

GLORY(ING) IN THE HUMILITY OF THE WORD

The Kenotic Form of Revelation in J. G. Hamann

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Nature vanishes before your Word. Here is the holy of holies;
the whole of creation is but a forecourt compared to what we see
in your Word.

J. G. Hamann¹

These old rags have saved me from the pit, and I pride myself in
them like Joseph in his colored coat.

J. G. Hamann²

In the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes: “At the threshold of modernity stands a uniquely tragic figure . . . because in this figure all lines seem to converge—the concerns of strict Lutheranism, of classical education and culture, and of a theological aesthetics that would embrace them both in a genuine encounter—and yet, he remained a figure out of joint with his times and his thought never came to fruition.”³ This figure, whose relevance von Balthasar wished to recover and who stands obscurely in the background of von Balthasar’s own theological project, was Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), otherwise known as “the Magus of the North.”⁴ While von Balthasar’s reading of Hamann

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- 1 Johann Georg Hamann, *Londoner Schriften* [London Writings], ed. Oswald Bayer and Bernd Weissenborn (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1993), 109 (SW 1:49). Page numbers in parentheses refer to the otherwise standard edition of Hamann’s works, *Sämtliche Werke* [Complete Works], ed. Josef Nadler, 6 vols. (Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1949–1957). See also *Londoner Schriften*, 59 (SW 1:4): “The Word of this Spirit is just as great a work as creation, and just as great a mystery as the redemption of human beings; indeed, this Word is the key to the works of the former and the mysteries of the latter.” At the outset I would like to dedicate this article to Oswald Bayer, who almost singlehandedly has brought Hamann back to the attention of modern theology, and who in so many ways has made this minor contribution possible. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Scott Hahn for graciously soliciting, inspiring, and in every way encouraging the development of this article—and for reminding me of what the communion of saints looks like.
 - 2 Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel* [Correspondence], ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955–1975), 1:341 (hereafter cited as *Briefwechsel* by volume).
 - 3 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 80 (revised translation).
 - 4 See the chapter on Hamann, the only Protestant, in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985),

is concerned with Hamann's aesthetics, broadly conceived, in the following I will be concerned more specifically with Hamann's understanding of Scripture, which holds much promise, I would argue, for biblical hermeneutics today. This promise, I submit, consists chiefly in Hamann's profound sensitivity to the *kenotic form* of divine revelation. While this form is commonly seen in the life and mission of the Son—the locus classicus for which is the so-called christological hymn of Philippians 2:5–11—what is distinctive to Hamann is that in the midst of his conversion in 1758 he also discovered this form in Scripture, seeing therein an analogous kenosis, and an analogously hidden glory, of the Holy Spirit. As von Balthasar observes, “The same wonder that fills Hamann at the depletion of God in the servant figure of Christ fills him when he contemplates it in the Holy Scriptures, for there ‘old rags’ are twisted into ropes to pull man out when he lies trapped like Jeremiah in the miry pit, and one must, with Paul, venture to speak of the foolishness and infirmity of God.”⁵

To be sure, Hamann is not the origin of discussions of kenosis in the modern period, which can be traced back earlier to Lutheran controversies of the seventeenth century between the faculties of Giessen and Tübingen over the extent and implications of divine kenosis in Christ.⁶ But it is with Hamann, arguably, that the full scope and Trinitarian implications of this doctrine are first seen; and it is primarily in this that his largely unrecognized significance to von Balthasar's theology consists. In the following, therefore, building on von Balthasar's study of Hamann in the third volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, my aim will be to determine what we could still learn from Hamann today: first, regarding a Christian aesthetics that is attentive to the kenotic form of divine revelation in general; second, regarding the kenotic form of Scripture in particular, which bears greatly, I would argue, upon the Church's understanding of the Bible and divine inspiration; and, finally, regarding the corresponding humility that is required not only to understand the works of the Trinity *ad extra* (“toward the outside”), but to see their glory—to see glory, as Hamann did, not only in the humble presence of God in creation, and not only in the servant-form (*Knechtsgestalt*) of Christ, but also in the “rags” of Scripture. Given Hamann's relative obscurity in the English-speaking world, however, and in order to establish his significance, I necessarily begin with a brief introduction to his role in the history of ideas.

239–278. Though Hamann was an ardent Lutheran and, being from Prussia, had little if any contact with the Catholic Church of his time, it is notable that his final years were spent among the Catholic “Münster Circle,” in which context he was received as something of a saint and buried by the Catholic priest Franz Friedrich von Fürstenberg (1728–1810). See John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 293–311.

5 Von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 3:251.

6 For a brief history of the doctrine of kenosis in modernity, see Graham Ward, “Kenosis: Death, Discourse and Resurrection,” in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash, and Graham Ward (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 15–68.

Hamann in the History of Ideas

In the history of ideas Hamann is typically remembered, if he is remembered at all, as an important but enigmatic critic of the Enlightenment—whose *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759),⁷ which is addressed to Immanuel Kant, reminded his friend of the principle of Socratic ignorance, emphasized the importance of faith to reason, and presented Socrates as a type and herald of Christian wisdom; whose *Aesthetica in Nuce* (“Aesthetics in a Nutshell”) (1762) upbraided J. D. Michaelis, arguably the father of modern biblical criticism, for failing to appreciate the allegorical and typological depths of Scripture, and modern philosophy for its corresponding insensibility to the text of creation; whose *Philological Ideas and Doubts* (1772) took his disciple J. G. Herder to task for naturalizing the “sacrament” of language; whose *Metakritik* (1784) of Kant’s critical philosophy drew attention to the cultural, linguistic, and historical mediation of all ostensibly pure, rational thought; and whose *Golgotha und Scheblimini* (1784), which was directed against Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*, thoroughly deconstructed the secular foundations of Mendelssohn’s political philosophy and his corresponding, politically expedient representation of Judaism as a religion of reason.⁸

Admittedly, these and other writings are little known and studied today, due largely to the difficulties of Hamann’s highly allusive, cryptic, and (in Mendelssohn’s phrase) “dark and puzzling” style.⁹ And we can be sure that it is partly on account of the notorious darkness of his style that he came to be known as the “Magus of the North.”¹⁰ But von Balthasar’s claim that Hamann’s thought never came to fruition is debatable, since Hamann was a mentor to the influential Herder and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and was admired, if not fully understood, by a host of prominent intellectuals and cultural icons: from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who regarded

7 See James C. O’Flaherty, *Hamann’s Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967).

8 For more on these works and subjects, see generally Betz, *After Enlightenment*. For English translations of some of his key works, see Johann George Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007).

9 See Moses Mendelssohn, “Rezensionsartikel,” in *Briefe, Die Neueste Literatur Betreffend* (1759–1765) [Letters Concerning the Latest Literature], ed. Eva J. Engel, in *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected Works] (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1991), 5/1:200–206.

10 As Matthias Claudius put it regarding the peculiarity of Hamann’s style: “He has wrapped himself in a midnight robe, but the golden little stars shining from it here and there betray him, and allure, so that one does not regret the effort [required to understand him].” See Claudius, *Sämtliche Werke* [Complete Works] (Gotha: Perthes Verlag, 1902), 23. Compare Friedrich Schlegel’s assessment: “With his divinatory profundity [Hamann] stood alone in the literature of his time, for which his peculiar religious orientation was already alienating and all the more inaccessible given that his sibylline leaves and hieroglyphic intimations are even more veiled in the dark raiment of symbolic allusions.” Friedrich Schlegel, “Geschichte der Alten und Neuen Literatur” [History of Ancient and Modern Literature], in *Kritische Neuauflage* [Critical New Edition], ed. Hans Eichner (Munich: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1961), 6:378.

him as the “brightest mind of his day,”¹¹ to F. W. J. Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel, who regarded him, respectively, as a “prophet” and a “genius,” to Søren Kierkegaard, who hailed him not only as “the greatest humorist in Christendom,” but as one of the “most brilliant minds of all time.”¹² As Hegel observed in his lengthy two-part review of Hamann’s works, “Herder and especially Jacobi (leaving aside Goethe’s . . . thorough appraisal) spoke of him . . . and appealed to him as one who was destined to come, who was in complete possession of the mysteries, of which their own revelations were simply a reflected glory.”¹³ And, in fact, it would be difficult to find in this period of German intellectual life a figure whose influence was so obscurely but powerfully present, operating like a dark center of gravity among the more familiar stars—particularly when one considers that Herder, Jacobi, Goethe, Hegel, Schelling, and Kierkegaard all made claims to being Hamann’s heir or interpreter, as though their own literary, philosophical, or spiritual credentials somehow depended upon it.

While he is better appreciated in Germany, Hamann’s importance was not lost on the eminent historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, whose provocative monograph on Hamann presents him not only as the *bête noir* (“black beast”) of the Enlightenment but as “the pioneer of anti-rationalism in every sphere.”¹⁴ Of

- 11 See Kanzler Friedrich von Müller, *Unterhaltungen mit Goethe* [Conversations with Goethe], ed. Renate Grumach (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982), 109. See in this regard the collection entitled, *Johann Georg Hamann: “Der Hellste Kopf Seiner Zeit”* [The Brightest Mind of his Day], ed. Oswald Bayer (Tübingen: Attempto Verlag, 1998). Moreover, in his journal from Italy, looking back on his own tradition, Goethe goes so far as to call Hamann the “literary father” of the German people. As he put it upon discovering the writings of Vico, “It is truly a beautiful thing if a people can claim such a literary father; one day Hamann will become a similar codex for the Germans.” See *Italienische Reise* [Italian Journey] (Weimar: Böhlau 1890), 1:31.
- 12 See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University, 1980), 178, 198. For more on the history of Hamann’s reception, see John R. Betz, “Reading Sibylline Leaves: Hamann in the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70 (January 2009): 93–118.
- 13 G. W. F. Hegel, “Hamann’s Schriften” [Hamann’s Writings], in *Werke* [Works], ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 11:277.
- 14 Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000), 257; Berlin’s treatment of Hamann originally appeared under the title, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993). Berlin’s attendant thesis of Hamann’s “irrationalism” is highly debatable. Suffice it to say that everything depends upon what one means by “rational” and “irrational.” If by rational one means a type of secular fanaticism that proudly refuses to consider the weakness of reason or the merits of faith and thinks reason alone is capable of providing a sufficient foundation for philosophy and culture, then Hamann was, by comparison, irrational. For his part, however, Hamann thought that the entire project of the Enlightenment was irrational, being founded upon a hypocritical misuse of reason that would end in philosophical confusion and spiritual darkness—since the light of reason (the human logos) is precisely not autonomous, as the Enlighteners claimed, but a dim reflection of the light of the *Logos* upon which every human logos depends. Accordingly, for Hamann, true reason is not reason operating by its own light (which is but a reflected moonlight), but reason invigorated by faith and enlightened by the Holy Spirit.” See Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 6, 16, 312–313.

course, given Berlin's own secular prejudices, there is something tendentious in his claims. There is also something misleading in his characterization of Hamann as the ringleader of the German "counter-Enlightenment" (not least of all given Hamann's own desire to clarify the limits of reason and thereby pave the way for genuine, spiritual enlightenment).¹⁵ Additionally, one must take stock of the fact that Berlin's work takes little account of the conclusions of German scholarship, which tends to see Hamann as a "radical Enlightener" among his contemporaries of the Enlightenment.¹⁶ That being said, however, Berlin has a point: for there is no denying the force of Hamann's "metacritique" or the success of his (and his disciple Herder's) "metacritical invasion," particularly his reduction of "pure reason" to language, history, and tradition—the very thing from which the Enlighteners sought to escape. Indeed, the postmodern crisis of reason, as a consequence of the demise of the Enlightenment's overblown doctrine of reason, is something that Hamann had long foreseen and to some extent brought about: not in order to dissolve reason into history (and historical relativism) and not in order to dissolve reason into language (and the interminable "play" of *différance*), but in order to help fallen reason, wounded by pride, discover in history and in language the divine revelation that alone can heal it. For, to sum up his "metacritique," reason must be humbled and shown its dependence, if it is to discover the truth, since truth is found not beyond history or apart from tradition in the vacuum of reason alone, but rather *in* history where God has revealed himself: partially in the dream-like mythology of pre-Christian paganism, but especially in the inspired stories, histories, and sacred poetry of the Hebrews, all of which, for Hamann, constitute a prophetic testament to the person of Christ.

Hamann's Theological Aesthetics

But if Hamann's ideas were not without effect, von Balthasar is nevertheless right that his vision was never transmitted whole, but only in part (as might be expected from an authorship that consisted largely of fragmentary prophetic tracts). Thus, in standard philosophical and literary accounts, Hamann is typically remembered for his *Metakritik* or for his influence upon the proto-Romantic literary movement known as the *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Stress"). What is generally lost from view in such accounts, however, is the theological inspiration behind his authorship, which stems from his dramatic conversion in 1758 and

15 See Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 1–8, 76–82, 317. See also, Betz, "Reading Sibylline Leaves," 93–102. Regarding Berlin's problematic classification of the Counter-Enlightenment, see also Robert Norton, "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 635–658.

