# The Invention of Liberal Theology: Spinoza's Theological-Political Analysis of Moses and Jesus

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# The Invention of Liberal Theology: Spinoza's Theological-Political Analysis of Moses and Jesus

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In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza attempts to establish a Scriptural basis for liberal democracy by showing that the Gospels, when understood correctly, assert the need for freedom, toleration, and equality. He does so by reducing prophecy to the imaginative expression of prejudice and superstition and then by confining such imaginings to the Hebrew Bible. Spinoza then contrasts the primitive Hebrew prophets, particularly Moses, with an idealized portrait of Jesus, whom he presents as a philosopher, free of prejudice and superstition. Moses was concerned with legislating for a particular regime, while Jesus, according to Spinoza was concerned primarily with salvation. Spinoza thereby exposes the political implications of Jesus' teaching. The injunction that we should obey God rather than man requires freedom and toleration, a condition that can be best guaranteed by a free and democratic regime.

Students of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*)[1] are often struck by the fact that although the work portrays Christianity more favorably than Judaism, Spinoza devotes far more time to an examination of the Hebrew Bible than the New Testament. Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in Spinoza's comparison of Moses, the greatest prophet in the Hebrew Bible, with Jesus, the most revered figure in the New Testament. Although Spinoza lavishly praises Jesus, insisting that Jesus had achieved more intimate apprehension of God, he devotes far more analysis to Moses. By asserting the superiority of Jesus, Spinoza clearly hoped to appeal to his largely Christian audience. But why then did he examine Moses and the Hebrew Bible more extensively than Jesus and the New Testament?

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1. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth designated by the letters *TTP*) in Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Verlag, 1925), 3: 1-267. *TTP* references are given according to chapter number, Latin page. I have also consulted *A Theological-Political Treatise and a Political Treatise*, trans. Robert H. M. Elwes (1883; New York: Dover, 1951). I have also benefitted from Edwin Curley's translation of the *TTP* (forthcoming).

Spinoza offers a straightforward response to this query in chapter 10 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. After completing a long section on the textual, historical, and grammatical errors and inconsistencies in the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza turns to analyze the New Testament "in the same manner" (*TTP*, X, 151). However, because his knowledge of Greek is insufficient to understand the New Testament properly, he "prefers to decline the undertaking."[2] Having received an education in the "mysteries of the Talmud and Kabbalah, the text of the Old Testament, and the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides," Spinoza claims to be unqualified to scrutinize Christianity and the New Testament.[3] Therefore, it is not surprising that Spinoza avoids analyzing the New Testament in the same detail as the Hebrew Bible.

While such an argument offers a plausible explanation of Spinoza's relatively scant attention to the New Testament, it is not entirely convincing. For one thing, Spinoza's poor Greek hardly prevented him from making scores of subtle and significant claims about Jesus and the Apostles throughout the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, including assertions about the authorship and composition of the New Testament. Moreover, Spinoza admits that his knowledge of Greek is advanced enough to distinguish nuances of meaning among Greek synonyms (cf. *TTP* note 24, 151). Most strikingly, Spinoza claims that Hebrew, a language he had mastered thoroughly enough to write a Hebrew grammar, and not Greek, is essential for understanding the New Testament:

> Because all the authors, both of the Old Testament and New Testament, were Hebrews, it is certain that the Hebrew language is necessary above all others...for understanding the books of the New Testament. For although they have been made common to all in other languages, nevertheless they express themselves in a Hebrew manner (*TTP*, VII, 100).[4]

2. Spinoza offers two other reasons for avoiding an analysis of the New Testament: first, other men have already performed the task, and second, the original Hebrew texts of the New Testament have been lost. Both of these reasons are unconvincing. The first is merely a cover for the revolutionary novelty of Spinoza's own remarks on the New Testament while the second, discussed below, would render hopeless any efforts (including Spinoza's) to uncover the true meaning of the New Testament.

3. See Introduction to Elwes's translation of *A Theological-Political Treatise*, p. xi.

4. Spinoza has already shown in chapter 6 of the *TTP* how the Hebrew manner of speaking exaggerates natural events to make them appear miraculous. Spinoza

To bolster this claim, Spinoza argues in a footnote that the native language of the Apostles was Syriac, a language closer to Hebrew than Greek, and that their teachings were later translated imprecisely into Greek. Such considerations suggest that Spinoza's mastery of Hebrew and his reading knowledge of Greek qualified him to scrutinize the New Testament. His decision not to do so must have been motivated by other reasons.

Scholars have long asserted that foremost among such reasons was Spinoza's desire to appeal to a largely Christian audience, for whom an explicit critique of the New Testament would have hardly been welcome.[5] Though persuasive, this explanation fails to explain why Spinoza thought that his extended critique of Moses and the Hebrew Bible would have appealed to such readers.[6] Nor does it explain why Spinoza went to such great lengths to praise Moses as a supremely wise legislator or the greatest of the Hebrew Prophets. This article attempts to address

encourages theologians to study Hebrew and thereby understand the Gospel's miraculous reports as pious exaggerations. However, he prudently avoids initiating such a critique himself.

5. Frederick Pollock, for instance, claims that the *TTP* is a "work of conciliation" which attempts to appeal to Christians despite its heterodoxy in *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy* (London: C. Kegan Paul and Co., 1880), pp. 336ff. Similarly, Leo Strauss argues that Spinoza favored Christianity in the *TTP* because, paradoxically, he thought that it would lead ultimately to the advent of a liberal society and therewith "the liberation of the Jews" (*Spinoza's Critique of Religion* [New York: Schocken Books, 1965], p. 21). More recently, Steven Smith has argued that Spinoza's positive presentation of Christianity "was dictated not by the methods of historical philology but by the need to gain genuine support for his universal religion of tolerance" (*Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997], p. 105). Such judgments have been based largely on internal evidence from the *TTP* itself; however, J. Samuel Preus has attempted in a recent series of articles to show that Spinoza's *TTP* must be understood as part of the larger seventeenth-century theological debate among Christians. See "Part III: The Hidden Dialogue in Spinoza's *Tractatus*," *Religion* 28 (1998): 111-124 and "A Hidden Opponent in Spinoza's *Tractatus*," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 361-88. Even scholars who deny that Spinoza's presentation of Christianity is more favorable than his presentation of Judaism admit that Spinoza hoped to establish a novel theology among Christians in the *TTP*. See, for instance, Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): pp.13-32, 180-83 and Errol Harris, *Is There an Esoteric Doctrine in The TTP?* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).

6. For more on Spinoza's rhetorical strategy in the *TTP*, see my "Politics and Rhetoric: The Intended Audience of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," *Review of Metaphysics* 52 (1999): 897-924.

these questions by comparing Spinoza's treatment of Moses with his analysis of Jesus. As we shall see, Spinoza's lengthy critique of Moses is meant to render obsolete the traditional theological and political teachings gleaned from the Hebrew Bible in order to replace them with a novel interpretation of the Gospels.[7]

## Spinoza's Novel Description of Prophecy as Political Wisdom

The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* begins with a definition of prophecy which accords with a traditional understanding: "Prophecy or revelation is the certain knowledge (*certo cognito*) revealed by God to man."[8] However, Spinoza adds almost immediately that "natural knowledge can [also] be called prophecy."[9] He further suggests that men should not regard prophets as having any supernatural source of knowledge "unless perhaps someone wishes to believe or rather to dream that the prophets had, indeed, a human body but not a human mind and thus that their sensation and awareness were of an entirely different nature than ours" (*TTP*, I, 16). Clearly, Spinoza does not believe this to be the case. As he insists in the *Ethics*, the mind is nothing other than the idea of the body, and therefore a superhuman mind would entail a superhuman body, which is impossible.[10] The fact that the prophets had ordinary minds means that their knowledge is likewise intelligible in terms of man's natural faculties. Similarly in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza rejects the

7. For more on the religious characteristics of Spinoza's Christian audience, see Preus, *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 361-88.

