

# THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE IN SPINOZA'S TRACTATUS THEOLOGICO-POLITICUS

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*The Tractatus Theologico-Politicus is Spinoza's great work directing us to his view of the superiority of the political-secular jurisdiction of the state over its religious dimension. For Spinoza, biblical exegesis and hermeneutics were autonomous scholarly endeavors, separate from traditional biblical homiletics. His theological-political approach leads him to hone and explicate the prophetic texts for their secular and political implications, undermining the belief that a definitive sacred history took precedence over the secular narrative. The Bible becomes a vehicle for affirming, or refuting, political interests, historically, and for Spinoza's own time. Through his biblical commentary, Spinoza articulates a commitment to a secular, liberal, republican politics, where philosophers have the security and freedom to reflect on ideas, free from any religious dogma and interference. Spinoza's use and abuse of the Bible are also an indictment of two millennia of Jewish scholarship and faith, and also implicitly undermines Christian beliefs about Christ's divinity and sacred dogma.*

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

## Introduction

Textual explication of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* requires some brief, preliminary observations about the human and intellectual world that he encountered. In 1656, at the age of twenty-four, Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community of Amsterdam. Although he never seemed to have been troubled by this estrangement, his own Jewish identity was more ambiguous. His Marrano origins are an imprecise guide for arriving at any definitive understanding of his Judaism, as Marranism did not manifest itself in a cohesive, unified religious vision.

He received a traditional Jewish education, like other Jews of his time in Amsterdam. Although there are significant gaps in what we know of Spinoza's life, it is worth noting that Amsterdam was a city in which secular culture was a powerful attraction for intellectuals, regardless of religious affiliation. Spinoza became familiar with the major intellectual and religious currents of his time, and took interest in some of the less dogmatic Christian movements, including the Quakers and Collegiants.

Amsterdam was a world of the capitalist entrepreneur, intellectual curiosity, and developments in scientific epistemology. Here the study of the Bible went beyond questions of harmonizing the text with prevailing dogma and theology; the Bible became a text seen through the prism of philological and hermeneutic principles. Like any other text, it was read and interpreted through a literary and historical outlook. This traditionally appropriated sacred text, defining God's commanding words, underwent human interrogation and judgment. The methodologies informing biblical exegesis would transform traditional biblical explication and point the way for the more sustained, systematic Bible scholarship of the nineteenth century.

Spinoza's Jewish identity has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Yirmiyahu Yovel argues that Spinoza accepted the condition of his Jewishness and did not attempt to escape it. Yet, as an individual, he could not find a positive expression for his heterodox Jewishness, and remained alienated, the victim of a double rejection. In the words of the highly perceptive Heine: "The gentiles were generous enough to grant him the title of Jew

of which the Jews had deprived him."<sup>1</sup> Further, he observed that Spinoza "was caught up in a double negation, rejected by gentiles as a Jew and by the Jews as a heretic. Spinoza lived in this situation without being able to suggest any way to remedy it."<sup>2</sup> Harry Wolfson sees "Benedictus [as] the first of the moderns; Baruch is the last of the mediaevals. It is our contention that we cannot get the full meaning of what Benedictus says unless we know what has passed through the mind of Baruch."<sup>3</sup> For Wolfson, Spinoza never accommodated to his Christian audience, but he did distance himself from the Hebraic authoritative tradition.<sup>4</sup> Leo Strauss describes Spinoza as "the greatest man of Jewish origin who had openly denied the truth of Judaism and had ceased to belong to the Jewish people without becoming a Christian."<sup>5</sup> Spinoza's debt to his intellectual and religious Jewish predecessors remains substantial. Still, if Judaism can be measured by what Emmanuel Levinas calls "extreme consciousness,"<sup>6</sup> Spinoza remains the prototype of Isaac Deutscher's "non-Jewish Jew."<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of Spinoza's intellectual and religious origins, he presented a major difficulty for Amsterdam's rabbis, who were struggling with the retrieval and revitalization of a Jewish community devastated by the Inquisition. The newly arrived Jewish refugees were often unfamiliar with Jewish religious traditions and obligations. The rabbis set out to reconstitute Jewish historical continuity, even as Spinoza's own thoughts and actions drew him away from his co-religionists. The rabbis encountered a world of Marrano Jews, drifting between Judaism, Christianity and secular currents, challenging the traditional world that they sought to reinforce.<sup>8</sup> Spinoza's writings were seen as provocative and threatening. His advocacy of intellectual and religious toleration, curiosity, and inquisitiveness threatened to undermine the rabbinic establishment. His search for truth led him to oppose theologically privileged readings, sacred dogma, and ceremonial practices deemed archaic. Philosophy, for Spinoza, became the noble science, providing insights for an intellectual elite, which the masses could never begin to comprehend. Indeed, Spinoza's writings were at times so ambiguous, subtle, inaccessible, and nuanced that he evoked the epithet of living "the life of a Marrano of reason."<sup>9</sup> For Yovel:

