



In 1924 Bach scholar Friedrich Smend discovered an elaborate, palindromic arch form with interlocking symmetries in Part Two of the *Saint John Passion*. A diagram of his findings is given here as Example A. The 26 affected numbers stretch from (in the Bach-Gesellschaft numbering) No. 27 (chorale, “Ach grosser König”) to No. 52 (chorale, “In meines Herzens Grunde”). Centerpiece of the arch is No. 40 (chorale, “Durch dein Gefängnis, Gottes Sohn”). Its text, “Through your imprisonment, Son of God, freedom must surely come to us,” is likewise the central tenet in Christian observance of Holy Week and Easter.

Arrayed in symmetrical fashion around No. 40 are four *turba* settings, Nos. 36 and 44 (the “crucify Him” choruses) and Nos. 38 and 42 (the first accusing Christ of naming himself “son of God,” the second cannily arguing that one who “makes himself a king” is “no friend of Caesar”). The length and hateful intensity of these four numbers have done a lot to provoke modern suspicions of anti-Semitism not only in the Fourth Gospel but also and especially in Bach’s depictions of this mob. They offer a potent contrast to No. 40 and its assertion of human salvation gained through Christ’s suffering.

Further removed from No. 40 are two more pairs of *turba* settings, Nos. 29 and 34 (“give us Barabbas” and “Hail, King of the Jews”), and Nos. 46 and 50 (“We have no king but Caesar” and “Write not, King of the Jews”); all anticipate and continue the affect of the other *turba* choruses. Centered in these distant *turba* pairs are the only two arias in the arch, Nos. 31/32 (“Consider, my soul”/“Behold,” an arioso/aria sequence) and No. 48 (“Run, ye souls whom care oppresses”).

Of what practical use is Smend’s analysis? At the very least, it reveals structural sources of the violence unleashed in Part Two: of the 14 concerted numbers encompassed in the palindrome, more than half are *turbae*. It also points up the care with which Bach distributed his scant relief resources, namely the three chorales and two arias. Finally, it encourages us to search out other linkages between the concerted numbers in this remarkable 26-number sequence.