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From Biblical Truth to the Truth About the Bible: Spinoza and the End of Scriptural Philosophy¹

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Abstract

This article examines Spinoza's confrontation with the religious traditions of scriptural philosophy and his effort to disentangle philosophy from biblical exegesis, and vice versa. By reading the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* alongside the *Theological-Political Treatise*, it argues that Spinoza's path to philosophy arises primarily from a reflection on the "true good" through the recognition of the futility of certain aspects and conventional "goods" of ordinary life. At the same time, it is shaped by his original and critical engagement with biblical and Pharisaic-rabbinic themes. The study highlights his critique of Pharisaic-rabbinic exclusivism and its interpretation of the biblical doctrine of chosenness, his rejection of philosophical-allegorical exegesis, and his polemic against theologians who subordinate Scripture to Neoplatonic and Aristotelian speculation. Against these traditions, Spinoza advances what may be called a dual liberation. On one side, philosophy (freed from theological tutelage) claims geometric certainty in uncovering the necessary order of nature and in guiding human beings toward genuine happiness and blessedness. On the other, Scripture (released from speculative distortions) regains its divine character and usefulness, preserving its dignity and authority through the universal moral precepts of justice and charity. Ultimately, the article argues that Spinoza brings scriptural philosophy to an end by exposing the contradictions inherent in all attempts to reconcile revelation with philosophy, and by inaugurating a new philosophical project (an ethics grounded in ontology) together with a hermeneutic science founded on historical-critical exegesis. This dual liberation stands out as one of Spinoza's most enduring contributions within the framework of modern thought.

Keywords: Spinoza, Philosophy, Scripture, Theology, Exegesis.

Kitabı Mukaddes'in Hakikatinden Kitabı Mukaddes Hakkındaki Hakikate: Spinoza ve Kitabı Mukaddes Felsefesinin Sonu

Öz

Bu makalede Spinoza'nın Kitabı Mukaddes'e dayalı felsefe anlayışını temsil eden dinî geleneklerle hesaplaşması ve felsefe ile Kitabı Mukaddes'i birbirinden ayırma çabası ele alınmaktadır. Bu çerçevede *Anlama Yetisinin Düzeltilmesi Üzerine İnceleme* ile *Teolojik-Politik İnceleme* birlikte okunmaktadır. Buradan hareketle, Spinoza'yı felsefeye götüren yolun, gündelik hayatta genellikle kabul gören "iyi"lerin beyhudeliğinin fark edilmesinden doğan bir "gerçek iyi" arayışının yanı sıra, bazı Tevradî ve Farisî-Rabbanî izleklere yönelik özgün ve eleştirel bir sorgulamayı da içerdiği ileri sürülmektedir. Çalışmada, Spinoza'nın Tevrat'taki seçilmişlik öğretisinin Farisî-Rabbanî yorumuna yönelttiği eleştiri ve bu anlayışın kısmen benimsediği felsefî-alegorik tefsiri çürütme girişimi öne çıkarılmaktadır. Ayrıca, Spinoza'nın Kitabı Mukaddes'i Yeni Platoncu ve Aristotelesçi spekülasyonlara tâbi kılan teologlara karşı yürüttüğü polemik ayrıntılı biçimde incelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda makalenin ana savı, Spinoza'nın, felsefeyi Kitabı Mukaddes'in çarpıtılmasına dayalı teolojik baskılardan, Kitabı Mukaddes'i ise felsefe ve teolojinin vesayetinden kurtarmayı amaçlayan çifte bir özgürleşme projesi geliştirdiği düşüncesi etrafında şekillenmektedir. Böylece teolojik boyunduruktan kurtulan felsefe, geometrik bir kesinlikle, doğanın zorunlu düzenini açıklamayı ve insanları gerçek mutluluğa ulaştırmayı amaçlarken; spekülatif çarpıtmalardan arınan Kitabı Mukaddes, içerdiği adalet ve iyilikseverlik gibi evrensel ahlâk ilkeleri aracılığıyla tanrısallığına ve yararlılığına yeniden kavuşarak, otoritesini ve saygınlığını güçlendirmektedir. Sonuç olarak makalede, Spinoza'nın vahiy ile felsefeyi uzlaştırma girişimlerindeki içsel çelişkileri açığa çıkararak Kitabı Mukaddes'e dayalı felsefeye son verdiği; bunun yerine ontoloji temelli bir etik ile tarihsel-eleştirel metin çözümlemesine dayalı bir hermeneutik bilim kurduğu savunulmaktadır. Bu çifte özgürleşme, Spinoza'nın modern düşünce bağlamında en kalıcı katkılarından biri olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Spinoza, Felsefe, Kitabı Mukaddes, Teoloji, Tefsir.

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Introduction

This article seeks to explore the place or the very possibility of a religious, scriptural, or specifically Jewish philosophy within Spinoza's thought. It asks, in particular, whether the method of biblical interpretation developed in the *Theological-Political Treatise* bears any relation to what is now called the philosophy of religion. It also examines how this historical-critical exegesis, with its primarily political implications, relates to the philosophical project articulated in the *Ethics*. It further considers how religious concepts such as "salvation" and "blessedness" can be understood within the framework of a philosophy conceived as an ethics grounded in ontology.

It is undeniable that religion and the Bible occupy a central place in Spinozism — as the foundation of religious institutions from a theological-political perspective, and as an immense historical-textual heritage from a linguistic and literary perspective. Yet whether this institution and this heritage carry a philosophical significance remains, to say the least, debatable. Our question, then, is whether one can speak of a philosophy of the Bible, or a philosophy *within* the Bible — as some Jewish ("Pharisaic") sages and Christian theologians have claimed — from a Spinozist perspective.

1. Spinoza as a Perplexed Disciple?

With regard to Spinoza's "religion" or "religious views," it may be instructive to begin by relating his much-discussed "heresy" or "apostasy" to the condition that one of the most prominent rabbinic figures famously calls "perplexity." Maimonides describes this state as an intellectual and spiritual crisis that arises from the apparent tension between the literal sense of biblical and Talmudic passages and the principles of philosophical or rational truth. The disciple thus finds himself in confusion, believing he must choose between two seemingly "opposing" paths: the path of the intellect, or that of the Law (the Torah), that is, the path of religious tradition.³

Maimonides further maintains that disciples who face this impasse can be delivered from the perplexity it entails only by gradually recognizing that the sacred texts of Judaism possess multiple layers of meaning. The teachings transmitted by the Prophets and Sages, he argues, also convey universal philosophical truths (namely, Aristotelian physics and metaphysics), albeit in a highly allusive and subtle manner. In other words, these revealed or inspired words — of which the Talmudic sages say, "*The Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man*" — express, in their literal or external layer of meaning, "sound opinions," that is, the most prudent and beneficial teachings for the moral and social well-being of both the individual and the multitude. Yet they also contain the "true essence [*māhiyyah*]" of things: metaphysical truths Maimonides designates as the "secrets of the Torah."⁴ Indeed, it is through the knowledge of these truths that one attains true perfection. To uncover the hidden truths embedded in the highly figurative, equivocal, and anthropomorphic language of the Jewish Scriptures, one must master the principles and methods of allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*).⁵

For Spinoza too, the path to philosophy begins with a profound *spiritual and intellectual crisis* — one might even call it a moment of confusion and perplexity. In his case, however, this crisis is not resolved through an allegorical interpretation that seeks to uncover the philosophical teachings of the Torah. Nor does Spinoza appear to

³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. I, trans. Shlomo Pines. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 5-6 (I: Introduction).

