

# **"THE HISTORIES AND SUCCESSES OF THE HEBREWS": THE DEMISE OF THE BIBLICAL POLITY IN SPINOZA'S THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL TREATISE**

Martin D. Yaffe

*This essay examines Spinoza's account of the political history of the Israelites (in chapter seventeen of the Theologico-Political Treatise) in the light of the standards which, he maintains, govern the writing of histories in general.*

Here it happens that human beings in their Chronicles and histories narrate their own opinions rather than the very things enacted, and that one and the same incident is narrated so differently by two human beings who have different opinions that they seem to be speaking of two incidents, and finally that it is often not very difficult to investigate the opinions of the Chronographers and historians from the histories alone.<sup>1</sup>

*Jewish Political Studies Review 7:1-2 (Spring 1995)*

## I

In chapter seventeen of his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza offers a sketch of the rise and fall of the biblical polity. He calls it "The Histories and Successes of the Hebrews."<sup>2</sup> Spinoza's sketch is remarkable for the blasphemous inference he would have us draw from it, namely that the biblical way of life is seriously flawed and scarcely worth imitating or following nowadays. Yet his sketch is also remarkable in light of the frank suggestion earlier in the *Treatise* that written histories are perhaps untrustworthy.<sup>3</sup> Readers who recall the earlier assertion cannot help wondering how Spinoza could have meant his own sketch to be trustworthy.

According to Spinoza, the untrustworthiness of histories is threefold. For one thing, historians may prefer their own opinions over events themselves. Sometimes, then, two historians with differing opinions narrate the same event so differently as to seem to be narrating different events. Hence, finally, it is often all too easy to discover a historian's opinions simply by reading his narrative. Historians tend to be, in short, opinionated, oblivious (to others' accounts), and ostentatious.

Spinoza leaves little doubt that he means his blanket criticisms to cover the biblical narrator as well. More exactly, he tars the biblical Ezra, whom he believes to be the author or redactor of the first twelve books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>4</sup> Ezra's histories purport to narrate events from the beginning of the world, up to and including the origin of the Hebrews, the formation of their political community, its inevitable rifts, and its eventual destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. Spinoza supplies a purified, or new and improved account of those events. But considering his blasphemous intent, we must ask just how Spinoza's account is meant to correct Ezra's. Does he, unlike Ezra, avoid conflating the events he narrates with his opinions about them? Or does his self-imposed distance from Ezra serve to protect him against rendering his own account unrecognizable vis-à-vis Ezra's, his ultimate documentary source? Or, assuming that his own opinions, unlike Ezra's, do not intrude overmuch, does he nevertheless forgo wearing them on his sleeve? As often happens with Spinoza's arguments in the *Treatise*, the answers are in each case yes and no.

## II

As for the admixture of opinion which overlays Ezra's histories, Spinoza does not bother to pry it loose piecemeal. He looks instead to dissolving it all at once, to reveal *in toto* the underlying bedrock of events. He considers how the biblical narrator's opinions must have come to be superimposed in the first place. In other words, he aims to expose the offending opinions at birth. For to understand their coming into being is to understand in reverse how they might be removed.

He thus arrives at a practical formula, or hermeneutic, as a means for offsetting those opinions as they appear in the text. His hermeneutic follows from his prior characterization of Ezra's books as a whole, or at least of "the five books vulgarly said to be Moses'."<sup>5</sup> They are books of law. They describe the political constitution intended for the ancient Hebrews while living in their promised land. Yet there is more to them than bare law.<sup>6</sup> Human beings are not governed simply by written decrees, backed by force. Force, or the threat of it, restrains unruly bodies and perhaps cows rebellious minds. But it does not by itself "moderate spirits"<sup>7</sup> so as to promote positive cooperation in society. Fellow citizens also need things to do and contemplate together, commensurate with their common abilities and inclinations. Hence Spinoza finds in the biblical books "ceremonies" and "histories" as well.<sup>8</sup> "Ceremonies" include not only animal sacrifices<sup>9</sup> (adopted from the Hebrews' neighbors) but also farming practices (plowing, sowing, and reaping stipulations),<sup>10</sup> personal habits (concerning food,<sup>11</sup> dress,<sup>12</sup> hairstyle,<sup>13</sup> shaving,<sup>14</sup> and celebrating),<sup>15</sup> and the use of handmade accessories (signs on doorposts, hands, and foreheads).<sup>16</sup> These legally mandated activities filled daily life and so prevented the people, who had been slaves until recently and were unused to freedom, from misusing their private discretion in publicly disruptive ways. The purpose of the biblical ceremonies was thus emphatically political. This same purpose Spinoza ascribes *mutatis mutandis* to the biblical histories too.

