Jacob’s ladder—a bridge between heaven and earth: reading Genesis 28:10–22 against the grain of modernity

Rev Dr Jeffrey Silcock

Jeff is Associate Dean for Research and Head of the Theological Department at ALC. He also chairs the LCA’s Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations.

Introduction

This article is a revision of a seminar paper presented at the 12th International Congress for Luther Research held at the University of Helsinki in August 2012. The title of the seminar was: ‘A Post-Modern Luther?’ New readings of the critique of epistemology and the revision of metaphysics. Participants worked with selected passages from Luther’s Lectures on Genesis, the fruit of his mature theology (1535–1545), to try to find clues to assist in a renewal of metaphysics and epistemology that is grounded in the biblical narrative. Quite specifically, that meant considering these topics in a counter-Enlightenment fashion that challenges the Kantian paradigm which has significantly influenced Continental theology over the last 200 years and in particular 20th century German Luther research. The passage I worked on was Genesis 28:10–22, the story of Jacob’s dream or Jacob’s ladder. The title of the paper, ‘A bridge between heaven and

1 Oswald Bayer is very cautious about the use of the term ‘postmodern’ (whatever it might mean) to designate Luther. His creative use of language and his trademark distinction between law and gospel, which is valid for all ages, ensure that Luther will be with us in the future as much as he is with us in the present. See Oswald Bayer, ‘With Luther in the present’, Lutheran Quarterly 21 (2007), 13,14. Nevertheless, postmodernism, properly understood, is retrieving understandings and emphases that are found in Luther and the pre-modern world generally.

2 It is a moot point whether ‘metaphysics’ can ever really be renewed on the basis of scripture or whether it must simply be overcome. The term itself is so thoroughly embedded in the philosophical tradition that it is doubtful if it can ever be redeemed. In light of that, it would probably make better sense to speak of the renewal of ontology, rather than metaphysics. However, since the term formed part of the seminar topic, I will retain it but only use it negatively in speaking of the metaphysics of Kant and the Enlightenment tradition. For a modern rereading of the metaphysical tradition with a view to liberating theology from its centuries-old captivity to metaphysics, see Joseph Stephen O’Leary, 1985, Questioning back: the overcoming of metaphysics in Christian tradition, Winston Press, Minneapolis.

3 This has been convincingly demonstrated by the Finnish scholar Risto Saarinen, a pupil of Tuomo Mannermaa and one of the leading lights in the new Finnish interpretation of Luther. See his pivotal book published in 1989, Gottes Wirken auf uns: die tranzendentale Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motivs in der Lutherforschung, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz 137, Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden.

earth: reading Genesis 28:10–22 against the grain of modernity’, is a reminder that its main focus is systematic rather than exegetical. The modernity in question specifically targets the eighteenth century German Enlightenment and its chief representative Immanuel Kant.

**Luther’s commentary**

The reformer permits himself a bit of harmless speculation when he muses that Jacob slept on Mt. Calvary: ‘It was God’s will that Christ should be crucified and die here, and that the place where Jacob saw the ladder should be the same place where Christ, the true Jacob, slept in the sepulcher and rose again and the angels descended and ascended’ (LW 5:243).

Luther offers three interpretations of Jacob’s ladder which all come from medieval exegesis: a literal, an allegorical, and a spiritual interpretation, although Luther leaves the latter unnamed (LW 5:223). First of all, the ‘historical, simple, and literal sense’ of Jacob’s ladder refers to Christ’s incarnation (see John 1:51): ‘the ladder is the wonderful union of the divinity with our flesh’ (LW 5:223).

The second, or allegorical interpretation of the ladder, is the union of Christ and believers. Luther bases this on passages in John’s Gospel which speak of the indwelling of Christ in the faithful (John 17:21). He says that two things happen: we ascend into him, and through the word and the Spirit we become one body with him; and he descends to us through the word and the sacraments. Or, to put it another way, justified sinners ascend to God by grace alone while they descend to the neighbour to do good works in response to grace (LW 5:223). Both these first two interpretations will be taken up again in connection with our discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum*.

