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Reasoning and Exegesis: Hamann and Herder's Notions of Biblical Hebrew

Late-eighteenth-century Germany displayed a fervent interest in Biblical Hebrew in the context of a general trend of admiration of the Old Testament. Prominent figures in this period's republic of letters, such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Johann Gottfried Herder, wrote about the language, often debating with one another as to the proper way to conceive of it.¹ In addition, specific genres of biblical literature, such as prophetic speech and the idyllic poetry found in the Psalter, were widely employed in new aesthetic enterprises, most prominently in the *Sturm und Drang* movement. This article describes how the debates concerning the reading of Biblical Hebrew shaped early philosophical positions in German idealism. I shall examine the work of two major late-eighteenth-century thinkers whose aesthetic theories were greatly informed by the question of how to read Biblical Hebrew: the theologian Johann Georg Hamann and his friend, Johann Gottfried Herder.

I shall begin by describing Hamann's vision of the revelatory potential of scriptural reading as a polemic against the scholarly approach to Biblical Hebrew advocated by his contemporary, the prominent philologist Johann David Michaelis. I will then demonstrate how Hamann's conception of Biblical Hebrew as a symbol for understanding that goes beyond the denotative meaning of words served Herder in formulating his own interventions into theology and textual interpretation. As Frederik Beiser has argued, "If we were to describe in a word how Herder assimilated Hamann's thought, then we would have to say that he secularized it. In other words, he explained it in naturalistic terms and justified it

¹ See Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1–50; Daniel Weidner, *Bibel und Literatur um 1800* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2011) offers a presentation of the engagement with the Bible during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Weidner demonstrates that the cultural prevalence of the Bible is revealed not merely in correspondences with biblical motifs and narratives, but that it is evident as well in the overall literary production of the period – e.g. literary texts emulated biblical genres and literary interpretation built on the period's new approaches to scriptural exegesis.

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in the light of reason.”² Following this contention, I will show that Herder builds on Hamann’s presentation of scriptural reading as a subjective and affective experience while at the same time promoting the view that readers should seek a deeper understanding of the Bible by reflecting on the text’s historical and cultural origins. This latter notion of reasoning, which has become a pivotal direction in both theology and modern interpretation,³ perpetuates the view of biblical interpretation as a revelatory experience, while combining this vision with the philological impetus of attaining an objective historical understanding of Scripture. I thus contend that Hamann and Herder’s diverging approaches to Hebrew are emblematic of their respective positions in Enlightenment thought, particularly with regard to the role of reason in language use.⁴

My discussion focuses on two main texts by the above-mentioned authors that represent the salient differences between their approaches to Biblical Hebrew: Hamann’s 1762 *Aesthetica in Nuce* and Herder’s 1783 *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. In his provocative manifesto, Hamann proposed a new aesthetic theory based on his perspective on scriptural reading. A central principle of Hamann’s approach is the notion of the reader’s engagement with Scripture as an inspirational process of filling in the gaps in the so-called obscure text. Biblical Hebrew represents for Hamann a central platform on which to exemplify this approach. Hamann thus derides contemporary scholarly attempts to recover the original meaning of Hebrew words; for him, the merit of Hebrew lies precisely in its linguistic intricacy, which necessitates the reader’s dynamic engagement with the biblical text.

By contrast, it was in the 1770s that Herder first began charting his distinct approach, which culminated with *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. This long essay celebrates Hebrew as a language with unique aesthetic merits and directly links the comprehension of the Hebrew text to the understanding of the culture that produced it, and of its religious, aesthetic, and social norms. As I shall show, Herder’s interpretation theory builds on his distinction between the ancient Hebrews

2 Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 195.

3 On Herder’s eminent part in a lineage of theologians who reconciled philological-historical approaches to the Bible with Protestant theology, and on the cultural prominence of this mediation, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

4 I see Hamann as enhancing the congruence of Herder’s theological efforts with central notions of reasoning in the late Enlightenment and in German idealism. In particular, I see this impact as ingrained in Hamann’s presentation of reading as a platform for the reader’s cognitive and affective experimentation. For a similar position – which depicts Hamann not merely as antagonistic to Enlightenment thought and to biblical philology, but as holding a constructive dialogue with them – see Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment Details: Theology, Natural History, and the Letter h,” *Representations* 61 (1998): 29–56.

and Judaism as a religion. He crystalizes the gap between the two in his praise of Hebrew as a unique aesthetic artifact of a national culture; the merits of the language were lost, he contends, during the diasporic stages of Judaism.

Notwithstanding the important differences between them, both Herder and Hamann were central proponents of a new approach to the Old Testament: the treatment of the Bible as an object whose supreme quality is the affective resonance it provokes in its readers owing to its style and use of literary devices. I wish to explore how the transformation of Scripture into a universal artifact relied on the transformation of Hebrew from a concrete language into a cultural artifact with symbolic presence. In this process, it was precisely the alleged difficulty of comprehending Hebrew literally, deemed a “problem” by all readers of Scripture, which gave rise to the conception of the language as a universal cipher. The reading of the Bible as an embodiment of God’s word and the corresponding perception of the Bible as an object of worship were thus replaced with a new perception of Scripture as transcendent of confessional difference.

