

READING THE BIBLE WITH SPINOZA

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This essay explores several themes of biblical exegesis in Benedict de Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise. The essay aims to show that Spinoza's critique of the Bible's teachings on spirit, prophecy and miracles has its point of departure in the Bible's own internal critique of these teachings. In passing, the essay sheds light on the Bible's teachings regarding the exodus and the miracle at Joshua 10. It is proposed that Galileo's teachings played a vital role in Spinoza's framing of his ideas. The essay attempts to follow Spinoza as he readies the Bible for its admission into the modern city, while not discounting Spinoza's exegetical motivation in writing his Treatise.

Introduction

The extraordinary command of the Hebrew Bible which Benedict de Spinoza displays in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* may be disarming. By the time Spinoza completes his dissections and disseverations of the biblical texts, his mastery of the Bible hardly seems worth the trouble for one who possesses, or wishes to possess, a philosophic understanding of matters pertaining to justice and piety. In Spinoza's hands the Bible appears to be the

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

last place that one should look even for a thoughtful understanding of justice and piety. Indeed, Spinoza's treatment of the Bible prefigures the emergence of the biblical higher criticism with the indifference to justice and piety which are characteristic of that enterprise.

The framers of modern liberalism did not seek to expel the Bible from the city which they built, as Plato sought to expel the poets. More interestingly, therefore, Spinoza's treatment of the Bible heralds the cautious and confident terms of the Bible's ticket of admission into the modern city.¹ Moreover, his exegesis, and indeed the preeminence of the exegetical motive in his *Treatise*, communicate a certain wonder for the Bible. In reading the Bible in order to better understand Spinoza's achievement, one finds oneself consulting Spinoza in order to discover a way to the Bible which helps to reveal man's fundamental motivations.

In pursuit of these foundations, in this essay I will explore two aspects of Spinoza's biblical exegesis in his *Treatise*. First I will discuss Spinoza's commentary on the Bible's teaching on spiritedness. Then I will turn to Spinoza's examination of the Bible's teachings on prophecy and miracles, both the Bible's advancement of these teachings and the Bible's own internal critique of them. I wish to show how Spinoza's critique of the Bible's teachings is an elaboration of the Bible's internal critique of its own teachings.

Spiritedness

Spinoza chose as the epigraph for his *Theologico-Political Treatise* a passage from the First Epistle of John in the New Testament, which reads as follows: "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his spirit" (1 John 4:13). The significance of the epigraph in relation to the title or the sub-title of the *Treatise* is not immediately evident. Nor is the significance or the suitability of the epigraph evident from Spinoza's preface to the work.

Chapter one of the *Treatise*, however, contains a sustained examination of the use of the expression "the spirit of God" and of the simpler expression "the spirit" in the Hebrew Bible.

Spinoza's examination establishes the range of meanings for these terms and directs the reader to the significance of their occurrences in the Hebrew Bible.

The occasion for the discussion of "the spirit of God" in chapter one is the investigation into prophecy as the content of God's communications with men. The discussion is also tantamount to a consideration of the purpose of prophecy. Spinoza offers a preliminary definition of prophecy as "sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man." Spinoza's teaching is that "the nature of mind itself is the primary cause of divine revelation." However, Scripture's idiom as to the cause of prophecy differs from Spinoza's. This is because "the Jews never make mention or account of secondary, or particular, causes, but in a spirit of religion, piety, or what is commonly called godliness, refer all things directly to the Deity." This observation anticipates Spinoza's infamous remark later in the *Treatise* that "the Jews despised philosophy."²