8. See *TTP*, I, 15. For an analysis of "*certo cognito*" see Alan Donagan's "Spinoza's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 357, 360ff.

9. Similarly, Maimonides defines prophecy as "an overflow overflowing from God" in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2 vols., trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 2: 36. However, he points out at *TTP*, I, 65, that when the Bible says "God spoke" it means "the prophet understood." For Maimonides, revelation is an act of intellectual apprehension rather than a supernatural communication.

10. *Ethica* (henceforth designated by the letter *E*) in Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza Opera* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Verlag, 1925), III, preface. *E* references are given according to chapter number, Latin page. Cf. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 171-72.

traditional distinction between supernatural and natural knowledge, a distinction which he claims is the result of the multitude's "thirsting for things which are rare and foreign to their nature."[11]

By denying prophets a supernatural source of knowledge, Spinoza exposes their understanding of nature to the same defects that plague the multitude. However, Spinoza insists that such ignorance does not prevent the prophets from acquiring political wisdom. In this respect, prophets resemble politicians who also have inadequate speculative knowledge but are nonetheless successful at controlling men's vices because of their abundant experience.[12] Such experience provides a kind of practical knowledge of the multitude and, consequently, is a surer teacher of statecraft than philosophy. In fact, Spinoza argues that "experience has revealed *all* the kinds of state we can conceive," as well as the means and extent to which the multitude can be manipulated (*PT*, I, 2-3, emphasis added). Philosophers have done little to supplement the teachings of politicians whose collective experience of politics is essentially complete. The experience of politicians is more comprehensive and relevant than the theories of philosophers; consequently, "politicians have written far more successfully [about political things] than philosophers" (*PT*, I, 2-3). This practical, political wisdom explains why some prophets were so successful at manipulating their followers despite being as ignorant of speculative matters, such as physics and metaphysics, as their followers.

## Spinoza's Novel Theology and the Hostility of Pious Readers

Thus, despite the initially orthodox definition of prophecy in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza's position is deeply problematic for pious readers who hold that "revelation is certain

11. *TTP*, I, 15. Later he summarizes his treatment of prophecy as follows: "we showed that the prophets had only a special power to imagine things, not a special power to understand them, that God did not reveal to them any secrets of philosophy but only the simplest matters, and that He accommodated Himself to their previous opinions" (*TTP*, XIII, 167).

12. The *Political Treatise* (henceforth *PT*) can be found in Gebhardt, *Spinoza Opera*, 3: 271-360.

knowledge of something revealed by God to man" (*TTP*, I, 15).[13] Spinoza is aware that such theologians will not accept his novel definition of revelation. Indeed, in the *Political Treatise* he analyzes their objections to this view and identifies the root of this problem in their reluctance to see as pious any statesman, even one who wisely acts to restrain the passions of the multitude:

> In their eagerness to anticipate human wickedness by deploying the arts which experience and long practice have taught them...[politicians] seem to be antagonistic to Religion, especially in the eyes of the Theologians, who believe that the supreme powers should handle public affairs according to the same rules of Religious Duty by which the private man is bound (*PT*, I, 2).

Political leaders appear impious and wicked to theologians because their wise governance of the states depends upon their political acumen rather than "Religious Duty." Because they govern their state according to experience rather than higher religious principles, such leaders appear to be simply cunning rather than wise, more interested in ensnaring men than taking care of them (cf. *PT*, I, 2). Theologians condemn statesmen because they do not understand the necessity and wisdom of the statesmen's actions. Spinoza attempts to address this hostility by presenting examples of prophets who were wise political leaders. He further demonstrates that any interpretation of Scripture that ignores the importance of political wisdom and its independence from religious duty will necessarily distort Scripture's teachings.[14] The most prominent case of such misinterpretation is the Pharisee's twisted explanation of Moses that ignores his political savvy and instead validates Moses' "ridiculous" claim that Jews are "the chosen people." Because the Pharisees insisted on seeing Moses as a mouthpiece of God, they interpreted his claims regarding divine

13. For an account of the radically heretical implications of Spinoza's critique, particularly the denial of the supernatural, see Pierre Bayle, "Spinoza," in *Historical and Critical Dictionary* trans. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 288-338.

14. If prophets were also skilled politicians, then it is likely that they too would appear impious to theologians. Obviously, theologians venerate the prophets, but do so at the cost of ignoring the political circumstances which determine the prophets' messages.

election literally. In order to avoid such interpretations, Spinoza explains the role of politics in the Hebrew Bible.[15]

Spinoza argues that the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets, like that of politicians, is based on practical experience rather than theoretical reasoning. As we shall see, the Bible's greatest prophet, Moses, was also its greatest politician; consequently, Spinoza gives Moses extraordinary prominence throughout the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Indeed, Moses receives more attention in the *Tractatus* than any other figure, including Jesus (despite Spinoza's claim that Jesus is superior to Moses). In addition to proposing a novel explanation of prophecy, Spinoza has other, more immediate political goals in the *Tractatus*. He makes clear in the preface that he rejects priests as political leaders, and therewith, theocracy, as a solution to the theological-political problem.[16] But in order to make this case on scriptural grounds, Spinoza must contend with the example of Moses that seems to prove that theology and politics can be successfully combined. Spinoza shows that theocracy is an untenable form of government on biblical grounds by interpreting the career of Moses in political terms.

## Spinoza's Presentation of Moses as an Exemplary Statesman

In chapter 3 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza presents Moses as an exemplary legislator who created a religion to systematize the superstitions and prejudices of the Hebrews in order that they might be made into a nation. At first glance, Spinoza's description of Moses appears to accord with his general

15. Thus, insofar as the Bible records Moses' deeds accurately, it is a storehouse of useful political experience rather than theological insight. Indeed, in chapters 17-19, Spinoza demonstrates this claim by mining the Hebrew Bible for useful political advice. Spinoza also interprets other prophets, such as Ezekial and Jeremiah, in light of their political circumstances (cf. *TTP*, III, 55ff.) In addition, Spinoza offers examples of prophets who are unwise political leaders. Not surprisingly, they resemble the theologians whom Spinoza attacks in terms of their hostility to political leaders who neglect religious duty.

16. See, for example, his account of the Ottoman Empire, in which theologians succeed so well at confusing "everyone's judgement" that no one in the regime is able to distinguish truth from error (*TTP*, preface, 7).

theory of prophecy, until he claims that he is "forced (*cogimur*) to distinguish between the prophecies of Moses and those of the other prophets" (*TTP*, I, 17). Since Moses was like other prophets in the sense that he was not a philosopher and was confined to imaginings that reflected his own experience, why should Spinoza be "forced" to distinguish Moses from the other prophets?

