

## On “der Held/Löwe aus Juda” by Thomas Braatz

Source: Lucia Haselböck, *Bach-Textlexikon: Ein Wörterbuch der religiösen Sprachbilder im Vokalwerk von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Bärenreiter, 2004), p. 138.

### Lion

Based upon its power and strength, the lion is considered in fairy tales and myths as the king of animals. It served as such in ancient religions as a guard before temples to ward off any demons. As a symbol of might and justice, the lion lay before the thrones of the pharaohs and before King Solomon. In Christian mythology the lion, like the serpent, had an ambivalent nature. Due to its strength, it was a symbol of the enemy, particularly of the devil:

**2 Kings 17:25** When they first moved in, they did not worship the LORD. So the LORD sent lions among them and the lions were killing them. (2Ki 17:25 NET)

**Daniel 6:4-24** <sup>4</sup> Consequently the supervisors and satraps were trying to find some pretext against Daniel in connection with administrative matters. But they were unable to find any such damaging evidence, because he was trustworthy and guilty of no negligence or corruption. <sup>5</sup> So these men concluded, "We won't find any pretext against this man Daniel unless it is in connection with the law of his God." <sup>6</sup> So these supervisors and satraps came by collusion to the king and said to him, "O King Darius, live forever! <sup>7</sup> To all the supervisors of the kingdom, the prefects, satraps, counselors, and governors it seemed like a good idea for a royal edict to be issued and an interdict to be enforced. For the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human other than you, O king, should be thrown into a den of lions. <sup>8</sup> Now let the king issue a written interdict so that it cannot be altered, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed. <sup>9</sup> So King Darius issued the written interdict. <sup>10</sup> When Daniel realized that a written decree had been issued, he entered his home, where the windows in his upper room opened toward Jerusalem. Three times daily he was kneeling and offering prayers and thanks to his God just as he had been accustomed to do previously. <sup>11</sup> Then those officials who had gone to the king came by collusion and found Daniel praying and asking for help before his God. <sup>12</sup> So they approached the king and said to him, "Did you not issue an edict to the effect that for the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human other than to you, O king, would be thrown into a den of lions?" The king replied, "That is correct, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed." <sup>13</sup> Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the captives from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the edict that you issued. Three times daily he offers his prayer." <sup>14</sup> When the king heard this, he was very upset and began thinking about how he might rescue Daniel. Until late afternoon he was struggling to find a way to rescue him. <sup>15</sup> Then those men came by collusion to the king and said to him, "Recall, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no edict or decree that the king issues can be changed." <sup>16</sup> So the king gave the order, and Daniel was brought and thrown into a den of lions. The king consoled Daniel by saying, "Your God whom you continually serve will rescue you!" <sup>17</sup> Then a stone was brought and placed over the opening to the den. The king sealed it with his signet ring and with those of his nobles so that nothing could be changed with regard to Daniel. <sup>18</sup> Then the king departed to his palace.

But he spent the night without eating, and no diversions were brought to him. He was unable to sleep.<sup>19</sup> In the morning, at the earliest sign of daylight, the king got up and rushed to the lions' den.<sup>20</sup> As he approached the den, he called out to Daniel in a worried voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, was your God whom you continually serve able to rescue you from the lions?"<sup>21</sup> Then Daniel spoke to the king, "O king, live forever!<sup>22</sup> My God sent his angel and closed the lions' mouths so that they have not harmed me, because I was found to be innocent before him. Nor have I done any harm to you, O king."<sup>23</sup> Then the king was delighted and gave an order to haul Daniel up from the den. So Daniel was hauled up out of the den. He had no injury of any kind, because he had trusted in his God.<sup>24</sup> The king gave another order, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the lions' den— they, their children, and their wives. They did not even reach the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones. (Dan 6:4-24 NET)

<sup>NET</sup> **2 Timothy 4:17** But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message would be fully proclaimed for all the Gentiles to hear. And so I was delivered from the lion's mouth!

