

The Rehabilitation of Myth:
Enlightenment and
Romanticism in Johann
Gottfried Herder's *Vom Geist
der Ebräischen Poesie*

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Johann Gottfried Herder is commonly recognised as a predecessor or even an initiator of German Romanticism. The recent research on Herder since the 1980s has confirmed this view and proven his influence to have been even far greater than acknowledged by the Romantic philosophers and writers themselves or by earlier research on them; moreover, his influence is not restricted only to Romantics proper but comprises the whole post-Kantian idealistic philosophy.¹ On the other hand, the recent research also emphasises that it is an oversimplification to consider the proto-Romantic Herder as an opponent of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, with his trust in the human cognitive and practical capacities needed for adapting to the natural living conditions of a people and for creating a culture, with his search for 'natural laws' governing the history of mankind – however difficult these laws might be to discern – and with his idea of a Humanity in which all men participate and which simultaneously is an ideal to be attained through the joint effort of mankind in history, Herder is a representative of his enlightened century.² In his main work *Ideen zur Geschichte der Philosophie der Menschheit* he, in spite of his criticism of previous Enlightenment historians for their teleological view that history attained its goal in the enlightened eighteenth century, unquestionably stands on their shoulders, as Michael Maurer puts it, not least in his view that the history of mankind should be written as a cultural history and not as a history of sovereigns and wars.³

How the 'late Enlightenment' and the 'proto-Romantic' strains relate to each other in Herder's thinking, is a difficult question which still needs considerable clarification. In this article, I focus on two important, interdependent fields of his interest, namely mythology and religion, and elucidate how he partly following, partly extending the Enlightenment mode of thinking proceeds to thinking that exceeds the Enlightenment in the direction of Romanticism.

It is well-known that Romanticism meant a turning point in the view on myths. In the period of Enlightenment, mythology was considered proper allegorical material

for poetry,⁴ but as uninteresting from the philosophical point of view, because myths lack any cognitive value: they were regarded as irrational beliefs deriving from the early stages of mankind which in the enlightened period had to be replaced by the knowledge attained by empirical perception of reality and by reasoning.⁵ In contrast, Romanticists such as Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and F. W. J. Schelling regarded myths not as allegorical illustrations of abstract ideas but as a particular form of cognitive appropriation of reality of its own which is different to, but no less valuable than, conceptual thought as it appears in the sciences and in philosophy, and as being closely connected with poetry. Myths were not solely regarded as a matter of the past but were considered to be necessary in the contemporary modern world, too. Thus, both Friedrich Schlegel, and already before him the author of 'Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus' (today believed to be the young Hegel after all, and not Schelling or Hölderlin) demand that a new mythology has to be created to serve as the basis for modern poetry.⁶ That the turning point in the thinking on mythology is Herder, has already been convincingly and thoroughly presented in Fritz Strich's history of the relationship between mythology and poetry in Germany, and Manfred Frank in his study of the Romantic view on mythology agrees with Strich.⁷ In the present paper, I wish to show that this turn did not mean turning one's back on the Enlightenment demand for rationality but rather redefining the limits of rationality. To show this, we must follow Herder into his definition of the relation between myth, poetry and knowledge.

For Herder, too, the question of mythology and its cognitive value is not connected only with poetry but also and foremost with religion. The Enlightenment thinkers in Germany were not generally hostile towards religion; on the contrary, efforts to reconcile the demands of reason with those of Christian religion were common.⁸ However, a tension between Enlightenment rationalism and religion did exist;⁹ as Johannes Adamsen puts it, referring to Immanuel Kant's famous definition of Enlightenment as man's freeing of oneself from a self-induced lack of autonomy,¹⁰ 'is not religion a self-induced lack of autonomy?'¹¹ It is symptomatic that for Kant himself pure theoretical reason, which is the basis of the scientific knowledge, cannot deal with God and the questions of religion at all, but they are confined to the realm of practical reason only. Instead, for Romantic thinkers religion is a matter of central concern. The Romanticists – and Hegel – saw in religion man's aspiration to reach the Absolute in mental images (*Vorstellungen*).¹² This conception derives from Herder's view of religion, which combines a kind of Spinozistic pantheism with the Christian view of the world and regards religion as a kind mythology. The Absolute of the idealistic philosopher, which refers to the whole of existence – such as for Herder Spinoza's *Deus sive natura* –¹³ and which philosophical knowledge seeks to obtain with concepts, is in Christianity imagined in Almighty God.¹⁴

In contrast to those Enlightenment philosophers who – like, e.g., G. E. Lessing – endeavoured to show the compatibility of Christian religion with reason by reducing it to its abstract idea content, Herder regards it impossible to strip religion of mythology, because this is exactly what religion is. He considers the Bible to be created by a similar process to other mythologies, namely by men who imagine as anthropomorphic figures the natural forces they are confronted with. But how can the truth of the Bible be defended against the rational criticism, if its content is regarded as a product of human mythopoetic activity? How can the demands of religion and reason be simultaneously satisfied, as Herder undoubtedly thought they were? We can answer the questions by analysing Herder's concept of myth as a form of human knowledge, his reading of Spinoza as presented in his *Gott. Einige Gespräche*, and his interpretation of the Old Testament in his *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* (1782-83). This analysis will show that he does not make myths and religion, which is based on mythology, acceptable by rejecting the Enlightenment perspective of rationality but by extending it or by following it in a manner which may seem paradoxical.

Knowledge as a creation of sensible figures: the rehabilitation of myth

As Heinz Gockel has pointed out, Herder had already discussed the use of mythology in modern literature in *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur* (1767–1768) and *Kritische Wälder* (1769; 1846). Christian Adolph Klotz had claimed that the classical mythology, based on errors and superstition, could offer an enlightened mind nothing useful or worthy of consideration. At most it can provide us with allegorical names for various matters; for instance, the ocean may be called the kingdom of Neptun, etc.¹⁵ Herder rejects the idea that myth is only an allegorical name for something that can be exhausted by a concept. Myth is for him a sensual (*sinnlich*)¹⁶ image, and as a result it can have an aesthetic value: 'We use them [mythic figures] [...] because of their sensual beauty.'¹⁷ Still more importantly, a mythic figure has a concreteness that separates it from a mere disguise for conceptual content. Through the tales connected with it, the mythic figure receives other meanings than that of an abstract idea. For example, Agamemnon is not only the brave commander of the Greek troops, but by the agony he feels as his daughter is sacrificed, new traits are added to his character.¹⁸ Due to these subsidiary meanings or ideas (*Nebenbegriffe*, *Nebenideen*) the mythical figures are in Herder's opinion highly suitable material for poetry.¹⁹

Herder's early interpretation of myths falls into the frame of the allegorical conception of myths typical of the Enlightenment in so far as the usefulness of the mythic figures and tales is not based on their religious but on their generally human content.

However, he disagrees with the customary view of the allegorical use of the myths in that he emphasises the irreducibility of a mythic figure to a certain conceptual content. A mythic figure is a concrete, sensible (*sinnlich*) figure, and precisely because of this, useful in poetry which operates with concrete and sensible, but simultaneously meaningful matters.²⁰

Gockel explains that as Herder later in his *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* says that he wishes he had never written *Kritische Wälder*, this refers to his comments on mythology, which now appear to him to be academic and shallow; Herder had namely reached a deeper understanding of the myths on the sea journey which he reports in the diary.²¹ On the sea, man is at the mercy of natural forces and experiences their mightiness compared to himself. He is also in a state of constant expectation of an encounter with the unknown, which he tries to give a *Gestalt* by way of his imagination. According to Gockel, Herder saw that the source of myths is man's encounter with nature, reflected in the imaginative figures produced to express this experience.²² It is true that there is a difference between the emphasis in Herder's early and his later discussion of myths: while in the early writings the emphasis is on the usefulness of (classical) myths in modern literature, he later considers myths in connection to religion. Yet, it certainly goes too far to regard Herder's experience on the voyage as such a radical turning point in his thinking that he had to renounce his previous writings on mythology.²³ This is because the connection he sees between mythology, poetry and knowledge can be traced back to his very earliest writings.