Reading the Bible literally, according to Spinoza, leads to the view that Moses is superior to the other prophets because God spoke to him in a "true voice" (*TTP*, I, 17). Yet Spinoza's proof texts do not unequivocally support this claim. The biblical passage that Spinoza cites as evidence says nothing about a true voice: "And I will be available to you, and I will speak with you from the part of the ark-cover which is between the two cherubim" (Exodus 25:22). Similarly, the other text to which Spinoza refers as evidence of the literal voice of God—"God revealed himself in Shiloh to Samuel by the word of God"—does not necessarily imply a true voice. In fact, this quotation has nothing at all to do with Moses! Spinoza mentions it only as an example which could be interpreted as a reference to a "true voice" were it not the case that Moses alone heard this voice. Spinoza's reinterpretation of the phrase "the word of God" to mean "the voice of God," when it could have been understood to be an imagining or a philosophical comprehension of God's truth, only draws attention to Spinoza's awkward attempt to raise the status of Moses above the other prophets.[17]

Why does Spinoza go to such lengths to interpret Moses as superior to the other prophets, an extraordinary assertion in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*?[18] In fact, Spinoza does not praise Moses unequivocally. Though he concedes that Moses heard the "true voice" of God, Spinoza argues that Moses' uniqueness does not consist in a more accurate or truer grasp of God's essence (cf.

17. Later, when contrasting Moses with Jesus in the same chapter, Spinoza claims that "the old law was imparted by an angel, but not by God immediately. So if Moses spoke to God face to face as a man speaks with his friend (*i.e.*, by means of their two bodies), Christ communicated with God mind to mind" (*TTP*, I, 21). Here, Spinoza does interpret the voice of God metaphorically as belonging to an angel. See also Maimonides, *Guide*, 2:39.

18. Furthermore, we would expect Spinoza to argue here for the uniqueness of Jesus instead of Moses' as he does later on. Why should he distinguish Moses from all the prophets if he intends to distinguish Jesus from Moses?

*TTP*, II, 38ff.). Like other prophets, Moses relied solely on his imagination and consequently envisioned God according to his prior experience and prejudices (cf. *TTP*, II, 35). Moses resembled the other prophets in the inadequacy of his theoretical speculations. Consequently, the only distinction between his revelation and that of other prophets is the particular prejudices that Moses projected onto God. The uniqueness of Moses' prophecy consists in is its nonspeculative, political content. By imagining God as a lawgiver and ruler, Moses created a powerful tool for unifying passionate individuals. For Spinoza then, Moses' distinction from other prophets consists in the fact that he was not only a prophet but also a legislator, who founded a state upon the idea of a providential and powerful deity. Spinoza asserts Moses' uniqueness as an extraordinary lawgiver in order to use Moses as an exemplar of the politician-statesman. Since Moses was both the greatest prophet and the wisest legislator, his political teachings are decisive for determining the status of the political teachings of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. As we shall see, Spinoza shows that the Mosaic law rests on untenable theoretical grounds and is therefore obsolete.

## The Theological-Rhetorical Basis of Spinoza's Moses

As we have seen, the reluctance of theologians to accept Spinoza's theory of prophecy is related to their distrust of politicians who ignore religious obligations in favor of political expedience. Therefore, Spinoza's assertion that Moses was the greatest of the Hebrew prophets on the grounds that he was the greatest politician hardly constitutes a compelling case for Christian readers. Spinoza attempts to bolster his position by showing how a political reading of Moses compliments the teachings of the Gospels. Specifically, he shows that the doctrine of divine election must be understood as a political ploy intended to improve the primitive Hebrews.

The central claim of Moses' theology is that God chose the Hebrews before all other nations and bestowed upon them eternal grace. This claim, Spinoza points out, directly contradicts the teachings of Jesus which maintain that "God is the God of all nations, i.e., since He is equally well-disposed to all, and since all were equally under the law and sin, [therefore] God sent to all

nations His Christ, who would free all equally of bondage to the law" (*TTP*, III, 54). Not only does the doctrine of divine election contradict the central claims of Jesus, Spinoza argues that the bulk of the Hebrew Bible itself refutes the doctrine by presenting evidence that the Hebrews had no special relationship with respect to God:

> For with respect to intellect and virtue, that is, with respect to blessedness, God...is equally well-disposed to all. Scripture itself bears testimony to this fact (*TTP*, III, 49-50, see also XII, 159-160).

Nor is prophecy particular to the Jews, for there were various non-Jewish prophets also, such as Job and Balaam (cf. *TTP*, III, 50, 51). Moreover, the Psalms teach that God is near to all who call him (see Psalm 145, 33, cf. *TTP*, III, 50).[19] If the teachings of the Gospels, and even many sections of the Hebrew Bible, refute the claim of divine election, how then are we to understand this preeminent doctrine of Moses' prophecy?

Spinoza argues that Moses' teaching was a political act which reflects Moses perception of the Hebrews' "childish power of understanding" rather than divine wisdom (*TTP*, III, 45, cf. III, 44-45). As a prudent political leader, Moses recognized that his nation was so backward that it needed both a draconian law and the promise of divine grace in order to survive. According to Spinoza, Moses knew such promises were ridiculous but, faced with the political necessities of governing a barbarous nation, promulgated them anyway:

> It is ridiculous that Moses should have been jealous of God's presence among the Gentiles, or that he should have dared to ask such a thing of God. But the fact is that Moses knew the temperament and the stubborn heart of his nation, he clearly saw that they could not carry out what they had begun without very great miracles and the special external aid of God; nay, they must necessarily perish without such aid (*TTP*, III, 53).

19. The Hebrew Bible omits the histories of non-Jewish prophets because "the Hebrews were concerned to write only of their own affairs and not of other nations" (*TTP*, III, 51). Since the Hebrew Bible is not a universal history of mankind but an account of the Hebrew nation, it focuses its attention on the relationship between God and the Israelites.

Moses' doctrine of divine election contradicts the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew Bible because Moses was forced to make this concession to satisfy the political needs of his childlike nation.[20]

In order to strengthen this interpretation, Spinoza puts the alternative interpretation in the mouth of Jewish theologians, whom he refers to as Pharisees. Spinoza was well aware of Christian antipathy towards the Pharisees, which antipathy had its source in the Gospels, where Pharisees are portrayed as small-minded "hypocrites" and "the offspring of vipers."[21] Appealing to such hostility, Spinoza describes how the Pharisees, in the interests of chauvinism and divisiveness, interpreted Moses' doctrine as confirmation of the superiority of the Jews over other nations (cf. *TTP*, III, 53). To maintain this fiction, these theologians interpreted Scripture perversely, presenting Moses as the mouthpiece of God rather than a savvy statesman. Thus, they insisted on understanding literally the scriptural passage where Moses asks God to grant special grace to Israel. Although Spinoza generally insists that literalness is a cardinal hermeneutical principle of scriptural interpretation, he claims here that this passage should be interpreted metaphorically because Moses as a statesman knew better. The erroneous interpretation of the Pharisees demonstrates the danger of ignoring the political elements of prophecy in favor of supernatural explanations.