1 Enlightenment Theology and the Universalization of Scripture

The backdrop for the above theological developments was the emergence of the Bible as a crucible for new approaches to textual interpretation. As Jonathan Sheehan has shown, Protestant theologians reconstituted the Hebrew Bible as a cultural artifact to which each individual can relate. Sheehan describes how this modern reconceptualization of Scripture was fashioned through a broad wave of biblical translations, a practice essential to Protestant theology since its inception. In the second half of the eighteenth century, a wave of biblical translations “pluralized” Scripture, as the decision to translate the Bible became linked to individuals’ own initiatives, ideologies, and motivations. According to Sheehan, it was, more specifically, a particular variant of Protestantism that made the Bible into a personalized object: the catalyst of biblical translation was a pietistic Bible project cultivating an “inspirational model of biblical translation.”⁵ Theories of textual interpretation played a seminal role in this cultural transformation as they rendered engagement with the Scripture a subjective enterprise that has an affective rapport with the individual.

5 Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 67.

Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible* participates in a scholarly trend that emphasizes the salient role played by theology in the Enlightenment. Until recently, the dominant stream of scholarship on the German Enlightenment contended that the period's investigations into human reason were largely intertwined with "secularization," i.e., with a certain decline in the status of sectorial religious affiliations. This tendency is common in such historiographies as Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment* and Louis Dupré's *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*.⁶ David Sorkin's 2008 *The Religious Enlightenment* has been influential in offering an alternative portrayal of the period in claiming that

Contrary to our secular master narrative, the Enlightenment was not only compatible with religious belief but conducive to it. The Enlightenment made new iterations of faith. With the Enlightenment's advent, religion lost neither its place nor its authority in European society and culture. If we trace modern culture to the Enlightenment, its foundations were decisively religious.⁷

Sorkin emphasizes the proliferation of religious practices during the Enlightenment, and the congruence of these practices with ideals conceived as central to the Enlightenment heritage (e.g. religious toleration). He thus demonstrates that far from disappearing, religious practices were transformed during this period in ways that made them compatible with different faiths and diverging confessions:

For Christians, the religious Enlightenment represented a renunciation of Reformation and Counter-Reformation militance, an express alternative to two centuries of dogmatism and fanaticism, intolerance and religious warfare. For Jews, it represented an effort to overcome the uncharacteristic cultural isolation of the post-Reformation period through appropriation of neglected elements of their own heritage and engagement with the larger culture.⁸

According to Sorkin, theology elicited a social turn in favor of moderation, which helped bring about nineteenth-century "cultural Protestantism."⁹ The emergence of the notion of the public sphere enabled the establishment of religious tolerance in the Enlightenment's distinct national regimes. The ability of the "religious Enlightenment" to influence several different countries, religious groups, and social strata can thus be said to be reflected in modern notions of political

⁶ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, An Interpretation: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966); Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁷ David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 313.

secularism. Sorkin's account thus offers an alternative model to the dismissal of religion from accounts of the Enlightenment by expanding the role of theology in shaping the Enlightenment public sphere. Treating such figures like William Warburton, Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten and Moses Mendelssohn, his *Religious Enlightenment* depicts how the interpretation of biblical and extra-biblical religious law builds on the notion of *sola scriptura* according to which every individual should be allowed to engage with the Scripture on his or her own terms.

In a similar manner, writings about Biblical Hebrew as a cultural asset could be seen as seminal in reconstituting the Bible as an object whose universal relevance derives not from its theological, juridical, and ritual standing, but from its cultural relevance to all readers. Close attention to the context in which Biblical Hebrew was dealt with highlights an additional – substantially different – facet of the Enlightenment's pluralistic approach to Scripture. Authors like Hamann and Herder represented early Romantic tendencies in their appreciation of Biblical Hebrew's "difficult" reading experience. Within this experience, they contended, the language serves to promote the subjective engagement with the text.

A major aspect of this pluralizing effect of Romantic reading was the abstraction of the language of Scripture from its confessional association. Hamann's theory of imaginative reading and Herder's hermeneutics of contextualization offer two ways of confronting the view of the Hebrew language as "Jewish knowledge," stressing, in Hamann's case, the revelatory potential that is unique to Christianity, and, for Herder, the need to rescue Hebrew from the damage of its circulation in Jewish contexts.

2 Hebrew beyond Confessional Difference

The Old Testament was the object of unprecedented interest in the German republic of letters between the years 1750–1780.¹⁰ In such enterprises as the philological work of Johann David Michaelis, the culture of the ancient Hebrews exerted a major influence on legal and political norms in contemporary Germany. Michaelis had argued that the Hebrew language should be treated as a historical object, and developed critical scholarly approaches to the language accordingly. He advocated the study of Hebrew through comparative philology, claiming that consideration of other ancient languages like Arabic could hone the understanding

¹⁰ For a recent account of the engagement with the Old Testament in this period, see Ofri Ilany, *In Search of the Hebrew People: Bible and Nation in the German Enlightenment* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

of Hebrew, and called in his influential *Mosaisches Recht* (1770–1) to analyze the laws of the Israelites in light of the East’s cultural norms. According to Michaelis, these norms had been determined by the area’s climate, tribal customs, the influence of the surrounding oriental peoples and other factors. Michaelis conceived himself primarily not as a theologian, but as a philologist. As such, he saw his main task in the contextualization of the biblical sources:

