

“Was soll ich aus dir machen, Ephraim?” BWV 89

1. *Was soll ich aus dir machen, Ephraim? Soll ich dich schützen, Israel? Soll ich nicht billig ein Adama aus dir machen und dich wie Zeboim zurichten? Aber mein Herz ist anders Sinnes, meine Barmherzigkeit ist zu brünstig.*<sup>1</sup>

2. Ja, freilich sollte Gott  
Ein Wort zum Urteil sprechen  
Und seines Namens Spott  
An seinen Feinden rächen.  
Unzählbar ist die Rechnung deiner Sünden,  
Und hätte Gott auch gleich Geduld,  
Verwirft doch dein feindseliges Gemüte  
Die angebotne Güte  
Und drückt den Nächsten um die Schuld;  
So muss die Rache sich entzünden.

1. *What am I to make of you,<sup>2</sup> [kingdom of] Ephraim?<sup>3</sup> Shall I protect you [selfsame kingdom],<sup>4</sup> Israel? Shall I not fittingly<sup>5</sup> make of you an Admah and destroy<sup>6</sup> you like Zeboim?<sup>7</sup> But my heart is otherwise minded;<sup>8</sup> my mercy is too fervent.<sup>9</sup>*

2. Yes, assuredly, God should  
Declare a word of judgment  
On his enemies  
And avenge the mockery of his name.  
[You, oh my conscience,<sup>10</sup>] the reckoning of your sins is innumerable,  
And even if God had like patience [for you as for Ephraim],  
Your inimical disposition yet rejects  
His offered goodness

<sup>1</sup>Hosea 11:8.

<sup>2</sup>Some cantata translations give “How shall I give thee/you up,” which is closer to the Hebrew text of Hosea 11:8 but is not what Luther’s German rendering means.

<sup>3</sup>By the time of the prophet Hosea, “Ephraim” (the biblical Joseph’s younger son, and the name for the Israelite tribe of this son’s descendants) had become a designation for all ten biblical tribes of the northern Kingdom of Israel (as opposed to the two biblical tribes of the southern Kingdom of Judah). Revelation 7:4-8 speaks of a cosmic restoration of twelve tribes, among which, in its listing, the name “Joseph” is substituted for “Ephraim.” Ephraim was taken to have been left out in these verses on account of its falling away from God into idolatry (cf. Hosea 4:17). The cantata librettist, in movement 2, thus reads “Ephraim” and its synonym here, “Israel,” as exemplars of the mocking of God (cf. Galatians 6:7) by idolatry.

<sup>4</sup>Some cantata translations give the rendering “How shall I deliver thee/you,” which is closer to the Hebrew text of Hosea 11:8 but is not what Luther’s German rendering means.

<sup>5</sup>In this line, “billig” does not mean “cheaply,” nor “simply.” Here the word is an archaic synonym for “angemessen” (“meetly/justly/fittingly”). There is no corresponding word for Luther’s “billig” in the Hebrew text of Hosea 11:8.

<sup>6</sup>Some cantata translations give the rendering “How shall I set thee/you as Zeboim/Zeboiim,” which is closer to the Hebrew text of Hosea 11:8 but is not what Luther’s German rendering means. Luther’s verb “zurichten,” here, is an archaic synonym for “verderben” (“ruin/destroy”).

<sup>7</sup>Admah and Zeboiim were cities in the same valley as Sodom and Gomorrah, likewise destroyed for their wickedness. “Sodom and Gomorrah” and (less often) “Admah and Zeboiim” both became proverbial phrases standing as expressions of God’s wrath.

<sup>8</sup>Some cantata translations give the rendering “Mine/My heart is turned within me,” which is closer to the Hebrew text of Hosea 11:8 but is not what Luther’s German rendering means.

<sup>9</sup>Some cantata translations give the rendering “my repentings are kindled together,” which is not what Luther’s German rendering means.

<sup>10</sup>The “your” in “your sins” is unambiguously singular in the German, and thus these lines are addressed not to God’s enemies but to the speaker, in an internal dialogue.

And presses your neighbor for [repayment of] his debt;<sup>11</sup>  
Therefore [God's] vengeance must ignite.

3. Ein unbarmherziges Gerichte  
Wird über dich gewiss ergehn.  
Die Rache fängt bei denen an,  
Die nicht Barmherzigkeit getan,  
Und machet sie wie Sodom ganz zunichte.

3. A merciless judgment  
Will certainly be enacted upon you.  
[God's] vengeance begins with those  
Who have not done mercy,  
And completely annihilates them, like Sodom.<sup>12</sup>

4. Wohlan! mein Herze legt Zorn, Zank und Zwietracht hin;  
Es ist bereit, dem Nächsten zu vergeben.  
Allein, wie schrecket mich mein sündenvolles Leben,  
Dass ich vor Gott in Schulden bin!  
Doch Jesu Blut  
Macht diese Rechnung gut,  
Wenn ich zu ihm, als des Gesetzes Ende,  
Mich gläubig wende.