Abbreviations used: E = *Ethics*; TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise*; TIE = *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; CM = *Metaphysical Thoughts*; Ep = Letters; App = Appendix (Part I of the *Ethics*); p = Proposition; dem = Demonstration / Proof; s = Scholium; c = Corollary; def. aff. = Definitions of the Emotions; exp = Explanation; lem = Lemma; Pref. = Preface; annot = Annotation. Parts of works are cited by Roman numerals for major divisions and Arabic numerals for sub-sections. References to the Babylonian Talmud are given as *b.* followed by the tractate name.

⁴ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. I, 71 (I: 33).

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Vol. II, trans. Shlomo Pines. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 327-30, (II: 25).

believe that he must choose between “turning his back on his intellect” and “bringing harm to himself and to his faith”; for him, the question seems settled from the outset. His perplexity — or what he would describe as a “doubt” or a “wavering of spirit [*fluctuatio animi*]” — lies elsewhere.⁶ It is precisely his way of confronting and resolving this inner crisis that makes him one of the most emblematic “heretics” in both the Jewish tradition and the broader history of philosophy.

But it is difficult to assume that the crisis that sets Spinoza his philosophical path is of the same nature as the “great perplexity” described by Maimonides. According to his own account, Spinoza does not begin his critical inquiry with the contradictions of Scripture, still less with the rigorism or exclusivism of the Pharisaic (i.e. rabbinic) Jews, but rather with the observation of the “emptiness and futility” of ordinary life, governed largely by the arbitrary conflicts of the passions. The famous autobiographical prologue to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* thus bears witness to a different kind of disturbance or existential uncertainty, in which the conventional values (the so-called “highest goods”) of society reveal themselves to be fundamentally dubious, relative, and lacking any true foundation. From this reflection on the immediate experience of life there arises an entire philosophical project:

I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good [*verum bonum*], capable of communicating itself [*sui communicabile*], and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.⁷

It turns out that this decision to seek the “true good,” the “greatest joy and happiness,” and universal truth amounts, in effect, to what can be called a *conversion* to philosophy, or to the philosophical life. It is represented here as a “new plan of life [*novum institutum*],” lying beyond the illusory and transient “goods” pursued by the multitude. For Spinoza, the moment of perplexity thus resolves into a radical reordering of both thought and conduct: the adoption of a way of living inseparable from a way of thinking, perceiving, and knowing — a life capable of sustaining the difficult task of healing and perfecting the intellect and of attaining “the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature.”⁸

Judging from these descriptions, one might at first glance think that the young Baruch Spinoza’s initial soul-searching and existential questioning (his path toward philosophy) had nothing to do with his attitude toward biblical or rabbinic teachings, or with the question of divine providence or governance. Nothing in this early moment seems to explain the “evil opinions,” “abominable heresies,” or “monstrous deeds” mentioned in the *writ of ḥerem* (excommunication), which are cited as the basis for his categorical ban, not only from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, but from the Jewish people as a whole. Yet this first impression proves to be misleading.⁹ The road to philosophy, conceived as the pursuit of a “communicable true good,” is also shaped by other motives.

2. Religious Dimension of the Quest: The True Good and Pharisaic Exclusivism

To see what Spinoza leaves out in his account of the background to his initiation into a philosophical life, we may turn to another text: the third chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. This chapter, which addresses the question of “the vocation of the Hebrews,” was likely drafted before Spinoza’s excommunication and therefore

⁶ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics Proved in Geometrical Order*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Matthew J. Kisner. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), (EIIIp17s), 108. Hereafter, references to the *Ethics* will be given by part, proposition, scholium, etc., followed by the page number of the cited edition/translation.

⁷ Benedictus de Spinoza, TIE §1, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 7.

⁸ TIE §13, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Vol. I, 11.

⁹ See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza’s Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 2, 27-44.

predates the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.¹⁰ At its outset, Spinoza again raises the questions of the true good and supreme happiness, but this time within an explicitly theological-political and even socio-psychological framework. His analysis and critique of Pharisaism (i.e., rabbinic Judaism) in this context shed new light on the religious dimension of the “perplexity” that preceded his adoption of a new way of life. Here is how he denounces the claim to exclusive happiness and wisdom:

True joy and happiness lie in the simple enjoyment of what is good and not in the kind of false pride that enjoys happiness because others are excluded from it. Anyone who thinks that he is happy because his situation is better than other people's or because he is happier and more fortunate than they, knows nothing of true happiness and joy, and the pleasure he derives from his attitude is either plain silly or spiteful and malicious [*invidia et malo animo*]. For example, a person's true joy and felicity [*vera hominis felicitas et beatitudo*] lie solely in his wisdom and knowledge of truth [*sola sapientia et veri cognitio*], not in being wiser than others or in others' being without knowledge of truth, since this does not increase his own wisdom which is his true felicity.¹¹

In this passage — which also offers a glimpse into his broader philosophy, namely the pursuit of happiness and blessedness through adequate knowledge — Spinoza appears to remain focused on the individual level. Nothing here suggests that wisdom, happiness or blessedness could be collective, nor that adjectives such as “spiteful” or “malicious” can properly be attributed to an entire people. However, the rest of the chapter leaves little doubt as to the object of his critique: it is clearly a community he knew intimately — the Jews of the Diaspora, or more precisely, their Pharisaic ideologues, the rabbis. They are the ones who believe themselves to be the bearers of a unique and exclusive wisdom by virtue of which they claim to attain true happiness. Yet Spinoza argues that this very *exclusivist conception of wisdom* in fact reveals their ignorance and unhappiness. (Incidentally, he chooses to disregard both the arduous yet open path to sharing this wisdom by joining its bearer people, and the eschatological promise of the unification of nations under the banner of the knowledge of the true God; cf., e.g., *Ruth* 1:16; *Isaiah* 2:2–4; 11:9–10).¹²

We can now see why Spinoza, in his pursuit of true wisdom and happiness, felt compelled to break with Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism, which he regarded as a passion to be overcome. He thus embarked on a wholly different path, one that necessarily rejects exclusivist conceptions of wisdom and every form of national-religious particularism concerning the supreme good.

