**Two Pieces from J. G. Hamann**

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*Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) was a confessional Lutheran polymath. He lived during the Enlightenment and came under its intellectual spell before he became, and still is, its most trenchant critic. The following two pieces come from his London Writings, which he penned in 1758 in the aftermath of his return to orthodox Christianity. I am now translating them for publication by Ballast Press*

**On the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture**

God an author! - - (The Creator of the world and the Father of humanity is denied and criticized; the God-man was crucified; and the Inspirer of the divine Word is mocked and slandered.) The inspiration of this book is as great an act of self-effacement and condescension as the creation of the world by the Father and the incarnation of the Son. Thus a humble heart is the only proper frame of mind for reading the Bible and the essential preparation for doing that.

The Creator has been denied, the Redeemer has been crucified, and the Spirit of wisdom has been slandered. The Word of the Spirit is just as great a work as the creation of the world, and just as great a mystery as the redemption of mankind; yes, this Word is the key to the works of the former and the mysteries of the latter. Thus it is the epitome of atheism and witchcraft to assume God’s blindness in revelation, and it is an act of sacrilege to scorn this means of grace.

As little as an animal is able to read 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 beastly judgments on the sense of the stories and their applicability as people have made in criticizing and philosophizing about God’s Book.

We all lie in just as muddy a prison as Jeremiah. Old rags served as ropes to pull him out of it; he was indebted to them for saving him. He was not rescued by looking at them, but by the services that they offered and the use that he made of them (Jer 38:11-13).

Our Redeemer used a pool, for which He prepared the salve for the eyes from His spittle and the dust of the earth, to give sight to a man who had been born blind (John 9:6).

And who can, without fear and trembling, read the story of David in the court of the King of Gath, who distorted his gestures, acted as if he were mad, scribbled on the doors of the gate, and slobbered on his beard, without hearing, in the judgment of Achish, an echo of the thinking of the unbelieving smart alecks and sophists of our time (1 Sam 21:13-15)?

Who would, like Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:25, be so bold as to speak of God’s weakness? No one, except the Spirit who searches the depths of the godhead, could have disclosed to us this prophecy, which has, more than ever before, been fulfilled in our own times, the prophecy that not many who are wise according to the flesh, not many who are mighty, not many who are of noble birth, are called to the kingdom of heaven, and that the great God has desired to reveal His wisdom and power by deliberately choosing what is foolish in the world to shame the mighty. God chose what is lowly and despised, yes things that are not, in order to bring to nothing things that are, things that boast of what they are.

**The Role of the Bible in the Conversion of Johann Georg Hamann**

In the tumult of all my passions, which so overwhelmed me that I could often hardly breathe, I kept on praying to God for a friend, a wise, sincere friend, such as I could no longer envisage. Instead of that I had tasted, tasted enough, the bitterness of false friendship and the unlikelihood of a better friendship. A friend who could give me a key to my heart, the thread that would lead me out of my labyrinth — — That was a wish I often had, without understanding and discerning its content rightly.

Praise God! I found this friend in my heart, who crept into it just when I most felt its emptiness, darkness, and desolation. By this time I had read through the Old Testament once entirely and the New Testament twice, if I am not mistaken. So, because I wanted to make a new beginning, it seemed as if I began to be aware of a veil over my reason and my heart, which had at first closed this book to me. I therefore set out to read it with more attention, in a more orderly way, and with more hunger, and to write down the thoughts that would occur to me as I read it.

This beginning, when I still brought rather imperfect and unclear ideas about God’s Word to my reading of it, was nevertheless made by me on 13 March with more sincerity than before. The further I went, the newer it became for me, the more divine was my experience of its content and effect. I forgot all my books about it; I was even ashamed that I had ever compared them to **God’s** book, had ever set them side by side, and had ever preferred another book to it. I found the unity of the divine will in the redemption of Jesus Christ, so that all history, all miracles, all the commandments and works of God converge at this central point, in order to lead the human soul out of slavery, bondage, blindness, folly, and the death of sin to the greatest happiness, the highest blessedness, and a reception of such good gifts, whose greatness, when they are revealed to us, must shock us even more than our own unworthiness or the possibility of making ourselves worthy of them. I recognized my own offenses in the history of the Jewish people. I read the story of my own life, and thanked God for His forbearance with this his people, because nothing but such an example could justify a similar hope. Above all else, I made an extraordinary discovery in the books of Moses that in some cases the Israelites, however uncouth a people they may appear to us, sought from God nothing but what God wanted them to do. They acknowledged their disobedience just as vividly as any penitent sinner and also forgot their penitence just as quickly. Yet in anguish at their sin they called for nothing but a Redeemer, an Advocate, a Mediator, without whom they could neither rightly fear him nor rightly love him. In the midst of these reflections which seemed rather mysterious to me, I read the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy on the evening of 31 March, fell into deep meditation, and thought of God’s word about Abel: “the earth had **opened its mouth** to receive your **brother’s blood**.” — — I felt my heart beating, I heard a voice groaning and wailing in its depths as the voice of blood, the voice of a murdered brother, who wanted to avenge his blood, even though at times I did not hear it and continued to shut my ears to it. — — This was what made Cain restless and unable escape. At once I felt my heart flowing, it poured itself out in tears, and I could no longer — — I could no longer hide from God that I was the killer of my brother, the murderer of His only begotten Son. Despite my great weakness, despite the long resistance which I had, until now, put up against His witness and His tender touch, the Spirit of God kept on revealing to me the mystery of divine love and the benefit of faith in our gracious, only Savior, more and always more.

With groanings that were brought before God by an Interpreter, who is dear and precious to him, I went on reading the divine Word, enjoying the same assistance as that by which it was written as the only way to receive the understanding of it. With God’s help I brought my work to completion on 21 April, with unusually rich comfort and uninterrupted refreshment.

Praise God, my heart felt more at rest than ever before in my life. In the moments when depression wanted to arise I was overwhelmed with a sense of comfort whose origin I cannot credit to myself, and which no one is able to pour into his neighbor so abundantly. I was shocked by its overflow. It swallowed up all fear, all sadness, all mistrust, so that I could not find any trace of them in my soul any longer. I pray that God may bless the work that He has begun in me, bless my weak faith through his Word and gracious Spirit: the abundant Spirit of God, the Spirit of peace that passes all understanding but is not the kind of peace that the world gives, the Spirit of love without whom we are nothing but God’s enemies…, the Spirit of hope that does not disappoint us, like the shadow-play of fleshly fancies…

I conclude, from the evidence of my own experience, with heartfelt and sincere thanksgiving for his saving Word which I have tested and found to be the only light by which we not only come to God, but also get to know ourselves, the most precious gift of God’s grace that surpasses the whole natural world and all its treasures as much as our immortal spirit surpasses the clay of our flesh and blood,… the only bread and manna for our souls, which a Christian can no more do without than an earthly person can do without his daily necessities and sustenance — — yes, I confess that this Word of God accomplishes just as great miracles in the soul of a devout Christian, whether he be simple or learned, as those described in it. I confess that the understanding of this book and faith in its contents can therefore be gained by no other means than through the same Spirit, who inspired its authors, and that his unutterable sighs, which he creates in our hearts, are of the same nature as the inexpressible images, which are scattered throughout sacred scripture with a greater richness than all the seeds of the natural world and its realms.