<sup>NET</sup> **Hebrews 11:33** Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions.

In addition the lion could symbolize the mighty Word of God:

<sup>NET</sup> **Jeremiah 25:30** "Then, Jeremiah, make the following prophecy against them: 'Like a lion about to attack, the LORD will roar from the heights of heaven; from his holy dwelling on high he will roar loudly. He will roar mightily against his land. He will shout in triumph like those stomping juice from the grapes against all those who live on the earth.'

<sup>NET</sup> **Revelation 5:5** Then one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered; thus he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

or the victory of a hero, "the lion from Judah":

<sup>NET</sup> **Genesis 49:9** You are a lion's cub, Judah, from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches and lies down like a lion; like a lioness— who will rouse him?

<sup>NET</sup> **Numbers 23:24** Indeed, the people will rise up like a lioness, and like a lion raises himself up; they will not lie down until they eat their prey, and drink the blood of the slain." (Num 23:24 NET) Commentary: The oracle compares Israel first to a lion, or better, lioness, because she does the tracking and hunting of food while the lion moves up and down roaring and distracting the prey. But the lion is also the traditional emblem of Judah, Dan and Gad, as well as the symbol of royalty. So this also supports the motif of royalty as well as power for Israel.

<sup>NET</sup> **1 Samuel 17:34** David replied to Saul, "Your servant has been a shepherd for his father's flock. Whenever a lion or bear would come and carry off a sheep from the flock."

and:

<sup>NET</sup> **Revelation 5:5** Then one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered; thus he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

## 1. The Lion as the Symbol of Christ

The lion is here related to the Old Testament characterization of the tribe of Judah, to which Jesus belonged (“the young lion”)

<sup>NET</sup> **Genesis 49:9** You are a lion's cub, Judah, from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches and lies down like a lion; like a lioness— who will rouse him?

and to when the Book of the Seven Seals is opened:

<sup>NET</sup> **Revelation 5:5** Then one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered; thus he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

In the Christmas Cantata BWV 63/4 (“Christen, ätztet diesen Tag”), there is the line:

“Der Löwe aus Davids Stamme ist erschienen” [“The Lion from the lineage of David has appeared”].

In the final chorus of the Easter Oratorio BWV 249/11, the witnesses to Christ’s resurrection cry out:

“Eröffnet, ihr Himmel, die prächtigen Bogen, der Löwe von Juda kömmt siegend gezogen” [“Open up your splendid arches, you heavens, the lion of Judah approaches victoriously”].

In the cantata BWV 161/1 (“Komm, du süße Todesstunde”), the librettist Salomon Franck sees before him the personified image of the

“Honig spendenden Löwen” [“the lion who provides honey”] taken from Samson’s wedding:

<sup>NET</sup> **Judges 14:8** Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to see the lion's remains. He saw a swarm of bees in the lion's carcass, as well as some honey.

The cantata text reads:

“Komm, du süße Todesstunde, / da mein Geist / Honig speist / aus des Löwens Munde” [“Come, sweet hour of death, when my spirit will eat honey from the Lion’s mouth”].

## 2. The Negative Image of the Lion – a Metaphor for Satan

As a predator the menacing lion is frequently depicted at the main entrances of churches with its wide-open jaws symbolizing the gaping jaws of hell (“Höllendrachen”). Here the Bible understands the lion to be equated with the dragon:

<sup>NET</sup> **Psalm 91:13** You will subdue a lion and a snake; you will trample underfoot a young lion and a serpent.

<sup>NET</sup> **Daniel 7:4** "The first one was like a lion with eagles' wings. As I watched, its wings were pulled off and it was lifted up from the ground. It was made to stand on two feet like a human being, and a human mind was given to it.

<sup>NET</sup> **Revelation 13:2** Now the beast that I saw was like a leopard, but its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. The dragon gave the beast his power, his throne, and great authority to rule.