The political motivation behind the biblical histories, insofar as it serves to explain the opinions found in Ezra's text, is clarified by the following examples. On the one hand, he cites the opinion of Joshua, "and perhaps also the author who wrote his

history," to the effect that the earth is at rest and the sun moves around it, and that the sun could therefore stand still for a time to allow for a military victory (Josh. 10:11).<sup>17</sup> Spinoza's point is that the biblical figures, and by implication their author(s), were unscientific. They lacked a sound grasp of natural causes, and therefore of the historical events which happened in accord with them. They were public-spirited but ignorant. When judged by the standards of modern enlightenment, their opinions are laughable and easily dismissed. Modern science thus provides a convenient touchstone for Spinoza's hermeneutic, and a trusted guide to the biblical historian's possible biases.

On the other hand, he cites the opinion of Moses that the Hebrews are God's chosen nation (Deut. 4:4, 7, 8, 32; 10:15).<sup>18</sup> In the wake of the previous example, this opinion is now subject to qualification. Moses was speaking to the Hebrews "according to their childish capacity."<sup>19</sup> Being unscientific, they could think of God no further than as simply exercising particular providence on their behalf. But Spinoza insists, as it were scientifically, that there is only general providence: God's direction or governance of things means nothing more nor less than the "fixed and immutable order of nature";<sup>20</sup> God's decrees are identical with the "universal laws of nature";<sup>21</sup> God's power is exactly equivalent to nature's;<sup>22</sup> and God's help to human beings is the same as whatever works to preserve and enhance their lives, whether by their own natural-born and acquired endeavors (called by Spinoza God's "inside help")<sup>23</sup> or else by fortunate circumstances beyond their making (called God's "outside help"),<sup>24</sup> i.e., by "miracles."<sup>25</sup> God's having chosen the Hebrews, then, cannot be said to have been by reason of their supposedly superior intelligence or their moral virtue; on the contrary, statistically considered, these qualities prove to be spread more or less evenly among all nations. It was only "by reason [*ratione*]"<sup>26</sup> of society and of fortune, whereby [the Hebrew nation] acquired an imperium and whereby it retained that same one [*id ipsum*] for so many years."<sup>27</sup> The opinions of Moses' (or Ezra's) addressees notwithstanding, the Hebrews' divine chosenness amounts to nothing more than their erstwhile political survival.

From the foregoing considerations, the outlines of Spinoza's biblical hermeneutic emerge clearly enough. In order to separate off the actual events of Ezra's histories from the latter's opinions

concerning them, Spinoza restricts himself to looking for just those causes which effectively contributed to the formation, preservation, and demise of the Hebrews' imperium. Obviously such causes are best known in hindsight, after the status of the imperium in question has been decided once and for all by the subsequent facts of the case — or by God's decrees, if we may speak as Spinoza does for the moment. Here, surely, Spinoza as historian would seem to have the advantage over Ezra. After all, his hindsight is longer and his immunity to the charms of Ezra's opinions, or at any rate to the opinions found in Ezra's text, is presumably greater. And yet Spinoza undermines his presumptive superiority to Ezra. He allows that the Hebrew nation is by no means altogether finished. He goes out of his way to point out that there are Jews still living in scattered communities outside their lost homeland, and under certain by no means improbable conditions they might well come to reestablish their imperium as before.<sup>28</sup> No more than Ezra, then, can Spinoza as historian be simply said to have in view a *fait accompli*. We must reckon with the further possibility that for Spinoza, as for the biblical Ezra, his situation as historian is only part of a larger political setting in which he finds himself, and to which likewise the opinions in his text somehow conform.

### III

Spinoza's attempt to filter out Ezra's opinions from his historical sketch leads him to an apparent obliviousness with regard to his biblical source. The obliviousness turns out to be more than just his need to select from the welter of biblical data in the interest of economy. It follows as a matter of principle from how he sees his task as historian. Spinoza, as we have already suggested, means to trace the mechanics of the rise and fall of the biblical imperium, while at the same time he is compelled to acknowledge certain ongoing after-effects of that imperium in the form of the continued survival of the Jews, etc. Hence he cannot simply read off the mechanisms he would seek from the biblical data alone. If the future of the Hebrew nation is still open, then no historian can know merely from the biblical record what ancient mechanisms will yet prove to be at work in

the possible restoration of the Jews' political fortunes during their undisclosed future. Any claim by a present-day historian to have exhausted those mechanisms, on the contrary, cannot help being somewhat dubious. We must therefore say that Spinoza's task as historian requires him to make certain arbitrary concessions. Simply in order to bring his proper subject into view, he must fix its exact points of origin and demise beforehand. He thus alters or custom-tailors the scope of his subject to fit his immediate purpose. Here, as we shall see, he both acknowledges and ignores his biblical source.

