Prevalent among the new roles of the Bible in the second half of the eighteenth century was its conception as an aesthetic artifact. Eminent personas in the Enlightenment republic of letters evoked the Bible in multiple ways, including the modern adaptation of biblical stories in poetry and drama and the praising of the Bible’s aesthetic merits. The detailed paradigm of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, i.e, his programmatic comparison of biblical reading to the reading of all texts, relied on the extensive appraisal of the “Bible as literature” in circles of critics and poets. As I hope to show in my presentation, Herder’s reading of Hebrew poetry as a supreme instance of aesthetic creation is representative of this trend. Such readings became the epicenter of the eighteenth-century’s broad occupation with the Bible, eliciting its pluralizing effect: every citizen of the new collective of Enlightenment readers was expected to acknowledge the supreme merits of the Bible.

William Robert Smith has argued that in the eighteenth century, the new attitude toward the Bible resulted in a new conception of poetry as soliciting a clandestine understanding of authors’ feelings:
[T]he true power of poetry is that it speaks from the heart to the heart. True criticism is not the classification of the poetic effects according to the principles of rhetoric, but the unfolding of the living forces which moved the poet’s soul. To enjoy a poem is to share the emotion that inspired its author.¹

This principle of reading, which pertains to biblical reading and specifically the Old Testament, is a forthright description of major characteristics of the eighteenth-century interpretive turn from rhetoric to hermeneutics. The period’s heated debates on how to read Hebrew created a public discussion that negotiated, mobilized and brought to the fore aesthetic stances—dialectics that yielded a position of an emphatic and yet distant and critical relation to the author of a text for the purpose of restoring a text’s original meanings. With the view of reading practices and education as common to a collective audience, the view of Hebrew poetry as sublime made the biblical language approachable to all readers to the same extent, ironically exactly due to the idealization that generated its initial unreachability.

On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry and on Poetry in General

Herder’s On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry presents the discussion on the merits of Hebrew poetry in the form of a dialogue between Alciphron, a young and skeptical scholar passionate about the inquiry into ancient peoples, and Eutyphron, an older scholar who is convinced of the supreme merits of Hebrew poetry, which he is trying to demonstrate to his companion. These merits should grant the language a supreme status as a cultural asset. The so-called faults of Hebrew become in Herder’s text the evidence for its literary qualities: Eutyphron alerts his interlocutor at the beginning of the essay that the so-called major deficiencies of Hebrew in fact illustrate its
supreme aesthetic nature. He thus responds to several major problems that Alciphron finds in the language: it has few adjectives and prepositions; its tense system is irregular and unclear, disorienting readers; it lacks adjectives; the meanings of roots are enigmatic and seem far away from their common-sense meanings—the language formulations that derive, very often, from different roots thus lead to artificial collocations, far-fetched images and connections between terms that are far from one another. Alciphron then continues to criticize the language’s use of parallelism (the setting of sentences or clauses in conjunction with one another that presents them as equivalent)—which he finds dull with its lack of attention to syllables. With respect to this laconic repetition, the language’s tone appears monotonic and its sound unpleasant and tautological. Alciphron saves to the very end of his attack a most infamous attribute of the Hebrew language: the fact that vowels were added to the language at a late stage of its existence. As a consequence, the knowledge of how to pronounce Hebrew remains unknown and the language thus appears to lie like a “dead hieroglyph” (675). At the same time this dialogue privileges Hebrew over the Greek tradition, despite both the form of the text that resembles the Socratic dialogues and the setting in nature with a homo-social interaction between the interlocutors.

Herder’s characterization of Hebrew through the anthropological detection of its origins presents Hebrew as a functional communicative medium. In striking opposition to Robert Lowth’s statement that already during the time of its writing, the poets who composed the text were considered divine (“the ambassadors of heaven,” 28), Herder’s idea of poetic inspiration leaves more space to their characterization as humans who simply needed to address their surroundings. What is divine about the Bible is not the fact that its poetry is the word of God in its materialization through perfect transmission, but rather, exactly that the divine message took
the form of a human, inherently flawed medium. The divine aspect is the ability to transform a godly message into an utterly human form.

Hence, it is not the objective beauty of the Hebrew language which proves its divine origins; it is the human medium which exposes its merits. Herder describes the language’s media particularity in the context of eighteenth-century debates on aesthetics:

E. Also die Sprache, die viel ausdrückende, malende Verba hat, ist eine Poetische Sprache: je mehr sie auch die Nomina zu Verbis machen kann, desto poetischer ist sie. Ein Nomen stellt immer nur die Sache tot dar: das Verbum setzt sie in Handlung, diese erregt Empfindung, denn sie ist selbst gleichsam mit Geist beseellet. Erinnern Sie sich, was Leßing über Homer gezeigt hat, daß bei ihm alles Gang, Bewegung, Handlung sei, und daß darin eben sein Leben, seine Wirkung, ja das Wesen aller Poesie bestehe. Nun ist bei den Ebräern beinahe alles Verbis: d. i. alles lebt und handelt (675).