In exploring Scripture's idiom, Spinoza determines that prophecy takes place by means of either a real or an imaginary voice, but in any event by means of "a created thing." In Spinoza's view "it scarcely seems reasonable" that any created thing could either verbally or through its own nature express or explain the nature of God. He hints, however, that Scripture's elucidation of the process of prophecy by means of a visible (or at any rate sensible) figure is on a par with God's acquiescence to the Israelites' demand for a visible figure who will lead them up out of Egypt. (Consider *Exodus* 7:1-2 and Spinoza's brief discussion of it on the first page of chapter one in the *Treatise*; but cf. also *Exodus* 32:1.) The New Testament teaches that "Christ received the revelations of God without the aid of imagination, whether in words or vision"; while in the Hebrew Bible the prophets "perceived God's revelation by the aid of imagination, that is, by words and figures real or imaginary." In either case Spinoza professes not to understand the mechanism of prophecy or "the particular law of nature by which the communications took place."³

Scripture speaks of "the spirit of God breathed into the prophets, or the prophets speaking with the spirit of God." The meaning of "the spirit of God" ranges from "breath" and "life" to "courage," "strength" and "capacity" to "disposition of mind"

(such as any one of the human emotions) or even "mind itself." Passages which Spinoza adduces in support of his interpretation of "spirit" as "courage" and "capacity" include *Joshua* 2:11 and *Numbers* 27:18. Spinoza intends that his discussion should guide the reader of the Bible in interpreting other passages in which "spirit" or "the spirit of God" occur.⁴

A very interesting use of "spirit" occurs at *Exodus* 6:9. Spinoza does not cite this case, but I shall examine it here. In this passage the Israelites do not listen to Moses "because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery." The first phrase might be better translated as "shortness of spirit" or even as "dispiritedness."

This verse depicts the Israelites at the nadir that they reach as a result of the years of slavery in Egypt. They are at a lower state here than at any other point in *Exodus*. Chapter one of *Exodus* contains an amazing, synoptic compression of the events of 430 years (one of several characteristically synoptic compressions in these books), though as readers we do not learn that these events cover this long period until the text so informs us several chapters later (*Exodus* 12:40). But not even chapter one depicts the Israelites at their nadir. They do not reach this point until after Moses and Aaron stand before them and perform powerful signs to persuade them that they will depart from Egypt to begin a career as a free people. The Bible states that the people believed Moses when they saw the signs (*Exodus* 4:31); but they apparently believed that the liberation he promised would be an instantaneous one. Their officers began to strive with Moses and Aaron when Pharaoh ordered the Israelites to make bricks without straw; as for the majority of the Israelites, they became dispirited in the extreme when the liberation did not take place at once as they expected.

This episode anticipates the famous "stiff-neckedness" which the Israelites will exhibit on their journey from slavery to freedom. Like the prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave, they have become so accustomed to their fetters that they have difficulty turning their necks. The purpose of the journey which the Israelites will take is to enable them to attain liberty and hence also to teach them its meaning. In learning the meaning of liberty they will relinquish the erroneous conception of an instant-

neous liberty which they have when Moses stands before them and promises liberty to them while they are still slaves.

Lest they see war and desire to turn back, the Israelites take a "roundabout" route up from Egypt (*Exodus* 13:17-18). To Pharaoh it seems that they are "wandering aimlessly" (*Exodus* 14:3). Our text teaches us, however, that the purpose of the wanderings is to invigorate their spirit. By the time they receive the law at Mt. Sinai they have fought their first battle (*Exodus* 17:8-13) and so have changed significantly since the time of their departure. The fact that the wanderings chapters (*Exodus* 13-17) are framed by the theme of battle-readiness and then are immediately followed by the chapters on law (*Exodus* 18-24) teaches us that spiritedness includes battle-readiness and is a prerequisite to the consent to law under the covenant. (The discrete episodes within the wanderings chapters individually may or may not sustain the impression that a transformation of the people is occurring. Later portions of the narrative do report on their recurring stiff necks. However, one must bear in mind that the Bible's narrative is not strictly chronological and that the wanderings chapters are an arrangement drawn from a pre-biblical fund of material.⁵ The wanderings chapters in *Numbers* tell of some of the same incidents and are drawn from the same fund. Generally speaking, the arrangement in *Exodus* highlights the rebelliousness of the people in the context of their inspiritment, while the arrangement in *Numbers* highlights the spiritedness of the nobles among them, who contend with Moses for a share in rule.)