Spinoza's reinterpretation of Moses' prophecy not only refutes Jewish claims of special blessedness, it even asserts that Moses himself knew such claims to be false. Indeed, although Spinoza rejects the view of Moses as a prophet with supernatural capacities, Spinoza's interpretation offers even greater tribute to Moses than the ridiculous claims of the Pharisees by portraying Moses as the divine gift bestowed upon the Hebrews. Here the guidance of God is equated with the laws of nature that affect political affairs:

> If a society is established (*constat*) by men of untrained intelligence, it will depend for the most part on fortune and will be less stable. If, in

20. "To the first Jews, religion was imparted in writing as a law, because at that time they were regarded as infants" (*TTP*, XII, 158-59; see also VII, 101).

21. Cf. Matt. 3: 7, Luke 18: 9ff., etc. Spinoza asserts that Jesus was so repulsed by the teachings of the Pharisees that his "sole care" was to refute their identification of the Mosaic Law with true blessedness (cf. *TTP*, V, 71).

> spite of this, such a society lasts a long time, it is owing to some other directing influence than its own; if it overcomes great perils and its affairs prosper, it will perforce marvel at and worship the guidance of God (*TTP*, III, 47).

Spinoza had earlier emphasized the debased condition of the Hebrews as a result of their enslavement in Egypt (cf. *TTP*, III, 45). Moses single-handedly managed to overcome this condition by implementing a corrective "social order and laws" (*ratione societatis & leges*) which allowed the state to survive and achieve "temporal prosperity" (cf. *TTP*, III, 48). Indeed, given the debased condition of the Hebrews, Moses' creation of a prosperous state is a marvel. To say that the Hebrews were a chosen people is to say that fortune gave them a great leader, Moses, who not only governed them justly but also created a set of laws which were particularly well-suited to the prejudices and superstitions of that people. Moses was able to find "the manner and means" by which the Hebrews could acquire temporal prosperity and freedom. His genius as a legislator lay in his ability to create laws "necessary for stabilizing [this] particular state" and presenting them in a such manner (namely revelation) that his people would find compelling (*TTP*, III, 49, see also 48 and XVII, 216).[22] Spinoza says that Moses became the leader of the Jews "according to the predetermined order of nature"; but Scripture, in its imaginative language, says that God chose the perfect lawgiver for the Jews (cf. 46). Spinoza shows that when interpreted properly, Scripture's tribute to Moses is far greater than the ridiculous claims of the Pharisees.

## Spinoza's Critique of Moses

Because Spinoza is eager to undermine the theocracy that Moses succeeded in establishing (cf. *TTP*, III, 55-56), he tempers his praise of Moses' political savvy with a critique of Moses' thought. Spinoza presents Moses intellectually as belonging to the multitude. For "Moses, also, did not sufficiently perceive that

22. "Moses, more than anyone else, had gotten control of the judgment of his people, not by deception but by a divine virtue, with the result that he was believed to be divine and to speak and act in everything with divine inspiration" (*TTP*, XX, 239).

God is omniscient and that all human actions are directed by his sole decree" (*TTP*, II, 38). Here, Spinoza abandons the metaphorical interpretation of Scripture that he had earlier used to explain the divine election of the Hebrew nation, and once again insists on interpreting Scripture literally. When the text reports that Moses questioned God's assertion that the people would obey him, the report must be taken as a statement of Moses' disbelief in God's omniscience rather than a noble lie (cf. Exodus 4: 1). Similarly, when Moses sings "Who among the Gods is like You," Spinoza infers that Moses was a polytheist (Exodus 15:11, cf. *TTP*, II, 39). According to such literalism, Moses apparently believed that there were many Gods, though none as powerful as the God who

> had chosen for Himself alone the Hebrew nation...and had handed over to the care of other gods substituted by Himself the rest of the nations and territories. For that reason He was called the God of Israel and of Jerusalem, whereas the other gods were called the gods of the Gentiles (*TTP*, II, 39).

Spinoza's claim that Moses shared the superstitions of his nation, believing even in their divine election, seems to contradict his claim earlier in chapter 3 that Moses wisely adopted such a belief in order to appeal to the childlike mentality of his people.[23]

Spinoza's account of Moses as a wise legislator who propagated doctrines, which he knew to be ridiculous, for the benefit of his people appears to contradict his earlier portrait of Moses as an ordinary man with common, if somewhat chauvinistic, superstitions. Spinoza resolves this contradiction by arguing that God reveals Himself to prophets according to their capacity. In other words, revelation is both an act whereby God

23. In light of this notion of chosenness, Spinoza's comment at the end of chapter three—"If the foundations of their religion did not effeminate their hearts, I would absolutely believe that some day, given the opportunity, they will set up their state again, and God will choose them anew, so changeable are human affairs"—which was held by early Zionist thinkers to be prophetic, proves to have the opposite meaning. To "choose the Jews anew" means that they reestablish their political nation. But this can only be accomplished by surrendering their antiquated religious laws. Thus, Spinoza ironically suggests that the Jews must surrender their religion if they want to be chosen again. For more on the relation between Spinoza and Zionism see Ze'ev Levy, *Baruch or Benedict: On Some Jewish Aspects of Spinoza's Philosophy*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1989), pp. 74ff.

reveals Himself to a prophet (cf. *TTP*, II, 42) as well as the prophet's image of God's nature and his relation to the world (cf. *TTP*, II, 3 3-34, III, 37). For Spinoza, these definitions mean the same thing because God does not reveal Himself simply but rather accommodates His revelation to the capacities of the individual prophet. Since prophets perceive God "only through the imagination and not from certain principles of the mind," God can only "reveal" what the prophet vividly imagines. (*TTP*, I, 29).[24] Revelation occurs only in the sense that the individual prophet vividly imagines God according to his "preconceived opinions" (*TTP*, XIII, 171, cf. II, 32ff).[25]

Thus, when Spinoza asserts that God revealed Himself to Moses, he means only that Moses vividly imagined God according to his prior opinions. Because Moses was a legislator, he conceived of God in similar terms, as the supreme legislator who "possesses the supreme right and the supreme power over all things" (*TTP*, II, 39). Although Moses' view of God is based exclusively on "preconceived opinions" rather than knowledge, he was wiser than his people because of his political experience and insight. For instance, Moses intuitively perceived that it would be ridiculous for a weak people to ask a supremely powerful ruler to grant them special grace. As a result of such wisdom, Moses made concessions to his people that he knew were ridiculous such as the doctrine of divine election. At the same time, because Moses lacked philosophical wisdom, he misunderstood his vivid imaginings of God as revelation and mistakenly believed, for example, that God was jealous. In short, Moses was wiser than his people in political matters but his lack of philosophical wisdom insured that his conception of God was as ridiculous as that of his subjects. Spinoza tempers his praise of Moses enough to limit the influence of his political and theological claims without denying his considerable accomplishments.

24. Spinoza restates this point in chapter twelve as follows: "It is one thing to understand Scripture and the mind of the prophets, and another to understand the Mind of God, i.e., the truth of the matter itself. This follows from what we showed in chapter two about the prophets" (*TTP*, XII, 163).

25. The way in which a prophet imagines God depends on a number of factors such as the prophet's physical temperament, the strength of his imagination, and his previously held opinions. See also: "God accommodated himself to the imaginations and preconceived opinions of the prophets, and the faithful have cultivated different opinions about God" (*TTP*, XIII, 171).