Spinoza's custom-tailoring makes its appearance during his account of the very origin of the biblical imperium.<sup>29</sup> He introduces the unbiblical term "nature" into the account, despite his having been at pains before to stress the biblical figures' unscientific ignorance of that notion.<sup>30</sup> He does not waste further time trying to understand the biblical figures as they understood themselves before proceeding to understand them better than they understood themselves. Thus, the biblical imperium originated shortly after the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt, when they found themselves in the "natural state"<sup>31</sup> of being no longer bound by Egyptian laws, and of being able to establish new laws at will and to occupy whatever lands they wished. Each then owed nothing to anyone else but retained his "natural right"<sup>32</sup> to anything he could manage to do to maintain himself. On the advice of Moses, "in whom they had the greatest faith,"<sup>33</sup> they decided collectively to transfer all their natural right, or power of self-preservation, to no one except God, whose power alone they believed could preserve them. The resulting pact or covenant with God, says Spinoza, may be called a "theocracy"<sup>34</sup> (again, an unbiblical term), for there was absolutely no difference in the imperium they established between civil law and religion: religious dogmas were not teachings but laws and commands; piety was considered the same as justice, and impiety was both criminal and treasonous; to be deficient in religion was to fall short in one's civic duty; and whoever died a martyr was reputed as dying for his fatherland. In fact, however, the theocracy remained a concealed democracy:

Since the Hebrews transferred their right to no one else, but as in a Democracy all yielded their right equally, and with

one mouth shouted, Whatever God will speak (no mediator having been expressed) we shall do,<sup>35</sup> here it follows that by this pact all remained utterly equal, and the right to consult God and to receive and interpret the laws was equal for all, and all held absolutely all administration of the imperium equally.<sup>36</sup>

What made the theocracy-in-appearance a democracy-in-fact was its origin in the prior democratic consent by the Hebrews in their "natural state" to the direct covenant with God, from which their absolutely equal distribution of rights and offices followed as a matter of course. Despite Spinoza's eventual endorsement of what has since come to be called liberal democracy, the *Treatise's* straightforward assessment of the weakness of biblical theocracy proves to be at the same time an oblique assessment of the weakness of democracy — or at least of democracy inadequately conceived.

There is thus a democratic slant to Spinoza's account of the unsatisfactoriness of the original theocracy (*née* democracy) during the Hebrews' first public meeting with God. Being mortally terrified and thunderstruck, Spinoza reports, the Hebrews afterwards approached Moses anew with an alternative arrangement. Spinoza glosses their words as follows:

behold, we have heard God speaking in the fire, and there is no reason [*causa*] why we should wish to die; certainly this huge fire will devour us; if the voice of God is to be heard by us again, we shall certainly die. You, therefore, approach and hear all our God's sayings [*dicta*], and you (not God) will speak to us: Everything which God will speak to you, we shall obey and we shall execute [*exequemur*].<sup>37</sup>

Remarkably, Spinoza's gloss amounts to an unannounced shift in his biblical sources from Exodus 19ff. to Deuteronomy 5. The Exodus source offers a direct narrative of the theophany at Mount Sinai. The Deuteronomy source is only an indirect narrative, set inside Moses' farewell speech to his people at the Jordan River a generation later. In blurring the difference between his sources, Spinoza ignores an indication in the Exodus passage which the Deuteronomy passage momentarily overlooks. It is

the indication that those present at the theophany were not the entire community of men, women and children, but only the adult males or heads of families, who presumably spoke for each family as a whole (cf. Ex. 19:15). Spinoza's account, like Deuteronomy's, is momentarily oblivious to the family. Ezra's overall account of the biblical theocracy, however, treats the family rather than the individual as the fundamental social unit.<sup>38</sup> Were Spinoza's account to be judged simply in terms of its faithfulness to the letter of Ezra's, his obliviousness to the family in favor of the individual would be fatal to its credibility. And yet Spinoza's obliviousness does not stem from sheer naiveté or obtuseness. It follows, as we have said, from his attempt to circumvent Ezra's potentially intrusive opinions by generating the biblical theocracy from the quasi-democratic "natural state" which is said to have immediately preceded it.

One way of trying to solve the resulting difficulty of just how Spinoza's account squares with Ezra's would be to say that Spinoza imitates his biblical model in idealizing<sup>39</sup> his sources. That is, as Deuteronomy idealizes the Exodus passage, by looking at it from the perspective of certain higher possibilities implicit in the original but discerned more adequately in hindsight, so Spinoza perhaps idealizes Deuteronomy. In the former case, we could conceivably appeal to the peroration of Moses' farewell speech in order to argue that the explicit inclusion of women and children in the report of the Hebrews' standing before God at the Jordan River (Deut. 29:9-14) is evidence that, despite their *de facto* exclusion at Mount Sinai, the covenant was meant all along to be democratic, not just familial. But then consistency would require us to go further and idealize, say, the social policies of the biblical theocracy as well, which would seem to have been instituted *de facto* to preserve and possibly ennoble the family. For example, the redistribution of wealth mandated by the sabbatical year (which included the forgiveness of debts and the freeing of acquired slaves) and the jubilee (which protected homestead farms from bankruptcies) would have to be reinterpreted democratically as ways of promoting and enhancing individual rights, especially among the poor.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, a direct road would lead from those biblical provisions to the modern secular, liberal-democratic state, where similar policies may be adopted (or abandoned, as with the

homestead provisions) by voters acting in their own self-interest, rather than on the basis of any ancient authority. Nevertheless, so far as Spinoza himself is concerned, there is no warrant for such idealizing. In the first twelve chapters of the *Treatise*, Spinoza insists on (what he takes to be) a strictly literal reading, as opposed to any speculative reading whatever of the biblical text.<sup>41</sup> The liberal-democratic state, moreover, is the explicit political teaching of the remaining chapters of the *Treatise*, and given its origin in the "natural state" as well, its merits are meant to be separated from any biblical precedent.<sup>42</sup> All in all, in the *Treatise* as a whole Spinoza arrives at his political teaching by way of a vehement critique of the biblical alternative. In Spinoza's view, then, liberal democracy is hardly the idealized improvement of the biblical theocracy but, if anything, its thoroughgoing replacement.