Es ist nöthig, daß ich hier die Lebensart erwähne, auf die Moses seinen ganzen Staat gründete, und zugleich anzeige, wie sich seine Gesetze gegen die übrigen Lebensarten verhielten. Weder die Regierungsform, noch auch das, was ich bisher von einigen Grundmaximen des Staats gesagt habe, werden wir hinlänglich verstehen, ohne den Israelitischen Bürger, ohne das Volk zu kennen, welches den Stoff des Staates ausmachte.¹¹

It is necessary that I mention here the way of life on which Moses has founded his entire state, and at the same time indicate how its laws relate to the other forms of life. We can adequately understand neither the form of government, nor what I have previously said concerning some basic principles of the state, if we do not know the Israelite citizens, the people who constituted the fabric of the state.

Michaelis conceived of the Bible as centered on Mosaic laws. He thus aimed at scrutinizing the premises and cultural norms that led to Moses’s legal treatise. Moses’s treatise has a reciprocal, dynamic relationship with the norms of the culture in which it emerges: it wishes to foster a certain way of life. At the same time, it is shaped and informed by the social norms of the society in which it was conceived. In that latter sense, law is constantly shaped by the people it addresses.

Michaelis’s position was influential not only due to its provocative endorsement of an academic, philological approach to Scripture, but also because of the opposing stances that it provoked. Among these was the contention that the Bible should be read like a literary text, that is, regardless of the reader’s philological or theological training. One of Michaelis’s most vehement opponents was Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88). Hamann made a name for himself despite the fact that he did not complete his academic studies and never held a university position. Residing in Königsberg, home to the prominent philosopher Immanuel Kant, Hamann participated in several of the period’s most prominent intellectual polemics. Much of Hamann’s writing on Biblical interpretation sets itself in opposition to Michaelis’s influential work. The notion that Biblical Hebrew should be restored via philology served as a major point of departure for Hamann, allow-

¹¹ Johann David Michaelis, *Mosaisches Recht*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a. M.: J. Gottlieb Garbe, 1775), 234. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

ing him to develop his alternative conception of the language as a catalyst of the human imagination in the course of the reading process.

In the context of their ongoing intellectual exchange, Hamann communicated his original notions of scriptural reading to Herder (1744–1803). Changing his place of residence several times – to Riga and Weimar, among others – in his pursuit of a career in the Church, Herder was exposed to the period's innovations in philosophy, literature, and aesthetics. He established his own influence on the aforementioned fields through his friendship and correspondence with such figures as Goethe and Mendelssohn. Herder's wide-ranging works encompassed attempts to clarify the course of world history, polemical writings on the period's aesthetic theory and literature, as well as translations of the Bible and other texts which he held in high regard.

While not discounting the significance of context for the understanding of the Old Testament, for Herder it was not primarily philological erudition that could hone knowledge of ancient Hebrew culture. Rather, he advocated for close attention to the social and cultural norms that led to the text's production. Herder can thus be said to reconcile, in his approach to Biblical Hebrew, Michaelis's perspective that the Hebrew texts could be restored through comprehension of the historical setting from which they emerged with Hamann's emphasis on the individual's engagement with the text. Herder presents scriptural reading as a process of close affective engagement with the Hebrew text in the course of which modern readers put themselves in the shoes of the ancient authors and try to understand the worldview of the target culture. Hamann's original approach to scriptural interpretation as a process whose significance lies in its status as a revelatory experience greatly influenced this intervention into theology.

3 Hamann's Notion of Biblical Hebrew: The Birth of Common Secrets

Describing biblical language as the language of creation, Hamann opens his essay *Aesthetica in Nuce* with the further identification of biblical poetry as the form of the language spoken during humankind's primordial stages. Poetry, writes Hamann in this manifesto, which had significant influence on the *Sturm und Drang* movement, is “the mother tongue of humankind.”¹² This assertion emerges

¹² Johann Georg Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*, ed. Sven-Aage Jørgensen (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1968), 81 (“Poesie ist die Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlechts”).

as a major presumption guiding Hamann's philosophy of language and approach to the Hebrew language – which have shaped, in turn, his understanding of the hermeneutic act. The moment of the creation of man was the pinnacle of the process of the world's creation, as man stands at its end as the pattern, or the copy, of divine characteristics: "Endlich krönte GOTT die sinnliche Offenbarung seiner Herrlichkeit durch das Meisterstück des Menschen. Er schuf den Menschen in Göttlicher Gestalt."¹³ (Finally, God crowned the physical revelation of His grandeur with the masterpiece of man. He created man in the divine image.) At the center of Hamann's notion of creation is the parallel between God and man as creative entities.¹⁴

The beginning of Hamann's text demonstrates the significance of Hebrew. Hebrew is taken to be a "secret language" in the sense that its so-called incomprehensibility is a constitutive all-human experience. This conception of the language reconstitutes biblical reading as a newly universal practice: due to Hebrew's initial unapproachability, all readers come to the Bible from a similar starting place.