It would not be wrong, then, to claim that Spinoza's initial questioning also — and perhaps above all — concerns the Pharisaic-rabbinic interpretation and application of certain biblical teachings, such as the doctrine of the “chosenness” or “election” of the Jewish people. On this theme, he offers a series of psychological descriptions centered on the decisive illusion of possessing a “good” (wisdom or blessedness) exclusively, together with the false sense of superiority that inevitably follows. He suggests that the Pharisees (that is, the rabbis, and more broadly rabbinic Jews) adhere to the doctrine of “election” in an erroneous and passionate manner. This attitude is marked by *sad passions*, concerned less with their own supposed happiness than with the misfortunes of others. Ultimately, this psychological mechanism leads Spinoza to define the Pharisaic conception of chosenness as a kind of *bad joy*, especially when it is born of envy, which, as he writes in the *Ethics*, is “simply hatred itself, insofar as hatred is

¹⁰ See Leo Strauss, “How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 165–67.; Warren Zev Harvey, “Spinoza's Counterfactual Zionism,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 62, (2013): 235. Some scholars have suggested that Chapter III may be a reworked version of the “apology” (*Apología para justificarse de su abdicación de la sinagoga*), allegedly written in Spanish and read aloud by Spinoza in the synagogue shortly before his excommunication. Steven Nadler, however, challenges this view and questions whether such a “mythical manuscript” ever existed.” Cf. Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132–33.

¹¹ Benedict de Spinoza, (TTP III §1), *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), (TTP III §1), 43. Hereafter cited by chapter and paragraph, followed by the page number in this edition.

¹² For the *Tanakh* (Masoretic text and JPS translations), see Sefaria.org

considered as disposing a person to enjoy harm to another person and to be saddened by his success.”¹³

One might find it surprising that a thinker who advocates a philosophy of ontological and ethical affirmation should engage so critically with those negative aspects of the biblical heritage — aspects that must inevitably arouse in him a sad passion as well. Yet he obviously cannot avoid settling scores with his former coreligionists: Yet he clearly cannot avoid settling scores with his former coreligionists. It is precisely here that Spinoza reveals his talent as a fierce critic and polemicist, even while presenting himself as one “who dreads quarrels.”¹⁴ When we examine Spinoza’s attitude toward rabbinic literature, it is impossible not to notice the change in tone. Moving from the Bible to the Talmud — from the prophets to the rabbis, whom he cites rather sparingly — Spinoza’s discourse shifts entirely. Profound respect, deep interest, admiration, and fascination give way to contempt, denunciation, and even derision. According to him, most of the time, the “rabbis talk evident nonsense.”¹⁵

This shift, with its socio-historical and theological-political foundations, marks, in his view, not merely a change but a radical rupture — if not the very end — of the Jewish people’s vocation. In other words, the destruction of the “State of the Hebrews” and the rise of Pharisaic-rabbinic authority in the dispersed communities constitute, for Spinoza, a genuine decline and the loss of the Hebrews’ very *raison d’être*. In this process, he sees the degeneration of a revealed Law as the constitution of a state — that is, a divinely sanctioned, well-structured, and sustainable political order founded on the prophecy of Moses — into a body of legal-religious, ceremonial, and communal rules. And the sole purpose of these rules, in Spinoza’s view, is the isolation and preservation of the Jewish people among other hegemonic nations.

We have already seen that, in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza emphasizes the communicative (or rather, self-communicative) nature of the true good he seeks to attain. This implies that the “good” in question is, in principle, a theoretically and practically *common* and *universal* good — one that can be shared by all without exception. More precisely, it is a “true good” that arises only through “common notions,” which presuppose an affective and cognitive process of communalization. In any case, the true good, which fundamentally consists in adequate knowledge, is accessible to all in principle, even if, as Spinoza himself acknowledges, its attainment remains “difficult as well as rare.”¹⁶

The Pharisees-rabbis, by contrast, lay claim to a wisdom and blessedness that are, in Spinoza’s view, essentially *incommunicable* beyond the boundaries of an ethno-religious framework. While Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism is certainly not reducible to the “vanities” of ordinary life (wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure), whose excesses it condemns in its own way (see, e.g., *Mishnah Avot* 1:10, 1:13, 2:7),¹⁷ it nevertheless promises a form of national and legal wisdom and blessedness (Deuteronomy 4:6). This promise, however, ultimately proves not only illusory but also detrimental to the pursuit of the true common good. In this sense, Spinoza argues, the Pharisaic interpretation of biblical election or chosenness constitutes a major obstacle to philosophy, which progresses precisely through “common notions” and depends on a specific form of intersubjective community. It also reflects a profound misunderstanding of the true meaning and the theological-political intention of the biblical sources on which it claims to rely.

¹³ EIIp24s; 113. Thus, from Spinoza’s point of view, the doctrine of election could be described as a “pretentious chimera”: an affective reality without any real object. See Catherine Chalié, *Spinoza, lecteur de Maïmonide. La question théologico-politique* (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 109, 210.

¹⁴ Ep 6, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Vol. I, 188.

¹⁵ TTP IX §11; 136.

¹⁶ EIIp40s1; EIVp18s; EVp42s; 76–77, 250.

¹⁷ For translations of the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, see Sefaria.org (*The William Davidson Talmud*, ed. and trans. Adin Steinsaltz, 2017).

It is clear, then, that Spinoza's personal "perplexity" and philosophical questioning did, in fact, involve biblical, rabbinic, and even *Marrano* elements, in which he seems to have acquired considerable erudition and expertise at a young age.¹⁸ Significantly, he continued to engage with these issues rigorously even after his excommunication. While he does not appear to reject the authority of either Scripture or reason within their respective domains, he nevertheless draws a clear distinction between them. At the same time, he subjects the rabbinic tradition to a sustained critique, refuting it both biblically and philosophically.

All in all, in light of this intertextual reading (TIE §§1-11 and TTP III), it is safe to say that Spinoza's intellectual and spiritual crisis was resolved and crystallized in certain pre-philosophical thoughts. These early reflections appear to have led to his excommunication and were later articulated in a terminology that is partly Cartesian and partly scholastic. These thoughts seem to have consisted, on the one hand, in a rejection of certain religious ideas and institutions, and, on the other, in a quest for a "true good." This quest implied the rejection of a life devoted to empty and futile endeavors in favor of a truly free, happy, and joyful life (so far as one is capable of it), grounded in the knowledge of necessary causal relations and the essences of things.