The inference of nouns from stems, a known cipher of Hebrew, is taken by Herder as establishing a language that is built upon verbs (in Hebrew grammar, the primary function of stems is the construction of verbs). Hebrew thus appears to be a language which is in constant motion. To acknowledge what is at stake in this characterization of Hebrew poetry, one needs to observe Herder’s broad engagement with and contribution to aesthetic theory.

Here enters the picture another Enlightenment thinker. Herder’s dialogue namely reiterates the discussion about the dynamic and static features that are to be found in art and poetry—a discussion that was famously embodied in the correspondence between Winckelmann and Lessing. Lessing’s *Laocoön* rejects Winckelmann’s assertion that pain was not represented through sculpture since it would not suit the noble, unbreakable Greek spirit. In contrast to this
view, Lessing develops a theory that discerns the features of different media from one another: the expression of human emotions depends on the respective properties of the art, and generally, on the differences between fine arts and poetry. Whereas poetry unfolds a narrative in time, sculpture does that in space.

According to Herder, poetry may escape its spatial limits—this is in fact what it strives for. To make this point, Herder unfolds a critical account of Lessing’s Laocoön in his Kritische Wälder (Critical Forests). Lessing presented poetry and fine art as incomparable since the first depends on time, whereas the latter relies upon space. Herder’s reasoning, which leads to his original contribution to aesthetic theory, takes a few steps. First, Herder approaches the question of how art necessarily exists as a means for imitation. The world is temporary, and hence when he talks about how Laocoön’s sculpture cannot capture pain since it would be marked on his expression forever and be ugly, he finds a fault in art. If art cannot represent, the whole discussion is meaningless. Instead, Herder suggests looking at the way our minds operate when observing works of art.

But what about other arts, like music, that seem closer to poetry in some regards? Herder establishes that there are energetic arts in which the work unfolds a narrative and works in which everything appears at once. The energetic arts music, poetry and dance are distinguished from sculpture or painting. And yet, with this distinction in mind, what is so special about poetry, which makes Herder posit it as a separate category, in effect moving to a three-fold characterization of art? What differentiates it from the other energetic arts, and primarily from music, the art that Herder had brought as a counterexample to Lessing’s binary distinction between poetry and fine art? Poetry is more than sounds, Herder claims: in it, the sounds transform to words. This entails arbitrary meaning—poetry is not just about the senses, whereas
in music, sound is the most central aspect of a work. This is what gives the poet more possibilities than the artist. In the framework of this manifold of options, poetry obtains meaning not through time or space, but through what Herder calls “force,” a character that can be explicated through the synchronicity of sound, temporality and movement in poetry.

Lessing has shown—notes Herder—that the essence of poetry is its “motion” which induces the feeling of vividness. Since verbs are the most essential part of the Hebrew language, as Alciphron is happy to admit, the language is especially suitable for the creation of poetry—as his interlocutor manages to convince him. At the same time, Eutyphron determines that Hebrew is not suitable for the abstract thinker, the philosopher. The first step in praising the cultural eminence of Hebrew thus relies not on the denial that indeed, the language is poor—at least, in terms of its vocabulary—in comparison to other languages, but rather on the acknowledgement of its inherent characteristics. A correct examination of the language entails a comparison of its inner properties, e.g., the relatively large number of verbs and the derivation of nouns from verbs. This new way of assessment through intra- rather than through inter-logic turns perspective from the lack of Hebrew (its fallacy) to a macro-perspective when estimating the “numerous” verbs it contains. This assessment leads to the tracking down of Hebrew’s “symbolic value”: its dynamic or poetic essence.

That said, Eutyphron’s first move of defense echoes Herder’s eminent anthropological perspective on aesthetics, which he elaborates on in many essays, translations and intellectual correspondences. This principle, as Herder describes most copiously in Critical Forests, determines that the beauty of one culture’s artifact cannot be compared to that of another culture. Cultural artifacts should be examined only in the context of the specific time and culture that produced them. Critical Forests explores this relativism as it offers an elaborate account that
situates the relativist principle in a scientifically-based description of the physiological development of humankind. There, Herder establishes that cultural artifacts—poetry being the emblematic expression of this principle—were aimed at addressing the sensual needs and drives of the people by whom they were produced. Thus, whereas the ancient peoples were sensitive to tones (Tönen), humankind has lost this ability and can only respond to sounds (Laute). Herder therefore insists on the power of a synchronic cultural inquiry rather than a diachronic one. *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* idealizes Hebrew in an account that reiterates the positioning of the language as the source of human cultural efforts and specifically poetics—and at the same time, Herder’s different task, which is illustrated in his *Oldest Document of Humankind*, is to take an opposite approach: claiming that aesthetic beauty cannot be compared between cultures, since every culture has its own aesthetic ideals. The text reconciles these two agonistic arguments by describing Hebrew as one of many cultures that fulfills a unique role in the history of humankind, in that the uniqueness of its sounds are reminiscent of the primordial role of poetry, and the nature of its poetry, with its special vividness, is emblematic of poetry in general.

