

“Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot” BWV 39

1. Teil

1. *Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot und die, so in Elend sind, führe ins Haus. So du einen nacktet siehest, so kleide ihn und entzeuch¹ dich nicht von deinem Fleisch. Alsdenn wird dein Licht herfürbrechen wie die Morgenröte, und deine Besserung wird schnell wachsen, und deine Gerechtigkeit wird für dir hergehen, und die Herrlichkeit des Herrn wird dich zu sich nehmen.*²

2. Der reiche Gott wirft seinen Überfluss
Auf uns, die wir ohn ihn auch nicht den Odem haben.
Sein ist es, was wir sind; er gibt nur den Genuss,
Doch nicht, dass uns allein nur seine Schätze laben.
Sie sind der Probestein, wodurch er macht bekannt,
Dass er der Armut auch die Notdurft ausgespendet,
Als er mit milder Hand,
Was jener nötig ist, uns reichlich zugewendet.
Wir sollen ihm für sein gelehntes Gut
Die Zinse nicht in seine Scheuren bringen;
Barmherzigkeit, die auf dem Nächsten ruht,
Kann mehr als alle Gab ihm an das Herze dringen.

Part 1

1. *Break your bread with the hungry, and lead those who are in misery/exile³ into your home. If you see someone naked, clothe him, and do not draw back from [helping those who are off] your own flesh.⁴ Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your health will quickly prosper, and your righteousness will precede you, and the glory of the Lord will take you in.*

2. The bountiful God casts his abundance upon us,
We who without him do not even have breath.
What we are is his; he gives only the enjoyment [of his bounty],⁵
But not such that his treasures refresh only us alone.
They are the touchstone⁶ by which he makes known
That he also provides for poverty's dire need,
As with his generous⁷ hand
He bountifully bestows on us what each requires.
For his lent good we should not
Bring him interest into his storehouse;⁸
Mercy that bears on one's neighbor
Can touch his heart more than any gift.

¹“Entzeuchen” (or “entzeucheln”) is an older form of the word “entziehen.”

²Isaiah 58:7-8.

³The words “in Elend” in older German can mean “in misery” or “in exile,” or both. The Calov Bible in Bach’s personal library glosses this part of Isaiah 58:7 with the comment, “die in Exilio sind, und keine Herberge haben” (“[that is, those] who are in exile, and have no lodging”).

⁴That is, any person you break bread with is a fellow human being and thus of the same “flesh” as you, as Bach’s Calov Bible explains.

⁵This line borrows language from 1 Timothy 6:17, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Gott, der uns dargibt reichlich, allerlei zu geniessen” (“God, who bountifully proffers us things of all kinds to enjoy”). The idea in the cantata line is that God grants enjoyment of his treasures but not ownership of them.

⁶Probably a reference to the wisdom that comes from God, according to Sirach 6:21, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Denn sie ist ein harter Prüfestein” (“For it [i.e., wisdom] is a hard touchstone”).

⁷The word *milde* is often translated here as “gentle.” The word’s less well-known sense, as “generous,” which is much more likely here, is also used in Psalm 37:21, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Der Gottlose borget und bezahlet nicht; der Gerechte aber ist barmherzig und milde” (“The Godless one borrows and [re]pays not; the righteous one, however, is merciful and generous”).

⁸That is to say, any “interest” on the “lent good” should go not to God, but be included among the gifts to one’s “neighbors” who are in need. Compare also Proverbs 19:17, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Wer sich des Armen erbarmt, der leihet dem HERRN” (“Whoever has mercy on the poor is lending to the LORD”).

3. Seinem Schöpfer noch auf Erden
Nur im Schatten ähnlich werden,
Ist im Vorschmack selig sein.
Sein Erbarmen nachzuahmen,
Streuet hier des Segens Samen,
Den wir dorten bringen ein.

2. Teil

4. *Wohlzutun und mitzuteilen vergesst nicht; denn solche
Opfer gefallen Gott wohl.*¹¹

5. Höchster, was ich habe,
Ist nur deine Gabe.
Wenn vor deinem Angesicht
Ich schon mit dem deinen¹²
Dankbar wollt erscheinen,
Willt du doch kein Opfer nicht.

