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2 Baruch Spinoza and the Naturalization of Judaism

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Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) occupies a somewhat awkward position in the historiography of Jewish philosophy. In the standard story – or at least those versions of it that move beyond the simplistic description of how his philosophy represents a radical and heretical break from what comes before – he is presented either as the culmination of the Jewish medieval rationalist tradition (especially Maimonides and Gersonides) or as the father of modern Jewish thought, and sometimes as both. These are important (but still all too infrequently studied) perspectives for understanding Spinoza's metaphysical, moral, and political ideas, and not just their antecedents and their legacies, but their substantive content as well.[1] While most scholarly attention has been devoted to the seventeenth-century Cartesian background of Spinoza's philosophy, his system also needs to be situated (as Harry Wolfson and others have recognized)[2] in a Jewish philosophical context. But is this enough to give him a rightful place in a "Companion" to Jewish philosophy? After all, Thomas Aquinas was strongly influenced by Maimonides, and our understanding of the *Summa Theologiae* is deepened by a familiarity with the *Guide for the Perplexed*, but no one of course has ever suggested that St. Thomas is a Jewish philosopher. Does the additional fact that Spinoza, unlike Thomas, is Jewish alone qualify him for membership in the canon of "Jewish philosophers"?

A number of significant factors appear to point to, indeed demand, a negative answer to this question. First and foremost, Spinoza was expelled as a young man from the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community with the harshest writ of *cherem* ever issued by the congregation's leaders.[3] This seminal event in his biography is mirrored in the fact that for the rest of his life he clearly did not regard himself as Jewish. One is struck, for example, by the way the Jewish people are regarded in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (published anonymously in 1670; henceforth, TTP) from the third-person perspective. He seems in his writings, including his extant correspondence, to lack all identification

and sympathy with Jewish religion and history, and even to go out of his way to distance himself from them. And there is the issue of the content of his philosophy. Spinoza rejected the providential God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as an anthropomorphic fiction; he denied the divine origin of the Torah and the continued validity of the Law of Moses; and he argued that there is no theologically, metaphysically, or morally interesting sense in which the Jews are a chosen people. How, then, can one possibly regard him as a Jewish philosopher without doing a grave injustice to his personal experience, his own sense of identity, and the spirit of his philosophical thought?

However, philosophy (and this is its important difference from religion) never requires one *a priori* to adopt one set of substantive beliefs over another. That is, philosophy never prescribes particular answers in advance. Rather, it demands only that one ask certain kinds of questions and approach them in a certain kind of way (that is, through rational inquiry). And this is as true for Jewish philosophy as it is for, say, the philosophy of mind. Being a Jewish philosopher does not require one to think of oneself as a Jew; nor does it demand that one regard Jews or the Jewish religion or Jewish history in a certain way; nor, finally, does it call upon one to adopt specific theological, metaphysical, or ethical ideas.[4] Being a Jewish philosopher means only that an individual of Jewish descent[5] is, in his or her philosophical thinking, engaged in an honest dialogue with a particular canonical philosophical and religious tradition and wrestling with a certain set of questions.

Some of those questions are about specific Jewish doctrines – What does the election of Israel mean? Is the Law of Moses binding on contemporary Jews? What is the proper way to interpret Torah? What is the relationship between virtue and the world-to-come? Some of the questions, on the other hand, are about Judaism itself, and their answers constitute what Julius Guttmann has called a "philosophy *of* Judaism."[6] Even if a philosopher's answers to the questions differ radically from those provided by other, perhaps more orthodox thinkers, still, this philosopher is addressing the same questions, referencing (for the most part) the same textual canon, and talking across time to the same authoritative figures (for example, Saadya ben Joseph, Maimonides, Gersonides, et al.). According to these criteria, Spinoza is most certainly a Jewish philosopher.[7]

In this chapter, I examine Spinoza's views on some central features of Judaism, primarily with an eye to identifying the ways in which he naturalizes its doctrines, its laws, its texts, and its history. Spinoza had nothing but contempt for organized sectarian religion, Jewish or otherwise,

and for what he saw as its deleterious moral and political effects. To his mind, the key to mitigating those effects is to understand the phenomenon of religion – religious belief, religious tradition, even the divine being in which it stands in awe – in purely naturalistic terms, and thereby demystify it.

1. THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB

The God of Judaism is an all-powerful, all-knowing being. God is a source of being and the cause of great deeds, and God knows the hearts and minds of creatures. But beyond these basic metaphysical and epistemological characteristics, God is also endowed with important moral and even psychological features. God is a wise, just, caring, and providential agent. Like the God of many religions, it is a being to whom one will pray in times of good and bad fortune. It is also a God who has preferences – and, consequently, becomes pleased, angry, and jealous as those preferences are fulfilled or thwarted – and who issues commandments. God demands worship and obedience, and will reward the faithful and punish transgressors. It is, one might say, a very personal God, both in the sense of being a kind of person and in the sense of being there *for* a person.

