total of these experiences will define our collective narrative "text." For the St. John's Passion audience in Bach's time, of course, these meanings would have been much more simple and consistent.

The reality that our community will experience a work unevenly is hardly unique. An easier case in point is the music of Richard Wagner. Meaning in the Ring text necessarily includes the mythological structure of the narratives, including its antecedents, Wagner's ideology about humanity and the place of the German folk, the responses of the audience in his time,
and the dynamics relating to Wagner's theater. The controversy about Wagner is, of course, heightened by his antisemitism, which was amplified by the later expropriation of the Ring and Wagner by Hitler and the Nazis.

Obviously, differences will exist between listeners, be they Jews, Germans, or others, between Israelis, for whom the public performance of Wagner continues to be banned, Holocaust survivors and others, and between generations. Recent historical events, including the rise of neo-Nazism effects the "text" as well.

Admittedly, by speaking of Wagner, I choose an extreme example. Yet, in the eyes of many Jews, the distance between Wagner and the Holocaust--and the context surrounding the St. John Passion, Easter Passion play traditions, and historical antisemitism is more a continuum than a caesura. Both bodies of music, Wagner and Bach, play a role in defining how Jewish and Christian communities hear the St. John Passion. The nature of this struggle is what brings us together for a symposium.

I suspect that when Bach wrote the St. John Passion, he was unaware that a secular community such as ours today could be his audience. That his audience might include Jews would have seemed highly unlikely. The very concept of a secular setting that was independent of a royal court, itself was a newly emerging idea as the Enlightenment came to fruition. Unlike his more abstract works like the Art of the Fugue, Bach's St. John Passion is a profoundly religious piece intended for a religious Lutheran Christian audience. For that audience, the dramatic enactment of the Passion held profound, and more uniform, personal meaning. The performance and its purpose would have centered around a specific sacred moment with which his text was associated--Easter, offering a very personal textual gloss on what was already an established Passion tradition.

Granted all that I have said, any one of you might reasonable question why I continue to use the term "community" to describe a varied group of listeners to the St. John Passion. Despite our differences, when I look around the room at a Bach Society event, I know that I am among people who wish to create community centered on love of Bach. Whether this particular piece can serve as the basis of sustaining such community is an open question.

Perhaps the best way to address this point and why it is important in relation to the Bach St. John is by speaking personally and autobiographically. Thus, let me place a small piece of my own personal narrative text on the table. Following this, I will turn to Luther and then Bach. I preface these remarks with the observation that what I offer is a slice of my own current midrash on my relationship with Bach and how it relates to the Jewish and musical identities that emerged in my childhood. The inescapable connections with antisemitism, both passive and active will emerge through the telling. I offer my own narrative in part because it is surely not just my own. Of this I am convinced.

I have always loved Bach. I recall in a powerful way my first exposure to the keyboard music. I was seven. My piano teacher of the time, an accomplished pianist and church organist, opened a manuscript on the music stand, and asked me to sight read. It was a simple piece from the Clavier bung of Anna Magdelene Bach: the Musette, I believe. I found myself transfixed, amazed by the glory of the music coming out from my piano. Even to this day I cannot describe in words what I felt.

During the months that followed my first encounter, I literally devoured the music of Bach. Very quickly, I had found my childhood voice through Bach's keyboard works. In the years through High School, this was to change little, and eventually, as my musical interests focused on contemporary music, Bach remained just about the only Classical music that I continued to love to perform.
What did that childhood voice of mine have to say? I believe that I conceptualized the clearly etched polyphonic lines as if they were engravings in glass or stone. I felt them to be indelible messages that bore eternal power. The lines carried me off in my imagination to a place that became and remains one of my life-long homes, a place of magic and majesty, a land where everything exists in symmetry and geometric elegance.

As I matured, however, the voice I found in Bach remained solely within the keyboard music. This is not surprising, because, after all, I was a pianist. But there is more.