In *Versuch über das Sein*, a short essay that was not meant for publication but written in 1760s by the young student for his teacher Kant, Herder explains how he understands the origins of human knowledge. According to him, the basis of knowledge is Being, and Being is for him not like later for Kant a purely formal category but, on the contrary, the most concrete and the most sensible (*sinnlich*) category of all. The certainty of the concrete, sensible Being is given to us immediately, and this certainty is the basis of all our following knowledge.²⁴ This knowledge of Being is not given to us conceptually but through our senses and is therefore obscure. The basis of our reason is thus the non-rationally, the obscurely given.²⁵ Thus, in the essay written for the pre-critical Kant who was Herder's teacher in Königsberg, Herder is already constructing what John H. Zammito describes as a counter-position to the later Kant's conception of the *a priori* categories of reason as a prerequisite of knowledge: the starting point is the immediate experience of Being, which is sensory and not exhaustively analysable by concepts.²⁶

Whereas for Kant the categories of understanding (*Verstand*) and sensory perception are separated from each other, Herder regards understanding and sensory perception as related to each other, since both our mental images and our concepts derive from our sensory nature. The very first concepts are the most sensory. Our understanding, which

Herder also calls *Besonnenheit* (approximately: reflectivity), is the capacity for discriminating differences: with it we can discern in the sensed concrete object a distinctive mark, which – as Herder explains in his study on the origin of language – is stored in the words of language.²⁷ The senses, understanding and language are for Herder the interdependent and necessary tools of cognition. By discerning distinctive marks the concrete sensible object becomes less obscure and better defined.²⁸ In Herder's view our language and our thinking should continually preserve the connection with the sensory experience: an abstract language which has lost its contact with the sensory experience will lead to no knowledge but remains but a futile play with concepts.²⁹

The foundation of Herder's theory of human knowledge has been traced back to Alexander Baumgarten's distinction between sensory knowledge which remains unclear and the clear conceptual knowledge, art belonging to the first one, philosophy to the second one.³⁰ Baumgarten was a follower of Leibniz and an Enlightenment rationalist, and Herder owes much to both, yet his thinking exceeds the limit of Enlightenment rationalism in that he does not regard conceptual knowledge as superior to sensory experience. For Herder knowledge is based on the concrete-sensory experience of the world, and therefore he rejects the purely conceptual systems of the Rationalist philosophers. Abstraction can, in his opinion, only lead to some few steps further in the attempt to distinguish things from each other; ultimately one has concrete-sensory matter which cannot be divided by abstraction into more basic components.³¹

Herder is an empiricist, but of a totally different kind than Locke for whom the starting point of cognition is a simple sensory perception.³² Locke's simple sensory perception is, according to Herder, actually the result of a long series of abstractions, whereas our actual sensory perception of the world is concrete and non-differentiated.³³ To relate to man's concrete being in the world, the language in which our knowledge is stored and through which we can mediate it to others, has to be sensory and concrete, too. The original language of human beings has been totally sensory and that is why it was most appropriate for poetry, whereas the language of the modern world is abstract and distanced from the concrete experience.

In his early essay *Von der Ode*, Herder suggests that the original form of poetry was the lyrical poem,³⁴ which, in this context, he does not distinguish from the ode. The ode is a poem that expresses an emotion (*Empfindung*). This does not take place through abstract concepts because concepts can express a thought but not an emotion.³⁵ The expression of an emotion happens by means of poetic pictures (*poetische Bilder*)³⁶ which the poet creates by way of his imagination.³⁷ The creations of the imagination are sensuous (*sinnlich*); thus poetic language is sensuous language.³⁸ Poetry expresses emotions either by pictures (*Gemälde*) or by actions (*Handlung*).³⁹ Already in this essay the close connection between poetry and religion (myth) is mentioned: the author supposes

that the origin of poetry is to be sought in the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries, in the religious rites of the Druids and the bards.⁴⁰

For the young Herder, poetry thus already appears as *poiesis*, as the creation of imaginary figures through which human experience can be mediated. This view of poetry is well-known as the Romantic expressivistic conception of poetry. In Herder's writings this view of poetry is epistemologically founded: 'Our reason develops only through the creation of fictions. We always look for and create a unity for ourselves out of plurality and shape it into a *Gestalt*.'⁴¹ It is 'the necessary rule of our nature to immediately build for ourselves *configurations* from everything that we have experienced and feel, that is, to think only by way of building *Gestalts*.'⁴² *Poiesis*, the creation of meaningful, sensible figures is thus not only a talent or a characteristic of the poets, but, on the contrary, everyone is in this sense a poet: 'Our whole life is in a sense a *poetics*: we do not see, but create pictures for ourselves.'⁴³

By using his senses, his reason and his imagination man – or actually, human beings in different cultures – build themselves a world which is in no sense the absolute truth of Being, but only a human truth. Herder emphasises that human knowledge is anthropomorphic: man relates everything to himself and seeks analogies of himself in the outer world. We observe in the things we encounter our own manners of acting, thinking and experiencing, we imagine the phenomena we meet to be like ourselves. 'The more we look at the great play of powers acting in the Nature and contemplate it, the less we can avoid sensing a *similarity with ourselves*, from animating everything by our feelings', he writes.⁴⁴ 'But how? Is this »analogy with humans« also the truth?' he asks, and answers: 'Certainly it is the human truth, and from a higher one do I, as long as I am a human being, not have any knowledge'.⁴⁵ As human beings we cannot gain knowledge from any other but from the human perspective; for our construction of knowledge, no Archimedean point outside of humanity is given.⁴⁶

Among the analogical forms of perception, personification is the most important one. Personification is in Herder's view an anthropomorphic substitute for knowledge which we use because the deepest essence of the powers acting in Nature is unknown to us⁴⁷ – but a completely legitimate and in no way irrational substitute: 'If ignorance is its mother, the distinguishing understanding (*Verstand*) is its father'.⁴⁸ Herder might mean that human knowledge does not attain the deepest knowledge of the metaphysical essences of things, but when man builds himself a world with different things and powers, this does not happen in an arbitrary manner but in accordance with the distinctions we have made via our understanding.

As man encounters the events and things with his senses, his needs and his imagination, he personifies the natural forces and thus creates himself an anthropomorphic world of gods:

The sensuous [or sensual, *sinnlich*] human being cannot organise but sensuously [sensually, *sinnlich*]; and as he projects all his own acting power to everything that is effective, gods appear to him in all elements. In the roaring waterfall, in the ocean, in the storm, in lightening and thunder, in the sighing air, in all movements of Nature there are effective, acting beings. [...] The oldest mythology and poetry is also a *philosophy of the laws of nature*, an attempt to explain the changes of the universe in its becoming, its existence and its decline.⁴⁹

Thus, mythology is a form of creating a world that corresponds to the human capacities of knowledge and imagination, as well as being poetry of the human mind. Accordingly, poetry and mythology are very close to each other. Mythology is the poetry of the personification of the powers of nature. On the other hand, the core of the culture and the poetry of a nation is its mythology. Mythology is thus not a deplorable mistake to be done away with, but on the contrary the natural way of humans and cultures to create themselves a human world.

A mythic figure is in Herder's view an imaginative figure which interprets a phenomenon that is important for the culture. It expresses its creator's experience, but at the same time it is a part of the nation's cultural constructions of the world. The mythic figures and tales explain the culture for itself. Thus, mythology is for Herder a collective concept: it is a cultural imagery through which a nation defines itself and its world. For the original, sensuous human being, it has a similar function to that which philosophy has for modern man. According to Herder, every original culture had its own mythology which was connected with its living circumstances.