Seen in the light of its liberal-democratic replacement, Spinoza's critique of the biblical theocracy comes to sight as a critique of its divided sovereignty. Divided sovereignty was far from anyone's original intent. Rather, as a result of their revised covenant with God, the Hebrews granted Moses absolute monarchic power, including the sole right to learn God's decrees.<sup>43</sup> Since God's decrees were then fully revealed to him, and not partially hidden as with pagan monarchs, Moses' power was thereby further strengthened. His being the unique beneficiary of revelation, or of the full divine disclosure of the laws, assured the people that his every public act was divinely authorized. The revelation thus forestalled all doubts or questions about the legitimacy of his imperium. Hence, in order to stabilize the theocratic character of the imperium, Moses chose no single successor to rule like himself. Such a successor might easily claim new revelations, and so undermine the authority of the old. Instead he bequeathed a threefold separation of judicial, executive and legislative powers. The judiciary he bestowed on Aaron and his descendants, as high priests, and delegated their subordinate functions to the tribe of Levi. The executive<sup>44</sup> he handed over to Joshua, as commander-in-chief of a federated militia of the entire remaining twelve tribes, for whom Joshua and Aaron's son Eleazar were also to divide up the promised land into homestead farms. Mutual checks-and-balances were left between the judiciary and the executive, as for example the

provision that only the commander-in-chief (or, in his eventual absence, the “princes”<sup>45</sup> of each tribe) could consult God at will, and then only in emergencies<sup>46</sup> and only through the high priest, who would in turn specify God’s detailed response to be followed out by the executive. Meanwhile, the legislative was left fixed in written form by Moses.

Yet the intersection of divine revelation with practical politics was a dangerous one. Collisions proved inevitable, as Spinoza’s reading tries to show. On paper, the theocracy perhaps worked to “moderate spirits” to some extent.<sup>47</sup> Several measures would restrain the tribal “princes” from abusing their powers.<sup>48</sup> First, they could not interpret the laws by which they were bound (since Moses had given that right to the Levites, Deut. 21:5) or hire mercenaries (in place of the universal citizen-militia). Second, the “princes” were associated solely by the bond of religion, so that any “prince” who broke it was considered an enemy to the others. Third, there was always “the fear of a new Prophet,”<sup>49</sup> who might persuade an oppressed populace of his right to consult God directly on their behalf as Moses had. Fourth, tribal “princes” ruled not by right of blood or nobility “but only by reason of age and by virtue [*virtute*].”<sup>50</sup> Lastly, the tribal militias, being composed of citizen-farmers, generally preferred peace to war. At the same time, further measures also served to restrain the people. The equating of piety with patriotism unified them by generating a common hatred for foreigners. And a “most solid”<sup>51</sup> restraint was the aforementioned ceremonial laws, which fostered private self-discipline as well as a public charitableness and love among fellow citizens. Nevertheless, Spinoza insists, law-abidingness is not natural. Indeed, the unnaturalness of all political cooperation is the fundamental cause of its fragility, as he himself pauses to emphasize:

surely [nature] does not create nations, but individuals, who are not distinguished into nations unless from a difference of languages and of received laws and mores, and only from these two — to wit, laws and mores — can it arise that each nation has a unique character, a unique condition, and finally unique prejudices.<sup>52</sup>

If the character and condition and prejudices of a nation result entirely from its laws and mores, as Spinoza maintains, then the Hebrews' falling away from their laws must be explained in terms of the defectiveness of those same laws and mores — as Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's words are seen to confirm as well.<sup>53</sup> Spinoza ultimately traces the defectiveness of the Hebrews' laws to their theocratic origins. His telling evidence is the incident of the golden calf, which provoked the "anger" of the "heavenly spirit."<sup>54</sup> Punishment for the Hebrews' brief relapse into idolatry during Moses' forty-day absence at Mount Sinai was aimed at the firstborn of each family, who were originally left in charge of the sacrificial worship. Now Moses transferred their priestly rights exclusively to the Levites, who in lieu of any land rights were to be supported by taxation from the other tribes (Num. 8:17f.; Deut. 10:8f.). But God's vengeance here was misdirected, Spinoza argues, for the equal right and honor of all the tribes, and even the safety of the priests, were no longer assured. The "histories themselves"<sup>55</sup> report a rebellion over priestly rights by those who claimed that Moses' choice of the Levites was an act of favoritism toward his own tribe. And when a miracle extinguished the rebels, "there arose a new and universal sedition of the whole people, believing that they had been extinguished not by God the judge, but by the art of Moses."<sup>56</sup> Hence God predicted the Hebrews' eventual falling away from their religion after Moses' death (Deut.31:21), as did Moses on the basis of his own firsthand experience. Ezra's subsequent narratives accordingly describe "the great changes, and the great licentiousness, luxuriousness and sloth toward everything, by which everything began to deteriorate,"<sup>57</sup> until after often having been subjected to foreign powers they openly broke with their old covenant in wanting a mortal king. Yet as the resulting lines of kings began to monopolize the imperium, these prompted "huge material for new seditions,"<sup>58</sup> bringing not only rivalries over throne and altar, but also new and competing prophets who provoked further discords and civil wars, until the final collapse of the imperium under the Babylonians.