The third interpretation of the ladder is the ‘spiritual interpretation’ of Denis the Carthusian. According to this interpretation, the ladder that links heaven and earth is the gospel and the sacraments that are enacted in the church’s divine service of worship. Luther says ‘wherever we hear the Word and are baptized, there we enter into eternal life. But where is that place found? On earth, where the ladder which touches heaven

---


7 For an excellent defence of the medieval theory of levels of meaning and its value for interpreting the Old Testament today as opposed to the modern theory of a single meaning, see David C Steinmetz, 2011, *Taking the long view: Christian theology in historical perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

8 This is very different from the modern critical understanding of the historical, literal sense of the passage. For commentators today, Jacob’s dream functions mainly as a divine assurance that God will be with Jacob on his journey and will bring him back safely to the promised land (see Gordon J Wenham, 1994, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol 2, Word books, Dallas, Texas, 225). Luther also makes similar comments, but for him the literal sense of the text is determined by Christ himself in John 1:51.
stands, where the angels descend and ascend, where Jacob sleeps. It is a physical place, but here there is an ascent into heaven without physical ladders, without wings and feathers’ (LW 5:247). I will discuss this further in connection with the section on the ontology of space.

The literal, the allegorical, and the spiritual meanings, while different, are all interconnected. Luther in his mature years still freely operates with the allegorical and spiritual senses of the text, which he found in the medieval commentaries, and not only with the literal and historical sense, although he accords the latter first place and insists that the allegorical and spiritual meanings must be based on the literal and historical meaning of the text. This hermeneutical move to find a deeper theological or spiritual meaning behind a biblical story is today being reappraised by scholars committed to reading Old Testament texts against the grain of modernity in order to retrieve a worldview, older than modernity, with roots in the biblical tradition. To that end, the work of the eighteenth century Lutheran thinker, Johann Georg Hamann, is very helpful since after his death he was recognised as the one who had single-handedly identified the fatal flaw in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the most important philosophical work of the German Enlightenment. The theological thinking that underpinned his strategy is grounded in a worldview that is consistent with scripture and reason informed by faith as exemplified in his understanding of Jacob’s ladder. Hamann agrees with Luther’s allegorical interpretation of the ladder but at one crucial point deepens it in a way that allows him to challenge a fundamental assumption of Kant’s metaphysics on the basis of a dominical word about marriage (Matt 19:6) that Hamann interprets allegorically and uses to counter the false separations of the Enlightenment. We will investigate this more fully in the section on the *communicatio idiomatum*.

**False separations and broken bridges**

The bridge between the heavenly and earthly realms is axiomatic for Luther but not for the modern age. Indeed, for the Enlightenment there is no bridge, and the bond between heaven and earth, the visible and the invisible world, is sundered. Jacob’s ladder no longer spans the gulf between these two realms, but instead they remain separated by the iron curtain of Cartesian and Kantian dualism.

---


10 Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) was an orthodox Lutheran layman and scholar extraordinaire: journalist, philologist, philosopher, theologian, literary critic, classicist, and linguist. He powerfully defended the orthodox teaching of the church at the height of the Enlightenment. His significance for Luther scholarship is inestimable as not only was he steeped in Luther's theology, but he had an uncanny ability to apply his central insights to his own battle against Kant whose system enthroned monarchic reason and reduced God to a moral postulate and the gospel to a set of moral principles. For a good introduction to Hamann and his thought, see Oswald Bayer, 2012, *Johann Georg Hamann: a contemporary in dissent*, trans Roy A Harrisville and Mark C Mattes, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids; and John R Betz, 2009, *After enlightenment: Hamann as post-secular visionary*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester UK.
The fundamental methodological problem of the Enlightenment is its perpetuation of the dualism it inherited from Descartes. Kant, the central philosopher of the Enlightenment, works with a set of dualisms that are still potent today: the separation of the eternal from the temporal, reason from faith, the universal truths of reason from the accidental events of history, thinking from hearing or seeing, thought from speech, subject from object, the metaphysical from the historical, the heavenly from the earthly. Hamann polemicises against these false separations which he typically refers to as examples of Scheidekunst (the art of separation).\(^{11}\) Over against Kant's art of separation, Hamann promotes his art of marriage (Ehekunst) by which he argues for the union of all things\(^{12}\)—all things that God has united in ‘marriage’.\(^{13}\) The story of Jacob's ladder reminds us that God has united all things in heaven and on earth and that in Christ all things hold together (Col 1:17). This, as we will see, has vital implications for the sacramental worship of the church and its teaching of the bodily presence of God on this earth through the proclaimed word and the enacted sacraments.