In Bach's cantatas the lion appears more frequently with its negative symbolism:

Cantata 153/2: “Mein liebster Gott, ach, laß dich's doch erbarmen, / ach, hilf doch, hilf mir Armen, ' Ich wohne hier bei lauter Löwen und bei Drachen, / und diese wollen mir durch Wut und Grimmigkeit / in kurzer Zeit / den Garaus völlig machen.” [“Dearest Lord, O do have mercy on me; O do help me, poor as I am, ' I am living here among a lot of lions and dragons; with their fury and ferocity, they do want to very quickly do me in completely.”]

Also in Cantata 101/5 “Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott”, the statement based on

<sup>NET</sup> **1 Peter 5:8** Be sober and alert. Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour.

reads:

“Ja, dieser böse Geist, ....sucht uns um unser Heil zu bringen / und als ein Löwe zu verschlingen” [“Yes, this evil spirit,....wants to keep us from being saved and wants to devour us like a lion”].

In the Cantata 178/5 “Wenn Gott, der Herr, nicht bei uns hält” both lion symbols are represented: “the roaring lion” [“der brüllende Löwe”] and “the hero from Judah” [“der Held aus Juda”].

The sharp claws of the enemy “Den scharfen Klauen des Feindes” [“the sharp claws of the enemy”] in the Christmas Oratorio BWV 248/54 are contrasted with the protective angels as related in:

<sup>NET</sup> **Daniel 7:4** "The first one was like a lion with eagles' wings. As I watched, its wings were pulled off and it was lifted up from the ground. It was made to stand on two feet like a human being, and a human mind was given to it.

Page 97

## Hero

This is a metaphor for the victorious Christ with picture associations of the *maiestas domini*, of the supremacy and power of the Lord, of God is light and sun, of the king of heaven and of the hero of all time:

<sup>NET</sup> **1 Samuel 17:52** Then the men of Israel and Judah charged forward, shouting a battle cry. They chased the Philistines to the valley and to the very gates of Ekron. The Philistine corpses lay fallen along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron.

<sup>NET</sup> **Psalms 45:1** *For the music director; according to the tune of "Lilies;" by the Korahites, a well-written poem, a love song.* My heart is stirred by a beautiful song. I say, "I have composed this special song for the king; my tongue is as skilled as the stylus of an experienced scribe." <sup>2</sup> You are the most handsome of all men! You speak in an impressive and fitting manner! For this reason God grants you continual blessings. <sup>3</sup> Strap your sword to your thigh, O warrior! Appear in your majestic splendor! <sup>4</sup> Appear in your majesty and be victorious! Ride forth for the sake of what is right, on behalf of justice! Then your right hand will accomplish mighty acts! <sup>5</sup> Your arrows are sharp and penetrate the hearts of the king's enemies. Nations fall at your feet. <sup>6</sup> Your throne, O God, is permanent. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of justice. <sup>7</sup> You love justice and hate evil. For this reason God, your God has anointed you with the oil of joy, elevating you above your companions. <sup>8</sup> All your garments are perfumed with myrrh, aloes, and cassia. From the luxurious palaces comes the music of stringed instruments that makes you happy. <sup>9</sup> Princesses are among your honored guests, your bride stands at your right hand, wearing jewelry made with gold from Ophir. <sup>10</sup> Listen, O princess! Observe and pay attention! Forget your homeland and your family! <sup>11</sup> Then the king will be attracted by your beauty. After all, he is your master! Submit to him! <sup>12</sup> Rich people from Tyre will seek your favor by bringing a gift. <sup>13</sup> The princess looks absolutely magnificent, decked out in pearls and clothed in a brocade trimmed with gold. <sup>14</sup> In embroidered robes she is escorted to the king. Her attendants, the maidens of honor who follow her, are led before you. <sup>15</sup> They are bubbling with joy as they walk in procession and enter the royal palace. <sup>16</sup> Your sons will carry on the dynasty of your ancestors; you will make them princes throughout the land. <sup>17</sup> I will proclaim your greatness through the coming years, then the nations will praise you forever. (Psa 45:1 NET)

<sup>NET</sup> **Isaiah 9:6** For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us. He shoulders responsibility and is called: Extraordinary Strategist, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>NET</sup> **Matthew 2:2** saying, "Where is the one who is born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>NET</sup> **Mark 15:2** So Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He replied, "You say so."

