

Spinoza's Method(s) of Biblical Interpretation Reconsidered*

MICHAH GOTTLIEB

Central to securing Spinoza's place in the history of Bible criticism is his contention that the *truth* of the Biblical text must be distinguished from its *meaning*.¹ Distilling the meaning of Scripture (identical to authorial intent) requires a proper method. This method, which Spinoza sets forth in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth: *TTP*), requires technical knowledge. This includes a proper understanding of Biblical grammar, vocabulary, and phraseology; an understanding of the life, character, and pursuits of the particular Biblical author including who he was, on what occasion he wrote, for whom and in what language; and a proper textual history of the Bible including what happened to the book(s) in question, how it was received, what variant editions exist, and by whose decision each book was accepted into the canon.² Apply-

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¹ See Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Scripture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 205; Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz Koelln and James Pettegrove, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 184; Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 62. David Savan sees Spinoza's significance beyond Biblical interpretation claiming that, "Spinoza is the founder of scientific hermeneutics." See David Savan, "Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist of the Scientific Method," in *Spinoza and the Sciences*, eds. Marjorie Grene and Debra Nails (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1986), 97. Curley rightly takes Savan to task for this overblown claim. See Edwin Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece," in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 67–76.

² See *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus in Spinoza Opera* ed. C. Gebhardt, vol. III (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925), vii, 101–102, 106. English translation: Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 90, 94. In the future, I will cite the Latin text using the acronym *TTP*, followed by the chapter number, and then cite the English text using the acronym *TPT*.

ing this method leads Spinoza to conclude that the Pentateuch had multiple authors and that the Masoretic text is not original. In this way, Spinoza is a founder of both “higher” and “lower” Biblical criticism.

But Spinoza’s method of Biblical interpretation arouses considerable perplexity on at least two counts. First, in addition to the historical-critical method, he licenses two other exegetical approaches that violate this method. Second, Spinoza deploys his historical-critical method in an odd way, at once claiming that there are universal doctrines in Scripture, and indicating places where these doctrines are not held. Not surprisingly, these tensions have led to conflicting assessments of Spinoza’s method of Biblical interpretation.

In an influential article, Yirmiyahu Yovel claims that Spinoza deploys his method of Biblical interpretation for polemical purposes, namely to undermine the authority of Scripture. As Yovel puts it, “[Spinoza] believed that given the actual nature of the Bible and of prophetic inspiration, an objective, scientific approach would prove more detrimental to Scripture’s authority than any biased attack.”³ Yovel contrasts Spinoza’s historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation with Kant who, “has no intention of expounding the authentic intentions of the authors ... and recommends attributing meanings to the text which are taken from external, a priori schemes, in this case his own practical philosophy.”⁴

Yet turning back to one of Spinoza’s earliest biographers, we find the claim that Spinoza makes Biblical interpretation arbitrary, not objective. In his *Life of Benedict de Spinoza* (1706), the Lutheran Minister Johannes Colerus recounts some early reactions to the *TTP*. He cites the opinion of Spitzelius who writes in his *Infelix Literator* that the *TTP*, “ought to be buried forever in an eternal oblivion ... seeing that that wicked book does altogether overthrow the Christian religion by depriving the sacred writings of the authority on which it is solely grounded and established.”⁵ But it is not Spinoza’s *objective* method of Biblical interpretation, which disturbs Spitzelius:

³ Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Biblical Interpretation as Philosophical Praxis: A Study of Spinoza and Kant,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11 (1973): 191. In his later book, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*, Yovel modifies this claim somewhat asserting that Spinoza also seeks to reinterpret Scriptural religion as a popular version of a universal religion of reason. But Yovel does not develop this point well and indeed is extremely confusing on the relation between this aim and Spinoza’s commitment to “Biblical science.” See Yirmiyahu Yovel *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 133. For my criticism of Yovel’s later position, see below note 9.

⁴ Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Biblical Interpretation as Philosophical Praxis,” 205.

⁵ Johannes Colerus, *Life of Benedict de Spinoza* (London: B. Bragg, 1706), 59–60.

If what Spinoza affirms were true, one might indeed very well say that the Bible is a wax-nose which may be turned and shaped at one's will; a glass through which everybody may see exactly what pleases his fancy: a fool's cap, which may be turned and fitted at one's pleasure a hundred ways. The Lord confound thee, Satan, and stop thy mouth!⁶

I will argue that it is not incidental that the title of Spinoza's masterwork on the Bible is called the "Theological-Political Treatise," for the proper relationship between politics and religion shapes Spinoza's approach to Biblical interpretation. Placing the *TTP* in its historical context, I argue that Spinoza is concerned by the attempts of orthodox Calvinist theologians to stifle free inquiry and to use politics to enhance their power.⁷ Given that these theologians rely on Biblical authority, the Bible must be confronted.⁸ But Spinoza does not see the Bible as a purely dark force. Rather, it is a potentially powerful resource in creating

⁶ Colerus, 59. Interestingly, this criticism is similar to Spinoza's criticism of Maimonides. See *TTP*, vii, 115–116; *TPT*, 102. I thank Zeev Harvey for this point.

⁷ While I fundamentally disagree with many features of Strauss's interpretation of the *TTP* in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952), 142–201, Leora Batnitzky has pointed me to Strauss's early interpretation of the *TTP* in a 1924 piece on Hermann Cohen. See Leo Strauss, "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science," in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Zank (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 140–172. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* Strauss explicitly rejects reading the *TTP* in its historical-political context (see Strauss's distinction between 'interpretation' and 'explanation' on pp. 143–144 of that work). But in the earlier piece on Cohen, Strauss undertakes precisely this type of analysis. I found many of my conclusions anticipated in Strauss's early essay, although I arrive at the conclusions in a different way. Strauss's early essay also sensitized me to the connection between Spinoza's treatment of the Bible and his defense of liberty of thought. For a nice analysis of the early essay, see Leora Batnitzky, "Hermann Cohen and Leo Strauss" *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12 no. 3 (2006): 1–26. Strauss also accepts the historical-critical approach in his 1930 book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischem Traktat* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag), 1930; English translation: Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). Spinoza's rejection of his earlier historical-critical method of analyzing Spinoza is alluded to at the end of his well-known 1965 preface to the English translation of his 1930 book on Spinoza where he writes: "... I now read the *Theologico-political Treatise* differently than I read it when I was young. I understood Spinoza too literally [i. e. by means of historical-critical contextualization-MG] because I did not read him literally enough [i. e. by means of Strauss's later method which does away with historical-critical contextualization and resolves textual ambiguities and apparent contradictions imminently by claiming that the text has an exoteric and esoteric meaning-MG]." See Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 31.

⁸ Although the term "Bible" does not appear in the title of the *TTP*, it is clear that the question of the proper approach to Biblical interpretation is central to the work. Hence in Letter 30 Spinoza calls the *TTP*, "a treatise on my views regarding Scripture." See Baruch Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1995), 185.

a stable polity which preserves freedom of thought. *Pace* both Yovel and Colerus, Spinoza's problem is not with the Bible *per se*, but rather with theologians who seek to control its meaning. Instead of viewing Spinoza as an "objective" Bible critic who consistently employs the historical-critical method, Spinoza is better understood as one motivated by political ends who employs multiple, conflicting methods of Biblical interpretation to further his goals.⁹ And yet, there is some basis to Spinoza's claim that he employs a scientific method of Biblical interpretation, for Spinoza's pragmatic approach to Biblical interpretation is informed by recognition of a real problem in textual interpretation—the problem of the hermeneutical circle.

I.

The subtitle of the *TTP* makes clear Spinoza's aim in the work. Spinoza writes that the *TTP*, "contains various discussions by means of which it is shown not only that freedom of philosophizing can be allowed in preserving piety and the peace of the republic; but also that it is not possible for such freedom to be eliminated unless piety and peace of the state are also destroyed." Spinoza elaborates on his intentions in a letter to Henry Oldenberg in which he writes that in the *TTP* he seeks to justify, "the freedom to philosophize and [to] say what we think ... for it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers."¹⁰

So the purpose of the *TTP* is to defend freedom of thought whose fate is intertwined with politics and religion. Now in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (henceforth: *TdIE*), Spinoza tells us that his goal is to achieve the "highest good" which involves "the knowledge of the union of the mind with all of nature."¹¹ In other words, the highest good

⁹ My argument is directed especially against Yovel's 1973 article mentioned above in note 3. But even in his later *Spinoza and Other Heretics* where Yovel writes that Spinoza expects the Bible, "to serve as a means for reforming historical religion," Yovel offers no account of how this fits with Spinoza's desire that "Biblical hermeneutics become an objective and autonomous science." Nor does Yovel mention the tension between the different methods of Biblical interpretation employed by Spinoza, or connect Spinoza's Biblical hermeneutics with his political philosophy.

¹⁰ See Letter 30. Spinoza, *The Letters*, 185. In the same letter Spinoza also writes that his intention in the *TTP* is to "oppose the prejudices of the theologians," and to refute the charge of atheism popularly made against him.