Spinoza was a grand master of dual language and equivocation. He spoke to different audiences in different ways, using the same sentence or phrase in varying senses, masking his true intention to some while disclosing it to others. He would pass a covert message to anyone capable of grasping it, while using a phrase whose literal sense was the opposite, thus misleading the innocent reader.<sup>10</sup>

Leo Strauss, while acknowledging Spinoza's reticence to express himself unequivocally, observed that Spinoza was bolder than Hobbes dared to be in writing the *Leviathan*.<sup>11</sup>

### Spinoza's Approach

Spinoza's approach to the Bible dramatically transformed biblical exegesis. The Bible was to be understood and explicated through a careful reading of the text itself, and not through the prism of any prior or subsequent interpretive traditions. Spinoza affirmed that "biblical criticism can ruin only a faith that has already been weakened,"<sup>12</sup> but this assertion did not comfort the Jewish or Christian traditionalists. Spinoza's fresh examination of Scripture led him to a series of observations that precipitated considerable unease in religious circles. He concluded that God's importance was independent of the number of books in the Bible,<sup>13</sup> who wrote the texts, the number of authors, and the time frame of the biblical narrative. Similarly, Christ's message in the Gospels was not dependent on there being four Gospels. Indeed, the Scriptures, for Spinoza, were not equally sacred. He distinguished between primary and secondary texts. His concern was with those parts of the Bible where the general public was directed to fidelity and obedience.<sup>14</sup> Spinoza simplified and secularized God's message; he then proceeded to connect this to a vision of an improved social order, where justice and liberty would prevail.

The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, although it is directed to Christians and philosophers, is predominantly about the Hebrews of the Old Testament. A casual, inattentive reader might take Spinoza's marginalization of the Jews, and his gloss on the Bible, as observations that apply exclusively to the Jews, with-

out seeing his reflections as part of a broader critique of dogmatic religions, including institutional Christianity and the church. Spinoza's professed inadequacy about the Christian religion, or of his lacking proficiency in classical Greek, is an inadequate explanation for the relative inattention he paid to the New Testament and its interpretive traditions. Spinoza stated:

At this point we should proceed to a similar examination of the books of the New Testament. But I gather that this has been done by men highly skilled in the sciences and particularly in languages, and furthermore my knowledge of Greek is insufficient for venturing upon such an undertaking. And finally, we are without the originals of the books, which were written in Hebrew. For these reasons I prefer to leave the task.<sup>15</sup>

Spinoza's relative unfamiliarity with the Talmud and the rabbinic tradition did not, however, lead him to also temper his sweeping, unsubstantiated reflections on post-biblical Judaism. Spinoza noted that biblical Hebrew was not preserved properly, causing him considerable difficulty in trying to retrieve the earliest source material. Strauss stated that Spinoza's "relative reticence about specifically Christian subjects could be expected to protect him against persecution by the vulgar, while it was not likely to disqualify him in the eyes of the *more prudent* readers, who could be relied upon to understand the implication of his attack upon Judaism, and especially on the Old Testament."<sup>16</sup> Spinoza's implicit critique of New Testament theologians and Christianity is further illuminated in his assertion that all of the New Testament was written by Jews, in Hebrew, adding additional doubt to the textual competence of contemporary Christian theologians and church authorities, since few of them were versed in the Hebrew language. Spinoza was more concerned with philosophy and linguistics than he was with religious dogma: "For the point at issue is merely the meaning of the texts, not their truths."<sup>17</sup> It was easier for Spinoza to articulate his views on revelation and reason with Old Testament texts, as the Hebrews do not have the authority, or power, to harm philosophers. When Spinoza stated that "Solomon, Isaiah, Joshua and others were indeed prophets: but they were also men, subject to

human limitations,"<sup>18</sup> it is understandable why any explicit reference to Jesus was here omitted.

