A BOOK FORGED IN HELL

Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age

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The vilest hypocrites, urged on by that same fury which they call zeal for God's law, have everywhere prosecuted men whose blameless character and distinguished qualities have excited the hostility of the masses, publicly denouncing their beliefs and inflaming the savage crowd's anger against them. And this shameless license, sheltering under the cloak of religion, is not easy to suppress.

—Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*

Preface

Writing in May 1670, the German theologian Jacob Thomasius fulminated against a recent, anonymously published book. It was, he claimed, "a godless document" that should be immediately banned in all countries. His Dutch colleague, Regnier Mansveld, a professor at the University of Utrecht, insisted that the new publication was harmful to all religions and "ought to be buried forever in an eternal oblivion." Willem van Blijenburgh, a philosophically inclined Dutch merchant, wrote that "this atheistic book is full of abominations . . . which every reasonable person should find abhorrent." One disturbed critic went so far as to call it "a book forged in hell," written by the devil himself.

The object of all this attention was a work titled *Theological-Political Treatise* and its author, an excommunicated Jew from Amsterdam: Baruch de Spinoza. The *Treatise* was regarded by Spinoza's contemporaries as the most dangerous book ever published. In their eyes, it threatened to undermine religious faith, social and political harmony, and even everyday morality. They believed that the author—and his identity was not a secret for very long—was a religious subversive and political radical who sought to spread atheism and libertinism throughout Christendom. The uproar over the *Treatise* is, without question, one of the most significant events in European intellectual history, occurring as it did at the dawn of the Enlightenment. While the book laid the groundwork for subsequent liberal, secular, and democratic thinking, the debate over it also exposed deep tensions in a world that had seemingly recovered from over a century of brutal religious warfare.

The *Treatise* is also one of the most important books of Western thought ever written. Spinoza was the first to argue that the Bible is not literally the word of God but rather a work of human literature; that "true religion" has nothing to do with theology, liturgical ceremonies, or sectarian dogma but consists only in a simple moral rule: love your neighbor; and that ecclesiastic authorities should have no role whatsoever in the governance of a modern state. He also insisted that "divine providence" is nothing but the laws of nature, that miracles (understood as violations of the natural order of things) are impossible and belief in them is only an expression of our ignorance of the true causes of phenomena, and that the prophets of the Old Testament were simply ordinary individuals who, while ethically superior, happened also to have particularly vivid imaginations. The book's political chapters present as eloquent a plea for toleration (especially "the freedom to philosophize" without interference from the authorities) and democracy as has ever been penned.

The reputation of a philosopher from the past is often at the mercy of what is popular among contemporary practitioners. The canon of classical philosophers, while relatively stable at its core for a long time, has seen its share of additions and dismissals. And for a long time, especially in the Anglo-American philosophical world in the first half of the twentieth century, Spinoza did not make the cut. While he may have continued to enjoy honorary status as one of the great Western thinkers, he was not considered to be a relevant one, and his works were rarely studied even in survey courses in the history of philosophy. It certainly did not help that his metaphysical-moral

magnum opus, the *Ethics*, while composed in the "geometric style," was extremely opaque (contrary to the clarity of thinking and writing prized, at least in principle, by analytic philosophers), and that in that work he propounded doctrines that seemed to many to border on the mystical.

Spinoza's rehabilitation in the latter half of the twentieth century progressed as metaphysics and epistemology came to dominate academic philosophy. The metaphysics in fashion was not the system-building kind of earlier periods, including that of Spinoza or the idealist sort favored by the latter-day Hegelians of Cambridge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but rather precise analytic investigations into mind, matter, causation, and universals. Meanwhile, modern epistemologists, like Plato and Descartes before them, inquired into the nature of belief, truth, justification, and knowledge. And these were all topics on which, it was believed, Spinoza (despite his grander pretensions) had something interesting and relevant to say. Moreover, his unorthodox view of God and his ingenious approach to the mind-body problem made him seem, in some respects, much more modern than his more religiously inclined seventeenth-century contemporaries.