¹¹ See *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* in *Spinoza Opera* ed. C. Gebhardt, vol. II (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925), 8; English translation: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* trans. and ed. Edwin Curley, vol. 1

involves philosophical contemplation which presupposes freedom of thought. Moreover, Spinoza does not merely strive for this perfection for himself alone, but he “strives that many acquire it.”¹² Now in the state of nature people’s unrestrained appetites set them against one another thereby creating an insecure environment.¹³ A polity is needed in order to restrain the destructive passions that cause individuals in the state of nature to live in fear. By reducing the fear and anxiety arising from the possibility of being harmed at any moment, the state affords individuals the mental tranquility needed for philosophical contemplation. Furthermore, by encouraging economic diversification and specialization, individuals living in a stable state are able to have the strength and time needed to acquire “the arts and sciences which are indispensable to the perfection of human nature and its blessedness.”¹⁴ So in the interest of securing the freedom of thought needed for blessedness, Spinoza seeks to demonstrate how a state can best achieve political stability. But the state might be concerned that allowing freedom of thought would undermine its authority. Hence Spinoza also seeks to show that freedom of thought is fully compatible with political stability and indeed is necessary for it.¹⁵

It is not free thinkers who threaten the state, but unscrupulous religious leaders who seek to establish political authority independent of the state or worse turn the state into a tool for the enforcement of their religious ideals. In seeking to control people’s minds, these religious leaders pose a danger to both the philosopher and the statesman. The

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 10. I will abbreviate the Latin text using the acronym *TdIE*, and the English text using the acronym *TEI*. See Baruch Spinoza, *Ethica*, Part 4, Propositions 26–28. In citing from the *Ethica*, I will use “E” for *Ethica*, “P” for Proposition, “S” for Scholium and “C” for Corollary. For the Latin I use *Spinoza Opera* ed. C. Gebhardt, vol. III (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925). For the English I use *The Collected Works of Spinoza* trans. and ed. Edwin Curley, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

¹² Spinoza, *TdIE*, 8; *TEI*, 10; E4P37.

¹³ See Spinoza, E4P32–34; E4P37S2; Spinoza, *TTP*, xvi, 189–191; *TPT*, 174–176; See Spinoza *Tractatus Politicus* in *Spinoza Opera* ed. C. Gebhardt, vol. III (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925) Ch.1, Section 3, 274. English translation: Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 38. I will abbreviate the Latin text using the acronym *TP*, and the English text using the acronym *PT*.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *TTP*, v, 73; *TPT*, 63. See Edwin Curley, “The State of Nature and its Law in Hobbes and Spinoza,” *Philosophical Topics* 19 no. 1 (1991): 101–102.

¹⁵ See Spinoza, *TTP*, praefatio, 7; *TPT*, 3. “I think I am undertaking no ungrateful or unprofitable task in demonstrating that not only can this freedom [of thought] be granted without endangering piety and the peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace of the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom.” Spinoza calls this, “the main point, which I have sought to establish in this treatise.”

philosopher and statesman's interests converge in opposing power-hungry theologians.

II.

Spinoza witnessed severe theological challenges to the republican government of his day. Following the death of the Orangist Stadtholder William II in 1650, Jan de Witt formed a republican government without a Stadtholder.¹⁶ De Witt's government showed relative tolerance for other religions thus incurring the ire of the Counter-Remonstrant Calvinists. The Orangists, seeking a return to power, allied themselves with the Counter-Remonstrants.¹⁷ Since the sixteenth century, the Dutch had frequently understood their history in light of ancient Israel's.¹⁸ The Counter-Remonstrants played on this, demanding a restoration of the Stadtholderate which they viewed as a latter-day incarnation of the ancient Israelite monarchy.¹⁹ The Counter-Remonstrants claimed that all Christians owed a double allegiance – to the state in temporal matters and to the Church in spiritual matters. Significantly, these preachers viewed themselves as contemporary representatives of the Biblical priests and prophets. As such, they claimed that the Church should be independent of state authority with the exclusive right to appoint ministers, and promulgate doctrine.²⁰ But given that both church and state form the bases of “Christian society,” a proper civil authority should use its power to establish godly norms of behavior in accordance with the Counter-Remonstrants' interpretations of Scripture. In this way, these clergymen sought authority over the state.²¹ Indeed, Scripture itself demonstrated that the secular authorities were bound to promulgate Scriptural law as interpreted by the Counter-Remonstrants for the ancient Israelite state was governed by Biblical law as interpreted by the Levitical priests. Similarly, the Counter-Remonstrants argued that the state

¹⁶ See Michael Rosenthal, “Why Spinoza chose the Hebrews,” in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*, eds. H. Ravven and L. Goodman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 244.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 243. See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 26–27.

¹⁹ Rosenthal, 245.

²⁰ See Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (New York: Verso, 1998), 20.

²¹ See Preus, 18–19; Schama, 381; Rosenthal, 243.

should monitor the heresies of those whose ideas conflicted with Biblical truth.²²

Spinoza is appalled by this and in response articulates his theory of the relationship between religion and the state.²³ For Spinoza, right is coextensive with power.²⁴ Now in the state of nature there is no civil law or morality. As a result, individuals live in a precarious condition of fear.²⁵ Individuals thus realize that, “in order to achieve a secure and good life, [they] must unite into one body.”²⁶ To do so, they agree that the right possessed by each individual should be placed into “common ownership.” The process of turning over individual right to the community is the social contract, which forms the foundation of the state. But given that right is coextensive with power, turning one’s right over to the community involves granting the community the power to rule in whatever way it sees fit.²⁷ The common right possessed by the community is what Spinoza calls “sovereignty” (*imperium*).²⁸ If the community as a whole retains the common right, then the form of government is a democracy.²⁹ However, the community can also decide to transfer this right to a single person or a small group of people. If a single person is given the common right, then the sovereign is a monarch, while if a small group of people are given this right, then the sovereign is a group of aristocrats.

Receiving full coercive authority, the sovereign has the right to force individuals to act in whatever ways it deems necessary in order to ensure peace and stability. To this end, the sovereign promulgates laws of justice and morality which the sovereign enforces. But here the relation between the state and religion becomes a key concern. For if religion retains the authority to prescribe actions independently of the sovereign, or worse if priests impose religious law on the sovereign, there is a threat of faction-

²² Balibar, 20.

²³ Important discussions of Spinoza’s political philosophy include: Robert McShea, *The Political Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Steven Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 119–144; Henry Allison, *Benedict de Spinoza*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 176–204; Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984); Edwin Curley, “Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. D. Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315–342.

²⁴ For a reconstruction of Spinoza’s arguments to this effect see Curley, “Kissinger, Spinoza and Genghis Khan,” 318–322; Curley, “The State of Nature and its Law in Hobbes and Spinoza,” 102–114.

²⁵ See above p. 5. See Spinoza, *TTP*, xvi, 191; *TPT*, 175; *TP*, 281; *PT*, 43–44

²⁶ Spinoza, *TTP*, xvi, 191; *TPT*, 175.

²⁷ See Curley, “Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan,” 325.

²⁸ See Spinoza, *TP*, 282; *PT*, 44.

²⁹ Spinoza, *TP*, 282; *PT*, 44; *TTP*, xvi, 192, *TPT*, 177.

alism, religious warfare, and a return to the chaotic state of nature. To avoid these problems, the sovereign must have full control over the practice of religion in the state.³⁰

While the sovereign has authority over the practice of religion, the wise sovereign will not impose complex rituals or dogma. Rather, it will use religion to solidify civic virtue and political stability. The ideal religion of the sovereign will therefore, “regard piety and religion as consisting solely in the exercise of charity and just dealing.”³¹

Now while the state has full right to control the practice of religion, it has only a very limited right to control *beliefs* associated with religion. For while controlling people’s minds would result in the state never needing to resort to force to implement its decrees, the state can never completely accomplish this, and trying to do so risks creating great danger to itself.³²

Attempting to control people’s thoughts leads people to dissemble their true opinions thereby encouraging social vices such as sycophancy and dishonesty.³³ It also leads to sedition for human nature is such that the greater the attempt to control thought, the more men of “integrity”³⁴ will fight to preserve their opinions, even unto death. Death, in turn, makes these men martyrs, further fomenting seditiousness.³⁵ Moreover, as the wealth and power of the state depend on the development of the arts and sciences, which require the exercise of the free judgment of citizens, a state which attempts to control thought and speech will eventually become impoverished.³⁶ Also, given that people naturally *say* what they think, attempts to stifle free speech are doomed to failure.³⁷ The state thus does not have the right (i. e. power) to control religious thought and/or the expression of religious beliefs.

³⁰ Spinoza, *TTP*, xvi, 199; *TPT*, 182–183: “But in matters of religion men are especially prone to go astray and contentiously advance many ideas of their own devising ... It is therefore quite clear that if nobody was bound by right to obey the sovereign power in those matters which he thinks pertain to religion, the state’s right would then inevitably depend on judgments and feelings that vary with each individual ... Now since the right of the state, would in this way be utterly destroyed, it follows that it belongs completely to the sovereign power on whom alone both divine and natural right impose the duty of preserving and safeguarding the laws of the state to make whatever decisions it thinks concerning religion, and all are bound by their pledged word ... to obey the sovereign power’s decrees and commands in this matter.”

³¹ Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 247; *TPT*, 229.

³² Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 239; *TPT*, 222.

³³ Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 244; *TPT*, 226.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 247; *TPT*, 229.

³⁶ Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 243; *TPT*, 226.

³⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 240; *TPT*, 223.

We therefore have two competing views of religion's relation to the state. The Counter-Remonstrants claim that the state must be a vehicle for the promulgation and enforcement of religious law, while Spinoza maintains that the state must control public religion. Spinoza understands that for most people religion's authority is grounded in Scripture. The authority of the sovereign over religion therefore rests on its ability to control the interpretation of Scripture. But interpretation is an act of the mind.³⁸ Given the difficulty in controlling minds, how can Spinoza establish the sovereign's right over religion? For Spinoza, the sovereign's right over the interpretation of Scripture lies chiefly in its ability to *persuade* its citizens of the truth of its interpretations. This requires an explanation of the proper method of Biblical interpretation.

III.