16 See, for example, Oswald Bayer, *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch: Johann Georg Hamann als Radikaler Aufklärer* [J. G. Hamann as Radical Enlightener] (München: Pieper Verlag, 1988). See also James C. O'Flaherty's debate with Berlin in "Letters to the Editor," *The New York Review of Books* (November 18, 1993); compare Berlin, "Magus of the North," *The New York Review of Books* (October 21, 1993).

centers upon the *kenotic form* of divine revelation. Indeed, it is here—specifically in Hamann’s understanding of divine kenosis—that we find the organizing theme of his thought, which explains everything from his opposition to the Enlightenment and its “abstractions,” to his doctrines of creation, history, and Scripture, to the peculiar form of his own mimetic authorship. For in Hamann’s view the kenotic or utterly humble form of divine revelation not only showed up the pride of his rationalist contemporaries, who could find no eternal truth in history or tradition, much less in the history and scriptures of a particular people (given the supposed superiority of reason to history and the divide that was thought to lie between the contingent facts of the one and the eternal, necessary truths of the other); it also called for a new aesthetics that would disclose the Word of God in the otherwise “sealed” books of nature and Scripture—books that will remain sealed, according to Hamann, as long as our perception, our aesthetic sense, is unredeemed.

Accordingly, the first point of Hamann’s aesthetics, which marks his definitive rejection of every Gnosticism (ancient or modern), is that nature and history are significant *and that divine kenosis makes them so*. As such, their evidence need not be doubted (as with René Descartes), much less should they be spurned (as is the tendency of Platonism); nor is there any need to withdraw from them by way of Kant’s Platonizing transcendental method into the fortress of pure reason, thinking that their evidence is somehow tainted and unable to provide any certainty for the sciences (this being the chronic fear of all philosophy that seeks certainty apart from faith). On the contrary, divine kenosis precisely *redeems* nature and history from philosophical skepticism and restores our confidence in them *as* revelation. As Hamann memorably puts it in the *Aesthetica*, “Speak, that I may see you!—This wish was fulfilled by creation, which is a speech [*Rede*] to the creature through the creature; for day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.”¹⁷ In other words, with creation God has already responded to our desire to see him and know something about him. For the *Logos* is not simply the hidden ground or ratio of creation; he is also the one who continuously communicates through it as the *Logos*, the Word. But, again, in order to perceive the *Logos* in the kenotic form of his self-revelation, for Hamann (on account of our fallen condition) our senses must be opened, redeemed. As the incarnate *Logos* himself

17 Hamann, SW 2:198. Compare Ps. 19:1–4. The phrase, “Speak, that I may see you!” refers to a story about Socrates, which has come down to us from Erasmus and, earlier, from Apuleius. See Erasmus, *Apophthegmata* [Aphorisms], bk. 3, 70, in *Apophthegmata, Libri I–IV*, ed. Tineke Ter Meer (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2010). As the story goes, Socrates once addressed the son of a wealthy man in just these words, *loquere igitur, adolescens, ut te videam* (“Well then, lad, speak so that I can see you”), in order to “see” his talent. What Hamann means in the present context is that creation similarly fulfills the creature’s desire to see God’s “invisible nature” (see Rom. 1:20). See Hans-Martin Lupp, *Philologia Crucis: Zu Johann Georg Hamanns Fassung von der Dichtkunst* [Philology of the Cross: Hamann’s Conception of Poetry] (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1970), 55. Compare, Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 1:393: “Creation is a speech, whose thread stretches from one end of heaven to the other.”

frequently puts it, establishing the principle that whatever is known is known only in the mode of the knower, we must have “ears to hear.” And here we see why, for Hamann, a humble descent into self-knowledge precedes the resurrection of vision, indeed why his *Socratic Memorabilia*, which is dedicated to clearing away rational pretensions of knowledge—so that true knowledge born of poverty of spirit can take root in the soul—precedes his *Aesthetica*.¹⁸

For Hamann, in any event, philosophy need not and indeed should not seek its *Logos* in abstraction from the senses—this being, for Hamann, the *proton pseudos* (“original error”) of philosophy divorced from faith, since philosophy thereby *misses* the accommodating movement of revelation, falls *de facto* into a hamartiological condition, and mistakenly proceeds in its investigations as if creation itself were not a revelation and no other revelation had been given. Rather, for Hamann, the transcendent *Logos*, which is the ultimate desideratum of reason, being the source of reason, is found precisely in the ordinary humble forms where he has revealed himself: in the “words” of creation, in the words of the prophets, and, above all, in the person and words of the Word made flesh, whom “we have seen with our eyes” and “looked upon and touched with our hands.”¹⁹ This is why logic—which is sourced in something higher than the necessary truths of reason—cannot and should never be divorced from aesthetics; on the contrary, on account of the accommodating movement of divine kenosis, aesthetics is precisely the route to the *Logos*.

But if divine kenosis establishes that nature and history are significant, that both have something to *say*, this does not alter the fact that they require interpretation. For if human texts can be rich and demanding of interpretation, the books of nature and history are infinitely more so. As Hamann puts it, “All the appearances of nature are dreams, faces, riddles, which have their meaning, their secret sense. The book[s] of nature and history are nothing but *ciphers*, hidden signs, which require the same key that interprets holy Scripture and is the point of its inspiration.”²⁰ Further compounding the hermeneutical difficulty, as a consequence of our postlapsarian condition the “verse” or divine poetry of creation is precisely “jumbled,” so that we cannot understand it. As Hamann puts it in the *Aesthetica*, “Wherever the guilt may lie (whether outside us or in us): nature leaves for our use nothing but jumbled verse and the *disiecti membra poetae*. It is the task

18 See Hamann, SW 2:164: “nothing but the *descensus ad inferos* [Höllenfahrt: “descent into hell”] of self-knowledge paves the way for our deification.” Conversely, for Hamann, nothing is a greater impediment to seeing clearly than pride, since it bars the humble path to self-knowledge and prevents one from seeing the humility of God in creation. In this respect, Hamann’s method resembles the patristic model we see in Evagrius, for whom the discipline of the Christian life (*praktiki*), which is all about self-knowledge and the understood need to attain *apatheia* or purity of heart—certainly by the grace of God—precedes the contemplation of God in nature (*theoria physiki*).

19 See John 1:14; 1 John 1:1.

20 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 417 (SW 1:308–309).

of the scholar to collect them; of the philosopher, to interpret them; for the poet, to imitate them—or more boldly still!—bring about their destiny.”²¹

As a result, in our fallen condition, we no longer experience creation as a divine speaking “to the creature through the creature”—as little as Jesus’s unbelieving audience was able to understand his parables,²² which are the preeminent example of the speech of the *Logos* “to the creature through the creature.” Instead, all that we perceive are the fragments of an original poem, which we no longer know how to order or read, and no amount of labor on the part of the scholar or scientist will avail to do anything more than, so to speak, assemble the letters. As Hamann similarly put it to Kant (in the context of Kant’s proposal that the two of them collaborate on a physics book for children):

Nature is a book, a letter, a fable (in the philosophical sense) or however you want to call it. Assuming that we knew all its letters to the greatest possible degree; that we could make out the syllables and pronounce all the words; that we even knew the language in which it was written—Is all of that by itself enough to understand a book, to make judgments about it, to extract its character? In other words, the interpretation of nature involves more than physics. Physics is nothing but the Abc. Nature is an equation of an unknown quantity, a Hebraic word written with nothing but consonants to which the understanding must supply the [vowel] points.²³

For Hamann, therefore, whatever significance nature and history have will be opaque, especially to rationalists who obtusely interpret them by the light of reason alone and attempt to make them fit the mold of our limited reasoning capacities—a point that Hamann in various ways tried to make to Kant after Kant tried and failed to win him back to the Enlightenment. As he suggestively put it to Kant in the *Socratic Memorabilia*, “But perhaps all of history is . . . a riddle that will not be solved unless we plow with another calf than our reason.”²⁴ In other words, by itself reason will never be able to do anything more than scratch the surface of the books of nature and history; it will never be able to fathom their profounder prophetic content. And if this is true of nature and history, for

21 Hamann, SW 2:198–199. By the phrase *disiecti membra poetae* (“the scattered limbs of the poet”), which comes from Horace (*Satires*, bk. 1, sat. 4, 62), Hamann is alluding to the fate of Orpheus who was torn to pieces by the Maenads, and who therefore metonymically stands in the present context for the jumbled and fragmentary verse of creation.

22 Matt. 13:13–15.

23 Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 1:450.

24 See Hamann, SW 2:64. As it happens, Hamann’s efforts to convert Kant proved as useless as Kant’s own efforts to convert him, and yet they remained friends.

Hamann, it goes without saying that it is true of Scripture, which in his view is an even richer, profounder, and more mysterious communication “to the creature through the creature.”

So what then, for Hamann, is the hermeneutical key to understanding nature, history, and Scripture, the key that decodes their scrambled and sometimes baffling message? Beginning with the passage from the *Aesthetica* quoted above, Hamann suggests that the poet (in fulfillment of the vocation of Adam in Genesis 2:19) is somehow able to translate the meaning of nature and bring the words of creation to their destiny, that is, to render visible the hidden glory of the Word in the words of creation. And perhaps here we have a clue to his otherwise cryptic statement in the same text:

Speaking is translation—from an angelic into a human tongue, i.e., thoughts into words,—things into names,—pictures into signs, whether they be poetic, kyriological, historical, symbolic, or hieroglyphic—and philosophical or characteristic.²⁵

That is, the task of the poet is to translate the speech of creation, which is already in itself a translation of divine thoughts and ideas. But, for Hamann, the poet or would-be translator of creation is, strictly speaking, a Christian—someone who believes in Christ, is inspired with the Spirit of Christ, and is thereby made into a translator of divine things.²⁶ Accordingly—picking up on Hamann’s suggestion that creation is a kind of “speaking in tongues”—just as the spiritual gift of interpretation is required in order to understand the gift of speaking in tongues,²⁷ so too the gift of the Spirit is required in order to understand the “angelic tongue” of creation. The same holds true, for Hamann, of the strange stories of the Torah and the “strange tongues” of the prophets.²⁸ Thus, as with the Old Testament, the hermeneutical key, which begins to unlock the riches of the prophetic books of

25 See Hamann, SW 2:199. For the various kinds of signification Hamann has in mind, see the first section of Johann Georg Wachter’s *Naturae et Scripturae Concordia* [The Harmony of Nature and Scripture] (1752). See Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 127–128. For the most detailed investigation of this passage, however, see Xavier Tilliette, “Hamann und die Engelsprache: Über eine Stelle der *Aesthetica* in Nuce” [Hamann and the Speech of Angels: Concerning a Passage in *Aesthetics* in a Nutshell], in *Acta des Internationalen Hamann-Colloquiums*, ed. Bernhard Gajek (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979), 66–77.

26 As he strikingly put it to Lindner (*Briefwechsel*, 1:367): “Christian or poet. Do not be surprised that these are synonyms.”

27 See 1 Cor. 14:5–12.

28 Compare Isa. 28:11. To this extent, as we shall see, Hamann follows in the patristic tradition of allegorical exegesis, which similarly finds in Christ the hermeneutical key to the Old Testament. As the traditional maxim has it, “the Old [Testament] is revealed in the New, and the New is hidden in the Old” [Lat.: *vetus in novo patet, novum in vetere latet*].

nature and history, is faith in Christ, the giver of the Spirit,²⁹ who “searches everything, even the depths of God.”³⁰

But, following Hamann, we need to be more precise: we need to specify that the key is Christ *in his servant-form*, in his *Knechtsgestalt*. For it is in view of the kenotic form of the *Logos* in Christ that we are given to understand not only the ultimate prophetic *content* of creation and history but also the analogously *kenotic form* of God’s self-revelation throughout creation and history. With regard to content, for example, we are given to understand that creation is an intimation, declared with increasing clarity by the prophets, of the Word’s kenotic indwelling of his creation—to the point that Paul can say that “Christ in you” is the mystery hidden since the foundation of the world but now revealed to the saints.³¹ At the same time, with regard to form, to the degree that we see the glory of God in the face of Christ, the servant-king, we come to understand that majesty is found *in humility*, and that it is precisely the *humility* of the *Logos* that renders him, the archetype of all reason, invisible and unintelligible to the “proud little mare” of reason alone.³² Thus, as a fundamental rule for our interpretation of nature, history, and Scripture, Hamann would have us meditate in particular upon the *kenotic form* under which the Word—the *Logos*—appears.

Admittedly, after Paul, there is nothing particularly original in seeing the kenotic form of the incarnate Word, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself [*ekenōsen*] taking the form of a servant.”³³ On the contrary, seeing this form is what defines the vision and sensibility of every Christian who has grasped with Peter the radical nature of the incarnation,³⁴ and with Paul the shocking bathos and outright paradox—the glory in the disgrace—of the cross.³⁵ What is distinctive to Hamann, however, is that he expands upon Paul’s teaching in Philippians, seeing the same kenotic form that is evident in the incarnate Son, his *Knechtsgestalt*, as *the form of the glory of creation and Scripture*. In other words, Hamann sees the kenosis of the Son to be paradigmatic of the way that the *Logos* reveals himself—humbly and kenotically—throughout creation and history, and, among his historical revelations, above all in Scripture.