The concept of law in the Hebrew Bible hence comprises the element of choice or consent. Partly in this sense, Spinoza comments in chapter four of his *Treatise* that law seems to apply to many phenomena "by analogy," but that in its primary signification it contains the concept of choice or consent.⁶ By definition, slaves can in no way be said to live under law. The Israelites could not receive the covenant when Moses first performed signs for them (*Exodus* 4:31) because they were not spirited. When the Israelites receive the law at Mt. Sinai, it is as the bridle to direct their spiritedness.

Spinoza's analysis of "the spirit of God" has application to the New Testament also. In discussing the rules for the "historical" interpretation of Scripture in chapter seven of his *Treatise*,

he makes a few guiding observations on the Sermon of the Mount, to which he refers as "the whole of Christ's doctrine."⁷

Turning to the Sermon, Spinoza quotes the second of the eight beatitudes, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (*Matthew* 5:4), and establishes that Jesus here speaks of "those who mourn for the kingdom of God and righteousness neglected by man."⁸

Spinoza skips over the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew* 5:3). This beatitude contains the first words which Jesus publicly speaks in the New Testament. These words echo *Exodus* 6:9 regarding the aftermath of Moses' first public address to the Israelites. Indeed, the passage in *Exodus* is probably the model for Jesus' first public speech as reported in *Matthew*. In both texts the display of visible signs of power accompanies the first effort to inspire the dispirited. (Compare *Exodus* 4:20 and *Matthew* 4:24.) Moreover, *Matthew*, more than any other Gospel, interprets Jesus' career and teaching on the pattern of those of Moses in *Exodus*. (Compare *Exodus* 1:22 and *Matthew* 2:16; or consider that *Matthew's* Jesus delivers the Sermon from a mountain.) Yet the authors of a number of commentaries on *Matthew* express their puzzlement at being unable to find the Hebrew Bible antecedent for the expression "poor in spirit." I think that their puzzlement results from the fact that they have searched for this antecedent primarily in *Psalms*, *Proverbs* and the prophetic writings, or in the seemingly ethical as distinct from the national or the legal writings. They have failed to recognize it at *Exodus* 6:9, in the most emphatically political portion of the Hebrew Bible.⁹

The experience of the *Matthew* commentators ironically confirms Spinoza's suggestion that *Matthew* depoliticizes the Hebrew Bible's teaching on spiritedness and law. Through his discussion of the Sermon, Spinoza indicates his own interpretation of the first beatitude, as distinct from *Matthew's*. While Spinoza does not adduce the first beatitude or its model in his discussion of "spirit" in chapter one of the *Treatise*, yet he does adduce another verse from the Sermon along with its model in *Lamentations* in order to supply the "historical" interpretation of the Sermon. Spinoza's argument is as follows.

Jeremiah spoke his prophetic counsel that "it is good to give one's cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults" (*Lam.* 3:30) in a moment of national calamity, when justice was utterly uprooted. This was Jesus' situation as well, when he spoke to "men who were oppressed, who lived in a corrupt commonwealth on the brink of ruin, where justice was utterly neglected." Not unlike Jeremiah before him, Jesus, too, advised his followers, "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (*Matthew* 5:39). Under normal circumstances, neither Jeremiah nor Jesus would have advanced a teaching which neglects the claim of justice.¹⁰

More specifically, therefore, the "historical" interpretation of the Sermon serves to contrast Moses and Jesus. Moses, unlike Jesus, came "to found a good republic" and even taught that "an eye should be given for an eye." The contrary precept of Jesus and Jeremiah "concerning submission to injuries" is valid only in places where justice has to be neglected. Unlike Moses, Jesus did not lead his followers on a journey of national or political liberation. Jesus lacked a conception of political justice, or at least under the circumstances he did not leave a clear one. Spinoza supplies the "historical" interpretation of the Sermon in order to remedy the defect.¹¹