4. Well, then! My heart lays aside<sup>13</sup> anger, strife, and  
discord;<sup>14</sup>  
It is prepared to forgive its neighbor.  
But, how my sin-filled life does terrify me,  
Because I am in debts before God.  
Yet Jesus's blood  
Makes good this reckoning [before God]  
If, in faith, I turn to him  
As the fulfillment<sup>15</sup> of the law [of Moses].<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup>“Und drückt den Nächsten um die Schuld” does not mean “And forces the guilt onto your neighbor,” nor “And shifts the blame onto your neighbor.” This line—hyperliterally, “And presses the neighbor for the debt,” is drawing on the language of the gospel portion, Matthew 18:23-35 (the parable of the unforgiving servant), that was chanted within the liturgical occasion for which the cantata was designed. In Matthew 18:28 a servant (whose own debt his master had treated leniently) presses his fellow servant who is unable to pay back a debt (“Schuld”) and has him put in jail; in anger the servant's lord/master (“Herr”) then, in 18:34, takes vengeance on the debt-unforgiving servant: “Und sein Herr ward sehr zornig und überantwortete ihn den Peinigern, bis dass er bezahlte alles, was er ihm schuldig war” (“And his [the unforgiving servant's] lord/master became very angry and handed him over to the [prison-guard] torturers, till he should pay all that he was in debt to him”).

<sup>12</sup>With regard to Sodom, see fn. 7, above.

<sup>13</sup>In modern German “hinlegen” means “to lay down” but in older German it was also used as a synonym for “weglegen, bei seite legen” (“to lay aside”).

<sup>14</sup>“Zorn, Zank und Zwietracht” (“anger, strife, and discord”) are among the many “Werke des Fleisches” (“[evil] works of the flesh”) listed in Galatians 5:19-20.

<sup>15</sup>“Des Gesetzes Ende” does not mean “the source of the law,” nor “the law's foundation,” nor “the ultimate law.” This line is quoting Romans 10:4, “Christus ist des Gesetzes Ende; wer an den glaubet, der ist gerecht” (“Christ is the end/fulfillment of the law [of Moses]; whoever believes in him [Christ], he [that person] is righteous/justified [for salvation]”). For the Lutheran believer, then, Jesus is the end of Mosaic law and the starting point for salvation through his sacrifice.

<sup>16</sup>These lines derive much of their sense from Colossians 2:13-14, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach's day reads “Er hat uns geschenkt alle Sünde und ausgetilgt die Handschrift, ... und hat sie ... an das Kreuz geheftet” (“He [God/Jesus] has remitted us all sin and blotted out the promissory note and affixed it to the cross [where it is deluged with the blood of Jesus]”). “Handschrift” is the Luther Bible's rendering of the word “cheirographon” in Colossians 2:14, the term for any document written in one's own hand as a proof of obligation, as for example a note of indebtedness, an I.O.U. The bond that lies to humanity's charge because of its debt (of sin) to God—associated in Colossians with the Law of Moses understood as a “Schuldregister” (“list of debts”)—was said to be canceled/reckoned by virtue of the I.O.U.'s having been set aside through humans' identification (by faith) with Jesus's vicarious death on the cross.

5. Gerechter Gott, ach, rechnest du?  
So werde ich zum Heil der Seelen  
Die Tropfen Blut von Jesu zählen.  
Ach! rechne mir die Summe zu!  
Ja, weil sie niemand kann ergründen,  
Bedeckt sie meine Schuld und Sünden.

6. Mir mangelt zwar sehr viel,  
Doch, was ich haben will,  
Ist alles mir zugute  
Erlangt mit deinem Blute,  
Damit ich überwinde  
Tod, Teufel, Höll und Sünde.<sup>22</sup>

5. Righteous God, ah, do you reckon [my sins unto me]?<sup>17</sup>  
Then I will count the drops,<sup>18</sup> for the salvation of souls,  
Of Jesus's [atoning] blood.  
Ah! Reckon their sum unto me [for righteousness].<sup>19</sup>  
Yes, while nobody can fathom it [the sum<sup>20</sup>],  
It [the sum of the drops] covers my debt and sins.<sup>21</sup>

6. I lack much, indeed;  
Yet everything that I wish to have  
Is obtained to my benefit  
With your blood,  
Whereby I overcome  
Death, devil, hell, and sin.<sup>23</sup>

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV89> for an annotated translation

<sup>17</sup>The full sense of this line (and see also movement 4) is derived from 2 Corinthians 5:19, “Gott ... rechnete ihnen ihre Sünden nicht zu” (“God ... did not reckon their sins unto them”).

<sup>18</sup>It had long been a Christian view that even just one drop of Jesus's blood would suffice to atone for all sin.

<sup>19</sup>The full sense of this line is derived from Romans 4:3, “Abraham hat Gott geglaubt, und das ist ihm zur Gerechtigkeit gerechnet” (“Abraham believed God, and this [faith] is reckoned unto him for righteousness”).

<sup>20</sup>“Sie” here means not “they” (the drops—which would have required plural verb forms) but “it” (the sum).

<sup>21</sup>This line may be drawing on 1 Peter 4:8, “die Liebe deckt auch der Sünden Menge” (“Love covers even the multitude of sins”).

<sup>22</sup>A stanza of “Wo soll ich fliehen hin?”

<sup>23</sup>Death, devil, hell, and sin (in traditional Christian interpretation) are the four “eschatological enemies” of humankind.