But what, concretely, does this mean? As far as our understanding of creation is concerned, it means that, creation, while glorious—it is the speech of the *Most High*—can also appear plain, stripped of any greater significance, in a word, mun-

29 John 4:10.

30 1 Cor. 2:10.

31 Col. 1:27.

32 See Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 346 (SW 2:43).

33 Phil. 2:6.

34 Matt. 16:16.

35 1 Cor. 1:18–29.

dane. To be sure, in part this is due to our fallen condition. As Hamann observes, "Nature is glorious, who can overlook it, [but] who understands its language; for the natural man it is mute and lifeless."³⁶ To the eyes of faith, however, which have come to see the glory of God in Christ and thus have grown accustomed to seeing majesty in humility, the fact that creation can appear this way—as plain, as ordinary, as mere "nature"—is equally seen to be a function of divine kenosis, of a glory that is so humbly communicated that it can go unnoticed, just as the glory of the incarnate *Logos*, being clothed in utter humility, could go largely unnoticed. Accordingly, like the crucified-resurrected *Logos* to which it bears witness, creation too appears in a strangely double light of majesty and humility, of fullness and "the most complete self-emptying." As Hamann puts it in a core passage from the *Aesthetica*:

The book of creation contains examples of universal concepts that GOD wished to reveal to the creature through the creature; the books of the covenant contain examples of secret articles that GOD wished to reveal to the creature through the creature. The unity of the author is reflected in the dialect of his works;—in all *one* note of immeasurable height and depth! A proof of the most glorious majesty and of the most complete self-emptying! A marvel of such infinite calm [*Ruhe*] that makes GOD seem like nothing, so that one is forced either to deny his existence or be a beast (Ps. 73:21–22); but at the same time of such infinite power, which fills all in all, that one does not know how to save oneself from his most penetrating activity!³⁷

The same is true, as we shall see in greater detail below, of the Old Testament: it too exhibits a strangely double light of glory and humility. The only difference is that, in comparison to creation, the glory of its divine origin is arguably still more hidden, inasmuch as the Old Testament is an even profounder revelation. One could even say, the profounder the revelation—the more fully it approximates God's self-revelation in Christ—the more hidden beneath a kenotic form it will be: the more it will have the form not simply of truth-in-mystery, but of majesty-in-

36 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 152 (SW 2:91). Of course, reason should be able to grasp that nature is creation, that is, a divine artifact, as Paul says in Rom. 1. For reason is perfectly capable of tracing effects upward to a divine cause. By the same token, reason should be able to infer from the order of creation something about the intelligence and wisdom of the Creator. One could even argue that reason can see that creation, inasmuch as it is a divine expression, is a kind of divine language. But this is not to say that reason, unenlightened by faith, can understand the language (the *Logos*) in and through which it is spoken or see that it is a kenotic communication "to the creature through the creature." On the contrary, as we have seen, apart from faith, the language of creation will be indecipherable.

37 Hamann, SW 2:204.

humility, indeed, wisdom-in-folly. Accordingly, in comparison to creation (which is but a preliminary revelation of the *Logos*), one might speak hyperbolically of the still more “immeasurable height and depth” of the Old Testament, whose glory and wisdom are still more hidden from the wise and learned,³⁸ inasmuch as they are concealed beneath an even greater self-emptying. This is why in the absence of faith in Christ, who is their ultimate prophetic content, many of the stories of the Old Testament, far from being transparently divine, can appear nonsensical and even offensive. Indeed, one could read the Old Testament and come away with nothing; just as some see nothing in the testimony of creation.³⁹ Read with the eyes of faith, however, which have been sensitized to the humility of divine revelation—and are thereby equipped to see light in the darkness, as it were, and make sense of what is otherwise obscure to reason—the Old Testament is seen to be an even more mysterious and even more gloriously concealed, but at the same time, paradoxically, even more intimate communication “to the creature through the creature.”⁴⁰

For this reason, then, among the historical self-revelations of the *Logos*, the revelation given to Israel and recorded in Scripture is preeminent; for it is here, in a form proportionate to the *Logos*, that the *Logos* (in anticipation of his incarnation) is most fully revealed. But this is not to deny the significance of earlier revelations to the pagan world. On the contrary, following Hamann, who in turn develops the patristic tradition concerning the *logos spermatikos*, a sensibility enlightened by divine kenosis will delight to discover revelations of the *Logos*—in the form of traces, analogies, and typological foreshadowings—throughout human history. For, according to this view, there is no history that is not already *Heilsgeschichte* (“salvation history”) and, as such, the history of the *Logos* kenotically communicating himself to human beings for the purposes of our salvation. Nor, for Hamann, should one be deterred by the folly of the form through which such revelations are sometimes given, as is the case with much of pagan mythology. On the contrary, a “philology of the cross,” which is attentive to the wisdom-in-folly of divine revelation, will find unexpected meanings in much of the poetry and literature of the pagan world. As Hamann observes, seeing in Greek mythology a presentiment of divine kenosis: “Even the pagans knew to weave a little word of these mysteries into their mythology. Jupiter transformed himself into a miserable, shivering, and half-dead cuckoo dripping with rain in order to enjoy the favor of his lawful wife—And the Jew, the Christian rejects his king because he coos like a hen around his chicks,

38 Matt. 11:25.

39 Rom. 1:18–23.

40 See Hamann *Londoner Schriften*, 152 (SW 1:91): “Nature is glorious. . . . But Scripture, the Word of God, the Bible, is more glorious, is more perfect.” Compare *Londoner Schriften*, 251 (SW 1:190): “Next to the wealth of God in nature, which arose out of nothing, there is no greater creation than the transformation [through Scripture] of human concepts and impressions into heavenly and divine mysteries.”

contending in a meek and lowly form for the rights of his love.”⁴¹ Indeed, reading pagan literature with Hamann, who reclaims the teaching of the early Church, we find that the ultimate, unconscious witness of paganism is to the incarnate and glorified Word. As he puts it, “The mustard seed of *anthropomorphosis* and *apotheosis*, which is hidden in the *hearts* and *mouths* of all religions, is manifest here in the full stature, in the middle of the garden, of a *tree of knowledge and life*—all *philosophical* contradictions and the entire *historical* puzzle of our existence are resolved by the *original testimony* of the *incarnate Word*.”⁴²

In view of this rough sketch of Hamann’s aesthetics we can now see why von Balthasar accorded such importance to him, indeed, why von Balthasar’s theology is profoundly indebted to him. And in this regard, by way of summary, one might speak of three basic insights. Firstly, Hamann saw that truth, the *Logos*, is found not by abstraction from the aesthetic sphere but precisely through the aesthetic sphere, since this is the theater, the dramatic stage, so to speak, of divine *kenosis*—thereby suggesting the very method of von Balthasar’s theological project. Secondly, in von Balthasar’s view, Hamann saw the *form* of true glory—glory not as the world conceives of it, but “glory as *kenosis*, not only of the incarnate Son, but also of the [Father], who by creating reaches into nothingness, and of the Holy Spirit, who conceals himself, as Hamann strikingly puts it, ‘under all kinds of rags and tatters,’ ‘under the rubbish’ of the letter of Scripture.”⁴³ In other words, Hamann perceived that this striking coincidence of opposites—of *glory* and *kenosis*, *majesty* and *abasement*—is mysteriously proper to *all* of the persons of the Trinity: that their shared glory consists precisely in their shared humility, their reciprocal *kenosis*. Accordingly—and this will be a point of great importance in what follows—Hamann saw that divine glory as manifested in creation and the economy of salvation is a glory that is *hidden*, a glory, as it were, *in disguise*, a

41 Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 1:394; compare Matt. 23:37. For Hamann, therefore, there can be no ultimate opposition between Christ and Dionysus, the cross and pagan antiquity (as Friedrich Nietzsche had supposed); on the contrary, it is in the revelation of the Gospel and the folly of the cross that we see what the inspired pagan poets were unconsciously trying to say. See also, ZH 1:352: “Do we not find in Hosea: ‘I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah’ (Hos. 5:12). Does he not often change himself into a golden rain in order to win the love of a people and a soul. Is his justice not jealous about the bowels of his mercy and his love for the children of men. And what great projects did he have necessary in order to blind—that I should speak so humanly—the first [his justice]. How many amorous pursuits does he engage in to make us sensitive and to keep us faithful. Must he not abduct us, must he not often use force against his will—Tell me, how could it have occurred to the pagans to convert the glory of Olympus into the image of an ox, which eats grass?” The “golden rain” is an allusion to the story of Danaë and the manner of Zeus’s entrance into her chamber; the reference to God’s righteousness is an allusion to Zeus’s wife, Hera, who represents justice and order and whom Zeus deceived by his transformations; the reference to the ox is to the rape of Europa. See Harry Sievers, *Johann Georg Hamanns Bekehrung* [Hamann’s Conversion] (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1969), 126–135.

42 Hamann, SW 3:192.

43 Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:80–83.

glory, moreover, that is often so obscure, so hidden beneath a contrary, seemingly paradoxical form (*sub contrario*), as to be offensive to those who cannot perceive it and who, lacking the eyes of faith, duly reject it—whether in their rejection of the testimony of creation,⁴⁴ or in their rejection of the Crucified,⁴⁵ or in their rejection of Scripture. Thirdly, by way of analogy, Hamann found his way to a genuine universality, thereby steering between the extremes of a narrow pietism that would shut out the world and a liberal Christianity that is so open to the world as to be indistinguishable from it, and which invariably dilutes into “religion” the saltiness of the Gospel’s claims.⁴⁶ In other words, seeing Christ *as the root*,⁴⁷ as the Alpha and the Omega,⁴⁸ as the beginning and the end, Hamann saw how to reclaim the significance of human history and culture (namely, as the medium of divine self-revelation) without in the least compromising a radical Christocentrism.⁴⁹ Thus von Balthasar observes, Hamann was “alone in seeing that the real problem was how to construct a theory of beauty in such a way that in it the total aspiration of worldly and pagan beauty is fulfilled while all glory is at the same time given to God in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰

Finally, Hamann points the way for further theological reflection. For if one follows Hamann in seeing a shared kenotic form in the works of the Trinity *ad extra*, and if one follows him in seeing this form as constitutive of divine rev-

44 Rom. 1:19–24.

45 1 Cor. 1:18.

46 See Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 106 (SW 1:46): “There is but one truth; but it has countless analogies [*Gleichungen*] and expressions.” Thus von Balthasar laments that Hamann’s theological vision did not have greater influence than that of Schleiermacher. See *Glory of the Lord*, 3:277: “How little was needed and [Hamann] could have become the theological mentor and ‘familiar spirit’ of German Idealism (instead of [Friedrich] Schleiermacher), exceeding his actual historical influence, and so determined the theological climate for more than a century.”

47 Col. 1:15.

48 Rev. 1:8.

49 See Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 3:246: “Hamann never deviated one iota from this consistent and unbroken Christocentrism.” Compare Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 431 (SW 2:48): “It would be more possible to live without one’s heart and head than to live without him. He is the head of our nature and all our powers, and the source of movement, which can no more stand still in a Christian than the pulse can stand still in a living man.”

50 Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:81. And, true enough, seen in light of the larger theological context, what was briefly and singularly united in Hamann (both a full-blooded theological aesthetics, which sought to take in the whole of human history, literature, and culture, and an uncompromising Christocentrism) eventually split off into two antithetical directions within Protestantism: on the one hand, a subjective theology of feeling and culture in the Romantic spirit of Schleiermacher; on the other hand, an objective, dogmatic, dialectical theology in the tradition of Kierkegaard and the early Karl Barth. What was thereby lost from view was a genuine synthesis of Protestant Christocentrism (with all its subjective passion) and Catholic universalism (with all its objectivity and sacramental vision of reality). And looking back to Hamann, it was this synthesis that von Balthasar sought to reclaim for his own analogical, Christocentric theology of history and culture.

elation—whether in creation, or in the Old Testament, or in the servant-form of Christ—it is but a step to saying that this form, which is exhibited by the economic Trinity, affords a speculative glimpse of the kenotic form of the life of the Trinity *ad intra* (“unto itself”), as a divine life of mutually self-emptying relations.⁵¹ One could argue that Hamann points the way to a higher and more fitting doctrine of divine unity and simplicity: not by way of a rational affirmation of monotheism (because God *must* be one or because God *must* be free of composition, as the axiom of divine simplicity would have it), but by way of faith in the God who is *one* because, in the form of three persons, each existing fully in the other, he is perfect, complete, self-emptying love.