Spinoza's interpretations of Scripture underscore the congruity of Scripture's intention and his own in writing his *Treatise*. In the same chapter in which he supplies the "historical" interpretation of the Sermon, Spinoza criticizes Maimonides for, among other things, advancing an interpretation of Scripture which "does away with all the certainty which the people acquire by candid reading." Spinoza's goal is to establish a few simple rules for the interpretation of Scripture which will restore that certainty. The principle of these rules is that they are open to "the natural light of reason which is common to all." Spinoza's goal is to ready Scripture for its admission to the modern city. His teaching is that Scripture is holy only to the extent that one may enlist it in a project which will enable it to contribute to fulfilling its original purpose.¹²

In chapter fourteen of his *Treatise*, Spinoza does supply an interpretation of the epigraph which he takes from the First Epistle of John. Spinoza says that by "spirit" John means "love," and that he who has "love" has "the spirit of God." But no one

has seen God, and so it is only through "love of one's neighbor" that one participates in God's "love" or "spirit." By "love," John, with James, means "works." (See *Ep. James* 2.) What Scripture requires for obedience is not true doctrines but deeds.¹³ Thus Spinoza enlists John's epistle on the side of James in the debate within the New Testament on justification by works or by faith. Spinoza's interpretation of the epigraph is the practical counterpart to his argument that the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible are of little or no cognitive value and occur primarily through the faculty of the imagination.

The Critique of Prophecy and Miracles

One may wonder at Spinoza's many harsh statements about the prophets of the Hebrew Bible in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*. In chapter two of his *Treatise*, Spinoza fills out his thesis on the prophets in chapter one, that the prophets received revelations from God through the instrumentality of the imaginative faculty alone, and consequently that the certainty that the prophets acquired was not mathematical but moral. Spinoza might have foregone the elaborative, reiterative discussion in chapter two, but for "the demands of our age, of philosophy and of truth itself." The situation that has come about is that philosophers who wish to advance the scientific understanding of nature often have to answer to the charge of atheism.¹⁴ Here the scientific motivation of the *Treatise* is more eminent than the exegetical one.

The philosopher who answers best to Spinoza's description and whose intellectual presence motivates and justifies the *Treatise* is Galileo Galilei. Galileo's statements on the need to distinguish between the teachings of science and those of Scripture appear to lurk behind all of Spinoza's programmatic statements to this effect in his *Treatise*. The significance of Galileo's career and teaching for understanding the *Treatise* has to my knowledge nowhere been addressed or appreciated. Galileo's approach to the problem of Scripture and natural science is epitomized in a comment he makes while discussing the famous miracle at *Joshua* 10, where Joshua commands the sun and the moon to stand still in the middle of the heavens. Ecclesiastical

science prior to Galileo taught that if the sun could stop, it must have been moving. Rejecting the prevailing view that the teachings of Scripture confirm and indeed promote the geocentric view of the universe, Galileo declared that the Bible "was not written to teach us astronomy."¹⁵

Spinoza's argument for separating philosophy and theology is a systematic elaboration of Galileo's view that Scripture has only a limited purpose which does not include teaching about the heavens. Galileo archly describes his view as the true traditional one within the Church.¹⁶ But while Galileo's view of Scripture's limited scientific content may have been traditional, his teaching that knowledge of the heavens is universal or open to all men brought him into conflict with the traditional epistemologies. Galileo's teaching carries some of the distinctive marks of the republican revival as acted upon and transformed by Machiavelli. What is characteristic of this transformation is that it leaves untouched the classic contention that virtue is the property of the few,¹⁷ while resting the contention that knowledge can be universal on a kind of knowledge which in the classic teaching ranked low. Galileo's essays are a clarion call to Enlightenment. His teaching on the universality of scientific knowledge and on the role of inventions such as the telescope in acquiring this knowledge¹⁸ is probably a major vehicle through which Machiavelli's republican teaching reached not just Spinoza but a wave of philosophic thinkers in its characteristic form. One thinks particularly of the debt to Galileo implicit in Descartes' effort to enlist public support for a science based on experiments.