Hamann's answer to the splits and false dichotomies of the Enlightenment is Luther's doctrine of the communicatio idiomatum combined with his own sacramental understanding of language which he uses as a trump card to subvert Kant's concept of pure reason.\(^{14}\) As Bayer has brilliantly shown, Hamann's response to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is his Metacritique on the Purism of Reason, where he knocks the central plank out of Kant's critique by demonstrating that reason can never be ‘pure’ because it is always conditioned by such ‘impure’ things as experience, tradition, and language. Hamann particularly singles out language because it is central to all human activity, including reason and cognition. Reason cannot hermetically seal itself off from language in a putative ‘transcendental self’ but is united with language in a communication of properties (communicatio idiomatum) that is analogous to the communicatio idiomatum between the properties of the divine Logos and those of the human nature.\(^{15}\)

Robert Sparling cites a passage from Hamann where he refers to Jacob's ladder in connection with his metacritique of Kant's critical idealism in which autonomous reason makes a separation between the things that scripture and the pre-modern world keep together in a coincidence of opposites: faith and reason, idealism and realism, form and matter, concept and intuition. Hamann opines that if he had the rhetorical skill of a Demosthenes, ‘he would open readers’ eyes’ so that they might see ‘the hosts of intuitions ascending to the firmament of pure understanding, and hosts of concepts descending into the deep abyss of the most palpable sensibility, on a ladder of which no

---

11 For more on the Scheidekunst of the Enlightenment, see John R Betz, 2009, After enlightenment: 31,1 14,152,181,182,221,239,258,279.
12 For more on the contrast between Scheidekunst and Ehekunst, see Betz, After Enlightenment, 31,114,152,181,182,221,239,258,279; Bayer, A contemporary in dissent, 13,43,125,214,215,221,137.
13 Hamann argues this on the authority of Christ who taught that humans must not separate what God has joined together (Matt 19:6).
14 On the sacramental character of language in Hamann, see Betz, After enlightenment, 253–57.
15 See Betz, After enlightenment, 255.
sleeper has yet dreamt'.

Betz observes that Hamann would help Kant to see that just as angels were descending and ascending Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28:11,12.), foreshadowing Christ’s ‘descent into the lower parts of the earth’ and his ‘ascent above all the heavens’ (Eph 4:9-10), so too language is the site of a marvellous exchange, a ladder with ‘intuitions ascending’ and ‘concepts descending’ on it. He further notes that this Christological understanding of language, which unites both formal and material elements, is the key to the solution of the age old dialectic between empiricism and rationalism, realism and idealism.

Communication of attributes—the bridge

As we have seen, for Luther, Jacob’s ladder in its literal, historical, and simple sense refers to the Christ, to the wonderful union of the divinity and our flesh, which the angels never cease to marvel at (LW 5:223). Like Denis the Carthusian and Nicholas of Lyra, Luther cites Jesus’ words in John 1:51 as the warrant for this interpretation. The angels ascend and descend (without a ladder) in adoration of the Son of God, true God and true man. According to this exegesis, the ladder represents the inexpressible union of Christ’s divine and human natures such that the properties of each nature are shared with the other in a mutual interpenetration, while each nature retains its own integrity. Luther expressly says that Jacob’s ladder refers to this *communicatio idiomatum* (LW 5:219). This is the great mystery of the incarnation that brings together things that are opposites by nature, brings them into a *communicatio oppositorum*: the divine and human natures, majesty and abasement, height and depth.

This hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ also forms the central plank in Luther’s defence of the bodily presence of Christ in


17 Betz, *After enlightenment*, 256.

18 Although Luther takes the ‘ladder’ (Heb: *sullām*) to be a ladder, most modern commentators take it to be a ramp or staircase. At any rate, what matters is that the ladder links earth and heaven.

19 In relation to Jesus being the true Jacob’s ladder, it should be mentioned that John 1:51 specifically mentions connects vision of the angels ascending and descending on him with the open heavens. Only if the heavens are open can communication between heaven and earth be restored. Since Jesus is the mediator between God and humankind, he opens the heavens. The symbolical world of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, operated with the idea of a closed heaven.
the Lord’s Supper over against Zwingli and the Sacramentarians.\textsuperscript{20}

In his \textit{Sermons on the Gospel of St John} (LW 22:492 alt), Luther explains why this doctrine is indispensable for explicating and defending biblical Christology.

> The two natures, the human and the divine, are inseparable … Yet these two natures are so united that there is only one God and Lord, that Mary suckles God with her breasts, bathes God, rocks him, and carries him; furthermore, that Pilate and Herod crucified and killed God. The two natures are so joined that the true deity and humanity are one. Now if the true God dwells in Christ, who was born of Mary, that is, the God who made and created all, we must say that the deity and the humanity joined not only their natures but also their properties, except for sin.

Luther, therefore, says that both things are true: the highest divinity is the lowest creature, the Lord of all is the servant of all, and even subject to the devil himself. On the other hand, the lowest creature, the humanity or the man, sits at the right hand of the Father and has been made the highest; and he subjects the angels to himself, not because of his human nature, but because of the wonderful conjunction and union established out of the two contrary and unjoinable natures in the one Person (LW 5:219). Luther puts it most pointedly in his 1540 ‘Disputation on the divinity and humanity of Christ’: the creator is the creature (\textit{creator est creatura}).\textsuperscript{21}

Luther also speaks of another union, the union between Christ and the believer (based on John 17:21). This is the allegorical meaning of the ladder. Even if Luther does not specifically use the phrase \textit{communicatio idiomatum} to describe this union, Johann Hamann certainly does. Unlike Luther and Hamann, Kant and neo-Kantian tradition separate heaven and earth, being and effect (\textit{Wirkung}) so that there can be no real union between God or Christ and the believer. Luther says, ‘we ascend with Christ and are carried along through the Word and the Spirit’, and ‘he descends to us through the Word and the sacraments’. He concludes, ‘the first union, then, is that of the Father and the Son in the divinity. The second is that of the divinity and the humanity in Christ’ (LW 5:223).\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Zwingli opposed Luther’s doctrine of the \textit{communicatio idiomatum} with his \textit{alloeosis} which taught that the patristic ‘communication of properties’ concept involves a rhetorical \textit{alloeosis} where one nature in scripture is taken for the other. Hence, ‘the Word became flesh’ means that the flesh became Word or man became God. For Luther’s refutation, see, for example, LW 37:206, 210 (Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper, 1528). See also two significant publications: Joar Haga, 2012, \textit{Was there a Lutheran metaphysics? The interpretation of communicatio idiomatum in early modern Lutheranism}, Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, Göttingen; Oswald Bayer, 2007, ‘Das Wort ward Fleisch: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation’, in \textit{Creator est creatura: Luthers Christologie als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation}, ed Oswald Bayer and Benjamin Gleede, de Gruyter, Berlin, 5–34.

\textsuperscript{21} WA 39 II: 92–121. This disputation is not yet available in the American Edition of \textit{Luther’s Works}.