This life is fostered through the interactions and friendships of free and rational human beings "who sincerely love the truth," insofar as "the love they bear to one another is based on the love each has for knowledge of the truth."¹⁹ This conception of life-changing and unifying knowledge of truth requires a separation between the realms of Scripture and philosophy. One who seeks the truth must pursue his highest happiness in the latter. As we shall see, this philosophical life further requires, so to speak, "transcending" the laws and prescriptions of organized religion, even when these are biblically ordained and, in that moral and political context, considered "true" (i.e., extremely useful and necessary for the multitude).

Hence, with Spinoza we are confronted, on the basis of this distinction, with an adherence to the ancient idea of philosophy, combined with the conception of the new (Cartesian) philosophy and with an entirely new science of biblical hermeneutics.²⁰ The former aims not only to attain truth but also to realize the true life with geometric rigor and certainty. The latter, in turn, seeks to uncover the true — namely, the historically accurate and originally intended — meanings of the biblical verses through precise linguistic analysis and an inquiry into the mentality of the prophets and the ancient Hebrew people. To grasp Spinoza's stance toward Pharisaic-rabbinic thought, as well as toward all theological endeavors that claim justification in a "solid tradition or a true exegesis inherited from the prophets themselves" concerning the meanings of biblical verses, it is crucial to assess the radical break he introduces in both domains.²¹ Before doing so, however, we should take a closer look at the philosophical and theological tradition with which Spinoza engages in passionate debate throughout his oeuvre.

3. Allegorical Interpretation as Religious Philosophy

It is well known that one of the principal objectives of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is to separate the domains of theology and philosophy, thereby broadening the scope of freedom of thought and expression. In a famous letter in which he discusses the "considerations which move" him to compose this treatise, Spinoza explains how he perceives the threats to this freedom: "the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think, which I want to defend in every way; here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and

¹⁸ See Jean-Maximilien Lucas, *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza (La Vie de Feu Monsieur Spinoza)* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1927), 94–95.

¹⁹ Ep 19, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, 357.

²⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 271ff.; Edwin Curley, "Spinoza's Biblical Scholarship" in *Baruch de Spinoza, Theologisch-politischer Traktat*, ed. Otfried Höffe (Berlin: De Gruyter Akademie Verlag, 2014), 109–26.

²¹ TTP VII §9; 105.

aggressiveness.”²² This plea for the freedom to philosophize — aimed at liberating philosophy from the tutelage of theology — has attracted, and continues to attract, the attention of many commentators. And rightly so, for it is Spinoza himself who explicitly underscores this cause, making “an earnest request of [his] readers” to read the relevant chapters “with some attention and take the trouble to reflect on them again and again.”²³ Indeed, it is in these chapters that Spinoza articulates his theological-political positions most directly:

The foundations of philosophy are universal concepts, and philosophy should be drawn from nature alone. But the foundations of faith [*fides*] are histories and language and are to be drawn only from Scripture and revelation [...]. Faith therefore allows every person the greatest liberty to think, so that they may think whatever they wish about any question whatever without doing wrong.²⁴

The author writes as though he were here recapitulating the immediate conclusions of his analysis of the respective natures of Scripture and philosophy. Yet one cannot help but ask whether this theological-political cause fully encompasses the treatise’s broader aims, which also involve highly intricate historical, hermeneutical, and philological analyses. In fact, it is difficult to read these chapters (which the author describes as the heart of the work) as the main intended outcome of his earlier considerations concerning, among other things, the “chosenness of the Hebrews” or the “biblical and historical illegitimacy of the Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition.” We must therefore examine more closely the connection between Spinoza’s rejection of the conception of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* and his sharp critique of the rabbinic-Maimonidean tradition of philosophical-allegorical exegesis — often referred to as “Jewish philosophy” — beginning with its sources and distinctive features.

To be sure, the very question of whether one can speak of a “Jewish philosophy” remains, to this day, a subject of debate. Yet there is no denying that the historical encounter between biblical narratives and philosophical concepts gave rise to one of the most prolific currents of thought in history — a tradition of religious-biblical philosophy that dominated the medieval period and, in various forms, endures to this day. It is this exegetical orientation that characterizes Jewish philosophy, even if it is by no means confined to it. Scholars generally agree that it was Philo of Alexandria (1st century CE) who initiated this approach, which combines Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy with allegorical exegesis, although the Greek translation of the Pentateuch had already prepared the ground for it.²⁵ From this perspective, Philo is also regarded as the initiator of the “triple religious philosophy.” Philosophy as allegorical reading of sacred texts thus constitutes the foundation of the “common philosophy of the three religions with cognate Scriptures—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.” The philosopher-exegete who would eventually bring this scriptural-religious philosophy to an end is none other than Spinoza, with his historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.²⁶

This allegorical approach essentially assumes that, while there are indeed *two distinct sources* of truth or wisdom (namely, revelation and reason), this truth is *ultimately one and the same*. It can, at times, be uncovered through “philosophical” readings of the esoteric and multilayered passages of Scripture (in Philo’s case, the Pentateuch or the entire *Tanakh*). But since Scripture is divinely revealed or inspired, Greek philosophy — which relies solely on the natural capacities of the human intellect — can serve only as its handmaid (*ancilla*), enabling one to discern in these texts something other (*allos*) than their literal meaning. Hence, Philo can maintain that, although Jewish Scripture is primarily a Law (a divine law revealed to Moses), it is framed to convey the most profound truths

²² Benedictus de Spinoza, Ep 30, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. II, trans. Edwin Curley. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 14–15.

²³ TTP XIV §14; 185.

²⁴ TTP XIV §13; 184.

²⁵ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Vol. I, Third Printing Revised (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 94–95.

²⁶ Harry Austryn Wolfson, “Philo Judaeus” in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 70.

concerning God and the universe. The eternal wisdom it embodies, he adds, remains in its entirety beyond the full reach of human understanding. He writes the following with reference to the account of Creation, presented as a preamble to the Law of Moses:

It contains an account of the making of the cosmos, the reasoning for this being that the cosmos is in harmony with the law and the law with the cosmos, and the man who observes the law is at once a citizen of the cosmos, directing his actions in relation to the rational purpose of nature, in accordance with which the entire cosmos also is administered.²⁷

Filled with awe upon encountering this extraordinary biblical narrative and prose (yet struck also by a stylistic modesty no less remarkable when compared with the Greek classics), the commentator can only strive to elucidate, for himself and for others, a minute portion of this inexhaustible source of meaning. Philo himself likens it to the engraving of a “tiniest seal,” capable of “contain[ing] the representations of things with colossal dimensions.”²⁸ This means that the universal truth sought by philosophy (or the highest philosophy itself) is already inherent in the biblical text. In other words, the “highest branch of philosophy, which includes both theology and ethics, is to Philo that philosophy which is to be found in the revealed Law of Moses.”²⁹ And as philosophy, the universal content of the Torah can be assimilated to the laws of nature; for Philo, it is, in fact, “the law of the city of the world, the cosmopolitical law.”³⁰

In any case, although Spinoza was probably unacquainted with the works of this Hellenistic-Jewish author, it is clear that the allegorical method — which later became prevalent in medieval theological-philosophical thought — embodies everything he rejected in biblical exegesis. His own interpretive method is aimed precisely at breaking with the assumption that the “Old Testament,” though deeply rooted in the language, history, and culture of a small ancient nation and its theocratic state, could contain (on a universal and cosmopolitical level), anything beyond a few extremely simple moral lessons, let alone esoteric philosophical knowledge.