Herder's rehabilitation of myth, his making it acceptable for the modern world, is thus ambiguous. The myth is rehabilitated in the sense that its meaningfulness and truthfulness is emphasised, but it is separated from the modern world, which is an era of abstract, philosophical thinking. On many occasions Herder seems to suggest that myth, as well as poetry, belong to the past, whereas the contemporary world is unmythical and unpoetic.⁵⁰ But on the other hand, Herder criticises abstract thinking for the emptiness which results from severing the concepts from their sensual origin; and because a human being is still the same sensuous-intellectual being as always, would it not be preferable even for modern man to shape his world through mythical and poetic figures and tales? Indeed, as Gockel has remarked, one can also find in Herder's writings the idea of the necessity of a new mythology suitable to form a basis for modern poetry.⁵¹ This contradiction or ambiguity – whether the myth belongs to the past only or whether it would be pertinent also today – remains unsettled in Herder's work. As is well-known, Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel and Schelling decided the controversy in favour of a 'new mythology' that would be the foundation of the new poetry, whereas Hegel considers that poetry as a representation of the world in sensible

figures is due to be substituted in the process of history, first with religion, and then with philosophy, a representation of the world in terms of abstract concepts.

Herder's rehabilitation of the myth cannot be characterised as irrationalism, as a rejection of reason for irrational imaginations. Rather than advocating irrationalism, Herder's rehabilitation of mythology in a way extends the concept of rationality; a similar extension was effected by Ernst Cassirer in the second part of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* that deals with mythic thinking.⁵² Herder does not attack the Enlightenment demand for rationality as such, but he criticises the too-narrow concept of rationality: he questions the usefulness of abstract conceptual thinking and the effort to infer *more geometrico* in matters of the real world and instead prioritises the concrete-sensory thinking and language instead. This means that Herder questions the position of philosophy as the first, i.e. grounding discipline, and at the same time as the final, most perfect knowledge of the world.

In a sense one can say that Herder replaced philosophy as the first, grounding science with anthropology, because for him the basis for any knowledge must be the knowledge of the concrete human being – not of the abstract, transcendental subjectivity.⁵³ However, anthropology as an empirical science cannot be in the same sense an unquestionable foundation of knowledge as epistemology was supposed to be in modern philosophy; for Herder there cannot be any such theoretical, unquestionable founding discipline. That is why Herder as a theoretician of knowledge is an antifoundationalist and a hermeneutician for whom our interpretation of the world lacks the foundation of any absolutely certain knowledge.⁵⁴ This certainly is an unacceptable view for both the empiricist and rationalist philosophers of the Enlightenment era, but from the point of view of the twenty-first century this in no way means irrationalism.

The Old Testament as poetry – and as truth

By entitling his comprehensive study on the Old Testament as *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* Herder has provoked accusations of aestheticizing the Bible.⁵⁵ It is, however, a misunderstanding to assume that his intention is to ask us to search in the Bible for aesthetic values (beauty) only. Nor is his aim to apply categories of poetics to the Old Testament, as Robert Lowth had done. For Herder, who comments on Lowth's work, it is evident that our poetic categories – developed on the basis of Greek and Latin literatures – are not appropriate for the Hebrew poetry.⁵⁶

When Herder speaks about the Old Testament as poetry, he emphasises that the book has to be read as a human poetic creation (*Dichtung*), as *poiesis*. The Old Testament has to be read as human language by which human thoughts are conveyed, and thus in

its content also as thoroughly human, originating in the human mind.⁵⁷ In the first part of the study, the author declares that the objective of the study is ‘to grasp the general and characteristic basic traits of Hebrew poetry, its cosmology, the oldest conceptions of God, of Creation, of Providence, of angels and Elohim, of cherubim, of particular things and the poesies of nature; in addition especially the tales of the fathers [...]’.⁵⁸ Hence, the main object of the study is not the formal or aesthetic features of the book but its contents, which are regarded as a poetic creation.

One must read the Bible as human, because it is a book written by men for men; the language is human, the external means by which it has been written and preserved is human, and, finally, the sense [*Sinn*] in which it can be grasped is human.⁵⁹

In this way did Herder begin his advice to students of theology for reading the Bible. ‘It has been proved that the Hebrew language was spoken by people, by a nation; that it was also spoken by Gods, angels and Elohim, still has to be proved; that is why I adhere to the former one’, he continues.⁶⁰ In the early manuscript *Über die ersten Urkunden des menschlichen Geschlechts*, unpublished during his life-time, he goes a step further by saying that reading the Bible as if it described the things the way God saw and experienced them and how he spoke about the matters is the worst kind of anthropomorphism.⁶¹

The Old Testament is in Herder’s view the poetry of the Hebrews in the sense that in its mythological figures and tales and the ancient family histories the nation expresses its view of itself and of the world. A crucial part of this imagery is the conception of God shaped to accord with the Hebrew people’s experience of the world; as Herder wrote in *Über die ersten Urkunden des menschlichen Geschlechts*, theological traditions are as national as anything else.⁶²

Herder’s stand sounds shockingly radical, especially if one thinks of his position as a clergyman. Can one regard God as a creation of Hebrew national poetry – and yet think that this does not in the slightest undermine the Christian faith nor the authority of the Bible? It is certain that Herder considered it to be so; how can it be? The answer is found in Herder’s ‘two-layered’ conception of the Almighty, one layer being philosophical, the other being traditional Christian.

In *Gott. Einige Gespräche* Herder takes a stand on Spinoza and the dispute that was ongoing in Germany in the 1780s concerning his doctrine. Herder challenges those who claim that Spinoza’s ‘Deus sive natura’, ‘God or Nature’, means proclaiming atheism: Nature follows the inevitable laws of nature, whereby the role that remains for God is to be merely another name for the mechanically working machine.⁶³ According to Herder this is not true, or if there is a mistake made by Spinoza, it must be corrected. He is convinced that Spinoza, being a victim of the mechanistic view of nature

of his century, would, if he had lived in the following century, have had another view of Nature and God.⁶⁴ Herder's remark indicates that he regarded it as possible and as necessary to bring the view of God into accordance with the latest knowledge about nature as presented by science. Thus, he looks at religion as a man of the century of Enlightenment, yet not rejecting the truth of religion. For him, God and the Christian religion are in no way endangered by the progress of human knowledge; on the contrary, by using our reason we improve our understanding of God's creation and the way he acts.⁶⁵

It is Herder's opinion that had Spinoza lived a century later, he would also have thought of Nature – like Herder himself on the basis of the natural sciences of the eighteenth century, and still more on the basis of Leibniz's dynamistic philosophy – not as of a mechanical machine but as a totality of creative organic powers.⁶⁶ Those powers do not show themselves as such but only through their effects.⁶⁷ All powers of Nature are part of the deepest divine power which organises the whole of Nature.⁶⁸ Perceiving beauty, wisdom, power, reason, and goodness in Nature, Herder assigns these attributes to the power behind of the whole of the Nature, God.⁶⁹ As Klaus Hammacher has remarked, giving these attributes to God discords with Spinoza's thinking.⁷⁰ We could add that the attributes Herder assigns to God are humanizing in the manner which according to him is typical of man's anthropomorphic construction of the world. The attributes mentioned are also, of course, exactly those traditionally assigned to the Christian God: God is good, just and almighty.

Thus Herder has to exert violence on Spinoza's thinking in order to make it accord with the Christian world-view. On the other hand, the adjustment does not succeed without problems from the Christian point of view either. As Horst Lange has remarked, Herder's pantheistic view of God is heretical from the point of view of the Christian doctrine: he sees God as an impersonal power acting immanently in the world and believes that the personification of God results from man's inclination to think in analogies to himself, whereas for Christianity, God is personal and transcendent.⁷¹

Herder himself does not find any contradiction between his pantheism and the Christian faith. Moreover, he does not see any inconsistency in believing that we receive knowledge of God by reading the Old Testament, although this is a creation of ancient Hebrew poets (Herder prefers speaking about 'Hebrews' instead of 'Jews'). According to him, a mythic tale can be both a poetic imagination and true, because it is a human form of giving shape to the experience of a people.