I was raised in a neighborhood that was entirely Jewish and Black. The few non-black Christians I encountered were at Julliard, and these children were largely Oriental. I was familiar with Christmas and Easter as cultural phenomena--Christmas as a time of pretty lights, sitting on Santa Claus' lap at Macys, receiving gifts in stockings, and Easter, a season of large dinners at Patricia Murphy's in New York City, and brightly painted eggs. I was unaware of any religious context to any of this.

My first exposure to religious Christianity came in the Julliard Preparatory Division chorus, where I found myself singing carols, chorales, and other works that included words that seemed different and strange to me. I sensed that the words reflected a world view light years apart from my own. I didn't feel threatened by this, but merely confused. It was only when I questioned whether I had to sing them that I discovered that I was from a minority group. The answer to my question was an astonished "yes, you must if you are to remain a member of this acclaimed chorus." That settled that.

As the years passed, experience after experience reminded me that Bach's religious vocal works told a story, and that it was not my story. In Junior High School, like many Jews, I finally refused to sing the words to Christmas music, and I found myself in a crisis with teachers and administrators that was settled only by my decision to agree to sing. This crisis was occasioned by the fact that I had no choice but to sing music that affirmed beliefs that were in conflict with my own, even if I respected others who held those beliefs. I privately chose not to comply, and instead to mumble or leave out words that felt particularly offending--Mary, Jesus, lamb, Christ.

I experienced a real tension in these experiences because I was a serious young musician, and I had a particularly strong loyalty to Bach. And I found myself feeling like an outsider specifically in relationship with what I loved the most. Bach's Chorales themselves seem to be creating the problem. This conflict presented me with a terrible choice--to either think of the religious vocal music as "other"--or to think of myself as "other." The latter was an impossibility for a growing child to develop a healthy sense of self. Unlike an adult, who can suspend questions of self and belief, to enter into another musical world as a visitor, a child simply cannot do so with any ease.

It was around the same time that I began to learn about antisemitism, something that I had almost never known growing up in Queens, NY. I learned that there was a deep painful resonance for Jews in the words of the Gospels. I learned, for example, that the Blood Libels and other Medieval anti-Jewish accusations and persecutions that centered around Easter were initiated and fanned by Gospel preaching.

Soon after, I read the Gospel texts for the first time, including the St. John text. I was amazement to discover that there existed a tradition that considered my people--and by extension--me, murderers of their God. I learned about the Crusades and about generation after generation of anti-Jewish pogroms, riots, and mass murders, often political in purpose, but associated rhetorically with supposed religious ideals. Living in the suburbs, I also had
my first personal experiences with antisemitic attacks, including physical assaults in school and desecration of our property at home. I began to move away from active Jewish identification and involvement. I also began to lose interest in Bach.

My point is that Christian religious music is, in general, not neutral for Jews. This true of even text settings that do not vilify Jews. For many Jews, Christian texts and music exist within a context of historical coercion, if not oppression. When we turn to musical texts that actively vilify Jews, the ante is obviously substantially raised, where the stakes were already high.

I close these personal remarks by noting that a few years later, during college, I first sang the St. John Passion, as a member of the chorus. The work was new to me. I decided to not ever read the text in English. I chose to ignore the obvious message in the choral chant of the Jewish mob. In that moment, its meaning didn't matter to me. I only wanted to feel at home within the abstract flow of the music. I found the piece to be absolutely glorious. I sang it in as much innocent bliss as I could muster, by choice. I began to identify myself as a lover of the St. John Passion. While painting houses one Summer, I began to play recordings of Bach Cantatas as background music. I found them similarly wonderful, albeit a bit foreign. My favorite Cantata at the time was "Christ Lag in Totesbonden." I had not a clue what it was about, and I damn well didn't want to know.

In more recent years, I have made my peace with much of Bach's vocal music. My record collection includes many Cantatas. I find the St. Matthew Passion to be a deeply moving, loving requiem. As you can see, a number of years ago, I returned to active involvement with Judaism. And today, I am a rabbi. Here I am, a liberal religious Jew and rabbi whose major musical loves include contemporary music and Bach. With the instrumental Bach, I am thoroughly at home, and with his vocal music, I am making my peace. What has changed, as I now approach the St. John Passion, is that I now insist on entering Bach's "text" consciously in a way that maintains my own full integrity as a Jew.