It is this picture of God that Spinoza takes issue with in the very opening propositions of his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics* (begun around 1663 but not published until after his death in 1677). The God of Spinoza's philosophy is a far cry from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Spinoza's God is not some just, wise, good, and providential being; it is not a personal being whom one would thank or bless or to whom one would pray or go to seek comfort. It is not a God that fosters a sense of awe and spiritual piety, nor does it sustain the hope of eternal reward or the fear of eternal punishment. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza strips God of all traditional psychological and moral characteristics. God, he argues, is substance, the ultimate and immanent reality of all things, and nothing more. Endowed with the infinite attributes of Thought and Extension, Spinoza's God is identical with the active, generative aspects of nature. In an infamous phrase that appeared in the Latin but not in the more accessible Dutch edition of the work, Spinoza refers to *Deus sive Natura*, "God or Nature."[8] "By God," he says in one of the opening definitions of Part I, "I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence." In other words, God is the universal, immanent system of causal principles or natures that gives Nature its ultimate unity.

This definition is meant to preclude any anthropomorphizing of the divine being. Spinoza explicitly tells us that he is writing against "those who feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions . . . [T]hey wander far from the true knowledge of God."[9] His contempt for the fallacious inference that allows for the anthropomorphizing of God is obvious:

> If will and intellect do pertain to the eternal essence of God, we must of course understand by each of these attributes something different from what men commonly understand. For the intellect and will which would constitute God's essence would have to differ entirely from our intellect and will, and could not agree with them in anything except the name. They would not agree with one another any more than do the dog that is a heavenly constellation and the dog that is a barking animal.[10]

Besides being false, an anthropomorphic conception of God can only diminish human freedom, activity, and well-being, as it tends to strengthen passions such as hope and fear. When understood in the philosophically proper manner, 'God' is seen to refer to nothing but an impersonal, infinite, unique, uncaused causal source of everything else that exists.

> Ip16: From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).
>
> Dem.: This proposition must be plain to anyone, provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (that is, from the very essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more the definition of the thing expresses reality, that is, the more reality the essence of the defined thing involves. But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes, each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).
>
> Cor. 1: From this it follows that God is the efficient cause of all things which can fall under an infinite intellect.
>
> Cor. 2: It follows, second, that God is a cause through himself and not an accidental cause.
>
> Cor. 3: It follows, third, that God is absolutely the first cause.

If God is nothing but the infinite, eternal substance of Nature, endowed with the attributes of Thought and Extension (the natures of mind and matter), then God's causal powers just are the activity of these attributes and the law-like principles that follow immediately from them. And all particular things in nature are nothing but finite modes or effects of these infinite, eternal causes.

It follows that God is not a transcendent creator – that is, a being who spontaneously causes a world distinct from himself to come into being by producing it out of nothing. Spinoza's conception of God strikes right at the heart of the account of creation in Genesis (*Bereshith*, "In the beginning . . . "), according to which God purposively brings order out of *tohu v'vohu*, chaos. Spinoza's God is the cause of all things, but only because all things follow causally and necessarily from the divine natures – that is, from Nature itself. Or, as he puts it, from God's infinite power or nature "all things have necessarily flowed, or always followed, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles."[11]

Such a God obviously cannot be endowed with a teleologically conceived freedom of the will. All talk of God's purposes, intentions, goals, preferences, or aims is just an anthropomorphizing fiction.

> All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God.[12]

God is not some goal-oriented planner who then judges things by how well they conform to his purposes. Least of all is God a giver of laws and endowed with moral characteristics. "It is only in concession to the understanding of the multitude and the defectiveness of their thought that God is described as a lawgiver or ruler, and is called just, merciful, and so on."[13] Things happen only because of Nature and its laws. "Nature has no end set before it . . . All things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature." To believe otherwise is to fall prey to the same superstitions that lie at the heart of most organized religions.

> [People] find – both in themselves and outside themselves – many means that are very helpful in seeking their own advantage, e.g., eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish . . . Hence, they consider all

> natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.
>
> And since they had never heard anything about the temperament of these rulers, they had to judge it from their own. Hence, they maintained that the Gods direct all things for the use of men in order to bind men to them and be held by men in the highest honor. So it has happened that each of them has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshipping God, so that God might love them above all the rest, and direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed. Thus this prejudice was changed into superstition, and struck deep roots in their minds.[14]

Divine providence is reduced to the ordinary, law-like course of nature, as it is governed by eternal principles. "By God's direction," he insists in the TTP, "I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events . . . It is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature's laws or that they are regulated by God's decree and direction."[15] As for miracles – understood as supernaturally caused exceptions to the course of nature – they are impossible, given the universal, all-encompassing scope of Nature's dominion, along with the deterministic necessity that rules it. As Spinoza notes in the chapter on miracles in the TTP, "nothing can happen in Nature to contravene her own universal laws, nor yet anything that is not in agreement with these laws or that does not follow from them."[16] What we call a 'miracle' is, in fact, simply an event whose explanation happens to surpass our understanding, an event for which we can find no natural cause, even though, strictly speaking, there must be one.