Moses occupies a central role in the *Tractatus* because he forged the connection between theology and politics that continued to be effective because of the preeminence of the Bible into the seventeenth century (and beyond). Despite the fact that he did not understand God's essence or God's relation to the world, Moses had an extraordinary grasp of politics and therefore his theological teachings had an inordinate amount of influence. Because Spinoza aims to prepare the ground for a liberal theology based upon Scripture, he does not present Moses simply as a fraud. To the contrary, despite his aversion to Moses' theocracy, he is compelled to present Moses as an extraordinary statesman and uniquely great prophet. At the same time however, he undermines this theocracy by revealing the base condition of the Hebrews and Moses' own inadequate ideas of God.[26] In order to further undermine biblical support for theocracy and establish a religion more friendly to tolerance and freedom, Spinoza enlists the authority of Jesus, the one biblical figure widely accepted by Spinoza's seventeenth-century readers as superior to Moses.[27]

## Spinoza's Case for the Superiority of Jesus

Spinoza demonstrates most forcefully the inadequacy of Moses' teaching by comparing him with Jesus, who represents an ideal philosopher in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. In fact, Jesus is always referred to as "Christ" in the *Tractatus* because he represents the perfect philosopher rather than simply an historical personage.[28] In addition, virtually every passage where Spinoza discusses Jesus is preceded or followed by a passage contrasting him favorably to Moses. Although these comparisons are meant to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus, a careful reading of these passages reveals that Jesus' teachings are superior only in terms

26. Moses' view of God is ultimately inadequate for political life as well. This can be seen by comparing Spinoza's presentation of Moses' theology (*TTP*, II, 38) with Spinoza's tenets of universal faith (chapter 15). Most notably, Moses did not perceive God's omniscience, a necessary condition for a God whom the multitude fear.

27. See W. Z. Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 171.

28. I owe this insight to Daniel Garber of the University of Chicago. Professor Garber also points out that the idea of a completely rational individual is itself an inadequate idea (see *E*, IV , 68).

of philosophic rather than their political content.[29] Spinoza recognizes the hostility of Christian readers toward politicians who willfully neglect religious duty in favor of political expedience and he appeals to it by presenting Jesus as a thinker whose prophecy is moral, not political. In contrast to Moses, whose political law was rendered obsolete by the decline of the Hebrew state, Jesus' divine moral law remains the true guide for achieving salvation. Furthermore, despite the nonpolitical character of Jesus' teaching, Spinoza extrapolates the necessary political conditions for fulfilling Jesus' divine law. In this way, Spinoza establishes a nonsupernatural account of Jesus that can claim scriptural support.

## Moses and Jesus

The prophets, as we have seen, imagined the relationship of God and the world according to their prejudices; consequently, their prophecies are inconsistent and contradictory. The startling exception to this theory of prophecy is Jesus who "received the revelation of God without the aid of imagination" (*TTP*, I, 21). Because he had a perfect mind, Jesus was able to perceive "God's wisdom, that is, a wisdom surpassing human wisdom and thus [Spinoza claims that] Christ is the way to salvation."[30] Although Spinoza had earlier called absurd the view that "prophets have a human body and a superhuman mind," here he asserts that Jesus was the exception who perceived God's mind directly (*TTP*, I, 16). In contrast to Moses, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus was free of any defective knowledge of God:

29. See Steven Smith, "Spinoza's Paradox: Judaism and the Construction of Liberal Identity in the *TTP*," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (1994): 217ff.

30. Edwin Curley offers a plausible interpretation of these passages that does not accept the literal meaning as the only meaning of this text: "I take his position to be that it is not necessary for salvation to know Christ, but only to know God's eternal wisdom, which may have manifested itself most clearly in Jesus, but which has manifested itself in all things" (see Curley's forthcoming translation of the *TTP*). Indeed a number of Spinoza's letters seem to support this view (see letter #71, 73, 75, 78). Nevertheless, Spinoza explicitly says that Jesus is the way to salvation, and we must see what he intends by this in the *TTP*, particularly for readers who are unfamiliar with the discussion of salvation in the *Ethics*.

> If Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man speaks with his friend (*i.e.*, by means of their two bodies), Christ communicated with God mind to mind (*TTP*, I, 21).

Unlike Moses, Jesus knew God's mind and therefore he shares none of Moses' defects regarding philosophy.[31]

Spinoza's claim that Jesus knew God "mind to mind" (or that he understood God's mind purely through the intellect without interference from the imagination) is thrown into question, however, later in the same chapter when Spinoza considers the meaning of the phrase *spiritus dei*:

> Scripture usually, in concession to the ignorance of the multitude, describes God as having a mind, a heart, and emotions (*TTP*, I, 25).

The extraordinary claim that Jesus knew God "mind to mind" cannot be understood literally since it is incorrect to attribute mind to God. Spinoza means to indicate by this claim that Jesus' perception of God was purely rational and not mixed up with imaginings. As we have seen, Moses was a great statesman and therefore imagined God as a lawgiver, whereas "God revealed himself immediately to Christ, or to Christ's mind...[hence] Christ perceived truly" (*TTP*, IV, 64-65). In contrast to Moses, Jesus perceived things as they are eternally; if his teachings occasionally appear obscure, this is only because he accommodated them to the multitude (*TTP*, IV, 65).

The political implications of the distinction between Moses the statesman and Jesus the philosopher are not immediately clear. Both men, according to Spinoza, necessarily accommodated their teachings to the multitude (in the case of Jesus, this project was carried out largely by the Apostles) so that Jesus' philosophical teaching is often as obscure and susceptible to the misinterpretation by theologians as is Moses' revelation. In addition, Spinoza claims that the things that Jesus does teach clearly can be found also in the teachings of other prophets such

31. Despite the fact that Spinoza seems to be advancing a position acceptable to orthodox Christianity, he still attacks theologians here for their claims about Christ. Though he begins from orthodox Christian dogma, his position is too radical and innovative to furnish the grounds for any lasting reconciliation with orthodox theologians.

as Isaiah and Solomon.[32] Although Spinoza may have hoped to encourage greater tolerance of philosophy by identifying Jesus as a philosopher, he recognized that the multitude still require a nonphilosophical religion.[33] Clearly, Spinoza recognized that Jesus carried more authority with Christian readers, but what did he hope to achieve practically by insisting that Jesus was a philosopher and Moses only a statesman?

## Varieties of Law: Moses' Political Law vs. Jesus' Divine Law

The question may be approached by examining Spinoza's political teaching on the nature of law at the beginning of chapter 4. There he explains that the proper use of the word law is to refer to those effects "which follow necessarily from the nature or from the definition of a thing" (*TTP*, IV, 57-58). True laws are scientific descriptions of the universal and determined casual relations which explain all of nature. Thus, the rational man or philosopher can perceive the "true object" of nature's laws and therewith the best manner of living. Such a man follows the law voluntarily since he recognizes that its aim is none other than happiness (*TTP*, IV, 59). However, because most people "are completely ignorant of how things are really ordered and connected," another meaning of law has developed (*TTP*, V, 58). This popular concept of law refers to commands which "men had laid down for themselves" and which they can either obey or disobey (*TTP*, IV, 57). Although this latter definition of law is grounded in ignorance, it is fitting for the multitude who do not live according to reason.