I also want to meet Bach in a way that maintains his integrity, to the degree we can ever know what this requires. My personal goal is finding a ground for the kind of honest and complete meeting that was not possible between Christian and Jew in Bach's day. To be honest, I do not know whether such a meeting between the religious Bach of the St. John, and myself is possible.

And so, if I could speak with Bach, I would ask him what the literal St. John gospel story line meant to him? Was his metaphoric and personalized casting of the text intended to supplement, sharpen, or, draw attention away from the literal text? If draw attention away, did he feel at all uncomfortable with the literal narrative? What informed his choices?

What was the true nature of his personal spirituality when he wrote the St. John? Was it different than when he composed the St. Matthew? Was he indeed the "fifth evangelist," as his recasting of the St. John Gospel might suggest, or is this a misguided, romanticized notion? Was he familiar with Jews or Judaism? What did the word "Jew" mean to him as he made use of it in the St. John? Did he personally know Jews? Did he see them as living representations of the highly negative characters in the New Testament? Would any of this matter to him? What would he think about the concerns that bring us to this symposium, today?

Having spoken about myself, a Jew, let me turn to Martin Luther's story. Luther lived two centuries prior to Bach. It is not widely known that Luther was a semitophile throughout much of his career. During his Thirties, he was sympathetic to the Jews in his dismay with what he viewed as the intolerance of the Church. When he was Forty, Luther foreshadowed
the contemporary "Jesus was a Jew" school of thought. He asserted that the Jews were
correct in rejecting what he termed "papal paganism," saying: "if I had been a Jew and had
seen such fools and blockheads teach the Christian faith, I should rather have turned into
a pig than become a Christian." Luther was not known for his subtlety. There were Church
authorities who subsequently referred to him as a "half Jew." Luther also loved the Hebrew
Bible, and although his Hebrew skills were weak, he wrote an important German translation.

In his theological outlook, Luther was motivated by the weighty burden he perceived evil to
be as it pressed upon humanity. He experienced the attitude of the Catholic Church to be
overly negative and saw its focus on penance and indulgences as only adding to the burden.
Luther described humanity in a more positive light than he believed did the Church, holding
that "at every moment we are both saint and sinner." Our tendency to sin, he taught, is
forgiven through baptism, although we yet require forgiveness for individual sinful acts, and
our saintliness is solely because of God's grace.

Luther sought to define God as gracious because he believed that God loves humanity, but
also because he held that humanity's deep dependence upon grace was the only
counterbalance we have to the tendency to align ourselves with evil. Faith is everything. I
hear these themes in Bach's St. Matthew Passion, in its expression of deep sorrow for the
death of Jesus, and its message of hope that Jesus can help free people from sin and offer
support as they each "bear their own cross."

Luther held, however, that lacking faith, there is no saving from sin and the pull of evil.
Thus, Luther saw the Jews as believing in what a Lutheran colleague of mine described as
the "right God," but as non-believers, lacking in the understanding that could save them
from a total fall. Luther's pro-Jewish sentiments were thus tempered by another agenda, his
hope to missionize the Jews. Few would suggest that this agenda was not present all along.
But as his career progressed, this agenda became more explicit and his support for Jewish
rights became increasingly dependent upon the assumption that Christian tolerance would
help the Jews see the light.

As Jews increasingly resisted his attempts to convert them, and following on his
excommunication from the Church, Luther turned more and more hostile. The target of his
attacks began to shift from the Church to the Jews, whom he now referred to as "stiff-
necked... iron hearted and stubborn as the devil," "thieves and brigands," "venomous and
virulent" and "disgusting vermin." Forced labor and banishment was now his prescription,
and the rulers of Saxony followed his advice. Incidentally, Luther's attacks on the Jews have
very recently been disavowed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the largest Lutheran
denomination in America.