For Spinoza, biblical exegesis and hermeneutics were autonomous scholarly endeavours, separate from traditional biblical homiletics. His theological-political approach led him to hone and explicate the prophetic texts for their secular and political implications, undermining the belief that a definitive sacred history took precedence over the secular narrative. The Bible became a vehicle for affirming, or refuting, political interests, historically and for Spinoza's own time. Through his biblical commentary, Spinoza articulated a commitment to a secular, liberal, republican politics, where philosophers had the security and freedom to reflect on ideas, free from religious dogma and interference.<sup>19</sup>

Spinoza's attempt to distinguish philosophy from theology, and reason from revelation, led him to challenge the Maimonidean synthesis. Maimonides, the outstanding rationalist in Jewish religious-philosophical thought, argued that the prophets were also philosophers: Spinoza rejects this. Maimonides also subjected scriptural exegesis to rational analysis, and argued that the biblical text accommodated itself to valid, conflicting interpretations. For Spinoza, the genius of the Bible lay in its basic message of charity and justice. This was comprehensible for philosophers and for the multitude. Maimonides' employment of intellectual and rational methods of analysis to the study of the Bible, according to Spinoza, "deprives the common people of any confidence they can have in the meaning of Scripture derived from simply perusing it....Therefore we can dismiss Maimonides' view as harmful, unprofitable and absurd."<sup>20</sup>

Spinoza's ardent attempt to distinguish himself from Maimonides is suggestive of Aristotle's repeated efforts to distance himself from Plato. The differences, in both instances, are substantial; however, neither Aristotle, nor Spinoza, could be understood without reference to their intellectual predecessors. Warren Zev Harvey sees Spinoza "as the harbinger of many modern ideas and movements. Seen as a Maimonidean, however, he represents the end of a tradition. He was the last of the mediaeval Maimonideans. He was, if you will, a decadent Maimonidean, as one might expect from the end of the line, but he was nonetheless a Maimonidean."<sup>21</sup> Spinoza did not acknowl-

edge that Maimonides was as capable as he was in engaging in rational and philosophical discourse. He insisted that reason and revelation must be understood separately. His own world, despite its evolving modernity, was, however, one where the Bible still commanded respect and attention. Hyman notes that while "Spinoza the speculative philosopher writing for a few kindred spirits might have ignored Scripture, Spinoza the student of history and society could not."<sup>22</sup>

For Spinoza, the Bible was about revelation and obedience, with reason and philosophy constituting a separate and independent discourse. The Old and New Testaments both aimed at obedience to God. Moses, to Spinoza, did not engage in reflective, reasoned discourse, but communicated through threats of dire consequences for those who were disobedient. The message of the New Testament, however, was that faith directs us to obedience.<sup>23</sup> Sovereign authority must be obeyed at all times. Spinoza did not trust the "unstable and fickle multitude,"<sup>24</sup> who "remain ever at the same level of wretchedness."<sup>25</sup> They were not capable of philosophical learning; what they required was obedience. Spinoza saw Moses as a heroic founder, who "recognizes that good societies do not spring up like mushrooms, that omelets are not made without breaking eggs."<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss observes that:

Political philosophy deprived of its moral foundation is, indeed, Spinoza's political philosophy, but it is not Hobbes's political philosophy. Spinoza, indeed, and not Hobbes made might equivalent to right. Naturalistic political philosophy necessarily leads to the annulment of the conception of justice as such. Thanks to the moral basis of his political philosophy and thanks to it alone, Hobbes kept the possibility of acknowledging justice as such and distinguishing between right and might.<sup>27</sup>

For Spinoza, the commanding voice of religious obligation was a matter of temporal sovereignty; religious beliefs and inward piety were, however, individual rights, beyond the proper domain of secular rulers. In contrast, the Jewish covenantal tradition allowed for the exercise of considerable religious, regulative authority in a shared partnership with tempo-



ral powers, but only God was fully sovereign (and His sovereignty is, at times, also covenantally confined). Spinoza saw absolute sovereignty constitutionally delegated by the people to Moses, with God's sovereignty being "notional," not substantive. Spinoza observed that "no one can practice piety aright nor obey God unless he obeys the decrees of the sovereign in all things."<sup>28</sup> In turn, the sovereign "is thought to wrong his subjects and infringe their right when he seeks to prescribe for every man what he should accept as true and reject as false...."<sup>29</sup>

The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus's* main purpose was to distinguish faith from philosophy.<sup>30</sup> It was written in Latin and, as earlier noted, it was directed to a restricted audience. It was not meant for the common people, whose prejudices and superstitions, Spinoza feared, would impede its rational appropriation through the study of "natural phenomena." Religious faith could not be demanded. Individuals arrived at their faith and moral precepts differently. Philosophy could not be given at Sinai, for all to hear and obey. Spinoza's task was to create God in the image of rational man, with religion being free from fear, emotion and superstition.