In chapter seven of the *TTP*, Spinoza contrasts "theologians'" arbitrary methods of Scriptural interpretation with a "true method of Scriptural interpretation":

We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's Word [*sua commenta pro Dei verbo*], their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from the Sacred Texts [*Sacris Literis*] their own arbitrarily invented idea, for which they claim divine authority ... In order to escape this scene of confusion, to free our minds from the prejudices of theologians and to avoid the hasty acceptance of human fabrications as divine teachings, we must discuss the true method of Scriptural interpretation and examine it in depth, for unless we understand this, we cannot know with any certainty what the Bible or the Holy Spirit intends to teach.³⁹

By a "true method of Scriptural interpretation," Spinoza means a scientific method. In adumbrating this method, he draws on two great scientific theorists of his day, René Descartes and Francis Bacon.⁴⁰

³⁸ On this point see Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 238.

³⁹ Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 97–98; *TPT*, 86–87.

⁴⁰ To be sure, Spinoza's method of Biblical interpretation draws on elements not found in Descartes or Bacon such as his emphasis on Hebrew grammar, which he finds among medieval Jewish exegetes such as Ibn Ezra, Rashi, and Rashbam, the textual criticism of Christian scholars such as Cappel, Rivet, and Saumais, and the rudimentary source criticism of Ibn Ezra, La Peyrière, Hobbes, and Fisher. But while all of these scholars provide tools that Spinoza makes use of, none of them outlines a *scientific method*. For this, Spinoza turns to Descartes and Bacon. For discussion of the Hebrew

In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes describes how in the course of reflecting on what he was taught he came to doubt all intellectual authority. He notes that, “regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought that I could not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason.”⁴¹ Descartes resolves only to accept what he himself perceives “clearly and distinctly.”⁴² Similarly, seeing the great disputes over Scriptural interpretation in his time, Spinoza resolves to reject interpretations of Scripture based on authority, accepting as Scriptural teaching only what he derives “clearly” from it:

... when I saw that the disputes of the philosophers are raging with passion in Church and Court and are breeding hatred and faction which readily turn men to sedition, together with other ills too numerous to recount here, I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely and to admit nothing as its teaching, which I did not most *clearly* derive from it [*quod ab eadem clarissime non edoceret*].⁴³

While Descartes' method of doubt provides Spinoza with a starting point for his inquiry into Scripture, in a famous passage Spinoza compares the study of Scripture to the study of nature. Scholars have generally looked to Bacon's approach to the study of nature as Spinoza's influence here.⁴⁴ I agree that Bacon is an important source Spinoza, but I think that Spinoza likewise departs from Bacon in significant ways.

Michel Malherbe offers a concise description of Bacon's philosophical method:

grammarians and the Christian text critics, see Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 59–84. For discussion of Ibn Ezra, La Peyrière, and Fisher as precursors to Spinoza's “source criticism,” see Richard Popkin, “Spinoza and Bible Scholarship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 385–404. For the relationship between Hobbes' analysis of the Bible's authorship and Spinoza's see Edwin Curley, “‘I Durst Not Write So Boldly’ or How to Read Hobbes' Theological-Political Treatise,” in *Hobbes e Spinoza* ed. Daniela Bostrenghi (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992), 497–593. An excellent discussion of the rise of text and source criticism in the Renaissance is Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 3.

⁴¹ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. J. Cottingham et. al. vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 117.

⁴² See *ibid*, 120.

⁴³ Spinoza, *TTP*, praefatio, 9; *TPT*, 5. See Curley, “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece,” 77–81.

⁴⁴ Smith, 61–65. Also see Curley, “Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece,” 77–81; Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'écriture* (Paris: PUF, 1965), 29–33; Savan, “Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist of the Scientific Method,” 122.

Knowledge starts from sensible experience, rests upon natural history, which presents sense data in an ordinate distribution, rises up from lower axioms or propositions to more general ones, and tries to reach the more fundamental laws of nature (the knowledge of forms) ...⁴⁵

The scientist aspires to know the general forms, which express the most fundamental causes of nature. The “interpretation of nature” accomplishes this. It seeks the ultimate, most general principles of nature. However, to guard against rash abstractions and errors drawn from limited perceptions, the “interpretation of nature” operates using a gradual process of abstraction moving from the “forms” or real causes of particular things to the most general forms of nature as a whole. Bacon uses gold as an example. One first seeks the “simple natures” of gold. To avoid the problem of haphazard and unreliable sense perceptions, one composes an “experimental and natural history.” For example, we formulate our knowledge of gold by culling and organizing observations about the various properties of gold that have been recorded over history and derived from carefully controlled experiments. This information is organized into “tables of presentation” which include the tables of “presence,” “absence,” and “degree.”⁴⁶

Once one arrives at an understanding of the simple natures of gold, which include that it is yellow, heavy with a certain weight, malleable to a certain degree etc.,⁴⁷ one seeks a more fundamental understanding of these natures. For example, one seeks to understand “yellowness” by composing new tables of presentation that include diverse yellow objects such as gold, corn, and the sun. One then seeks to uncover the latent structure that underlies these qualities and the process that brings them into being by understanding the more fundamental qualities of nature such as color and texture, and ultimately the basic nature of elements that are not qualitative such as figure and bulk.⁴⁸ These are the general “forms” of nature.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Michel Malherbe, “Bacon’s Method of Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, ed. Markku Peltonen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 77.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*

⁴⁷ See Francis Bacon, *New Organon*, trans. and ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 105.

⁴⁸ See Antonio Pérez-Ramos, “Bacon’s Forms of Nature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, ed. Markku Peltonen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103.

⁴⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this process, see Malherbe, “Bacon’s Method of Science,” 86–98.

In a famous passage, Spinoza follows a long tradition comparing the method of interpreting Scripture to the method of interpreting nature:⁵⁰

To sum it up briefly, I say that the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely. For just as the method of interpreting nature [*interpretandi naturam*] consists above all in putting together a history of nature [*historia naturae*] from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things, so to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history [*sinceram historiam adornare*] of Scripture and to infer the mind of the authors of Scripture from it, by legitimate reasonings as from certain data and principles [*ex certis datis & principia*]. For if someone has admitted as principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing the things contained in it only those drawn from Scripture and its history, he will always proceed without danger of error [*sine ullo periculo errandi*] and will be able to discuss the things which surpass our grasp as safely as those we know by the natural light.⁵¹

Following Bacon, Spinoza claims that the study of nature begins with a “history of nature.” From this history we infer the “definitions” of finite things. These “definitions,” also called “essences” or “natures” by Spinoza,⁵² seem to correspond to Bacon’s particular “forms.”⁵³ So in this passage, Spinoza seems to say that we know the forms of finite natural things from the history of nature alone. Spinoza never describes in detail how these forms are derived. But in his *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, he notes that to know the nature of things one must, “collect the differences, agreements, and oppositions of things.”⁵⁴ Scholars have noted that this is based on Bacon’s tables of degree, presence, and absence.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Discussion of the two divine “books” (Scripture and nature) goes back at least to Hugh of St. Vincent in the 12th century. For discussion of the analogy between Scripture and nature see Harrison, 3 ff.

⁵¹ Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 98.

⁵² See Spinoza, E1P19.

⁵³ Spinoza does not define “essence” in the *Ethics*, but he defines what “belongs” to an essence as follows: “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which being given the thing is also necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily taken away; or that without which the thing can neither be nor be conceived and which can neither be nor be conceived without the thing.” See Spinoza, E2D2. For a good discussion of Spinoza’s doctrine of essence see Alan Donagan, “Essence and the Distinction of Attributes in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor Press, 1973), 164–181.

⁵⁴ Spinoza, *TdIE*, 12; *TEI*, 15.

⁵⁵ See Alan Gabbey, “Spinoza’s Natural Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 170–171; Savan “Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist”, 122, n8. These scholars do not, however, explain the precise relationship between Bacon and Spinoza on this point, and it is unclear to me.

Just as the interpretation of nature requires a history of nature, so the interpretation of Scripture requires a history of Scripture. This history mirrors the history of nature, albeit loosely. The statements of Scripture on a given subject must be organized into tables. One begins by identifying the clear pronouncements of each book. One then classifies the contents of each book of the Bible under different headings noting passages which are obscure or contradict. Contradictory statements should be resolved using metaphorical interpretation in light of clear statements. Spinoza gives an example. In seeking to understand Moses' conception of God, Spinoza notes that Moses claims that God is both fire and jealous (Deut. 4:24). Fire, however, is inanimate, so these two statements contradict. In a third place, however, Moses claims that God has no form (Deut. 4:15). Spinoza also notes that in Job 31:12, fire is used as a metaphor for jealousy. Thus, the statement that God is fire is a metaphor describing God's jealousy.⁵⁶

While this method of tabular organization seems to be informed by Bacon's "tables of presentation," there is no precise correspondence. For Bacon, the table of presence involves recording those instances where a quality is present.⁵⁷ The table of absence involves recording those instances where one would expect a given quality to be present, but it is absent.⁵⁸ The table of degree comprises those instances where a quality is present in varying degrees depending on the circumstance.⁵⁹ Spinoza's tables are based on finding obscure or contradictory texts under a particular heading, rather than composing tables of presence, absence, and degree for each subject. In addition, Spinoza's method requires biographical data that facilitates understanding the mind of the Biblical author, and so recovering authorial intent. Both Bacon and Spinoza agree, however, that nature has no intentions.