Herder’s *Volksgeist* theory and the relativism it encompasses thus yielded an important divergence from Lowth: empathy for the ancient authors was not the direct outcome of self-identification with their legacy. Herder’s idea of the contribution of Hebrew poetry to humanity dictates, rather, that one should feel empathy for the culture even as it is entirely separate from one’s present stance, and yet, at the same time one should acknowledge that in its the relativity, Hebrew (as any other culture) fills a unique role and has a specific place of “beauty” in the world’s system of aesthetic artifacts, language, and sensitivity. With its primordial nature, Hebrew is the emblem of this emphatic process.
Hebrew thus appears to embody the prevalent tension that is inherent in Herder’s thought: the conflict between universalistic ideals and truisms and a relativist understanding of different cultures and historical periods. We should aim to understand the context in which Hebrew emerged; this would yield an understanding of the ancient perception of poetry, its primordial origins. The Enlightenment’s standardization of taste in accordance with national collectivity, as established through Lessing’s eminent theory of media difference, is shown to enrich and be enriched by the new political ontology of literary hermeneutics. That is, universalistic theories of how cultural artifacts should be interpreted—which discern the cognitive effects of poetry, its ability to produce affect, address a certain social context and ponder the restrictions of its medium—accelerated certain political transformations to which those theories were responding.

A certain quality of Hebrew makes it transcend the damages of time: its genuine reflection of the language of nature, with which the sounds of the language hold direct, mimetic connections. Thus, Alciphron insists, the biblical stories show the Hebrews as a distinct nation that encumbers the acknowledgement of its contribution to humanity as a universal asset:

Der Glaube an die Vorsehung, den Sie mir aus den Schriften und die Geschichte des Ebraeischen Volks neulich entwickelten, und als eine Blüte fürs Menschengeschlechts anpriesen, hat an mir keinen Gegner; ich wünschte vielmehr, dass ihn die Schriften dieses Volks wirklich auf eine reine und fürs menschliche Geschlecht teilnehmende Art entwickelt hätten?

Eutyphron’s response restates the aesthetic value of the Hebrew language as a contribution to humankind. Despite the emergence of this language and culture having occurred in a specific
cultural and historical setting, Hebrew’s contribution to humanity prevails with its resonances of humanity’s primordial roots. The language’s intimate connection with nature, which Herder pointed out in *Treatise on the Origin of Language* as the merit of the *Morgenländer* languages, has survived and is still echoing in the biblical language, despite the all-and-all harmful presence of the Jews.

*On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* cogently reiterates several times complaints against the rabbinic transformation of the language. For example, upon Alcophron’s comment that the rabbis have been speaking the language, his older companion refutes the view of Judaism as preserving the beauty of Hebrew, insisting that the rabbis only contributed to the corruption of the language:

E.: ‘Nicht eben Perlen, auch leider nicht nach dem Genius ihrer uralten Bildung. Das arme Volk was in die Welt zerstreut: Die meisten bildeten also ihren Ausdruck nach dem Genius der Sprachen, unter denen sie lebten, und es ward ein trauriges Gemisch, an das wir hier nicht denken mögen. Wir reden vom Ebräischen, da es die lebendige Sprache Kanaans war, und auch hier nur von ihren schönsten reinen Zeiten .’ (678)

The Hebrew that Herder wants to return to is therefore a dead language. The effort of putting oneself in the shoes of the Bible’s authors—an effort that became the model of the hermeneutic tradition in its entirety—is always a restorative one. For the hermeneutic enterprise that emerges from Herder’s philosophical anthropology to be achievable, a rupture has to be made noticeable between ancient Hebrew and its traditional, continual circulation in the Jewish tradition. The legacy of identifying with the Hebrew poets shaped modern interpretation by way of the recurring correspondences between how we read literature and how the Bible should be read in its universalized status as a cultural asset. At the same time that hermeneutics prompted the
emergence of new aesthetic ideals, these new aesthetic ideals were in turn reforming biblical hermeneutics and societal positions toward the Bible. The beginning of the hermeneutic tradition—insofar as it relied on the aesthetic features of the Bible—is in the distancing of the reader from the Jews in order to reconnect with the Hebrews.