Faith had to be accompanied by works for salvation to be attained. The Apostle of James was a useful reference for Spinoza;<sup>31</sup> it allowed him, implicitly, to focus on the historical Jesus and his worldly deeds, rather than on an exclusive reliance on Paul and the crucified Son of God. Spinoza wanted a social order where people were obedient to laws, temporal and sacred, without regard to dogma, which encouraged persecution, so alien to his reading of the Gospel message. He denied that his theo-political analysis "is at variance with God's word or true religion and faith, or can weaken it; on the contrary,...I am strengthening it...."<sup>32</sup> Spinoza was critical of those who "are turning religion into superstition; indeed, instead of God's Word they are beginning to worship likeness and images, that is, paper and ink."<sup>33</sup>

For Spinoza, the Bible's importance was to direct man to living according to principles of charity and justice. The Bible demanded obedience to duly constituted authority and its message was universally applicable. It is not demanded that we acquire "the intellectual knowledge of God which contemplates his nature as it really is in itself...."<sup>34</sup>



## Spinoza Confronts the Scriptures

Spinoza's analysis of the Bible suggested two broad, interpretive possibilities. First, he was a master of biblical exegesis; second, he was a careless reader. It is arguable that his knowledge of Talmud and rabbinic Judaism was limited; however, his familiarity with the biblical text was demonstrated throughout the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* by his considerable hermeneutic deftness (for example, his delineation of seven different meanings and contexts for the word *ruach*). We, therefore, dismiss the latter possibility. Assuming that the former is generally more accurate, we then have to attribute increasing credence to the view that his commentary needs to be honed for its esoteric and exoteric meanings, as the interpolation and comprehensiveness of his examination is inadequate.

Spinoza's explication of the biblical narrative portrayed the ancient Hebrews and their religious practices as quite primitive and parochial. The Jews were described as a particularistic people, whose importance was limited to the time they were a politically sovereign nation. Their understanding of God was grounded in arrogance, superstition, and outdated ceremonial practices. They were depicted as feeling superior to their neighbors and "despising" other peoples. The Jews, Spinoza stated, "have not ceased to this day to invent miracles with view to convincing people that they are more beloved of God than others, and are the final cause of God's creation and continuous direction of the world."<sup>35</sup>

Spinoza argued that the practice of circumcision and Jewish separation incited hatred of the Jews. Covenantal circumcision was contrasted with the Chinese religious custom of wearing pigtails.<sup>36</sup> The theological concept of "chosenness" was transformed into a political image. Spinoza observed that "God did not choose the Hebrews unto eternity, but only on the same terms as he had earlier chosen the Canaanites."<sup>37</sup> Spinoza interprets the covenantal-theological idea of biblical chosenness as illustrative of Hebrew privilege and proprietary hubris. The biblical Jew becomes culpable for God's covenantal choices: "For surely they would have been no less blessed if God had

called all men equally to salvation, nor would God have been less close to them for being equally close to others, nor would their laws have been less just or they themselves less wise if those laws had been ordained for all men. Miracles would have displayed God's power no less if they had been wrought for other nations as well, and the Hebrews would have been no less in duty bound to worship God if God had bestowed those gifts equally upon all men."<sup>38</sup>

Moses is portrayed as a political leader who demanded harsh, retributive justice: "an eye for an eye." This is understood as vengeful, pentateuchal particularism, rather than the more ethical Judaic admonition that punishment must fit the crime. Spinoza introduces Leviticus 19:18 (loving one's neighbour as oneself), not to illuminate Jewish ethical precepts, but toward the end of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in a discussion about how the Jews should abide by the laws of temporal authority. Spinoza here repeats the assertion in the Gospel of Matthew that the Jews were taught: "Love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy" [5:43].<sup>39</sup> Earlier in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* Spinoza states that the Divine Law would have been just as valid if it were written in any language. Its message is "to love God above all, and one's neighbour as oneself." This is the core of religion, the basis of what should be thought.<sup>40</sup> Spinoza here omits any reference to Leviticus 19:18, or to the Pharisee, Hillel, and his restatement of this commandment. He does, however, refer to the New Testament's adaptation of this verse in Paul's Letter to the Romans [13:8].