To say that for Spinoza "God exists only philosophically," as his contemporary critics were wont to do, does not even begin to do justice to the radical nature of his conception of God. Descartes's God, it was often said by his religious critics, is a "merely philosophical" God – a dispassionate, infinitely powerful cause whose ways are beyond our comprehension, who is not in any way "close" to human beings with the

kind of care often portrayed in Biblical writings. And yet even Descartes's God still has will and understanding,[17] and acts with an indifferent, libertarian freedom but nonetheless with reason.[18] Descartes's God has purposes. For Spinoza, on the other hand, God is not even the kind of being of which it is coherent to speak of will or purpose. Spinoza's God is substance, period, along with whatever else follows necessarily from that claim. The moral and psychological spareness of Spinoza's conception of God goes well beyond anything Descartes could have imagined. It is as profound a naturalization of God as one can imagine.[19]

2. JEWISH LAW

Spinoza's project of naturalization continues with his account of Jewish law. The Torah says that the Law was revealed by God to Moses in a series of commandments (*mitzvot*). Whether the object of a particular commandment regards ethical behavior (the way one human being is to treat another human being), piety (the way a human being is to relate to God), or more mundane matters (a prohibition against combining fabrics in a garment or the numerous dietary restrictions), all of the commandments are, according to tradition, literally divine, and complying with them is obedience owed to God. The changed historical condition of the Jews may have made fulfilling some of the *mitzvot* unnecessary or even impossible (such as those regarding Temple sacrifice), but the suspension of one law or another is brought about by the decision of Jewish *halakhic* or legal authority, not by mere historical or political circumstance per se.

Spinoza sees things otherwise. Not all (or even most) of the laws or commandments of the Torah are divine; consequently, not all of them are of universal scope or perpetual validity. He draws a sharp distinction in Scripture's laws between those that are divine and those that are merely ceremonial. The divine law is very simple, and is concerned only with the "supreme good [*summum bonum*]." What this supreme good consists in is the perfection of the intellect – "the better part of us" – through the acquisition of knowledge. Now, since all true knowledge refers things back to their first and highest causal principles, it ultimately consists in the understanding and the intellectual love of God (or Nature). Consequently, the "divine" law is constituted only by the prescription of those means necessary for the achievement of this intellectual perfection.

> This, then, is the sum of our supreme good [*summum bonum*] and blessedness [*beatitudo*], to wit, the knowledge and love of God. So

> the means required to achieve this end of all human action – that is, God in so far as his idea exists in us – may be termed God's commands, for they are ordained for us by God himself, as it were, in so far as he exists in our minds. So the rules for living a life that has regard to this end can fitly be called the Divine Law.[20]

In addition to the epistemic pursuit of the knowledge of God, the Divine Law requires certain types of conduct, but only to the extent to which these are conducive toward that epistemic goal, both for ourselves and for others. These will be the principles of action essential to a good commonwealth and healthy social organization, as well as to the flourishing of our fellow human beings. This part of the law is very neatly summed up in a single phrase: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Together with the command to love God – not from fear of punishment or hope of reward, but from the love due to our true good – this exhausts the content of Divine Law.

This law alone is what is universally valid (*universalis*), regardless of time, place, and circumstance, and binding upon all human beings (*omnibus hominibus communem*), regardless of religious persuasion. As the supreme moral law, it can be known through human reason and deduced from human nature, although it is also the message of Scripture. And it demands nothing in the way of beliefs about what did or did not take place with regard to a certain people in the course of time. "It does not demand belief in historical narratives of any kind whatsoever."[21]

All the other commandments found in the Torah relate only to ceremonial practices and sectarian religious rites. Unlike the Divine Law, which is universalistic, a kind of eternal truth, the ceremonial laws are particularistic and of only limited scope and validity. They were instituted by Moses for the ancient Hebrews alone, and thus adapted to their historical and political circumstances. Moses, realizing that devotion was a much better motivator than fear, created a state religion in order to get the people to do their duty. The laws of this state religion are, in fact, social and political regulations. They do not contribute at all to true blessedness and virtue, Spinoza insists, but tend only toward "the temporal and material prosperity" of the community and the peace and security of its government. In and of themselves, "they are of no significance and are termed good only by tradition"; they have, in other words, not intrinsic but only instrumental value.[22] With the end of the Hebrew Commonwealth, moreover, Moses's laws lost their normative force. "The Hebrews are not bound to practice their ceremonial rites since the destruction of their state . . . Since the fall of their independent

state, Jews are no more bound by the Mosaic Law than they were before their political state came into being" – that is, before Moses issued the Law in the form of the commandments.[23]