\textsuperscript{22} Luther in his summary uses a different typology than previously. Here he begins with the union of the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity rather than with the union of the divine and human natures.
he does not elaborate on this. He keeps the focus rather on the union of the divinity and the humanity, the literal and historical sense, for this, he says, is the true meaning of the ladder because here God gives ‘a veiled indication of this great sacrament of the incarnation of the Son of God’ (LW 5:223).

Following Luther, Hamann also made the communicatio idiomatum a central emphasis in his theology. In fact, he called it ‘a fundamental law and the master-key of all our knowledge and of the whole visible economy’. But he argued that the communicatio idiomatum applies not just to Christology, but it should be generalised to cover all human action.

The ontology of sacred space

Luther’s Lectures on Genesis follow the biblical narrative in highlighting the historical specificity of God’s self-manifestation to people like Jacob by means of theophany or angelophany. Although God is present everywhere in creation, he is not accessible everywhere but remains concealed from human sight. Put another way, God does not want humans to seek him except in those places where he has revealed himself and promises to be found (LW 23:121, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 6–8, 1530). But where does God want us to seek him? Where does God dwell? On the basis of Jacob’s dream, Luther argues that God’s dwelling place is on earth and not in heaven: ‘On earth, where the ladder which touches heaven stands, where the angels descend and ascend, where Jacob sleeps. It is a physical place (locus corporalis), but here there is an ascent into heaven without physical ladders, without wings and feathers’ (LW 5:247). But the ladder also signifies a descent, sacramentally, in the divine service. Here, the heavenly Jerusalem comes down from heaven (Rev 21:2) and the heavenly sanctuary is located on earth. Since God’s presence bridges heaven and earth, Luther can say, ‘Therefore he joins the earth with heaven and heaven with the earth’ (LW 5:244).

To those schooled in the philosophy and metaphysics of the Enlightenment, the Old Testament with its uncompromising talk of God’s physical presence on earth in space and time will seem a very strange book. Scholars who feel uncomfortable with the idea

23 Later he identifies the third way of interpreting the ladder as a reference to the Word and the sacraments (LW 5:247).
25 This emphasis on the physicality of sacred space is found elsewhere in Luther’s Genesis Lectures, but also in many other places he highlights the bodily nature of God’s presence on earth through the physical and ritual means he has ordained. He says God manifests himself at the temple in ‘a definite and visible form which can be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, in sum, which have been exposed to the five senses (in summa, quae quinque sensibus exposita sunt, LW 3:109; trans alt). Luther insists that we find God only in the man Christ ‘who was in Mary’s womb and sucked at her breasts’ (WA 40 III, 338,334,345, Lectures on the Songs of Ascent, 1532/33; on Ps 130; see LW 23:123). In a sermon on John 6:51, which the philosophers of the Enlightenment would later find offensive to their religious sensibilities, Luther boldly asserts: ‘I know nowhere to find God, either in heaven or on earth, except in the flesh of Christ’ (LW 23:123). Again, in a similar vein, he says elsewhere that ‘whoever takes hold of Christ the man has God’ (WA 40 III, 400, 21).
of a physical locatedness of God on earth will often explain it away in one of three ways: ‘mentally, in terms of ideas or subjective experiences of God; historically, in terms of events or interactions with God and his people; existentially, in terms of a personal I-Thou relationship with God or of an act of commitment to him’. It is clear from the exposition of Jacob’s dream that Luther’s spirituality is at once embodied, corporate, and sacramental.

Luther ties God’s presence on earth to the proclaimed Word and the enacted sacraments (LW 5:247). But this is a hidden presence. The human ear hears only a human voice; the eyes see only bread and wine. Without faith, we perceive only physical things. But if we look with spiritual eyes, if we consider ‘whose Word it is that is spoken and heard there, not indeed the word of a man…but the Word of God, then you will understand that it is the house of God and the gate of heaven’ (LW 5:248).