But there is an area where Spinoza's method of interpreting Scripture seems to diverge much more dramatically from Bacon's method of interpreting nature. As we have seen, for Bacon science aims at a progressive,

⁵⁶ See Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 101; *TPT*, 89. Why Spinoza deems it admissible to bring a proof-text from Job is unclear to me. Although Spinoza cites the view that Moses was the author of Job, he writes that he is "inclined to agree with Ibn Ezra that [the book of Job] is a translation from another language." See Spinoza, *TTP*, x, 144–145; *TPT*, 130–131.

⁵⁷ Bacon, *New Organon*, 110. Bacon uses the example of "heat." The first instance of heat that Bacon uses is the sun's rays, especially in the summer and at noon.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 111. The first instance of absence of heat that Bacon uses is the moon's rays which one would expect to be hot, but are not.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119–120. Bacon cites the heat of plants as an instance of degree. Plants generally are not hot to human touch, while certain vegetables (i. e. spicy ones) are warm to the palate or stomach.

stepwise understanding of the most general forms of nature. He explicitly attacks the method that begins with general forms and interprets particulars in light of those axioms. In describing the method of interpreting Scripture, however, Spinoza seems to proceed in precisely this manner. He notes that in order to interpret Scripture, “we must first seek from our study of Scripture that which is most universal and forms the basis and foundation of all of Scripture ...”⁶⁰ Spinoza then notes that, “having acquired a proper understanding of this universal doctrine of Scripture [*universali Scripturae doctrina*], we must then proceed to other matters which are of less universal import, but affect our ordinary life and which flow from the universal doctrine like rivulets from their source.”⁶¹

Why this divergence? In fact, Spinoza breaks from Bacon not just when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture, but likewise with regard to the interpretation of nature. For, one must begin by uncovering the universal features of nature and then interpret the particulars things of nature in light of these universal features.⁶²

Spinoza's divergence from Bacon's method is principled. Whereas Bacon censures those who would derive the general features of nature hastily on account of their having performed an incomplete induction, according to Spinoza one knows the general definitions and universal axioms and postulates of nature without detailed empirical study. In E2P10 he criticizes those who think that they can know created things without prior knowledge of God. The empiricist, “believed that the divine nature, which they should contemplate before all else (because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature) is last in the order of knowledge, and that the things, which are called objects of the senses are prior to all.”

In fact, as Spinoza makes clear at E1P15 and E2P45, individual, finite things are finite modes of God's infinite attributes and hence require prior understanding of God's infinite attributes to be fully understood. Furthermore, we know from Letter sixty four that Spinoza considers motion and rest to be an immediate infinite mode of God,⁶³ and from

⁶⁰ Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 102–103; *TPT*, 90–91.

⁶¹ Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 102–103; *TPT*, 90–91.

⁶² Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 102; *TPT*, 90: “In examining natural phenomena we first of all try to discover those features that are the most universal and common to the whole of Nature, to wit, motion and rest [*motum & quietum*] and the rules governing them which Nature always observes and through which she constantly acts: and then we advance gradually from these to other less universal features.”

⁶³ See Spinoza, *The Letters*, 299.

E1P21D, it is clear that immediate infinite modes follow directly from the attributes, which are known without an inductive study of nature.⁶⁴ Thus when in the passage just cited Spinoza speaks of motion and rest as constituting the universal features of nature, it is clear that he thinks that these are derived immediately from our knowledge of the attributes.⁶⁵

Now Bacon considers knowledge of the general forms of nature that is not grounded in a careful accumulation of experimental data to be subject to error.⁶⁶ But Spinoza makes clear in Letter two, that Bacon is simply wrong about this.⁶⁷ For Spinoza, what is perceived clearly and distinctly mirrors reality perfectly. Bacon's error is that he assumes that the human will is more extensive than the intellect. In fact, Spinoza famously claims that the will is an abstraction and is identical with the intellect.⁶⁸ Thus, the interpretation of nature requires not only a history

⁶⁴ See Spinoza, *TdIE*, 20; *TEI*, 20; E1P24–26; G. H. R. Parkinson, *Spinoza's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 77–79; Allison, 72–73. Whether and to what extent empirical knowledge is involved in our knowledge of the definitions, axioms, and postulates is a question that is debated among scholars, but all agree that the definitions, axioms, and postulates are not derived through discursive inductive reasoning. See Spinoza's correspondence with Oldenburg, letters 2–4. In Ludwig Meyer's introduction to Spinoza's *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* which was approved by Spinoza himself, Meyer makes clear that definitions are explanations of what is contained analytically in, "the words and terms by which the things to be discussed are designated." Postulates and axioms (the latter term which Meyer identifies with "common notions of the mind") are, "propositions so clear and evident that no one can deny his assent to them provided only that he has rightly understood the terms themselves." See Spinoza, *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy in The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 1 trans. and ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 225. Martial Gueroult notes that definitions are of real things and that axioms are "true and immediately certain." See Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), 20–23, 85; *Spinoza II: L'âme* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), 34–36. Curley considers the axioms as "propositions so fundamental to our thought about the world that we cannot rationally doubt them," but not necessarily immediately certain. See Edwin Curley, "Rationalism," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. J. Dancy and E. Sosa (London: Blackwell, 1992), 411–415; Edwin Curley, *The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 1, s. v. axiom, 626–627; Edwin Curley, "Spinoza's Geometrical Method" *Studia Spinozana* vol. 2 (1986): 151–168. Bennett understands the definitions, axioms, and postulates as "general hypotheses" that must be checked against the data of experience and may be revised. See Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 20. See below note 101 where I take issue with Bennett.

⁶⁵ See Spinoza, E2P10S.

⁶⁶ See Bacon, *New Organon*, 79.

⁶⁷ Spinoza, *The Letters*, 62–63: "[Bacon] takes for granted that the human intellect, besides the fallibility of the senses, is by its very nature liable to error and fashions everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe ..."

⁶⁸ See Spinoza, E2P49CS. Discussions of Spinoza's view of the will include: Michael Della Rocca, "The Power of an Idea: Spinoza's Critique of the Pure Will," *Nous* 37 no.

of nature, but must begin with knowledge of universal motion and rest which is deduced from the universal attributes.

Now, as we have seen, Spinoza claims that the method of interpreting Scripture is “in complete accord” with the method of interpreting nature. But how can one achieve knowledge of Scripture’s universal teachings without careful accumulation of data? Before addressing this, I will aggravate the issue by exposing further difficulties in Spinoza’s method of Biblical interpretation.

IV.

Recall that Spitzelius claims that Spinoza’s method of Biblical interpretation is arbitrary. For Spitzelius, the doctrine of accommodation stands at the root of Spinoza’s method of interpretation. Philosophers such as Maimonides and Spinoza’s friend Ludwig Meyer understand accommodation as the idea that the prophets received their prophecies through the medium of their imaginations. For both Maimonides and Meyer, the prophets were philosophers and this accommodation was merely a way of clothing their philosophical knowledge in imaginative form.⁶⁹ Given the rational core of Biblical religion, it is legitimate to use philosophy to interpret Scripture. In his early writings circa 1665, Spinoza appears to accept the accommodationist doctrine as Maimonides and Meyer understand it.⁷⁰ But in the later *TTP* (1670), Spinoza abandons his early

2 (2003): 200–231; Genevieve Lloyd, “Spinoza on the Distinction between Intellect and Will,” in *Spinoza: Issues and Directions*, eds. E. Curley and P. F. Moreau (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 113–123; Joel Friedman, “Spinoza’s Denial of Free Will in Man and God,” in *Spinoza’s Philosophy of Man: Proceedings of the Scandinavian Spinoza Symposium, 1977*, ed. Jon Wetlesen (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1978), 51–84.

⁶⁹ See Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Part II, chs., 36–38; Moses Maimonides, *Book of Knowledge*, “Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,” ed. S. Rubenstein (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook), ch. 7, law 1. On Meyer see Preus, 34–67.

⁷⁰ See Spinoza, *The Letters*, 135 (Letter 19); *Descartes’ “Principles of Philosophy”*, Appendix II, Ch. 8 in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* trans. and ed. Edwin Curley, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 331. See Jay Harris, *How Do We Know This?* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 123–125. Curley claims that Spinoza’s early Maimonideanism is “ironic.” See *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. and ed. Edwin Curley, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 331, n. 22. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 196, suggests that this “early” view is an exoteric position meant to disguise Spinoza’s esoteric rejection of Maimonidean accommodationism. I find Strauss’s position especially hard to endorse, given how explicitly and vitriolically Spinoza rejects Maimonides method of Biblical interpretation in the *TTP*. See Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 112–116; *TPT*, 99–102. For further discussion see note 130 below.

view and radicalizes Maimonides' accommodationism. He affirms that prophecies were indeed accommodated to the imagination of the prophet, but he drops the notion that there was a rational core behind this imaginative clothing. Rather, Biblical prophecies reflected whatever each prophet imagined God to be like. Spinoza criticizes Maimonides and Meyer claiming that a historical-critical reading of Scripture shows that the prophets were neither scientists nor philosophers, and held divergent and quite ordinary conceptions of God and nature.⁷¹ Scientific/philosophical truth must be separated from Scriptural meaning, and it is foolish to use reason to interpret Biblical prophecies.⁷² Rather than intellect, what distinguished the prophets was that their minds were "directed exclusively to what was right and good [*aequum & bonum*]."⁷³ Their different conceptions of God reflected the various ways each prophet imagined God and was thereby moved to preach ethics.