A prominent aspect of Hamann's approach to Hebrew is related to his use of the word Kabbalah (the sub-title of *Aesthetica in Nuce* is "Eine Rhapsodie in Kabbalistischer Prose"). As noted by Betz, "The word ["Kabbalistic"] is perfectly suited for Hamann's sense of humor, evoking such notions, so antithetical to his 'enlightened' contemporaries, as 'hermeticism,' 'esotericism,' 'cryptography,' and, above all, 'darkness.'"¹⁵ Despite its status as the divine language, the language of Scripture does not exclude the possibility of human comprehension, but is in fact tuned toward it. Hamann develops the notion, most frequently identified with its adaptation by his companion Herder, according to which the Bible should be read as meant for human eyes: "[F]or Hamann the humility of Scripture has another, plainly practical purpose, being suited precisely to accommodate our sensible nature and our intellectual weakness. This is why Scripture is written in a narrative form, and why Christ himself speaks in parables . . ."¹⁶ The Bible represents an invitation to exercise the faith in God through a dynamic process of reading.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ As Eva Kociszky has noted, the creation topos in the text often describes God as a sculptor or a painter. As such, man's creation by God elevates the notion of flesh, thereby implicitly praising human sensuality. "Leib und Schrift in Hamanns *Aesthetica in Nuce*," in Bernhard Gajek, ed., *Die Gegenwartigkeit Johann Georg Hamanns*, Regensburger Beiträge zur deutschen Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2005): 145–160.

¹⁵ John Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J.G. Hamann* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 101.

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

Biblical interpretation transforms the inability to understand – a so-called human weakness – into a higher mode of “understanding.”

Hamann opens the text with two epigraphs: the first from the book of Judges (from the “Song of Deborah”), the other from Job (Elihu’s speech). The choice of these specific biblical excerpts underscores his approach to the Bible’s so-called ambiguity. Taken from biblical poetry – a genre that is often archaic (or archaizing) – the citations are also enigmatic to readers of Hebrew and to biblical scholars, for they use several words in a manner at odds with their lexical meanings. And yet Hamann includes no translation to the epigrams.

Book of Judges, 5:30.

שלל צבעים רקמה

צבע רקמתים לצוארי שלל:

spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered,

two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil.¹⁷

Book of Job, 32:19–22.

הנה-בטני בין לא-יפתח

כאבות חדשים יבקע:

אדברה וירוח לי

אפתח שפתי ואענה:

אל-נא אשא פני-איש

ואל-אדם לא אכנה:

כי לא ידעתי אכנה

כמעט ישאני עשני:

19 My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent;

like new wineskins, it is ready to burst.

20 I must speak, so that I may find relief;

I must open my lips and answer.

21 I will not show partiality to any person

or use flattery towards anyone.

22 For I do not know how to flatter –

or my Maker would soon put an end to me!¹⁸

Hamann thus begins his own text with a performance of obscurity typical of his entire oeuvre.¹⁹ Thereafter follows a third epigraph, a citation in Latin from the poet Horace: “Odi profanum vulgas et arceo.” (“I hate the mob and distance

¹⁷ The translations to both biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁸ In *Aesthetica in Nuce*, 79.

¹⁹ On Hamann’s own writing as performative, and on his original notion of textual interpretation and philology, see Eckhard Schumacher, *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit: Johann Georg*

myself from it.”)²⁰ By playing familiarity against unfamiliarity, the text wishes to exclude precisely those readers who think that they understand a text by means of merely comprehending the language in which it is written. Hamann’s many references to Michaelis in his oeuvre suggest that the target for his critique of the “mob” is this prominent philologist.²¹ John Hamilton has argued that both the act of choosing to open his text with Hebrew fragments and the transition to the Horace citation embody the language philosophy that Hamann develops in his essay.²² As Hamilton points out, Hamann dispels the ease embedded in the feeling of understanding a language: Latin-literate but Hebrew-illiterate readers would be made to feel that they are part of the vulgar crowd. In addition, one should note that in Hamann’s text the transition away from Biblical Hebrew is a cipher for the shift from obscurity to clarity – or, at the least, the belief in such clarity. The Latin epigram is followed by Hamann’s attack on the period’s philologists, who aim to restore Scripture through the assembly of so-called remnants of ancient sources: “Heil dem Erzengel über die Reliquien der Sprache Kanaans!” (“Praise the archangel of the relics over the language of Canaan”).

The “obscurity” of Hebrew thus emerges as a cultural trope, a representation with which the reader is now assumed to be familiar. The subsequent process of transcending the written letter builds on the presumption that the gaps in comprehension act as a barrier on a cognitive level, jeopardizing the understanding of the text for *all of its readers*. Hamann conceives of reading Hebrew as a cognitive mechanism relevant for the general audience. In other words, for both Hamann and Herder, the Hebrew Bible becomes a platform for explicating reading techniques as ingrained in a general theory of the reading process and its affective impacts. For Hamann, Hebrew embodies the obscurity of Scripture, an obscurity that continually challenges the confidence of the universal reader as to whether he in fact grasps its content, thereby eliciting understanding that is beyond the literal sense of the word.

