The Life and Career of Spinoza

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THE LIFE AND CAREER OF SPINOZA: A LESSON IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

The current state of biblical interpretation, however one views it, has been highly influenced by the scholarship of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). He is certainly considered to be one of the catalysts of the Enlightenment, or at least one who laid the groundwork for the Enlightenment to take place. Much of his methodology in interpreting the biblical text resulted in what we currently call historical criticism,[1] characterized by extreme skepticism of the miraculous and supernatural, and focus on matters of faith and morality over historical precision. Although his *Ethics* is probably the most famous of his works, much of his biblical hermeneutical philosophy comes from his *Theological-Political Treatise*.[2] Due to the focus and limits of this article, I will confine my study to his latter work, focusing on his philosophy of biblical interpretation.

Brief Biography

Understanding Spinoza's life and experiences is crucial if one would understand the motivations for his methodology of biblical interpretation. But the social, political, and religious

[1] Frampton, *Spinoza*, 14.

[2] I have used the edition of Spinoza's works in Morgan, *Spinoza: Complete Works*. Cf. Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2:3, who confirms that the *Theological-Political Treatise* is where we get his ideas of biblical hermeneutics.

conditions into which he was born are also very important for understanding the ideas that drove him. For purposes of understanding Spinoza's personal motivations, I will briefly review his birth and early life, including the social, political, and religious conditions into which he was born, as well as circumstances in his adult life that led to his writing career.[3]

Baruch Spinoza was born on 24 November 1632, his name meaning "blessed one" in Hebrew. The name he went by as a child was Bento, Portuguese for "blessed." The Spanish Inquisition was taking place around this time, resulting in many Spanish and Portuguese Jews relocating to Amsterdam, including Spinoza's father and mother (Miguel/Michael de Espinoza and Hana Debora, Miguel's second wife), where they could practice their Jewish faith freely, in contrast to many Jews who had posed as Roman Catholics to be spared persecution back home in Portugal.[4] Those who feigned Catholic belief while still holding to the Jewish faith were called Portuguese Marranos. Yovel notes how the Marranos had a significant impact upon Spinoza's own religious reflections.[5] While Spinoza's early childhood is not heavily documented,[6] it appears that the genesis of his philosophy was when he witnessed, at an early age, the oppressive nature of religious orthodoxy upon its adherents. One experience in particular, when young Bento (as he was presumably called) was not yet ten years old, involved a Spanish convert to Judaism named Uriel d'Acosta, with whom he was acquainted.[7] Uriel yearned to learn of the background to his new Jewish faith, but ended up challenging, or rather was accused of "insulting," the authority of the synagogue leaders, who subsequently excommunicated him from the community. Sometime later, d'Acosta testified that he was publicly flogged in conjunction with his

[3] For more extensive biography, see Frampton, *Spinoza*, esp. 43–198; Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*; Klever, "Spinoza's Life and Works"; Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, esp. vol. 1.

[4] Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 5–6.

[5] Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, esp. 1:15–39. See also Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 8–14.

[6] Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 38.

[7] Cf. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 53–63.

excommunication, and in the end d'Acosta committed suicide.[8] This series of events undoubtedly had a significant impact upon young Bento, who was naturally peaceable and avoided confrontation, and he ended up despising the authoritarian tyranny of the religious leaders of the day.

Spinoza himself was excommunicated from his religious community on 27 July 1656, when he was about 23 years of age.[9] The excommunication read as follows: "That no one should communicate with him, neither in writing, nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him."[10] Rabbi Morteira, who was acquainted with both Spinoza's father and grandfather, was purportedly one of the representatives to excommunicate him. There were others with him in this charge, and Spinoza was the quietest and least heretical among them. Gullan-Whur states: "His muted insolence was neither standard youthful questioning nor outright heresy."[11] The religious authorities most likely banned Spinoza from public assembly due to his "sinisterly calm demeanor suggest[ing] a rational ground-clearing of the mind."[12] However, it does not seem that this excommunication affected Spinoza much, at least, it does not appear to have made him seek revenge directly. He simply changed his name from Bento/Baruch to Benedictus (latinizing it), symbolizing a shift in his religious allegiance, if he ever had one.[13]

We need to be aware of several other of Spinoza's experiences in adult life if we wish to understand the fuel that drove his passion for writing his books. He began writing *Theological-Political Treatise* (setting aside the writing of *Ethics*, which was

[8] Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 37–38.

[9] For a more extensive description of this, see Kasher and Biderman, "Why was Baruch de Spinoza Excommunicated?" 51–99. Essentially, they state that outside philosophies (e.g., Cartesian and Quaker) resulted in his banishment. But they admit there are no primary sources that confirm the actual reason.

[10] Ibid., 60.

[11] Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 68.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 72.

partially complete) around 1664 (he was about 31) during a three-sided dispute involving the English, Dutch, and Germans. Dungan writes: "He saw it [the writing of *Theological-Political Treatise*] as his contribution to the struggle for democracy and liberalism in his adoptive country. Little did he suspect the disastrous consequences that would ensue after it was published."[14] His involvement with politics was related to a friendship he had with Jan de Witt, who was prime minister of the Dutch provinces at that time. De Witt was successful in putting the financial affairs of the country in order, and pushed for political democracy and religious toleration. However, there was still some political unrest, as the majority of the heads of the Dutch states decided not to appoint the prince of Orange as the sovereign of the state and instead wanted to move towards being a republic.