But Spinoza does not rest with this observation. As Spitzelius correctly observes, Spinoza claims that just as the prophets represented God in different ways, so it is perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the Bible for the *contemporary* reader to interpret Scripture in whatever way will move him or her to piety:

I will not level the charge of impiety against those sectaries simply because they adapt the words of Scripture to their own beliefs. Just as Scripture was once adapted to the understanding of the people of that time, *in the same way anyone may now adapt it to his own beliefs* [suis opinionibus accomodare licet] *if he feels that this will enable him to obey God with a heartier will in those matters that pertain to justice and charity.*⁷⁴

But matters get more perplexing for in a number of places Spinoza employs the very method of Biblical interpretation that he criticizes Maimonides and Meyer for using. One of the boldest examples of this is Spinoza's treatment of miracles. Miracles play a central role in the Bible. From the burning bush, to the ten plagues, to Jesus rising from the dead, miracles abound. Furthermore, the Bible makes clear that miracles are critical to proving God's existence and power. Consider Exodus 10:1–2:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers in order that I may display these My

⁷¹ Spinoza, *TTP*, cap. i–ii.

⁷² Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 29–44; *TPT*, 21–34.

⁷³ Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 31; *TPT*, 23.

⁷⁴ Spinoza, *TTP*, xiv, 173; *TPT*, 158. Leo Strauss misinterprets this passage, claiming that it means that, "piety requires ... that one should give one's opinions a Biblical appearance." See Strauss, *Persecution*, 180.

signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed my signs – in order that you may know that I am the Lord.”

Or consider John 20:29–31 where Jesus speaks to Thomas after Thomas witnessed Jesus him risen from the dead:

Jesus said to him: Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are they that have not seen yet have believed. And many other signs truly did Jesus perform in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that believing you might have life through his name.

But in discussing Biblical miracles, Spinoza makes the incredible claim that, “Scripture itself makes evident that miracles do not affirm true knowledge of God ... [or of] God’s providence.”⁷⁵ Indeed, according to Spinoza Scripture itself denied the possibility of miracles. When speaking of God’s decrees and actions, Scripture only referred to the natural order. Descriptions of miracles were merely prophetic accounts of natural events accommodated to the imagination of the masses as a way of exciting their imagination and moving them to reverence and piety.⁷⁶ Spinoza goes so far as to claim that “nowhere does it state [in Scripture] that something can happen in nature that contravenes her laws or that cannot follow from her laws; so neither should we impute such a doctrine to Scripture.”⁷⁷ I cannot explore Spinoza’s efforts to justify this interpretation of Scripture, though there are good reasons to find it thoroughly unconvincing.⁷⁸ That Spinoza is aware that he is violating his own principle of distinguishing truth from meaning is clear for near the end of the chapter on miracles he writes that, in discussing miracles, he has “adopted a method very different from that employed in dealing with prophecy.” While in the case of prophecy, Spinoza draws his evidence from Scripture alone, in the case of miracles he draws his conclusions “from the natural light of reason.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 88; *TPT*, 77.

⁷⁶ Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 90; *TPT*, 79.

⁷⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 95; *TPT*, 84.

⁷⁸ For example, Spinoza notes that before bringing the plague of boils upon the Egyptians, Moses was told to scatter ashes (Exodus, 9: 10). Spinoza takes this as evidence that Moses knew that boils could not simply appear, but must have a natural cause. But what does bringing ashes have to do with spreading boils? This seems to be more akin to a magical understanding of events rather than a proof that Moses knew that nature only operates according to natural causes. See Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 90; *TPT*, 79.

⁷⁹ Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 94–95; *TPT*, 83. Husik notes the inconsistency of Spinoza’s interpretation of miracles as does Strauss. See Isaac Husik, “Maimonides and Spinoza on the Interpretation of the Bible,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 55 (1935):

Furthermore, in deploying the historical-critical method, Spinoza claims that one must begin with an account of the general doctrines held by all Scriptural authors. According to Spinoza, the prophets agreed that God, “demands nothing from men but ... obedience to God [which] consists solely in loving one’s neighbor [*amore proximi*].”⁸⁰ He likewise claims that the Scriptural authors recognized that the majority of people would not act morally without holding certain theological beliefs.⁸¹ For this reason all the Biblical authors affirmed seven

38; Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 164–167. While Husik simply leaves this as an inconsistency, Strauss attempts a resolution. Leora Batnitzky reads Strauss as arguing that Spinoza interprets the Bible as rejecting miracles in order to undercut the possibility of supernatural revelation. See Leora Batnitzky, “Spinoza’s Critique of Miracles,” 10–11. I will take up this point later in the paper. Zeev Harvey points out three other cases where Spinoza makes the bible conform to reason. First, Spinoza claims that Moses uses the Tetragrammaton to signify God’s essence, which is eternal and unrelated to created things. See Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 38, xv, 169; *TPT*, 29, 154. The idea that the Tetragrammaton refers to God’s essence is found in Maimonides. See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 61, 64. Second, in the *Ethics* Spinoza affirms that the Scriptural term for “glory” (*kabod*), refers to intellectual love of God. See E5P36S. The source of this interpretation is again Maimonides. See Maimonides’ interpretation of Isaiah 58:8 at the end of III, 51 in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Third, Spinoza interprets Christ as the consummate philosopher who received God’s communication without aid of the imagination by communicating with God “mind to mind.” See Spinoza, *TTP*, i, 14; *TPT*, 21; Zeev Harvey, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Hebraism,” in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, eds. H. Ravven and L. Goodman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 110–111; Zeev Harvey, “The Biblical Term ‘Glory’ in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” *Iyyun* 48 (1999): 447–449; Zeev Harvey, “A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 169–171. Zac likewise points out a number of places where Spinoza makes Scripture conform to reason. See Zac, *Spinoza et l’interprétation de l’écriture*, 165–218. Edwin Curley stresses Spinoza’s frequent attempts to make the New Testament accord with reason. For example, in his correspondence with Oldenburg Spinoza explains Christ’s resurrection metaphorically. Resurrection implies that as Christ came to possess divine wisdom, he came to embody eternal life since wisdom is eternal. But, as Curley correctly points out, this violates the plain sense of texts such as I Corinthians 15, which stress bodily resurrection. Indeed, Spinoza seems to acknowledge this when he writes: “It is only on this hypothesis [i. e. a metaphorical interpretation of resurrection] that Chapter 15 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians can be explained and Paul’s arguments understood, which otherwise according to the common hypothesis, appear weak and easily to be refuted.” So Spinoza acknowledges that the only reason for his metaphorical interpretation of I Corinthians, 15 is that otherwise the text does not conform to reason. See Spinoza’s letter 75 to Oldenburg. Curley’s discussion is found in Edwin Curley, “*Homo Audax*: Leibniz, Oldenburg, and the *TTP*,” in *Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa: Leibniz’ Auseinandersetzung mit Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen* ed. Ingrid Marchewitz and Albert Heinekamp (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990), 277–312. I have used the version posted by Professor Curley at: <http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/emcurley/spinoza>. See especially pp. 13–19 and 32–35 of that version.

⁸⁰ Spinoza, *TTP*, xiii, 168; *TPT*, 154.

⁸¹ See Spinoza, E5P41S. This became a standard view in the 18th century. Kant, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, thinks that one could not will the moral law without

dogmas about God, which are necessary for ethical piety. These dogmas or “tenets of faith” included: (1) God exists and is supremely just and merciful; (2) God is one; (3) God is omnipresent and omniscient; (4) God has the supreme right and dominion over all things; (5) worship of God and obedience to him consist solely in justice and charity; (6) all who obey God and those alone are saved; (7) God forgives repentant sinners.⁸²

To contemporary Bible scholars this must seem a strange and arbitrary claim from the founder of their discipline! And indeed Spinoza’s proofs that these doctrines are found everywhere in Scripture are extremely slight. His main proof that the prophets consistently preached ethics is based on a passage from Deuteronomy 13, where “Moses gives warning that if any prophet should seek to introduce new gods, even if he should confirm his teaching by signs and wonders, he must nevertheless be condemned to death.”⁸³

Since a wonder working prophet who preached violating ethical norms was put to death, prophets must have been distinguished by their concern for morality. The problem is that in the passage in question (Deut. 13, 2–6), the prophet was not disqualified because he taught hatred of one’s neighbor, but rather because he commanded the people to worship other gods:

If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or portent saying, “*Let us follow and worship another god*” whom you have not experienced- even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For the Lord your God is testing you to see whether you really love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul ... As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death.

There seems to be little proof that the prophets universally taught love of the other. While one can cite passages such as Leviticus 19: 18 or Matthew chs. 5–7 that tend in that direction, they are opposed by passages such as Deuteronomy 7: 1–2 and 25: 17–19 that preach genocide, or by Matthew 10: 34–36, where Jesus told his disciples that he has “not come to bring peace to the earth ... but a sword.”

postulating the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. Mendelssohn likewise affirms that without belief in God, the immortality of the soul, and divine providence, we would be miserable and could never be motivated to act morally. See *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, eds. Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttmann, Eugen Mittwoch (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929), 3.2, 68.

⁸² See Spinoza, *TTP*, xiv, 177–178; *TPT*, 162.

⁸³ Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 30; *TPT*, 22.

Regarding the seven dogmas, Spinoza's claim is even more tenuous. He offers *no textual support* that the Biblical authors universally held these views. Indeed, his "proof" that these dogmas were taught consistently in Scripture is based on the fact that most people need to believe in them to practice morality.⁸⁴

But Spinoza is not such a poor scholar, and despite affirming these "universal doctrines" of Scripture, he contradicts himself noting instances where these doctrines are not found in Scripture.⁸⁵ Thus, the ancient Israelites are encouraged by Moses to consider non-Israelites to be, "God's enemies for whom they felt an implacable hatred" (see Psalms, 139: 21–22).⁸⁶ Adam, Abraham, and Moses did not know that God was omniscient (see Gen. 3: 8, Gen. 18: 24, Exod. 4: 8) thus contradicting the third dogma,⁸⁷ and Samuel taught that God did not alter any decision he has made, even if a person repented (see I Sam. 15: 29), thereby contradicting the seventh dogma.⁸⁸

Spinoza's approach to Biblical interpretation seems deeply muddled. He apparently sanctions at least three different methods of Biblical interpretation: (a) the historical-critical method; (b) the method that harmonizes Scripture with philosophical truth; (c) the view that every individual has the authority to interpret Scripture in whatever way will move him or her to piety. Does Spinoza have a consistent method of Biblical interpretation? He asserts that all the prophets preached love of one's neighbour and the seven dogmas of faith, while, while tacitly denying this.