However, even if we could agree with Herder that in spite of being mythological, a representation can be true, we still have to ask, on what grounds does the Old Testament, being a creation of Hebrew poets, deserve its unique position as a source of religious truth. For Herder the question as such is almost too radical to be posed: asking

a Christian, and even a clergyman, for arguments for the superiority of the biblical 'mythology' over the superstitious imaginations of other peoples, is an impertinent, an almost heretical demand. Yet he clearly gives an answer to this question, and in this answer it is essential that his arguments for the superiority of the Old Testament as a source of religious truth totally concur with Enlightenment thought and ideals.

The truth of mythology: 'national idiotism' and the promotion of humanity

How does Herder proceed in elucidating the mythology of the Old Testament, so as to make it appear both as a product of a certain people under certain historical conditions and as fundamentally true and relevant for modern man? It is a paradox that he applies to the Bible essentially the same historical-critical approach which Spinoza had developed in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), but with an opposite goal: his intention is not to shake the authority of the Bible but on the contrary to show its superiority.

Herder underlines that the poetry of the nomadic people has to be understood by imagining oneself into its way of life.⁷² The objective of reading the Old Testament is (first) the same as reading the poetry of any nation: one tries to get hold of the culture's way of thinking and its imagery, to understand its specific character. The word 'spirit' (*Geist*) in the title of the study then refers to this purpose of grasping the specific nature of the Hebrew culture. The word is thus used in a similar manner as Montesquieu uses it in his *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), in which the 'spirit' of the laws varies with the cultures of the nations and the peculiarity of each culture is explained through the concrete living circumstances of the people (for Montesquieu, the 'climate').⁷³ In this sense, Herder's manner of asking about the 'spirit of the Hebrew poetry' does not transgress the boundaries of Enlightenment thinking. I would like to emphasise this, because the Romantic thinkers following him soon started talking about the 'spirit' of a nation as if this were an entity of its own, a kind of collective subjectivity of the culture.

In spite of the demand of imagining oneself into the ancient Hebrews' way of life in order to understand the mythic world-view of the Old Testament, Herder actually deciphers the mythic tales as a reader of the enlightened eighteenth century. He explicitly states that the reader has to try to understand the events in the Bible so that they follow the natural course of events. It is not wrong to see the influence of God in the events, but his interference does not violate the laws of nature: his influence takes place in accordance with them.⁷⁴

Applying the principle of realism implies in Herder's reading of the Old Testament that supernatural figures are interpreted as imaginary cultural creations which carry

symbolic meanings. This interpretation distinguishes him from those Enlightenment thinkers who, like Voltaire, could see in the non-realistic elements of the Bible only superstition.⁷⁵ For instance, angels personify the acting power of God.⁷⁶ Herder says that the figure of an angel or a cherub is a borrowing from the Chaldeans and as an imagined creature is a mixture of a lion, an oxen, a human being and an eagle.⁷⁷ He also remarks that the cherub has an equivalent in the sphinx of the Egyptian, in the dragon of the Greek and in the griffin of the Nordic mythology.⁷⁸ Correspondingly, the miracles are interpreted symbolically or as instances of using the national *topoi* in describing events. For example, when we are told that God appeared as a pillar of smoke or fire to lead the people of Israel in its wandering through the desert, this is interpreted as deriving from the habit that nomadic peoples carried a fire torch at the head of the flock of people, indicating the direction, which appeared as a pillar of smoke during daytime and as a fire in the night. When this concrete fact is combined with the conviction that it was God himself who guided his chosen people to the Promised Land, this all can be abbreviated symbolically as God appearing as smoke and fire.⁷⁹ In a similar manner, Herder interprets the tale about the sea withdrawing in front of the people of Israel and rolling over and drowning the Egyptians who were pursuing them. This refers in Herder's interpretation in reality to the passing over the dangerous isthmus connecting Egypt and the Arabian peninsula, but on the other hand the escape from the danger is presented with a *topos* typical of the Hebrew culture: namely for the Hebrews the great water represents danger and the rescue from the perilous waters is correspondingly the *topos* of being saved in general or, as Herder puts it, a national image of being saved (*National-Bild der Errettung*).⁸⁰ Similarly, the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as an allegory of fatal illness and recovery.⁸¹ Herder uses the word 'allegory' several times when interpreting the Old Testament, but one must be careful not to take this to mean allegory in the traditional sense of an illustration of an abstract idea. Herder constantly underlines that the Hebrews did not think in abstractions but imagined things in concrete figures and events – sensuously and poetically: 'The primeval world thought sensuously'.⁸²

For Herder, the most important of the cultural creators of the Old Testament is Moses. Herder considers Moses to be the author of the first books of the Old Testament, in which he included ancient national tales, tales of common Oriental origin – the prime example being the Creation Narrative – and tales from the tribal history.⁸³ In Herder's opinion, Moses has a similar position in Hebrew culture as Homer does in the Greek: he is a *vates*, a seer-poet, who has given his people its basic national imagery.⁸⁴ In Moses' books one can find all the most important elements of the religion of the Hebrews, including the oldest conceptions of God.

The traditional traits of Jehovah are in Herder's interpretation explained mainly by the living conditions and the world-view of the nomad people. According to Herder,

the traditional figure of God has to be seen as the 'natural poetry' of the Hebrews,⁸⁵ as a personification of the experience of nature, just as are mythological figures in general. What is crucial in the Hebrew world-view – as in the world-view of other Near Eastern peoples – is the distinguishing of heaven and earth from each other and their polarity: everything noble, mighty and good belongs to heaven, whereas everything mean, poor and worthless has its place on the earth. God is the Lord of heaven and thence of the whole world.⁸⁶ Simultaneously God has traits deriving from the most important social institutions. For a patriarchal nomadic people, the most important roles were those of a shepherd and the head of the family, and God carries traits of both of these: 'In the tent of a shepherd God is a shepherd, in the circle of the family he is the family father.'⁸⁷ God is to the Hebrews the shepherd and the caring father of His people and of all Creation.⁸⁸

Herder regards the conception of God as the Lord of heaven, a shepherd and a family father as a 'national idiotism' (*National-Idiotismus*) of the Hebrews⁸⁹, i.e. an idiosyncrasy which originates in the living conditions and the concomitant world-view of the people. His interpretation shows how the demand to understand the Bible by immersing oneself in the world of the ancient Hebrews does not entail the loss of the enlightened perspective of the interpreter; on the contrary, following the climate theoretical mode of thinking he is able (to a certain extent) to explain the peculiarities of the Hebrew imagination. One has then to ask why this does not make Herder think of the Hebrew religion, and consequently of the Christian faith, in relative terms, seeing in them only the mythology of one people among many others. What makes the Old Testament so important even to the enlightened readers of the eighteenth century, if it is to be considered as 'local poetry', a 'national tale', a 'theological-philosophical-historical national tradition', even a 'national prejudice'?⁹⁰

The first decisive difference compared with the mythologies of other peoples is the monotheism of the Hebrews. As Herder remarks, the Hebrew religion was in the beginning polytheistic, as according to him, the religions of all ancient peoples were. Nature was populated by a variety of gods holding sway over different natural phenomena, often in conflict with each other. The gods were called Elohim by the Hebrews; later, during monotheism, they were reduced to subordinate spirits.⁹¹ In *Über die ersten Urkunden* Herder characterises polytheism as a religion of chaos and fear, as a superstition created by people who had imagined themselves a crowd of frightening or fear-dispelling deities.⁹² In *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* he describes how the chaos became a cosmos as polytheism was replaced by monotheism. The transition to monotheism meant for mankind an enormous cognitive and moral stride forward: from worshipping a number of deities who were in constant conflict with each other, man came to look at the existence as a creation of one single god, the Almighty. This made one see the 'unity

of the purpose of things everywhere',⁹³ from the way how things happen in nature one could discern 'natural laws of wisdom, love and goodness'; unity was brought to plurality, order to disorder, light to darkness.⁹⁴ Through its Creator, the world became a single whole, a cosmos, in which man could discern wisdom, order and beauty.⁹⁵ Thus, for Herder monotheism means nothing less than creating a cosmos out of chaos.