Thus far, with reference to von Balthasar’s work, we have been concerned with Hamann’s aesthetics, broadly conceived. It is notable, however, that Hamann’s aesthetics arose out of his interpretation of Scripture and that the proper interpretation of Scripture (in a polemic against J. D. Michaelis) was the principal theme of his *Aesthetica in Nuce*. Indeed, Hamann’s conversion took place precisely through his reading of Scripture, specifically through his reading of the Old Testament. Moreover, it was his discovery of the kenotic form of the Word, majestically hidden in the pages of the Old Testament, that first opened his eyes to the kenotic form of the Word everywhere else.⁵² In the apt phrase of Joachim Ringleben, “The Bible was his *Hen* [“One”] because it disclosed the *Pan* [“All”].”⁵³ It would be impossible, therefore, to overestimate the importance Hamann attached to Scripture. And yet, remarkably, his understanding of Scripture is probably the most neglected aspect of his thought. In the rest of this essay, therefore, my concern will be to elucidate Hamann’s biblical hermeneutics, ultimately in order to determine what promise, if any, it holds for the Church today.

Hamann’s Conversion: A Dramatic Transposition

To judge from the manner of Hamann’s conversion, he was destined to be a sign of contradiction. The *lumières* of the Enlightenment, most notably Voltaire, had little patience or tolerance for the Old Testament: as a literary work it was com-

51 See John R. Betz, “Hamann’s *London Writings*: The Hermeneutics of Trinitarian Condescension,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (Spring 2005): 191–234.

52 See Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 132 (SW 1:72): “God has revealed everything in his Word.” Compare *Londoner Schriften*, 59 (SW 1:4): “The Word of this Spirit is just as great a work as creation, and just as great a mystery as the redemption of human beings; indeed, this Word is the key to the works of the former and the mysteries of the latter.” See also Joachim Ringleben, “Rede, Daß ich Dich Sehe’: Betrachtungen zu Hamanns Theologischem Sprachdenken” [“Speak, That I Might See You”: Reflections on Hamann’s Thought Regarding Religious Speech], *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 27 (1985): 222: “The Bible was to him precisely the book above all books, the book of books: *liber instar omnium* [the book of books]. What was said there opened his eyes to all speech; and the very one whom the Bible revealed he saw again everywhere.”

53 Ringleben, “Gott als Schriftsteller: Zur Geschichte eines Topos” [God as Author: The History of a Theme], in Bayer, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 37.

monly considered rubbish, certainly inferior to the classics of pagan antiquity; but, more to the point, many considered it morally offensive, even execrable.⁵⁴ And yet, ironically enough, Hamann's conversion took place precisely through the Old Testament, which, together with the New Testament, he subsequently came to regard and value as a work greater than all the works of pagan antiquity and, indeed, greater than the work of creation itself: "Nature is glorious. . . . But Scripture, the Word of God, the Bible, is more glorious, is more perfect . . . it is the wet nurse that gives us our first food, the milk that makes us strong."⁵⁵ So how did Hamann, one of the most literate men of his age, come to this unpopular view?

As for the circumstances of his conversion, they remind us of Augustine; and, in fact, Hamann's confessional *London Writings* (1758) bear striking similarities to Augustine's own *Confessions*—not least of all in that both ardently defended the Old Testament against the scoffing critics of their age. So too, on a more personal level, both had reached a point of desperation, both were led to "pick up and read" the Bible, and both were overwhelmed by how deeply it penetrated their heart, spoke to their own situations, and filled them with unexpected grace. According to Hamann's own account, his conversion began when, after a *second* reading of the entire Old Testament, he was moved to deep reflection on the story of Cain and Abel:

I thought about Abel, of whom God said: the earth opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother -- -- and suddenly I felt my heart beat, I heard a voice sighing and wailing in its depths as the voice of blood, as the voice of a murdered brother, who wanted to avenge his blood if I did not at times hear it and should continue to stop up my hears to its voice. -- -- that precisely this made Cain a restless fugitive. I felt at once my heart swelling, it poured itself out in tears, and I could no longer—I

54 As Voltaire contemptuously put it in his *Sermon of the Fifty*: "If one can dishonor the divinity with absurd fables, may these fables perish forever. . . . My brethren, you know what horror seized us when we read the writings of the Hebrews together, directing our attention only to those traits that violated purity, charity, good faith, justice, and universal reason, traits we found not merely in every chapter but which, to make things worse, were sanctified in all [. . .] but [. . .] it is not here that I wish to examine the ridiculous and the impossible; I concentrate on the execrable." See *Sermon of the Fifty*, ed. J. A. R. Séguin (New York: R. Paxton, 1962), 11. Similar sentiments can be found in some of the earliest critics of the first Christians, such as Celsus, Porphyry, and the Manichees, and in our own day in the writings of popular atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, the latter of whom finds the God of the Old Testament to be "arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction." See his *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 31. As we shall see, none of their aspersions would have taken Hamann by surprise.

55 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 152 (SW 1:91).

could no longer hide from God that I was the murderer of my brother, that I was the murderer of his only begotten Son.⁵⁶

In other words, feeling himself strangely transposed into the story and its hidden allegorical dimensions, Hamann came to recognize and feel in the murder of Abel his own guilt in the spilling of Christ's blood, and that his previous failure to admit this guilt had made him, like Cain, a restless fugitive. But, he adds in a parallel reflection, no sooner do "we hear the blood of the redeemer crying out in our heart than we feel that its ground has already been sprinkled [. . . and] that the same avenging blood cries grace to us."⁵⁷ That is, to put it simply, Hamann experienced in the middle of his reading of the Old Testament what Lutheran theology means by "law" and "gospel"—the law that convicts us of sin, the gospel of grace that sets us free.⁵⁸ Fittingly, therefore, looking back on his conversion, he speaks of being poured "from one vessel into another," seeing in all of this the workings of the Holy Spirit, who over the course of the next several months "continued, in spite of my great weakness, in spite of the long resistance that I had previously mounted against his witness and his stirrings, to reveal to me more and more the mystery of divine love and the benefit of faith in our merciful and only Savior."⁵⁹

By all accounts Hamann's conversion is striking; it is the kind of thing that William James might have recorded in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*⁶⁰ had he known about it. What makes it especially interesting, however, given the age in which Hamann lived, is that it occurred through the same Old Testament that many of his contemporaries had come to despise (and at least in this respect the Enlightenment did not deter but precisely lent support to the anti-Semitism of the modern age). What is more, to judge from Hamann's account, the Holy Spirit caused him to *linger* in the Old Testament, which, to his amazement, revealed his own life *through* the history of Israel: "Whoever would compare my life with the travel log of Israel would find that they exactly correspond."⁶¹ In other words, Hamann discovered that the particular history of Israel was also, strangely, a universal story; that Israel's errands were his errands.⁶² And in this way, as in a

56 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 343 (SW 2:41).

57 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 138 (SW 1:78).

58 It is not, therefore, that the Old Testament is simply "the Law" and the New Testament is the "Gospel," as an oversimplified account of Lutheran theology would have it, since Hamann had this experience of "law" and "gospel" while reading the Old Testament, and since, as we shall see, the Old Testament is at bottom filled with the grace of Christ.

59 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 343 (SW 2:40), *Londoner Schriften*, 345 (SW 2:42).

60 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902).

61 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 345 (SW 2:42).

62 See Hamann's *Golgatha and Scheblimini* (1784; SW 3:311): "According to the analogy of its ceremonial law, the entire history of the Jewish people seems to be a living primer to all historical literature in heaven, on and under the earth, which awakens the mind and heart — a progressive,

mirror, he came to know himself. Thus, subsequent to his conversion, in reference to Scripture's uncanny power to interpret and probe the hearts of those who read it—even haughty contemporaries, who were wont to ridicule it—Hamann was fond of citing the line from Horace: "What are you laughing at? Change the name and the story is about *you*."⁶³

Thus, rather ironically, in the middle of the Enlightenment Hamann had an awakening—one that *ipso facto* placed him in opposition to his age, the "age of reason," which failing to understand Scripture mistakenly placed reason above Scripture. For the going ideology—which Kant enshrined in his popular manifesto of 1784, entitled "What is Enlightenment?"—self-knowledge was thought to come through reason by way of an internal and unmediated auto-illumination. As Hamann discovered, however, it actually comes by way of the external, historically mediated prophetic Word of Scripture, which is "more sure" than reason⁶⁴ and deeper than reason, because it reveals a *Logos* that is higher than reason—indeed, a *Logos* that, unbeknownst to fallen reason, is the archetype of all true reason. Whereas Kant supposed enlightenment to come through an internal self-critique of reason, reason being for Kant sufficient unto itself, for Hamann it comes adventitiously—as grace—through the critical and transforming power of the Word of God, which is "living and active," even to the dividing of "soul from spirit,"⁶⁵ and in this way, through this separation,⁶⁶ brings light and the new creation out of the darkness and confusion of our souls. Accordingly, he concludes his brief autobiography:

with a proof [based on] my own experience, with heartfelt and sincere thanks to God for his saving Word, which I have found tested as the only light not only to come to God, but to know ourselves, as the most valuable gift of divine grace, which surpasses nature and all its treasures as much as our immortal spirit surpasses the lime of flesh and blood, as the most astonishing

diamond-like index pointing to the Jubilees and plans of divine government, spanning the whole of creation from its *beginning* to its *end*."

63 To describe this rhetorical transposition Hamann later used the term "metaschematism," which derives from 1 Cor. 4:6, where Paul says that he has "figuratively applied" (*meteschēmatisa*) his words to Apollos and himself—not for his own benefit, but so that through indirect means the Corinthians will come to the realization that his message (about not boasting in human leaders, see 1 Cor. 3:5–4:5) applies specifically to *them*. See Hamann, ZH 4:272: "*Quid rides? de TE fabula narratur*" ("Why are you laughing? *You* yourself are the man of the fable"). See also, *Briefwechsel*, 1:396. Compare Horace, *Satires*, bk. 1, sat. 1, 69: "*Quid rides? mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*" ("What are you laughing at? Change the name and the story is about you"). For Hamann, the paradigmatic instance of such transposition in the Old Testament is Nathan's parable in 2 Sam. 12.

64 2 Pet. 1:19.

65 Heb. 4:12.

66 See Gen. 1:3.

and praiseworthy revelation of the most profound, most sublime, most marvelous mysteries . . . of God's nature, attributes, and exceedingly good will chiefly toward us miserable human beings . . . as the only bread and manna of our souls, which a Christian can no more do without than the earthly man can do without his daily necessities and sustenance—indeed, I confess that this Word of God accomplishes just as great wonders in the soul of a devout Christian, whether he be simple or learned, as those described in it; that the understanding of this book and faith in its contents can be attained by no other means than through the same Spirit, who inspired its authors; that his inexpressible sighs, which he creates in our hearts, are of the same nature as the inexpressible images, which are scattered throughout the Holy Scriptures with a greater prodigality than all the seeds of nature and its kingdoms.⁶⁷

Glory(ing) in the “Old Rags” of Scripture

What is arguably most striking about Hamann's conversion, however, is that he does not dispute the initial impression Scripture affords. On the contrary, following in the tradition of Church fathers like Jerome and Augustine, he readily admits that Scripture's form is not immediately impressive or transparently divine: that, on the face of it, it is a miscellaneous, fragmentary collection of ancient stories and poetry written by people who were by no means the “*literati* [intellectuals] of their *saeculi* [age].”⁶⁸ And yet, to Hamann's own amazement, it was precisely through such humble means that he was saved. As he puts it in his brief statement on biblical hermeneutics: “We all find ourselves in a swampy dungeon like the one in which Jeremiah found himself. Old rags served as ropes to pull him out; to them he owed his gratitude for saving him. Not their appearance, but the services they provided him and the use he made of them, redeemed his life from danger (Jer. 38:11–13).”⁶⁹

67 See Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 1:345–346 (SW 2:43).

68 Hamann, SW 2:169. St. Jerome, for example, initially found the style of Scripture repugnant to his classical sensibility (*Letter* 22, chap. 30, 2); similarly, St. Augustine initially thought the style of Scripture inferior to the works of Cicero (*Confessions*, bk. 3, chap. 5, 9). But what Augustine and Jerome discovered, following Origen, was that the divine character of Scripture and the “splendor of its teachings” is “concealed under a poor and humble style.” See Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 267. For more on this topic, see Henri De Lubac, *The Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 261–289. I wish to express my thanks here to John C. Cavadini for a helpful discussion of this topic, especially as it relates to Origen.

69 Hamann, SW 2:169. Compare *Briefwechsel*, 1:341. Von Balthasar comments on this passage in *Glory of the Lord*, 3:251. See n. 6 above.