This strong sacramental emphasis is, as we would expect, a salient aspect of Luther’s exposition. But it does not stand alone as there is an equally strong sacrificial emphasis. As we have seen, the angels not only descend from heaven, but they also ascend, representing the prayer and praise of God’s people in worship. During the divine service, the sanctuary of the local congregation becomes the location of the heavenly sanctuary, the gate of heaven, where the angels ascend and descend over Christ (John 1:51) and where our prayer and praise ascend with the angels even as these angels descend with the message of the gospel.

The biblical text identifies Jacob’s stone pillar as the ‘gate of heaven’. Luther understands this in two different ways corresponding to the two directions of the angels on the ladder. On the one hand, we enter through the gate of God’s kingdom already in worship, and finally at our death. This corresponds to the ascent of the angels. On the other hand, Luther puts the main emphasis on the descent of the angels from heaven to earth, and this is the direction that still needs to be emphasised today to counteract the dominant emphasis of modernism which makes the human, as homo religiosus, the active subject of religion and holds that physical things like the sacraments can only point to divine

26 John W Kleinig, 2000, ‘Where is your God? Luther on God's self-localization’, in Dean O Wenthe and others (eds), All theology is Christology. Essays in honor of David P Scaer, CTS Press, Fort Wayne, 124,125.

27 Luther speaks of the need to make the ‘addition’ (additionem) which only faith can make based on God’s word. With the addition of faith, Christians can say that the water of baptism is not just ordinary water but a washing of regeneration in the Spirit, and that the bread and wine of the supper are the body and blood of Christ (LW 5:249).

28 The word for Luther is constitutive: ‘For the flesh fixes its eyes only on the water, on the bread, on the wine … The flesh … judges that the water is water and excludes God. Therefore, one must learn contrary to the view of the flesh that it is not a simple word and only an empty sound, but that it is the Word of the Creator of heaven and earth’ (LW 5:249).

29 While we think of the ‘gate of heaven’ (Jacob’s stone altar-pillar) first and foremost sacramentally as that which mediates God’s presence to his people gathered in worship, Luther also emphasises the eschatological dimension: the gate of heaven is the gate that we pass through at death and that brings us into the very presence of God (LW 5:250).
realities but not mediate them.\textsuperscript{30}

The narrative of Jacob’s dream has important implications for the theology of worship. The movement of the angels up and down the ladder that Jacob saw in a dream means that the rock he anoints and makes into an altar is the locus of the heavenly sanctuary. It also means that this same heavenly sanctuary is present wherever Christians gather around the altar to receive the sacrament and to hear the gospel. Inspired by Jacob’s dream and Luther’s exposition of it, many churches, especially in Scandinavia, have the Latin words \textit{porta Dei} (the gate of God) inscribed over their portals as a reminder to worshippers that when they enter the church for worship, they are passing through the gate of heaven, the door of the kingdom (LW 5:247).

**Towards a renewal of metaphysics and epistemology**

Luther says that the story of Jacob’s dream or Jacob’s ladder is full of theological and spiritual gems, but, prophetically, it also calls into question many of the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of modernity and in particular those of Immanuel Kant.

For those committed to the renewal of metaphysics, it means more than getting it back on the philosophical agenda after it was summarily dismissed by Kant along with his justified rejection of the proofs for God. It means elaborating the Creator-creature relationship on the basis of biblical ontology rather than general or philosophical ontology. The challenge is to radically deconstruct Enlightenment theism by developing a doctrine of God that is in tune with God’s communicative action and interaction with his people, rather than one that conforms to the Aristotelian concept of God as an inert, transcendent Being that is totally self-absorbed and cut off from the world. At the same time, it needs to be attentive to the relational turn arising from the renewal of the doctrine of the Trinity with its stress on God’s kenotic and perichoretic activity.\textsuperscript{31}

In a similar way, the renewal of epistemology means disavowing the sole supremacy of reason as the final arbiter in the quest for knowledge and re-appreciating the role