Spinoza supplements Galileo's teaching as to Scripture's narrow purpose by providing a more extensive account of the Bible's motivations for its teachings on prophecy and miracles. Galileo's teaching that Scripture's purpose is not scientific but moral is perhaps the seed for Spinoza's elaboration of an even sharper disjunction between philosophy and prophecy. Spinoza's doctrine takes the following form. Because the imaginative faculty is the sole vehicle for prophetic revelation, only individuals who have a powerful imagination are suitable to be prophets; while those who cultivate a rigorous, logical intellect, which one usually does at the expense of the imagination, are suitable to be philosophers but not prophets. Moreover, divine

revelation suits the emotional state and the previous opinions of the prophet who receives it. Spinoza hints that it is not even the imagination but rather the emotionalism of the prophets that qualifies them for their role. Scripture's sole intention is to teach obedience in accordance with the principles of faith.¹⁹

Spinoza's critique of prophecy follows Galileo's lead and at the same time has its point of departure in the Bible's internal critique of prophecy. The Bible's internal critique of miracles follows closely from its internal critique of prophecy, but this closeness is not immediately evident from the *Treatise*, where an interlude of three chapters disjoins Spinoza's critiques of prophecy and of miracles.²⁰ Nor is it evident in Galileo's writing on the Bible, since Galileo's purpose was not to provide a systematic account of the Bible's teachings on prophecy and miracles.

Several times in his *Treatise*, Spinoza draws attention to the key statements in the Bible's internal critique of prophecy. These statements occur at *Deuteronomy* 13 and at *Deuteronomy* 18. In first drawing the reader's attention to these important passages, Spinoza takes them in reverse order and so inverts their meaning. His first discussion of these passages occurs in chapter two of his *Treatise*. Spinoza observes that the prophets frequently doubted or were held in doubt when they received a divine communication, and that, when in doubt, they requested a sign. Abraham and Moses, Gideon and even Hezekiah (who never before had reason to doubt Isaiah) requested and received signs. The purpose of the signs was to convince them of the genuineness of the revelation. Hence Moses at *Deuteronomy* 18 advises the Israelites to seek a sign from a prophet who should appear among them to teach them after his death. The passage at *Deuteronomy* 18 to which Spinoza refers reads as follows:

You may say in your heart, "How may we know a word that the Lord has not spoken?" If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken (*Deuteronomy* 18:21-22).

Spinoza here draws the inference that prophecy, or knowledge acquired through divine revelation, is inferior to natural knowledge, "which needs no sign, and in itself implies certainty."²¹

Spinoza then turns to the earlier passage, at *Deuteronomy* 13, the burden of which is to teach that signs are not wholly reliable indicators. This passage reads as follows:

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you signs or wonders, and the signs or the wonders declared by them take place, and they say, "Let us follow other gods" (whom you have not known) "and let us serve them," you must not heed the words of these prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul (*Deuteronomy* 13:1-3).

Spinoza also refers to *Ezekiel* 14:9, *I Kings* 22:22-23 and even *Matthew* 24:24 in the New Testament to confirm the teaching that God sometimes deceives men with false revelations.²²

Still, the moral certainty of the prophets rested on three factors: the vividness of what they imagined, the occurrence of a sign, and the right and good dispositions of the prophets' minds. When prophecy did nothing more than to confirm what the law of Moses already taught, there was no need for a sign, since the prophecy "was confirmed by that law." The purpose of signs was to convince the prophet when there was no other reason for certainty. Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible was geared to the intellectual capacity of the prophet, or rather to his intellectual incapacity, and hence to his temperament, imagination and previous beliefs.²³