In 1668, Spinoza's friend and disciple, Adrian Koerbagh, was being tried in an ecclesiastical court for promoting atheism and hedonism. Koerbagh, who was a successful physician, was questioned about his relationship with Spinoza, and eventually was convicted of heresy. He received several punishments, including cutting off his right thumb (so he could never practice medicine again), having his tongue bored through with a red hot iron (so he could never talk again), being fined 6,000 florins (so he would be financially ruined), and finally receiving a thirty-year prison sentence. He died after serving only a year of his sentence.[15] One could only imagine the effect this treatment had upon Spinoza, particularly as he was writing his *Treatise* during this time.

It was also around this time that Spinoza's friend de Witt got into trouble with both the English and the French, resulting in the possibility of another war. The Dutch responded to the threat by reinstituting the Prince of Orange as the national sovereign and sending him to make peace with the English. While de Witt's career was on the brink of extinction, Spinoza's *Treatise* was published and went on the market. Since it was basically a treatise against all things orthodox and monarchal, there was

[14] Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 205.
[15] Ibid., 205–6.

much dissension over it, to say the least. De Witt's attempt to suppress it was unsuccessful, and subsequent translations into French, German, and English resulted. Dungan notes that the work resulted in a "violent reaction,"[16] part of which was the termination of de Witt from office and his subsequent imprisonment, along with his brother Cornelius (who was heavily involved in the Dutch military with Jan), since they were known associates of Spinoza. On 20 August 1672, a mob stormed into the prison where the de Witt brothers were held and killed them, dragging their bodies into the streets where the attackers hacked them into pieces. When Spinoza heard news of this, he flew into an uncontrollable rage and attempted to go to the scene, but his landlord successfully locked him in and probably saved his life.[17] Spinoza than decided he would seclude himself from political life, and lived the rest of his life in near isolation. He once declined a professorship offered by Karl Ludwig at the newly founded University of Heidelberg, and instead, finished writing *Ethics*, despite his uncertainty of how it would be received.

A couple of years later (1674), Spinoza learned that his old friend Frans Van den Enden had been hanged in France, due to "the collapse of a utopian scheme there."[18] This depressed Spinoza even more, ultimately crushing his "republican optimism,"[19] and his deteriorating health resulted in his death on 21 February 1677, at the young age of 45. One can (and should) easily empathize with Spinoza after understanding the horrific persecution he and his friends and colleagues endured. This set the stage for what developed as Spinoza's philosophy of religion, especially his philosophy of biblical interpretation.

[16] Ibid., 206.

[17] Morgan, Introduction to "Political Treatise," 676. He contends that the facts surrounding Spinoza's relationship with de Witt may be disputed, whether he personally knew him or not, but most seem to think that they had a friendship of some sort, cf. for example, Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason*, 58–60.

[18] Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 207.

[19] Ibid., 207.

Spinoza's Philosophy and Methodology

Spinoza's experiences, as described in the previous section, are critical to understanding his philosophy of biblical interpretation and, in general, religion. Dungan suggests two aspects of his philosophical vision that are important for understanding Spinoza. First is his "profound moral rage." Dungan writes:

> As a Marrano Jew whose heritage included two hundred years of brutal persecution, first in Spain and then in Portugal, Spinoza and his fellow Amsterdam Marrano Jews were only too aware of the precariousness of their existence in the presence of autocratic Christian sovereigns and powerful and prejudiced Christian preachers. Centuries of vicious treatment, encouraged and led by Christian clergy, bred in many Jews, including Baruch de Spinoza, an all-consuming rage.[20]

This is certainly evident in the preface of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, as well as the entire work, where he proceeds to destroy "the entire medieval religious worldview, repeatedly putting one thing in its place: the commandment to love God and *love your neighbor*" (italics original).[21] Details of this attitude will be given throughout this paper.

The second aspect of his philosophical vision is his ability and willingness to see beyond the claims of Judeo-Christianity toward a new vision of the universe, a freedom that was not at all common during this period. Dungan writes: "In Spinoza and other Jews, the behavior of both the hated Spanish monarchs and Jesuit Inquisition, as well as the miserable hypocrisy of the *conversos* [i.e. Jewish converts to Roman Catholicism for the sake of avoiding persecution], produced an utter skepticism regarding all religious claims."[22] This new vision of the universe was partly based on the views of Descartes, who skeptically questioned anything one could not know with certainty, including metaphysical and theological constructs. "No hidden agenda

[20] Ibid., 208.
[21] Ibid., 209.
[22] Ibid.

permitted here; no illicit logical leaps."[23] But he also denied Descartes' idea that "God" was a part of "basic knowledge," and contended that "nature" actually constituted basic knowledge. Nevertheless, Descartes was certainly a huge influence upon the development of Spinoza's philosophical worldview.

