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BENEDICT SPINOZA:
A PIONEER IN BIBLICAL CRITICISM

By WALTER E. STUERMANN*

Under "the curse wherewith Elisha cursed the children" and with "the wrath and fury of the Lord" burning against him, Benedict Spinoza was in 1656 cast out of the synagogue and cut off forever from Israel. He turned to grinding lenses and writing philosophy. Both products were excellent, but it was the latter which earned for him notoriety in his day and the highest praise when it was too late for him to enjoy it.

For the most part, Spinoza's writings were published posthumously. They express what is perhaps the purest form of rationalism. Thomist scholar Gilson confesses that his philosophy is a "one hundred per cent metaphysically pure answer to the question how to achieve human salvation by means of philosophy alone" and that he feels "infinitely grateful to him because, after having discarded all positive religion as purely mythological, he did not replace it by a philosophical mythology of his own."¹ Set forth in the manner of mathematics, Spinoza's world-view was, however, the incarnation of a deeply religious spirit. Few can read the *Ethics* without sensing the intense love of God which motivated the writer and without realizing that it voices an urgent struggle with the problem of salvation.

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¹ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 103.

Spinoza's religious struggle was a solitary one. During his lifetime and for several generations after, both he and his thought were the objects of terrible invectives. His first biographer, Colerus, described his thought as "the most pernicious atheism that ever was seen in the world" and that great doubter, David Hume, following the lead of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, referred to "the hideous hypothesis . . . of that famous atheist."² Even more genuinely religious than his philosophy was his life. Not infrequently and not without justification have the names of Jesus of Nazareth and the blessed Spinoza been linked. "As a philosopher, and toward his own philosophical God, Spinoza is probably the most pious thinker there ever was," says Gilson.³ Even Bertrand Russell in a rare tender moment comments that

Spinoza is the noblest and the most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme. As a natural consequence, he was considered, during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness.⁴

In 1799 Friedrich Schleiermacher eulogized him, saying,

Offer with me reverently a tribute to the names of the holy rejected Spinoza. The high World-Spirit pervaded him; the Infinite was his beginning and his end; the Universe was his only and his everlasting love. In holy innocence and in deep humility he beheld himself mirrored in the eternal world, and perceived how he also was its most worthy mirror. He was full of religion, full of the Holy Spirit. Wherefore, he stands there alone and un-

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Vol. I (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1949), p. 229. G. Nador, "Metod i znachenie kritiki biblii Spinozi," *Acta Orientalia (Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae)*, V, 1-2, p. 29, has recently (1955) revived this erroneous and tattered description of the philosopher: Spinoza is "a materialist . . . who uses biblical research for the overthrow of theology and for the establishment of atheism."

³ Gilson, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁴ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 569.

equalled; master in his art, yet without disciples and without citizenship, sublime above the profane tribe.⁵

Solitary and ill as he was in the productive years of his life, his influence was so pervasive and so mighty that it did not require an organized tribe of followers to perpetuate it.

The Theologico-Political Treatise. During his lifetime, Spinoza published only *Principles of the Cartesian Philosophy and Cogitata Metaphysica* (1663) and the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670). The latter, to which our attention will chiefly be directed, carried as its motto the text of I John 4:13: "Hereby know we that we dwell in him and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit." His other, perhaps better known, works were published after his death in 1677.

The *Theologico-Political Treatise* is the philosopher's work on freedom of thought and speech and on biblical criticism. It was met with a tornadic wave of protest and resentment. Professor Jacob Thomasius of Leipzig denounced it as a "godless document" and Professor Mansvelt of Utrecht asserted that "it ought to be buried forever in eternal oblivion."⁶ In September, 1672, at the auction of the possessions of Spinoza's friend Jan DeWitt, the Grand Pensionary of the Dutch Republic, there appeared the following notice.

Item 33: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* wrought by the renegade Jew together with the Devil in Hell, and published with the knowledge of Mr. Jan and his accomplices.⁷

Condemned within a half a dozen years by thirty-seven church councils and synods as "wicked and blasphemous" and as a "soul-destroying book," it was finally interdicted by the state in 1674.⁸ As a result, the work was reprinted frequently and

⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1958), p. 40.

⁶ Lewis Browne, *Blessed Spinoza* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 274-275.

⁷ Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

⁸ For example, Rudolf Kayser, *Spinoza: Portrait of a Spiritual Hero* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 246: "On the 30th of June, 1670, the Church Council of Amsterdam brought forward this grievance:

found increased circulation under such titles as "The Surgical Works of Dr. Franziskus Henriquez de Villacorta" and "Collection of the Historical Writings of Daniel Heinsius." Rudolf Kayser says that

it is the monument of a mind which, out of its knowledge of eternal truth, was compelled to fight for the truth and purity of all lives and all epochs. Two hundred years later in an entirely different world, when Gustave Flaubert read the Treatise for the first time, he confessed, "I was acquainted with Spinoza's 'Ethics' but not with the 'Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,' which amazes, dazzles and moves me to admiration. Good God! What a man! What a genius! Such knowledge and such a mind!"⁹

The temper and style of the *Treatise* are quite different from those of the deliberately posthumous *Ethics*, which was arranged in elegant geometric order and expressed in the antiseptic style of pure mathematics. Nevertheless, the philosophic position presupposed by the *Treatise* is precisely the rigorous rationalism of the *Ethics*, which has no place for anthropomorphic conceptions of deity, for a teleological interpretation of nature, or for an anthropocentric understanding of the universe.¹⁰ On these points one can profitably consult the Appendix of Part I of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza expresses himself clearly and specifically on the issues.¹¹ It is important to remember that the

'Our Church only desires that among the old complaints special care should be taken with regard to the boldness of the Papacy and of the Socinians, and the unrestricted printing of books, especially the dangerous book entitled "Theological-Political Treatise."' A few days later the District Synod of the Hague expressed the same demand; and the Synod of South Holland gave this opinion on the *Treatise*: 'as wicked and blasphemous as, to our knowledge, the world has ever seen, and about which the Synod must be grieved in the extreme.'

⁹ Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

¹⁰ Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1950), Band I, Buch 3, p. 256: "Die Gotteslehre der Ethik [von der wir an anderer Stelle gesprochen haben] bildet in dieser Schrift lediglich den mittelbar einwirkenden Hintergrund."

¹¹ Also see the letter of 13 March 1665 from Spinoza to William Blyenbergh, quoted in A. Wolf, *The Correspondence of Spinoza* (London: George

manuscript of the *Ethics* was almost complete when it was laid aside by the philosopher in order to write the *Treatise*. In the *Treatise* and in the *Ethics*, the "pernicious atheist" was saying, "Let God be God!"—though he certainly uses a different sense for the injunction from that of a Barth or a Calvin. The *Treatise* did not, however, lack religious sincerity because of its want of conformity to orthodox expectations. It is neither illogical nor irreverent to maintain that religion, pure and undefiled by obscurity, is advanced by opposing those who, without stimulating the mind or heart, excogitate "only novelties and paradoxes, such as would tickle the ears."¹² An assumption of this kind must be adopted as we approach the study of the *Treatise*.

Evidently Spinoza was prompted to abandon temporarily his *Ethics* for the *Treatise* by the growing conflict between church and state which threatened the freedom of thought and expression he cherished. He was also increasingly distressed by

Allen and Unwin, 1928), pp. 190–191: "Further, I should like to remark here that while we are speaking philosophically we must not use the modes of expression of Theology. For Theology has usually, and not without reason, represented God as a perfect man; therefore it is quite appropriate in Theology that it should be said that God desires something, that God is affected with weariness at the deeds of the ungodly, and with pleasure at those of the pious. But in Philosophy, where we clearly understand that to apply to God the attributes which make a man perfect, is as bad as to want to apply to a man those which make perfect an elephant or an ass, these and similar words have no place; and we cannot use them here without thoroughly confusing our conceptions. Therefore speaking philosophically we cannot say that God demands something from someone, or that something wearies or pleases Him, for all these are human attributes, which have no place in God."

¹² Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* in *The Chief Works of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. by R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), Vol. I, p. 7. Hereafter this source will be denoted by *T*. On pages 175–176 of *T*., Spinoza also writes: "I am consequently lost in wonder at the ingenuity of those . . . who detect in the Bible mysteries so profound that they cannot be explained in human language, and who have introduced so many philosophic speculations into religion that the Church seems like an academy, and religion like a science, or rather a dispute."

the charges of atheism being voiced against him, and he desired to reply to those who spoke of the Jew "who is an atheist, a scoffer, and a bad subject in this Republic." Written to these ends, the *Treatise* was the only document the philosopher produced with the intent of influencing public opinion and action. In a letter to Henry Oldenburg, he described his purposes.

I am now writing a *Treatise* about my interpretation of Scripture. I am driven to do this by the following reasons: 1. The Prejudices of the Theologians; for I know that these are among the chief obstacles which prevent men from directing their mind to philosophy; and therefore I do all I can to expose them, and to remove them from the minds of the more prudent. 2. The opinion which the common people have of me, who do not cease to accuse me falsely of atheism; I am also obliged to avert this accusation as far as it is possible to do so. 3. The freedom of philosophizing, and of saying what we think; this I desire to vindicate in every way, for here it is always suppressed through the excessive authority and impudence of the preachers.¹³

The chief aim of the *Treatise* was, then, to defend freedom of thought and speech. What it has to say about biblical criticism is a means to this end.¹⁴ By discussing the interpretation of the Bible, Spinoza hoped to dull the swords of the theologians who used their weapons for political purposes. In addition, he intended to liberate philosophic and scientific inquiry from theological prejudices. To do these things would, in his opinion, also serve to restore true piety and true morality. To separate philosophy and theology was to return each to its proper func-

¹³ Letter 30 (to Henry Oldenburg, September or October, 1665), A. Wolf, *Correspondence*, p. 206.

¹⁴ Manuel Joel, *Spinoza's Theologisch-Politischer Traktat auf seine Quellen Geprueft* (Breslau: Schletter'sche Buchhandlung, 1870), p. 5, rightly comments that the *Treatise* is not a work in biblical research as such, but a polemic writing in which biblical criticism is used as a tool. G. Nador, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30, argues in a similar manner; the *Treatise* defends freedom of thought and expression, democratic political ideas, and the separation of church and state, while opposing the religious world-view, biblical dogmatism, and ecclesiastical feudalism and clericalism.

tion with renewed vigor and purity. Those who accept the invitation to read the *Treatise* cannot go away without feeling the sincere and pious intent which infused the writing.