In his desire to simplify religion to a few fundamental precepts of observance and belief, Spinoza notes the "doctrine of charity" which is everywhere commended in the highest degree in both Testaments.<sup>41</sup> That he omits distinguishing it from the Jewish concept of *tsedakah*, and subsumes it under a syncretistic, Judeo-Christian notion of charity, is again consistent with his marginalization of Judaism. Further, he states: "I show that the revealed Word of God is not to be identified with a certain number of books, but is a simple conception of the divine mind as revealed to the prophets; and that is—to obey God with all one's heart by practicing justice and charity."<sup>42</sup> This paraphrase of the Shema, however, is not a passage from one of the prophetic texts, or from the New Testament, but is in Deuteronomy,

a pentateuchal text that can be cited to illuminate the ethical, universalistic dimension of the Torah and Judaism.

Spinoza will also criticize the prophetic influence in politics. The prophets are seen as religious nuisances, who interfere with proper state prerogatives, and cause interminable civil strife and casualties. These observations are incomplete. The biblical prophetic tradition rejects political absolutism and can be seen to offer a republican tradition of liberty, not inconsistent with Spinoza's own views. For Spinoza, the prophets, and false prophets, contribute to interminable, bloody warfare and the establishment of absolutist monarchical regimes. The prophets are not seen as courageous advocates of the people, who speak truth to power. Spinoza's republicanism demanded a strict separation of church and state, with the state being the sovereign body; this perspective is absent in the Jewish covenantal tradition.

To Spinoza, "the function of the prophet was to teach not the special laws of his country but true virtue....[T]here is no doubt that all nations possessed prophets and that the gift of prophecy was not peculiar to the Jews."<sup>43</sup> That the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were not exclusively Jewish; that they directed their exhortations beyond the covenantal community; that other religions also have a prophetic tradition, are clear. However, Spinoza's tendency to read the Bible so as to universalize what he finds laudable, and to particularize to the Hebrews what he sees as antiquated, diminishes the distinctly Jewish legal-national rootedness of the biblical prophets. In Spinoza, the Hebrew prophets become "prophets unto the Gentiles." The Pharisees are depicted as narrow particularists, begrudging other nations a share in God's grace. In contrast, Spinoza approvingly cites Paul and his Epistle to the Romans to demonstrate the universal resonance of the New Testament: "it was for all nations that God sent his Christ to free all men alike from the bondage of the law...."<sup>44</sup>

Spinoza describes the Torah as a narrow, legalistic text, setting out the laws, customs, and material underpinnings of the Hebrew nation. Although it has a moral dimension, it is not about universal, moral teachings. Moses is here not the teacher, or prophet, but the temporal legislator, who governs through coercion rather than instruction. In contrast, Jesus is depicted as

a spiritual, moral figure, concerned with universal laws that transcend those of the earlier Hebrew polity. Jesus differed from Moses because he perceived eternal truths, while Moses was a legislator of a people. When Jesus communicates through parables, or in terms of understood laws, it was to adjust to the inability of the people to comprehend his "eternal truths."<sup>45</sup>

Spinoza sees the Christian covenant as universal; it "is no longer written in ink or engraved in tablets of stone, but is inscribed by God's spirit in men's hearts."<sup>46</sup> He suggests that Moses, the supreme Old Testament prophet, communicates God's revealed message through the commandments, while Paul's Epistle to the Romans is grounded in rational discourse.<sup>47</sup> The Old Testament is concerned with the actions and behaviour of the Jews; the New Testament and Christ are directed to the intellect and mind of man.<sup>48</sup> The apostles are more rational and less dogmatic than the Old Testament prophets.<sup>49</sup> Spinoza understands that Christianity has its own particular ceremonial tradition, for example, the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Spinoza doubts that they emerge with Christ or the Apostles, the embodiments of intrinsic holiness. To him, Judaic ceremonies were instituted to bind a state, Christian ceremonies were directed to the unity of a Christian society.<sup>50</sup>