Spinoza's methodology could be construed as a type of historical criticism, but it was essentially a polemic against the religious hierarchy of his day:

> It is commonly believed that the historical investigation of the Bible pioneered by Spinoza and [Richard] Simon represented a major breakthrough for the spirit of scientific objectivity, releasing the Bible to speak for itself after centuries of dogmatic allegorical exegesis in medieval Roman Catholicism, and the equally doctrinaire readings of the Bible employed by Protestant scholasticism.[24]

One of the commonly understood fruits of the Enlightenment was the development of an *objective*, *scientific* method of study, particularly of the Bible; many of its students wanted to study the Bible outside of dogma or theological agenda, stripped of its doctrinal bias and understood in strictly historical terms. However, it is clear that Spinoza's methodology was far from objective and passionless; in fact, there was a different agenda for his historical-critical method, especially seen in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. Dungan states that "the method of historical criticism was utilized by Spinoza as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma (both Jewish and Christian) and also to identify the political ideology that was its ultimate rationale."[25] He also claims that Spinoza—along with other Enlightenment scholars such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, and Immanuel Kant—used biblical criticism "*as a weapon to destroy or at least discredit the traditional metaphysics of Christianity and Judaism.*"[26] Yovel also states: "His biblical hermeneutics is not only an independent science in itself; it is also—and primarily—a

[23] Ibid., 210.
[24] Ibid., 198.
[25] Ibid., 199.
[26] Ibid. (italics original).

weapon in combating historical religion and a vehicle in constructing a purified substitute for it."[27]

Summary of Spinoza's Works

While Spinoza is widely known for his *Ethics*, which is a "comprehensive account of his philosophical system,"[28] he also wrote several books dealing with other philosophical and political issues, many of which were left incomplete at the time of his death. His *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts* is probably his most significant philosophical work outside of *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*, outlining the philosophy of Rene Descartes. That Spinoza was a solitary rebel is a bit of a misconception, as he was part of a group of Cartesian philosophers who participated in this revolution, including Frans (or Franciscus) Van den Enden, Lodewijk Meyer, Johan Bouwmeester, Pieter Balling, Simon de Vries, and Jarig Jelles.[29] He also wrote a Hebrew grammar, reflective of his rationalist belief that interpreting Scripture requires knowledge of its original language, which he believed to be living and human, rather than a sacred, holy, mysterious system.[30]

He also wrote a few shorter works, including *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which is the earliest record of Spinoza's professional philosophical writing, most likely written after his excommunication in 1656 and his subsequent involvement in the Collegiate (an eclectic group of religious thinkers who met regularly to discuss various issues of religion and to encourage free thinking). It outlines three major aspects of his blooming philosophy: (1) the value of scientific reason and knowledge of nature, (2) the superiority of deductive and intuitive reason over imagination and sensation, and (3) requirements for definition, distinguishing independent essences from dependent and contingent ones.[31] There is also his *Short Treatise on*

[27] Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2:3.

[28] Morgan, Introduction to "Ethics," 213.

[29] Morgan, Introduction to "Principles of Cartesian Philosophy," 108.

[30] Morgan, Introduction to "Hebrew Grammar," 584.

[31] Morgan, Introduction to "Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect," 1–2.

God, Man, and His Well-Being, which discusses the origin of things and a first cause, including various proofs of God's existence.[32] It is safe to say that his philosophy was incomplete at this time, and that a more comprehensive philosophy would be found in *Ethics*.

He expanded on his political ideas in his *Political Treatise*, which became a sort of addendum as the final five chapters of his *Theological-Political Treatise*, strictly focusing on political issues. Furthermore, many of the letters he wrote to his friends and colleagues have been preserved, which reveal more of Spinoza's personal motivations and thoughts.

Due to the nature and limits of this article, I will spend the majority of space in reviewing his *Theological-Political Treatise*, which is more related to his view of biblical interpretation than his other works (though *Ethics* is certainly a more comprehensive work), and compare relevant sections of his other works where appropriate.

Purposes for Writing Theological-Political Treatise

Spinoza's purposes in writing this treatise were explicated in a letter to his friend Henry Oldenburg. The following is a short excerpt of this letter:

> I am now writing a treatise on my views regarding Scripture. The reasons that move me to do so are these:
> 1. The prejudices of the theologians. For I know that these are the main obstacles which prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy. So I apply myself to exposing such prejudices and removing them from the minds of sensible people.
> 2. The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation, too, as far as I can.

[32] Morgan, Introduction to "Short Treatise," 31–32.

> 3. The freedom to philosophise and to say what we think. This I want to vindicate completely, for here it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers.[33]

Again, the heavy libertarian leanings of Spinoza are evident: the freedom to think, the freedom to choose one's own beliefs, the freedom to question and ponder.[34] We must remember that while this kind of thinking may not be as radical for us today (having gone through such revolutions as the civil rights movement and feminist movement in recent decades in North America), it was certainly something that was derided during Spinoza's time.

His *Theological-Political Treatise* contains twenty chapters, fifteen on theology and five on politics. In the following section, I will summarize some of Spinoza's main points relevant to his theory and understanding of biblical interpretation. Special focus will be given to chapter 7, "Of the Interpretation of Scripture." But before doing so, I want to review some preliminary remarks made by Spinoza in his preface that will further elucidate his intent.[35]

First, it must be noted that Spinoza spurned the miraculous, attributing belief in the miraculous to superstition. He stated that miracles are to be interpreted naturally, as closely as possible.[36] He then attributed the source of "superstition" to fear: "It is fear, then, that engenders, preserves and fosters superstition."[37] He also writes: "For it arises not from reason but from emotion, and

[33] Spinoza, "Letter 30," 844. See also Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 111–12. Strauss also recognizes that Spinoza's ultimate purpose in writing this treatise is with "the freedom of philosophizing" (112).

[34] As another example of this, in the preface to *Theological-Political Treatise*, he writes: ". . . everyone should be allowed freedom of judgment and the right to interpret the basic tenet of his faith as he thinks fit, and that the moral value of a man's creed should be judged only from his works. In this way all men would be able to obey God wholeheartedly and freely, and only justice and charity would be held in universal esteem" (393).