While the whole text of the *Treatise* bears evidences for Spinoza's method of biblical criticism, the middle part—Chapters 7 to 13—gives a specific description and application of the method. Chapter 7, for example, is entitled, "Of the Interpretation of Scripture." "Of the Authorship of the Pentateuch, and the Other Historical Books of the Old Testament" is the title of Chapter 8. This middle section closes with Chapter 13, "Scripture Teaches Only Very Simple Doctrines, Such as Suffice for Right Conduct." In the other chapters of the *Treatise*, the philosopher's treatment of biblical materials is turned more severely to the defense of political freedom.

Fearless and unprejudiced and possessing a mind that was at once mathematical and philosophical, he cleared away the old structure of allegory, Kabbala, and literalism, and then proceeded to lay a new foundation called the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which is the Magna Charta of Biblical Criticism.¹⁵

Spinoza's *Treatise*, says James A. Froude, was "the forerunner of German historical criticism; the whole of which has been but the application of principles laid down in that remarkable work."¹⁶

Spinoza's Reputation as a Founder of Biblical Criticism. When the "holy outcast" anonymously published the *Treatise* in 1670, the biblical studies of the Reformers were over a hundred years old and Spinoza's important Jewish predecessors in biblical criticism had been dead for three or more centuries.¹⁷ Another

¹⁵ Fred G. Bratton, "Precursors of Biblical Criticism," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 50 (1931), p. 182.

¹⁶ James A. Froude, "Spinoza," *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1874), p. 317.

¹⁷ The Jewish commentators and critics who seem to have influenced Spinoza were Abraham ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Judah Alfakar, Gersonides, and Hasdai Crescas. The recent article by G. Nador treats at some length the criticism by Spinoza of medieval commentators on the Bible and through them of contemporary trends in biblical criticism. He emphasizes the con-

century or more would have to pass before Jean Astruc's work on the Old Testament appeared and before J. G. Eichhorn's *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (1780–1783) was published. J. Wellhausen's critical work on the Old Testament appeared two centuries after Spinoza.

Almost without exception, recent writers of books on Old Testament literature or the history of biblical criticism cite the philosopher as one of the founders of modern biblical criticism. They pay him, however, only brief homage. R. H. Pfeiffer¹⁸ commemorates him with two paragraphs; Aage Bentzen¹⁹ offers several sentences to his memory, as does O. Eissfeldt.²⁰ E. G. Kraeling²¹ and S. Terrien²² invest a few more words in describing his work, but they exhibit no great lack of inhibition about the matter. When it is all said and done, there are very few treatises, whether books, articles, or monographs, which undertake to present adequately just what this champion of freedom did to earn the reputation as a founder of biblical criticism.

Pfeiffer says that Spinoza and Richard Simon (d. 1712) are "the two founders of modern biblical criticism."²³ The *Treatise*

controversy between Alfakar and Maimonides and the contest over the allegorical interpretation of the Bible. Manuel Joel's book directs attention especially to Spinoza's relations to Hasdai Crescas and Maimonides.

¹⁸ R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1941), pp. 46 and 136.

¹⁹ Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1952), I, pp. 10–11.

²⁰ Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1956), pp. 187–188.

²¹ E. G. Kraeling, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), pp. 45–46.

²² Samuel Terrien, "History of the Interpretation of the Bible—III. Modern Period," *The Interpreter's Bible*, IV (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952), pp. 129a–130a.

²³ Pfeiffer, *op. cit.*, p. 46. S. Karppe, "*Essais de critique et d'histoire de philosophie*" (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1902), p. 136, argues persuasively that "Richard Simon ne peut légitimement prétendre à ce titre. . . . Ce titre revient de plein droit à Spinoza. Pages 160, 166, and 187 of Karppe's work are also relevant.

is to be ranked "with the ablest works in biblical criticism," asserts E. E. Powell.²⁴ Naming Spinoza as one of three precursors of biblical criticism, F. G. Bratton contends that his importance lies in anticipating the two successive stages through which we have passed in biblical criticism: rationalism and historical criticism.²⁵ S. Terrien argues that "a great many of his reflections are still valid in our time" and that some, "such as those on the importance of understanding Hebrew manners of speech in order to interpret correctly not only the Old Testament but also the New Testament," are not yet fully appreciated.²⁶ Aage Bentzen credits Spinoza with marking out for the first time the field of work for the "science of Old Testament Introduction: 1) The origins of the different books, 2) the history of the Canon, and 3) the history of the text," commenting further that the philosopher works "quite independently of the tradition concerning the authors of the books."²⁷ In Spinoza's works, says Edward Gray, we find "the first serious analytical criticism of the Old Testament."²⁸ "Greater than any single insight on the Old Testament . . . is the fact that he built into the whole future development the belief that religion must not contradict reason," affirms E. G. Kraeling.²⁹ And we discover Hans-Joachim Kraus testifying that "the principles of historical [and] critical hermeneutics are formulated for the first time in the writings of Spinoza."³⁰

Such are the testimonies to Spinoza's importance in the his-

²⁴ Elmer E. Powell, *Spinoza and Religion* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1941), p. 29.

²⁵ Bratton, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

²⁶ Terrien, *op. cit.*, p. 129a.

²⁷ Bentzen, *op. cit.*, I, p. 10. This three-fold division of Old Testament science to which Bentzen refers was cited in almost exactly the same words in Carl Siegfried's *Spinoza als Kritiker und Ausleger des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: S. Calvary and Co., 1867), p. 9.

²⁸ Edward McQueen Gray, *Old Testament Criticism, Its Rise and Progress* (New York: Harper and Bros., c1923), p. 86.

²⁹ Kraeling, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³⁰ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen: Kreis Moers, 1956), p. 57.

tory of biblical criticism. It is therefore surprising that the literature on the philosopher's work in the biblical sciences is so limited. It seems as if the *Treatise* achieved that degree of notoriety where everyone finds it necessary to mention it but no one feels obliged to study it. Many of Spinoza's judgments about details in biblical studies have, of course, been outdated by the subsequent development of biblical criticism. Nevertheless, on matters of method and of attitude toward the Bible and in terms of his contributions to subsequent generations, the *Treatise* is by no means a historical curiosity. Spinoza is still able to instruct his readers in biblical interpretation, as he seems able to do on almost every issue touched by his penetrating mind and sensitive heart; for "like Moses returning from Sinai, he bears in his presence the witness that he has held communion with the Most High."³¹

This paper is offered in the attempt partially to fill the gap in the Spinoza literature created by the lack of attention given to the philosopher's biblical criticism. It will emphasize, not the particular judgments he was led to make, but the method he employed and the semantic principles operative in his method.

"*Rationalism*" in the *Treatise*. As we mentioned above, the rigorous rationalism of the *Ethics* stands as a background to the *Treatise*. The latter is not written, however, in the mathematical pattern of definitions-postulates-theorems, and there are some other evidences in it of an attenuation of the formal rigor of the distinctly philosophic work. Spinoza endeavors to show that philosophy and theology are distinct disciplines. If this is the case, each would therefore be expected to have its peculiar method and style. On this assumption, the striking differences in these respects between the *Ethics* and the *Treatise* are quite understandable.

As an illustration of this difference, we can cite the contrast between Spinoza's use of philosophic, a priori definitions in the *Ethics* and his attitude toward definitions in the *Treatise*.

³¹ R. H. M. Elwes, "Introduction," *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, Vol. I (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. ix.

Scripture does not give us definitions of things any more than nature does: therefore, such definitions must be sought in the latter case from the diverse workings of nature; in the former case, from the various narratives about the given subject which occur in the Bible.³²

Two things are significant here: first, definitions in the sciences among biblical studies are a posteriori; second, the method to be employed in the biblical sciences is patterned after that of the natural sciences. As a matter of fact, while the *Ethics*, as a philosophic study, had to be deductive in structure (given Spinoza's rationalistic presuppositions), the *Treatise*, as a political and biblical work, had to be fashioned in accord with empirical or inductive procedures.³³ Furthermore, if we attend to the circumstances in which the biblical materials were first uttered or written, we discover why religious or moral discourse (and discourse about such discourse) cannot be in the style and structure of mathematics.

But the deduction of conclusions from general truths, *a priori*, usually requires a long chain of arguments, and, moreover, a very great caution, acuteness, and self-restraint—qualities which are not often met with; therefore people prefer to be taught by experience rather than deduce their conclusion from a few axioms, and set them out in logical order. Whence it follows, that if anyone wishes to teach a doctrine to a whole nation (not to speak of the whole human race) and to be understood by all men in every particular, he will seek to support his teaching with experience, and will endeavor to suit his reasonings and the definitions of his doctrines as far as possible to the understanding of the common people, who form the majority of mankind, and he will not set them forth in logical sequence nor adduce the definitions which serve to establish them.³⁴

Since the Bible was written for a whole people, if not for the whole race, its contents were "necessarily . . . adapted as far

³² *T.*, pp. 100–101.

³³ Cf. Nador, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁴ *T.*, p. 77.

as possible to the understanding of the masses."³⁵ The peculiar occasions and intents of the biblical materials resulted in the Bible being a collection of writings which simply does not lend itself to the deductive method.

Moreover, Spinoza contends that God uses different means of revealing himself to man. Unquestionably in first position is that revelation which consists in the deposit of the divine image in the human mind. This postulate about man's connection to God explains the great confidence the philosopher lodges in the metaphysical competence of reason (as we shall see, he does not have a similar confidence in the ability of language to communicate the true ideas seized by reason). He admits, however, that other means are also used.³⁶ Some of these are related to the human exercise of imagination and to such other faculties as lead to the writing of directive or poetic discourse. Where things are clear, distinct, and coherent, as in Euclid, understanding comes with ease by the use of the tool of reason.³⁷ But where imagination is at work, one must call for research into the life, pursuits, language, problems, and habits of the writer or speaker. In short, empirical inquiry is demanded by the latter, whereas such works as Euclid's require only the armaments of the formal sciences.