<sup>NET</sup> **Mark 15:9** So Pilate asked them, "Do you want me to release the king of the Jews for you?"

<sup>NET</sup> **Acts 17:7** and Jason has welcomed them as guests! They are all acting against Caesar's decrees, saying there is another king named Jesus!"

<sup>NET</sup> **1 Corinthians 15:24** Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power.

<sup>NET</sup> **1 John 3:8** The one who practices sin is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was revealed: to destroy the works of the devil.

In <sup>NET</sup> **Psalms 19:5-6** Like a bridegroom it emerges from its chamber; like a strong man it enjoys running its course. It emerges from the distant horizon, and goes from one end of the sky to the other; nothing can escape its heat. the rising sun is compared with the bridegroom coming from his room "Sie frohlockt wie ein Held and läuft ihre Bahn". Baroque poets tried to outdo each other in finding words and phrases to describe the victorious savior: "Todbesieger" ["Conqueror of Death"], "Höllenstürmer" ["hell attacker"], "der Held aus Juda" ["the hero from Judah"], "Stamm der alle Ding erhält" ["the lineage {root, or stem} that maintains everything"], "Der mit dem Wurtzelstand bis in die Hölle reicht und einen Gipfel hat" ["the One who reaches all the way down to hell with his roots and also has a peak"], "der sich dem Himmel gleicht" ["He is equal to heaven"], "Blutbürg" ["the guarantor of our blood"], "Ruhestifter" ["peacemaker"], "der starcke Schlangentreter" ["the strong snake-treader"], "des Lebens Held und Fürst" ["the hero of our lives and our Lord"], "der Herzog unsrer Herzen" ["the duke of our hearts"].

Bach's cantatas also describe the battles of this hero and of this victor Christ who destroys all the chains of sin:

Cantata BWV 178/5: "Der Held aus Juda schützt uns noch." ["The Hero from Judah still protects us."]

St. John Passion BWV 245/30: "der Held aus Juda siegt mit Macht." ["The Hero from Judah mightily achieves victory."]

Cantata BWV 92/3: “Seht aber fest und unbeweglich prangen, / was unser Held mit seiner Macht umfassen.” [“Whatever our Hero has embraced with his might stands resplendently secure and immovable.”]

Cantata BWV 90/4: “Es schützt uns doch der Held aus Israel, / es hemmt sein Arm der Feinde Lauf.” [“The Hero from Israel nevertheless protects us, His arm impedes our enemies free reign.”]

Cantata BWV 184/3: “Zu denen, die in Sündenbanden lagen, / die hat der Held aus Juda schon zerschlagen, / ein David steht uns bei, / ein Heldenarm macht uns von Feinden frei.” [“To those who lay in the bonds of sin, which the Hero from Judah has already broken apart, a David stands with us and with the arms of this Hero he has freed us of our enemies.”]

Cantata BWV 43/5: “Es kommt der Helden Held, / des Satans Fürst und Schrecken, / zu denen, die in Sündenbanden lagen.” [“The Hero of heroes who is the ruler of Satan and his terror is coming to those who lay in the bonds of sin.”]

Cantata BWV 62/3,4: “Der Held aus Juda bricht herein, / den Weg mit Freudigkeit zu laufen / und uns Gefallne zu erkaufen....Streite, siege, starker Held, / sei vor uns im Fleische kräftig.” [“The Hero from Judah approaches mightily to run {His} path joyfully and save us who have fallen....Fight, be victorious, strong Hero and be powerful in the flesh for us.”]

Cantata BWV 63/4: “Der Löwe aus Juda”. [see above]

Easter Oratorio BWV 249/11: “Der Löwe aus Juda”. [see above]

\*NET = The Net Bible