The parallels between Luther's relationship with the Jews, and the relationship of early
Christianity with Judaism of the first three centuries are telling. In both cases, conversion of
the Jews was desired and aggressively attempted. Late in each relationship, when Christian
hopes for the conversion of the Jews failed to come to fruition, St. John and subsequently
Martin Luther began to write vicious anti-Jewish polemics. Similar to early Christian
midrashim on the Hebrew Prophets, The Concord, a core Lutheran document of faith,
describes Israel, corrupt and fallen, as an examplar of divine judgment, a living symbol of
what can happen if one fails to accept faith in Jesus.

The Passion story was liturgically important to Martin Luther. He viewed the Passion, for
many centuries already a part of Christian liturgy, as a vehicle for addressing the faith
concerns of individual worshippers. Luther identified with the dualism of St. John, that is,
the split between the material and the spiritual. He associated the material with Jews, or more
broadly, the opponents of Jesus depicted in John. The spiritual he associated with the cross
and faith. The crucifixion and faith in Jesus has the power to uplift humanity out from the material. These become core themes in Bach's St. John and his depiction of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion as representing the triumph over sin.

Bach inherited a long-evolving tradition of Passion setting. This tradition began with recitation, on to dramatic reading. Around the time of Luther, polyphonic writing added emotional power as Passion settings sought to strengthen the connection between individual worshipper and the narrative. Schutz and others carried this tradition further, preparing the way for Bach. Compositions in this style alternated among soloistic recitative, choral passages, and highly instrumental sections. The Pietism of the time brought personal religious emotionalism to a new height. To achieve this, the biblical text was supplemented with contemporary expressive poetic pieces, as we see in Bach's St. John and St. Matthew's Passions.

The heightened personal piety that we find in Bach's St. John Passion is an exemplar of this movement. Witness the opening choral text: "Herr, unser Herrscher... Lord, our master, whose glory fills the whole earth, show us by your Passion that you, the true eternal Son of God, triumph even in the deepest humiliation." The answer to this petition, sung above driving instrumental figures, comes late in the work, as a resounding "yes" in the words "It is accomplished."

In the St. John Passion, the goal is for the individual worshipper to affirm that his or her personal liberation will surely be accomplished, as a consequence. The worshipper is to identify with the suffering of Jesus, who triumphs as a result of his tribulations. The Arias, intense expressions of spiritual longing, are placed strategically around the dramatic narrative. The chorales drive the point home, not unlike a Greek chorus, offering poignant commentary that takes on a timeless quality. The cumulative effect is to help the worshipper experience personal healing and salvation from sin, and true spiritual freedom from the material, by virtue of Jesus' torments and crucifixion. The tone is triumphant, and there is a one-to-one correspondence between the symbols of Jesus' experience and their effects on the worshipper.

While Bach's focus is the worshipper and not the Jews, Bach draws deeply upon Luther's recast Johnine theology associating Jews with the material. Bach appropriates Luther's assertion that Jesus' afflictions are at the hands of the Jews, a people who are symbolic of the dangers of the material and of its sinful pull. Bach's inherited palette includes the use of the word "Jew as a device," and a highly negative characterization of the collective Jews as a dramatic tool. It is through this use of symbolism that Bach depicts the intense pathos of Jesus' suffering, the depth of his persecution by the people, both central to his message.

The central dramatic focus of the St. John Gospel, the final of the four synoptics, is the conflict between Jesus and the Jews: the plotting of the Jews against Jesus and the final drama. As I have noted, this is so very different than the St. Matthew Passion. In the St. John, Bach narrows the focus even further, to the final drama bringing the issue into even greater relief. Thus, the negativity of the Jews is highlighted, especially their stubbornness, vindictiveness, and they unwillingness to either see the light or stand up to Pilate on behalf of Jesus, and we might suppose, anyone but themselves. The rule of the mob is symbolized in one word: "Jew."

Of significant concern to me is that this resource bank of symbols are among the stock caricatures of Jews over the ages, especially as filtered through Luther and the Pietism of the day. Bach's musical genius, hopefully not seeking to grind an ax against Jews, at least unconsciously serves to raise a tradition of Jew hatred to new artistic heights. It is a testimony to Bach's genius that these symbols and characterizations are so effectively
utilized. A question for me is "how integral are these symbols to Bach's metaphoric structure?" Is his basic message dependent upon them? Are they separable? I will soon return to this question.