[35] Dungan notes that the preface in this work reveals "all of the passionate concerns within Spinoza's heart more clearly than any other writing of his" (Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 217).

[36] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 455.

[37] Ibid., 388.

emotion of the most powerful kind. So men's readiness to fall victim to any kind of superstition makes it correspondingly difficult to persuade them to adhere to one and the same kind."[38] He defines miracles as "stories of unusual occurrences in Nature, adapted to the beliefs and judgment of the historians who recorded them."[39] So while Spinoza criticized the religiously orthodox for their presuppositions, it appears Spinoza's own presupposition was a naturalistic worldview. This will continue to be evident throughout his work, as we will see.

It is important to note Spinoza's purpose statement in the preface:

> This, then, is the main point which I have sought to establish in this treatise. For this purpose my most urgent task has been to indicate the main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion—that is, the relics of man's ancient bondage—and then again the false assumptions regarding the right of civil authorities.[40]

These false assumptions were related to one of Spinoza's bigger contentions, in fact, the biggest criticism he had against religious orthodoxy, not surprising given his experiences as outlined briefly above. He wrote: "I have often wondered that men who make a boast of professing the Christian religion, which is a religion of love, joy, peace, temperance and honest dealing with all men, should quarrel so fiercely and display the bitterest hatred toward one another day by day, so that these latter characteristics make known a man's creed more readily than the former."[41] He saw a huge inconsistency between what

[38] Ibid., 389.
[39] Ibid., 457.
[40] Ibid., 390.
[41] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 390. He also extends this idea to the introduction to his seventh chapter: "On every side we hear men saying that the Bible is the Word of God, teaching mankind true blessedness, or the path to salvation. But the facts are quite at variance with their words, for people in general seem to make no attempt whatsoever to live according to the Bible's teachings. We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's Word, 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 Holy Scripture their own arbitrary invented ideas, for

they professed and how they acted—in essence, he detested their hypocrisy. He also contended that his contemporaries taught little more than the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato, rather than unveiling the mysteries of "divine light."[42] He wrote: "It was not enough for them to share in the delusions of the Greeks: they have sought to represent the prophets as sharing in these same delusions."[43] By using rhetorical language, he was aiming to break down the perceived infallibility of the religious authorities and give power back to individuals to think freely for themselves.

Principles for Interpreting Scripture

Now that I have expounded the purposes and causes of Spinoza's theological ideas, and more specifically his *Theological-Political Treatise*, I will review a few key points he made regarding his view of biblical interpretation. First is his approach to interpreting Scripture. He writes: "Now to put it briefly, I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it."[44] This results in a naturalistic interpretation of supernatural occurrences in Scripture, resulting from Spinoza's pantheistic view of God as synonymous to nature.[45] But with respect to actual principles, he briefly states that interpreting Nature involves a deductive method, using only principles from Nature to draw conclusions about Nature, without any prejudices or

which they claim divine authority . . . Now if men were really sincere in what they profess with regard to Holy Scripture, they would conduct themselves quite differently; they would not be racked by so much quarrelling and such bitter feuding, and they would not be gripped by this blind and passionate desire to interpret Scripture and to introduce innovations in religion. On the contrary, they would never venture to accept as Scriptural doctrine what was not most clearly taught in Scripture itself" (456).

[42] Ibid., 391.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 457.

[45] See Keener, *Miracles*, 114–15, for a concise critique of Spinoza's naturalism/pantheism. He suggests that Spinoza's assumption that divine nature is identical to natural law is subject to critique, in light of "theological and philosophic readings of contemporary physics" (115).

assumptions being held. The same applies to Scripture.[46] He writes:

> In this way—that is, by allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture—steady progress can be made without any danger of error, and one can deal with matters that surpass our understanding with no less confidence than those matters which are known to us by the natural light of reason.[47]

So the approach to studying Scripture is a rationalistic deductive approach, gathering all the relevant data and drawing appropriate conclusions. "Therefore, knowledge of all these things—that is, of almost all the contents of Scripture—must be sought from Scripture alone, just as knowledge of Nature must be sought from Nature itself."[48] Again, he later writes: "Therefore all knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone."[49] This sounds like the Protestant, no less Reformed, principle that *Scripture interprets Scripture*.[50]

A second point in interpretation is what he calls the "universal rule" for interpretation, namely, "to ascribe no teaching to Scripture that is not clearly established from studying it closely."[51] Again, this is in line with his deductive approach, the idea that Scripture interprets Scripture. It agrees with the Enlightenment and rationalist philosophy of ascertaining truth according to deductive reasoning. He outlines three general principles for interpretation.

First is the primacy of the original languages, particularly the Hebrew language. He states that "we should be able to investigate, from established linguistic usage, all the possible meanings of any passage."[52] He not only applies the influence of

[46] With specific referent to ideas such as inspiration and the supernatural.
[47] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 457.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 458.
[50] Walther, "Spinoza's Critique of Miracles," 280.
[51] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 458.
[52] Ibid.

the Hebrew language for the Old Testament, but also the New Testament, since the New Testament writers were Hebrews and their idiom was Hebraic, even if it was written in Greek. Thus, it not surprising that he published a Hebrew grammar, since he deemed it to be important in interpretation.