Since the vast majority of mankind are "incapable of grasping" the true law, they must be compelled to behave sociably. This is the primary task of legislators:

> Legislators, with a view to exacting general obedience, have wisely set up another end, one very different from that which necessarily follows

32. Cf. *TTP*, V, 69ff. and XII, 163. The fact that Jesus' teaching is for Spinoza as commonplace as the teachings of the other prophets demonstrates the extent to which he must revise that teaching in order to preserve a religion based on Jesus' authority.

33. As the opening sentence of the *TTP* suggests, men will always be in "the grip of superstition."

> from the nature of law by promising to the observers of the law what the multitude most desire, and on the other hand, by threatening those who would break the laws with what they most fear (*TTP*, IV, 59).

Using hope and fear, that is, by appealing to men's strongest passions rather than their intellect, legislators have "wisely" found a way to restrain the multitude and prescribe to them a manner of living.[34] Moses, the archetypal legislator in the *Tractatus*, accomplished precisely this—he restrained the ignorant multitude by enslaving them to a comprehensive set of laws "which always reminded them of the need for obedience" (*TTP*, V, 75-76). Having been only recently freed from slavery, the Israelites "were not capable of governing themselves" and therefore the law simply acted as a surrogate master, one which controlled all aspects of their lives (*TTP*, V, 75). Spinoza claims that this sort of all-encompassing legislation which men follow out of fear (or hope) is equivalent to slavery.[35] In contrast to such laws, the Gospels teach that the truly just man does not "seek to be justified in the sight of God by keeping the law" (Romans 3:19-20).[36] Thus, Spinoza's distinction between human and divine law corresponds to the distinction between Moses and Jesus: human law, as exemplified by the Mosaic code, attempts only to stabilize and secure the state by appealing to men's passions. In contrast, divine

34. See *TTP*, XIV, 178. Also see: "If men did not have this hope and fear, but believed instead that minds die with the body, and that the wretched, exhausted with the burden of morality, cannot look forward to a life to come, they would return to their natural disposition, and would prefer to govern all their actions according to lust and to obey fortune rather than themselves" (*E*, V, 41s).

35. Shlomo Pines goes further, claiming that for Spinoza all religions which contain laws enslave the multitude: "Spinoza's sharpest criticism is undoubtedly directed against the Mosaic law, but it is equally valid if directed against all religious systems of legislation which draw their authority from a God conceived as a ruler and lawgiver. All such systems contain a series of commandments and prohibitions and are founded upon the (inadequate) concepts of good and evil. They lead men into bondage and they keep him there" ("On Spinoza's Conception of Human Freedom and Good & Evil," in *Spinoza: His Thought and Work*, ed. Rotenstreich and Schneider. [Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983], pp. 154-55).

36. Spinoza omits the phrase "in the sight of God" when paraphrasing this passage (see *TTP*, IV, 59). Apparently, obedience to the law in order to please God is akin to slavery. Similarly, he claims that Jesus "was sent, not to preserve the state and institute laws, but only to teach the universal law" (*TTP*, V, 70-71).

law, as taught by Jesus, directs men toward true blessedness which is the perfection of his intellect and acquisition of knowledge (see *TTP*, IV, 59).[37]

The practical meaning of this distinction is the obsolescence of Moses' law. Through his experience and prudence, Moses was able to create laws and regulations which stabilized the Hebrew state (cf. *TTP*, IV, 63-64). However, Moses suffered from many of the same delusions as the Israelites to whom the law was accommodated and therefore neglected his nation's intellectual or moral perfection, which is the basis of true blessedness. For example, instead of making the Hebrews truly virtuous, the Mosaic law aimed at inculcating an extraordinary level of obedience through fear and hope (see *TTP*, V, 69 and III, 43). Moreover, since it was not universal in nature but rather fashioned specifically for a particular people, the law became obsolete with the destruction of the state (*TTP*, IV, 64). Moses' inadequate understanding resulted in a revealed law that is neither universal nor eternal.

In contrast to Moses' law, Jesus' perfect understanding led to legislation that was universal and eternal. As a philosopher, Jesus expressed true or necessary laws as moral teachings. For example, rather than forbid adultery with a commandment, Jesus taught that loyalty to one's spouse is secured only by conquering one's desires (cf. *TTP*, V, 70-71). Such a moral teaching does not require obedience to a law as much as rational cognition of the true good. Hence, only those who follow Jesus' divine law can enjoy true blessedness or salvation.

## The Relation of Divine and Human Law

Spinoza argues that the divine law taught by Jesus is concerned only with improving moral character: Jesus did not "care about anything other than teaching moral lessons," including political law (*TTP*, V, 71). Jesus' divine law appears to

37. Jesus taught universal truths not contingent on historical narratives and free of ceremonies aimed at enslaving men and legislators, who attempted to control unruly mobs with specific ceremonies and myths (cf. *TTP*, IV, 61-62). In this way, Spinoza diminishes the importance of ceremonies and expunges superstitious meaning from them.

accord with the "religious duty" which, theologians insist, pertains to politicians in their governance of the state. By insisting on the preeminence of religious duty, Spinoza's portrait of Jesus appears to confirm the very hostility of theologians towards politicians which Spinoza seeks to combat.[38]

Spinoza attempts to allay this hostility by insisting on the strict separation of divine and political law. Divine or moral law, he argues, is not sufficient by itself for maintaining a state because only rational men will obey it:

> If men were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason indicates, then of course society would require no laws: it would be sufficient to teach men true moral lessons so that they would do spontaneously, wholeheartedly, and in a manner worthy of a free man, what is really useful (*TTP*, V, 73).

Political laws are a necessary requirement for any moral teaching or divine law because without them, "everyone is permitted to do whatever he likes, and no more right is granted to reason than hatred or anger" (*TTP*, XVI, 191). When society reverts to such anarchy, the fulfillment of the divine law, which Spinoza defines as the continual pursuit of justice and loving-kindness, becomes impossible (cf. *TTP*, XIX, 229).

Spinoza further clarifies the relationship between political and moral law by interpreting the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus' advice to turn the other cheek and "to repay others' hatred, anger, and disdain with love or nobility" is useful for moderating one's "affects and appetites" (*E*, IV, 46 & *E*, V, 10s). However, since most men are not rational enough to recognize the truth of such a teaching, Spinoza teaches instead that religious duty requires "exacting a penalty for injuries in the presence of a judge" (*TTP*, VII, 104). The divine law guides rational individuals toward salvation but is inadequate for a state which contains a majority of nonrational men. Thus, converting Jesus' moral lessons into

38. According to Jesus and the Gospels, the path to true blessedness and salvation cannot be legislated by a statesman, even the greatest prophet. At best, "the whole law of Moses" succeeded in securing only "the conveniences of the body," an end to which every wise human law is aimed (*TTP*, V, 76). Jesus' teaching transcends politics altogether and consequently, the universal divine law can have little impact on those laws prescribed to *homo carnalis*.

political legislation would be "fatal to the preservation of the state" (*TTP*, XIX, 232). Despite its superior rationality and truth, the divine law cannot supplant the political law.[39]

The separation of divine and political law leaves open the question of what import the divine law has for the multitude who are not sufficiently rational to submit to such a law. In order to resolve this issue, we must examine further Spinoza's explanation of the divine law. As we shall see, Spinoza attempts to extract a political teaching from Jesus' divine law.