Today, the situation for me is this: the more closely I attend to the words, the more alienated I find myself feeling from the work. It is no longer possible for me to return to blissful innocent listening. At best when I listen, I feel invisible. On one level, this is all right, for it is legitimate to be a visitor in someone else's culture, and to listen and try to understand. On the other hand, in this piece, I hear my ancestors being spoken at in defamatory ways, almost as if their negative nature is inherent to the natural order.

The result is that I come out feeling somehow complicit in granting legitimacy to what is certainly a proof text of a horribly negative historical legacy that has been perpetuated at the expense of my people. I imagine Native Americans sitting before the television watching an old Western that features their ancestors scalping White settlers, a show that professes to be a morality tale about and for White people, and feeling as if their very being is under assault.

For me, the situation is even more complex. I not only live fully in Western society, but I identify myself as a composer, listener, and even advocate of the Western musical tradition. I live simultaneously within two cultures, Jewish and American. I live in a society that holds that the two are mutually compatible. American law maintains my right to live free from duress as a Jew, and there is no reason today that I should face the kinds of choices that required Mahler or Schoenberg to convert. I see myself as a member of the Bach-loving community that is present here today. I experience the music of the St. John powerfully. And I feel deeply torn.

With this much said, let me now try to identify some of the questions that would hope that we might ask:

1. Can we not just go on and let the music speak for itself, the dilemmas of the text and the complex tradition it represents noted and put on the back burner? If so, can we yet consider ourselves a "community" operating with a shared narrative text, or are we "just" an audience here to experience a musical work as individual listeners?

2. Should this piece simply not be banned from performance, at least in secular settings? Should its performance be limited to sacred renditions in church settings during Easter week? Would this not deprive Bach lovers of a great work? And could this not, for some, perpetuate the ancient tradition of Easter Passion plays that can serve to offer support to anti-Semitic impulses and sentiments?

3. Considering that this Passion is a midrash on a series of previous texts, can its problematics be corrected by revising Bach's text? Would excising and replacing certain words, effectively removing the Jews as targets, address our concerns? Can the symbolic structure stand, rebuilt? Is Bach's meaning structure dependent upon the symbolic use of the Jews? Would changes serve to highlight the problems rather than remove them? Would Bach's musical integrity remain in tact, or would emendation disembowel Bach's work?

The questions I feel the need to ask include whether texts to which great music has been set can be reconstructed; whether they can be read in a non-literal manner that at best transcends, or, alternatively, obfuscates the literal story line; whether the narrative may be retold in a way that smooths or removes the violence of the imagery; or, alternately, can a counter-text be created that turns the offending imagery on its head entirely. The latter
would substitute a contemporary religious value structure for the older one, a task that is legitimate within a tradition that sees itself as living and evolving.

Let us remember that Bach himself constantly musically revised his own works, including the St. John. He also regularly recast the works of other composers. If Bach be thought of as the great musical recycler, can we more comfortably consider emending a text that he set?

Because I do not believe that biblical texts are divinely authored or that they represent absolute truth, I can entertain making textual emendations in sacred literature, especially liturgy. In my view, the sacredness of a text or object is heightened, not lessened by its closeness to us. I am interested in its function as a living symbol. If I can say this about an ancient sacred text, I can even more easily say the same about a newly composed musical text setting.

What stops me from easily making changes in texts is that as a composer, I honor the integrity of the artist, and I can appreciate the wound that poetry and music suffers when others attempt to make emendations. Witness the great musical creations by committee under Stalin. Is this simply a free speech issue? If so, I believe that it is often the case that "more speech" can counteract speech that offends. Obviously, I consider the issues to be more than freedom of expression.

What of the question of "ownership" of a sacred text, if one might call it that? Who holds the right to make decisions about the destiny of a Gospel text? Is this the sole province of the collective group of those who consider it to be their core narrative? If so, did Bach act as an empowered Lutheran rather than as a composer-at-large when he set Picanter's poetic rendering of the St. John Gospel? If he had the right to gloss the inherited text, can we claim the right to further emend his text today? Who "owns" Picanter's libretto, a midrash on the Gospel? Do we as a Bach society have the right to emend this text?