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched for us to describe Spinoza's history (as opposed to Ezra's) as falling somewhere between a modern account of an old-country saga and a statesmanship

manual for future citizens of liberal democracies. Like the former, it recalls the deeds and misdeeds of authoritative figures dead and gone but more or less vivid in popular and pious memory. Like the latter, however, it is meant to have current practical application. Its chief application crystallizes as its old-fashioned authoritativeness melts. What has appeared most solid at the beginning of Spinoza's history, namely the rootedness of the biblical way of life in the Hebrews' covenant with the provident yet fear-inspiring God, is soon recognized as the height of political folly. The inference becomes inescapable that no stable laws and mores, no matter how democratically conceived, can be based on a covenant with such a God. Divine anger remains politically unsettling. Here, at bottom, is where Spinoza parts company with his biblical source. Having sprung the Hebrews' theocracy from its "natural" ground, invisible to the unscientific Ezra and so impervious to his opinions, Spinoza outlines the trajectory of its development until its putative demise, at a point before Ezra even arrives on the scene.

#### IV

From Spinoza's point of view, we may safely characterize Ezra's opinions as that of a public-spirited, if perhaps partisan, Hebrew. He is no prophet, if only we judge him by the evidence his histories supply for Spinoza's claim that the prophets could not help being politically destabilizing.<sup>59</sup> Nor, for similar reasons, can his histories be said to be simply royalist. Presumably, then, Ezra inclines toward the priestly party, since both as historian and as religious leader of the returnees from Babylon he is evidently learned in the law, and his return helps inaugurate a second imperium ruled largely by the priests.<sup>60</sup> At any rate, this much is evident about Ezra's opinions "from the histories alone," to use Spinoza's expression.<sup>61</sup> But what about Spinoza's own opinions, if any? Do these decorate, or perhaps determine, his history in turn?

The most direct evidence for Spinoza's opinions as historian would seem to be chapter eighteen of the *Treatise*. It lists "some political dogmas"<sup>62</sup> or pointers derived from the preceding historical sketch. The immediately relevant pointers amount to

four:<sup>63</sup> do not give religious leaders political authority; do not make laws abridging freedom of thought; let the political sovereign alone decide right and wrong (within the foregoing limitations); and never let people not used to kings choose a king. All four are caveats which point in the direction of liberal democracy. That is, they confirm Spinoza's preference for a popularly elected government which considers religion a private matter, part of each citizen's personal liberty. Is liberal democracy then Spinoza's "opinion"?

That the answer to this last question is both no and yes may be seen as follows. Spinoza claims to "conclude"<sup>64</sup> his political pointers from his historical sketch. But his sketch, as he would have us understand it, does not consist of his own opinions so much as his attempt to blunt Ezra's opinions. He especially wishes to counter Ezra's opinion that the biblical theocracy ought to be restored.<sup>65</sup> To that end, as we have seen, he appeals to "nature." Knowledge of nature is from the very start of the *Treatise* identified with knowledge of scientific laws, the polar opposite of opinion.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless Spinoza does not teach what nature is from a strictly scientific point of view. He only appeals to nature within the limits of his set purpose, which is to wean potential students of nature, or philosophers, from the theological opinions which would impede their study.<sup>67</sup> In other words, he aims to dissuade potential philosophers from Ezra's (or the Bible's) opinions, in favor of modern science. If our foregoing analysis is correct, he does so by indicating the "natural" basis for the biblical histories, including why they have been wrapped in Ezra's opinions to begin with. He thus presents "nature," and the liberal democracy which is held to follow from it, not in its own guise, or scientifically, but in the guise of Ezra's opinions suitably trimmed. In this way, we may speak of Spinoza's opinion-ridden manner of presentation as the unscientific or extra-scientific means by which he conveys to the reader his quasi-theological exhortation to science and to a liberal democracy conducive to its flourishing. He addresses his reader by means of opinions which he has carefully and studiously cultivated for that purpose.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

1. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. VI, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. Gebhardt (4 vols.; Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925), vol. III, p. 92, ll. 5-10; henceforth references to chapter, page and line numbers in Gebhardt's edition appear as, e.g., VI.92.5-10. Translations are my own, though cross-references to R.H.M. Elwes' (reprint; New York: Dover, 1951) and Samuel Shirley's (2nd ed.; Leiden and New York: Brill, 1991) will appear as, e.g., E92f., S135. Cf. Yaffe, "On Beginning to Translate Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670)," *Il cannocchiale* (1994), pp. 199-216, and "Biblical Religion and Liberal Democracy: Comments on Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* and Sacks' *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*," *The Political Science Reviewer* XXIII (1994), pp. 284-341.
2. *Hebraeorum historias, & successus* (XVII.203.8f.; E216, "the history and successes of the Jews"; S252, "the course taken by the history of the Jews").
3. See note 1, above.
4. VII.125.27-IX.134.5, E128-38, S169-78.
5. V.70.13ff., E70ff., S113ff.
6. Cf. V.74.18-21, 75.12-25; E74, 75; S117, 118.
7. *Animos moderari* (XVII.212.5; E226 suppresses this expression; S261, "exercise control over men's passions"). See also notes 37 and 47, below.
8. V.69.1-76.29 and 76.30-80.31; E69-76 and 76-80; S112-19 and 119-23.
9. Cf. Ex. 12:43-50, 13:11-13, 20:21-22, 23:18, 29:15-25, 31-46, 34:19-20, 25, Lev. 1-7, 12:6-8, 14:10-32, 17:1-9, 19:5-8, 22:1-33, 23:12-14, 17-20, 36-38, 27:9-13, 26, Num. 5:15, 9:9-14, 15:1-31, 18:8-19, 19:1-10, 28:1-30:1, Deut. 12:4-14, 26-27, 15:19-21, 16:4-7, 17:1, 18:3, 23:19.
10. Cf. Ex. 23:10-12, 19, 34:21, Lev. 19:9-10, 23-25, 23-33, 25:1-7, 11-12, Deut. 14:22, 18:4, 21:4, 22:9-10, 23:25-26, 26:10-16.
11. Cf. Gen. 32:33, Ex. 12:3-24, 13:3, 6-7, 21:28, 22:30, 23:19, 29:31-34, 34:26, Lev. 7:19-21, 10:12-15, 11:1-47, 16:27, 17:10-16, 19:5-8, 23-26, 22:10-16, 23:14, 29, Num. 6:1-4, 9:9-14, Deut. 12:15-28, 14:3-21, 15:19-23, 21:20, 22:6-7, 26:12-14, 32:38.
12. Cf. Ex. 28:2-43, Num. 15:37-41, Deut. 22:5, 11-12.
13. Cf. Lev. 19:27, 21:5, Num. 6:5.
14. Cf. Lev. 19:27, 21:5, Deut. 14:1.

15. Cf. Ex. 12:1-28, 16:29, 20:8-11, 23:12, 14-17, 34:18, 21-26, 35:2-3, Lev. 23:1-44, 25:1-12, 26:2, Num. 9:2-14, 29:1-39, Deut. 5:12-15.
16. Cf. Deut. 6:8-9.
17. II.35.34ff., E33f, S79.
18. III.44.27-45.9, E43f., S88.
19. III.45.24, E44, S89, with Leo Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press 1952), p. 178, n. 63. Cf. Yaffe, "Biblical Religion and Liberal Democracy," p. 338, nn. 19, 25.
20. III.45.34f.; E44 mistranslates *directionem* as "help"; S89.
21. III.46.1f., E44, S89.
22. III.46.6-12, E45, S89.
23. *Auxilium internum* (III.46.14, E45, S90).
24. *Auxilium externum* (III.46.15, E45, S90).
25. III.47.24f., E46, S91. Cf. III.45.6f, 49.24-50.3 (E43f., 48f., S88, 93) and the argument of chapter VI as a whole.
26. Or: by the pl<sup>u</sup> n.
27. III.47.29-31, E46, S91.
28. III.56.19-57.20, E55f., S99f.
29. XVII.205.15-206.22, E218-20, S254f.
30. This is the argument of the first two chapters of the *Treatise*.
31. *Statu naturali*: (XVII.205.22, E219 and S254 translate "state of nature"). This notion is spelled out, apart from the biblical setting, in chapter sixteen of the *Treatise*.
32. XVII.205.19f., E219, S254.
33. XVII.205.23, E219, S254.
34. XVII.206.17, E220, S254.
35. Cf. Ex. 19:8, with note 37, below.
36. XVII.206.23-29, E220, S255f.
37. XVII.206.33-207.2, E220, S256. Cf. Deut. 5:21-24, with Ex. 19:1-25, 20:15-18. Spinoza has translated the Hebrew term *na'aseh* in Ex. 19:8 literally as "we shall do" (see note 35, above), but now translates the cognate term *v'asinu* in Deut. 5:24 as "and we shall execute." Spinoza's Latin suggests that, as God's "executors," the Hebrews promise to "follow out" God's decrees or laws. But in view of the ambiguity of the term "laws" — scientific and political — to which Spinoza has also called attention (IV.57.23-59.28, E57-59, S101-103), we are led to wonder at his new meaning. Scientifically speaking, the Hebrews cannot help "following