Spinoza's views on the Law bear on an important set of related issues. In rabbinic Judaism, there is generally no distinction drawn between law and morality.[24] What God decrees as law is thereby what is moral. There is no independent code of moral behavior distinct from Divine Law (and in accordance with which that law can be judged). Consequently, there is no such thing as natural law – that is, a universally valid law discovered by and justified through reason, without any appeal to the will of God. Spinoza departs from Jewish tradition on this question, and does so once again from a naturalizing standpoint. What he calls Divine Law is the supreme moral law, and it is distinct from Jewish religious (or ceremonial) law. And the Divine Law, while revealed by Scripture, is in principle discoverable and justified by reason alone; in fact, Spinoza insists, it is "innate" in the human mind. Jewish ceremonial law, on the other hand, is a human convention, instituted by Moses and later codified and systematized by Ezra, the Pharisees, and the Mishnaic sages.

3. PROPHECY

The law, according to Jewish tradition, was revealed through prophecy – that is, through a special communication between God and a selected individual, Moses. Later prophets, also benefitting from divine revelation (although not the direct apprehension granted to Moses), were able to convey truths about various other matters. The insights resulting from these highly individualistic exchanges with God are supposed to be beyond what is naturally available to other human beings. Prophetic illumination, in other words, is to be understood as a supernatural phenomenon reflecting the divine will.

Spinoza agrees that there is something special about a prophet. The prophet is above ordinary human beings in certain respects. But, as demanded by Spinoza's metaphysics, there can be nothing literally supernatural about prophecy. The prophet is, to be sure, "filled with the spirit of God." But this means only that he is a person of extraordinary virtue and is devoted to piety with unusual constancy. The prophet is a kind of moral authority, and his teachings – to the extent that they are true – consist only in that simple message of the Divine Law. On the other hand, Spinoza insists, the prophet is not distinguished by any kind of intellectual or philosophical superiority. The prophet is no better

endowed with reason than any other human being, and thus can claim no expertise in such subjects as science and philosophy – that is, on matters the knowledge of which is available to all people through the natural light of the intellect.[25]

Prophets excite the admiration and wonder of others only because the latter are ignorant of the causes of prophetic knowledge. When confronted with a person of prophetic powers, the people were amazed and "referred it like all other portents to God, and were wont to call it divine knowledge."[26] In fact, the explanation of prophecy is perfectly natural (although Spinoza confesses his ignorance of the law of our (psychological) nature that make this kind of "revelation" possible; to this extent, he is willing to concede that prophecy is a "gift"). The prophet is simply someone with a highly active and finely tuned imagination. He is, more than the ordinary person, capable of picturing to himself, with words and images, matters that are properly spiritual – that is, "things related to charity and moral conduct."[27] These visions allow the prophet to extend his apprehensions beyond what the intellect alone can convey. The content of prophecies will vary according to the different external circumstances and physical and cognitive endowments of the prophets, and especially differences in their temperaments, beliefs and imaginative faculties. But the core (moral) message embedded in the visions and stories and parables related by the prophets should always be the same.

Spinoza, with his emphasis on the role of the imagination and the natural foundation of prophecy is, to a certain degree, in good Jewish philosophical company. In fact, his position can be seen as a *reductio* of Maimonides' more complex account in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides believes that prophecy represents the culmination of the perfection of a person's capacities – in particular, the perfection of his intellect, which receives from the Agent Intellect a divine overflow of cognition (a process accessible to any rational agent), and of his imagination, which represents that general intellectual content in the concrete form of a vision. To this extent, there is nothing miraculous about prophecy; God does not arbitrarily single out a person for prophetic communication. Rather, prophecy is a natural result of the development of the human faculties. It comes about simply when a person reaches a certain level of perfection in his moral and rational capacities and is endowed with a particularly strong and vivid imagination. Prophecy is, Maimonides insists, "a perfection that belongs to us by nature."[28] However, it is not for him an *entirely* natural phenomenon, as it is for Spinoza,

because, he adds, it is always up to God to decide if a person who has achieved the appropriate level of perfection is to be denied the gift of prophecy.

4. THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

Spinoza provides an equally deflationary account of God's election, or the "vocation," of the Hebrews. It is "childish," he insists, for anyone to base their happiness on the uniqueness of their gifts. In the case of the Jews, it would be the uniqueness of their being chosen by God from among all nations and all peoples. In fact, Spinoza insists, the ancient Hebrews did not surpass other nations in their wisdom, their character, or (which amounts to the same thing) their proximity to God. They were neither intellectually nor morally superior to other peoples. Reason and the capacity for virtue are distributed by nature equally among all individual human beings, and the achievement of virtue is found among all nations. "The Hebrews surpassed other nations not in knowledge nor in piety . . . the Hebrews [were] chosen by God above all others not for the true life nor for any higher understanding."[29]

There is, then, no theologically, morally, or metaphysically interesting sense in which the Jews are a chosen people. The only respect in which the Israelites *were* chosen by God (or Nature) is in regard to their social organization and political good fortune. "The individual Jew, considered alone apart from his social organization and his government, possesses no gift of God above other men, and there is no difference between him and a Gentile."[30] This "chosen-ness" is, in fact, nothing but the fortunate external circumstances that came their way from the determinate operations of the ordinary course of nature. The Israelites obeyed the laws that had been set for them, with the natural consequence that their society was well-ordered and their autonomous government long-lived. The process requires no supernatural intervention. If a group is provided with wise and pragmatic laws, and it lives by them, then the result will (naturally) be a secure and prosperous polity.

> The Hebrew nation was chosen by God before all others not by reason of its understanding nor of its spiritual qualities, but by reason of its social organization and the good fortune whereby it achieved supremacy and retained it for so many years. This is quite evident from Scripture itself. A merely casual perusal clearly reveals that the Hebrews surpassed other nations in this alone, that they were successful in achieving security for themselves and overcame great dangers, and this chiefly by God's external help

> alone. In other respects they were no different from other nations, and God was equally gracious to all . . . Therefore their election and vocation consisted only in the material success and prosperity of their state . . . In return for their obedience the Law promises them nothing other than the continuing prosperity of their state and material advantages, whereas disobedience and the breaking of the Covenant would bring about the downfall of their state and the severest hardships.[31]

The election of the Jews was thus a temporal and conditional one. With their kingdom now long gone, the distinction has come to an end. "At the present time there is nothing whatsoever that the Jews can arrogate to themselves above other nations."[32] With respect to understanding, virtue and true happiness, with respect to blessedness, there is not, never has been and never will be anything peculiar to the Jews.[33]

5. SCRIPTURE

By analyzing prophecy in terms of vividness of imagination, Jewish election as political good fortune, Jewish law as a kind of social and political expediency, and the belief in miracles as grounded in an ignorance of nature's necessary causal operations, Spinoza naturalizes (and, consequently, demystifies) some of the fundamental elements of Judaism and other religions and undermines the foundations of their external and (to his mind) superstitious rites. At the same time, he thereby reduces the fundamental doctrine of piety to a simple and universal formula involving love of one's fellow human beings and knowledge of God or Nature. This process of naturalization achieves its stunning climax when Spinoza turns to consider the authorship and interpretation of the Bible itself. Spinoza's views on Scripture constitute, without question, the most radical theses of the TTP, and explain why he was attacked with such vitriol by his contemporaries. Others before Spinoza had suggested that Moses was not the author of the entire Pentateuch. But no one had taken that claim to the extreme limit that Spinoza did, arguing for it with such boldness and at such length. Nor had anyone before Spinoza been willing to draw from it the conclusions about the status, meaning, and interpretation of Scripture that Spinoza drew.

Spinoza denies that God is literally the author of Scripture and that Moses (either as God's amanuensis or on his own) wrote all, or even most, of the Torah. The references in the Pentateuch to Moses in the third person; the narration of his death and, particularly, of events following his

death; and the fact that some places are called by names that they did not bear in the time of Moses – all "make it clear beyond a shadow of a doubt" that the writings commonly referred to as "the Five Books of Moses" were, in fact, written by someone who lived many generations after Moses. Moses did, to be sure, compose some books of history and of law, and remnants of those long lost books can be found in the Pentateuch. But the Torah as we have it, as well as other books of the Hebrew Bible (such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) were written neither by the individuals whose names they bear nor by any person appearing in them. Spinoza argues that these were, in fact, all composed by a single historian living many generations after the events narrated, and that this was most likely Ezra. It was the post-exilic leader who took the many writings that had come down to him and began weaving them into a single (but not seamless) narrative. Ezra's work was later completed and supplemented by the editorial labors of others. What we now possess, then (according to Spinoza), is nothing but a compilation of human literature, and a rather mismanaged, haphazard, and "mutilated" one at that.

> If one merely observes that all the contents of these five books, histories and precepts, are set forth with no distinction or order and with no regard to chronology, and that frequently the same story is repeated, with variations, it will readily be recognised that all these materials were collected indiscriminately and stored together with view to examining them and arranging them more conveniently at some later time. And not only the contents of these five books but the other histories in the remaining seven books right down to the destruction of the city were compiled in the same way.[34]

As for the books of the Prophets, they are of even later provenance, compiled (or "heaped together," in Spinoza's view) by a chronicler or scribe from the Second Temple period. Canonization into Scripture occurred only in the second century BCE, when the Pharisees selected a number of texts from a multitude of others. Because the process of transmission was a historical one, involving the conveyance of writings of human origin over a long period of time through numerous scribes, and because the decision to include some books but not others was made by ordinary, fallible human beings, there are good reasons for believing that a significant portion of the text of the "Old Testament" is corrupt.

