

Hamann on Revelation

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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 is an extract from the introduction to his "Biblical Meditations of a Christian" the London Writings, which he penned in 1758 in after his return to orthodox Christianity. My translation of the London Writings will be published by Ballast Press in 2021.

I would like to make a few general remarks about divine revelation as they occur to me. God has revealed Himself to human beings in nature and His Word. We have not yet analyzed the similarities and connections between both of these revelations so extensively and explained them so clearly, nor have we penetrated into this harmony, so that sound philosophy could open up a wide field for itself. In countless instances both revelations must be rescued in the same way from the greatest objections to them. Both revelations explain and support each other; they cannot contradict each other, no matter how much the interpretations of our reason would like to claim that they do. Rather, it is the greatest contradiction and abuse of reason when reason itself wishes to reveal anything. A philosopher who puts the divine Word away from his eyes in order to please reason, is like the Jews who seem to cling more rigidly to the Old Testament the more obstinately they reject the New Testament. In them the prophecy was fulfilled that what was meant to confirm and complete their other insights is an offense and foolishness in their eyes. The study of nature and history are the two pillars of true religion. Unbelief and superstition are based on shallow physics and shallow history. Nature is as little subject to blind accident or to eternal laws as all events can be explained in personal and political terms. Newton is deeply moved as a historian by the wise omnipotence of God and equally so as a scientist by God's wise government

God reveals Himself — — The Creator of the world an author — — What kind of fate would His books have to experience? To what kind of strict judgments and what kind of sharp-witted literary critics would His books be subject? — — How many miserable scornors of religion have enjoyed their daily bread from His hand? How many heroic spirits, like

Herostratus, have arrogantly and shamefully looked for some kind of immortality which they, on their death bed, foreswore to God, their God, and begged for a better kind of immortality by their repentance?

God is used to seeing His wisdom criticized by the children of men. The staff of Moses was not in any danger even though it was encircled by the staffs of the wise Egyptians that hissed at it. These masters of a thousand arts were finally compelled to recognize the finger of God in a most contemptible insect and give way to the prophet of the true God. Thus the notion that the highest Being has Himself honored these humans with a special revelation seems to be so strange and extraordinary to these dim-wits that together with Pharaoh they asked what this god wanted and why he had come to visit them. But this notion of revelation must necessarily be combined with consideration of those who benefit from it. God desired to reveal himself to **people**; he has revealed Himself **through people**. The means by which God made this revelation beneficial for them and won them for it, the means by which He spread, propagated, and preserved it among them, had to be based most appropriately on human nature and His wisdom. Any philosopher who wished to criticize or correct God in His choice of all these circumstances and ways by which God communicated His revelation would always act more reasonably if he trusted in his own judgment about it less, so that he did not run into the danger of that royal astronomer who regarded the Ptolemaic system and his explanation of movement of the stars as the true construction of the heavens.

If God had intended to reveal Himself to human beings and the whole human race, then the folly of those who wish to make a limited taste and their own judgment the touchstone for the divine Word is even more evident. We do not speak about a revelation that a Voltaire, a Bolingbroke, or a Shaftesbury would find acceptable, revelation that catered best to their prejudices, their wit, their moral, political, magical fancies, but about a disclosure of truths whose certainty, credibility, and importance are of concern to the whole human race. People who are confident enough in their own insight to be able to make do without divine instruction would have found faults in any other revelation and would have need of none. They are the healthy people who need no physician.

God has certainly found it most suitable for His wisdom to bind this nearer revelation of Himself first to a single man, then to his family, and finally to a particular people, before He allowed it, as He wished, to become more general. We may no more fathom the reasons for this choice than why it pleased Him to create in six days what His will could have done just as well in a single moment.

Furthermore, God has accommodated and lowered Himself as much as possible to human inclinations and notions, yes even to human prejudices and weaknesses. This hallmark of His love for humanity, which fills the whole of Holy Scripture, is the cause of mockery by weak minds who presuppose that they will find some human wisdom in the divine Word, or some satisfaction for their curiosity, their wit, and some agreement with the taste of time in which they live or the sect to which they belong. No wonder that they find themselves deceived in their thinking! No wonder that the Spirit of Scripture is dismissed with the same indifference! Yes, no wonder that this Spirit seems just as dumb and useless as the Savior was to Herod, who, despite his great curiosity and desire to see him, soon sent him to Pilate with something more than cold indifference!