On the other hand, what Spinoza knew very well and felt compelled to challenge were the Pharisaic-rabbinic (Talmudic-Midrashic) methods of interpretation. He insists that their legal, moral, and “philosophical” interpretations of the Hebrew Bible are entirely unfounded, fabricated, and erroneous, both biblically and historically. The same, he argues, applies to their conception of the Oral Tradition — believed to have been equally revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai and to constitute the foundation of their legislative and interpretative authority.³¹ However, it may easily be observed that the complex current of thought now known as “Jewish philosophy” developed and flourished, especially from the tenth century onward, largely within the Talmudic-rabbinic tradition. It drew on biblical and rabbinic categories alongside Greco-Arabic-Islamic philosophical concepts. It is therefore worth undertaking a brief examination of the characteristics of this form of *religious philosophy* — or “philosophic form of [biblical-Talmudic] religion” — before considering why, for Spinoza, it constitutes a *contradiction in terms*.³²

The Talmudic sages themselves adopt an ambiguous stance toward the study of philosophy and toward the wisdom and intellectual influence of the other nations (each of which was considered idolatrous in their time), especially the Greeks. One illustrative example is the following passage, in which a Torah scholar is warned against studying Greek thought:

Ben Dama, son of Rabbi Yishmael’s sister, asked Rabbi Yishmael: In the case of one such as I, who has learned the entire Torah, what is the *halakha* [rule/law] with regard to studying Greek wisdom [*hokhmat Yevanit*]? Rabbi Yishmael recited

²⁷ Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*, trans. David T. Runia. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 47 (I: §§3-4).

²⁸ Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation of the Cosmos According to Moses*, 47-48 (I: §6).

²⁹ Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy*, 147.

³⁰ Gérard Bensussan, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie juive?* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 30.

³¹ TTP annot 25; 269–70. Cf. Mishnah Avot 1:1.

³² Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism: The History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. David W. Silverman. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966), 53-54.

this verse about him: “This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall contemplate in it day and night” [Joshua 1:8]. Go and search for an hour that is neither part of the day nor part of the night, and learn Greek wisdom in it (b. *Menachot* 99b).

This passage, which at first glance appears to categorically reject the study of Greek wisdom, nevertheless displays a certain deliberate ambiguity. According to Rabbi Yishmael, best known for his “Thirteen Exegetical Principles” that serve as a basis for the formation of *halakhah* (Jewish law), the exclusion of Greek wisdom from the curriculum is not due to its being intrinsically worthless, but rather to the fact that the Jewish disciple is obliged to devote himself constantly to the study of the Torah. For the Torah itself is deemed inexhaustible.³³ There are, however, other passages that seem to present a more lenient and open view of this kind of cultural-linguistic interaction:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Even with regard to Torah scrolls, the Sages permitted them to be written only in Greek [*Yavanit*]. [...] What is the reason for the opinion of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel? He based his opinion on an allusion in the Torah, as the verse states: “God shall enlarge Japheth [*Yaft Eloqim le-Yefet*], and He shall dwell in the tents of Shem” (Genesis 9:27), indicating that the words of Japheth shall be in the tents of Shem (b. *Megillah* 9b).

This passage undoubtedly refers to the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is noteworthy that rabbinic tradition (even centuries after Philo of Alexandria) continues to reflect on and seek to justify, naturally through biblical figures, the profound influence exerted upon it by Hellenistic culture and Greek philosophy. According to the biblical genealogy presented in Genesis 10, the so-called “Table of Nations,” among Noah’s sons are Japheth (identified as the ancestor of the Greeks), and Shem, described as “the ancestor of all the descendants of Eber,” that is, the Hebrews (Gen. 10:21). This rabbinically sanctioned “interaction,” however, clearly works in both directions. It can be seen both as an attempt to express the Word of the Torah in Greek and as an effort to subject Greek thought (that is, philosophy) to the test of the Hebrew Word. “It is,” writes Lévinas, “the spiritual trial, for the tradition of Shem, of welcoming the speech of Japheth, while at the same time exalting the genius peculiar to the oral Torah.”³⁴

This reluctant and cautious openness is thus both a way of engaging with another culture — one that itself lays claim to universality — by inhabiting its language, and a way of coming to know oneself more fully. It entails seeking to discern the polysemy and plurivocity of one’s own words, figures, and images within the more or less univocal concepts of the other. As we have noted, this in no way implies abandoning the singularity of the Hebrew text, which, as an inexhaustible source, continually calls forth new meanings in accordance with tradition. Thus, while accepting the legitimacy of translating Scripture into foreign languages, the rabbis nevertheless “reject the claim of these translations to *replace* the Hebrew, by ignoring their own Midrashic dimensions and the perennial “generative power [*pouvoir dire*]” of the Hebrew letter.”³⁵

This, then, is the foundation on which “Jewish philosophy” develops: it undertakes the difficult task of *conceptualizing* (under the sign of *logos*) not only the words, but the Word (*davar*) itself — that is the infinite “generative power” that emanates from the Sinaitic Revelation. Conversely, this task, often imposed by external circumstances and power relations, continually shapes the open-ended act of translation between prophetic and philosophical discourses that characterizes Jewish philosophy. It thus represents a constant search to “forge a path toward a philosophical discourse that is at once rigorous in its reasoning and open to the diversity inherent in biblical commentary.”³⁶

³³ See Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*, trans. Chaya Galai. (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 99.

³⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 51–52.

³⁵ Catherine Chalié, “Le pouvoir révélateur de la Bible juive” in *Catherine Chalié and Marc Faessler, Judaïsme et christianisme, l’écoute en partage* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 97.

³⁶ Catherine Chalié, *L’inspiration du philosophe: “L’amour de la sagesse” et sa source prophétique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), 79.