As monotheism means to Herder the recognition of the unity and the inner ordering principles of nature, it comes very close to his Spinozan-Leibnizian pantheism, in which God is conceived of as the ubiquitous, deepest acting power in Nature. The principles of reason and of monotheism come close to each other, as man through monotheism learns to perceive order and purpose everywhere in Nature: as he sees God's heaven and earth surrounding himself, nature appears to him as a rational whole ('*Verstandes-Einheit*').⁹⁶ Thus, Herder not only makes the transition to monotheism appear to be the discovery of the pantheistic principle but also makes it accord with the enlightened principle of the unity and regularity of nature.

In addition, as Herder praises the influence of religion on men, his point of view is that of the Enlightenment: 'A poetry that gives me eyes to see the Creation and myself, to watch them in the right order and proportion, to perceive everywhere the highest love, wisdom and omnipotence, even with the eyes of my imagination and with words which seem to be created for that purpose – such poetry is holy and noble.'⁹⁷ The value of religion or poetry is then determined by the effect it has on man, how it develops him. On another occasion Herder remarks that stories like those in the Old Testament make man mild, they increase his distance from the state of savageness and improve him.⁹⁸

In Herder's evaluation of monotheism, the other side of his reading of the Old Testament, complementary to regarding it as 'national idiotism', comes into view. Religion is considered from the perspective of the improvement of the individual and of mankind. The perspective is the same as in *Ideen zu einer Geschichte der Philosophie der Menschheit*, in which the supreme organizing principle is that of the progress of humanity (*Humanität*). The approach in this work is similar to his reading of the Old Testament in that here, too, the task is on the one hand to grasp the specificity of the achievements of any national culture, whereas on the other hand all cultures are valued from the point of view of general humanity. This double perspective is again a clear indication of Herder's belonging to the late Enlightenment thinkers.

In spite of the fact that Herder considers the biblical tale of Creation, in which the godly power creates the cosmos out of chaos and simultaneously shows man the order of work and rest in human life,⁹⁹ to be of common Oriental origin, the resolute monotheism of the Hebrews raises their religion above any other contemporary religions of the Orient. But there is still another, no less important matter that makes the religion of the Old Testament superior to any other religion so far. This is the Mosaic Law,

through which Moses – to put it boldly, following the sense of Herder’s presentation rather than his words – redefines Jehovah for his own people.

According to Herder, Moses is not only the Homer of his people but also its Solon, its legislator. Herder started his analysis of the Old Testament Jehovah by explaining how the figure of God was determined by the living conditions of the nomadic people. What raises his figure above the imaginations of any other people is the Mosaic Law, the law that Moses announces to be given by God himself to his people. In Herder’s understanding, this means in a way that the law takes the place of God: theocracy has become a nomocracy.¹⁰⁰ Herder notes that in a Hebrew sanctuary, there is no statue of God, nor his throne, but in the holy of the holies, the scroll of laws (*das Gesetzbuch*) was kept safe, and God was its guardian;¹⁰¹ ‘the word »temple« actually meant the place where the book of laws was stored, guarded by God.’¹⁰² Thus, the law is no casual supplement or attribute of God, but it is the very essence of what he is to his people. It is only ‘in his law that God is present to his people and influences it’,¹⁰³ and the Hebrews admonished their authorities to follow the Law of God. In Herder’s interpretation, God that expresses himself through his law comes to mean an immanent principle, which now is discerned not only in Nature – this was achieved by the monotheism – but as a law for the human community to be followed for its own benefit.

Giving a law to a people means a decisive step in its development towards happiness and humanity. It means nothing less than order becoming the principle of the community as well. Herder regards this to mean freedom of the individual. In his view, ‘the idea of Moses’ legislation was to create a free people which would not be subjected by anything but law.’¹⁰⁴ Thus, Herder’s interpretation of the Mosaic Law springs from the Enlightenment discussion about the constitution and the autonomy of citizens which was going on since Rousseau’s *Du contrat social* (1762): disorder and despotism are through the Mosaic Law replaced by a constitutional rule. The connection with the demand for democracy and national sovereignty is clear when Herder writes that through the law every member of the nation has ‘the same national rights’¹⁰⁵ and that by legislation Moses has bestowed upon the members of his people the freedom from any tyranny.¹⁰⁶ The civic rights proclaimed a few years later by the French Revolution as well as the idea of the autonomy of nations are already heard in the manner in which Herder praises the new ‘rule of God’ (*Gottesregiment*):

that the law rules and no legislator, that a free nation accepts it freely and willingly follows it, that an invisible, sensible, beneficent power will guide us, and no chains and bondages. This was the ideal of Moses; and I do not know if there could be any purer and nobler one. Unfortunately he came three or four centuries too early with it and with all the institutions that he grounded on it; and perhaps another Moses who may come six thousand years later may still have come too early.¹⁰⁷

The passage reveals that the object of Herder's deepest interest are not the peculiarities of the Hebrew imagination and history but what is new and important in it for the development of humanity – i.e. what is still valid and exemplary for us today.

Herder also makes it very clear what in his understanding is the content and purpose of the Mosaic Law. This is not 'to give orders concerning sacrifices or the forgiving of sins, but the well-being of the state, the welfare and the political success of Jehovah's people'.¹⁰⁸ In other words, the legislation does not concern rituals and religion in the first place but how the people live and thrive in this world (according to Herder, the Hebrews did not originally have the concept of a life hereafter at all¹⁰⁹). The political is accordingly not separated from the religious, but in the most natural manner the welfare of the people is in Herder's view connected with the autonomy and the 'political success' of a nation state. He specifies that Jehovah promised his people neither world power nor luxury, but a calm and contented enjoyment of the fruits of their labours.¹¹⁰ The aim of the legislation is to organise activities in the society in a manner that leads to the nation's thriving and to its happiness – i.e. the aim of the Mosaic Law is, according to Herder, the same as that of Enlightenment and the modern civil society.

The holiness of the law then does not mean that it is about practicing religion separated from the everyday life, but in Herder's interpretation it means that the authority of the laws is supported by the religion. In Herder's opinion, the laws had to be regarded as holy, they had to be backed up by the power of God to make an uncivilised people like the Hebrews obey them: the Mosaic laws 'had to be regarded as the natural order of God'.¹¹¹ 'God' appears here almost as a wise means of Moses to guarantee the holiness of the laws instead of as the actual legislator. 'Take it at least as being necessary, take it as cleverness of the legislator and as humbleness that the laws of Moses appear in the divine glory',¹¹² he writes, but hastens to reassure the reader that the Mosaic Law is to be considered as truly divine in its origin:

Has Providence any other task among men than to create and spread laws and order, light and truth among the peoples? And have these divine gifts ever been promoted by any institution as much as by the pure, wise, moral legislation of Moses?¹¹³

The development of man towards humanity, achieved by the wise legislation by Moses, is here regarded as the task of divine Providence. For Herder, there is no contradiction in seeing in Moses a free actor and simultaneously seeing in his legislation an act of Providence, because Providence does not mean for him a divine intervention into the natural order of things, but on the contrary, the divine power being effective in the whole existence might appear for us as Providence.¹¹⁴ In this manner, the purely human

perspective on the matter – the perspective of the developing humanity – is for Herder totally compatible with a religious perspective on it.