\textsuperscript{30} Modern subjectivity, under the influence of Hegel, sees these external things as nothing more than mere starting points for higher forms of spirituality, which are completely free of such primitive devices as the external means of grace and depend solely on the mind. Hegel posits a fundamental disjunction between the infinite and the finite so that, on the one hand, true spirituality is completely non-material and, on the other, finite, material things such as water, bread and wine, cannot mediate the presence of the infinite God. Modern Protestantism in the Enlightenment tradition, aided and abetted by a postmodern neo-gnosticism, will inevitably privilege pure inwardness over externality because of its inability to conceive of the interpenetration of the spiritual and the material. See Oswald Bayer, 2008, \textit{Martin Luther's theology: a contemporary interpretation}, translated by Thomas H Trapp Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 249–53.

\textsuperscript{31} What makes Hamann such a great Lutheran is his stress on divine condescension and kenosis. For Hamann there is no Scheblimin (Ps 110:1) apart from Golgotha, no glory apart from abasement (see John 12:24), ‘just as there is no exaltation of the creature apart from the humility of Christ, which is the key to the entire economy and the logic of every ascent’ (see Phil 2:6–11). See Betz, \textit{After enlightenment}, 224.
played by the senses, the passions, the emotions and the imagination as well as the inextricable connection between reason and faith. It presupposes a nuptial Christological vision (the union of Christ and the believer) which entails a coincidence of opposites. Above all, it requires a realisation that, contra Kant, reason can never be ‘pure’ in the sense of being isolated from experience, tradition, and language.

In conclusion, Hamann reminds us that there are two sources of knowledge, sensibility and understanding, and language is common to both. This was Hamann’s single most important emphasis. Language, logos, unites concepts and intuitions as well as understanding and sensibility. Far from excluding language, as Kant does in his Critique of pure reason, Hamann, in his Metacritique on the purism of reason, argues that language is indispensable to reason; in fact he asserts, ‘language is reason’. Hamann grounds language theologically; it is never merely language but also revelation. Language, logos, is that which mysteriously unites both the particular and the universal, forming a mysterious analogy to the Logos who, in the incarnation, united the human and the divine in the one person, Jesus Christ, who is vere Deus and vere homo (Nicene Creed). Again, as we have seen, Hamann points out that language is the site where an exchange or communicatio idiomatum takes place between ‘the spiritual and the material’, the ‘corporeal’ and the ‘intelligible’, and the heavenly and the earthly. This is the deeper significance Hamann finds in Jacob’s ladder, a ladder with ‘intuitions ascending’ and ‘concepts descending’ on it. Hamann goes much further than Luther in developing the allegorical sense of the ladder, but both point to Christ as the true Jacob’s ladder.

32 Space does not permit any discussion on the role of sense perception in Jacob’s awareness that he was in a holy place where God was mysteriously present. In fear he exclaims, ‘how awesome is this place’ (Gen 28:17). At first glance, there is a similarity between Jacob’s reaction and the awe that Otto associates with the experience of the mysterium tremendum. But more importantly, Jacob’s awareness of God’s presence is not something mental or rational, but physical and sensuous—a proposition that would be impossible for Enlightenment rationalism to accept.

33 Luther says that reason can either be ‘something divine’, when used with faith, or a ‘whore’, when used against faith. See Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, 2011, The devil’s whore: reason and philosophy in the Lutheran tradition, Fortress, Minneapolis MN.

34 Hamann’s metacritique delivered the coup-de-grace to Kant’s critique and his whole transcendental system of logic by radicalising Kant’s own critique of reason and exposing the deception by which he used it to bolster reason and validate its autonomous status. See Oswald Bayer, 2002, Vernunft ist Sprache. Hamanns Metakritik Kants, Fromann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt. For a brief summary of the metacritique in English, see Bayer, A contemporary in dissent, 156–70; Betz, After enlightenment, 242–48.

35 See Betz, After enlightenment, 244.