Spinoza's sharpest illustration of his argument occurs in his discussion of the miracle at *Joshua* 10. As a military man, Joshua, or "perhaps also the writer who wrote his history," was ill-equipped to speculate on the motions of the heavenly bodies and so misapprehended the true cause of the lengthening of the day. "Joshua the soldier" was surely no "learned astronomer" and so represented the incident as a miracle without reference to its physical causes, which may have included the increased refraction of sunlight due to the amount of snow in the air (*Joshua* 10:11).²⁴

Spinoza is here bolder than Galileo, who, discussing this same occurrence, adopted the maxim to "speak always with caution and reserve." Galileo capitalizes on Scripture's gloss

that "the sun stopped in midheaven, and did not hurry to set for about a whole day" (*Joshua* 10:13) to assert that the Copernican teaching is intended, and that the sun did indeed stop in the midst of the heavens, since that is where the sun always is, but that the time that it did so was near sunset. Indeed, if the sun had been near the meridian, there would have been no reason for Joshua to request a longer day, with so many hours of daylight still left.²⁵ In advancing his own, scientific explanation for the occurrence, Spinoza rebukes those "who have learned to philosophize more correctly, and understand that the earth moves while the sun stands still, or at any rate does not revolve around the earth," and yet "try with all their might to wrest this meaning from Scripture, though plainly nothing of the sort is intended."²⁶ I take it that Spinoza is referring obliquely to Galileo in particular. For my part in this debate, I think it is worthwhile to observe that the Bible reports this miracle not on its own authority but on that of the popular Book of Jashar (*Joshua* 10:13).

But what is a miracle? Spinoza turns to this question in chapter six of his *Treatise*. The prevailing conception of miracles is that they interrupt the course of nature. Thus the theory of "two powers," each of which, God and nature, operates only while the other is at rest. According to that theory, the search for natural causes is tantamount to denying God's governance of the world. The "two powers" theory has its main motivation in piety commonly understood, but its effect is to "remove natural causes" and to oppose those who inquire into them.²⁷

The prevailing conception "seems to have taken its rise among the early Jews." The ancient Israelites introduced the doctrine of miracles to the world as a means of teaching God's governance of the world, as a means of showing "the Gentiles round them worshipping visible gods such as the sun, the moon, the earth, water, air, etc." that these weak, inconstant and changeable beings are under the command of an invisible God. In order to achieve that purpose, the ancient Hebrews "narrated their miracles." They taught moreover that God had arranged the whole of nature for the benefit of man.²⁸ In order to refute the theory of "two powers," Spinoza uncovers the source of the teaching on miracles. The purpose of the teaching on miracles was to depopulate the world of spirits or autonomous powers or gods the supposition of whose existence made inquiry into any

form of causality impossible. In its original conception, the doctrine of miracles established the basis for the scientific view of the world. The Bible's teaching fosters the human spiritedness which informs inquiry and provides the intellectual basis for that inquiry.

Nonetheless "God cannot be known from miracles." Though Scripture never states this "openly," we may infer it from many passages, but especially from *Deuteronomy* 13. From this passage it is clear that false prophets can perform miracles, and hence that miracles may as easily lead men to "follow false gods as to follow the true God."²⁹ Miracles never conveyed an accurate conception of God, but were geared only to those for whom it would take a miracle to make them obey. Spinoza's discussion of *Deuteronomy* 13 here in the context of his discussion of miracles appears to affirm what he denies vigorously throughout his *Treatise*, that the Bible has an esoteric teaching about miracles which complements but also diminishes its exoteric teaching regarding their centrality and importance. At least the discussion of *Deuteronomy* 13 in chapter six shows the centrality of this passage in the Bible's own critique of miracles, whereas the argument in chapter two assigned preeminence to the passage from *Deuteronomy* 18, and so served Spinoza's argument as to the low cognitive value of prophecy.