It is important for Herder that man need not give up his autonomy in using his cognitive skills when following the orders of religion. The holiness of the law ought not to lead to a blindly submissive attitude towards it, but the law has to be followed, because man by his own reason recognises its appropriateness:

When all laws are traced back to God, everything is derived from God's will, this enfeebles the will of man and his investigating powers. It will end up in a blind or intoxicated surrender to God, in short Islamism.¹¹⁵

A slavish attitude towards the law of God discords in Herder's opinion with the dignity of man, and true religion does not demand this attitude. Blind submission is found in the Oriental religions even after the Old Testament, as men blindly followed the tradition of the primeval world and thus lost their liberty. The consequence was that man degenerated instead of improving. 'Why? Because he constantly looked only at God and did not get to know himself [...].'¹¹⁶ Herder requires of man vigilance: man has to understand the commands of religion in the light of his developing understanding of himself. Thus, Herder's view also implies that religion is open to renewal along with the progress of humanity, as Moses renewed the religion of his people.¹¹⁷

The latter part of *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* deals with the later books of the Old Testament, which Herder assigns to different authors. He analyses the composition, themes and uses of the stories, the historical parts and the poems in them. What is essential is that all writings are interpreted in the context of the Hebrew nation and nation state. In the histories, the most important events of the nation are written down, in prophecies and psalms the fate of the people is foretold, its disasters mourned and its triumphs rejoiced. The manners in which the young and old live their lives are reflected upon and sung in aphorisms and songs. Religion is omnipresent, but not as knowledge of the transcendent but as an immanent, organizing principle of the life. Herder considers religious festivals to be national feasts in which the people, through sacrifices, songs and other ceremonies celebrate its constitution and praises the freedom and welfare it enjoys under the divine law.¹¹⁸

Thus, Herder's justification of the superiority of the religion of the Old Testament is that, better than any other religion of that time, it takes care of the earthly happiness of its people and promotes true, free humanity.

Conclusion

Since we are used to think of Romanticism and Enlightenment as opposed to and hostile towards each other, an effort is needed to conceive of how the transition to the Romantic understanding of mythology in Herder's writings is achieved by still drawing in a certain way on the principles of the Enlightenment thinking. As shown above, the rehabilitation of myths by Herder did not take place by giving up the Enlightenment principle of rationality but by extending it so as to make man's cognitive appropriation of the world comprise his mythopoetic activity as well. Furthermore, by combining a mythopoetic view of the Bible with the conviction that the pantheistic conception of God as the ubiquitous power acting in nature is compatible with the Bible and, in addition, that the biblical God is the most reasonable, the most enlightened mythopoetic creation of man, Herder believed he had attained a world-view that satisfied the demands of both philosophy and religion. By doing this, he believed himself to have demonstrated that the reason and the Enlightenment ideals of human freedom and the pursuit of earthly well-being are completely compatible with the Christian religion. Hence, his understanding of the mythic creations of man does not mean giving up either reason or religion but carries out their reconciliation.

We have seen that in *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*, Herder's arguments for the superiority of the religion of the Old Testament (before the birth of Christianity) are not theological but measure the religious myths by the Enlightenment ideals of the constitutional state and human freedom and happiness. We need to take only one further step to think that Herder was actually, like his Moses (almost) seems to be doing, backing up the ideals of the Enlightenment with the authority of religion; but, of course, he did not take this step but remained sincere in his Christian conviction.

1. Cf., e.g., *Herder und die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, ed. Marion Heinz (Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA, 1997).

2. 'It is now fairly well established that Herder was a true son of the Enlightenment', John H. Zammito writes in *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago & London, 2002). For the re-evaluation of Herder's relationship to the Enlightenment, cf. e.g. H. B. Nisbet, 'Zur Revision des Herder-Bildes im Lichte der neueren Forschung', in *Bückerburger Gespräche über Johann Gottfried Herder 1971*, ed. Johann Gottfried Maltusch (Bückerburg, 1973); *Vom Selbstdenken: Aufklärung und Aufklärungskritik in Herders 'Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit'*, eds Regine Otto & John H. Zammito (Heidelberg, 2001); Marion Heinz, 'Kulturtheorien der Aufklärung: Herder und Kant', in *Nationen und Kulturen: zum 250. Geburtstag Johann Gottfried Herders*, ed. Regine Otto (Würzburg, 1996); Michael Maurer, 'Die

Geschichtsphilosophie des jungen Herder', in *Johann Gottfried Herder 1744–1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg, 1987).

3. Maurer, *Geschichtsphilosophie*, p. 154.

4. Cf. Christoph Jamme, *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mythos*, 2: Neuzeit und Gegenwart (Darmstadt, 1991), p. 18.

5. To quote only a sample: Voltaire suggests that myths derive from human stupidity: 'c'est que le gros du genre humain a été très longtemps insensé et imbécile; et que peut-être les plus insensés de tou ont été ceux qui ont voulu trouver un sens à ces fables absurdes, et mettre de la raison dans la folie.' Voltaire, *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, in *The Complete Works of Voltaire / Les Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman et al., 59 (Geneva & Toronto, 1969), p. 105.

6. Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie*, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, 2, ed. Ernst Behler (München/Paderborn/Wien, 1967); G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, I (Frankfurt a.M., 1973), p. 234–36; for the authorship and dating see p. 628.

7. Fritz Strich, *Die Mythologie in der deutschen Literatur: von Klopstock bis Wagner*, I (Bern/München, 1970 (1910)); Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt a.M., 1982).

8. The thesis of the Enlightenment on the whole as a period of anticlericalism and secularisation has in the latest research been rejected as an oversimplification; cf. Pasi Ihalainen, 'The Enlightenment Sermon: Towards Practical Religion and a Sacred National Community', in *Preaching, Sermon and Cultural Change in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Joris van Eijnatten (Leiden & Boston, 2008).

9. Cf. Tadeuz Namowicz, 'Der Aufklärer Herder, seine Predigten und Schulreden', in *Herder*, ed. Sauder, p. 23.

10. 'der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit'; Kant, 'Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?' (1764), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8, ed. by the Königlich Preußischen (bzw. Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin & Leipzig, 1900–1966), p. 40.

11. Adamsen, 'Die theologische Grundfrage in Herders Aufklärungskritik', in *Vom Selbstdenken*, ed. Otto & Zammito, p. 49.

12. Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (Berlin, 1799); F. W. J. Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800) (Leipzig, 1979); Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Religion*., in *Werke*, 16–17; especially vol. 16, p. 139–51.

13. For the connection between Herder's Spinozism and the Absolute of the Idealistic philosophy see John H. Zammito, 'Herder, Kant, Spinoza und die Ursprünge des deutschen Idealismus', in *Herder und der deutsche Idealismus*, ed. Heinz.

14. For the Christian religion as the highest, 'absolute' religion see Hegel, 'Vorlesungen über die Religion', in *Werke*, 17, part III.

15. Herder, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Fragmente: dritte Sammlung*, FA I, p. 432–33; Heinz Gockel, 'Herder und die Mythologie', in *Herder*, ed. Sauder, p. 411, 409; Sigmund von Lemp-

cki, *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft bis zum Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1968), p. 383.

16. The word 'sinnlich', which is central in Herder's argumentation, can be translated into English depending on the case as 'sensory', 'sensuous', 'sensible' or 'sensual'. I have tried to find the best solution for each case, but one must keep in mind that the differences between the English words do not exist for Herder.

17. Herder, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, FA 1, p. 433.

18. Herder, *Erstes kritisches Wäldchen*, FA 2, p. 116.

19. Herder, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, FA 1, p. 435; FA 2, p. 115; Gockel, *Herder und die Mythologie*, p. 412.

20. For the difference between an allegory and a poetic figure, see Herder, 'Über Bild, Dichtung und Fabel', FA 4.

21. Gockel, *Herder und die Mythologie*, p. 414–416.

22. Herder, *Journal meiner Reise*, FA 9/2, p. 19–26; Gockel, *Herder und die Mythologie*, p. 409, 413–14.

23. Herder's exclamation 'O why did I write Kritische Wälder' (*Journal*, p. 74) does not appear in the context of mythology but of the author's considerations about his eventual future in Riga.