Biblical criticism draws upon the resources of natural reason.³⁸ But reason operates here as it does in the natural sciences rather than in the mode appropriate to the fabrication of a logical or mathematical system.³⁹ This reliance on reason may justify

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *T.*, pp. 14, 175. On page 14 of *T.*, we read: "The other ways and means by which God makes revelations to mankind . . . both of that which transcends ordinary knowledge, and of that within its scope; for there is no reason why God should not employ other means to communicate what we know already by the power of reason."

³⁷ *T.*, p. 112 f.

³⁸ *T.*, p. 113.

³⁹ Thus, while we must agree with Karppe, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-148, that there is a deposit of Cartesian rationalism in the *Treatise*, resulting from Spinoza's general philosophical perspective, we must nevertheless assert that Karppe has failed to appreciate the real differences in scientific meth-

us in saying that the *Treatise* is in a way "rationalistic." It is only so, however, in the sense that any natural science is rationalistic. We do not have here the frozen elegance and precision of the *Ethics*, which seems to try to rehearse the very structure of reality at the level of abstract thought. Clearly and explicitly, Spinoza affirms the scientific—that is, the empirical—character of biblical criticism. He was perhaps the first man clearly to conceive biblical studies as sciences and then to elaborate a technique for the prosecution of them.

While the reliance on reason in the *Treatise* differs in conception and use from that in the *Ethics*, it seems clear that the principles by which Spinoza assesses the *truth* of biblical passages and ideas in the *Treatise* are exactly those established by his general philosophic position as it is deposited in the *Ethics*. Thus, when he says that "our mind subjectively contains in itself and partakes of the nature of God, and solely from this cause is enabled to form notions explaining natural phenomena,"⁴⁰ we are confronted with an idea which is typical of the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of the *Ethics*. As another example, we can cite the philosopher's explanation of the term "the help of God."

By the help of God, I mean the fixed and unchangeable order of nature or the chain of natural events: for I have said before and shown elsewhere that the universal laws of nature, according to which all things exist and are determined, are only another name for the eternal decrees of God, which always involve eternal truth and necessity.⁴¹

odology between the *Ethics* and the *Treatise* and to recognize that the method in the latter is chiefly empirical.

⁴⁰ *T.*, p. 14.

⁴¹ *T.*, p. 44. H. H. Britan, *Principles of Descartes' Philosophy by Benedictus de Spinoza* (La Salle, Ill., Open Court, 1943), p. 158, gives a passage of the *Cogitata Metaphysica* which bears out the contention that Spinoza uses the resources of natural reason to assess the truth of biblical passages: "The Sacred Pages ought to teach the same things . . . [as those] which are able to deduce with certainty from Natural Reason. For truth is not at variance with truth, nor do the Scriptures teach the nonsense that the multitude believe. For if we find anything in them contrary to the laws

Furthermore, Chapter VI, "Of Miracles," in the *Treatise* openly returns in part to the method of proof used in the *Ethics* in order to demonstrate that "a miracle, whether in contravention to, or beyond, nature, is a mere absurdity; and, therefore that what is meant in Scripture by a miracle can only be a work of nature, which surpasses, or is believed to surpass, human comprehension."⁴² These citations are examples of the evidences which could be summoned to show that, while Spinoza adopts a different method of inquiry in the *Treatise*, he will determine the truthfulness (not the meaningfulness) of biblical assertions and ideas in terms of the system set forth in the *Ethics*. It should be observed, however, that these judgments do not frequently or obviously appear in the *Treatise*; for he is here in the business of elaborating a method for the empirical study of biblical materials which uses as a key criterion an appeal to the evidences of Scripture alone.⁴³

Inasmuch as Spinoza concentrates on the problems of meaning among biblical passages and demands that those problems be solved by an appeal to biblical evidences (rather than extra-biblical ones), the reader who has not clearly grasped the significance of the distinction between meaning and truth is likely to misinterpret Spinoza's discourse as accommodation and extreme caution. Even so careful a scholar as Leo Strauss has fallen

of Reason we should refute it with the same freedom that we refute such statements in the Koran or the Talmud. However, there is no reason to think that the Sacred Writings contain anything opposed to the Natural Reason." In connection with this assertion, it must be carefully noticed that, when we come to the interpretation of Scripture, Spinoza is not dealing with the truthfulness of passages but with their meanings. Furthermore, this statement must be assessed in the light of what Savan, "Spinoza and Language," *Philosophical Review*, 67, 2 (April, 1958), has said about Spinoza's view of language. To these matters we shall return later.

⁴² *T.*, p. 87. I. Husik, "Maimonides and Spinoza on the Interpretation of the Bible," *Philosophical Essays*, 1952, pp. 141-159, pp. 157-158, comments that Spinoza's treatment of miracles in the *Treatise* fails to use his principles of biblical criticism and that he even seems to revert to the exegetical techniques of Maimonides, whom he so severely criticizes.

⁴³ *T.*, pp. 99, 100, *et passim*.

into this trap. Therefore he emphasizes that Spinoza expressed himself contradictorily as a device of accommodation to the vulgar.⁴⁴ His opinion that each chapter of the *Treatise* refutes one particular orthodox dogma while leaving all others untouched is an oversimplification and an exaggeration arising from the same failure to recognize that the *Treatise* deals only with the meaning of biblical terms and statements.

Spinoza's Approach to Scripture. While the philosopher here and there has a harsh word for those theologians who misuse Scripture to fortify philosophical speculations, to perpetuate superstition and credulity, or to suppress freedom,⁴⁵ his treatment of the biblical materials and his elaboration of methodology are amazingly free from bias. He had cause to be otherwise disposed. Hampshire comments that Spinoza "nowhere shows the slightest personal or nationalistic bias or bitterness, in spite of his excommunication and of his inherited memories of centuries of persecution and fanaticism."⁴⁶ The absence of a truculent, partisan spirit in the *Treatise* is, therefore, a striking testimony to his serious intent to make biblical criticism scientific.

Besides adopting the attitude of critical impartiality, Spinoza demanded that the student of the Bible approach the biblical materials as a scientist approaches natural phenomena. Only after all the pieces of evidence are collected, organized, and assessed can inferences safely be made. Even then, since those inferences are inductive, generalizations or explanations must be put forward cautiously and tentatively.

It is quite clear, especially from his *Ethics*, that Spinoza did not regard the Bible as an inspired system of truths, particularly of philosophic truths. Part of his warfare against literalism is motivated by the idea that literalism presupposes such an under-

⁴⁴ Strauss, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 184 ff.

⁴⁵ T., Preface.

⁴⁶ S. Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 203.

standing of the Scriptures. In a letter to William van Blyenbergh in 1665, Spinoza wrote:

I do indeed believe that I do not attribute to Scripture that Truth which you believe to be therein, and yet I believe that I ascribe to it as much, if not more, authority, and that, far more cautiously than others. I take care not to impute to it certain childish and absurd views; and this no one can do better unless he understands Philosophy well, or has Divine revelations. So the explanations of Scripture which ordinary Theologians offer have very little influence with me, especially when they are of that kind which always take Scripture according to the letter and the external meaning. And yet I have never seen any Theologian except the Socinians, who was so dense as not to perceive that Holy Scripture very frequently speaks of God in human fashion, and expresses its meaning in Parables.⁴⁷

The literalist has misconstrued his texts, thinks Spinoza; he has wrongly assumed that they are logical or scientific expressions. In any case, contends the philosopher, literalism is a conclusion which might be drawn after an examination of the texts; it should not "be set up on the threshold, as it were, of inquiry."⁴⁸ Rejecting the idea that the Bible is a system of inspired truths, he nevertheless approaches the Scriptures with the attitude that they may very well be a depository of intellectual and spiritual wealth. Frequently he speaks as if he is endeavoring to free the Bible from the horrendous misinterpretations of the theologians in order that it may be restored to its proper pious function. He deplores the perversion of faith into credulity, the twisting of biblical passages to carry the freight of Platonic and Aristotelian speculations, the use of the Bible as a political weapon, and the investment of only a formal assent in the Scriptures. All these, we infer, are deprecated as a mishandling of a source which could foster true piety and faith

⁴⁷ Letter 21 (to William van Blyenbergh, 28 January 1665), A. Wolf, *Correspondence*, pp. 179-180.

⁴⁸ *T.*, p. 8.

and bring "a very great consolation to mankind."⁴⁹ "Those, therefore, who reflect," he says, "will find nothing in what I have written repugnant either to the Word of God or to true religion and faith."⁵⁰ The spiritual treasure deposited in the Scriptures rests there in a particular and peculiar way. Spinoza thinks that the Bible is inspired, but that it is not inspired in the way in which the literalist thinks it to be. For him, the task of drawing upon the religious and moral wealth laid away in it is somewhat more difficult than following in a literalistic way its dicta as a recipe for life.

The philosopher employs a distinction between the realms of knowledge and of obedience which he believes is of crucial importance for an understanding of the Bible. We shall return to this theme at a later point in the discussion. Now very briefly, however, we must recognize that for Spinoza "between faith . . . and philosophy, there is no connection, nor affinity . . . for they are as wide apart as the poles. Philosophy has no end in view save truth: faith . . . looks for nothing but obedience and piety."⁵¹ "The best faith is not necessarily possessed by him who displays the best reasons, but by him who displays the best fruits of justice and charity."⁵² As we read such statements, we must remember that Spinoza would, in the wider context of his philosophy, say that he who possesses truth does lead the good or pious life. In any case, faith and the Bible have obedience as their object.

So also the other Prophets, at the command of God, revealed the Word of God to the people in this way, as the best means, though not as that which God enjoined, of leading the people to the primary object of Scripture, which according to the word of Christ himself consists, of course, in loving God above all things and one's neighbour as oneself. High speculations, I believe, concern Scripture least. As far as I am concerned, I have learned none of

⁴⁹ *T.*, p. 199.

⁵⁰ *T.*, p. 165.

⁵¹ *T.*, p. 189.