To be sure, as Hamann recognized, such a humble or “low” style will not suit the tastes or prejudices of proud philosophers or literary critics—no more than it satisfied the literary sensibilities of Christianity’s ancient critics, like Celsus or Porphyry. “The talk,” he writes, “is not of a revelation that a Voltaire, a [Henry St. John] Bolingbroke, a [Earl of] Shaftesbury would find acceptable [to which one might add more recent critics of Christianity, like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins]; that would most satisfy their prejudices, their wit, their moral and political fancies.”⁷⁰ And why? The principal problem, as Hamann sees it, is that his contemporaries, duped by pride into trusting their own reason more than revelation, could not imagine that enlightenment, that salvation, could come through such humble means—as little as first-century Jews under Roman occupation could imagine that the Messiah would come in the form of a suffering servant and carpenter’s son.⁷¹

As Hamann recognized, however, it is not to the proud that Scripture is given (their own pride denies them the gift), but to the lovers of God, whose humility allows them to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit and to recognize in such disguise “the beams of heavenly glory.” As he puts it in his *Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters* (1762):

If the divine style elects the foolish—the trite—the ignoble—in order to put to shame the strength and ingenuity of all profane authors: then it almost goes without saying that eyes that are illumined, inspired, and armed with the jealousy of a friend, an intimate, a lover are required in order to see in such disguise the beams of heavenly glory.⁷²

Accordingly, for Hamann, there is an unavoidable subjective element to interpretation of the Bible. One’s disposition or attitude is largely what determines what one will see. And in this regard, given the objective humility of Scripture, a corresponding subjective humility would seem to be indispensable. As Hamann puts it, “Humility of heart is therefore the one required disposition and most indispensable

70 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 68 (SW 1:10). Compare *Londoner Schriften*, 59 (SW 1:4): “As little as an animal is capable of reading the fables of Aesop, Phaedrus, and *la Fontaine*—or, even if it were able to read them—it would not be able to make such bestial judgments regarding the sense of the stories and their justification as human beings have made in criticizing and philosophizing about the book of God.”

71 Matt. 13:55. And yet, as Hamann was surprised to find, it was through this particular “style” that God was pleased to reveal himself—just as, throughout Scripture, God elects not the powerful, not those of noble birth, but precisely the weak to shame the strong, and even the foolish to shame the supposedly wise, and in general “what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not” (or are reckoned not) in order “to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:26–31).

72 Hamann, SW 2:171.

preparation for reading the Bible.”⁷³ Indeed, it would seem to be a precondition for entering the “hermeneutical circle” and experiencing the illumination that Hamann describes. For, in order to discover the glory of the Holy Spirit hidden in the humility of the letter, one must read Scripture in like mind—in the same Spirit of humility that originally inspired it: “The lowliest images contain a meaning that is unlocked when we read the Word of God with simplicity and humility—with precisely the simplicity and humility that the Spirit of God assumed when by this means he revealed himself to man.”⁷⁴

In the same work, with regard to the objective humility of Scripture, Hamann then continues with a reference to Paul’s dictum in 2 Corinthians 4:7 that we have this “glory in earthen vessels,” but now applies this to the earthen quality of the divine style: “We have this treasure of divine documents, as Paul says, *‘en ostrakinois skeuesin ina ē hyperbolē tēs dynameōs ē tou theou kai mē ex ēmōn’* [in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power is from God and not from us].”⁷⁵ To which he adds, “we can be sure that the *stylus curiae* [style of the curia] of the Kingdom of Heaven remains the meekest and humblest, especially when compared to that of the Asian courts.”⁷⁶ Indeed, he says, “the external appearance of the letter bears a greater resemblance to the untamed foal of an ass, that beast of burden, than to the proud stallions that spelled Phaeton’s demise.”⁷⁷ In other words, Hamann daringly suggests, far from being externally glorious, the form of Scripture, as a vehicle of the Word of God, is more like the ass on which Christ rode into Jerusalem.⁷⁸ But, as his allusion equally makes clear, this does not prevent Scripture from conveying

73 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 158 (SW 1:97).

74 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 163 (SW 1:102). Compare Origen, *On First Principles*, 306: “These treasures require for their discovery the help of God, who alone is able to ‘break in pieces the gates of brass’ [Is. 45:2] that conceal them and to burst the iron bars that are upon the gates.”

75 Hamann may have taken this from Origen, who says the same thing in *On First Principles*, bk. 4, 7, where he also observes that “if it had been the hackneyed methods of demonstration used among men and preserved in books that had convinced mankind, our faith might reasonably have been supposed to rest in the wisdom of men and not in the power of God.” See *On First Principles*, 267.

76 Hamann, SW 2:171. Compare SW 2:171–172: “According to all the textbooks of rhetoric, journalistic and epistolary styles belong to the *humili generi dicendi* [humble class of speech], of which class there remain few analogies in ancient Greek. And yet it is with just this kind of taste that one must judge the books of the New Testament, and in this respect they are to a certain extent original.” For a discussion of the Christian notion of a so-called “low style” or *sermo humilis* as it develops out of Augustine, is received in the western tradition, and relates to and radically transforms classical understandings of the *sermo sublimis* or “elevated style,” see Erich Auerbach’s famous study, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953), 72–73, 151–152.

77 Hamann, SW 2:171–172. The reference is to the brazen Phaeton, son of Helios, who could not manage his father’s horses and, as a result, nearly scorched the earth before being struck down by Zeus.

78 Compare Matt. 21:1–5.

a divine content and, as it were, leading one to the true Jerusalem that is above.⁷⁹ On the contrary, for Hamann, it is as if divine revelation does not come in any other way—and that one must be wary of any purported revelation that does not come in a similarly humble form.⁸⁰

For Hamann, therefore, as a first rule of exegesis, one must see the style of Scripture as an extraordinary testament to the humility of the Holy Spirit, who condescended to inspire the sounds and letters of human language and charge them with divine purpose. But, following Hamann, we have not yet appreciated the depth of the Holy Spirit's kenosis in the inspiration of Scripture until we appreciate the extent to which in inspiring human authors He also accommodated "human inclinations and concepts, indeed even prejudices and weaknesses."⁸¹ And here we have, as it were, a second rule of biblical exegesis—one that goes a long way toward addressing (and obviating) criticisms of the Old Testament on the basis of the violence it contains or the primitive science it represents.⁸² Accordingly, Hamann's understanding of kenosis bears a certain similarity to doctrines of accommodation that have been current in theology at least since the nineteenth century, which found in the concept a convenient way of excusing Scripture, in particular the Old Testament, for its otherwise humble and, in the words of a notable English divine, "most unspiritual appearance."⁸³

But, while Hamann's understanding of kenosis bears a certain similarity to going doctrines of accommodation, one must immediately add and emphasize that

79 Gal. 4:26.

80 See 2 Cor. 11:14.

81 See Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 68 (SW 1:10). Compare *Londoner Schriften*, 251 (SW 1:190): "Next to the wealth of God in nature, which arose out of nothing, there is no greater creation than the transformation [through Scripture] of human concepts and impressions into heavenly and divine mysteries; this omnipotence [which transforms] human language into the thoughts of the Cherubim and Seraphim."

82 For, to take the obvious example of Genesis, a doctrine of accommodation helps one to appreciate the creation narratives as accommodating the natural philosophy of the time, and not confuse biblical inerrancy with what we mean today by scientific explanation. So too, as far as the violence of the Old Testament is concerned, a doctrine of accommodation helps one to see it as a reflection of the violent culture of the time and—this being the case—a testament to the humility of the Holy Spirit who lowered himself to communicate divine mysteries in its everyday language. Of course, following Origen in book 4 of *On First Principles*, one could go further and deny that certain passages of Scripture have any literal meaning at all; and that the initial offense they cause is simply a provocation to read more deeply and spiritually in order to discover the hidden treasure they contain.

83 See Charles Gore, "The Holy Spirit and Inspiration," in *Lux Mundi* [Light of the World]: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation (London: John Murray, 1904), 240. As Gore goes on to say of the Old Testament, "Its material sacrifices, its low standard of morals, its worldliness, were constantly being objected to by the gnostic and Manichaeian sects, who could not tolerate the Old Testament canon. 'But you are ignoring,' the Church replied, 'the gradualness of the Spirit's method.' He lifts man [little by little] he condescends to man's infirmity: he puts up with him as he is, if only he can at the last bring him back to God."

it is not exhausted by a doctrine of accommodation and differs significantly from it. For the humility of Scripture (and, for that matter, of creation) is not merely the function of a necessary accommodation to our senses and spiritual weakness. A doctrine of kenosis, taken in this sense, would still be too Platonic—the humility of the form (of creation, of Scripture) being here merely the terminus of a downward and, in the colloquial sense of the term, “condescending” emanation. Moreover, kenosis, taken in this sense, would be a merely negative concept, a matter of God stooping down, so to speak, as a matter of necessity for our salvation, whereas for Hamann the concept of kenosis is an utterly positive one, representing a free act of love, which loves to give itself to the beloved—even to the point of leaving everything behind. And it was above all by seeing this—seeing the humility of Scripture as the emblem of God’s love—that he came to love the humility of the Word.

This difference, between a positive and negative doctrine of kenosis, is especially manifest in how one reads the Old Testament. When proponents of accommodation (or a merely negative doctrine of kenosis) read the Old Testament, they see it as necessarily “limited” and “imperfect,” as spiritual “milk” suited to the spiritual infancy of Israel.⁸⁴ When Hamann reads the Old Testament, on the other hand, he reads it in light of a positive kenosis of the Holy Spirit, who does not hold anything back but presents himself fully in *Knechtsgestalt*—just as the Son of God is fully present in Christ, but in *Knechtsgestalt*. Consequently, there is no lack of wisdom in the Old Testament (as little as it is lacking in Christ); its wisdom (as with the wisdom of the incarnate *Logos*) is simply hidden beneath a seemingly incongruous form. To be sure, this form is in part an accommodation to our senses and spiritual weakness (as the flesh of Christ is in some sense an accommodation to our senses and the weakness of our spiritual vision). But it is also a positive function of the humility of the Holy Spirit, who does not overtly draw attention to his own Wisdom, the *Logos*, but in the form of an *indirect communication* leaves it for the humble and discerning to find. And, for his part, it seems that Hamann was someone who found it—who discovered the infinite riches of the *Logos* in the Old Testament, the Word kenotically hidden at the bottom of its words. And having found it, he gloried in it.

How different this is from a merely negative doctrine of accommodation, which can see in the Old Testament only its limitations! Whereas Hamann glories in the Old Testament, proponents of accommodation (in the sense described above) are secretly embarrassed by it—and, as a result, are far too accommodating to Christianity’s cultured despisers whom they otherwise hope to assuage. This is not to deny that the Old Testament can give an unsettling impression, an impression that might tempt one to embrace Marcion. But, as Hamann found, there is a mystery to its form, which is mysteriously adequate to the depth of the mystery it

84 Gore, “Holy Spirit and Inspiration,” 256.

conveys. For truth—at least any truth that isn't trivial, like the necessary truths of logic or mathematics—is always “hidden in a mystery.”⁸⁵ Instead, therefore, of seeing the limitations of the Old Testament, Hamann would have us look deeper and see the infinite wealth hidden in its poverty, the glory hidden in its humility, the light hidden in its darkness, the divine power hidden in its weakness, the wisdom hidden in its “folly.” And for this reason, if we are properly to appreciate the form of Scripture, we need to see it in light of the cross.

Wisdom in Folly: The Cruciform Style of Scripture

Needless to say, devout readers will bristle at the notion of the “foolishness” and “infirmity” of God; and understandably so, for God is certainly not foolish, nor is he weak. But once again, for Hamann, following Paul, we have not fully appreciated divine revelation until we have truly grasped how foolish and weak it can appear, what foolish, weak, and insignificant instruments God can use, and, what is more, how all of this accords with God's pleasure. To be sure, after Paul, we are more accustomed to speaking of the wisdom-in-the-folly of *the cross*. But, for Hamann, if our exegesis of Scripture is not to be naïve or disingenuous, we must also appreciate the corresponding wisdom-in-the-folly of *the Old Testament*. In other words, we must own up to the fact, which is obvious to any unbelieving critic, that its stories frequently defy rational comprehension—sometimes because they strike us as fanciful or magical (as with the parting of the Red Sea or the miraculously floating axe head), sometimes because they strike us as morally repugnant (as with the command to sacrifice Isaac or the murder of Sisera, not to mention the actions of Phinehas and the occasional sanction of genocide), and sometimes because they strike us as tasteless, ludicrous, or downright absurd. Understandably, out of piety, we might not want to admit the offence that such stories can cause; but this does not keep them from posing serious hermeneutical challenges for modern interpreters—whether for unbelievers who will readily write them off, following Voltaire, as the crude and foolish imaginations of human authors who “impiously ascribed their work to the supreme being,”⁸⁶ or for believers who, embarrassed by them, would rather ignore them, and therefore never raise the question of how they could be divinely inspired.

So, in view of the hermeneutical difficulty, how does Hamann proceed? In what way does he help modern Christians past the apparent impasse? We have already seen that, far from being embarrassed by the form of Scripture, he glories in it. Now we simply have to add that he glories in it just as Paul glories in the cross, seeing a correspondence between the folly of the one and the folly of the other.⁸⁷ For, like Paul, but now with regard to the form of the Old Testament, Hamann

85 1 Cor. 2:7.