⁸⁴ See Spinoza, *TTP*, xiv, 177; *TPT*, 161: "A catholic faith should contain only those dogmas which obedience to God absolutely demands, and without which such obedience is absolutely impossible ... I can now venture to enumerate the dogmas of universal faith, the basic teaching which Scripture as a whole intends to convey ... No one can fail to realize that all these beliefs are essential if all men without exception are to be capable of obeying God ..."

⁸⁵ See Strauss, *Persecution*, 195–197.

⁸⁶ Spinoza, *TTP*, xvii, 214; *TPT*, 197–198: "Therefore the patriotism of the Hebrews was not simply patriotism but piety and this together with the hatred for other nations was so fostered and nourished by their daily ritual that it inevitably became part of their nature. For their daily ritual was not merely quite different, making them altogether unique and completely distinct from other people, but also utterly opposed to others. Hence this daily invective, as it were was bound to engender a lasting hatred of a most deep-rooted kind, since it was a hatred that had its source in strong devotion or piety and was believed to be a religious duty for that is the bitterest and most persistent of all hatred." See Strauss, *Persecution*, 196.

⁸⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 37–38; *TPT*, 28. See Strauss, *Persecution*, 196.

⁸⁸ Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 42; *TPT*, 32.

V.

In chapter twelve of the *TTP*, Spinoza equates the “word of God” with the divine law, which is sacred.⁸⁹ As he makes clear in chapter four, the divine law contains the rules for living an ethical life. Now in discussing the divine law Spinoza uses the language of the Deist doctrine of natural law morality, noting that “it is natural knowledge that teaches us ethics and true virtue, once we have arrived at the knowledge of things and have tasted the excellence of the understanding.”⁹⁰ Deists such as Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1624)⁹¹ had claimed that morality is not contingent on the revealed will of God, but rather is “revealed” to natural reason. For these Deists, “natural religion” consists of basic precepts such as worshipping God by loving one’s neighbor, repentance for wrongdoing, and reward and punishment.

But while Spinoza often adopts the rhetoric of Deism and natural religion in the *TTP*, he is fundamentally opposed to it for a number of reasons. First, while Deism proposes that God’s existence is easily known through reason, Spinoza makes clear that “God’s existence is not self-evident,” but requires that we “fix our attention on ... universal axioms and connect them to the attributes that belong to the divine nature.”⁹² In other words, to know God’s existence, we must understand the ontological argument as laid out at the beginning of the *Ethics*.⁹³ Second, as we have seen, for Spinoza the state of nature is an amoral state. Moral laws only gain force within the state when the sovereign ordains them.

Now Spinoza thinks that people need to be *inspired* to act ethically. For the masses who are under the sway of the passions, this requires appealing to their imagination. While, in principle, there may be many ways to accomplish this, in practice, given the recognized authority of Scripture in European society, Scripture is indispensable to this end. Spinoza notes that, “knowledge of these writings [i. e. Scripture] and belief in them is in the highest degree necessary for the common people

⁸⁹ Spinoza, *TTP*, xii, 162; *TPT*, 148.

⁹⁰ Spinoza, *TTP*, iv, 68; *TPT*, 57. Of course natural law morality has a long history going back to the ancients. For discussion see Paul Sigmund, *Natural Law in Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1971). I link Spinoza to the Deist conception of natural law morality, because in the *TTP*, Spinoza’s uses Deist rhetoric.

⁹¹ Herbert of Cherbury, *A Dialogue between a Tutor and his Pupil*, (1748). Scholars consider this work, published posthumously, to be an original version of Herbert’s 1705 Latin treatise *De religione gentilium*. See John Mackinnon Robertson, *A History of Freethought* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969), 614.

⁹² Spinoza, *TTP*, ad. 6, 252–253; *TPT*, 232.

⁹³ Spinoza, E1P20.

[*vulgo*].”⁹⁴ Now the majority of people will not act morally without holding the seven “dogmas of faith.” So for the Bible to be the “word of God,” it must be read as everywhere commanding the moral law and teaching the seven dogmas of faith. In this way, given that the moral law only acquires force when enacted by the sovereign, it is *the sovereign who turns Scripture into the “word of God.”*

But a fair reading of Scripture does not bear out the claim that it everywhere teaches the seven dogmas and love of one’s neighbor. Spinoza’s distinction between Scripture and the “word of God” helps resolve this paradox. For Spinoza, Scripture is not equivalent to the “word of God” *per se*. For a thing is not sacred in virtue of some intrinsic property, but rather in view of its effects. As he puts it, “a thing is called sacred and divine when its purpose is to foster piety and religion [*pietati & religioni*], and it is sacred only for as long as men use it in a religious way.”⁹⁵ Scripture is thus the “word of God” only insofar as it inspires people to act ethically.⁹⁶ It must therefore teach love of one’s neighbor and the seven dogmas everywhere to be the “word of God.” Now, as we have seen, the scientific method of interpretation requires *beginning* with universal axioms. In my view, in the interest of showing how the sovereign might turn Scripture into the “word of God,” Spinoza adheres to the scientific method by *imposing on Scripture the universal doctrines that he claims to find in it*.

But Spinoza’s approach not only serves his political objectives, it likewise meets a philosophical need. The problem of the hermeneutic circle is an old one going back to Luther.⁹⁷ It is first formulated as a problem in textual interpretation, though later thinkers give it an ontological meaning.⁹⁸ Briefly, the problem is that interpretation requires a conception of the whole to begin, but any conception of the whole must be based on an understanding of the parts. How then is interpretation possible?

One common answer to this problem is that although hermeneutics is indeed circular, the circle is not vicious.⁹⁹ It is true that to interpret a text one must begin with a prior understanding of whole. But this prior understanding need not be immutable. Interpretation may begin with a

⁹⁴ Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 78; *TPT*, 67.

⁹⁵ Spinoza, *TTP*, xii, 160; *TPT*, 146.

⁹⁶ See Spinoza, *TTP*, xii, 161; *TPT*, 147: “Scripture likewise is sacred and its words divine only as long as it moves people to devotion towards God.”

⁹⁷ See John Connolly and Thomas Keutner eds., *Hermeneutics versus Science*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 7.

⁹⁸ e. g. Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Division II, Part III, sections 62–63.

⁹⁹ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division I, Part V, Section, 33.

provisional understanding of the meaning of the whole, which is continually revised in light of one's emerging understanding of the parts. Thus interpretation can progress and one can move closer and closer to authorial intention.¹⁰⁰

Spinoza cannot accept this view of textual interpretation. For he thinks that the interpretation of Scripture can be a science, only if it is identical in method to the interpretation of nature. The interpretation of nature has a measure of absolute certainty, given that it begins with firm definitions, axioms, and postulates.¹⁰¹ But if the general doctrines of Scripture are only set out provisionally and are constantly subject to revision in light of our understanding of particular passages, this makes the interpretation of Scripture less certain than the interpretation of nature thereby calling into question the "scientific" nature of Biblical hermeneutics. For Biblical hermeneutics to be a science thus requires an account of the general doctrines of Scripture, which is not subject to revision. As these doctrines cannot be derived from Scripture itself, they must be imposed on it.

But what about passages that contradict these universal doctrines? Spinoza's hermeneutical method provides guidance, for having firmly established the universal teachings of Scripture, all particular teachings must "flow from the universal doctrine like rivulets from their source."¹⁰² In other words, particular teachings in Scripture, which conflict with the general doctrines of Scripture do not change our under-

¹⁰⁰ See Edwin Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece," in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 82.

¹⁰¹ See Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), 20–23, 85–92. In his *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Jonathan Bennett claims that Spinoza applies a "hypothetico-deductive method" which involves beginning with "general hypotheses." From these hypotheses, one then deduces consequences which one checks against empirical data. If empirical data contradicts these hypotheses one must revise one's hypotheses in light of the data. According to Bennett, Spinoza's definitions, axioms, and postulates are general hypotheses. This seems to me an anachronistic reading of Spinoza. In Ludwig Meyer's introduction to Spinoza's *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* which was approved by Spinoza himself, Meyer claims that, "certain and firm knowledge of anything can only be derived from things known *certainly* beforehand (my emphasis)." See Spinoza, *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy in The Collected Works of Spinoza* vol. 1 trans. and ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 225. But even if one claims that Spinoza did not accept Meyer's understanding of his epistemological method, there is no evidence that Spinoza saw the definitions, axioms, and postulates that he lays out at the beginning of the *Ethics* as in any way subject to correction. In Letter seventy six, Spinoza famously claims: "I do not assume that I have discovered the best philosophy, but I know that I understand the true one." Furthermore, as I will show immediately, when in the *TTP* Spinoza uncovers prophetic views of God which contradict his account of the universal doctrines of Scripture, Spinoza does not revise his account of these universal doctrines, but rather reinterprets the individual prophetic views in light of the universal doctrines.

standing of these general doctrines, but rather must be interpreted consistently with them. These discrepancies reflect an awareness on the part of the Biblical authors that the universal divine law required being adapted to particular circumstances.