⁵² *T.*, p. 188.

the eternal attributes of God from Holy Scripture, nor could I learn them.⁵³

In the context of his treatment of the Bible, Spinoza's distinction between the spheres of truth and of obedience may be interpreted as a demand that the attempt to answer scientific questions cannot be prejudiced by a prior determination of what it would be good to say in answer to them. Let us agree that, when the Scriptures say that God is a judge, they do so to inculcate obedience. Let us further agree that this is good. Our recognition that the Scriptures serve this worthy directive function should never, however, hamper, bias, or preclude a scientific examination of the meaningfulness or truth of the statement that God is a judge. Nor should it thwart an examination of whether the Scriptures elsewhere contradict or qualify this assertion. Spinoza's distinction between these two realms is at least methodological and as such it is an expression of the attempt to make biblical studies scientific. The distinction may, of course, be more than methodological.

In sum, Spinoza's approach to the Bible included a critical impartiality, a recognition that a doctrine of inspiration must be framed in terms of a proper understanding of the biblical texts, and a distinction between the realms of truth or knowledge and of obedience or piety. Although his approach to the biblical materials was in these respects scientific, he was not simply a rationalistic critic. We have already mentioned his real concern for piety, for a living faith, and for the consolation to be found in the Bible. Chapter XII of the *Treatise* has the ponderous but revealing title, "Of the True Original of the Divine Law and Wherefore Scripture Is Called Sacred, and the Word of God. How That in so far as It Contains the Word of God, It Has Come Down to Us Uncorrupted." The opening words are:

Those who look upon the Bible as a message sent down by God from Heaven to men, will doubtless cry out that

⁵³ Letter 21 (to William van Blyenbergh, 28 January 1665), A. Wolf, *Correspondence*, p. 180.

I have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost because I have asserted that the Word of God is faulty, mutilated, tampered with, and inconsistent; that we possess it only in fragments, and that the original of the covenant which God made with the Jews has been lost. However, I have no doubt that a little reflection will cause them to desist from their uproar: for not only reason but the expressed opinions of prophets and apostles openly proclaim that God's eternal Word and covenant, no less than true religion, is Divinely inscribed in human hearts, that is, in the human mind, and that this is the true original of God's covenant, stamped with His own seal, namely, the idea of Himself, as it were, with the image of His Godhood.⁵⁴

Perhaps the only serious misjudgment by Spinoza in this passage was that men would soon desist from their uproar upon reading the *Treatise*. Some may have reservations about the particular bent of Spinoza's religion,⁵⁵ but it is clear that we discover in him a relentless scientific criticism of biblical materials fused with a sincere religious aspiration and sensitivity. As Terrien asserts, he was not merely a rationalistic exegete.⁵⁶

Opposition to Reading Ideas into Scripture. A scientific and properly religious approach to the Bible demands that one truly listen to what the biblical texts have to say. Just as a natural scientist is careful to let factual data speak for themselves, not twisting them by interpretation to say what he would like to have them say, the reader of the Scriptures must similarly be attentive and receptive before the evidences in the Bible.

The very antithesis of this attitude is that in which the reader infuses the biblical words and sentences with his own thoughts and prejudices. Throughout the *Treatise*, Spinoza goes to war against this uncritical and impious handling of the Scriptures. He is keenly aware of the fact that seeing and

⁵⁴ *T.*, p. 165.

⁵⁵ Bentzen, *op. cit.*, I, 1 1, for example, says that there is in Spinoza a "defect in real religious understanding."

⁵⁶ Terrien, *op. cit.*, p. 129b.

hearing are often faulty. Thus, in sound scientific fashion, he says,

it is very rare for men to relate an event simply as it happened, without adding any element of their own judgment. When they see or hear anything new, they are, unless strictly on their guard, so occupied with their own preconceived opinions that they perceive something quite different from the plain facts seen or heard, especially if such facts surpass the comprehension of the beholder or hearer, and, most of all, if he is interested in their happening in a given way.⁵⁷

This phenomenon must be taken into account, both in assessing what took place when the parts of the Bible were written and what takes place now when they are read. Leaders of the churches, says Spinoza,

are never tired of professing their wonder at the profound mysteries of Holy Writ; still I cannot discover that they teach anything but speculations of Platonists and Aristotelians to which . . . they have made Holy Writ conform; not content to rave with the Greeks themselves, they want to make the prophets rave also; showing conclusively, that never even in sleep have they caught a glimpse of Scripture's Divine nature.⁵⁸

When the philosopher discusses prophecy, he deplors the popular tendency quickly to assert that the prophets knew everything within the scope of the human mind. If the popular mind cannot sustain this claim in the face of certain passages, it makes an attempt to assert that there is a meaning present different from the evident one. "If either of these proceedings is allowable we may as well shut our Bibles, for vainly shall we attempt to prove anything from them if their plainest passages may be classed among obscure and impenetrable mysteries, or if we may put any interpretation on them which we fancy."⁵⁹ "Every absurd and evil invention of human perversity could

⁵⁷ *T.*, p. 92.

⁵⁸ *T.*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ *T.*, p. 33; also p. 153.

thus, without detriment to Scriptural authority, be defended and fostered."⁶⁰ The appeal to a secret stratum of meaning beneath the evident one permits every man to read the words of the Bible and to think his own thoughts, pretending that they are the divine message. Here Spinoza touches upon one of the most prevalent and pernicious errors committed in biblical interpretation.

We see most people endeavouring to hawk about their own commentaries as the word of God, and giving their best efforts, under the guise of religion, to compelling others to think as they do: we generally see, I say, theologians anxious to learn how to wring their inventions and sayings out of the sacred text, and to fortify them with Divine authority.⁶¹

As another evidence of the philosopher's religious respect for Scripture, it should be emphasized that he characterizes the attempt to read one's own thoughts into the Bible as sacrilegious as well as unscientific.⁶² Spinoza demanded, says Terrien, that men listen to Scripture rather than appeal to it.⁶³ One must also keep clearly in mind that the meaning of Scripture is to be derived from Scripture itself, not from elsewhere. "The philosopher was aware," asserts Husik, "that he was making a revolutionary suggestion."⁶⁴

Those who do not truly listen, but rather appeal, to the Bible are swept away into using the Scriptures to foment discord, to buttress personal ambition or unscrupulousness, to

⁶⁰ *T.*, p. 34.

⁶¹ *T.*, p. 98; at various points in the *Treatise*, Spinoza criticizes Maimonides severely on this score. On page 115 of *T.*, he says, "If he [Maimonides] had been convinced by reason that the world is eternal, he would not have hesitated to twist and explain away the words of Scripture till he made them appear to teach this doctrine. He would have felt quite sure that Scripture, though everywhere plainly denying the eternity of the world, really intends to teach it."

⁶² *T.*, p. 98.

⁶³ Terrien, *op. cit.*, p. 129b.

⁶⁴ Husik, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

deprecate reason, or to propagate hatred disguised as zeal for the Lord.⁶⁵ "Every result of their diseased imagination they attribute to the Holy Ghost."⁶⁶

The Method. According to Spinoza, the study of the Bible is to proceed by use of the tool of natural reason, and it will seek to investigate the biblical texts in the critical and empirical manner in which the sciences study natural phenomena.⁶⁷ "I determined," says Spinoza, "to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines, which I do not find clearly therein set down."⁶⁸ Such a scientific study will sweep aside any conscious use of preconceptions, including those operative in literalism.

As the interpretation of nature consists in the examination of the history of nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain fixed axioms, so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its authors as a legitimate conclusion from its fundamental principles. By working in this manner everyone will always advance without danger of error—that is, if they admit no principles for interpreting Scripture and discussing its contents save such as they find in Scripture itself. . . .⁶⁹

Questions about the senses of biblical passages are to be answered on the basis of evidences in the Bible alone.⁷⁰ Extrabiblical principles are extraneous and irrelevant.

⁶⁵ *T.*, p. 98 f.

⁶⁶ *T.*, p. 99.

⁶⁷ Cf. Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* (Berlin, 1930), p. 259.

⁶⁸ *T.*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ *T.*, p. 99.

⁷⁰ Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, p. 260, says, "Das positive Prinzip der Bibel-Wissenschaft besagt: nichts darf als Lehre der Schrift behauptet werden, was nicht durch Rekurs auf den Wort-Sinn der Schrift als Lehre der Schrift auszuweisen ist." In his "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 145–146, Strauss writes, "Spinoza's formulation of his hermeneutic principle ('the whole knowledge of the Bible must be derived exclusively from the Bible itself') does not express precisely what he actually demands. In the first place,

To express Spinoza's thought in modern terminology, we may say that there is a certain range of significance attaching to biblical passages. This range is the cultural, literary, and linguistic heritage of the Jewish people. The determination of meanings can only be made within this range, not by casting the passages in question into non-biblical or non-Jewish contexts. We must carefully observe that this is said with respect to the question of meaning, not with respect to the question of truthfulness. Just as it would be unscientific to decide questions of meaning in mechanics by principles governing, say, biological phenomena, it would be similarly futile to treat the matter of biblical meanings by criteria drawn, say, from the Aristotelian philosophy. "In order not to confound the meaning of a passage with its truth," says the philosopher, "we must examine it solely by means of the signification of the words, or by a reason acknowledging no foundation but Scripture."⁷¹ From a modern point of view, Spinoza's position is, to be sure, somewhat oversimplified—we think, for example, of the relevance of archaeology—but the main contention is quite sound and is a rather revolutionary one in the history of biblical criticism.

the knowledge of the language of the Bible has to be derived primarily, as he maintains, not from the Bible, but from a certain tradition. Besides, as for the knowledge of the lives, etc. of the authors, and of the fate of their books, it may not be impossible to derive it partly from the Bible, but there is certainly no reason why it should be an indispensable duty to derive it exclusively from the Bible; Spinoza himself welcomed every reliable extraneous information shedding light on matters of this kind." Moreover, on page 148, Strauss contends that "according to him [Spinoza], the Bible is essentially unintelligible. . . . [It is] a 'hieroglyphic' book—which is the reason why a special procedure has to be devised for its interpretation. . . . It is because of its essential unintelligibility that the Bible must be understood exclusively by itself. . . ." We have already remarked on Strauss' failure to appreciate Spinoza's distinction between the questions of meaning and truth. In addition, we observe that Spinoza's argument for his own method is not primarily based on biblical unintelligibility *per se* but is founded on the appropriateness and adequacy of inductive procedures for such subject-matter.

⁷¹ *T.*, p. 101.