A second principle of interpretation that Spinoza advocates is the idea of categorizing and listing various statements (or pronouncements) together in terms of their degree of clarity. He writes: "The pronouncements made in each book should be assembled and listed under headings, so that we can thus have to hand all the texts that treat of the same subject."[53] He asserts that all the "obscure" or difficult statements, even apparently contradictory ones, should be categorized together. Obscure statements are those, he defines, which are difficult to determine "according to the difficulty with which the meaning can be elicited from the context, and not according to the degree of difficulty with which its truth can be perceived by reason."[54] So he affirms that obscure passages are not those that we may disagree with, but those in which it is difficult to ascertain the meaning. He affirms again that interpreters should put aside their own prejudices and assumptions and seek to find an objective meaning in the text.[55]

An example he gives of this is in the statements of Moses,[56] "God is fire" and "God is jealous," presumably taken from various passages in the Pentateuch where God is manifested in fire (since he gives no precise references to these statements and the precise statement "God is fire" cannot be located). He claims that linguistically, these statements are clear, even though the literal meaning of these statements may be contrary to "the

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid. He writes: "In order to avoid confusion between true meaning and truth of fact, the former must be sought simply from linguistic usage, or from a process of reasoning that looks to no other basis than Scripture."

[56] Interestingly, here he cites Moses as the author, although he was known for his wholesale denial of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, since knowledge of this is unavailable directly in Scripture (cf. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 142–44).

natural light of reason," as he states.[57] The basis by which one would have to take these statements literally is in comparison with other statements of Moses. So he writes: "Therefore the question as to whether Moses did or did not believe that God is fire must in no wise be decided by the rationality or irrationality of the belief, but solely from other pronouncements of Moses."[58] Based on this principle, Spinoza concludes that since other pronouncements of Moses state that God is unlike physical or tangible things and has no semblance of such, the statement "God is fire" must be taken metaphorically. However, the interpreter should also investigate the linguistic phenomenon of the meaning of "fire" and see whether this term (in the Hebrew) is used metaphorically in the same sense in other places. Spinoza finds that it is (e.g., Job 31:12), and so the two statements "God is fire" and "God is jealous" are one and the same.[59] Further, whether we believe it or not, since there are no statements to state that God is without emotions or passions, we must believe that (at the very least) Moses believed that God is jealous. Whether we believe it or not is a separate discussion, as Spinoza writes: "For, as we have shown, it is not permissible for us to manipulate Scripture's meaning to accord with our reason's dictates and our preconceived opinions; all knowledge of the Bible is to be sought from the Bible alone."[60] Taken at face value, Spinoza's principles align quite nicely with many of the tenets established during the Reformation, such as *sola scriptura* and the idea that *Scripture interprets Scripture*. But again, it is evident that his intent was dissonant to what the Reformers had in mind.

A third principle of Spinoza relates to the historical aspect of biblical interpretation. "Finally, our historical study should set forth the circumstances relevant to all the extant books of the prophets, giving the life, character and pursuits of the author of

[57] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 458–59.

[58] By "rational" and "irrational," I am interpreting these words to be more closely related to *believable*/*unbelievable* rather than *logical/illogical*.

[59] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 459.

[60] Ibid.

every book, detailing who he was, on what occasion and at what time and for whom and in what language he wrote."[61] This includes investigating the historical background of each book of the Bible, identifying the author and the circumstances in which the author wrote each book, as well as identifying the audience of each book.[62] This also extends to textual criticism (locating textual variants) and a type of canonical study, investigating how each book relates to the canon, and how and why it was received into the canon. In order to recognize the difference between laws and moral teachings, he writes, "it is important to be acquainted with the life, character and interests of the author."[63] But again, this should not be confused with "traditional" grammatical-historical methods of interpretation,[64] as "in Spinoza's hands this slogan [Scripture interprets Scripture] takes on new meaning."[65]

Spinoza was adamant that the outline he proposed for studying Scripture was not only the best way, but the only way, to an accurate understanding of the text. He writes: "We have thus set out our plan for interpreting Scripture, at the same time, demonstrating that this is the only sure road to the discovery of its true meaning."[66] Of course, he is pointing to a deductive reasoning model for his interpretation of Scripture as we have seen from the examples discussed above.

Practical Implications of Spinoza's Methodology

After laying out his principles for interpreting Scripture, Spinoza noted some of the practical implications for what he proposed.

[61] Ibid.

[62] However, this should be distinct from what is traditionally known as discovering authorial intent, since Spinoza's intent was skeptical. Walther writes: "The general consequence of this insight is that one must read all scriptural reports in a critical spirit. That is, in order to understand what really took place, one must first know the views and interest of the narrator, in order not to take the given interpretation for the thing itself" (Walther, "Spinoza's Critique of Miracles," 284).

[63] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 459.

[64] See for example Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 143; Hirsch, *Validity*, 1–23.

[65] Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece," 331.

[66] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 462.