Spinoza was working within a well-known tradition. The claim that Moses was not the author of the entire Pentateuch had already been made in the twelfth century by Ibn Ezra. In his commentary on the Pentateuch,

focusing on Deuteronomy 33, Ibn Ezra argued that Moses could not have written the account of his own death. Spinoza knew and admired Ibn Ezra's writings, and there is no question that his views on the authorship of the Torah were influenced by them. But he was also familiar with Isaac La Peyrère's more recent *Pre-Adamitae*, in which the French Calvinist millenarian questioned not only the Mosaic authorship of all of the Pentateuch but also the reliability of the transmission process and, hence, the accuracy of the received Biblical texts. In 1660, Samuel Fisher, the Quaker leader in Amsterdam with whom Spinoza seems to have been acquainted, published *The Rustic's Alarm to the Rabbies*. Scripture as it has come down to us, Fisher insisted, is a historical document, a text written by human beings, and therefore should not be confused with the Word of God, which is ahistorical and eternal. Finally, there is the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who, in his *Leviathan* – which Spinoza clearly studied very closely – insists that most of the five books attributed to Moses were actually written long after his time, though Moses did indeed compose a good deal of what appears in them – namely, "all that which he is there said to have written."[35]

To be sure, Ibn Ezra and others who followed him did not question the fact that Moses had written most of the Pentateuch, and denying the Mosaic authorship of the Torah was still an exceedingly unorthodox view. Spinoza noted that "the author [of the Pentateuch] is almost universally believed to be Moses," and he knew that rejecting that dogma would earn an author the condemnation of religious authorities. But there was nothing novel, by 1670, in claiming that Moses did not write all of the Torah, nor even in suggesting that Scripture was composed by human beings and transmitted through a fallible historical process. On the other hand, Spinoza's radical and innovative claim was to argue that this holds great significance for how Scripture is to be read and interpreted. He was dismayed by the way in which Scripture itself was worshiped, by the reverence accorded to the words on the page rather than to the message they conveyed. If the Bible is a historical and thus natural document, then it should be treated like any other work of nature. The study of Scripture – or Biblical hermeneutics – should therefore proceed as the study of nature, or natural science proceeds: by gathering and evaluating empirical data – that is, by examining the "book" itself for its general principles.

> 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. For the method of interpreting Nature consists

> essentially in composing a detailed study of Nature from which, as being the source of our assured data, we can deduce the definitions of the things of Nature. Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture. 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 that are known to us by the natural light of reason.[36]

Just as the knowledge of nature must be sought from nature alone, so must the knowledge of Scripture – an apprehension of its intended meaning – be sought from Scripture alone. Spinoza explicitly took issue with Maimonides' view in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides, as much of a rationalist as Spinoza, had argued that deciphering the meaning of Scripture is a matter of seeing what is consistent with reason. Because Scripture is the Word of God, its intended meaning must be identical with the demonstrable truth. Therefore, if some passage, when read literally, cannot possibly be accepted by reason as true, then the literal meaning must be rejected in favor of a figurative one. For example, the Bible speaks, on occasion, of divine bodily parts. But reason tells us that an eternal, immaterial God does not have a body. Therefore, any references in Scripture to God's feet or hands must be read metaphorically.[37] For Spinoza, this type of exegesis is illegitimate in so far as it goes beyond Scripture itself – to some external standard of rationality or truth – in order to interpret Scripture. "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."[38] There must be a distinction between the meaning of Scripture, which is what one is after when interpreting it, and what is philosophically or historically true. Much of what Scripture relates is not, in fact, true. Scripture is not a source of knowledge, least of all knowledge about God, the heavens, or even human nature. It is not, in other words, philosophy or science, and therefore the principles of reason must not serve as our sole guide in interpreting Scripture. The moral message of Scripture does indeed agree with reason in the sense

that our rational faculties approve of it. But *that* Scripture teaches such a message can be discovered only through the "historical" method.

The implementation of that method to discover what the authors of Scripture intended to teach requires a number of linguistic, historical, and textual skills. One should know the language in which Scripture was written, Hebrew, as well as the life, times, and even the "prejudices" of its authors and the nature of their audiences. Only by placing a book in its personal and historical context can one hope to decipher what the writer was trying to communicate.

> 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 every book, detailing who he was, on what occasion, at what time, for whom, and in what language he wrote. Again, it should be related what happened to each book, how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many variant versions there were, by whose decision it was received into the canon, and, finally, how all the books, now universally regarded as sacred, were united into a single whole. All these details . . . should be available from an historical study of Scripture; for in order to know which pronouncements were set forth as laws and which as moral teaching, it is important to be acquainted with the life, character and interests of the author. Furthermore, as we have a better understanding of a person's character and temperament, so we can more easily explain his words.[39]

One consequence of Spinoza's views is that the interpretation of Scripture is open and accessible to any person endowed with intelligence who is able and willing to acquire the necessary skills. There are, of course, various obstacles standing in the way of even the most well-trained of scholars – the fragmentary knowledge of the Hebrew language as it existed in the seventeenth century; the inherent ambiguities in its alphabet, vocabulary, and grammar; and the difficulty of accurately reconstructing the history surrounding such ancient writings. Nonetheless, Spinoza insists that his method of interpreting Scripture "requires only the aid of natural reason." There is no need for lengthy and complex commentaries or ordained intermediaries such as priests, rabbis, or pastors. "Since the supreme authority for the interpretation of Scripture is vested in each individual, the rule that governs interpretation must be nothing other than the natural light that is common to all, and not any supernatural right, nor any external authority."[40]

6. SALVATION AND THE WORLD-TO-COME

Spinoza, despite his recommendation of the life of reason, argues that human beings, for the most part, live in "bondage" to their passions.[41] We are tossed about by our affective responses to the world and to the comings and goings of the temporal and mutable goods in which we place value. Hope and fear, in particular, direct our behavior as we strive after the things we desire and flee those objects that we believe will bring us harm. These two passions and the subsidiary affects that they ground constitute the greatest natural obstacle to our freedom, well-being, and true happiness. They also cause us to accept a kind of secondary bondage, as hope for eternal reward (in heaven) and fear of eternal punishment (in hell) lead us to submit ourselves to ecclesiastical authority and engage in the superstitious rituals that constitute organized religion. Spinoza believes that an important step in liberating humanity from the grip of these irrational passions and from the voluntary servitude that they engender is to undermine the foundational belief upon which they rest – namely, the belief in the immortality of the soul. For only if one believes that, after bodily death, the soul survives in a robust and personal sense and that the self is the subject of a postmortem divine reward and punishment is one likely to be governed by hopes and fears over its eventual fate.

For Spinoza, there is no personal immortality.[42] There are, to be sure, eternal aspects of the human mind. According to Spinoza's metaphysics, the mind includes, as an essential constitutive element, an idea of the essence of the human body. This extended essence of the body as a material thing is eternal – more precisely, it is an eternal mode of the attribute of Extension – and is independent of the actual existence of the body in duration. Likewise, the 'idea' of the body's essence that forms a part of the mind is eternal, as it constitutes the mind's intellectual understanding of its body's nature and a core feature of its own nature; this idea is an eternal mode of the attribute of Thought. When a person dies, all those aspects of the mind that are dependent on the body's durational existence – its sensations, memories, imaginations, and so on – come to an end. The part of the mind constituted by the idea of the body's extended essence, however, persists eternally. It is in this sense that "the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed along with the body, but something of it remains, which is eternal."[43] Moreover, the knowledge that the human mind acquires in this lifetime, to the extent that it is a deep understanding of the natures of things, and thus a perception of their essences *sub specie aeternitatis*, is likewise eternal, since

it is nothing but a collection of eternal adequate ideas (the content of what Spinoza calls the "third kind of knowledge," which is a rational intuition of the eternal essence of a thing). This part of a person's mental makeup also remains after he has died.

> The essence of the mind consists in knowledge. Therefore, the greater the number of things the mind knows by the second and third kind of knowledge, the greater is the part of it that survives . . . Death is less hurtful in proportion as the mind's clear and distinct knowledge is greater, and consequently the more the mind loves God. Again, since from the third kind of knowledge there arises the highest possible contentment, hence it follows that the human mind can be of such a nature that the part of it that we have shown to perish with the body is of no account compared with that part of it that survives.[44]

Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind is not a doctrine of immortality. There is nothing personal about what remains of a person after death. It is not a self; there is no consciousness or memory, nor any intrinsic relationship to the life that one led in duration. It is simply a body of ideas and knowledge.[45]

For Spinoza, therefore, the true reward of virtue is not to be sought in eternal benefits in an afterlife. Spinoza rejects the rabbinic eschatalogical doctrine of *olam ha-ba* (the world-to-come) and a standard Jewish philosophical account of divine reckoning.[46] It is all just another ecclesiastical fiction used to encourage hope and fear (and thus servitude) in the masses. Virtue, he insists, just is the pursuit of knowledge, and the good it does us lies in this life. "Salvation" and "blessedness" are achieved here and now as the knowledge of (God or) Nature provides us with the self-mastery and peace of mind that allow us to navigate the obstacles that this world presents. This naturalization of virtue is the capstone of Spinoza's moral and political project. As Spinoza puts it, "blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself."[47] Virtue, that is, is its own reward.

Notes

1. For example, I argue that Spinoza's account of the eternity of the mind cannot be properly understood without considering the views of Maimonides and Gersonides on the active intellect; see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2. Harry Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934); Warren Zev Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 151–172; Ze'ev Levy, *Baruch or Benedict: On Some Jewish Aspects of Spinoza's Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).
3. For the text of the *cherem*, see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 120.
4. Although Steven Schwarzschild has argued that what characterizes Jewish philosophy just *is* its primarily ethical orientation (or, as he puts it, "the primacy of Practical Reason"); see "An Agenda for Jewish Philosophy in the 1980s" in Norbert Samuelson (ed.), *Studies in Jewish Philosophy: Collected Essays of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy (1980–1985)* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).
5. I know that the qualification "of Jewish descent" begs the question, and I introduce it with hesitation. I am not certain that one needs to be of Jewish descent to engage in Jewish philosophy, but since it is not an issue in the case of Spinoza, I do not want to engage that question.
6. Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, 1964).
7. On the question of Spinoza and Jewish philosophy, see Manfred Walther's articles, "Spinozas Philosophie der Freiheit – eine 'jüdische Philosophie'?" *Edith Stein Jahrbuch* 3 (1997): 99–133; "Was/Is Spinoza a Jewish Philosopher? Spinoza in the Struggle for a Modern Jewish Identity in Germany: A Meta-Reflection," *Studia Spinozana* 13 (1997):207–237; and "Spinoza und das Problem einer jüdische Philosophie" in W. Stegmaier (ed.), *Die philosophische Aktualität der jüdischen Tradition* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000). See also Levy, *Baruch or Benedict*; and Geneviève Brykman, *La Judéité de Spinoza* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1972).
8. G II.206/C 544. All references to Spinoza's works and translations are abbreviated as follows:
   G = *Spinoza Opera*, 5 vols. Carl Gebhardt (ed.) (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Verlag, 1972), by volume number, page number.
   C = *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1. Edwin Curley (trans.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
   S = *Theological-Political Treatise*, Samuel Shirley (trans.) (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998).
   Citations to the *Ethics* are by roman numeral (for Part); p = proposition; s = scholium; c = corollary.
9. *Ethics* Ip15s.
10. Ip17s2.
11. Ip17s1.
12. Part I, Appendix.
13. TTP G III.65; S 56.
14. Part I, Appendix, G II.78–9; C I.440–1.
15. G III.45–6; S 37.
16. G III.83; S 74.
17. Although, as Descartes is at pains to insist, in God will and understanding are one and the same; see his letter to Mersenne of 6 May 1630.

18. On God's reason, see, for example, the letter to Hyperaspistes of August 1641, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols., Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.) (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964–75), vol. 3, p. 431. On God's "freedom of indifference," see Sixth Set of Replies, *ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 432–3.
19. This has not stopped some scholars from trying to find in Spinoza a more theologically robust and religiously attractive conception of God; see, for example, Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
20. TTP, G III.60; S 51.
21. TTP, G III.61; S 52.
22. TTP, G III.62, 69; S 53, 60.
23. TTP, G III.72; S 62–3.
24. For a discussion of this issue, see Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chapter 8.
25. TTP, chapters 1 and 2.
26. TTP, G III.27–8; S 20.
27. TTP, G III.42; S 34.
28. *Guide to the Perplexed* II.32.
29. TTP, G III.45; S 37.
30. TTP, G III.50; S 42.
31. TTP, G III.47–8; S 39.
32. TTP, G III.56; S 47.
33. For a discussion of Spinoza on the election of Israel, see David Novak, *The Election of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter 1.
34. TTP, G III.131; S 121.
35. See *Leviathan*, Book III, chapter 33. For the historical and philosophical background to Spinoza's Bible scholarship, see Richard Popkin, "Some New Light on Spinoza's Science of Bible Study," in Marjorie Grene and Deborah Nails (eds.), *Spinoza and the Sciences* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980); "Samuel Fisher and Spinoza," *Philosophia* 15 (1985): 219–36; and "Spinoza and Bible Scholarship" in Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
36. TTP, G III.98; S 89.
37. See *Guide of the Perplexed* II.25.
38. TTP, G III.100–1; S 91.
39. TTP, G III.101–2; S 92.
40. TTP, G III.117; S 107.
41. See *Ethics* IV, Preface.
42. Not all scholars, however, recognize this; see Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. 2, pp. 289–325; Mason, *The God of Spinoza*, pp. 240–241; Tamar Rudavsky, *Time Matters: Time, Creation and Cosmology in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), p. 181.
43. *Ethics* Vp23.
44. *Ethics* Vp38.

45. I argue this point at greater length, including a comparison with medieval Jewish rationalist views on immortality, in Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy*. I believe, in fact, that Spinoza's doctrine of the eternity of the mind is similar in important respects to Gersonides' doctrine of the acquired intellect.
46. See, for cxample, Saadya ben Joseph (Saadya Gaon), *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise V, chapter 2.
47. *Ethics* Vp42.