For example, Moses taught love of the neighbor as directed solely to fellow Israelites for at the time he viewed this as a means of solidifying Israelite patriotism and maintaining the integrity of the state. Christ, on the other hand, wrote at a time when the Jews had lost their political authority, and thus deemed it inappropriate to preach hatred of those nations under whose rule the Jews lived. He therefore preached universal love of humankind.¹⁰³ Spinoza leaves it up to the contemporary sovereign to determine how to interpret the command to love one's neighbor, though he notes that the command to hate non-citizens only suits a state, which can survive without relations to other states.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, while divine knowledge is generally an important doctrine for instilling obedience among the people, Moses found it necessary to expound a limited version of this doctrine, perhaps because he felt that too rigorous a notion of divine knowledge called free will into question thereby leading to resignation and moral laxity. Likewise, while the efficacy of repentance is generally an important value that encourages piety by preserving hope, Samuel felt that the principle had to be curtailed when King Saul made the grave error of not slaying the Amalekite king Agag. Despite his pleas for repentance, Samuel determined that for the sake of the political welfare of Israel Saul had to be removed. Therefore Samuel informed him that, "the Eternal of Israel (*Nezah Israel*), does not deceive or change His mind for He is not a human being that He should change his mind."¹⁰⁵

Just as in the Bible we find the universal doctrines adapted to particular circumstances, so the contemporary sovereign as the sole legitimate "interpreter of the divine law,"¹⁰⁶ may 'tweak' the universal doctrines of Scripture in whatever way will help make Scripture into the "word of God." But it is not only the sovereign who may adapt the meaning of Scripture. Spinoza notes that, "opinions vary as much as tastes,"¹⁰⁷ and, as such people have different conceptions of God. But given that to be the "word of God," the Bible must *at present* promote piety, it is in the interest

¹⁰² Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 103; *TPT*, 91.

¹⁰³ Spinoza, *TTP*, xix, 233; *TPT*, 216

¹⁰⁴ Spinoza, *TTP*, xviii, 221; *TPT*, 205.

¹⁰⁵ ISamuel, 15:29.

¹⁰⁶ Spinoza, *TTP*, xix, 232, *TPT*, 215.

¹⁰⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, xx, 239; *TPT*, 222.

of the sovereign to allow every person to imagine God in whatever way will most effectively promote ethical behavior. Spinoza's theory of prophecy supports this. Just as the prophets represented God in different ways according to what most effectively moved them and their audiences to piety, so the *contemporary* reader has the right to interpret Biblical pronouncements concerning the seven dogmas in whatever way will move him or her to act ethically as long as he or she grants this right to others.¹⁰⁸ The simplicity of the seven dogmas promotes piety as the dogmas admit a wide range of understandings of God.¹⁰⁹ Equally important, giving the people the right to interpret the seven dogmas as they see fit and requiring that they grant this right to others supports freedom of thought.

Spinoza's concern that the interpretation of Scripture be under the authority of the sovereign, likewise drives both his efforts to separate the question of the truth of Scripture from the question of its meaning, and his violation of this principle. Now one might think that Spinoza's opposition to harmonizing Scripture with philosophy is motivated by his desire to secure freedom of thought.¹¹⁰ But the harmonistic approach to Scripture is no threat to freedom of thought because the philosophical harmonist can read into Scripture whatever reason teaches. Rather, Spinoza's concern is that if philosophy becomes the arbiter of the meaning of Scripture the sovereign risks losing control over religion for the people would then turn to philosophers rather than to the sovereign for their understanding of Scripture:

If this view [i. e. that philosophy must decide the meaning of Scripture] were correct, it would follow that the common people, for the most part knowing nothing of logical reasoning or without leisure for it would have to rely solely on the authority and testimony of philosophers for their understanding of Scripture.¹¹¹

This observation leads Spinoza to note a way in which Judaism was superior to Christianity. While Spinoza frequently praises Christianity

¹⁰⁸ Spinoza, *TTP*, praefatio, 11; *TPT*, 6: "As men's ways of thinking vary considerably and different beliefs are better suited to different men, and what moves one to reverence provokes ridicule in another, I repeat the judgment that everyone should be allowed freedom of judgment and the right to interpret the basic tenets of faith as he sees fit and that the moral value of a man's creed should be judged only from his works."

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Hyman emphasizes the wide range of ways in which the seven dogmas can be interpreted. See Arthur Hyman, "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith in Light of their Medieval Jewish Background," in *Biblical and Other Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 183–195

¹¹⁰ Zac makes this claim. See Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'écriture*, 123–124.

¹¹¹ Spinoza, *TTP*, vii, 115; *TPT*, 101.

at the expense of Judaism,¹¹² Judaism's superiority lies in the fact that in it, politics and religion were never separate. But *pace* the Counter-Remonstrants who claim that the Israelite rulers were instruments for the enforcement of priestly law, Spinoza claims that in its original and most successful constitution the Mosaic state comprised a sovereign who centralized power and controlled religious ritual.¹¹³ Moses originally had the power to legislate, enforce and interpret the law, judge, wage war and peace, and appoint all religious functionaries.¹¹⁴ In contrast, Christianity arose concurrently with the decline and destruction of the Jewish state and one of Christ's great innovations was to provide a model for religion independent of state control.¹¹⁵

But herein lies the great danger to the state posed by Christianity. For in freeing religion from control by the state, Christianity set up an independent authority that could rival the state for its citizens' loyalty. This threat became a reality when medieval popes rivaled kings for political power.¹¹⁶ But how did Christianity remain separate from the state? While there were a number of factors, the most important factor was that in contrast to Judaism, which made obedience to the law its central religious obligation, Christianity emphasized complex dogma. This prevented the secular authorities from gaining control over religion, for given the complexity of Christian dogma, only a theologian/philosopher

¹¹² This occurs especially in the first five chapters of the *TTP*. Discussions of Spinoza's view of Christianity include, Zac, 167–174, 190–199; Andre Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier Montagne, 1971); Graeme Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); Strauss, *Persecution*, 171–176.

¹¹³ See Spinoza, *TTP*, v, 17–19.

¹¹⁴ See Spinoza, *TTP*, xvii, 207–208; *TPT*, 190–191. Later, in the interests of inspiring reverence and devotion for the state, Moses built a national Tabernacle and appointed his brother Aaron as the head of it. As the Tabernacle was to be the house of God, Moses gave Aaron the right to interpret the laws. But Aaron only had this right when consulted by Moses—and his interpretation only acquired the force of law when Moses accepted them. This right was originally supposed to pass to the firstborns of each tribe thus giving all the people a part in the interpretation of the law, but after the sin of the Golden Calf, in order to punish the people, God made the Levites the administrators of the religious rites in the Tabernacle (later the Temple) and the interpreters of the law. This proved disastrous for the people resented supporting these idle men and the Levites were constantly rebuking and annoying the people. Eventually, in the second Temple period, the Maccabean Levites seized political power acquiring control over the army and the power to legislate. They tried to extend their control over the people by legislating new, complex religious ritual and convoluted dogma as well as interpreting Scripture to license their immorality. At this point, the Jewish commonwealth was doomed. See Spinoza, *TTP*, cap. xvii–xviii.

¹¹⁵ See Spinoza, *TTP*, cap. v, vii, xix.

¹¹⁶ Spinoza, *TTP*, xix, 234; *TPT*, 218. See Rosenthal, 242–247.

could be the head of the church as a secular political leader would not have the leisure to become an expert in theology/philosophy.¹¹⁷ The simplicity of the Biblical dogmas of faith thus serves a second purpose by facilitating state control of religion.

Just as political considerations explain Spinoza's distinguishing the truth of Scripture from its meaning, they likewise explain his collapsing this distinction in the case of miracles.¹¹⁸ Spinoza locates the origin of superstition in the masses' feelings of powerlessness:

When fortune smiles on them, the majority of men, even if quite unversed in affairs, are so abounding in wisdom that any advice offered to them is regarded as an affront, whereas in adversity, they know not where to turn, begging for advice from any quarter; and then there is no counsel so foolish, absurd or vain that they will not follow ... If they are struck with wonder at some unusual phenomenon, they believe this to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of some supreme deity, and they therefore regard it as their pious duty to avert evil by sacrifice and vows, addicted as they are to superstition and opposed to religion [*superstitioni obnoxii, & religioni adversi*]. Thus there is no end to the kind of omens that they imagine and they read extraordinary things into Nature ...¹¹⁹

Credulity concerning miracles is associated with weakness and the desire to uncover a power which people can channel in order to gain control over their circumstances.¹²⁰ Some prophets claim to have privileged access to such a power as evidenced by their ability to control nature or

¹¹⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, xix, 200; *TPT*, 220.

¹¹⁸ Many of Spinoza's philosophically informed interpretations of Scripture are tied to his endeavor to undermine the authority of miracles. This is seen clearly in Spinoza's metaphorical interpretation of Christ's resurrection. But it is likewise behind Spinoza's interpretation of the tetragrammaton as referring to God's essence which is unrelated to created things. For the tetragrammaton had frequently been interpreted as referring to God's providential rule of the world. From the Septuagint's rendering of the tetragrammaton as *kurios*, through the Vulgate's rendering of it as *dominus*, to Luther's rendering of it as *der Herr*, the tetragrammaton was interpreted to mean "Lord." The most well known example of this in English is the King James Bible's famous rendition of Psalm 23:1; "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." This view is likewise expressed in traditional Jewish practice where the tetragrammaton is forbidden to be pronounced as written and is instead vocalized as *Adonai* meaning "my Lord." See Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, *Scripture and Translation* trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 99–113. Also see *Genesis Rabba* 12: 15 cited in Rashi's commentary to Genesis 1: 1 (11th century), where the tetragrammaton is interpreted as referring to God's attribute of mercy, and Judah Halevi (12th century) who interprets the tetragrammaton as referring to God's creating the world through his direct will without intermediaries. See Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, trans. Y. Kafah (Kiryat Ono: Machon Moshe, 1997), part II, ch. 2, 46 (but compare part IV, ch., 25, 182).