The turning of Hebrew into a trope does not of course presume that every reader will now comprehend Hebrew letters, penetrating the Hebrew text and its secrets. It also does not imply that every reader could now understand Hamann’s

Hamann, Friedrich Schlegel, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 109–22.

²⁰ Carmina 3.1.1, in *Aesthetica in Nuce*, 81.

²¹ On Hamann’s continual attacks on Michaelis’s studies of the Hebrew language and their centrality to Hamann’s rhetoric, see Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 162.

²² John Hamilton, “Poetica Obscura: Reexamining Hamann’s Contribution to the Pindaric Tradition,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2000): 93–115, especially, 93–5.

performative theory of reading. According to Betz, "Hamann was arguably the first to introduce into German letters an intentionally 'sublime style,' characterized like Hebrew poetry by elevated themes, a proliferation of symbolic figures, gnomic allusions, darkness, terseness, and vehemence of expression."²³ Robert Lowth's 1753 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* deeply resonated with Hamann's efforts. Lowth was both a Bishop of the Church of England and a professor of poetry; accordingly, he examined the unique features of Hebrew verse – such as its parallelism, rhythm, and rhyme – as literary devices.²⁴ It was not only Lowth's methodology of reading the Bible that was received enthusiastically by German theologians, but also the premise that stands behind it: the contention that Hebrew poetry is a refined aesthetic creation.

The transition that takes place in *Aesthetica in Nuce*, via the aesthetic appraisal of the Bible, is the emergence of Hebrew as a trope that depicts the potential existence of a universal community of interpreters. Whereas the notion of Hebrew as a secret language was hardly new in the period, the case of the re-esotericization of the language in the mid-eighteenth century is telling. Against the backdrop of the period's description of human reason as universal, Hamann promotes a mirror phenomenon: an experience of obscurity, which he takes as shared by all readers of the biblical text.

Hamann composes the text as an aesthetic manifesto that connects his theory of an affective connection to Scripture to a theory of reading in general. It was already in his early writings that Hamann declared enthusiastically "Gott ein Schriftsteller!" ("God [is] an author"), and thereby compared the act of divine creation to writing.²⁵ *Aesthetica in Nuce* thus begins as an attack on the period's attempts to recover the world of the Bible – pertaining especially to the Old Testament – showing, through multiple references to Psalms, that the work of God the creator is shown in creation's fragmented structure. The Hebrew text is an epitome of God's work of creation. Treating Biblical Hebrew as a mere "relic" that could be restored, as does Michaelis, misses the point of recognizing an essential aspect of God's work.

Hamann's text exemplifies reading as a process that continually poses and challenges common assumptions regarding readers' identity and efforts. Hamann views the Bible not as a perfect divine object, but rather as a "human" transmission of the word of God in which errors, fragments, and gaps create moments

²³ John Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 12.

²⁴ Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, ed. and trans. by G. Gregory (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1829).

²⁵ Johann Georg Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, ed. Oswald Bayer and Bernd Weissenborn (München: C.H. Beck, 1993), 59.

of incomprehension. The gaps in human understanding elicit a higher mode of conceiving cultural objects.²⁶ This mode of reading Scripture by confronting the lack of human knowledge can be described as a kind of leap of faith. A forerunner of religious existentialism (the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, the most notable representative of this stream of thought, quotes Hamann in an epigraph to his seminal text *Fear and Trembling*), Hamann praises the inspiration that emerges in the act of the creative reconciliation of textual gaps and difficulties through the use of one's imagination.

To Hamann, the interpreter of the Bible must have the courage to become a “Kabbalist,” that is, to say more than the text does and utter what the author left unsaid. From the Kabbalah, Hamann derives the notion of the creative and imaginative reading of the Bible. According to his understanding of Kabbalistic reading techniques, interpretation is motivated by spiritual longing, which then yields powerful new connections to additional texts (including literary ones). In Hamann's mind, the power of the Bible lies in its position as an object that kindles the reader's imagination. Evoking this aspect of the Jewish practice of reading, Hamann forms a model of reading the Bible as a point of foci that activates and orchestrates human imagination. The recognition that the Bible is imperfect is highly important to Hamann. Indeed, this perception is a precondition for its role as a mediator of godly communication to humankind. As formulated by Dickson, for Hamann, “[t]he Bible, whatever the source of its inspiration, is written by human authors and is addressed to human beings to evoke a ‘human’ and personal response. Perfection [. . .] would be inappropriate [. . .] God communicates with us on *our* terms, in *our* fashion, within *our* limitations.”²⁷

Hamann's inspirational theory of reading embraced the conviction that every reader can engage in interpretation, as the “holy language” was taken to facilitate a common (if, yet, idealized or “sublime”) starting-point for all readers. Thus, ironically, Hamann's radical theory of religious conduct through creative and inspirational imagination in fact constitutes a community, based on a presumed shared vocabulary, a vocabulary taken from religious practices – the reading of Hebrew, the secretiveness of the text, faith in God. It is precisely the esoteric and obscure character of Hebrew which invites a universal readership to grapple with its meaning and come to its own individual conclusions. The language points to a paradoxical notion that can be seen as salient to the Enlightenment heritage: that of a collective individuality.