86 See Voltaire, *Sermon of the Fifty*, 11.

87 1 Cor. 1:18–25.

wants us to see the offence; he wants us to recognize the scandal (as if to suggest that faith is not faith in the profoundest sense of the word until it is tested, until one recognizes the offence but still believes).⁸⁸ And in this regard he draws our attention to one story in particular, the story of David's bizarre behavior before the court of Gath in 1 Samuel: "So he changed his behavior before them; he pretended to be mad when in their presence. He scratched marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard."⁸⁹

The reason why this particular story piques Hamann's interest is that it genuinely puts reason to the test. Indeed, here we have precisely the kind of passage that elicited Voltaire's impassioned objection. And yet, where others scoff and turn away,⁹⁰ and where even many a believer is perplexed, Hamann would have us see right in the midst of the difficulty a striking revelation. As he puts it in his commentary:

The Holy Spirit has become an historian of human, foolish, indeed, even sinful deeds in order to dupe Achish like David. David disguised himself; the Spirit of purity and wisdom- -he makes signs on the doors of the gates- - - - -The Holy Spirit is not satisfied to speak and write like a man- -but as less than a man- -as a foolish, raving madman- -but he poses this way only in the eyes of God's enemies- -he paints the *doors* of the *gates* with signs that no Achish could make any sense of, signs people took for the handwriting of an idiot- -what is more, he lets his spittle run down onto his beard. He seems to contradict and pollute himself by what he inspired as the Word of God.⁹¹

In other words, for Hamann, the mystery, which is so great that he underscores it with an excess of dashes, is that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of *Wisdom*, poses this way, "plays the fool," as it were, disguising himself and concealing his glory not only here but throughout the Old Testament.⁹² What is more, Hamann observes,

88 It is in Hamann, therefore, that we see the modern prototype of Kierkegaard's thought and authorship—the difference being that, whereas Kierkegaard is concerned more exclusively with the offence and scandal of the paradox of the God-man, Hamann is equally focused on the offence and scandal of the form of Scripture. See in this regard especially Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), and *Practice in Christianity* (1850). For more on the relation between Hamann and Kierkegaard, see John R. Betz, "Hamann before Kierkegaard: A Systematic Theological Oversight," *Pro Ecclesia* 16 (Summer 2007): 299–333.

89 1 Sam. 21:13–14.

90 John 6:66.

91 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 160 (SW 1:99).

92 Of course, the Holy Spirit only *plays* the fool, for in this way he *wisely* conceals his wisdom from the "wise and learned" (Matt. 11:25). In this regard, one should note, Scripture is a species—or rather the prototype—of esoteric literature in that it suitably guards from the profane and their

the Holy Spirit condescends even to apparent contradiction—not only clothing his eternal glory in humble stories that have “no form or majesty” that we should regard them,⁹³ but condescending even further to become a historian of the sins of the people of Israel, thereby “polluting” himself—the *Holy Spirit*—with the “lies of Abraham” and the crimes of David.⁹⁴ And what is the result of this shocking, proto-Christological kenosis? In return for thus humbling and abasing himself for the purpose of our salvation, the writing of the Holy Spirit, as Hamann observed, is more often than not despised and rejected by the *literati* of the age.

In the same context, therefore, Hamann takes special interest in the response that David’s behavior elicits from Achish—“Achish said to his servants, ‘Look, you see the man is mad; why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?’”⁹⁵ Hamann’s commentary on this passage is similarly striking: “Who can read without trembling reverence the story of David, who distorted his gestures, played like a fool, painted the doors of the gate, [and] slobbered on his beard, without hearing in the judgment of Achish an echo of the thinking of an unbelieving joker and sophist of our time.”⁹⁶ Thus, once again, we see a mysterious correspondence between the form of Scripture and the form of the cross. For, by clothing himself in such stories, the Holy Spirit not only freely condescends to adopt a humble and at times even scandalous form, but, as a result, similarly suffers the rejection and ridicule of human beings. As Hamann observes in the dramatic opening of his brief statement on biblical exegesis: “God an author!—The Creator of the world and Father of human beings is denied and reprov’d, the God-man was crucified, and the inspirer of God’s Word is ridiculed and blasphemed. The

acquisitive grasp (see Gen. 3:6) the mysteries it contains. See Ps. 138:6: “For . . . he regards the lowly; but the haughty he knows from afar”; compare Matt. 7:6: “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine”; and Matt. 13:13–17. Written subsequent to his conversion, Hamann’s own mimetic writings are of a similar nature: they too, like the Old Testament, have an outward form of folly; their content, however, which is concealed behind a welter of mystifying allusions, is none other than Christ, “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). See SW 2:197, where Hamann begins his *Aesthetica in Nuce* with the following epigraph from Horace: *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo. Favete linguis! Carmina non prius audita, Musarum sacerdos, Virginibus puerisque canto.* (“I loathe the profane crowd and repel it. Silence your tongues! I, a priest of the muses, sing to virgins and youths of songs never heard before.”) The corollary here is that the knowledge of God is reserved for those possessed of a pure of heart and a childlike disposition—“Let the little children come to me” (Matt. 19:14)—who allow themselves to be instructed by Wisdom and are therefore able to recognize her in such disguise.

93 Compare Isa. 53:2.

94 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 160 (SW 1:99). Presumably Hamann is thinking of Abraham’s lie to Abimelech that Sarah was his sister (Gen. 20:2).

95 1 Sam. 21:14–15.

96 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 61 (SW 1:5).

inspiration of this book is just as great an act of abasement and condescension as the creation of the Father and the incarnation of the Son."⁹⁷

Following Hamann, then, we should not be surprised to see the Old Testament ridiculed and rejected; for if Hamann is right, it is a peculiarity of the kenotic form of divine revelation to be a sign of contradiction.⁹⁸ Indeed, to this extent, the *form* of revelation is itself already a sign of eschatological judgment; for it is here already, in view of this kenotic form, that the spirits divide—just as they divide over the kenotic form of the Son. But if this is so, as Hamann would ultimately have us see, this is a judgment that critics bring upon themselves, inasmuch as they are unwilling to see in the kenotic form of revelation the deeper mystery of divine love:

This marvelous characteristic of his love for human beings, of which Holy Scripture is full, is ridiculed by weak minds, who prefer a human wisdom or a satisfaction of their curiosity . . . an agreement with the taste of the time . . . to the divine Word. No wonder . . . if the Spirit of Scripture is dismissed with just the same indifference, indeed, if the Spirit seems just as mute and useless as the Savior did to Herod, who, notwithstanding his great curiosity and expectation to see him, readily sent him . . . back to Pilate (Luke 23:7–11).⁹⁹

In other words, Herod could not see Christ, even though he was standing right in front of him; and, for Hamann, it is the same with Scripture. Its critics, whether ancient or modern, whether Celsus or Voltaire—or, most recently, “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens—also fail to see the Holy Spirit, who is clothed in a similarly humble form. By the same token, as a result of their own judgment, they are unable to perceive the glory of the *Logos* shining from the depths of Scripture’s pages. In both cases the outward, humble, scandalous form—and not the inner glory—is all that they see.

But, given this difficulty, the question now becomes all the more pressing how one comes to see differently—how one comes to love the “old rags” of the Old Testament and pride oneself in them as instruments of salvation, which are capable of lifting our souls, like Jeremiah, out of the pit? Needless to say, this is a difficult question, which touches upon the mystery of faith (cf. Mt. 16:7). Following Hamann, however, one condition would seem to be necessary if one is

97 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 59 (SW 1:4). Compare *Londoner Schriften*, 68 (SW 1:10).

98 As Christ himself says to the disciples, through whom the divine revelation of the Gospel is to be furthered and who, to the extent that they abide in the truth, are likewise destined to be signs of contradiction, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account . . . for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11–12).

99 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 68 (SW 1:10).

ever to break the seals on the Old Testament: one must perceive the fundamental correspondence between the servant-form of the incarnate Logos and the “old rags” of the Holy Spirit. More precisely, one must read the Old Testament in light of Christ Crucified. For it is through the cross that we are trained to see strength in weakness, glory in disgrace, wisdom in folly, majesty in humility, and it is in precisely such terms, Hamann suggests, that one must also understand and read the Old Testament. As he puts it in a key passage from his *Aesthetica in Nuce*:

The spirit of prophecy is the testimony of JESUS; this first sign, whereby he revealed the majesty of his *Knechtsgestalt*, transfigures the holy books of the covenant into good, old wine, which tricks the stewards’ [sic] judgment and strengthens the weak stomach of the art critics. *Lege libros propheticos non intellecto CHRISTO*, says the Punic Church father, *quid tam insipidum & fatuum invenies? Intellege ibi CHRISTUM, non solum sapit, quod legis, sed etiam inebriat.*¹⁰⁰

Accordingly, as a last and most fundamental rule of biblical hermeneutics, Hamann would have us read Scripture backwards, as it were, through the lens of the cross, which reveals not only the ultimate christological *content* of the Old Testament, whose stories and allegories are at the end of the day a mysterious prophetic witness to Christ,¹⁰¹ but also the corresponding christological *form* of the Old Testament.

With regard to content, for example, we come to see in the otherwise troubling story of Genesis 22—a story that one can read only with “fear and trembling”—a cryptic allegory of the Father who gave his only Son; so too, in a further revelation, we see in the life of Joseph, the beloved Son of Jacob—in his being stripped of glory, in his being rejected and betrayed by his brothers, in his being handed over to Gentiles, in his descent into a pit, in his being taken for dead, in his rising from the pit, in his being accepted by Gentiles, in his being seated at the right hand of Pharaoh with dominion over all the earth, and in his saving of the world from hunger—a striking allegory and prophetic foreshadowing of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and mission of the Son of God, who saves from death and spiritual malnourishment all who come to him. As Hamann notes, “When we look at the history of Joseph our experience is like that of certain portraits: from whatever angle we look at it we catch glimpses of the Redeemer looking back.”¹⁰² By the same token, we come to see that the form

100 Hamann, SW 2:212. The quotation is from St. Augustine’s *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Tract. 9, 3: “If you read the prophetic books without understanding CHRIST, what exceedingly insipid and fatuous things you will find! But if you perceive Christ in them, what you read will not only be to your taste, but will also intoxicate you.” Compare John 2:9.

101 Luke 24:44.

102 *Londoner Schriften*, 101 (SW 1:44).

of the Old Testament—its majestic humility, its wisdom in folly—is a mysterious analogue of the majestic humility of the incarnate Son and the wisdom-in-folly of his cross. In other words, in light of the cross, which takes our burden, even our exegetical burden, we come to see the apparent folly of the Old Testament as an analogous incarnation of Wisdom—of Wisdom *in disguise*, of Wisdom in an unexpected and potentially alienating form. According to the terms of Hamann’s aesthetics, therefore, to see as a Christian is an entirely new kind of seeing: it is to see beauty—to see glory—“in a nutshell,” i.e., concealed beneath the rough exterior of a *stylus atrox*. And in this regard, I would argue, Hamann lightens the burden of the Church’s defense of Scripture—a burden that it has had ever since the fathers of the Church, most notably Augustine, struggled to defend the inspiration of the Old Testament against scoffing critics inside the Church (such as Marcion) and outside the Church (such as the Manichees).

A Postscript on Hamann’s Relevance to the Question of Biblical Inerrancy

But if Hamann is to be relevant to biblical hermeneutics today, there is one final question we need to address, and that is: how his understanding of Scripture—specifically, his understanding of the kenotic form of Scripture—bears on the Church’s doctrine and contemporary debate concerning biblical inerrancy.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this question, since Hamann had nothing directly to say about the topic. In fact, the term “biblical inerrancy” is quite foreign to his vocabulary, representing what is arguably an entirely different mode of response—a very reactionary response—to the particular challenges that came with the Enlightenment. To introduce him into our contemporary debate and guess at his response to it therefore cannot help but seem an anachronism. Moreover, the entire question of biblical inerrancy is itself so vexed that one has little desire to address it in the first place. After all, what do we mean by “biblical inerrancy”?¹⁰⁴ One is tempted to say that the concept is a category mistake, unsuited to any literary work, much less the Bible, which for Hamann (following

103 For the Catholic Church’s teaching on biblical inerrancy, see the encyclicals *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence] (1893), *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter] (1920), and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit] (1943), and the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God] (1965). These and other encyclicals can be found in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002).

104 Does it mean, for example, that Scripture is a divine dictation, which could be said to override the sensibilities of Scripture’s human authors, rendering them incapable of the slightest historical error? Or does it mean that the intentions of the Holy Spirit with regard to faith, morals and all that is necessary for our salvation are infallibly executed in and through the freedom of the authors he inspired, which honors not only human freedom but also the genius of the Holy Spirit, who is able to accomplish his will in and through the freedom of those he inspires? Does it mean inerrant at the level of the letter, so that we must suppose God to have commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and to have killed the firstborn of Egypt, et cetera, or does it mean inerrant sometimes with regard to the letter, as in the report that Jesus was born in

Robert Lowth) is the *most poetic* of all texts.¹⁰⁵ In any case, the question of biblical inerrancy and its relation to the doctrine of kenosis is not a simple one; nor can it be answered adequately here.