Spinoza modifies his interpretation of the occurrence at *Joshua* 10, which he discussed first in chapter two. Here in chapter six Spinoza adds a new interpretation in accordance with the thesis on miracles which he now advances. Instead of relating merely that the day was longer, the Hebrews in the time of Joshua supplied an interpretation of this occurrence whose purpose was to undermine the Gentile belief in the sun as a deity. It was partly from piety and partly from their opinion as to the motion of the sun that "they conceived of and related the occurrence as something quite different from what really happened."³⁰ In chapter two he had said that Joshua, "and perhaps also the writer who wrote his history," stated the reason for what they witnessed in terms of their own understanding about the heavens. The present discussion, however, serves Spinoza's inquiry into the true origin of the Bible's teaching on miracles. This teaching laid the basis for man's scientific inquiry by

establishing the one governing principle in the world, an achievement which the "two powers" theory vitiated.

Spinoza's third discussion of *Deuteronomy* 13 and *Deuteronomy* 18 occurs in chapter fifteen of his *Treatise*. The argument affirms that the prophet's teaching, not his signs, are the proof of the genuineness of a prophetic revelation. The certainty of the biblical prophets rested entirely on three factors: the vividness of their imaginations, their signs, and a heart turned toward what was right and good. But since the vividness of their imaginations was exclusively theirs, "our certainty" must rest entirely on the other two, "namely, the sign and the teaching." Spinoza refers to *Deuteronomy* 18 where Moses bids the people to obey one who gives a true sign in the name of the Lord, but to put to death one who divines falsely. *Deuteronomy* 13, in contrast, teaches that "a true prophet could be distinguished from a false one, both by his doctrine and by the miracles he wrought," that is, by his doctrine and his signs together,³¹ or by his doctrine principally.

It seems to be true, as Spinoza points out, that the key statements in the Bible's internal critique of prophecy occur at *Deuteronomy* 13:1-5 and *Deuteronomy* 18:20-22. These passages are from Moses' valedictory address to the Israelites and concern the prophets who will succeed Moses. The first passage instructs the Israelites that when prophets arise who divine the future but who tell the Israelites to follow other gods than the one whom Moses taught them to follow, those prophets prophesy falsely. Here Moses teaches that the criterion for establishing the validity of a prophet's teaching is rather an intellectual one than one of signs or miracles. The Israelites must be able to compare and contrast the teaching of Moses and that of the new prophet in order to establish whether the new prophet's teaching affirms that of Moses.

This criterion is not within the capacity of slaves. It is fitting that Moses indicates this criterion in his farewell address, well after the Israelites have consented to law under the covenant, and rather than in his initial addresses to them in Egypt. Nor, the passage suggests, is the capacity to evaluate a new prophet's teaching within the jurisdiction of the new prophet. This capacity rests with the people and not with the new prophet. This passage anticipates the republicanism of the Bible, just as

Spinoza's discussion anticipates the republicanism of the later chapters in his *Treatise*.

But *Deuteronomy* 18 qualifies this teaching by proposing a narrower criterion for evaluating the teachings of new prophets. Here Moses teaches, as at *Deuteronomy* 13, that the criterion should be whether the prophet speaks in the name of God or in the name of other gods. However, Moses here adds a second criterion, consisting in whether the new prophet says, in the name of God, something that God did or did not command him to say. In the latter instance, the Israelite may say in his heart, "How may we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" Moses anticipates this doubt and says that if the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but what the prophet predicts does not come true, you may know it is a false prophet (*Deuteronomy* 18:21-22). Here Moses stakes more on signs than at *Deuteronomy* 13. But by the same token, Moses here states his instruction in response to a popular doubt as to the capacity of the public to evaluate a new prophet's teaching. Does Moses' response qualify the republicanism of the earlier passage? The latter passage stakes more on signs, but only in accommodation to the public's lack of confidence in its capacity to make a judicious determination.

