CHAPTER 7

Commentaries and Sermon Collections Consulted in Preparation

The 1750 Specification of the Estate Left by the Late Mr Johann Sebastian Bach itemises the theological works Bach owned at the time of his death.1 An avid collector of books, Bach owned:

15 volumes of the Altenburg edition of the works of Luther, a five-volume Bible commentary by Johann Olearius, the five-volume School of Piety by Johann Gerhard, as well as eight volumes of the Leipzig Hymn-Book and three volumes by Calov in addition to Calov’s three-volume commentated ‘Great German Bible’.2

While it is attractive to think of these works as a reference library or Handbibliothek consulted by the composer, it cannot be said with certainty which works Bach might have consulted, or how he might have received these texts. Examination of the libretto and music of the St John Passion, however, strongly suggests that Bach and his collaborating librettist or librettists made regular use of three works in his collection for the preparation of the libretto and setting of this work.4 Among them are Abraham Calov’s three-volume commentary, Johannes Olearius’ five-volume commentary, and Luther’s Weekly Sermons on St. John’s Gospel.5

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1 For the music manuscripts of Bach’s estate, see: NBR, nos. 286–301.
5 Abraham Calov, ed., I. N. J. Das Neue Testament/ verdeutschet durch D. Martin Luthern/ ... fürgestellet/ durch/ D. Abraham Calovium (Wittenberg: Christian Schröter, 1682) [cited as CB 3], BB 46–51.
Abraham Calov’s ‘Great German Bible’ (1682)

The composer’s own copy of Calov’s ‘Great German Bible’ survives today in Concordia Seminary, St Louis, Missouri. Bach carefully annotated the work, in particular recording comments on music and music-making in the margins. The ‘explanation and exposition of the Evangelist St John’ from the third and final volume of Calov’s commentated Bible, covering the entire Greek Scriptures, has been extensively consulted in preparation for this commentary. 

Calov’s Bible significantly influenced the libretto, leading Bach and his collaborator to make adjustments to Luther’s Biblical text in the St John Passion. This is shown particularly well in movement 38: in his reflection on the John’s Gospel account of Jesus’ burial (John 19.38), Calov includes the Greek particle oun (therefore), omitted in Luther’s text, for which he provides a distinctive translation, derowegen. Calov explains: ‘in the Greek text follows: therefore (derowegen) he came/ and took down the body of Jesus. Which word is omitted in the current German translation of the Bible’. The fact that Bach’s libretto amends the text to adhere to Calov’s gloss strongly suggests that Calov’s work was consulted in the preparation of the text and the musical setting of the Johannine Passion narrative.

Johannes Olearius’ Haupt Schlüssel (1681)

Another key Lutheran commentary on John’s Passion bequeathed by Bach in his estate, and consulted extensively in preparation for this commentary, is the final volume of Johannes Olearius’ five volume Haupt Schlüssel der Gantzen Heiligen Schrift, a detailed systematic commentary on the Hebrew and Greek

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1. Abraham Calov’s ‘Great German Bible’ (1682)

2. Johannes Olearius’ Haupt Schlüssel (1681)

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9 CB 3: 954.