## The Political Implications of Jesus' Divine Law

Spinoza begins with what appears to be Jesus' central political goal, namely, to liberate men "from bondage to the law [of Moses], so that they should no longer act well because of the command of the law, but by the constant determination of their hearts" (*TTP*, III, 54). By freeing men of their obligation to the old law, Jesus meant to teach that freedom is not a question of simple obedience to a lawcode, but involves acceptance of the law based on rational knowledge of "the true reason for the laws and their necessity" (*TTP*, IV, 59). However, such a teaching appears inappropriate for the multitude, who fail to recognize that true law is necessary and eternal, and therefore obey laws commanded by others in a slavish fashion (see *E*, V, 41s).[40] Indeed, Spinoza observes that true freedom has little to do with politics and thus that "no matter what type of state a man is in, he can be free. For certainly a man is free insofar as he is led by reason" (note #33, 263). Of course, the multitude, who confuse freedom with license, do not accept such a definition.

Spinoza freely admits that Jesus' teaching on freedom and divine law is inappropriate for the multitude since "*homo carnalis* cannot understand these things...because in this highest good he can discover nothing which he can handle or eat, or which affects the fleshly appetites wherein he chiefly delights" (*TTP*, IV, 61).

39. In light of this fact, Spinoza argues in chapter 19 that religious duty "becomes impious if some harm to the state as a whole should follow from it" (*TTP*, XIX, 232).

40. Only the rational few recognize the "divine law" and obey it freely because it aims at the greatest good (cf *TTP*, IV, 60).

Jesus' teaching on freedom appears to have little political relevance for the multitude.[41] Moreover, Spinoza does not simply ground society of obedience to law based on recognition of the true good (cf. *TTP*, IV, 59).[42] Nor does he even attempt to provide "a complete Ethics" in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, even though such a teaching is necessary for the attainment of salvation (cf. *TTP*, IV, 60). Instead, Spinoza elaborates on what he calls "the divine law in general," that is, a moral and political law which he derives from Jesus' philosophical teachings.[43]

Spinoza creates this political meaning by reexamining the political bondage from which Jesus freed mankind. He begins by showing that the debased condition of the Hebrews (at the time of Moses) made it necessary to enslave them with a coercive political law:

> All of them were crude in their understanding and weakened by wretched slavery. Therefore, the dominion had to remain in the hands of one person only, who would command the others and compel them by force, and who would make laws and afterwards interpret them (*TTP*, V, 75).

The Hebrews were too backward to enjoy freedom; as a result, they needed a powerful lawgiver—so powerful, in fact, that he

41. Cf *TTP*, IV, 62. Spinoza emphasizes the importance of faith which "cannot give us the knowledge and love of God...[but] is very useful with a view to life in the world. For the more we have observed and the better we know the character and circumstances of men...the better will we be able to live more cautiously among them and accommodate our lives to their disposition as much as reason suggests."

42. The *TTP* does not attempt to provide "a complete Ethics" because the multitude as well as most theologians would not find such a teaching compelling. Rather than transform the multitude into philosophers, Spinoza hopes to teach them a number of sub-rational (but not irrational) lessons which he calls "the divine law in general." David Lachterman offers an interesting alternative explanation of the treatment of law in the *TTP*. According to Lachterman, the *TTP* attempts to retranslate the scientific concept of law back into the human domain so that the "pre-scientific understanding of law, legislation, legislators, obedience and disobedience can all be intelligently derived" ("Laying Down the Law: The Theological-Political Matrix of Spinoza's Physics," in *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward A Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff [Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991] p. 132).

43. "Everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, has always been the same; in every age virtue has been extremely rare" (*TTP*, XII, 160). Because virtue is so rare, Spinoza does not make the inculcation of virtue a primary goal of his interpretation of Scripture; instead, he aims at the more modest goal of instilling obedience to the state.

spoke with divine authority—in order to form a stable state. Moses "introduced a religion into the Body politic so that the people would do their duty" (*TTP*, V, 75). In order to achieve devotion to the law, Moses enslaved his people to it so that "they were not their own master in anything, but completely subjected to someone else" (*TTP*, V, 76; cf. XVII, 216ff.). Jesus liberated men not only from the Mosaic law but from any religious law which employs coercion. His rationale in doing so was that salvation required willful acquiescence to the divine law and therefore could not be coerced. In this way, Spinoza reveals in Jesus' theological teaching a political teaching, namely, the repudiation of theocracy and religious coercion in favor of tolerance.

## The Appeal of Political Freedom to the Multitude

Spinoza builds his case against theocracy not only from Scripture but also "from universal foundations" as well (*TTP*, V, 73). These nontheological foundations confirm the practical considerations involved in Spinoza's political theology. For example, Spinoza asserts repeatedly that most men are unreasonable and must be compelled by others to behave.[44] Thus, his attack on Mosaic theocracy and his praise of the Gospels for liberating men from the enslavement of the law does not rest solely on religious conviction or even the desire to relieve men of all social constraints.[45] Rather, his argument on behalf of freedom includes other, more pragmatic reasons such as his hard-headed assessment of the temperament of the multitude:

> Men can put up with nothing less than to be subjected by their equals and governed by them. Finally, nothing is more difficult than to take freedom away from men once it has been granted (*TTP*, V, 74).

Nonrational men in need of compulsion nevertheless resist such compulsion because they resent the authority of others whom they

44. See for example: "no social order can subsist without dominion and force, and hence, laws which restrain men's immoderate desires and unchecked impulses" (*TTP*, V, 74.)

45. See Hilail Gilden, "Spinoza and the Political Problem," in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marjorie Grene (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 377-87.

regard as equals. In order to address this political problem, Spinoza suggests two solutions: Limit obedience so that "no one is bound to be subject to his equal" (in other words, democracy ) or create a society where the multitude is convinced that the leader "has something above ordinary human nature" and therefore is worthy of being obeyed (in other words, theocracy, *TTP*, V, 74). Since the multitude will not recognize those wiser than them unless they have divine authority (and since there is no consistent connection between such authority and philosophy), Spinoza rejects the theocratic solution.

By presenting Jesus as a philosopher, Spinoza does not intend to subject the multitude to the authority of philosophers.[46] On the contrary, Spinoza associates Jesus' teaching with freedom in order to stir up the multitude against the rule by their perceived equals. The success of this teaching is ensured by the fact that "nothing is more difficult than to take freedom away from men once it has been granted" (*TTP*, V, 74). Once he has freed his followers from enslavement to the law entailed by theocracy, Jesus, at least in Spinoza's presentation, has made it virtually impossible to return to such a regime. Spinoza's intends his analysis of Jesus as a theological prerequisite for any democratic religion.

## Spinoza's Theology as a Restraint on the Freedom of the Multitude

Spinoza's praise of freedom must be understood in light of his novel theology, otherwise his argument appears incoherent, asserting the need to restrain the multitude with force while simultaneously extolling the virtues of freedom to them.[47] In

46. As we have seen, Spinoza's theology proves that Mosaic theocracy is obsolete and that any attempt to coerce religious belief contradicts the teachings of Jesus; therefore, Spinoza endorses democracy as the best regime (cf. *TTP*, XVI, 195). Spinoza also argues that the failure of Maimonides' religious reform demonstrates that men cannot discern wisdom from superstition, and consequently, they resent the authority of philosophers (cf. *TTP*, VII, 114). See my "The Dual Teachings of Scripture: Spinoza's Solution to the Quarrel between Reason and Revelation," *Archiv für Geshichte Der Philosophie* (forthcoming).