¹¹⁹ Spinoza, *TTP*, praefatio, 5; *TPT*, 1.

miraculously predict changes in it. These prophets offer to put this power at people's disposal if the people obey them. In this way, such prophets threaten to establish an authority independent of the sovereign which is extremely dangerous. Belief in miracles is thus as a chief reason why people obey religious leaders rather the sovereign.

Now Scripture is a prime source for the belief that miracles provide a foundation for trusting a prophet. Thus in Deuteronomy 18: 15–22, the Bible made clear that a prophet was deemed reliable on account of his ability to miraculously predict the future.¹²¹ Similarly, I Kings 18: 20–38 famously recounts how in the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Bál, Elijah proved himself the true prophet through his ability to miraculously call forth fire from heaven. But given that the state is the foundation of morality, to ensure that Scripture is the “word of God,” it is necessary to undercut the authority afforded to unscrupulous theologians by belief in miracles. Furthermore, given the authority that people accord Scripture, Spinoza thinks that to displace people's trust in miracles, he must not only demonstrate that miracles are impossible,¹²² and theologically impious,¹²³ but also that Scripture itself places no trust in them. In chapter two of the *TTP*, Spinoza claims that Scripture saw miracles as *psychologically* effective in moving people, but never deemed miracles a true sign of prophecy. Among Spinoza's proofs are that Moses commanded the people not to follow a prophet who produced miracles if the prophet commanded the people to worship other gods (Deut. 13), and that Scripture recorded instances where false prophets produced miracles (I Kings 22: 23).¹²⁴ But it is Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture in which he claims that Scripture *itself* denied the possibility of miracles which constitutes his boldest attempt to undercut the authority of miracle working prophets.¹²⁵

This interpretation of Biblical miracles likewise preserves freedom of thought. For as Leora Batnitzky has pointed out, divine revelation, as

¹²⁰ Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 81; *TPT*, 71.

¹²¹ “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people, like myself [i. e. Moses]: him you shall heed ... And should you ask yourselves ‘How can we know that the oracle was not spoken by the Lord?’ if the prophets speaks in the name of the Lord and the oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken in the name of the Lord; the prophet uttered it presumptuously: do not stand in dread of him.”

¹²² See Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 82–84; *TPT*, 72–74.

¹²³ See Spinoza, *TTP*, vi, 84–86; *TPT*, 74–76.

¹²⁴ Spinoza, *TTP*, ii, 30–32; *TPT*, 22–23.

¹²⁵ Discussions of Spinoza's view of miracles include: Edwin Curley, “Spinoza on Miracles,” in *Proceedings of the First Italian International Congress on Spinoza* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1985), 421–438; G. H. R. Parkinson, “Spinoza on Miracles and Natural

popularly understood, presupposes the possibility of miracles.¹²⁶ Now Spinoza defines “revelation” as “sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man.”¹²⁷ He divides “revelation” in two. Natural knowledge can be called “revealed” since all scientific knowledge depends on “knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees [i. e. the laws of nature].” But since “the multitude are ever eager for what is strange and foreign to their nature, despising their natural gifts,”¹²⁸ the masses only consider supernatural knowledge divinely revealed. Supernatural revelation assumes that God miraculously imparts knowledge to human beings. But supernatural revelation presents a real threat to freedom of thought. For if the Bible contains supernatural ideas unknowable to natural reason, theologians can claim that people must surrender their rational understanding in favor of Scriptural mysteries.

Now although Spinoza writes that “there is nothing to prevent God from communicating by other means to man that which we can know by the natural light,”¹²⁹ I don’t think that he is being completely sincere—at a minimum he is quite misleading. For supernatural communication presupposes the possibility of miracles. But in chapter six Spinoza shows not only that miracles are impossible, but also that *Scripture itself* denies their possibility. By showing that the prophets’ “strange” ideas were merely the product of an overactive imagination and that the prophets really held quite ordinary views of God, Spinoza opens the field to people employing reason freely in metaphysics.

In sum, Yovel’s picture of Spinoza as an “objective” Bible critic who seeks to undermine Scriptural authority through rigorous historical analysis is incorrect. For Spinoza, in order for Biblical interpretation to be scientific, it must be guided by the universal doctrines of Scripture. Spinoza suggests how the sovereign can impose universal doctrines that further political stability and help secure freedom of thought. Passages that contradict these universal doctrines are interpreted as adjustments to the universal doctrines made by Biblical sovereigns to address particular necessities. Furthermore, to advance his moral and political goals, Spinoza licenses three contradictory methods of Biblical interpretation: (a) the historical-critical method; (b) the method that harmonizes Scripture with philosophical truth; (c) the view that every individual has the

Law,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* XXXI (1977): 145–157; Manfred Walther, “Spinoza’s Critique of Miracles: A Miracle of Criticism?,” in *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 100–112.

¹²⁶ See Leora Batnitzky, “Spinoza’s Critique of Miracles,” 10–11.

¹²⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, i, 15; *TPT*, 9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Spinoza, *TTP*, i, 16; *TPT*, 10.

authority to interpret Scripture in whatever way will move him or her to piety.

In a word, Spinoza is best understood not as an objective Biblical scholar, but as a moral and political thinker who employs whatever methods of Bible interpretation will help preserve freedom of thought and civil stability. These, in turn, are needed so that the maximum number of people can achieve the highest good, the *Vita contemplativa*.¹³⁰

Conclusion

From a critical contemporary vantage point, Spinoza's method of Biblical interpretation seems quaint at best, and often bizarre. Who could

¹³⁰ At this point, I'd like to explain my disagreement with Strauss's view in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. In that work, Strauss claims that Spinoza's method of Biblical interpretation is aimed at signaling to the astute reader that there are contradictions in Scripture. Spinoza's alleged rule is that in cases where an author who admits that he sometimes writes, "after the manner of men" contradicts himself, then one must assume that his vulgar view is exoteric posturing, while the statement opposing the vulgar view represents the author's esoteric, "serious" position. Strauss then claims that Spinoza's method of Biblical interpretation must be applied to the *TTP* itself. The *TTP* contains numerous contradictions. In each case the vulgar, popular position must be considered Spinoza's exoteric view, while the heterodox opinion contradicting the vulgar view must be considered Spinoza's esoteric, true view. See Strauss, *Persecution*, 176–187. As regards Strauss's claim that according to Spinoza *the Bible* abounds in contradictions, I see no evidence for this. As I have explained, Spinoza's view is that there are certain universal doctrines of Scripture. Deviations from these universal doctrines are explained by reference to the fact that the prophets adapted the universal messages to particular circumstances. Indeed, with regard to Scriptural contradictions, I don't see how one can decide, which view is vulgar and which is heterodox. Is it more vulgar to believe that God is omniscient as taught "everywhere in Scripture" or that God has limited knowledge (which is closer to polytheism) as sometimes taught by Moses? The same problem applies to Strauss's interpretation of Spinoza's writing. Spinoza employs the historical-critical method of interpretation as well as the method that harmonizes Scripture with reason. Strauss claims that the historical-critical method is meant to undermine the authority of Scripture in the minds of potential philosophers. Hence, this is the more heterodox view and must be Spinoza's true, esoteric view. But this would be very strange since the historical-critical method is laid out and defended most explicitly, while the method that harmonizes Scripture with reason is only briefly alluded to. While Strauss is interested in all sorts of contradictions in the *TTP*, my sole interest is in the contradictions pertaining to Spinoza's method of Biblical interpretation. I do not think that Spinoza's use of a scientific method of Biblical interpretation contradicts his position that the Bible contains certain universal teachings. Indeed, I have shown that it follows from it. In the case of the contradictions between the different *methods* of interpreting Scripture, my claim is that Spinoza did not have a *true* method that he adhered to. For his interest was only in how Scripture could be effective in promoting ethical obedience and preserving free inquiry.

really believe that the Scriptural authors did not believe in miracles or that Scripture consistently teaches the seven dogmas of faith?

But I think that it is more than just our critical sensibilities which cause our discomfort – it is likewise our very different politics. In America, the idea that the sovereign should control religion is anathema. Toleration is grounded in respect for religious pluralism rather than in the unified religious message of the sovereign. Given these commitments, I think that we are inclined to see *divergent* voices in Scripture rather than a single unified message. Values and scholarship are not so easily disentangled.

Among those with critical sensibilities, attempts by readers to find a single, unified message in Scripture often arouses the suspicion that such readers harbor illiberal commitments. It is therefore important not to simply assimilate Spinoza's method of Biblical interpretation to critical scholarship or to post-modern theories of textual indeterminacy.¹³¹ Rather, Spinoza's idiosyncratic approach reflects an authoritarian commitment to state control of religion. The distance between Spinoza's political commitments and our own is obscured in some recent work on Spinoza.¹³² But to my mind, what makes Spinoza interesting is not the ways in which his philosophical, theological, and political views reflect our own, but the ways in which they diverge from them.

¹³¹ Textual indeterminacy may be seen to be implicit in Spinoza's granting the individual the right to interpret Scripture in whatever way will be him or her to piety.

¹³² See my review essay, "Defending Spinoza?" forthcoming in the *AJS Review*.