Scripture very often treats matters which cannot be deduced from principles known to reason: for it is chiefly made up of narratives and revelation: the narratives generally contain miracles—that is . . . relations of extraordinary natural occurrences adapted to the opinions and judgments of the historians who recorded them. . . . Therefore the knowledge of all these—that is, of nearly the whole contents of Scripture, must be sought from Scripture alone, even as the knowledge of nature is sought from nature.⁷²

Matthew Arnold was puzzled by the fact that Spinoza was prepared to take the Scriptures as they stand and to inquire about meanings by the use of biblical evidences alone.⁷³ He indicates that the philosopher discourses always on the basis of a hypothesis. The reply to Arnold is that this sort of procedure is quite common in scientific investigations and that his very comments on the matter simply emphasize how successfully scientific Spinoza was in biblical criticism. A large measure of any truly scientific search for knowledge is precisely that of pushing forward inquiry on the basis of a clearly framed hypothesis. One is always careful to distinguish what follows from the hypothesis from the question of the truthfulness of the hypothesis or its constituent parts. Spinoza's use of this technique is exactly what lends clarity to his treatment of biblical materials. When questions of meaning and truth are mixed, confusion results. Spinoza always asks—at least in the *Treatise*—the question of meaning. He should not be chided for not answering a question which he does not ask.

While we interpret Spinoza's technique as an expression of scientific method (empirical), it should be noticed that Nador comments that the philosopher uses the appeal to biblical evidences alone as an effective strategy for meeting his adversaries on their own ground and fighting them with their own weapons.⁷⁴ Moreover, he remarks that there is an ironic use of this procedure in the *Treatise* when Spinoza "proves" propositions which

⁷² *T.*, p. 100.

⁷³ Matthew Arnold, "Spinoza and the Bible," *Essays in Criticism: First Series* (New York, 1924), pp. 326 ff.

⁷⁴ Nador, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

are quite evident on other grounds.⁷⁵ Of these two suggestions, the latter appears to be far less substantial than the former. In any case, this writer maintains that it is fairer to Spinoza to emphasize the scientific character of the technique he employed. It does not seem to be simply a polemic tool.

A biblical passage is to be examined in terms of its "history." Its history is, to use our terminology, always within the range of significance set by the bounds of Jewish language, literature, and cultural phenomena.⁷⁶ Consequently, when Spinoza cites the details of the history of a biblical passage, he presents to us the different aspects or dimensions of the science of biblical criticism as he conceives it. These dimensions are⁷⁷

- (1) The study of the properties of the language or languages in which the books of the Bible were written.
- (2) An analysis of each book and an organization of its contents under headings, so that one can have at hand all the texts which treat a given subject.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁶ Strauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151, maintains that the demand for the "history" of a book or passage relates to unintelligible books or passages, not to intelligible ones.

⁷⁷ These aspects of biblical criticism are, for the most part, cited on pages 101-106 of *T*. Not all of them appear, however, in any formal and organized list in *T*.

⁷⁸ Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 146, says that the philosopher "does not say a word to the effect that the Biblical statements regarding the various significant subjects must be arranged according to principles supplied by the Bible itself; there are reasons for believing that his own arrangement of Biblical subjects would have had no Biblical basis whatever, but would have corresponded to what he considered the natural order of the subjects in question." This comment by Strauss, as well as his whole presentation, fails to recognize the centrality in Spinoza's criticism of the distinction between meaning and truth. To be sure, if questions of truth were at issue, the arrangement of subjects would be "the natural order," after the manner of the *Ethics*. But in biblical criticism the chief issue is that of meaning and the present writer finds no ground for thinking that Spinoza, who clearly maintained this distinction, would have used anything other than a "biblical arrangement." To this issue we shall return in the subsequent section on semantic principles in the *Treatise*.

- (3) A list of all ambiguous, obscure, or mutually contradictory passages or terms.
- (4) A study of the life, conduct, beliefs, studies, experiences, and temperament of the writer, as well as a study of the language, epoch, and occasion of the utterance or writing.

Such a history [of a scriptural statement or book] should relate the environment of [that statement or book]; that is, the life, the conduct, and the studies of the author . . . , who he was, what was the occasion, and the epoch of his writing, whom did he write it for, and in what language. Further, it should inquire into the fate of each book: how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different versions there were of it, by whose advice it was received into the Bible, and, lastly, how all the books now universally accepted as sacred, were united into a single whole.⁷⁹

- (5) Careful adherence to the distinction between what the biblical writer or character intended to say and what we think or conjecture.
- (6) Attention always to the fact that, only after we are in possession of the history of the biblical text and have decided that we assert nothing which does not directly follow from it, can we undertake to investigate the minds of the prophets and of the Holy Spirit.
- (7) A careful study of the differences between those ideas and doctrines on which there seems to be universal agreement and those on which biblical writers and characters disagree.

⁷⁹ *T.*, p. 103; Karppe, *op. cit.*, p. 166, says of this passage and the section from which it is drawn, "Par cette page magistrale, dont il n'y a rien à retrancher et à laquelle il n'y a rien à ajouter, Spinoza a véritablement été l'initiateur, le fondateur de la science appelée critique biblique." Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 149, maintains that Spinoza contends that in the case of intelligible books one does not "have to know the life of the author, his interest and character, the addressee of his book, its fate, nor the variant readings, etc. Intelligible books are self-explanatory." The points which David Savan makes about Spinoza's view of language tell heavily against Strauss' hypothesis.

- (8) Very great caution in inferring the intention of one prophet or writer from clearer passages in the writings of another.
- (9) Care always not to confuse the mind of the prophet or historian or writer with the mind of the Holy Spirit or with the truth of the matter.
- (10) A careful notation of those cases in which unclear, speculative passages are defined from a general understanding of prophecy, revelation, et cetera.
- (11) Attention to the fact that all biblical passages do not stand on the same level as history, literature, moral instruction, or religious edification.
- (12) A study of the editorial history of the books of the Bible.
- (13) An investigation of the steps by which a book came to be generally accepted or canonized.

Limitations of space prohibit a discussion of each of these principles or recommendations. Perhaps it is sufficient to point out that the philosopher grasped quite clearly the importance and interlocking roles of linguistics, literary analysis, historical criticism, and semantics in his elaboration of a scientific method for biblical studies. He marked out rather adequately, though not in an organized fashion, the chief departments of scientific biblical study. He is always careful to distinguish meaning from truth, what the writer meant from what we think, the clear from the obscure, the writer's discourse from the editor's work, what is universally agreed from what is disputed, and the writer's thoughts from the thoughts of the Holy Spirit. Throughout his work, he emphasizes the necessity of deriving conclusions from biblical evidence alone.⁸⁰ Repeatedly he arrives at judgments about authorship, order of narratives, meanings of passages, et cetera, by a comparison of the biblical testimonies taken in context. In this respect his work is semantically very astute.

⁸⁰ Husik, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34, interprets Spinoza as expressly opposing Maimonides on this principle of appeal to scriptural evidences alone.

Spinoza's formulation of a methodology for biblical studies in terms of these criteria is a startling achievement for his day and it is one which is in some respects still instructive for us. His claim to be named the founder of modern scientific biblical criticism is well justified.

Some Results of the Method. It is impossible to cite here all of the results of Spinoza's use of his method. This is, however, not necessary, for his methodology is more important than the specific results it produced. To cite a few examples of his conclusions may nevertheless help to illuminate his procedures.

- (1) He rejected, of course, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. After discussing the opinions and suggestions of Ibn Ezra, he says that this investigator did "not call attention to every instance [of evidence], or even to the chief ones."⁸¹ Spinoza goes on to note the narration in the third person, the accounts of Moses' death and burial, the fact that the narrative is extended beyond Moses' death, et cetera. "It is thus clearer than the sun at noonday that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived long after Moses."⁸² He holds the opinion that Moses may have written some small parts of the compilation, such as "War Against Amalek" and "A Book of the Covenant."
- (2) By a similar type of argument, he shows that the book of Judges was the work of a historian after the establishment of the monarchy.
- (3) His examination of the text results in the judgment that the editors of the biblical books used sources.

⁸¹ *T.*, p. 123. Siegfried, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-12, contends that Spinoza inferred too much from Ibn Ezra's references to Moses' relation to the Pentateuch. Ibn Ezra, he argues, viewed the Pentateuch generally as the work of Moses and did not deserve Spinoza's praises at this point. He concludes—perhaps unjustifiably—"Und so wuerde es denn dabei bleiben, dass die ersten Zweifel an der mosaischen Abfassung wie an der Integrität des Pentateuch von dem oben erwähtnten Le Peyrère geaeussert worden sind" (p. 12). Cf., for example, Pfeiffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46, 135-136.

⁸² *T.*, p. 124.

- (4) When he attends to questions of dates and times, as in the case of the interval between the Exodus and the Solomonian Temple, he concludes that "it is . . . abundantly evident that we cannot arrive at a true computation of years from the histories, and, further, that the histories are inconsistent themselves on the subject . . . [and] we are compelled to confess that these histories were compiled from various writers without previous arrangement and examination."⁸³
- (5) "Some error must have crept into the text of the second chapter of Ezra, for in verse 64 we are told that the total of all those mentioned in the rest of the chapter amounts to 42,360; but when we come to add up the several items we get as a result only 29,818. There must, therefore, be an error, either in the total, or in the details. The total is probably correct for it would most likely be well known to all as a noteworthy thing; but with the details, the case would be different. If, then, any error had crept into the total, it would at once have been remarked, and easily corrected."⁸⁴
- (6) He comments on the differences in style and content between prophetic writings and the epistles in the New Testament, noting that "the Apostles everywhere reason as if they were arguing rather than prophesying. . . . [For in the latter case] God is therein introduced not as speaking to reason, but as issuing decrees by His absolute fiat."⁸⁵ Other marks distinguishing the roles of prophet and apostle are cited by him.
- (7) There is scriptural ground for the contention that God cannot be known from miracles. Biblical passages are summoned by the philosopher to indicate that miracles were performed by false prophets and

⁸³ *T.*, p. 138.

⁸⁴ *T.*, p. 152.

⁸⁵ *T.*, p. 158.

that they were performed without producing a sound knowledge of God even among the Israelites.