The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* primarily addresses Old Testament texts. Spinoza's illustrations often depict a people and a religion replaced by a new, triumphant successor, accentuating the marginal status of Jews and their history. A careful reading suggests, however, that Spinoza's integration and synthesis of the two Testaments provide little solace for Jews, who are troubled by the spiritual elevation of Jesus, or to Christian triumphalists, who are confronted with Jesus, that great man of the flesh. Spinoza is more circumspect in his observations on the New Testament than on the Bible. He hermeneutically considers the text as it informs us about Christ, with the disclaimer that "I am certainly not alluding to the doctrines held by some Churches about Christ, nor am I denying them; for I freely confess that I do not understand them."<sup>51</sup>

The leadership of the established Christian institutions would find little comfort in a theological-political treatise that implicitly undermines their claim to dogmatic certainty, or to their right to political ascendancy in secular governance. Spinoza

privileges politics over religion and theology, to the extent that he is able to speculate about the possibility of a future Jewish state and the restoration of Jewish chosenness, not as a superior, spiritual people, but in the form of a reinvigorated commonwealth. He states that the success of this non-theological chosenness will depend on the future fortune, prosperity, and political success of the Jewish people.<sup>52</sup>

### Conclusion: Spinoza and Post-Biblical Judaism

Spinoza, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, reflects on Judaism and post-biblical texts, and the interpretive traditions informing their appropriation. His biblical erudition is evident; however, the precision and quality of his commentary on post-biblical, Jewish religious texts are often flippant and gratuitous.

Recent Spinoza historiography casts doubt on Spinoza's familiarity with the Talmud. His school records indicate that he never even registered in advanced Talmud study.<sup>53</sup> Spinoza, to some a saintly philosopher, is capable of pointed, acerbic invective, especially at the Pharisees and their intellectual successors.<sup>54</sup> He sees them as the inciters of the mob responsible for Pontius Pilate's reluctant acquiescence to the crucifixion of Christ. Spinoza accepts the New Testament characterization of the Pharisees as vile hypocrites. If the conflict between the Sadducees and Pharisees had been strictly doctrinal and restricted to theology, without temporal consequences, Spinoza would have been less concerned with them. What he condemns is the Pharisees' political domination "under the cloak of religion."<sup>55</sup>

The apostles are Spinoza's prototype of a teacher, each with his own method and style of instruction. Conversely, the rabbis of the Talmudic period are rarely acknowledged as teachers, or scholars. The Jews, Spinoza asserts, "despised philosophy."<sup>56</sup> Spinoza dismisses the Jewish biblical interpretive tradition as inaccurate, intellectually flawed, and untruthful. His task is "to correct these faults and to remove common theological prejudices."<sup>57</sup>

The rabbis read and interpreted texts with creativity and imagination; they ascribed multiple meanings and nuances to

what seemed to be uncomplicated passages of the Bible: "A Biblical word, a custom or a saying, was thought to be crammed with a multiplicity of meaning. The plain was too shallow to be true. Only the mystery was plausible, while the one-dimensional, the superficial was inconceivable. Everywhere they found cryptic meaning."<sup>58</sup> Spinoza's reaction is dramatically different: "The Rabbis run quite wild, and such commentators as I have read indulge in dreams, fantasies, and in the end corrupt the language altogether."<sup>59</sup>

Spinoza mocks what he sees as inept, rabbinic scholarship, especially those who dabble in Kabbalism "whose madness passes the bounds of my [Spinoza] understanding."<sup>60</sup> Spinoza's denigration of rabbinic scholarship continues: "They think it a mark of piety to alter some passages of Scripture to harmonize with others—an absurd piety, in that they adapt clear passages to suit the obscure, the correct to suit the faulty, and they contaminate what is sound with what is corrupt."<sup>61</sup> Spinoza, however, is also capable of imaginative, biblical elaboration. For example, he argues that Job was likely a Gentile because the style and content of the book "seem not to be the work of a man wretchedly ill, lying amid ashes, but of one mediating at ease in a library."<sup>62</sup> Ironically [and ignored by Spinoza], many rabbis of the Talmudic period also argued that Job was not Jewish.