But an attempted answer is perhaps better than none at all given what is at stake with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and given that, at least indirectly, by way of anticipation, Hamann did have something to say about it. For, in emphasizing the kenotic form of divine revelation as a starting point of Christian reflection, what Hamann helps us to see, if I may dare to say so, is that both sides in this debate are missing the same thing—believers when they trumpet Scripture’s infallibility as though this were an obvious virtue or even its greatest virtue; unbelievers when, failing to see any such virtue, they obtusely deride Scripture for its lack of a satisfying form. That is, to put it simply, what both sides fail to register and reflectively consider is the kenotic form of *glory-in-humility* that for Hamann is paradigmatic of divine revelation. For, seen thus, the glory of Scripture consists not in any evident clarity (it is often obscure) or in any evident integrity (it is a miscellaneous collection) or in any evident harmony (its various authors sometimes seem to contradict one another), but in the radical humility of the Holy Spirit, who lies hidden, as a result of his own divine kenosis, under all kinds of “rags and tatters.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the authority of Scripture will precisely *not* be apparent to unbelievers (as little as the authority of the *Logos* was evident in the servant-form of Christ), and so it is folly on the part of believers to expect them to see it. And, as for believers who are able to see it, who are able to recognize in such disguise “the beams of

Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod (Matt. 2:1), and at other times inerrant at the level of its figurative meaning or content, of which the external letter is a mere vehicle?

105 See Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory, F.A.S. (Boston: Joseph T. Buckingham, 1815), 25–26. In other words, if Scripture is more like divine poetry than a work of logic, and if it is a work of art greater than creation itself, as Hamann maintains, that is, an even more unfathomably rich testament of divine things expressed through human words, images, and concepts, then how could the word inerrant be a sufficient description of it? What, for instance, would we think of someone who came away from a great poem, and *a fortiori* from Scripture, with no other word on his lips to describe it? Would we not think that he had precisely not understood it, that he had not even begun to fathom the wealth of its imagery and the depth of its mystery? Is the Holy Spirit not the *Creator* Spirit? Is he not, in Hamann’s phrase, the “Poet in the beginning of days”? Is his work not *more* wonderful than less inspired works of poetry? Is it not more deeply laden with meanings that arrest the understanding and stretch the imagination and leave us awestruck?

106 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 59 (SW 1:5); quoted in Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:80–81. According to Aquinas, the three formal criteria of beauty are integrity, clarity, and consonance. See *Summa Theologiae*, pt. 1a., q. 39, art. 8. For a masterful treatment of the topic, see Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1988). The question, therefore, which is implicitly taken up by von Balthasar, is how this classical understanding of beauty is to be reconciled with what Hamann discovered about divine revelation. Provisionally, we might say that Aquinas’s aesthetics holds true of Christ and of Scripture, but that their beauty is hidden in a kenotic form.

heavenly glory,” the word “inerrant” is likely to be the last and least meaningful word on their lips, far behind many exclamations of wonder and praise.

Following Hamann, therefore, this much seems clear: the doctrine of biblical inerrancy must not be taken in isolation from the doctrine of divine kenosis—and for reasons having ultimately to do with the christological mystery of Scripture. But if this is the conclusion to which Hamann leads us, it need not—indeed must not—be understood to diminish the significance of the doctrine of inerrancy, for it too is in some sense indispensable. On the contrary, I submit, the two doctrines require and mutually support one another—the doctrine of kenosis guarding against an all too rational, abstract, and ultimately sterile understanding of the biblical text (as something alien to our humanity); and the doctrine of inerrancy guarding against relativistic uses of the doctrine of kenosis that would present the biblical text as so human and so fully accommodated to the cultural sensibilities of the time as to evacuate its claims of any eternal significance.¹⁰⁷ In other words, hermeneutical problems and distortions of the true character of Scripture arise only when one doctrine is emphasized to the exclusion or neglect of the other—just as Christological problems arise when one emphasizes either the divinity of Christ to the neglect of his humanity, or his humanity to the neglect of his divinity. Accordingly, in a way that is analogous to the conclusions of the Council of Chalcedon, the hermeneutical challenge is to hold the two doctrines together in productive tension, whereby the doctrine of kenosis qualifies what is meant by inerrancy, and the doctrine of inerrancy qualifies what is meant by kenosis.

Sic et Non: *The Problematic Doctrine of Inerrancy*

In practice, however, one doctrine tends to be emphasized more than the other, and often this can be explained by the particular challenge that the Church is facing at a given time. Such seems to be the case with the doctrine of inerrancy. Therefore, before attempting to “balance out” the doctrines, or better, before attempting to hold them in productive tension, it is incumbent upon us first to appreciate the exigency of the doctrine of inerrancy in our modern context, which is precisely to uphold the authority of Scripture as the Word of God in the face of the enormous challenges that came with the Enlightenment and the advent of modern historical criticism. As Oswald Bayer summarizes the challenge, specifically with regard to Kant’s critical revolution:

In Kant the authority hitherto accorded to Scripture is assumed by the authority of reason. This can easily be shown point by point: *auctoritas*, *infallibilitas*, *perfectio*, *sufficientia*, *perspicuitas*

107 For example, it is conceivable that one could misuse the doctrine of kenosis—and the doctrine of accommodation that it implies—in the service of Bultmann’s demythologization program, such that all references to supernatural agencies, for example, demons, are said to be “accommodations” to the world view of ancient Israel.

and *efficacia*, above all the power of self-interpretation, of criticism, of autonomous judgment, and the power to establish norms—all of these effective modes and attributes of Holy Scripture, which can only be effective modes and attributes of the Triune God, are ascribed by Kant to reason.¹⁰⁸

No longer, therefore, could the authority of Scripture be taken for granted. On the contrary, with the tables now turned, Scripture (hitherto understood to be a corrective to fallen reason) would now have to prove itself before the court of (fallen) reason. As Kant put it in the programmatic preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “Our age is the true age of criticism, to which everything must submit. Both religion and law-making seek to escape it, the one through its holiness, the other through its majesty. But then they arouse against themselves justified suspicion and cannot claim unfeigned respect, which reason grants only to that which can endure its unfettered and public examination.”¹⁰⁹

To be sure, seen in the context in which it arose, the doctrine of inerrancy is a reactionary doctrine, one that goes beyond Scripture’s own claim that the “law of the Lord is perfect”¹¹⁰ or Paul’s claim that “all of Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”¹¹¹ For that matter, it is a concept, one could argue, alien to Scripture and the entire ancient world, appealing more to our modern scientific, propositional sensibility. And yet, while it may not be the best way to respond to modern critics and skeptics, given the enormity of the challenge of the Enlightenment, it is entirely understandable—perhaps even necessary—as is the fact that in many Protestant churches today the doctrine of inerrancy has become (arguably more so even than the doctrine of justification) the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*, the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls. Indeed, to the extent that many even in the Church have

108 See Oswald Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik: Zur Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* [Authority and Criticism: On Hermeneutics and the Theory of the Sciences] (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 44.

109 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A XII (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 100–101. Accordingly, after the Enlightenment, neither the authority of Scripture nor the authority of the Church could be taken for granted: they themselves, now stripped of their authority, were held in suspicion and subject to interrogation (a fate not unlike that of the Lord to whom they bear witness). Such is the challenge faced by the Church in the modern world; and it is in this context that the modern doctrine of biblical inerrancy (as an attempt to reaffirm the authority of Scripture) and also the doctrine of papal infallibility (as an attempt to reaffirm the authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals) must be understood. See in the present volume of *Letter & Spirit*, the article by Pablo T. Gadenz, “The emphasis on the inerrancy of Scripture in the pre-conciliar period was the result, in part, of the necessity of defending the Bible against rationalist and modernist criticism.” (“Magisterial Teaching on the Inspiration and Truth of Scripture: Precedents and Prospects.”)

110 Ps. 19:7.

111 2 Tim. 3:16.

consciously or unconsciously adopted the ideology of the Enlightenment, putting their own opinions before Scripture or the mind of the Church, one could argue that it is nothing less than a matter of ecclesial integrity, safeguarding the much contested authority of Scripture in matters of faith and morals.

Additionally, for the individual believer as well one must appreciate the role the doctrine of inerrancy plays in securing our confidence in Scripture and—rightly understood—preserving the mystery of Scripture.¹¹² For without due deference to the biblical text, inspired by confidence in the unerring intentions of the Holy Spirit, we ourselves, as individuals, are adrift in a sea of doubts about Scripture, whose authority as the Word of God is *ipso facto* denied. Moreover, its ability to speak to us, to probe our hearts, to interpret *us*, and instruct us in the ways of God is hampered and curtailed. We are resistant to it; we maintain a critical distance; we presume to be *its* judge; and, consequently, having denied Scripture its power to judge our hearts, it fails to have the critical and transforming effect for which it was intended.¹¹³ Simply put, the effective Word finds in us no avenue by which to reach its destination. It is the same point that the Logos makes in the Parable of the Sower: his seed, which is his Word, needs the “good soil” of humility in order to grow.¹¹⁴ And here, it would seem, an overly critical attitude is just as problematic as the “cares of the world.” Thus Hamann says, and is well worth repeating, “Humility of heart is . . . the one required disposition and most indispensable preparation for reading the Bible.”¹¹⁵

By the same token, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy keeps us from disregarding passages in Scripture that might otherwise seem trivial, irrelevant, or, on the face of it, even objectionable—alerting us to the fact that, for the Church, Scripture is an organic whole, that no part of it is without purpose, and that, as with creation itself, great depths of significance are often hidden in the most surprising places. Indeed, it is precisely confidence in the unerring intentions of the Holy Spirit that forces us to look for meaning in passages we might, for whatever reason, neglect. And in this, too, the doctrine of inerrancy preserves the mystery of Scripture: it effectively keeps us from a selective approach to Scripture that would be guided not by humility but by our own sensibilities (a danger of which every reader of Scripture must be aware, since it is all too easy to *use* Scripture for one’s own purposes and bend it or even twist it into conformity with an agenda or ideology alien to Scripture itself).

112 Of course, a literalist conception of inerrancy, which reduces the inerrancy of Scripture to its letter, can have precisely the opposite effect of stripping Scripture of its mystery, flattening its many dimensions, and reducing it to a series of propositional statements and historical claims. This, in any event, would not be a Catholic understanding of inerrancy.

113 See Heb. 4:12.

114 Matt. 13:8.

115 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 158 (SW 1:97); quoted in *Glory of the Lord* 1:80–81.

There are good reasons, then, to hold fast to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy—reasons that we might now summarize as follows. Firstly, it serves as a principle of ecclesial integrity, inasmuch as it establishes a common reverence for the Word of God as wholly inspired.¹¹⁶ Secondly, it keeps us humble, reaffirming that the prophetic word of Scripture is *more sure* (2 Pet. 1:19) than our own fallen reasoning and therefore to be trusted, since it derives from a higher Logos.¹¹⁷ Thirdly, it keeps us open to the meanings for which the Holy Spirit intended it—so long, that is, that inerrancy is not restricted to the literal sense. Finally, it accords with the Augustinian principle that faith (in authority) *precedes* understanding—as anyone who has learned arithmetic on the authority of a grade school teacher and has gone on to college-level calculus can grasp. And if this is true of dianoetic knowledge, to use a Platonic term, it is all the more true of noetic, i.e., spiritual knowledge, in which no one advances apart from humble deference to those farther along the way. With regard to Scripture, therefore, this means that one must trust its authority and be open to its instruction if one is to make any progress in understanding its content.

But, however justified, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is not without its problems—at least when it is taken in isolation from the doctrine of divine kenosis and thereby made absolute. Among its problems is that it inevitably makes the debate about Scripture a debate about authority, thereby engaging the Church in an exhausting and ultimately fruitless dialectic with the Enlightenment—with the Church affirming the authority of the light of Scripture¹¹⁸ and secular modernity affirming the authority of the light of reason (however dim and fallen). More problematically, when it is made the sole and absolute criterion of interpretation, it tends to obscure the humanity, the human face, of Scripture, which includes everything from the personalities and idiosyncrasies of its various authors to the real human history to which its redaction was subject. To be sure, it succeeds in conveying the fact that Scripture is a divine communication *to* “the creature”; it fails, however, to do justice to how thoroughly Scripture is also a communication *through* “the creature.” As a result, taken in isolation from the doctrine of kenosis, it skews the nature of revelation as a communication, in Hamann’s phrase, “to the creature through the creature.” Perhaps most problematic of all, inasmuch as the doctrine of inerrancy presents Scripture as a text of overpowering divinity, it fails to register the extraordinary humility of the Holy Spirit, who lowered himself to speak through our humanity. Granted, it is a doctrine that helps us to appreciate the biblical text as something sacred; it helps us to appreciate its wisdom and make

116 2 Tim. 3:16.