- (8) Spinoza suggested that the writer of the Pentateuch was Ezra—"whom I will take to be the author," he says, "until some more likely person be suggested." Nevertheless, Ezra did not "put the finishing touches to the narratives contained therein, but merely collected the histories from various writers, and sometimes simply set them down, leaving their examination and arrangement to posterity."⁸⁶

If anyone pays attention to the way in which all the histories and precepts in these five books are set down promiscuously and without order, with no regard for dates; and further, how the same story is often repeated, sometimes in a different version, he may easily, I say, discern that all the materials were promiscuously collected and heaped together, in order that they might at some subsequent time be more readily examined and reduced to order. Not only these five books, but also the narratives contained in the remaining seven, going down to the destruction of the city, are compiled in the same way.⁸⁷

Hans-Joachim Kraus makes an important observation on Spinoza's suggestion that Ezra was the writer of the Pentateuch. The philosopher was chiefly engaged in trying to determine the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* for the origin of the Pentateuch. The former is Moses; the latter apparently is Ezra. Without the determination of these limits, other dates cannot be securely fixed, and consequently the opinions of the authors and the inferences to be drawn from them remain obscure.⁸⁸ As a methodological procedure, then, the denoting of Ezra as the writer is somewhat more important than an ordinary guess at or judgment on the authorship of a book.

⁸⁶ *T.*, p. 133.

⁸⁷ *T.*, p. 135.

⁸⁸ Kraus, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

- (9) The books of Chronicles were written after the time of Ezra and possibly after the restoration of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus. The Psalms were collected and organized in the time of the second Temple. The materials in Isaiah and Jeremiah are "heaped together confusedly, without any account being taken of dates."⁸⁹
- (10) As to Job, Spinoza says, "Aben Ezra . . . affirms, in his commentaries, that the work is a translation into Hebrew from some other language: I could wish that he could advance more cogent arguments than he does, for we might conclude that the Gentiles also had sacred books. I myself leave the matter undecided, but I conjecture Job to have been a Gentile. . . ."⁹⁰

Among the surer results of a more general nature which came from his method was the clearly framed idea that the biblical books were compilations and had been subjected to a process of editorial activity. Spinoza produced the rudiments of a documentary hypothesis, although he was not in a position to name and characterize some of the documents as "J," "E," and "P." While he did not discriminate between sources in the Pentateuch on the basis of divine names, there is, as Karppe has pointed out, a passage in the *Treatise*, which indicates that Spinoza came to the very edge of this sort of theory. After a discussion of the names for God, we find him saying,

As the patriarchs did not know the distinctive name of God, and as God mentions the fact to Moses, . . . Before I proceed I ought to explain how it comes that we are often told in Genesis that the patriarchs preached in the name of Jehovah, this being in plain contradiction to the text above quoted. A reference to what was said in Chap. VIII will readily explain the difficulty. It was there shown that the writer of the Pentateuch did not always speak of things and places by the names they bore in the times of which he was writing, but by the names best known to his contemporaries. God is thus said in the Pentateuch to

⁸⁹ *T.*, p. 147.

⁹⁰ *T.*, p. 149.

have been preached by the patriarchs under the name of Jehovah, not because such was the name by which the patriarchs knew Him, but because this name was the one most revered by the Jews. This point, I say, must necessarily be noticed, for in Exodus it is expressly stated that God was not known to the patriarchs by this name; and in chap. iii. 13, it is said that Moses desired to know the name of God. Now if this name had been already known it would have been known to Moses. We must therefore draw the conclusion indicated, namely, that the faithful patriarchs did not know this name of God.⁹¹

At several points, Spinoza mentions sources used by later writers and historians. He comments on the presence of editorial phrases which were evidently used to bridge from one document to another. The presence of the same story in several versions is clear to him. There are evidences, he judges, of an attempt by later writers and editors to weave materials together and to give the final production a certain theological caste. As we have said, he discerns the hand of the editor in the prophetic books as well as in the historical ones. It is a short step from the position he has here developed to that in which certain of the documents or sources are characterized as to style, religious content, place of origin, et cetera.

As his results are established, Spinoza displays a great facility in amassing, organizing, and assessing internal evidences, an ability to argue points on the basis of the characteristics of the Hebrew language, an adroitness in discriminating between styles, and a scientific temperament which allows him simply to conjecture when evidences do not securely fix a conclusion. He treats New Testament materials in the same way but much more briefly because, among other reasons, he does not "possess a knowledge of Greek sufficiently exact for the task."⁹²

Having cited these examples of the results of Spinoza's method, we must again emphasize that his importance in the history of biblical criticism does not rest on them (for most of his spe-

⁹¹ *T.*, pp. 178-179.

⁹² *T.*, p. 156.

cific judgments on details have, of course, been outdated) but on his general attitude toward biblical studies, the criteria he used in criticizing the Bible, and the methodology he developed. These came as a valuable heritage to subsequent generations of biblical scholars.

Limitations in Biblical Criticism. The philosopher recognizes that the very nature of the texts with which one deals in biblical studies places limits upon what can be achieved. Often we must be content with conjectures rather than certainties. We have only a fragmentary knowledge of the Hebrew language, which is indispensable for an adequate development of the biblical sciences. "The devouring tooth of time has destroyed nearly all the phrases and turns of expression peculiar to the Hebrews, so that we know them no more. Therefore we cannot investigate as we would all the meanings of a sentence by the uses of language. . . ." ⁹³ The vocabulary and syntax of the language are known only in part. Furthermore, there are certain peculiarities of the Hebrew language itself which present difficulties, such as the absence of certain tenses in the indicative mood and the lack of a subjunctive mood. The literature has come into our hands only in fragments and those fragments are themselves very jumbled. In the Bible, some sources are cited which are no longer extant. Writings of certain of the prophets have been lost. In some instances, there has obviously been damage to the texts which we do have. Authorship is in many cases unknown or obscure. In several cases, the biblical book is not extant in the original language. We are unable to reconstruct the editorial histories of the various books to our satisfaction. And so on. In brief, this is the unfortunate situation with which we must deal, using a method which requires the reconstruction of the "history" of a book or passage. "If we read a book which contains incredible or impossible narratives, or is written in a very obscure style, and if we know nothing of its author, nor of the time or occasion of its being written, we shall vainly endeavor to gain a certain

⁹³ *T.*, p. 108.

knowledge of its true meaning.”⁹⁴ These and similar difficulties, says Spinoza, “I conceive to be so great that I do not hesitate to say that the true meaning of Scripture is in many places inexplicable, or at least mere subject for guesswork.”⁹⁵

Within the limits set by such difficulties, the method of inquiry he has defined must nevertheless be applied; for it is the only reliable technique available for determining the sense of Scripture. Just as the scientist does not forsake the use of his critical and empirical method in the face of great difficulties, the biblical student cannot, without peril to the cause of sound knowledge and true piety, abandon such an investigation of biblical materials. As a matter of fact, in the face of such difficulties, a scientific method of inquiry is the only secure anchor against the winds and waves of speculation and superstition.

Semantic Principles in the Treatise. One of the striking features of Spinoza’s work in biblical criticism is the formulation and use by him of what we would call semantic criteria. James A. Froude commented that the philosopher “spent the better part of his life in clearing his language of ambiguities.”⁹⁶ Similarly, David Savan said that “nearly every one of his writings attempts some analysis of language.”⁹⁷ In the *Treatise*, some of these semantic principles are extensively used, while others appear only in germinal form and enjoy limited use.

(1) At earlier points, we mentioned one of the key criteria which the philosopher employs throughout his work: the distinction between the meaning of a passage and its truth, or between the sense of a term and whether there exists an object designated by the term. This sort of distinction looms large in recent philosophic investigations. To find it in Spinoza is rather surprising.

As he describes the framework of his method, the philoso-

⁹⁴ *T.*, p. 111.

⁹⁵ *T.*, p. 112.

⁹⁶ Froude, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

⁹⁷ Savan, *op. cit.*, p. 212. Savan also remarks that “the radical inadequacy of words is something which Spinoza points out emphatically and repeatedly in most of his writings” (p. 216).

pher explicitly asserts that "we are at work not on the truth of passages, but solely on their meaning."⁹⁸ Hirsch observed that for Spinoza exegesis and the determination of truth-status are two different disciplines.⁹⁹ When Spinoza analyzes the meaning of a biblical term or passage, using senses and symbols from a biblical context only, the reader who has not grasped the distinction between meaning and truth is likely to think the philosopher is accommodating his discourse to the orthodox public or is carrying caution to such an extreme that it damages scholarship. Many a student of the *Treatise* has fallen into this error, including Leo Strauss.

After reading the *Ethics* we can be rather confident as to what Spinoza's judgments are on the truth-status of assertions about God being a person, the occurrence of miracles, and the providential care of deity. It is a matter of great credit to him that he can, despite rather firm philosophic persuasions about the truth-status of biblical passages, pursue so impartially and independently the question of their meanings. He is able carefully and critically to make an inquiry as to the biblical connotations of a term such as "angel," without his investigation being biased by a belief or disbelief in the existence of angels.

⁹⁸ *T.*, p. 101; *et passim*. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 268: "Spinoza ist der erste Mensch innerhalb der europaeischen Geistesgeschichte, der rueckhaltlos erklart, die Bibel zwar als praktische Volksreligion gelten zu lassen, aber mit den biblischen Lehraussagen nichts mehr zu tun haben zu wollen. Die Frage nach dem Inhalt der Bibel und die nach der Wahrheit fallen ihm ganz auseinander. Auslegung und Wahrheitserforschung sind verschiedene Dinge geworden. Es hat noch rund hundert Jahre gedauert, bis die Theologie—unabhaengig von Spinoza—eine solche Trennung der geschichtlichen und der systematischen Aufgabe als unvermeidlich erkannte und sich muehte, ihr eine verantwortliche, von dem heimlichen Zynismus Spinozas freie Gestalt zu finden."

⁹⁹ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 262. On Spinoza's assertion that the meaning of the prophet is one thing and that of God is another, Hirsch says: "Es gehoerte zur Auslegung, die Meinungen der Propheten, Apostel und biblischen Schriftsteller nuechtern festzustellen, ganz gleich, ob sie vernuenftig und wahr sind oder nicht." Siegfried, *op. cit.*, p. 50, has taken note in several sentences of this criterion.