6. Wie soll ich dir, o Herr, denn sattsamlich vergelten,
Was du an Leib und Seel mir hast zugut getan?
Ja, was ich noch empfang, und solches gar nicht selten,
Weil ich mich jede Stund noch deiner rühmen kann?
Ich hab nichts als den Geist, dir eigen zu ergeben,
Dem Nächsten die Begierd, dass ich ihm dienstbar werd,
Der Armut, was du mir gegönnt in diesem Leben,
Und, wenn es dir gefällt, den schwachen Leib der Erd.
Ich bringe, was ich kann, Herr, lass es dir behagen,
Dass ich, was du versprichst, auch einst davon mög tragen.

3. To become, still on earth, akin to his Creator
Merely by shadow/prefiguration⁹
Is, by foretaste, to be [eternally] blessed.¹⁰
To imitate his mercy
Sows the seeds of blessing here [on earth]
That we will reap there [in eternity].

Part 2

4. *Do not forget to do good and to share; for such
offerings are well-pleasing to God.*

5. Most High,¹³ what I have
Is entirely your gift [to me].
If I would desire to appear, thankful, before your face
With [a sacrifice to bring of]
What is [in truth] already yours,¹⁴
You will, however, not desire any offering [of any kind].

6. How shall I sufficiently repay you then, O Lord,
For what you have done, to the benefit of my body and
soul,
Indeed, for what I still receive, and such things not at all
infrequently,
In that at every hour I can still boast of you?¹⁵
I have nothing of my own except my spirit to offer you;
To my neighbor, [I offer] my eagerness that I may be
ready to serve him;
To poverty, that which you have granted me in this life;
And to the earth, if it pleases you, my weak body.
I bring what I can, Lord; let it gratify you,
So that I may someday yield that which you promised.

⁹The words “Im Schatten” are the language of religious “typology,” whereby earlier events and principles act as “types” (or “prefigurations” or “shadows”) for their later, correlated “antitypes” (or “substances”). Romans 5:14 describes the first man Adam as a type of “the one to come” (Jesus, the antitype). The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day use the word “shadow” in this sense, for example, in Colossians 2:7 and in Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1. In appearance the “shadow” may look insignificant, but in essence, by dint of its typological correspondence, it is to be taken as profoundly significant.

¹⁰In this Lutheran devotional idiom, “to be blessed” means “to be saved” (that is, to have a blessed afterlife, eternally in heaven).

¹¹Hebrews 13:16.

¹²Modern editions of the cantata supply the word “meinen,” not “deinen.” These lines are sung twice in the aria, and the word “yours” (“deinen”) is indicated both times in the original performing part that was copied by one of Bach’s students, with no signs of having been revised or corrected, while in Bach’s composing score it clearly reads “yours” the first time and apparently reads “mine” (“meinen”) the second time. “Deinen” is most probably correct; the sense here is that anything one might desire to offer already belongs, in truth, to God.

¹³“Most High” — *elyon* in Hebrew, *hypsistos* in Greek — is used in the Bible as a name for Israel’s God, who dwells on high. In nonbiblical Greek, *hypsistos* was used for Zeus as the most high god.

¹⁴These three lines partly use the language and logic of Psalm 95:2, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Lasset uns mit Danken vor sein Angesicht kommen” (“Let us come before his face with thanksgiving”).

¹⁵A play on the sentiments of 1 Corinthians 4:7, as rendered in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, “Was hast du aber, das du nicht empfangen hast? So du es aber empfangen hast, was rühmest du dich denn, als der es nicht empfangen hätte?” (“But what do you have that you have not received [as a gift from God, as opposed to through your own efforts]? If you have received it, then why do you boast, as if it were not received [as a gift but were your own achievement]?”)

**7. Selig sind, die aus Erbarmen
Sich annehmen fremder Not,
Sind mitleidig mit den Armen,
Bitten treulich für sie Gott.
Die behülflich sind mit Rat,
Auch, womöglich, mit der Tat,
Werden wieder Hülff empfangen
Und Barmherzigkeit erlangen.¹⁶**

**7. Blessed are they who out of mercy
Take on the distress of the stranger,
Are compassionate with the poor,
Faithfully pray to God for them.
They who are helpful in word,
And, when possible, in deed,
Will in turn receive help
And obtain mercy.¹⁷**

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV39 for an annotated translation

¹⁶A stanza from the hymn “Kommt, lasst euch den Herren lehren.”

¹⁷“Erlangen” here means “to obtain,” not “to win/achieve.” This line of the hymn quotes an exceptionally famous biblical passage, Matthew 5:7, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day was rendered as “Selig sind die Barmherzigen, denn sie werden Barmherzigkeit erlangen” (“Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy”). In Lutheranism, one cannot “achieve” God’s mercy. transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed