

[15] These are the topics, philosophical reader, that I here offer for your examination. I trust they will not be unwelcome given the importance and usefulness of the subject matter both of the work as a whole and of each chapter. I could say more, but I do not want this Preface to swell into a volume, especially as I believe the main points are well enough known to philosophers [i.e. those capable of rational reasoning]. As for others, I am not particularly eager to recommend this treatise to them, for I have no reason to expect that it could please them in any way. I know how obstinately those prejudices stick in the mind that the heart has embraced in the form of piety. I know that it is as impossible to rid the common people of superstition as it is to rid them of fear. I know that the constancy of the common people is obstinacy, and that they are not governed by reason but swayed by impulse in approving or finding fault. I do not therefore invite the common people and those who are afflicted with the same feelings as they are [i.e. who think theologically], to read these things. I would wish them to ignore the book altogether rather than make a nuisance of themselves by interpreting it perversely, as they do with everything, and while doing no good to themselves, harming others who would philosophize more freely were they able to surmount the obstacle of believing that reason should be subordinate to theology. I am confident that for this latter group of people this work will prove extremely useful.

[16] For the rest, as many people will have neither the leisure nor the energy to read it right through to the end, I must give notice here, as I do again at the end of the treatise, that I maintain nothing that I would not very willingly submit to the examination and judgment of the sovereign authorities of my country. If they judge anything I say to be in conflict with the laws of my country or prejudicial to the common good, I wish it unsaid. I know that I am human and may have erred.²³ I have however taken great pains not to err, and to ensure above all that everything I write entirely accords with the laws of my country, with piety, and with morality.

²³ Compare Terence, *Adelphi*, 579.

CHAPTER I

On prophecy

[1] Prophecy or revelation is certain knowledge about something revealed to men by God. A prophet is someone who interprets things revealed by God to those who cannot themselves achieve certain knowledge of them and can therefore only grasp by simple faith what has been revealed. The Hebrew for 'prophet' is *nabi*,¹ which means 'orator' or 'interpreter', but is always used in Scripture to mean an interpreter of God. We may infer this from Exodus 7.1, where God says to Moses, 'Behold, I make you Pharaoh's God, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet'. It is as if God were saying that, since Aaron acts as a prophet by interpreting your words to Pharaoh, you will be like Pharaoh's God, i.e., someone who performs the role of God.

[2] We will discuss prophets in the next chapter; here we will discuss prophecy. From the definition of prophecy just given, it follows that the word 'prophecy' could be applied to natural knowledge. For what we know by the natural light of reason depends on knowledge of God and his eternal decrees alone. But the common people do not place a high value on natural knowledge, because it is available to everyone, resting as it does on foundations that are available to all. For they are always eager to discover uncommon things, things that are strange and alien to their own nature, and they despise their natural gifts. Hence when they speak of prophetic knowledge, they mean to exclude natural knowledge.

And yet, natural knowledge has as much right to be called divine as any other kind of knowledge, since it is the nature of God, so far as we share in

¹ Spinoza's footnote: see Annotation 1.

it, and God's decrees, that may be said to dictate it to us. It does not differ from the knowledge which all men call divine, except that divine knowledge extends beyond its limits, and the laws of human nature considered in themselves cannot be the cause of it. But with respect to the certainty
 16 which natural knowledge involves and the source from which it derives (namely God), it is in no way inferior to prophetic knowledge – unless perhaps one is willing to accept the nonsensical suggestion that the prophets did not have human minds though they had human bodies, and that their sensations and consciousness therefore were of a quite different nature from ours!

[3] But despite the fact that natural knowledge is divine, its practitioners cannot be called prophets.² For other men may discern and embrace what they teach with as much certainty and entitlement as they do themselves. They do not just accept it on faith.

[4] Since therefore our mind possesses the power to form such notions from this alone – that it objectively contains within itself the nature of God and participates in it – as explain the nature of things and teach us how to live, we may rightly affirm that it is the nature of the mind, in so far as it is thus conceived, that is the primary source of divine revelation. For everything that we understand clearly and distinctly is dictated to us (as we have just pointed out) by the idea of God and by nature, not in words, but in a much more excellent manner which agrees very well with the nature of the mind, as every man who has experienced intellectual certainty has undoubtedly felt within himself.

[5] But as my principal purpose is to discuss things which concern only Scripture, these few words about the natural light of reason will suffice. I now move on to the other causes and the other means by which God reveals to men things that exceed the limits of natural knowledge (as well as things that do not exceed those limits, since nothing prevents God from communicating to men by other means knowledge which we learn by the light of nature). I will discuss these other means at some length.

² Spinoza's footnote: see Annotation 2.

[6] Truly, however, whatever we are able to say about them must be derived from Scripture alone. For what can we say of things that exceed the limits of our understanding apart from what comes to us from the very lips of a prophet or his writings? Since we have no prophets in our day so far as I know, our only recourse is to peruse the sacred scrolls the prophets have left us. But we must take great care not to say anything about such matters, or to attribute anything to the prophets, which they have not clearly stated themselves. And here at the outset we must note that the Jews never specify intermediate or particular causes and take no notice of them, but owing to religion and piety, or (in the common phrase) 'for devotion's sake', refer
 17 everything back to God. For example, if they have made some money by a business transaction, they say that it has been given to them by God; if they happen to want something, they say that God has stirred their heart; and if they think of something, they say that God has said it to them. Therefore we should not consider as prophecy or supernatural knowledge everything that Scripture claims God says to someone but only what Scripture expressly designates as prophecy or revelation or which, from the circumstances of the narrative, clearly is such.