The first implication is that his method "demands a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew language."[67] He posed the question of where this knowledge should be obtained, and stated that the ancients had left insufficient knowledge of the Hebrew language to his contemporaries. He wrote:

> The idiom and modes of speech peculiar to the Hebrew nation have almost all been consigned to oblivion by the ravages of time. So we cannot always discover to our satisfaction all the possible meanings which a particular passage can yield from linguistic usage; and there are many passages where the sense is very obscure and quite incomprehensible although the component words have a clearly established meaning."[68]

Herein lies the skepticism for which Spinoza is known, not only "our inability to present a complete account of the Hebrew language," but also "the further problem presented by the composition and nature of that language."[69] He writes: "This gives rise to so many ambiguities as to render it impossible to devise a method that can teach us with certainty how to discover the true meaning of all Scriptural passages; for apart from the sources of ambiguity that are common to all languages, there are others peculiar to Hebrew which give rise to many ambiguities."[70] He proceeds to list several of these. One ambiguity is a result of the gutturals and the oral nature of the Hebrew language. He states that there may be confusion, for example, between על and אל, since they are so similar. But in most cases, it appears the context would determine which reading fits best. A second source of ambiguity involves the multiple meanings of the conjunctions. However, it may be said that even conjunctions in the Greek have multiple functions, depending on the context in which they are used, so again, context plays an important role in determining meaning.[71] The third ambiguity he claims is the lack of other tenses in the indicative mood of the Hebrew language,

[67] Ibid., 463.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] See Porter, *Idioms*, 204–19.

such as the present, past, imperfect, future, and pluperfect. Of course, recent research has shown that the Greek verbal system is more like the Hebrew verbal system than previously thought, with three major aspects that dominate (perfective, imperfective, and stative; compared to the perfect and imperfect aspects in the Hebrew verbal system),[72] and again, context plays a major role in shaping the meaning of the verbal unit.

A couple of other, more significant, ambiguities in the Hebrew language, Spinoza states, are (1) the lack of letters for vowels, and (2) the lack of punctuation and means of emphasis. Of course, we know that the Masoretes were skilled textual critics, but Spinoza states that they were simply "men of later ages [who] added both of these in accordance with their own interpretation of the Bible."[73] However, as Emanuel Tov states, while the Masoretic Text was solidified in the Middle Ages, the shape of the text most likely preceded it by a much earlier tradition.[74] Furthermore, Spinoza simply writes off the Masoretes without seriously interacting with the careful science and art they crafted for preserving the original text as accurately as possible.[75]

It is interesting that though Spinoza begins with some definite assertions about how to interpret Scripture, he concludes with much skepticism regarding its actual possibility. He writes: "These difficulties [noted above], which I undertook to recount, I consider so grave that I have no hesitation in affirming that in many instances we either do not know the true meaning of Scripture or we can do no more than make conjecture."[76] However, he states that the basic meaning of Scripture still can be ascertained, just as one can ascertain the general gist of Euclid without reading it in its original language. Thus, Spinoza boils down the

[72] See Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, passim; Porter, *Idioms*, 20–49, for lengthy discussion of verbal aspect theory for Hellenistic Greek.

[73] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 464.

[74] Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 23–73, esp. 24–26.

[75] See, for example, ibid., 23–73, for a detailed study of the Masoretic Text and how it came about.

[76] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 466.

basic meaning of Scripture to its moral and ethical components, while its historical and factual aspects are highly questionable.[77]

However, the "plain" statements of Scripture do not reflect this at all, statements such as Jesus stating "I am the way, the truth, and the life," or Paul describing Jesus' resurrection in physical terms. One can understand why Spinoza would hold this conviction, especially considering his life experiences. But to give a concrete example of Spinoza's method of interpretation, the next section will see how he applied his method to actual texts of Scripture.

The Application of Spinoza's Hermeneutic

As stated above, Spinoza believed that only the moral and ethical teachings in Scripture were important, and that historical statements were unreliable, based on some ambiguities in the Hebrew language.[78] Spinoza used a lot of contextual exegesis in his interpretation of texts. His interpretations of two statements in the Sermon on the Mount in particular are given below, illustrating his principles.

The Moral Teachings of Jesus

First, Spinoza takes the statement by Jesus, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted," and asks the (appropriate) question (in the form of a statement), "we do not know

[77] He writes: "Thus we can conclude that, with the help of such a historical study of Scripture as is available to us, we can readily grasp the meanings of its moral doctrines and be certain of their true sense . . . Therefore we have no reason to be unduly anxious concerning the other contents of Scripture; for since for the most part they are beyond the grasp of reason and intellect, they belong to the sphere of the curious rather than the profitable" (ibid., 467).

[78] Another proposed difficulty not yet mentioned deals with the possibility that certain books of Scripture (e.g., Matthew and Hebrews) were written in a different language originally, of which we do not have any copies or versions (ibid., 466). However, this is based on mere conjecture (although there may be good reason to believe it to be the case), and reliant upon another assumption, that if there were an original version of Matthew and Hebrews, that the translations are inaccurate renditions of them.

from this text what kind of mourners are meant."[79] In (good) grammatical-contextual examination, he concludes:

> But as Christ thereafter teaches that we should take thought for nothing save only the kingdom of God and His righteousness, which he commends as the highest good (Matth. Ch. 6 v. 33), it follows that by mourners he means only those who mourn for man's disregard of the kingdom of God and His righteousness; for only this can be the cause of mourning for those who love nothing but the kingdom of God, or justice, and utterly despise whatever else fortune has to offer.[80]

While critique of the exact exegesis of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper,[81] Spinoza's words illustrate his use of context to determine the meaning of a seemingly difficult passage or word.

A second example in the Sermon on the Mount that Spinoza provides for illustrating his interpretive principles relates to Matt 5:39, which states, "But if a man strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the left also." He states that if the context were on judges in the role of lawgivers, this command would have violated the law of Moses, which states "an eye for an eye." However, because of the predicating statement by Jesus in Matt 5:17 ("I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it"), the difficulty is reconciled by understanding that:

> [Jesus] was not ordaining laws as a lawgiver, but was expounding his teachings as a teacher, because (as we have already shown) he was intent on improving men's minds rather than their external actions. Further, he spoke these words to men suffering under oppression,

[79] Ibid., 460.