24. 'It is the first, sensory concept whose certainty is the foundation of everything' ('Es ist der erste, sinnliche Begriff, dessen Gewissheit allem zum Grunde liegt [...]'; 'Versuch über das Sein', FA 1, p. 19); cf. also Herder, *Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, FA 8, p. 362: 'Being is the basis of all knowledge. [...] Being is also the main concept of reason and of its copy, the human language.' ('Sein ist der Grund aller Erkenntnis. [...] Sein ist also auch der Grundbegriff der Vernunft und ihres Abdrucks, der menschlichen Sprache.'). Gesine Lenore Schiewer, 'Das Konzept einer Integration von »Körper« und »Geist« in Herders *Metakritik*', in *Herder und der deutsche Idealismus*, ed. Heinz.

25. Cf. Hans Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen: Gnoseologie – Ästhetik – Geschichtsphilosophie bei Johann Gottfried Herder* (Hamburg, 1990).

26. Zammito, *Herder, Kant, Spinoza*, p. 139, 140.

27. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, FA 1.

28. E.g., Herder, *Ursprung der Sprache*, p. 722.

29. 'The so-called pure concepts are mostly mere numbers or zeros of the mathematic table [...].' (Die sogenannten reinen Begriffe sind meistens reine Ziffern und Zeros von der mathematischen Tafel [...].) Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*, FA 4, p. 392.

30. Cf. Hans Adler, *Die Prägnanz des Dunklen*.

31. Herder, 'Versuch über das Sein', FA 1, p. 11.

32. Cf. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) (Oxford, 1975), p. 119: 'Though the Qualities that affect our Senses, are, in the things themselves, so united and blended, that there is no separation, no distance between them; yet 'tis plain, the Ideas they produce in the Mind, enter by the Senses simple and unmixed.'

33. Herder, *Viertes Kritisches Wäldchen*, FA 2, p. 254–55.
34. Herder, *Von der Ode*, FA 4, p. 72, 77, 78.
35. Herder, *Von der Ode*, p. 6.
36. Herder, *Von der Ode*, p. 67.
37. Herder, *Von der Ode*, p. 69.
38. Herder, *Von der Ode*.
39. Herder, *Von der Ode*, p. 93.
40. Herder, *Von der Ode*, p. 78–79.
41. 'Unsre Vernunft bildet sich nur *durch Fitionen*. Immerdar suchen und erschaffen wir uns *Eins in Vielem* und bilden es zu einer *Gestalt* [...].' Herder, 'Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung' (*Die Horen* 1796), in *Herders sämmtliche Werke* [SWS], 18, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin, 1877–1913), p. 485.
42. '[...] die notwendige Regel unsrer Natur, aus allem, was wir erlebten und fühlen, sofort *Konfigurationen* uns zu erschaffen, d.i. nur durch *Gestaltung* zu denken.' Herder, *Kalligone*, FA 8, p. 752.
43. 'Unser ganzes Leben ist also gewissermaßen eine *Poetik*: wir sehen nicht, sondern wir erschaffen uns Bilder.' Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*, FA 4, p. 645.
44. 'Je mehr wir indes das große Schauspiel wirkender Kräfte in der Natur sinnend ansehen, desto weniger können wir umhin, überall *Äbnlichkeit mit uns* zu fühlen, alles mit unsrer Empfindung zu beleben.' Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, p. 329.
45. 'Aber wie? ist in dieser »*Analogie zum Menschen*« auch Wahrheit? Menschliche Wahrheit gewiß, und von einer höhern habe ich, so lange ich Mensch bin, keine Kunde.' Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, p. 330.
46. Herder, *Fragmente: dritte Sammlung*, FA 1, 371; cf. also Hans Dietrich Irmscher, 'Aspekte der Geschichtsphilosophie Johann Gottfried Herders', in *Herder und der deutsche Idealismus*, ed. Heinz.
47. Herder, 'Über Bild, Dichtung und Fabel', FA 4, p. 651.
48. '[...] wenn aber Unwissenheit ihre Mutter wäre, so ist doch der bemerkende Verstand ihr Vater.' Herder, 'Über Bild, Dichtung und Fabel', p. 642.
49. 'Der sinnliche Mensch kann nun nicht anders, als sinnlich ordnen; und indem er in alles Wirkende seine eigne ganze Wirkungskraft hinüberträgt: so erscheinen ihm Götter in allen Elementen. Im rauschenden Wasserfall, im Meer, im Sturm, im Blitz und Donner, in der säuselnden Luft, in allen Bewegungen der Natur sind lebendige, wirkende, handelnde Wesen. [...] Die älteste Mythologie und Poetik also ist eine *Philosophie über die Naturgesetze*; ein Versuch, sich die Veränderungen des Weltalls in seinem Werden, Bestehen und Untergehen zu erklären.' Herder, 'Über Bild, Dichtung und Fabel', p. 643, 645.
50. Cf., e.g., Herder, *Viertes Kritisches Wäldchen*, FA 2, 365; Herder, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, 2/I, FA 1, p. 620, 644.
51. Gockel, *Herder und die Mythologie*, p. 413.

52. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 2: das mythische Denken (Darmstadt, 1994 [1925]).
53. Cf. Zammito, *Herder, Kant, Spinoza*, p. 110.
54. On antifoundationalism, see *Antifoundationalism Old and New*, eds Tom Rockmore & Beth J. Singer (Philadelphia, 1992); on the antifoundationalism of Romantic philosophy, see Elisabeth Millán-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (Buffalo, 2007).
55. Cf. Christoph Bultmann, *Die biblische Urgeschichte in der Aufklärung: Johann Gottfried Herders Interpretation der Genesis als Antwort auf die Religionskritik David Humes* (Tübingen, 1999), p. 13.
56. Herder, *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend*, FA 9/1, p. 152–53, 164–65. Wulf Köpke has pointed out that one additional aspect in Herder's discussion of the Old Testament as poetry was to make his contemporaries rethink the beginnings of our literary tradition: maybe the real origin is to be found in the Bible, not in ancient Greece; cf. Köpke, 'Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie. Biblisch-orientalische Poesie als alternatives Vorbild', *Herder Jahrbuch* 7 (2004).
57. Herder, *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*, I. SWS, 11, p. 225.
58. '[...] die allgemeinen und charakteristischen Grundzüge der Ebräischen Poesie fassen, ihre Cosmologie, die ältesten Begriffe von Gott, der Schöpfung, der Vorsehung, von Engeln und Elohim, den Cherubim, einzelnen Gegenständen und Dichtungen der Natur u.f.; zusammen insonderheit den Sagen der Väter [...].' Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 218.
59. 'Menschlich muß man die Bibel lesen: denn sie ist ein Buch durch Menschen für Menschen geschrieben: menschlich ist die Sprache, menschlich die äußern Hilfsmittel, mit denen sie geschrieben und aufbehalten ist; menschlich endlich ist ja der Sinn, mit dem sie gefaßt werden kann.' Herder, *Briefe*, p. 145.
60. 'Daß die Ebräische Sprache von Menschen, das sie von einer Nation gesprochen sei, ist bewiesen; daß sie aber auch von Göttern, von Engeln und Elohim gesprochen werde, ist noch zu erweisen; mithin bleibe ich bei dem Ersten.' Herder, *Briefe*, p. 150.
61. Herder, *Über die ersten Urkunden des menschlichen Geschlechts*, FA 5, p. 28.
62. Herder, *Über die ersten Urkunden*, p. 13.
63. Cf. Horst Lange, '»Ich bin (k)ein Spinozist«. Warum sich Herders Berufung auf Spinoza gewandelt hat', in *Der frühe und der späte Herder: Kontinuität und/oder Korrektur*, eds Sabine Groß & Gerhard Sauder (Heidelberg, 2007), p. 262.
64. Herder, *Gott: einige Gespräche*, FA 4, p. 707–709, 717.
65. E.g., Herder, *Gott*, p. 723.
66. Herder, *Gott*, p. 709.
67. Herder, *Gott*, p. 704, 709–10.
68. Herder, *Gott*, p. 703.
69. Herder, *Gott*, p. 772, 791.
70. Klaus Hammacher, 'Herders Stellung im Spinozastreit', *Herder und der deutsche Idealismus*, ed. Heinz, p. 179.