On the basis of this criterion, Spinoza's principle of using biblical materials alone makes quite a good sense—these alone are the data which can justifiably be used to settle questions of meaning. Questions of truth or of existence will, of course, entail the use of extra-biblical data and principles, as his *Ethics* very well illustrates. We might almost say that the *Ethics* treats the question of truth among biblical terms and statements, while the *Treatise* deals with the question of meaning among them. At this point we come upon a fundamental principle of Spinoza's method which has been scarcely mentioned in the literature, despite the key position which it holds. Furthermore, it is a semantic principle which is as important and useful in biblical sciences today as it was in his time. A modern statement of it would, of course, require some revisions in the formulation which Spinoza gave to it. To him, however, goes the credit for giving birth to the ingenious idea. In biblical criticism subsequent to Spinoza, the investigators do not seem to have capitalized on it.

(2) A second, more commonplace criterion which plays a major role in the philosopher's work is his demand that the definitions of terms are not to be given a priori but through an examination of the contexts in which they occur. This is one of the principles which lies behind the consistent pattern in the *Treatise* of deciding meaning by summoning for examination the various passages in which a given term occurs.

At this point, Spinoza employs an insight upon which semanticists have been disposed to insist, namely, that the full and proper meaning of a term comes from its context, not from a lexicon.¹⁰⁰ Concerning biblical terms, Spinoza asks, "How are they used?" In other words, he asks for operational definitions.

¹⁰⁰ Pages 19–24 of *T.* give us one example of this method. In the attempt to "determine the exact signification of the Hebrew word *ruagh*, commonly translated spirit," Spinoza brings forward nine meanings by citing the biblical passages in which the word occurs with these various senses. Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, p. 256: "... sodann ist die Bedeutung jeder einzelnen Rede aus dem Kontext zu ermitteln."

The meanings of terms are to be found in the ways in which they are actually employed in the process of communication and in the relations they have to the life situations in which they appear. His insistence upon tracing the "history" of a term or text, which involves its ties with its user, his background, and his problems, thus makes good sense in terms of the problem of trying to settle the question of meaning. The definitions of scriptural terms "must be sought . . . from the various narratives about the given subject which occur in the Bible."¹⁰¹ One of the reasons for the analysis and arrangement of the contents of biblical books under headings is that "we may have at hand the various texts which treat of a given subject."¹⁰²

How adamant his adherence is to the two criteria so far mentioned—the distinction between meaning and truth, definitions taken from context and usage—may be seen from this example.

The words of Moses, "God is a fire" and "God is jealous," are perfectly clear so long as we regard merely the signification of the words, and I therefore reckon them among the clearer passages, though in relation to reason and truth they are the most obscure: still, although the literal meaning is repugnant to the natural light of reason, nevertheless, if it cannot be clearly overruled on grounds and principles derived from its Scriptural "history," it, that is, the literal meaning, must be the one retained: and contrariwise if these passages literally interpreted are found to clash with principles derived from Scripture, though such literal interpretation were in absolute harmony with reason, they must be interpreted in a different manner, *i.e.* metaphorically.¹⁰³

At the very beginning of the *Treatise* we are presented with a short and simple example of the technique when Spinoza offers what is now a familiar way of defining *nabi* by its use in Exodus 7:1, where it is applied to Aaron. Definitions from contexts is the procedure throughout the *Treatise*; for this is the way,

¹⁰¹ *T.*, p. 101.

¹⁰² *T.*, p. 102.

¹⁰³ *T.*, p. 102.

contends Spinoza, that one will apprehend the biblical meanings of terms.

(3) Recently David Savan has argued very cogently that Spinoza's view of words was such as to lead him to maintain that neither natural language nor mathematical language can give a "direct or literal exposition of philosophical truth."¹⁰⁴ Words and the images associated with them arise from experience and express the constitution and movement of our bodies. "The imaginative, general and confused character of words . . . is the necessary consequence of the action of external bodies upon our body."¹⁰⁵ Men generally are disposed erroneously to ascribe the imagery connected with words to the external world. But Spinoza draws a sharp line of distinction between true ideas, on the one hand, and words and their associated images, on the other hand. True ideas are singular, unique, and certain. Consequently, Savan maintains that "so sharply does Spinoza separate words from adequate ideas that it is difficult to make out for language any useful philosophical function at all. It is no more possible for us to discover and express true knowledge through language than it is for a somnambulist to communicate intelligently with the waking world."¹⁰⁶ To know that God exists is, for example, quite different from *saying* that I know he exists. In almost all of his writings, Spinoza points out clearly the radical inadequacy of words.

Savan goes on to indicate how Spinoza's awareness of the difficulty that this view of words posed for philosophizing is exhibited in the contradictions which appear in his *Ethics*. The philosopher's theory of the entities of reason helps to explain his methodology in the *Ethics*, says Savan. It throws considerable light also, we contend, upon his handling of biblical terms, phrases, and sentences.

An entity of reason is "nothing except a mode of thought which pertains most properly to the intellect, viz., to retention,

¹⁰⁴ Savan, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

to understanding, and to the imagination."¹⁰⁷ The entities of reason are not true ideas. They have no objects corresponding to them. In short, they are simply tools employed by the mind in order to "see more clearly what is presented confusedly in the imagination" or "to discover and formulate such truth as is proper to the imagination."¹⁰⁸ As examples of such entities of reason, we may cite mental images, or the categories of time, number, or measure.¹⁰⁹ On the basis of this theory, Spinoza criticizes the hypostatization of these entities, the tendency to "judge objects from the names and not names from objects,"¹¹⁰ and the assumption that the manipulation of words and images yields truth. "A matter is understood," he asserts, "when it is perceived simply by the mind without words or symbols [images]."¹¹¹ Words cannot be divorced from images or other entities of reason in order to set forth true ideas. "There is no conformity between a real being and being of reason. Therefore, it is easily seen how sedulously we must be on our guard lest we confuse the two. For it is one thing to inquire into the nature of things and quite another to inquire into the nature of the modes of thought under which they are perceived."¹¹²

The theory of entities of reason serves, then, to explain and to justify the care taken in the *Treatise* to separate the question of meaning from the question of truth when one assesses biblical texts. Biblical terms, images, and other symbols are among the entities of reason. Consequently, they have no objects corresponding to them. Since truth refers to a correspondence between an idea and its object,¹¹³ one simply does not ask about the truth of biblical words and assertions. He can inquire about their meaning or about such "truth" as is appropriate to the imagination. The theory of modes of thought or

¹⁰⁷ Britan, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁰⁸ Savan, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

¹⁰⁹ Britan, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *T.*, p. 64.

¹¹² Britan, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

entities of reason gives us a better understanding of such statements in the *Treatise* as these:

A perusal of the sacred books will show us that all God's revelations to the prophets were made through words or appearances or a combination of the two. These words and appearances were of two kinds; (1) *real* when external to the mind of the prophet who heard or saw them, (2) *imaginary* when the imagination of the prophet was in a state that led him distinctly to suppose that he heard or saw them.¹¹⁴

The prophets only perceived God's revelation by the aid of imagination, that is, by words and figures either real or imaginary. We find no other means mentioned in Scripture, and therefore must not invent any.¹¹⁵

The prophets were endowed with unusually vivid imagination, and not with unusually perfect minds.¹¹⁶

In the Bible, just as in every case of the use of language and its imagery, we are dealing with entities of reason, not with true ideas. To be sure, we must interpret the biblical words and images. But such interpretation consists in determining the meanings of the symbols on the basis of the contexts in which they are used. These meanings are that sort of "truth" which is appropriate to the imagination. It may be very useful in the conduct of life, but it must not be hypostatized. The apprehension of true ideas is a different matter entirely. To investigate it would take us too far afield from the study of Spinoza's biblical criticism.

(4) The frequent warnings in the *Treatise* that we attend to what the biblical writer or character intended to say rather than what we suppose or imagine are injunctions that we listen to the Bible. Spinoza recognizes that listening is a very difficult art. Nevertheless, it is indispensable if communication is to occur. "We cannot wrest the meaning of texts to suit the dictates of our reason, or our preconceived opinions"¹¹⁷ without pro-

¹¹⁴ *T.*, p. 15.

¹¹⁵ *T.*, p. 25.

¹¹⁶ *T.*, p. 27.

¹¹⁷ *T.*, p. 103.

voking a breakdown in communication or understanding. The two criteria we discussed above may also be understood as devices to insure that the reader of the Bible will really listen to his texts. Spinoza's incisive criticism of those who conform Scripture to Platonic or Aristotelian speculations is an indication that even among the learned listening is a rare art. The demand that we attend to biblical materials *alone* is a way of minimizing the influx of extraneous ideas so that we hear what the Bible says, not what we think or what some extra-biblical authority has said.

(5) Spinoza's distinction between the realms of knowledge and of obedience expresses a partial appreciation by him of the different functions of language. In the realm of knowledge, of which science and philosophy are examples, we have to do with the logical function of language. Language functioning logically finds expression in propositions. Propositions are either true or false. The philosopher's refusal to ask the question of truth in the *Treatise* is, therefore, an indirect assertion that the biblical texts are not language used in its logical functions.¹¹⁸ The biblical materials, he contends, were produced to the end of obedience.

Scripture . . . does not aim at explaining things by their natural causes, but only at narrating what appeals to the popular imagination, and doing so in the manner best calculated to excite wonder, and consequently to impress the minds of the masses with devotion.¹¹⁹

Scripture . . . narrates [things] in the order and the style which has most power to move men, and especially uneducated men, to devotion; and therefore it speaks inaccurately of God and of events, seeing that its object is

¹¹⁸ Hirsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-264: "Es kommt der Bibel nicht auf Wahrheit oder Unwahrheit der Meinungen an, sondern darauf, ob diese Meinungen ein frommes und dem Guten zugewandtes Leben stuetzen oder nicht. Wenn eine Lehraussage nur fromm ist, d. h. die Menschen, zu denen sie geschieht, zum Gehorsam bewegt, dann braucht sie auch nicht einen Schatten von Wahrheit zu haben."

¹¹⁹ *T.*, p. 116.

not to convince the reason, but to attract and lay hold of the imagination.¹²⁰

Even among discourses which are directive or expressive in function, we find it necessary to make different judgments about the meanings or intentions on the basis of our knowledge of the authors.