[80] Ibid., 460–61.

[81] The purpose is not to decide whether Spinoza was a "good" exegete, but to simply illustrate his interpretive process. Here, he simply uses context to determine the specific meaning and application of the word "mourn." Interestingly, he does not go into much depth regarding the original language (whether Hebrew or Greek), a main principle of interpretation.

> living in a corrupt commonwealth where justice was utterly disregarded, a commonwealth whose ruin he saw to be imminent.[82]

Here Spinoza again utilizes contextual cues to determine the meaning of a passage that may have come into dispute, showing how an interpreter may resolve a seemingly difficult passage.

An observation should be made at this point that confirms Spinoza's admission that he utilizes his principles of interpretation for only those texts that are of a moral or ethical nature. While he insists that no prejudice or assumption be placed upon the text, he himself assumes that only the moral commands in Scripture are those that are clear, and any historical or factual statements are beyond interpretation. Why he dichotomizes between moral and historical statements for interpretation should be evident already, given the hypocritical and violent persecution of the religious leaders of his day.[83] His motives were clearly spelled out, nowhere more clearly than in the preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*.[84]

Next we will observe his views on the apostolic authorship of the New Testament epistles and how they impacted his interpretation of these books.

Apostolic Authorship and Interpretation

While Spinoza was a Jew who focused more on the Hebrew Scriptures than the New Testament, he did interact with the New Testament as well, as we have just seen. Chapter 11 of his *Theological-Political Treatise* is entitled "An enquiry as to whether the Apostles wrote their Epistles as Apostles and prophets, or as teachers." The function of the Apostles is explained."[85] This is in accord with his principle of identifying the

[82] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 461. Again, the point here is not to critique his exegesis, but to illustrate how he applied the principles he provided.

[83] See for example Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 208: "He clearly felt compelled to take on the theologians and preachers and do whatever he could to break their power, discredit them, and convince people to turn away from them."

[84] Ibid., 217.

[85] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 498–503.

author of each book and the circumstances surrounding their writings (see above). We will evaluate the application of his method in the following paragraphs.

In chapter 1 of *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza contends that prophets did not speak at all times from revelation;[86] based on this understanding, he poses the question: did the apostles write the epistles as prophets (with the express authority from God), or did they write them as teachers (as private individuals)? In other words, he questions whether the epistles are authoritative words of God or whether they are simply teachings of the church leaders.[87] Of course, this is an appropriate investigation for Spinoza, since he establishes the importance of authorial identification as a part of biblical interpretation (see above). Not surprisingly, he contends that the New Testament epistles are not prophecy, for three reasons.

[86] Ibid., esp. 402–4. He writes: "the Spirit of the Lord was upon a prophet, the Lord poured his Spirit into men, men were filled with the Spirit of God and with the Holy Spirit and so on. They mean merely this, that the prophets were endowed with an extraordinary virtue exceeding the normal, and that they devoted themselves to piety with especial constancy. Furthermore, they perceived the mind and thought of God . . . Therefore the imaginative faculty of the prophets, insofar as it was the instrument for the revelation of God's decrees, could equally well be called the mind of God, and the prophets could be said to have possessed the mind of God. Now the mind of God and his eternal thoughts are inscribed in our minds, too, and therefore we also, in Scriptural language, perceive the mind of God. But since natural knowledge is common to all men, it is not so highly prized, as I have already said, and particularly in the case of the Hebrews, who vaunted themselves above all men—indeed, despising all men, and consequently the sort of knowledge that is common to all men" (402–3). Spinoza's view of prophecy, then, differs from traditional understandings of prophecy, which is viewed as speaking the very words of God (see, e.g., Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 21–23). Traditional understandings of prophecy, or prophets, claim that the prophet speaks the very words of God, not, as Spinoza claims, simply having the mind of God, which evidently is "inscribed in our [perceivably, everyone's] minds."

[87] Baird also notes that he rejected the apostles as the originators of the epistles, but Spinoza does not mention this in this treatise (Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 1:6).

First, he contends that the style of writing differs significantly from the Old Testament prophetic writings.[88] He notes that it was the "constant practice of the prophets to declare at all points that they were speaking at God's command,"[89] phrases such as "thus saith the Lord," and "the commandment of the Lord," phrases that we do not observe in the New Testament epistles. In contrast to this type of prophetic formula that the Old Testament prophets used to confirm their prophecies, the New Testament prophets seem to relay their own opinions. The example he gives is 1 Cor 7:40, where Paul states his own opinion.

However, Spinoza misunderstands this verse. First, Paul immediately states in the same verse that this "opinion" is from the Spirit of God, and second, the Greek for "opinion" (γνώμη) has more of a sense of maxim than of personal opinion.[90] Furthermore, the omission of the Old Testament prophetic formula does not necessitate the omission of prophecy itself in the New Testament, for a variety of reasons. There is a lack of this formula in general in the New Testament, which would indicate, according to Spinoza's line of thinking, that only a few statements in the New Testament are actual prophecy. This line of thinking would further indicate that the vast majority of statements of Jesus himself are not prophecy.