71. Lange, 'Ich bin (k)ein Spinozist', p. 257; from the contemporary point of view, Herder's variation of Spinozism, in which God is the power acting *in* nature, is, as Zammito (*Herder, Kant, Spinoza*, p. 113) has remarked, rather panentheistic than pantheistic.
72. Herder, *Briefe*, p. 151: 'You shall become with shepherds a shepherd, with a farming people a farmer, with ancient Orientals and Oriental, if you wish to enjoy these writings in the atmosphere of their origin'. ('Werden Sie mit Hirten ein Hirt, mit einem Volk des Ackerbau- es ein Landmann, mit uralten Morgenländern ein Morgenländer, wenn Sie diese Schriften in der Luft ihrer Ursprungs genießen wollen'); see also Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 226.
73. Lempicki remarks (*Geschichte der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*, p. 387) that to Herder, as to the historians of the Enlightenment, 'spirit' was in the first place a structural principle of the historical reality and not an explanatory principle. On Herder's relationship to the 'theory of the climate', cf. Gonthier-Louis Fink, 'Von Winckelmann bis Herder. Die deutsche Klimatheorie in europäischer Perspektive', in *Herder*, ed. Sauder.
74. Herder, *Briefe*, p. 178; cf. also Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 209.
75. Voltaire, *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, e.g. p. 222–23: 'Chaque peuple a ses prodiges; mais tout est prodige chez la peuple juif; et cela devait être ainsi, puisqu'il était conduit par Dieu même. Il est clair que l'histoire de Dieu doit point ressembler à celle des hommes. C'est pourquoi nous ne rapporterons aucun de ces faits surnaturels dont il n'appartient qu'à l'Esprit-Saint de parler. Encore moins oserons-nous tenter de les expliquer.'
76. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 259.
77. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 340; II, p. 15.
78. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 341.
79. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 68.
80. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 57.
81. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 29.
82. 'die Urwelt dachte sinnlich'; Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 325.
83. Cf. Herder, *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts*, FA V, p. 310.
84. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 47.
85. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 291.
86. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 260.
87. 'Im Zelte des Hirten ist Gott Hirt, im Kreise der Familie Vater.' Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 11.
88. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 269, 275.
89. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 385, II, p. 53.
90. 'Lokaldichtung', 'Nationalmärchen', 'theologisch-philosophisch-historische Nationaltradition', 'Nationalvorurteil'; Herder, *Über die ersten Urkunden*, p. 14, 16.
91. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 253, 254.
92. Herder, *Über die ersten Urkunden*, p. 11.
93. 'überall Einheit des Zwecks der Dinge', Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 225.
94. 'Naturgesetze der Weisheit, Liebe und Güte', Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 225.

95. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 225.
96. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 296.
97. 'Eine Poesie, die mir Augen giebt, die Schöpfung und nicht zu sehen, sie in rechter Ordnung und Beziehung zu betrachten, überall höchste Liebe, Weisheit und Allmacht zu erblicken, auch mit dem Auge meiner Phantasie und in Worten, die dazu recht geschaffen scheinen – eine solche Poesie ist heilig und edel.' Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 294.
98. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 326.
99. Herder examines this thoroughly in *Älteste Urkunde*.
100. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 82.
101. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 87.
102. '»Tempel« war eigentlich Haus des Gesetzbuchs, über dem Gott wachte'. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 82.
103. 'nur durch Gesetze sei Gott in seinem Volk gegenwärtig und wirkend'. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 88.
104. 'Moses Gesetzgebung hatte die Idee, ein freyes Volk zu bilden, das keinem als dem Gesetz unterworfen wäre [...]' Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 82.
105. 'gleiche Nationalrechte', Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 82.
106. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 82.
107. 'daß das Gesetz herrsche und kein Gesetzgeber, daß eine freye Nation es frei annehme und willig befolge, daß eine unsichtbare, vernünftige, wohlthätige Macht uns lenke, und nicht Ketten und Bande. Dies war die Idee Moses; und ich wüßte nicht, ob es eine reinere, höhere gäbe? Leider aber kam er mit ihr und mit allen Anstalten, die er darauf gründete, drei vier Jahrhunderte zu früh; ja vielleicht wird auch nach sechs Jahrtausenden ein anderer Moses noch zu früh erscheinen'. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 117.
108. 'Glückseligkeit seines Staates, politische Wohlfahrt des Volkes Jehovah'. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 101.
109. Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 363, 369.
110. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 114.
111. 'Wie Naturordnung Gottes sollte sie angesehen werden'. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 123.
112. 'Nehmts also wenigstens für Nothwendigkeit, nehmts für Gesetzgeber-Klugheit und Demuth an, dass Moses Gesetze mit dem Glanz der Göttlichkeit geprägt erschienen'. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 123.
113. 'Hat die Vorstehung ein anderes Werk unter den Menschen, als Gesetze und Ordnung, Licht und Wahrheit unter den Völkern zu schaffen und auszubreiten? Und ist je durch Eine Anstalt so viel dieser göttlichen Gaben befördert worden, als durch die reine, weise, sittliche Gesetzgebung Moses?' Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 123.
114. Cf. John Rogerson, 'Herders »Gott: einige Gespräche« im Lichte seiner Predigten', in *Herder*, ed. Sauder, p. 37–39.

115. 'Alle Begriffe werden auf Gott zurückgeführt, alles vom Willen Gottes hergeleitet; das erschafft endlich den Willen des Menschen, wie seine untersuchenden Kräfte. Es wird blinde oder trunkne Ergebung an Gotte, kurz Islamismus.' Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 361.

116. 'Warum? weil er nur immer auf Gott sah und sich selbst nicht kennen lernte [...].'
Herder, *Vom Geist*, I, p. 362. It is possible that also Judaism is meant here, but I shall not go into the matter here. For Herder's relationship to Judaism, see Emil Adler, 'Johann Gottfried Herder und das Judentum', in *Herder Today: contributions from the International Herder Conference, Nov. 5–8, 1987, Stanford, California*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Berlin & New York, 1990); Karl Menges, 'Hebräische Poesie, Rabbinisches Judentum, Haskala: Perspektiven jüdischer Identität bei Herder', in *Der frühe und der späte Herder*, eds Groß & Sauder.

117. An application of this idea is Thomas Mann's novel *Joseph and his Brothers*. Here he describes how Abraham 'discovered' God and how God's image was developed and humanised as a result of the ponderous reflections on God, which was a family tradition among Abraham's descendants. Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder*, 4–5 (Frankfurt a.M., 1990).

118. Herder, *Vom Geist*, II, p. 82.

The Rehabilitation of Myth Enlightenment and Romanticism in Johann Gottfried Herder's *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*

In literary, cultural and historical study of mythology, Johann Gottfried Herder is often portrayed as the bridge between the Enlightenment and the Romantic age. Myths for Herder were not only material for poetry, but the essential content of religion. Herder's new understanding of myth and religion did not, however, signify a rejection of the Enlightenment principle of rationality. On the contrary, this understanding expanded and transformed his understanding of rationality. Herder regarded man's mythopoetic activity as a genuine and natural form of man's cognitive appropriation of the world. The personification of natural forces in the cultural creation of gods did not denote a return to irrationalism, but an extended form of rationality. According to Herder, the Bible had to be read as a human mythopoetic creation. The Old Testament, which depicts the special relation of God to His people, was in Herder's *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie* (1782–1783) the result of a poetic worldview characteristic of nomadic societies. Herder did question the validity of the Old Testament as a true source of religion and its usefulness even for modern man. Mythology did not have to be rejected as untrue imagination. Old Testament monotheism could be related to Spinoza's pantheism and the Law of Moses could be seen as a precursor of the modern constitutional tradition.

Keywords: Johann Gottfried Herder, Hebrew poetry, mythology, religion, the Old Testament, Enlightenment, Romanticism

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