47. Lewis Feuer, for instance, attempts to establish Spinoza as one of the founders of modern liberalism, by focusing primarily on the advocacy of democracy in the *TTP*. But Feuer cannot account for the host of apparently authoritarian

praising freedom, Spinoza is not hoping to encourage license or further liberate the passions of the multitude; rather, he seeks to render theocracy obsolete by interpreting the Gospels as a text which encourages tolerance and freedom. Clearly this is a nonphilosophic freedom, for it has little in common with the rational freedom of a philosopher like Spinoza who freely chooses to live in accord with the determined laws of nature.[48] This nonphilosophic freedom, however, is essential to the flourishing of a tolerant, democratic state because it discourages theocracy and promotes stability and harmony among the citizens.[49] Spinoza's endorsement of democracy is inseparable from his new theology because freedom can be granted to the multitude only in conjunction with a religious teaching that discourages the abuse of that freedom (cf. *TTP*, XVI, 195).

These constraints on liberty cannot be left to the whims of the individual ruler as in a theocracy but must be institutionalized as the true religion. Spinoza confirms the need for such a religion based on the Bible in the last section of chapter five where he discusses the question whether it is necessary to believe in "the historical narratives contained in Scripture" (*TTP*, V, 76ff.). Spinoza begins by distinguishing between a teaching aimed at the learned few and one directed toward the many. Since the learned few are not enslaved to their passions, they have the ability to follow and

assertions both in the *TTP* and in the entire Spinoza corpus. Ultimately, he concludes that Spinoza had not adequately clarified his own thought and remained torn between a personal preference for liberalism and a hard-nosed recognition of the need for authority: "The democratic aspiration and the trauma of the mob struggled within his thought. The political thinker found himself divided within as did the philosopher, meditating on man and the universe. Not all the resources of the geometrical method could resolve the conflict within himself." Feuer conjectures that after writing the *TTP*, Spinoza changed his mind about democracy as he gradually became aware of the political instability of the people. Thus for Feuer, the discrepancies between the *PT* and the *TTP* are a result of Spinoza's incoherent political thought. See Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 197, see also chaps. 4-5.

48. See Leszek Kolakowski's "The Two Eyes of Spinoza," in Grene, *Spinoza*, pp. 279-94.

49. This nonphilosophic freedom is dedicated to a noble end in its own right (cf. *E*, IV, 73). Thus, Spinoza does not speak simply ironically when he relates the freedom of a philosopher to that of the multitude in a democracy (see *TTP* XVI, 194-95, 199).

be persuaded by long, subtle arguments which involve definitions, axioms, and corollaries as in the *Ethics*.[50] The multitude, on the other hand, do not have the circumspection, perceptiveness or discipline to learn from a purely rational teaching and must be taught in a manner suited to the imagination. The style is best exemplified by Scripture:

> Since all Scripture was revealed first for the use of an entire nation, and eventually for the whole human race, the things which are contained in it must necessarily have been adapted as far as possible to the understanding of the common people and proved by examples drawn from experience alone (*TTP*, V, 77).

By narrating stories about the experience of pious individuals, the Bible cannot prove the foundation of ethics. But since proof is not essential to the multitude, these stories "can teach and enlighten sufficiently to impress (*imprimere*) *obedience* and devotion on their hearts" (*TTP*, V, 77-78, emphasis added).[51] Spinoza chooses to ground his religion on Scripture because its stories are compelling to ordinary men who cannot be persuaded by reason alone to act decently.

Significantly, Spinoza reintroduces obedience into the argument after describing Scripture's speculative teachings. A few pages earlier, he had argued that "obedience has no place in a social order where dominion is vested in the whole people and where laws are enacted by common consent" (*TTP*, V, 74). He had also, as we have seen, criticized the law for enslaving the Hebrews in opposition to Jesus' teaching. Here, however, he praises Scripture for promoting obedience and limiting men's license. Spinoza seeks to reinstall obedience via Scripture because men do not resent divine compulsion as they do human coercion. To this end, he enumerates Scripture's speculative dogmas which teach men that they cannot escape divine justice even if they elude the temporal authorities. Although Spinoza had claimed earlier (*TTP*, II, 29-30) that the Bible teaches nothing with regard to speculation, he prudently admits such teachings here since, as

50. See also *TTP*, XIII, 167.

51. "Although faith in historical narratives cannot give us the knowledge and love of God, we do not deny that reading them is very useful in relation to civil life" (*TTP*, IV, 61).

we have learned from the argument, "belief in historical narratives is very necessary for the multitude" (*TTP*, V, 78). In this case, it is necessary for encouraging the multitude to fear divine retribution for their misdeeds. The Bible in fact does not teach anything regarding speculation, but given its authority with the common people, Spinoza himself must draw speculative lessons from it which encourage restraint. Consequently, he interprets the Bible so that it teaches nonrational men how to restrain their passions as if they were rational.[52] Spinoza draws these lessons here and more definitively in chapter fourteen where he enumerates the essential tenets of universal faith.

We have seen that Spinoza's attempts to establish a scriptural basis for tolerance and freedom by reducing prophecy to the imaginative expression of prejudice and superstition and then by confining such imaginings to the Hebrew Bible. Spinoza's theology contrasts the primitive Hebrew prophets with an idealized portrait of Jesus, whom he presents as a philosopher, free of prejudice and superstition. Spinoza connects Jesus' superiority to his rationality, arguing that Jesus understood God through the intellect or "mind to mind." As a result of his rationality, Jesus' revelations can be interpreted to accord with the tenets of science and philosophy.

During the course of his demonstration of the superiority of Jesus, Spinoza introduces the issue of law into his discussion. Specifically, Spinoza is at pains to present Moses as an extraordinary prophet because of his extraordinary political prudence. Such wisdom allowed Moses to accomplish an extraordinary political feat, namely the organization of a group of backward slaves into a real state. Moses' wisdom would seem to be greater than that of Jesus, whom Spinoza has already distinguished as knowing God "mind to mind." However, Spinoza preserves Jesus' preeminence by emphasizing the superiority of Jesus' divine law to Moses' political law. Because it was accommodated to a single nation, Moses' legislation was rendered obsolete by the decline of that state and the exile of its citizens. In contrast, because of his superior philosophical (rather

52. Spinoza returns to this issue in chapter 14 of the *TTP* where he defines the necessary dogmas of universal religion. In this way, Spinoza limits freedom of opinion among the multitude without harming the free inquiry of science and philosophy.

than political) wisdom, Jesus was able to create nonpolitical legislation which is universal, eternal, and concerned with the path to true blessedness rather than the legislation of a particular regime. Spinoza extracts political guidelines from Jesus' law, despite its philosophic character, by examining the political conditions necessary for salvation: Jesus teaches that salvation requires obedience to God rather than to the will of the state or a tyrant, and thus requires freedom, a condition best guaranteed by a free and tolerant democracy.