The second reason Spinoza gives for contending that the epistles are not prophecy is regarding the manner in which the apostles expounded the gospel.[91] He makes the observation that the apostles "everywhere employ argument, so that they seem to be conducting a discussion rather than prophesying. The prophetic writings, on the other hand, contain only dogma and decrees, for they represent God as speaking not like one who reasons, but one who makes decrees issuing from the absolute power of his nature."[92]

[88] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 498.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 605. See also Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, who define this lexeme as "that which is purposed or intended, with the implication of judgment or resolve—'purpose, intention,'" §30.67).

[91] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 499.

[92] Ibid.

But this is a narrow view of prophets in the Old Testament. There was a variety of means by which the prophets spoke the word of God. One example is the occasion when Nathan the prophet addressed David about his sin of adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12) with a fable (or an extended metaphor). This is certainly beyond the categories of "dogma and decrees." Another example comes from the Ten Commandments, which Moses prophesied to the nation of Israel. The fifth commandment is to honor one's father and mother, followed by a *reason*: "that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you" (Deut 5:16). Moses the prophet argues and reasons (hence, God argues and reasons) that honoring one's parents will lead to long life.

The final reason for Spinoza not accepting the epistles to be prophecy is an appeal to reason.[93] He writes:

> I do not absolutely deny that the prophets may have argued from the basis of revelation, but this much I will assert, that the more use the prophets make of logical reasoning, the more closely does their revelatory knowledge approach to natural knowledge, and the surest mark of supernatural knowledge in the prophets is their proclamation of pure dogma, or decrees, or judgment.[94]

The underlying assumption of Spinoza is that revelatory knowledge (i.e., revelation) and natural knowledge (i.e., logic) are absolutely separate kinds of knowledge that do not coincide. He relegates supernatural knowledge to dogma and decrees—which is essentially a presupposition merely asserted without evidence—but this assertion is simply not consistent with other parts of Scripture (using Spinoza's method of authorial identification). Paul argues in his Epistle to the Romans that knowledge of God is evident within all humanity (cf. 1:18–25). While the primary referent of this knowledge is his "invisible attributes" (Rom 1:20), it also by contextual reference includes a moral component, since the subsequent sentences in this discourse say that immorality, that is, "all manner of unrighteousness

[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 500.

(πάσῃ ἀδικίᾳ)" (Rom 1:26–32), is a result of suppressing the knowledge of God. The point I am trying to make is that, using Spinoza's own principles of taking clear language to mean what it means without consideration of whether one believes it or not, Paul advocates a natural knowledge that is moral; in this case, revelatory knowledge and natural knowledge (or revelation and logic) go together.

Spinoza ends his chapter on the apostles with his view of their overall purpose: "This is the object of the Epistles, to teach and exhort men in whatever way each Apostle judged would best strengthen them in religious faith."[95] Spinoza emphasizes (1) the moral component of the faith, and (2) the naturalistic source for this morality.[96]

Again, we must note the inconsistency here, utilizing the principles Spinoza outlines in his previous chapter on interpretation. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, not with words of wisdom, so that the cross of Christ would not lose its power (οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλέν με Χριστὸς βαπτίζειν ἀλλὰ εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου, ἵνα μὴ κενωθῇ ὁ σταυρὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ)" (1 Cor 1:17). What is the gospel that Paul preached? He outlines it in 15:1–13 of the same epistle: it consists of the facts surrounding who Jesus was and what he did, namely his death and resurrection.[97] It appears Paul's *morality* is based on his understanding of *history* (i.e., Jesus' death and resurrection). This is why he says, "and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins . . . But now Christ has been

[95] Ibid., 502.

[96] Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2:12–13, notes that Spinoza had three distinctions for defining religion and that he was primarily against organized religion. He says, "Spinoza's ultimate wish, at least in theory, was to have all men attain religion in the philosophical sense" (2:13), referring to the universal moral component composed of loving God and loving one's neighbors. Again, this is not surprising, given that he witnessed the *unloving* actions of his fellow religious authorities and their oppression.

[97] Whether or not one believes the gospel of Paul to be true is beyond the point. The point here is simply that Paul believed it to be true and that relaying this was the purpose and occasion of his writing this epistle to the Corinthians.

raised from the dead (εἰ δὲ Χριστὸς οὐκ ἐγήγερται, ματαία ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν, ἔτι ἐστὲ ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ὑμῶν . . . Νυνὶ δὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται ἐκ νεκρῶν)" (1 Cor 15:17, 20). Again, as Spinoza contends, whether or not one believes this to be true is not the point; but it is clear that Paul believed it to be true. And if Paul believed it to be true, then his purpose in writing is beyond mere morality, though morality certainly is a result of history.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined Spinoza's basic beliefs regarding biblical interpretation. Spinoza is known for his skepticism and his naturalistic worldview, which corresponded with—and were most likely caused by—the experiences he had with the religiously orthodox and their hypocrisy. If some of his principles are taken at face value, without understanding the motives and implications behind them, one would possibly consider Spinoza to be an objective interpreter of the text. But we have seen that his purpose, as explicitly stated by himself in the preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, as well as personal correspondence to colleagues, reveal his underlying motives: (1) to expose the prejudices of the theologians, (2) to realign others' view of him as an atheist (he was a deist but not an atheist), and (3) to defend the freedom to think according to one's own prerogatives. However, it has been seen that his own presuppositions hindered objective biblical interpretation, and consequently, his principles are inconsistent with his application.

Again, I would like to reiterate that given the experiences of religious hypocrisy in his life, it is not surprising that Spinoza went in the direction he did. Though he was a skeptic and naturalist, even the most conservative of theologians, if they have any passions, should be empathetic towards Spinoza.

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