²⁶ See Gwen Griffith Dickson, *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 189.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

Hamann holds that one's perspective on the text is contingent upon one's particular life circumstances. He regards reading as a praxis that reciprocally constitutes the reader and the Bible. This radically "human" perception of divine language is, in effect, what mediated and enabled, in turn, Herder's famous and influential insistence upon reading the Bible as a "human" text. Hamann and Herder's mutual influence, the similarities and differences between their approaches, and their historical influence upon Enlightenment theology shed light on the cultivation of the Bible as a cultural artifact.

4 Herder's Notion of Biblical Reading: Between Theology and Anthropology

For both Hamann and Herder, it is the view of Hebrew as initially opaque that elicits a new, universalistic theory of reading. Whereas Hamann relies on this premise to develop a theory of a subjective and imaginative engagement with the Scripture, Herder, as we shall see, portrays Hebrew's enigmatic nature as a constructive challenge to human reason. In Herder's interpretation theory, Hebrew is emblematic of the need to understand a foreign culture in its historical and ethnographical context, in order to hone the comprehension of its cultural objects. Conceiving the Bible as a cultural object of universal relevance, Herder presents the question of how to read Hebrew as exemplary of the deciphering of an object foreign to the reader's own culture. In fact, it was already Hamann who defined in his early work on biblical interpretation the principle of empathy as seminal to reading in general. Written during the sudden religious conversion he experienced while in England in 1758, Hamann asserts in his London writings that affects should play a central role in biblical interpretation. Affect, in his view, is transferred between authors and readers through what Hamann describes as "Die Notwendigkeit uns als Leser in die Empfindung[en] des Schriftstellers, den wir vor uns haben, zu versetzen uns einer Verfaßung so viel möglich zu nähern. . . ." ("the necessity as readers to immerse ourselves in the feeling[s] of the author whom we have before us, in order to come as close as possible to his state of mind").²⁸

Furthermore, Hamann believes that "Einbildungskraft" (force of imagination) is a leading principle of this empathic process.²⁹ This conviction can be said

²⁸ Johann Georg Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 66.

²⁹ Ibid.

to have influenced Herder's more paradigmatic contention that the ancient, biblical text can and should be understood in the context in which it was composed. Despite its fragmented nature and linguistic obscurity, and notwithstanding the discrepancy between its cultural background and that of its modern readers, the Hebrew Bible can be made more approachable to the modern reader. Affective identification plays a seminal role in this process for Herder as well. Yet, a major difference between them lies in his view of biblical reading as a process that yields progress *toward an objective truth*, insofar as the reader gets closer to the authors' original meanings.

This view is expressed, for instance, in Herder's 1767–8 *Fragments on Recent German Literature*. Engaged with textual interpretation in general, this work explicates how the meaning of texts is modulated through time, through discussion of the difficulties of translating the Old Testament into German. Herder discusses Hebrew in the context of his thesis concerning the development of language from its childhood to its later stages. The early stages in a language's development parallel the primeval phase in the life of the nation that produced this language.³⁰ The antiquity of Hebrew thus results in meanings that are not immediately comprehensible to the modern reader. The ancient authors of the Bible scrupulously expressed with the vocabulary available to them their impressions of the world. Much of what they intended is no longer accessible to modern readers – a key example being their descriptions of nature and animals – which creates a problem for biblical translators.³¹

Another important principle that Herder shares with Hamann is the idea that the Bible is a text that was written for humans by humans, and that it should be read and interpreted as such. Herder thus develops an elaborate commentary on Hebrew poetry, applauding its aesthetic and historiographical value. His broad engagement with Hebrew verse, which extends to several volumes, thus strives to maintain the spiritual stature of the Bible, while at the same time developing a new, historiographical approach to the text. The divine, in this project, is embodied in the cognitive process of apprehending the thoughts of the ancient authors, witnessing God's greatness in His ability to be materialized in human form through the text of the Bible. Herder's view that the Bible should be read as a human artifact was strongly influenced by Hamann's earlier insistence that the Bible is a human text – a text that represents the divine at the same time that it addresses humankind, in its language. “[B]ei Gott ist Alles ein ewiger, vollkom-

³⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Frühe Schriften 1764–1772*, ed. Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag [DKV], 1985), 182.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 195–197.

mener Gedanke: und in diesem Verstande einen Gedanken, ein Wort der Bibel Göttlich nennen, ist die größte Hyperbel von Anthropomorphismus," writes Herder at the beginning of his *On the First Document of Humankind*. ("With God, everything is an eternal and perfect thought, and in this sense, calling a word or a thought from the Bible divine is the grandest hyperbole of anthropomorphism.") Reading the Bible as God's word in its literality would thus be "Unsinn, Vergötterung einer Menschlichen Seele" ("nonsense, the divinization of the human soul"): an act that would contradict reason.³² In light of the lack of means for understanding the divine, readers should instead seek a better understanding of the "human" aspects of the text: "... so lange wir keine Göttliche Grammatik, Logik, und Metaphysik haben; so lange wollen wir also auch Menschlich auslegen. Sprache, Zeiten, Sitten, Nation, Schriftsteller, Zusammenhang – alles, wie in einem Menschlichen Buche" ("so long as we do not have a godly grammar, logic, and metaphysics, we want to interpret [everything] in a human manner. Language, time, customs, nation, authors, context – everything, just like in a human book.")³³

Understood via a process of reflection that does not require prior knowledge, the Hebrew language is a means of preserving both the "human" nature of the Bible, and its divine standing. Hebrew is a universal asset in the sense that it can be approached in the same manner by all readers, regardless of their level of education or ethnic identity. This feature of the language is shared between Hamann and Herder, insofar as it evokes a relational coexistence with God for Hamann, and insofar that for Herder the process of reading the Bible through reasoning is guided by the Protestant principle according to which the Bible itself holds the key to how it should be read.