Ultimately, the St. John is a musical work, and as such, it is the inheritance of all of us. As a community of Bach lovers, I believe that musicians and students of Bach must take it in hand to make emendations in the St. John Passion. I believe that it is the responsibility of this Bach society to consider doing so, were it to present this work in the future. We would not be the first to emend the St. John. Admittedly, I have not seen the results of such emendations. But if we are a community and not just a consumer organization, we must show responsibility to the core human and artistic concerns before us.

Naturally, emendations would have to be achieved through a studied reading of all the issues that are being discussed today, and as the product of a profound understanding of Bach. I personally conclude that alternate, non-oppressive symbols exist for the concept of "material," and that there is the strong possibility that Bach's work can be sustained.

Were I to emend this work, I would remove every reference to the Jews and their leadership, the Priests. Let the mob be called what it is, a mob. If its leaders be demagogues, name them as such. If this work is about the triumph of the spiritual, symbolized by the cross, over the material, let this theme find foils in symbols other than the Jews. I have no doubt that gifted poets with an appreciation of Bach can offer new meaningful and artistically effective symbols.

I recommend the option of emendation because I fear that the alternative unnecessarily perpetuates hurt, undergirds ideologies of hatred, and ultimately compromises the music's humanity. To do less than at least consider emending this text, one generation after the Holocaust, is, to my mind, unthinkable.
Removal of the words "Jew" and "High Priest" from the symbolic structure of the St. John cannot excise the legacy perpetuated by the presence of these words in the piece for more than 250 years. Bach's symbolism, once again, draws upon an ancient demonization of the Jews that is forgotten only at great risk. On one hand, this shadow needs to be erased. On the other hand, we must find ways to memorialize the original text and all that it represents. It is my contention that these issues can be effectively addressed in program notes and in symposia such as this.

Our goal as a community of Bach lovers is to serve the ultimate aim of great art--to inspire humanity to seek its highest potential for goodness, peace, and love. Fully exploring the music and its implications, and potentially, emending the text may, in fact, bring us to a deeper understanding of this work. My own study has done just that. And for this fact, I am grateful.

As lovers of music and of Bach in particular, this work is our inheritance. How we perform and sponsor its performance has important implications for issues of identity, community and meaning. We owe it to Bach to take seriously the meaning and implications of his work for our time.
Postscript

Bach revised his St. John Passion several times during his career. One manuscript varies from another in significant ways, include different arias and chorales. As far as I can tell, the presentation of the Gospel narrative remains constant. An interesting side note: Mendelsohn's manuscript of the St. Matthew, used during its 19th century revival under his baton deletes the Gospel story from that work!

It is not my intention to suggest that Bach's text be replaced for all time with a new "approved text." Rather, I would hope to see the creation of several versions, including more than one emendation, alongside Bach's text. Concerns and sensibilities, musical, sociological, and otherwise, change from one era to the next. Even prayerbooks-- including translations into English, diction of English passages, supplementary readings, song selection, and ideological issues--tend to have a "shelf life" of no more than 20 years. The same is true for musical interpretation. Note the rise and decline in popularity of the "original instrument" movement in Baroque and Early Music performance during the 1980s.

It is also true that the first generation of audiences listening to an emended Bach text would be consciously aware of the changes. Afterall, wouldn't most listeners know who is "really" speaking when the blood thirsty mob calls for the crucifixion.

With this "Emperor's New Clothes" issue in mind, my goal is to change how audiences will hear this work in future generations, more than I hope to "fix" it for listeners today. Granted my previous comment about changing trends, this may sound contradictory. I do believe that ultimately, we are attempting to address long standing historical issues that never seem to go away--issues of hatred and antisemitism. Concerns about oppression and hatred tend to easily be swept under the carpet. I would hope that if future audiences were to voice fewer concerns about these issues than do we, our work today would offer a strong reminder about their urgency. Finally, were antisemitism and xenophobia to disappear in the meantime, our concerns would remain an important historical footnote, a memorial, if it were, to one of the tragedies of previous ages.