Spinoza's use and abuse of the Bible are an indictment of two millennia of Jewish scholarship. It is not the definitive work of modern Bible scholarship, although for many intellectuals and theologians, Spinoza is the embodiment of philosophical reason, challenging the forces of superstition, dogma and intolerance. His scholarship is often formidable, but occasionally flawed, especially when he sweepingly ascribes characteristics and qualities to Judaism, its theo-political underpinnings, and to the covenantal political tradition. Spinoza's rancour also extends to the Catholic Church, especially its Thomistic elements. He criticizes papal authority, and the ingenuity of their priests and scholars, who confuse Scripture with philosophy and science.<sup>63</sup> Spinoza objects to the Bible becoming a vehicle for any arbitrary, political interpolation of theological ideas, Jewish or Christian. He fears that this will only contribute to the transformation of natural religion into sectarian superstition. For a variety of reasons, however (some of which I have attempted to address in

this essay), his focal point is the Bible and its enemies, whom are often the sages, scholars, and teachers of Judaism.

### Notes

1. Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 194.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
3. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Meridian Books, 1934), p. vii.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
5. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 15.
6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 6.
7. See Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, ed. with an introduction by Tamara Deutscher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).
8. Yovel, pp. 12 and 49.
9. Yovel, pp. 31-32. Spinoza states, the people "accuse me falsely of atheism." A. Wolf, ed., *The Correspondence of Spinoza* (London: n.p., 1928), letter 30, p. 206, cited in Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, p. 25.
10. Yovel, p. 29.
11. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 183.
12. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 107.
13. Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 2nd ed., trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), pp. 209-210.
14. Spinoza, p. 122.
15. Spinoza, p. 196.
16. Strauss, *Persecution*, p. 191.
17. Spinoza, p. 143.
18. Spinoza, p. 80.
19. The importance of politics, philosophy, religion and individual autonomy, all important for a proper reading of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, engenders scholarly disagreement on their respective significance. For example, Robert McShea states that



"[a]lthough Spinoza wrote much on politics and is clearly in the first rank of political philosophers, he is primarily interested neither in politics nor in metaphysics but in an ethical program for the achievement of personal autonomy." Robert J. McShea, *The Political Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 30. Brad S. Gregory's introduction to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* notes his disagreement with Leo Strauss on the issue of Spinoza's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology. Gregory rejects the Straussian view that Spinoza's ultimate quest is philosophical freedom. For Gregory, "[p]hilosophy is *ultimate* only in the derivative sense of being the means whereby one arrives at salvation; the blessedness of the individual, not philosophy as such, is *primary* for Spinoza....[I]t does not seem that Spinoza is bent on completely reducing religion to philosophy." [Spinoza, fn. p. 25 and p. 37.]

20. Spinoza, pp. 158-159.
21. Shlomo Pines, "Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides and Kant," *Further Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 20, ed. Ora Segal (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), p. 6.
22. Arthur Hyman, *Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith in the Light of their Medieval Jewish Background* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 284.
23. Spinoza, p. 221.
24. Spinoza, p. 220.
25. Spinoza, p. 50.
26. McShea, p. 101-102.
27. Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 27-28.
28. Spinoza, p. 284.
29. Spinoza, p. 291.
30. Spinoza, p. 221.
31. Spinoza, p. 222.
32. Spinoza, p. 205.
33. Spinoza, p. 206.
34. Spinoza, p. 218.
35. Spinoza, p. 125.
36. Spinoza, pp. 99-100.
37. Spinoza, p. 98.
38. Spinoza, p. 88.

39. Spinoza, pp. 284-285.
40. Spinoza, p. 211.
41. Spinoza, p. 212.
42. Spinoza, p. 55.
43. Spinoza, p. 94.
44. Spinoza, p. 97.
45. Spinoza, pp. 107-108.
46. Spinoza, p. 272.
47. Spinoza, p. 199.
48. Spinoza, p. 146.
49. Spinoza, p. 198.
50. Spinoza, p. 119.
51. Spinoza, p. 64.
52. Spinoza observes that "the Hebrew citizen could enjoy a good life only in their own country; abroad they could expect only hurt and humiliation" (p. 198).
53. Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, translated from the French by Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 99.
54. For Spinoza, Maimonides is also seen as a Pharisee because he believes that "Scripture must be made to conform with reason" (p. 228).
55. Spinoza, p. 276.
56. Spinoza, p. 203. Spinoza does briefly acknowledge that the Pharisees who decided upon the canon were teachers (p. 210). However, he admonishes the rabbis for trying to keep Ecclesiastes and the Proverbs of Solomon out of the canon, and doubts their good faith (p. 187).
57. Spinoza, p. 161.
58. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1978), p. 57.
59. Spinoza, p. 178.
60. Spinoza, p. 179.
61. Spinoza, p. 193.
62. Spinoza, p. 189.
63. Spinoza, p. 214.