As Spinoza demonstrated in his *Political-Theological Treatise*, human reason can be exercised through the reading of the Scripture. The success of Herder's hermeneutics lies in its ability to reconcile this contention with the religious view of the Bible as a divine artifact. The assumption that readers share similar tendencies – such as the understanding of a text in its cultural context – preconditions Herder's methodology. For this reconciliation to work, it was not enough to blur the distinction between factuality and fact-likeness, insisting that both should be interpreted in light of the cultural conventions at the time of the writing of the Hebrew Bible. A significant additional component of Herder's hermeneutics is an idealized conception of Hebrew and of philology. Herder holds that identifica-

³² Johann Gottfried Herder, *Schriften zum Alten Testament*, ed. Rudolf Smend (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag [DKV], 1993), 28.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

tion with the Hebrews is essential to the “historical” understanding of the Bible. He thus echoes the period’s philological attempts to offer new insight into the Old Testament, while yet preserving, through his notion of affective empathy, the standing of the text as supreme and faultless.

This effort reiterates the vision of philological recovery proposed by Michaelis. Nonetheless, there is a major difference between the two. In accordance with his position as a Protestant theologian, Herder’s theory of biblical interpretation applies to each and every reader of the Bible. Thus, Herder’s notion of the so-called historical understanding of Hebrew does not require the readers to learn the language. His proposed methodology of attending to authors’ cultural norms and historical background can be followed by all readers. Similarly, the general reader is also capable of following Herder’s aesthetic readings of biblical poetry by attending to such features as parallelism, repetition, and rhythm. In this way, Herder’s examinations of Hebrew do not highlight its philological aspects, for they at the same time convey that the text can be interpreted by any reader, regardless of scholarly training, thanks to common-sense apprehension of the circumstances in which the text was produced. Hebrew consequently emerges as a language that is decipherable by all readers.

These interpretive principles reach their mature formulation in Herder’s 1783 text *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. There, Herder contends that the Hebrews’ “Denkart” (way of thinking) can be unveiled through the close examination of this people’s poetry.³⁴ The presumption is that the Old Testament is a uniquely refined aesthetic artifact and that it can therefore serve effectively to examine the expression of a people’s spirit. *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* explains the purpose of studying the Old Testament in a dual apologia whose two parts are at odds with one another. First, Hebrew poetry, Herder explains, is not barbaric, primitive and inferior as one may think. It is an apt object for readers of poetry. Second, one should understand Hebrew poetry in order to understand the roots of the New Testament (whose importance to humanity Herder does not need to state): “Studiere man also das A.T., auch nur als ein menschliches Buch voll alter Poesien, mit Lust und Liebe; so wird uns das Neue in seiner Reinheit, seinem hohen Glanz, seiner überirdischen Schönheit von selbst aufgehn.” (“If we study the Old Testament, even only as a human book filled with old poems, with love and desire, then the New [Testament] will rise for us by itself, in all its purity, high glory and celestial beauty”).³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 666.

³⁵ Ibid., 670.

The text takes the form of a platonic dialogue between Alciphron, a young scholar who dismisses Hebrew as a barbaric language, and Eutyphron, who proves his companion wrong by pointing out to him Hebrew's various merits. Against the accusation of Hebrew's shortage in nouns, Eutyphron makes the point that their relatively small number only highlights the importance of verbs for this language. Hebrew thus appears to hold unique poetic attributes, since the high ratio of verbs to nouns fosters a feeling of continual motion ("Handlung," i.e., sustained development of the plot).³⁶ Similarly, the accusation that the parallelism of Hebrew poetry reflects simplicity of thought (and that it has a tedious effect on the reader) meets Herder's praise of symmetry as operating effectively on the human senses. Hebrew poetry exemplifies poetry's ability to provoke emotional rapport: "Für den Verstand allein dichtet die Poesie nicht, sondern zuerst und zunächst für die Empfindung" (Poetry does not resound for understanding alone, but first and foremost for feeling.).³⁷

5 Judaism and the Command of Hebrew

In his writings on the Bible, Herder distinguishes between Hebrew as an ancient language, spoken by the ancient Hebrews, and the language's continued presence in modern Judaism. Thus, Eutyphron replies to his young companion's claim, according to which the language was preserved by the rabbis who kept speaking it, that it was not "pearls" that these had in their mouths:

... auch leider nicht nach dem Genius ihrer uralten Bildung. Das arme Volk war in die Welt zerstreut: Die meisten bildeten also ihren Ausdruck nach dem Genius der Sprachen, unter denen sie lebten, und es ward ein trauriges Gemisch, an das wir hier nicht denken mögen. Wir reden vom Ebräischen, da es die lebendige Sprache Kanaans war, und auch hier nur von ihren schönsten reinsten Zeiten ...³⁸

And nor, unfortunately, were [their words] in accordance with the genius of their primeval education. The poor nation has been dispersed in the world: most of them thus shaped their way of expression according to the genius of the languages among which they lived, and it was a sad mixture, about which we would prefer not to think here. We are instead talking about Hebrew when it was the living language of Canaan, and even here, only about its most beautiful and purest times ...