It often happens that in different books we read histories in themselves similar, but which we judge very differently, according to the opinions we have formed of the authors. I remember once to have read in some book that a man named Orlando Furioso used to drive a kind of winged monster through the air, fly over any countries he liked, kill unaided vast numbers of men and giants, and such like fancies, which from the point of view of reason are obviously absurd. A very similar story I read in Ovid of Perseus, and also in the books of Judges and Kings of Samson, who alone and unarmed killed thousands of men, and of Elijah, who flew through the air, and at last went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, with horses of fire. All these stories are obviously alike, but we judge them very differently. The first only sought to amuse, the second had a political object, the third a religious object. We gather this simply from the opinions we had previously formed of the authors.¹²¹

Referring to the use of metaphor in the Bible, Spinoza argues that "the Jews employed such phrases not only rhetorically, but also, and indeed chiefly, from devotional motives."¹²² In the Bible, language is used, not in its logical function, but in its

¹²⁰ *T.*, p. 91.

¹²¹ *T.*, pp. 111–112.

¹²² *T.*, p. 95. Letter 78 (to Henry Oldenburg, 7 February 1676), A. Wolf, *Correspondence*, p. 358, reads in part: "I do not think it necessary to warn you here that when Scripture says that God is angry with sinners, and that He is a judge who takes cognizance of the actions of men, judges, and passes sentence, it is speaking in human fashion, and in accordance with the received opinions of the people, since its intetion is not to teach Philosophy, nor to make men learned, but obedient." Cf. also Letter 75 (to Henry Oldenburg, December 1675), A. Wolf, *Correspondence*, pp. 349–350; and Letter 19 (to William van Blyenburgh, 5 January 1665), A. Wolf, *Correspondence*, pp. 149–150 *et passim*.

directive or expressive function. To misconstrue the function of biblical discourse will lead to confusion and superstition.

Scripture does not teach philosophy, but merely obedience, and all it contains has been adapted to the understanding and established opinions of the multitude. Those, therefore, who wish to adapt it to philosophy, must needs ascribe to the prophets many ideas which they never even dreamed of, and to give a very forced interpretation to their words: those on the other hand, who would make reason and philosophy subservient to theology, will be forced to accept as Divine utterances the prejudices of the ancient Jews, and to fill and confuse their mind therewith.¹²³

We need now no longer wonder . . . that the sacred books speak very inaccurately of God, attributing to Him hands, feet, eyes, ears, a mind, and motion from one place to another; or that they ascribe to Him emotions, such as jealousy, mercy, et cetera, or, lastly, that they describe Him as a judge in heaven sitting on a royal throne with Christ on His right hand. Such expressions are adapted to the understanding of the multitude, it being the object of the Bible to make men not learned but obedient.¹²⁴

Moral and religious edification are the ends chiefly in view in the Bible. In the cases of language functioning to these ends, one asks about meaning and about efficacy, but not about truth. To assess directive language as if it were logical leads only to error and superstition.

Countless other testimonies in the *Treatise* make it clear that Spinoza conceived biblical language to be operating in some other fashion than that in which it communicates truth. He was not, of course, aware of all of the different functions of language to which a modern critic would point; but we cannot expect everything of him who first breaks ground in virgin territory. He does, however, give considerable attention to the use of metaphor in the Bible, admonishing that the reader take care "not to reason from metaphor. . . ." ¹²⁵ There are some

¹²³ *T.*, p. 190.

¹²⁴ *T.*, p. 180.

¹²⁵ *T.*, p. 15 *et passim*.

indications that he vaguely sensed a greater richness in human symbolic activity, as when he comments that

many things narrated in Scripture as real, and were believed to be real, . . . were in fact only symbolical and imaginary. As, for instance, that God came down from Heaven (Exod. xix. 28, Deut. v. 28), and that Mount Sinai smoked because God descended upon it surrounded with fire; or, again, that Elijah ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire, with horses of fire; all these things were assuredly merely symbols. . . .¹²⁶

This conjecture should perhaps not be pressed; it may be sufficient to give Spinoza credit for his distinction between the logical and directive functions of language. We should note, however, that Hampshire says that "Spinoza avoids many of the over-simplifications and crudities of later rationalist thought, and shows a most precocious understanding of the social function of religious myth."¹²⁷

When it is all said and done, Spinoza was the first biblical critic to have seen clearly the significance of the various functions of language for the interpretation of the Bible.

(6) There are other insights of a semantic nature in the *Treatise*. We can only mention them briefly here. Spinoza comments on the fact that the meanings of sentences are much easier changed or twisted than are the meanings of words.¹²⁸ That is, the range of interpretations for a sentence is in general of a higher order than is the range of interpretations for a term. He takes note of the difficulties occasioned by losses both in words and in meanings in a language like Hebrew.¹²⁹ Sometimes the meanings of phrases and sentences are for various reasons "altogether inexplicable, though the component words are perfectly plain."¹³⁰ The philosopher is sensitive to the errors produced by giving verbal explanations or using "transcendental

¹²⁶ *T.*, p. 93.

¹²⁷ Hampshire, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

¹²⁸ *T.*, p. 107.

¹²⁹ *T.*, p. 108.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

terms."¹³¹ He is very much aware of the multi-ordinal meanings of words and the difficulties presented by this polyvalence.¹³² The vocabulary of scientific and philosophic discourse demands a different kind of interpretation from that demanded by re-religious discourse.¹³³ The semantic distinctions between words, meanings, and things are at the forefront of his mind in biblical interpretations. Furthermore, he is everywhere anxious to eliminate that form of word-magic which insists that words do not gain their meanings from usage but are in themselves meaningful, efficacious, or inviolate.¹³⁴

Not many men since Spinoza have displayed as clearly and used as consistently semantic principles in the critical study of biblical texts. At this point he is not only a pioneer but one who has had few followers across the horizon into a new world.

The Word of God and the Bible. The chief object of this paper has been to present and to assess the method of biblical criticism formulated and used by Spinoza. We have, therefore, left to the side a discussion of his relations to medieval critics of the Bible. This topic has been treated, however, several times in the literature. Moreover, it has been necessary to avoid being drawn into a discussion of the broader topic of his critique of positive religion in general. This problem has been very frequently explored by investigators. Without engaging in a long discussion of tangential matters, it may nevertheless be valuable to take brief notice of Spinoza's view of the connection between the Bible and the Word of God; for this is related indirectly to questions of biblical criticism and of the meaning of the scriptural texts.

Because of the things he has said in critical assessment of the Bible, Spinoza fears that his position and the status of biblical messages will be seriously misinterpreted.

¹³¹ *T.*, p. 25 *et passim*.

¹³² E.g., *T.*, pp. 19-20, 109, *et passim*.

¹³³ *T.*, pp. 112-113.

¹³⁴ *T.*, p. 167; also p. 150 *et passim*.

Some profane men, to whom religion is a burden, may, from what I have said, assume a license to sin, and without any reason, at the simple dictates of their lusts conclude that Scripture is everywhere faulty and falsified, and that therefore its authority is null.¹³⁵

Since the Bible teaches "what is necessary for obedience and salvation," it has a sacredness or divinity which "cannot have been corrupted."¹³⁶ "A thing is called sacred and Divine when it is designed for promoting piety and continues sacred so long as it is religiously used; if the users cease to be pious, the thing ceases to be sacred; if it be turned to base uses, that which was formerly sacred becomes unclean and profane."¹³⁷ Spinoza sets forth this contention on the basis of biblical evidences.

Now one of the situations in which the Bible loses its sacredness is bibliolatry, which arises from the failure to distinguish verbal symbols from their meanings.

The multitude—ever prone to superstition, and caring more for the shreds of antiquity than for eternal truths—pays homage to the Books of the Bible, rather than to the Word of God. I show that the Word of God has not been revealed as a certain number of books, but was displayed to the prophets as a simple idea of the Divine mind, namely, obedience to God in singleness of heart and in the practice of justice and charity.¹³⁸

Words gain their meaning solely from their usage, and if they are arranged according to the accepted signification so as to move those who read them to devotion, they will become sacred, and the book so written will be sacred also. But if their usage afterwards dies out so that the words have no meaning, or the book becomes utterly neglected, whether from unworthy motives, or because it is no longer needed, then the words and the book will lose both their

¹³⁵ *T.*, p. 166.

¹³⁶ *T.*, p. 167.

¹³⁷ *T.*, p. 167.

¹³⁸ *T.*, p. 9; the fact that this statement appears in the Preface of the *Treatise* indicates that it is no accidental element in Spinoza's presentation, but rather a core theme of his argument. In many other ways and in many other places in the *Treatise* the idea finds expression.

use and their sanctity: lastly, if these same words be otherwise arranged, or if their customary meaning becomes perverted into its opposite, then both the words and the book containing them become, instead of sacred, impure and profane.¹³⁹

The Bible is divine, then, in the measure that it performs its function of promoting piety and obedience. Or, it is divine in terms of its relation to the human mind, which "contains in itself and partakes of the nature of God."¹⁴⁰ Otherwise, it is "nothing but paper and ink, and is left to be desecrated or destroyed."¹⁴¹

For Spinoza the expression, "the Word of the Lord," signifies the divine law communicated through the biblical words. This Word is not identical with the books of the Bible. As a matter of fact, even if we had fewer books of the Old and New Testaments, we would still possess the Word of God. Whereas the Bible is in many passages faulty, incomplete, or obscure,

the Word of God . . . is neither faulty, tampered with, nor corrupt. By faulty, tampered with, and corrupt, I here mean written so incorrectly that the meaning cannot be arrived at by a study of the language, nor from the authority of Scripture. . . . I . . . maintain that the meaning by which alone an utterance is entitled to be called Divine, has come down to us uncorrupted, even though the original wording may have been more often damaged than we suppose.¹⁴²

Spinoza clearly maintained a difference between the biblical texts and the Word mediated by those texts. He understands the Word to be the divine law, whose chief precepts are to love God above all and to love one's neighbor as one's self. He has been led to this distinction between the Word and the Bible by the semantic principle which insists upon a clear division between verbal symbols and their meanings.

¹³⁹ *T.*, p. 167.

¹⁴⁰ *T.*, p. 14.

¹⁴¹ *T.*, p. 168.

¹⁴² *T.*, p. 172.