This form of philosophy must contend with the tension between *particularism* (the divine Law revealed to a specific people, cf. Exodus 19:5ff.) and *universalism* (the creation of all humanity “in the image of God,” cf. Genesis 1:27). Spinoza claims to resolve this tension by rejecting any form of universalism that is not intrinsically natural and rational; that is, one arising from a particular historical and cultural process linked to the destiny of a people. We shall now consider why the Spinozist conception of philosophy represents the very antipode of religious (or, more specifically, Jewish) philosophy.

4. Philosophy and Scripture: Toward Mutual Liberation

For Spinoza, even the very expressions “religious philosophy,” “scriptural philosophy,” or “Jewish philosophy” are *contradictions in terms*. The defining feature of the latter is the constant to-and-fro between figurative-narrative language and conceptual language, particularly evident in allegorical interpretation. Spinoza thinks that this form of interpretation not only constitutes a major obstacle to an adequate understanding of the Bible but also undermines the possibility of a genuine philosophical pursuit of truth and of true life. Anyone who truly wishes to philosophize and to grasp the true meanings of biblical verses must therefore begin by recognizing the irreconcilable nature of these two domains. This point was so important for his philosophy that Spinoza interrupted the writing of the *Ethics* to compose the *Theological-Political Treatise*. We must therefore inquire into what “true philosophy” means for Spinoza and how it “relates” to biblical exegesis, how it “relates” to biblical exegesis, and why the intrusion of philosophy into the Bible (or of the Bible into philosophy) proves so detrimental to both.

In a reply to a former student who had recently converted to Catholicism, and who chastised Spinoza’s philosophy before imploring him to “repent [his] sins, realize the fatal arrogance of [his] wretched and insane reasoning,” Spinoza responds calmly, setting out how he understands his own philosophy and its criterion of truth. To the question, “How do you know that your philosophy is the best [there is]?” he replies with the following words:

I do not presume that I have discovered the best Philosophy; but I know that I understand the true one. Moreover, if you ask how I know this, I will reply: in the same way you know that the three Angles of a Triangle are equal to two right angles. No one will deny that this is enough, not if his brain is healthy and he is not dreaming of unclean spirits, who inspire in us false ideas which are like the true. For the true is the indicator both of itself and of the false [*verum index sui et falsi*].³⁷

This “immanentist” idea that truth requires no external criterion beyond itself constitutes, from the very outset, a cornerstone of Spinozism. Already in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, we read: “for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea.”³⁸ In other words, Spinozist epistemology is not a search for *criteria* of truth, for some clear *sign* by which we can know that we know; it is a search for the *truth itself* — truth that bears within it its own mathematical certainty. By the same token, Spinoza can be certain that he possesses the true philosophy, expounded through the geometrical method and modeled on Euclidean demonstrations. In the “true cognition of things,” true philosophy owes the overcoming of anthropomorphic and anthropocentric prejudices to “mathematics, which is not concerned with purposes but only with the essences and properties of figures.” It likewise owes its immanent certainty, based on the “concatenation” of adequate ideas corresponding to the “concatenation of things,” to the geometrical order.³⁹

But to be able to follow (or reproduce) this demonstrative reasoning, one must first “distinguish carefully between an idea or conception of the mind and the images of things which we imagine. Then it is necessary to distinguish between ideas and the words by which we signify things.”⁴⁰ Philosophers who conflate words with ideas

³⁷ Ep 67 and 76, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. II, 443, 475.

³⁸ TIE §35, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, 18.

³⁹ EI App, Ellp7; 37, 47.

⁴⁰ Ellp49s; 88.

(particularly those who follow the line of Aristotelianism) are doomed to fail in grasping the true nature of things. True philosophy, therefore, must not attach itself to words as they occur in ordinary language, for these are naturally laden with errors as well as with corporeal and cultural biases. In his first published work, Spinoza writes: “Nevertheless, I do not wonder that Philosophers preoccupied with words, or grammar, should fall into such errors [the improper division of being into real being and being of reason] For they judge the things from the words, not the words from the things.”⁴¹ This nominalist stance likewise forms part of the immanentist critique of anthropomorphism and teleologism, as well as of the pursuit of truth with mathematical certainty.

True to these principles, Spinoza appears to pay little or no attention to the so-called “linguistic and cultural dimension” or “sources” of philosophy. From his perspective, philosophy, like mathematics, can dispense with linguistic mediation by means of demonstrations. Moreover, Spinoza seems to exclude the very possibility of cultural influence in the formation of his philosophy — or indeed of any true philosophy. In the *Ethics*, it is evident that he seeks to neutralize the semantic weight of the Latin terms he employs by redefining them within a wholly self-referential conceptual framework. Hence the famous definitional formula: *intelligo id*.⁴²

Thus, although his first encounter with philosophy was shaped by Hebraic and Sephardic culture, Spinoza’s deep conviction is that he transcends it — just as he later transcends the Latin in which he writes — in favor of a universal and universally intelligible thought, while still preserving a special fondness for, and ease in using, “the language in which [he] was raised.”⁴³ For him, philosophical training does not consist in the appropriation of a culture or of previously accumulated knowledge, but in the possession and exercise of our power to act and to understand, which is achievable only through our own intellectual-bodily striving.⁴⁴ The method of initiation into philosophy points, first and foremost, to a critical reflection on ordinary experiences of life and, at the same time, to an emendation or healing of the intellect. This, in turn, brings about a gradual (but necessary) transformation in our modes of perception and existence.

So, the process of realizing the innate power of the intellect to know things necessarily involves its “emendation.” This process is directed, among other things, against cultural and linguistic errors — errors themselves rooted in imagination and memory. Philosophical activity can be conceived, at least initially, as a way of employing our primary instrument, the intellect, to fashion further instruments. These, in turn, gradually serve to attain supreme perfection through knowledge of the principles governing the workings of Nature and the essences of things. Spinoza illustrates this with an analogy to the progression of material culture and civilization, explaining that “the intellect, by its inborn power, makes intellectual tools for itself, by which it acquires other powers for other intellectual works, and from these works still other tools, or the power of searching further, and so proceeds by stages, until it reaches the pinnacle of wisdom.”⁴⁵

But the crucial point is that none of these intellectual efforts can be effectively realized or brought to fruition by an isolated human being. The augmentation of our power of thought and of our power of action depends on the thing that is most necessary for a happy, active, and virtuous life: our relations with *others*. If the “better part of ourselves” is the “understanding,” then the “most useful thing” for a human being is another human being, “insofar as they live by the command of reason” and, consequently, “necessarily always agree in nature.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ CM I:1, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, 301.

⁴² EIII def. aff. 20, exp; 148.