³⁶ Ibid., 674–675.

³⁷ Ibid., 686.

³⁸ Ibid., 678.

Herder's fullest account of the aesthetic supremacy of Hebrew thus distinguished between different cultural eras. Hebrew was at its peak when it functioned as a national language and it lost its beauty when the Jews were dispersed in the diaspora.

Expressed in many of his texts, and most famously in the *Treatise on the Origins of Language*, Herder described linguistic capacities as relying upon the bodily linguistic apparatus. The distinct bodily structure of a race – a structure that is shaped by many factors including climate and geography – is reflected in the particular structure of national languages. The statement that contemporary or medieval Jews do not use the same language as the ancient Hebrews thus marks them as inherently different and inferior from the ancient Hebrew people. This distinction thus seems at odds with Herder's treatment of Judaism elsewhere as a national entity that has existed since antiquity.³⁹

As John Baildam has argued, “in an age which considered Hebrew poetry barbaric [. . .] Herder was unique with his plea that poetry in general was divine revelation, and that the Hebrew poetry of the Bible was the epitome of all poetry.”⁴⁰ The important role that Hebrew plays in Herder's aesthetic theory marks nonetheless only a brief phase of the language's overall history: that which the theologian defines as the golden age of Hebrew poetry. This distinction is crucial in regard to Herder's perception of modern-day Jews. The Jews are guilty of linguistic hybridity, which disrupts the correlation of language to national culture.⁴¹ Their daily use of the vernaculars of their respective places of residence interferes with their theological cultivation of Hebrew. Modern Jews weaken in this way Hebrew's national grounding and corrupt the language. Their linguistic hybridity is thus reflective of the deterioration of the Jews' national position: they are no longer members of an independent people nor are they fully immersed in modern states.

³⁹ See F.M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 17–20.

⁴⁰ John D. Baildam, *Paradisaal Love: Johann Gottfried Herder and the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 54.

⁴¹ Herder compares Jews elsewhere to nomadic peoples whose presence in Europe he sees as destructive: “Die Erhaltung der Juden erklärt sich eben so natürlich, als die Erhaltung der Brahmanen, Parsen und Zigeuner” [“The preservation of the Jews can be explained just as naturally as the preservation of the Brahmans, Persians and Gypsies”] (Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag [DKV], 1989), 491. See *ibid.*, 703 for a critique of the harmful presence of nomads on the European continent.

6 Conclusion

The treatment of Biblical Hebrew in early Romantic circles exemplifies, in sum, the intricacies of establishing the modern conception of humanity upon the globalization of theological practices, and, particularly, of scriptural interpretation. In his writings on Hebrew, Hamann insists on the role of imagination, personal inspiration, and faith, which readers employ as they fill in the gaps in the biblical text. Herder, on the other hand, presents biblical reading as a process of retrieving the particular historical conditions that led to the writing of the Bible. Herder developed a set of interpretive practices that aimed to scrutinize the cultural context of the composition of Hebrew Scripture. The attempts during the 1760s and 70s to reimagine and idealize the Hebrew language were essential steps in establishing a grand narrative of a system of nations. In this process, seemingly opposing approaches to the Hebrew Bible were combined with one another, creating an infrastructure that tethers interpretation to a universalistic understanding of biblical reading.

Insofar as it engaged with biblical interpretation continually, and expressed its innovations through biblical exegesis, late Enlightenment philosophy relied at its core upon religious ideology. Thus, as modern hermeneutics was becoming a dominant cultural practice, biblical interpretation served as the concrete field with which to establish reading as a form of interpersonal deciphering. The public appeal to dialogism is sustained through the belief in every person's aptitude to read and interpret, "abilities" that at times mask the fact that other conditions are required for embarking on a cultural dialogue. Readers of the Bible who used it to develop hermeneutics as a cultural phenomenon had to develop a Bible that everyone could interpret in the same manner: a Bible that could be a model for interpretation. The Bible could be perceived in the same manner "for everyone" through such means as emphasis on a text's style, literary devices, and the historical circumstances of its writing. The extensive engagement with the Hebrew language in the late eighteenth century was emblematic of this effort: it promoted a universalized approach to the language through such distinct forms as Hamann's construction of obscurity through Hebrew and Herder's new model of deciphering the Bible through the attention to its cultural context. The manifold perspectives on Hebrew as a cultural asset thus yielded two major stances in the period's philosophical climate: Hamann's invitation to endorse faith as an inseparable part of the human apparatus and Herder's model of adhering to affect as a companion to reason. Distinguishing himself from Hamann, Herder established his pivotal model of constructive intellectual reasoning: textual interpretation that promoted the period's interest in aesthetics, interpersonal exchange, and human empathy.

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