out" whatever God or nature impels them to do; politically, however, they can only "follow out" Moses' God-given plan for "moderating" — actually, managing — their natural, i.e., politically chaotic, impulses in the interests of their own self-preservation (cf. note 7, above). Since according to Spinoza political life lacks any further support whether from nature (cf. note 52, below) or from divine revelation (cf. notes 55-56, below), it is at best managed chaos. On the resulting ambiguity of "executors," compare the treatment of Moses by Spinoza's political-philosophical mentor Machiavelli (cf. Spinoza, *Political Treatise* I.1-2, V.7, X.1) in *The Prince*, ch. 6 and 26, and *Discourses* III.30, with Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 130. See also Yaffe, "Body and the Body Politic in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," forthcoming in a collection of essays on Judaism and the body, etc., edited by Peter Ochs, to be published by SUNY Press.

38. Cf., e.g., Ex. 20:12-14, 21:15, 17, 22-25, 22:21-23, Lev. 18, 19:3, 29, 32, 20:9-24, 21:7-9, 25:10, 54, 27:1-11, 36:1-12, Deut. 5:16-18, 22:5, 13-29, 23:1, 24:1-5, 16, 19-22, 25:5-10, 26:11-13, 27:16, 20-23, 28:30, 32, 41, 53-57, 29:9-14, 21-24, 30:1-3; with XVII.218.30-219.1, E233f., S268.
39. Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. S. Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972), pp. 77-82.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 134ff., 146-58.
41. Cf. Yaffe, "Biblical Religion and Liberal Democracy," pp. 288-94. On Cohen's castigating Spinoza for, among other things, his failure to idealize biblical sources, cf. his "Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum," in *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, ed. B. Strauss (3 vols.; Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), vol. III, pp. 290-372, with Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. 18-28, or *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 243-54.
42. Yaffe, "Biblical Religion and Liberal Democracy," pp. 318-27.
43. XVII.207.2-212.3, E220-26, S256-61.
44. Cf. *exequenda* (XVII.207.11; E221 "...carried out"; S256, "obey"; also XVII.208.34; E223, "carrying...out," while *statuendi* in the previous clause is "to execute" at E222; S258, "executing") with note 37, above.
45. *Principes* (XVII.208.26f. and *passim*; E222ff. and S258ff., "captains"). Spinoza may well have smiled at the opportunity to follow, e.g., the Vulgate in translating the Hebrew *nesiim* as

"princes" (cf., e.g., Num. 1:16) for the sake of what he took to be the Latin term's Machiavellian overtones; cf. notes 37, above, and 50, below. But the root of the Hebrew *nasî* means "to lift," and its biblical usage here seems connected with Moses' stated inability to "bear" the burden of judging disputes among his people all by himself (cf. Ex. 18:22, Deut. 1:12), with the result that others from each tribe had to be "elevated" to share that task. I am grateful to Daniel J. Elazar for alerting me to this point, as well as to E.A. Speiser's notes to Gen. 17:20 and 23:6 in his *Anchor Bible translation of Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 126 and 170, together with *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963):111-17. On the decisive importance of "lifting" in the biblical narrative, see Robert Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Lewiston, NY; Queenston, ON; Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) on Gen. 19:21, 32:28, 45:25, 47:29, and 50:12; Sacks' book was originally serialized as "The Lion and the Ass" in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 8 (1980):29-101; 9 (1981):1-81; 10 (1982):67-112, 273-317; 11 (1983):87-128, 249-74, 353-82; 12 (1984):49-82, 141-92. For Spinoza's irreverent levity in these matters, consider his repeated remark to the effect that one person's religion is another person's laughter (*Praef.*11.3f. and XIV.177.2-4, E10 and 186, S55 and 224). In any case, we shall supply quotation marks around Spinoza's "princes" henceforth.

46. *In rebus novis* (XVII.208.30, E222, S258). More or less literally: "in new circumstances." Cf. notes 37 and 43, above.
47. Cf. note 7, above.
48. XVII.212.4-217.13, E226-32, S261-66.
49. XVII.213.23, E227f., S263. On prophets, cf. Yaffe, "Biblical Religion and Liberal Democracy," pp. 301-10, with 318-27.
50. XVII.214.4; E228 translates *virtute* simply as "personal qualities," S263 as "qualities." But following Machiavelli (cf. note 37, above), Spinoza characteristically assimilates "virtue" to "power"; cf. *Ethics* III, Pref., and Prop. 55 (Scholium); IV, Def. 8, and Prop. 18, 37 (Schol. 1,2), 52, also App. 35. At VI.83.7f., 20f. (E82, S126), Spinoza identifies "the power of nature" (*potentia naturae*) with "divine power and virtue" (*divina potentia & virtus*), and again "the virtue and power of nature (*virtus, & potentia naturae*) with "God's power and virtue" (*Dei virtus & potentia*); and at III.53.11f., he refers to the Pharisees' contention that unlike Jewish prophets, non-Jewish nations predicted future things "according to I know not what diabolical virtue" (*ex virtute nescio quâ diabolicâ*; E52, "by some unexplained diabolical faculty"; S96, "with the aid of some diabolical power"). Elsewhere Leo Strauss remarks, "Spinoza lifts Machiavellianism to theological heights." (*Spinoza's*