The Bible’s Pietistic alterations mark it as an object whose so-called singular merit stems, ironically, from its versatility and malleability as a collection of texts which has been vastly altered in the course of history. The process of “universalizing” the Bible presumes not only its inherent merits, but also the ability of every reader in the Enlightenment’s emerging reading culture to recognize biblical forms and motifs despite their alteration.

Herder’s account sheds light on his invention of the Hebrew sublime. The role of Hebrew aesthetics in mobilizing the new hermeneutic readings of poetry entails first and foremost advancement of anthropological consideration of cultures and texts. The Hebrew culture is perceived in Herder’s Protestant surrounding as the childhood of literary creation and the birth of script. Therefore, the reference to Hebrew is a means to explicate a new interpretive endeavor (examining cultural artifacts in their context) while at the same time scrutinizing its conceptual origins (interpreting the first human culture in its context).

Several major theories of the Enlightenment have formulated a certain counterintuitive assumption: that the enhanced presence of literary affect in eighteenth-century Germany signaled a new stage in the status of the sign, a stage that entailed not the dispelling of rhetoric by means of establishing an immediate emotional connection with texts, but the transformation of rhetoric into a new critique that can be pursued by all. Affect did not yield the elimination of distance
from texts, but—quite the opposite—stimulated a new distance from the text by way of the novel observation of literary devices as constituting emotion.

The Hebrew language, Herder establishes in *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, is unique in its unfolding of a representation, which evokes a supreme aesthetic feeling for its readers. With this praising of Hebrew, the idealized presentation of Hebrew eliminates the status of the Bible as a ritual object—exactly *due to* the sublime and spiritual nature attached to the Bible’s aesthetic merits, which are taken to address the cognitive capacities of all readers. A wave of biblical translations that emerged in the late eighteenth century was a vibrant demonstration of how the Bible can be adapted for individual and group identity, strengthening through its aesthetic standing its status as a universal asset of every citizen of the modern state. It is crucial to note that Herder’s undertaking is contingent on his address of an audience of no readers of Hebrew—the concrete language, with its unique alphabet, vocabulary and grammar. Herder’s evident philological erudition leads to a transformation of Hebrew into a new trope: one that derives its importance from its significance for all readers. Since Hebrew is a language in which verbs are most prominent and have an effect on all speech parts, it is therefore a language that is uniquely suitable for the unfolding of a plot. Hebrew poetry, a unique *national poetry*, nevertheless embodies the aesthetic ideal of poetry in general: it pushes the reader to an acknowledgment of the ontological status of the poetic artifact, an artifact that encompasses a unique power: the outcome of its musicality (sensual property) and semantic flexibility (cognitive merit).

In his *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad reflects on the eighteenth-century’s emerging discussion of the Hebrew Bible as an aesthetic artifact. His analysis shows the period’s sweeping admiration for Hebrew poetry as a prominent step in advancing Lutheran reading
techniques as universal, making them into pillars of modern interpretation: “What mattered was not the authenticity of facts about the past but the power of the spiritual idea they sought to convey as gifted humans.”

In the romantic invention of authorship and readership, according to Asad, human vulnerability was being idealized: insofar as godly attributes like the ability to create and interpret are manifested in the process of reading and writing literature, theology is not rejected but is transformed into an abstract concept. Gifted humans, according to Asad, did not long have to experience divine revelation. Instead, the Hebrew sublime stimulated the view of inspiration as a force whose Christian origins were now presented as a neutral aesthetic merit. When the Bible loses its ritual standing in favor of its transition into an abstract, everyman can take up the ardent faith and enthusiastic nationalism as the morals that it now embodies, for example, with its resonances in the prophetic monologue of the poetic speaker.

The fascination with biblical poetry, as I have shown, advertised intimacy with God and religious experience through the period’s aesthetic project, echoing religious zeal in its energizing power if not in concrete form of religious practice. The Hebrew language has become, in this process, a trope signifying the unity of the nation under the umbrella of an aesthetic experience that is not contingent upon, and is in fact detached from, textual comprehension in the traditional sense of the word. Turning the language into a sublime artifact engrained the incongruity of Hebrew poetry—a marker of Jewish faith and of concrete ritual practice of a religious minority—with its new model of a universalistic experience of reading texts; the Hebrew sublime is a constant reminder that the cognitive process that aesthetics elicits suppresses religious and ethnic differences, engraining this suppression in the dependence of
modern aesthetics on a religious experience that is rendered global. This is a loss that is at the same time a continual and disturbing recollection of that which is left behind.

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