⁴³ Ep 19, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, 361. On this issue, see my “Les langues de Spinoza, les langues des Juifs et la ‘langue juive’” in *Philosophical Remarks on City and Right to the City*, ed. M. Ertan Kardeş and Özgüç Güven (Istanbul: Istanbul University Press, 2021), 95–113, <https://doi.org/10.26650/BS/AA23.2021.001-2.07>.

⁴⁴ See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin. (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 287.

⁴⁵ TIE §31, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, 17.

⁴⁶ EIVp35ff.; 182ff.

Nothing therefore is more useful to a human being than another human being [*Homini igitur nihil homine utilius*]; human beings, I say, can wish for nothing better for preserving their own being than that all should agree in all things, so that the minds and bodies of all of them compose as it were one mind and one body, and all of them simultaneously endeavor as much as they can to preserve their own being, and all simultaneously pursue what is useful for all in common. It follows from this that human beings who are governed by reason, that is, human beings who aim at what is useful for themselves under the command of reason, want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for all other human beings [...].⁴⁷

One can discern in this passage (beneath its praise of the affective, corporeal, and intellectual union of human beings), a strategy of individual *conatus* grounded in reason as the criterion of the common good or common utility. From this it follows that desiring the good for others rests, in fact, on a natural form of *egoism and utilitarianism*, both of which are irreducible aspects of human nature. Once guided by the decrees of reason, these tendencies necessarily give rise to a social framework in which the desire for the common good could emerge and flourish. Yet this interactional strategy of *conatus* concerns not only social and political solidarity — though that is certainly one of its beneficial effects — but, more importantly, the formation of “common notions,” which constitute the very basis of adequate knowledge. In the *Ethics*, these notions are described as the sole means of conceiving, within a particular relation, the necessary and interrelated nature of the things that make up the universe, in other words, God or Nature, as an infinitely complex Individual who remains constant in form while changing and diversifying infinitely in its affections.⁴⁸

To sum up, according to Spinoza, the promise of true philosophy is nothing other than to lead us — through knowledge of the necessary causes of things — to our supreme perfection and blessedness. Yet we must not forget the context in which we are seeking to determine the goal of Spinozist philosophy. If philosophy provides us with true “salvation” and “blessedness” through an “adequate knowledge of God,” what, then, remains for religion or for the Bible?

A detailed hermeneutical inquiry into the “true meanings” of biblical passages, or into the compositional structure of the Bible itself lies beyond the scope of this article.⁴⁹ We will content ourselves with saying only this: from Spinoza’s point of view, there is no doubt that the Bible, too, conveys salvation — but not through the discovery of esoteric philosophical doctrines or the disclosure of the true nature of God and of things. It does so solely through its simplest and most universal moral precepts, namely “justice and charity.” These universal precepts are consistently ordered and upheld throughout all the books of Scripture, whether in the “Old” or the New Testament. The meanings of the verses that contain these “matters necessary for salvation and happiness” can be easily understood by all with clarity and certainty, regardless of one’s knowledge of biblical language or culture.⁵⁰ So central are these to his view of the Bible that Spinoza does not hesitate to derive from them all “the dogmas of universal faith or the fundamentals of the intent of the whole of Scripture.” And at the very core of this universal biblical faith, we find the teaching “that there exists a supreme being who loves justice and charity, and that, to be saved, all people must obey and venerate Him by practising justice and charity towards their neighbour.”⁵¹ In short, insofar as they call for obedience to these moral principles, religions too can provide human beings with salvation.⁵²

The lesson to be drawn here is the following: in order to realize the salutary effects intended by God and His prophets, Scripture must be liberated from theological-philosophical inventions altogether extraneous to the

⁴⁷ EIVp18s; 172-73.

⁴⁸ EII lem7s; 59-60.

⁴⁹ For a broader analysis of this subject, see, among many others, Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza. État et religion* (Lyon: ENS, 2005), 81-92.; Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 104-70.

⁵⁰ TTP XII §11; TTP VII §17; 170-71, 110-11.

⁵¹ TTP XIV §10; 182.

⁵² Cf. Alexandre Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971), 187-280.

text. These are, in fact, nothing but theological inventions that obscure the universal moral precepts constituting the essence of all its doctrines. For it is precisely these precepts that render Scripture *sacred*: Spinoza's ultimate aim seems to be to persuade his readers to seek sacredness not in the mere letter of the biblical texts, but in pious thoughts and righteous, charitable actions, which are inspired by the Word of God that the Bible surely contains in its essence. In this way, alongside his historical-critical exegesis, he develops a performative and utilitarian approach to the reading of sacred texts. Accordingly, even when conducted within the framework of a historical-critical exegesis, a religious and moral reading should take as its sole semantic and hermeneutic criterion the *morally beneficial effects* produced by the words of the Bible. On this point, Spinoza writes:

Words acquire a particular meaning simply from their usage [*verba ex solo usu certam habent significationem*]. Words deployed in accordance with this usage, in such a way that on reading them people are moved to devotion, will be sacred words; and any book written with words so used will also be sacred.⁵³

When it comes to words, therefore, we can speak only of a performative and conditional sacredness. It follows, moreover, that the words of the Bible, and the Bible itself, possess a sacred character only insofar as they lead people, through obedience, to the love of God and the practice of justice and charity — in short, to “the true way of life.” Philosophy is in no way necessary (and may even be counterproductive) for drawing from the Bible the true teaching that leads to salvation.

This does not mean, by any means, that philosophy has nothing to do with salvation or blessedness. On the contrary, as we noted above, Spinoza conceives it as the more certain path to the more genuine forms of these states. Yet this difficult path involves something *very different from obedience* to the moral precepts of Scripture. Here, salvation follows necessarily from adequate knowledge — knowledge, among other things, of the human condition and of the order and connection of things within God or Nature. This means that Spinozism implies, for some people at least, an entirely different mode of existence: one liberated from the yoke of revealed positive law and governed solely by the command of reason. Spinoza, in fact, likes to describe philosophers (or “free persons”) as “those who are above the law, i.e., who follow virtue not as a law, but from love, because it is the best thing.”⁵⁴ In other words, although the actions of moral and pious people (in the biblical sense) and of philosophers may appear similar from a practical and external perspective, they differ radically in the primary and proximate causes from which they follow.