- Critique of Religion*, p. 18, or *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 242.)
51. *Solidissimum* (XVII.215.32; E230, "of great importance"; S265, "of indisputable weight").
  52. XVII.217.19-24, E232, S267.
  53. Jer. 32:31, which Spinoza cites but does not quote (XVII.217.30, E232, S267), reads in the Hebrew more or less literally as follows: "for I have had this city at my anger [lit.: nostril] and at my fury from the day they built it, for [me] to remove it from my face." In the original context, Jeremiah's emphasis would seem to be on God's anger as a result of the city which the Israelites have "built," rather than on the defectiveness of the divine law from which the Israelites have deviated (cf. Jer. 32:23). Spinoza quotes Ez. 20:25f. in Latin translation: "I have also given them statutes [which are] not good and laws [lit.: rights] by which they would not live, so that I have defiled [*impuravi*] them in respect of their gifts, by sending back [*remittendo*] every opening of the womb (that is, the firstborn), so that I might devastate them, that they might know I am the Lord." (XVII.217.32-35, Spinoza's interpolation in parentheses; E232, S267). In the original context, Ezekiel refers above all to the Israelites' reversion to idol-worship; hence the "statutes," etc., would seem to be either the God-given ones as corrupted by the Israelites or else those of the Israelites' idol-worshipping neighbors which they have syncretized with their God-given ones.
  54. XVII.218.8f.; E233, "celestial mind...inflamed with anger"; S267, "wrath of heaven." Cf. Ex. 32-34 (esp. 32:10ff.).
  55. XVII.219.8, E234, S268. Cf. note 1, above.
  56. XVII.219.16-17, E234, S269.
  57. XVII.219.28-30, E235, S269.
  58. XVII.219.33f., E235, S269.
  59. Cf. note 49, above.
  60. Cf. note 4, above, with XVIII.222.15-223.22, E238f., S273f.
  61. Cf. note 1, above.
  62. *Quaedam dogmata Politica*, in the title to chapter eighteen, XVIII.221.14f., E237, S272. Actually, the list of "dogmas" is altogether nine, though it is split into three separate lists: (1) an unnumbered list of two (XVIII.222.1-13, E237f., S272f.), which states the basic principles from which the others "are concluded" (see note 64, below), namely that the Bible permits both an undivided sovereignty and the exclusion of religious spokesmen from political power; (2) a numbered list of three (XVII.222.14.-

225.11, E238ff., S273ff.), which summarizes the political dangers of priests, prophets and kings, respectively, to the biblical imperium (cf. Yaffe, "Biblical Religion and Liberal Democracy," p. 324f.); and (3) a numbered list of four, which translates the previous five "dogmas" into modern-day caveats (see note 63, below).

63. XVIII.225.12-228.14, E241-44, S275-79.

64. XVIII.221.15, E237, S272.

65. It is enough to compare what we may call Spinoza's proto-Zionism (cf. note 28, above) with Deut. 30:3-5 as understood by Maimonides. Spinoza writes:

unless the foundations of their religion were to effeminate [effoeminarent] their spirits, I would absolutely believe, as human things are mutable, that someday, given the occasion, they will erect their imperium again and God will choose them anew (III.57.4-6, E56, S100).

Contrast Spinoza's implicit encouragement of political activism and opportunism with the patience mandated by the traditional view:

The messianic king will arise in the future and restore the kingdom of David as it was of old in the first dominion. He will rebuild the sanctuary, gather the dispersed of Israel, and restore all the laws in his days as they were before. They will bring sacrifices and observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years in accordance with everything that has been commanded in the Torah. Anyone who does not believe in him or does not await his coming repudiates not only the other prophets, but Moses our master and the Torah as well.... (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Kings and their Wars," XI.1, as translated in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, ed. Raymond L. Weiss with Charles Butterworth [New York: Dover, 1983], p. 171).

Nor does Spinoza say, as Maimonides does, that the days of the messiah are for the sake of leisure for the study of "the Torah and its wisdom" (*ibid.*, XII.4, p. 176). Spinoza associates religion with womanishness at *Praef.*5.28 (E4, S49).

66. Cf. I.15.5-16.25, II.29.15-30.12, VII.100.8-101.25; E13f., 27f., 101ff.; S59f., 73f., 143f.; with note 21, above.

67. Cf. *Praef.*12.3-19, E11, S56, with Yaffe, "On Beginning to Translate Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," pp. 199-203, 215.

68. Cf. note 19, above.