[7] If therefore we peruse the sacred books, we shall see that everything that God revealed to the prophets was revealed to them either in words or in images, or by both these means together, i.e. in words and images. But the words, and the images too, were either true and independent of the imagination of the prophet who heard or saw them, or else imaginary, that is the prophet's imagination, even when he was awake, was so disposed that it seemed to him that he was clearly hearing words or seeing something.

[8] It was with a real voice that God revealed to Moses the Laws which he wished to be given to the Hebrews, as is apparent from Exodus 25.22, where he says, 'and I will be ready for you there, and I will speak with you from that part of the covering of the ark, which is between the two cherubim'. This plainly shows that God used a real voice, since Moses found God ready to speak to him there whenever he wished. But it was only this voice with which the Law was proclaimed that was a real voice, as I shall show directly.

[9] I might perhaps be inclined to think that the voice in which God called Samuel was also a real one since at 1 Samuel 3.21 it is stated: 'And

go through the passages of Scripture that point to the means by which God has revealed his decrees to men.

[14] That revelation occurred through images alone is evident from 1 Chronicles 21, where God manifested his anger toward David by means of an angel holding a sword in his hand. So also toward Balaam.⁴ And although Maimonides and others maintain that this story happened in sleep (and likewise all the narratives which tell of the appearance of angels, like the one to Abraham at Minoah, when he was thinking of sacrificing his son, etc.) and refuse to accept that anyone could have seen an angel with his eyes open, they are surely talking nonsense. They were only concerned to derive Aristotelian trifles and some figments of their own from Scripture, than which, to my mind, nothing could be more ridiculous.

[15] It was also by means of visions that were not real but derived from the imagination of the prophet alone that God revealed to Joseph his future pre-eminence.⁵

20 [16] By visions and words God revealed to Joshua that he would fight for them [i.e. the Hebrews]. For he showed him an angel with a sword, like the leader of an army, and also revealed it to him in words and Joshua heard it from the angel.⁶ Visions were also the means by which it was represented to Isaiah (as we are told in ch. 6) that the providence of God would desert his people, namely by his imagining the thrice holy God on his lofty throne and the Israelites stained with the filth of their sins and immersed so to speak in a pile of manure and thus very distant from God. By this he understood the miserable state of his people in the present, and their future calamities were revealed to him in words as if pronounced by God. I could give many more examples of this sort from the holy Scriptures, if I did not think that everybody knows them well enough.

[17] But it is all most plainly confirmed by the text of Numbers 12.6-7 which reads as follows: 'If one of you shall be a prophet of God, I will reveal myself to him in a vision' (that is, through images and holy signs, whereas the prophecy of Moses is said to be a vision without holy signs); 'I will speak to him in dreams' (that is, not in real words and a real voice).

⁴ Numbers 22-4. ⁵ Genesis 37.5-11. ⁶ Joshua 5.13-15.

'But that is not how' (I reveal myself) 'to Moses; I speak with him face to face and not in riddles, and he sees the image of God'. That is, in seeing me he speaks with me as a friend, not as one who is terrified, as is the case at Exodus 33.11.⁷ Thus there is no doubt that the rest of the prophets did not hear a real voice, and this is still more clearly confirmed by Deuteronomy 34.10, where it is said, 'and there has not been' (literally, 'arisen') 'a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face', which has to mean, 'by voice alone', for not even Moses ever saw the face of God (Exodus, ch. 33).

[18] These are the only means I find in the holy Scriptures by which God communicated with men, and therefore, as we showed above, we should not invent or admit any other method. Although we clearly understand that God can communicate with men directly (for he communicates his essence to our minds without the use of any physical means), nevertheless, for a person to know things which are not contained in the first foundations of our knowledge and cannot be deduced from them, his mind would necessarily have to be vastly superior, far surpassing the human mind. I do not believe that anyone has reached such a degree of perfection above others except Christ, to whom the decrees of God which guide men to salvation were revealed not by words or visions but directly; and that is why God revealed himself to the Apostles through the mind of Christ, as he did, formerly, to Moses by means of a heavenly voice. Therefore the voice of Christ may be called the voice of God, like the voice which Moses heard. In this sense we may also say that the wisdom of God, that is, the wisdom which is above human wisdom, took on human nature in Christ, and that Christ was the way of salvation.

[19] Here I must point out that I am not speaking at all of the things that certain churches affirm of Christ nor do I deny them; for I freely admit that I do not understand them. What I have just said, I infer from Scripture. Nowhere have I read that God appeared to Christ or spoke with him, but that God was revealed to the Apostles through Christ, and that he is the way of salvation, and finally that the old Law was given through an angel and not directly by God, etc. Therefore if Moses spoke with God face to face as a man with his friend (that is, through the mediation of two bodies), Christ communicated with God from mind to mind.

⁷ This may refer to 33.11 or 33.17.