Conclusion: Spinozist Refutation of Scriptural-Religious Philosophy

We now know that, according to Spinoza, although we may find our salvation through the Bible, we will never find there the “truth of things [*rerum veritas*]” — that is, the truth about God or the necessary order of nature — because it is simply not the Bible's task to provide it. Such truths, rather, must be attained through philosophy (or science). Therefore, one of the principles to be followed in interpreting Scripture is “not to be blinded by our own reasoning, in so far as it is founded on the principles of natural knowledge [i.e., philosophy]” so as “not to confuse the genuine sense of a passage with the truth of things.”⁵⁵

When Spinoza says that the “biblical teaching contains no elevated theories or philosophical doctrines, but only the simplest matters,” it is easy to see why this poses a problem for the proponents of religious-scriptural philosophy.⁵⁶ It means, for example, that contrary to Maimonides' assumption, Scripture does not teach us the “essence of things” or other metaphysical truths. The whole premise upon which scriptural philosophy is built is thereby decisively undermined. Thus, the purpose of Scripture is not to convey philosophical speculations concerning the

⁵³ TTP XII §5; 165.

⁵⁴ Ep 19, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, 360.; see also EIVp63c, EIVp73dem; 207, 213.

⁵⁵ TTP VII §5; 100.

⁵⁶ TTP XIII §1; 172.

nature of God, the order of the universe, or related matters. If we truly wish to associate a form of “knowledge” intended for the multitude with this collection of sacred books, it is, paradoxically, one that leads not to true knowledge of God but merely to the most useful and loving obedience to Him. Even this knowledge of obedience, however, rests on a representation of God that does not fully correspond to the reality of God as substance.⁵⁷ As Spinoza clearly writes:

[I]t was not the purpose of the Bible to teach any branch of knowledge [*Scripturae intentum non fuisse scientias docere*]. For from this we can readily infer that it requires nothing of men other than obedience, and condemns not ignorance but disobedience. [...] All other philosophical concerns [*reliquas autem speculationes*] that do not directly lead to this goal, whether concerned with knowledge of God or of natural things, are irrelevant to Scripture [*Scripturam non tangere*] and must therefore be set aside from revealed religion.⁵⁸

The question naturally arises: which philosophical speculations, then, are at stake here? It is as if Spinoza were once again responding to those who read Scripture with the intention of discovering in it — through allegorical interpretation — a revealed science or an esoteric knowledge. And by rejecting this *Philonic premise* altogether, he seeks, in fact, to restore Scripture to its *proper function* and *genuine meaning*. For one must ask: if the only knowledge that Scripture requires of the faithful of revealed religion is that extremely simple knowledge that leads to obedience to God through justice and charity, why then does the Bible not function as a firm foundation for morality and sociopolitical stability? Why is there so much controversy, sectarian conflict, and even war over its true teaching? One of the reasons for this situation lies with the theological-philosophical authorities who distort the Bible’s peaceful and loving message with irrelevant interpretative interventions. Of them Spinoza writes defiantly: “They were only concerned to derive Aristotelian trifles [*nugas Aristotelicas*] and some figments of their own from Scripture.”⁵⁹

Thus, concerning these philosophical speculations irrelevant to Scripture, Spinoza points chiefly to the Greek philosophers who provided the foundations of medieval scriptural philosophy. What the proponents of this tradition believe they discover in the Bible as its hidden or allusive teaching is, in fact, merely the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideas they had already presupposed to be the truth itself:

[W]hile I admit that they could not express greater veneration for the deepest mysteries of Scripture, what I see in their actual teaching is nothing more than the speculations of the Aristotelians or Platonists. Since they did not wish to appear to be following pagans [*ne gentiles sectari viderentur*], they adapted the scriptures to them. It was insufficient for them to be mouthing nonsense themselves, they also desired, together with the Greeks, to render the prophets equally nonsensical [*prophetas cum iisdem deliravisse voluerunt*]. This proves clearly that they cannot even imagine what is really divine in Scripture.⁶⁰

It is well known that Spinoza had little esteem for these famous philosophers of antiquity — and, indeed, of all time.⁶¹ Yet the harshness of Spinoza’s words in these passages is striking. What is also remarkable is that he positions himself on the side of the prophets against the *hermeneutical violence* of the commentators, who are inspired by the “nonsense” of the Greeks. In this way, he subtly turns the accusation of heresy, which has undoubtedly hung over him since his excommunication, back against his potential (and actual) accusers. From this perspective, it is in fact the Jewish and Christian theologians who are too attached to “pagan” thought, to the point of adapting revealed Scripture to the profane speculations of the Greeks. Religious-scriptural philosophy thus amounts to nothing more than subjecting Scripture to the ideas of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy. Spinoza writes here with both irony and humor:

⁵⁷ Cf. Elp11-36; 10–34; TTP XIV §10; 182–83.

⁵⁸ TTP XIII §3; 173.

⁵⁹ TTP I §14; 18.

⁶⁰ TTP Pref §9; 8.

⁶¹ Ep. 56, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. II, 423.

[I]t would be truly surprising had these men introduced anything novel, on any philosophical question, that had not long before been commonplace among pagan philosophers [*gentiles philosophos*] (despite which they claim the latter were ‘blind’). For if you ask what mysteries they discover hidden in Scripture, you will find nothing but the fabrications of Aristotle or Plato or some like philosopher which mostly could be more readily dreamt up by some layman than derived from Scripture by even the most consummate scholar.⁶²

Thus, even though they “imported into religion so many philosophical questions that the Church now resembles a university and religion a field of learning, or rather of ceaseless scholarly controversy,” these eminent theologians and commentators prove incapable of inventing new philosophical questions or solutions — let alone of uncovering profound mysteries concealed in Scripture. Spinoza once again plays on their ambivalent stance toward the Greek masters. These, after all, are pagans-Gentiles who, according to both Judaism and Christianity (albeit in very different ways), are ignorant of revealed truths (which are themselves of very different natures). Yet theologians readily enlist their insights to “illuminate” biblical verses that are divinely revealed or inspired. Against those who accuse him of atheism, Spinoza retorts that they are the ones profaning prophetic discourse and ultimately reducing Scripture to the role of servant or mouthpiece of the philosophy of the Gentiles. Those who uphold the idea of philosophy as the servant of theology turn out, in fact, to be proponents of the idea of the Bible as the servant of pagan authors. *Biblia ancilla paganorum/gentilium* instead of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

These are the reasons why, according to Spinoza, it is high time to put an end to religious-scriptural philosophy and thereby liberate both the Bible and philosophy (or science) from each other’s yoke — and, at the same time, from the yoke of theology. Philosophy must be free to flourish through the natural powers of human reason and human relations, without being suppressed by fictitious biblical restrictions. The Bible, for its part, must be rehabilitated as a source of peace, concord, and love (on the basis of its moral precepts) and freely subjected to scientific analysis with respect to its historical dimensions. In this dual liberation, Spinoza not only redefines the boundaries between faith and reason, or between Scripture and philosophy, by systematically discrediting theological speculation on biblical texts, but also lays the groundwork for modern freedom of thought — especially in the philosophical study of the human condition and human felicity, as well as in the scientific study of the Bible.

⁶² TTP XIII §2; 173.

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