These two passages present somewhat conflicting teachings which one may seek to reconcile in terms of the Bible's expectation regarding the public's capacity to evaluate the teaching of the prophet who stands before it. To place these teachings in further perspective, one may consider the Bible's account of the exodus and of the role which miracles play in the exodus. Let us review the key elements of that account. In the time of the Israelites' dispiritedness, Moses stood before them and performed signs which gained their attention and inspirited them enough to believe that they would be free soon. However, because they were slaves, because they were "uncultivated and sunk in most abject slavery,"³² they entertained an erroneous conception of the liberty that Moses promised them; they thought that this liberty would be instantaneous. Moreover, the Israelites erroneously imputed to Moses himself the power by virtue of which he performed these signs. In their degraded state they were unable to grasp that these displays came from an invisible God. Signs, whose purpose was to introduce them to God and to

teach them of his providential care for them, led them to error, the belief in Moses as the source of this power and as the man who would give liberty to them. Pharaoh's magicians made a similar mistake. They at first thought that Moses was a magician like them, only that he was a better one. Only Pharaoh was impervious to the teaching which Moses brought. As a tyrant, or as the most slavish of men,³³ Pharaoh was wholly beyond the reach of Moses' teaching that law consists not in decree but in consent under the covenant. Indeed, the purpose of the miracles was not to teach Pharaoh the truth but to solve the practical issue of physically freeing the Israelites.

The miracles which Moses performed were instrumental to inspiring the Israelites so that they would leave Egypt and become even more spirited in the wilderness, where they would see the necessity for law under the covenant. Miracles as such did not make the Israelites free. The Bible's teaching about political liberty is rather that it consists in the consent to law under the covenant. The signs were only instrumental to bringing into existence the conditions under which Moses could establish this teaching. Signs, or miracles, are for slaves; but law is for peoples who are spirited enough to begin to think about what it means to be free.

Notes

1. See Thomas Jefferson's letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 425-427.
2. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, tr. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), pp. 13-15, 164 (chs. 1, 11). Cited below as *TTP*. Translations of this work are from this edition, though where essential I modify the translation by referring to the Latin text in Benedicti de Spinoza, *Opera Quotquot Reperta Sunt*, eds. J. Van Vloten and J.P.N. Land, 3rd ed., vol. I (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1914).
3. *TTP*, pp. 16, 19, 25 (ch. 1).
4. *TTP*, pp. 19-20 (ch. 1).
5. See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, tr. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1967), pp. 172-173, 187-188 and *passim*.

6. *TTP*, p. 58 (ch. 4).
7. Spinoza specifies the Sermon as "the whole of Christ's doctrine" in a note which is omitted from the Elwes translation, but it is in the Latin text. It is moreover in Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, tr. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), p. 307.
8. *TTP*, pp. 104-105 (ch. 7).
9. See, e.g., Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 128-129; and J.C. Fenton, *Saint Matthew* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 80.
10. *TTP*, p. 105 (ch. 7).
11. *TTP*, pp. 105-106 (ch. 7).
12. *TTP*, pp. 118, 119, 167, 171-172 (chs. 7, 12).
13. *TTP*, pp. 184-186 (ch. 14).
14. *TTP*, p. 27 (ch. 2).
15. Galileo Galilei, "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, ed., tr., Stillman Drake (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), p. 212.
16. For Galileo's account of this tradition, see "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," pp. 173-216.
17. Plato, *Crito*, 47c-d.
18. Galileo Galilei, "The Starry Messenger," in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
19. *TTP*, pp. 27, 30, 183 (chs. 2, 14).
20. Leo Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," in Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 164.
21. *TTP*, p. 28 (ch. 2).
22. *TTP*, pp. 28-29 (ch. 2).
23. *TTP*, pp. 29-30 (ch. 2).
24. *TTP*, pp. 33-34 (ch. 2).
25. Galileo, "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," pp. 214-215.
26. *TTP*, p. 33 (ch. 2).
27. *TTP*, p. 81 (ch. 6).
28. *TTP*, p. 82 (ch. 6).
29. *TTP*, pp. 87-88 (ch. 6).
30. *TTP*, p. 93 (ch. 6).
31. *TTP*, pp. 196-197 (ch. 15; emphasis added).

32. *TTP*, p. 38 (ch. 2).
33. Plato, *Republic*, 579d-e.