117 See, for example, *Londoner Schriften*, 112 (SW 1:52–53). Accordingly, one could argue that true reason (or reason redeemed) is reason naturally wedded to the Word (its origin and archetype) and that “secular reason”—the reasoning of the Enlightenment—is reason unnaturally divorced from the Word. For more on this claim, see *After Enlightenment*.

118 See Ps. 119:105.

us receptive of it. By itself, however, it is incomplete. For the more one emphasizes the inerrancy of Scripture, even out of a well-intentioned attempt to defend it, the more one inevitably tends to overlook and perhaps even deny its humility and certainly its “folly.” It is, therefore, but one pole in our understanding of Scripture, and by itself cannot lead us to a deeper appreciation of the christological mystery of Scripture—which demands our appreciating its divine and human aspect, its glory-in-humility, its wisdom-in-folly. It is in this sense a preliminary guide, a Virgil, not a Beatrice.

What is needed, therefore, I submit, in addition to a dogmatic affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture, is a theological sensitivity to the kenotic form, the *christological* form, in which the Word appears—both for the sake of the Church’s own reading of Scripture and for its engagement with the modern world. The virtue of thus shifting the ground of debate, I would argue, is that debate is then no longer centered upon the question of authority, which admits of no rational resolution, but instead upon the wonder of divine humility as manifest in Christ, but also in Scripture. Then, with the focus shifted to the humility of revelation, the question becomes one of whether we can see it, or whether our own pride prevents us even from noticing it (given that the humility of revelation often falls *below* our rational expectations). Additionally, it is from this ground that we see what *true* authority really looks like: it is an authority clothed not in dread power, which naturally elicits our defiance, but an authority clothed in *humility and love*, which is arguably the only kind of authority that deserves our obedience, and is the only kind of authority that the Church, if it is to be faithful to its Lord, should ever represent to the world. It is, moreover, then, when the Church is clothed in the humility proper to the Spirit of its Lord, that the grounds of the Enlightenment disappear, when the critics of the Church can see its humility and are thereby prepared to hear its message concerning the Word of God. To such critics one might reply: “Admittedly, Scripture may appear substandard compared to other literary works. Admittedly, it has ‘no form or majesty’ that would command our attention or approbation.”¹¹⁹ To be sure, it appears to be ‘nothing much,’ just as the figure of Jesus of Nazareth could seem like ‘nothing much’—‘Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary?’¹²⁰ But looks can be deceiving, especially when we are unaccustomed to the ways of God. For it is in Jesus that the saints see the glory of the Son of God; in his cross that they discover the power of God; and it is in the fragments of Scripture, and in the rag-tag body of the Church, that they see—similarly hidden—the glory of the Holy Spirit.”

119 See Isa. 53:2.

120 Matt. 13:55.

Inerrancy in Kenosis: The Christological Mystery of Scripture

Seen in light of divine kenosis, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy thus stands in need of certain qualifications. This is true, most obviously, as soon as one considers what one might call the “accommodative” aspect of divine kenosis, i.e., the fact that God humbles himself to accommodate the cultural sensibility of his audience—in the way, for example, that the creation accounts are written in a narrative form not altogether dissimilar to other ancient creation accounts, and in the way that Jesus uses agricultural metaphors that his audience would readily understand.¹²¹ Thus, as a *first* necessary qualification, inerrant need not mean that Scripture is scientifically accurate in a modern sense of the term, as though its veracity or even its perfection could be undermined by the findings of modern natural science.¹²²

The doctrine of inerrancy stands in need of qualification, furthermore, if this doctrine is taken to mean that the Bible must be to all appearances flawless and free of inconsistencies. For if Hamann’s hermeneutics succeeds in conveying anything it is that the kenotic form of Scripture, far from being necessarily agreeable to (fallen) reason, sometimes strikes us as the opposite of reason—indeed, as scandalous to reason. The same is true of its ultimate christological content. Accordingly, as a *second* qualification of the term, inerrant need not mean that Scripture must or will satisfy rational expectations—either in its form or in its content. On the contrary, to the extent that it is written in a kenotic style, we should expect it to elicit quite the opposite reaction. We should expect many a scholar, for instance, to be put off by its fragmentary appearance, the messiness of its redaction history, its apparent incongruities, and even its apparent contradictions (just as we should expect morally sensible persons to be offended by the violence it contains, and just as we should expect philosophers to balk at the notion of an incarnate and crucified God). Indeed, we should expect them to wonder how so human and seemingly fallible a text could be so perfect and so divinely inspired a text.

To admit this, however, is not to deny the inerrancy of Scripture. It is simply to say that its inerrancy, far from being something obvious, is something that is hidden—in keeping with its christological form. At the same time, it is to recognize that the divine “style” is sublimely indifferent to human standards; indeed, that the perfection of Scripture is somehow bound up with its apparent imperfection—just as the perfect revelation of God in Christ is bound up with the seeming imperfection of his “no form or majesty.”¹²³ As Hamann puts it, “According to

121 This not to say that everything in Scripture can be culturally relativized; this would be to assume mistakenly that its ultimate author, the Holy Spirit, did not possess complete knowledge of the future audience that would eventually read it.

122 As Hamann himself points out, Genesis should be understood as a narrative [*Erzählung*] rather than an explanation [*Erklärung*], noting that many of his contemporaries obtusely rejected Scripture on the basis of an erroneous notion that Genesis was something on the order of a scientific explanation. See *Londoner Schriften*, 69 (SW 1:11).

123 Isa. 53:2.

the saying of a well-known exegete *DEI Dialectus, Soloecismus*. The same applies here: *Vox populi, vox DEI*. The emperor says schismam, and the gods of the earth rarely bother to be masters of language. What is sublime in Caesar's style is its carelessness.¹²⁴ What makes this passage potentially liberating for the exegesis of the Church, is that (as Hamann gives us to understand), far from being bound to rational standards of orthography, the genius of Scripture, the Holy Spirit who blows where he wills,¹²⁵ is precisely beyond them. Indeed, seen in this way, it matters not a whit whether Scripture appears to contain errors or even contradictions; for even these (as judged, say, by modern historical critics) are part of its kenotic form, which is to say, part of its disguise.

And this leads to a *third* qualification, which is also implied by the passage quoted above: "*Vox populi, vox DEI*." In other words, in keeping with the nature of prophecy, the voice of God is mysteriously and miraculously heard in and through the voice of human beings.¹²⁶ Accordingly, inasmuch as Scripture is the "prophetic Word,"¹²⁷ inerrant need not mean—and in fact does not mean—that Scripture is written without or to the exclusion of the free will and creativity of the human authors of Scripture.¹²⁸ On the contrary, it is characteristic of the kenosis of the Holy Spirit that he humbly lets others speak on his behalf as surrogates of his own authority: that he speaks, in Hamann's phrase, "to the creature *through* the creature."¹²⁹ And precisely for this reason we should not be taken aback by but delight in the different personalities and even idiosyncrasies that shine through the different biblical authors. As Hamann strikingly puts it: "If the hairs of our head, down to the variation of their color, belong to the *Datis* of divine providence, why should the *straight* and *crooked* lines and strokes of our symbolic and typological (but not hieroglyphic) handwriting not be the counter images and mirror of a

124 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 2:171. The allusion is to emperor Sigismund, who is supposed to have said at the Council of Constance (1411–1437): "We don't want any schismam," that is schism, in the Church. When the correct spelling was pointed out to him, namely, "schisma," he replied: "Well, I am an emperor and have greater authority than the grammarians. I can even make another grammar." Quoted in Martin Seils, *Johann Georg Hamann: Eine Auswahl aus Seinen Schriften* [Selected Writings] (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1987), 268.

125 John 3:8.

126 Compare *Londoner Schriften*, 188 (SW 1:127): "God . . . makes the voice of clay, earth and ash as pleasant, as melodious, as the jubilation of the Cherubim and Seraphim." See also *Londoner Schriften*, 188. Compare 251 (SW 1:190): "Next to the wealth of God in nature, which arose out of nothing, there is no greater creation than the transformation [through Scripture] of human concepts and impressions into heavenly and divine mysteries."

127 2 Pet. 1:19.

128 Thus, *Dei Verbum* speaks of the "true authors" (*veri auctores*) of Scripture. See Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (November 18, 1965), 11, in *Scripture Documents*, 24–25.

129 Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, 188 (SW 1:127).

theopneustie (2 Tim. 3:16), of an unrecognized central force in which we *live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28)."¹³⁰

But if the doctrine of inerrancy at certain points breaks down and therefore stands in need of qualification, it does so importantly *not* due to negative external pressures (say, the fact that Scripture does not measure up to the standards of modern science), but for positive reasons owing to the kenotic form of Scripture itself. For this reason the Church need not be defensive about the humility of its Scriptures or their seeming inadequacies; rather, it should glory in them, seeing that their poverty, their apparent weakness, their apparent folly is a reflection of the poverty and apparent weakness of its Lord; knowing, moreover, that they contain mysteries which are hidden from the wise of this world, but are revealed to mere children (see Matt. 11:25), i.e., those members of the Church who, by virtue of their own humility, their own poverty of spirit, are able to perceive them and to recognize "in such disguise the beams of heavenly glory."¹³¹

So, in conclusion, how can Hamann's biblical hermeneutics help us to think about the question of biblical inerrancy today? On the one hand, Hamann certainly affirms the authority of Scripture as wholly inspired and worthy of our veneration—to know this one need only recall his inspiring coda in praise of Scripture at the conclusion of his autobiography. And to this extent, one could argue, he implicitly affirms the intention behind the doctrine of inerrancy, which is to uphold the authority of Scripture in the face of modern biblical criticism. On the other hand, it is equally clear that Hamann's hermeneutics is driven not so much by a recognition of Scripture's authority, still less by notions of its infallibility, as by wonder at its shocking humility and even its apparent fallibility. Again, this is not to deny the doctrine of inerrancy; for Scripture can appear fallible and yet be infallible, just as the cross can *appear* to be folly and yet *be* the wisdom of God. It does, however, force us to consider more deeply the kenotic form of Scripture as an effect of the Holy Spirit's own authorial kenosis. Otherwise, taken in isolation, the doctrine of inerrancy tends to obscure precisely what Hamann, in the name of a properly *Christian* aesthetics, wanted us to see, namely, the humility and apparent folly of divine revelation.

If, therefore, Hamann's hermeneutics has anything to teach us about biblical inerrancy today, it is that its truth is *relative* to the principle of divine kenosis. For

130 Hamann, SW 3:240. Admittedly, how the Holy Spirit accomplishes his perfect will in and through the freedom of the human authors of Scripture is a mystery—one that corresponds to the overarching mystery of divine providence (Rom. 8:28). But to judge from the economy of salvation, it would seem that God does not want to save us without us. He does not work through us without our *fiat*, without our consent. For salvation is effected in and through the flesh of Christ, which is the flesh of Mary; and this flesh is, as it were, our human contribution. The same is true here: the *external* Word of Scripture, which is given to our hearing and reading for the purpose of our salvation, in order to prepare us for the indwelling of the *incarnate* Word, is effected in and through the humanity of the "true authors" of Scripture.

131 Hamann, SW 2:171.

it is not enough to make declarations about the authority of Scripture; one must go farther and deeper: one must come to the point of seeing the *authority-in-the-humility* of Scripture. It is not enough to make declarations about the truth of Scripture: one must come to the point of recognizing the *truth-in-the-mystery* of Scripture. It is not enough to make declarations about the wisdom of Scripture: one must come to the point of recognizing the *wisdom-in-the-folly* of Scripture. In short, one must come to the point where the doctrine of biblical inerrancy fails, where its logic breaks down and proves to be inadequate to the mystery of divine revelation—especially to the extent that it cannot be squared with contradictions. For inasmuch as the doctrine of inerrancy cannot tolerate contradictions of any kind, it fails to register not only the contradictory form of Scripture—its majesty-in-humility and wisdom-in-folly—but also its deepest content, which is itself a single, *holy contradiction*: the God-man, who is at once the Lion and the Lamb.¹³² Thus, once again, following Hamann, an adequate doctrine of Scripture would have to be a *Christological* doctrine of Scripture. For it is then that we are seeing (and reading) not simply as theists, who believe in a God who has authoritatively revealed himself, but as Christians, who can see in the very form of Scripture, in its humility, in its “rags and tatters,” a reflection of the incarnate Word it proclaims.

132 Compare Hamman SW 3:221: “As if we lacked original documents that are sealed (Isa. 29:11–12), because one can no longer read (since Divi Renati Cartesii *Methodus* and B. Joannis Clerici *Ars Critica* have become the primers, the *Wolffianism* and *Machiavellianism* in sheep’s clothing, the deceptive *patois* of our Gallic *Pedagogue*), and which one cannot read on account of the seven seals on the inside and the back or the *seventy times seven* contradictions of the conquering lion and slaughtered lamb—including a beast that was and is not, but nevertheless is.” Compare Rev. 17:8.