The somewhat problematic result of this was that Spinoza (again, like Descartes) came to be seen as someone who was primarily engaged in metaphysics and epistemology, and who was interested only in such questions as the nature of substance and the mind-body problem and in addressing the skeptical challenges to human knowledge. The focus, in teaching and in scholarship, was on the first two parts of the *Ethics*, in which are found Spinoza's monistic view of nature, his account of understanding and will, and the mind-body parallelism that is supposed to be his response to the difficulties faced by Descartes's dualism. Parts Three, Four, and Five of the *Ethics*—his theory of the passions and his moral philosophy—were seldom discussed at all (and even less frequently taught). This produced a very incomplete and misleading picture of Spinoza's philosophical project; one was left wondering why the work is called *Ethics*.

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* received even worse treatment in this period; indeed, it was all but ignored by philosophers in the twentieth century. The neglect came not only from those working in metaphysics and epistemology but also, and more surprisingly, from scholars of political philosophy and of religion. Very few histories of political thought discuss Spinoza, and works on the philosophy of religion rarely mention his name. Even today, one would be hard-pressed to find the *Treatise* taught in a philosophy course.

Despite all this, outside the walls of academia there continued to be widespread fascination with Spinoza's thought. And the interest was not so much in what he had to say about substance or mind-body relations, which may be topics that only professional philosophers can get excited about, but in his views on God, religion, miracles, the Bible, democracy, and toleration. Nonphilosophers—the kind of people who will show up in great numbers on a Sunday afternoon for a public lecture about Spinoza—are deeply curious about his radical ideas on these questions, especially in the light of his well-known excommunication from Judaism. They may have some passing familiarity with—as well as a good many romantic and innocent notions about—what Spinoza had to say, but few have actually read the *Treatise*, even though it is a much more accessible work than the intimidating and heavy-going *Ethics*.

The last two decades have been much kinder to the *Treatise*. There have been a number of important books and many fine articles devoted to elucidating its theses and arguments, as well as its historical context. Most of these works, however, are of a specialized nature, and they tend to

be devoted to this or that aspect of Spinoza's religious and political thought. Useful as they are in furthering our understanding of the *Treatise*, these scholarly studies are directed to an academic readership. Thus, they seem to have done little to sate what appears to be a real longing among general readers for information on a book about which they have heard or read such extraordinary things.

With this study, I hope to bring Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* to a larger audience. My focus is broad: the composition, contents, and context of the *Treatise*. What exactly does Spinoza say in this book that so scandalized early modern Europe? What moved him to write such an incendiary treatise? What was the reaction to its publication, and why was it so vicious? And why is the *Treatise*, almost three and a half centuries after its publication, still of great relevance?

This is not a book on Spinoza's philosophy as a whole. Nor is it even a study of Spinoza's religious and political philosophy; I have considered the philosophical theology and political themes of the *Ethics*, as well as his late and unfinished *Political Treatise*, only insofar as they are relevant to my project of elucidating the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Nor do I investigate the considerable and very important reception of the *Treatise* beyond the immediate response to it by Spinoza's contemporaries. The legacy of the *Treatise*—from 1670 to our own time—is a rich and fascinating topic, one deserving thorough study in its own right.

What I *am* interested in is simply understanding what Spinoza is saying in the *Treatise* and why he is saying it, as well as showing why the book occasioned such a harsh backlash. Spinoza has a rightful place among the great philosophers in history. He was certainly the most original, radical, and controversial thinker of his time, and his philosophical, political, and religious ideas laid the foundation for much of what we now regard as "modern." But if we do not give the *Theological-Political Treatise* the attention it deserves, then we do not really know Spinoza.

Prologue

On the morning of July 28, 1670, Philips Huijbertsz[1] said goodbye to his wife, Eva Geldorpis, and left his home on the Nieuwendijk in Amsterdam. On this summer day, however, the fifty-six-year-old silk merchant was not on his way to the shop he had inherited from his father. It was Sunday, and he had more spiritual matters to attend to—matters of grave concern to the religious and moral well-being of his community.

Just four days earlier the consistory, or church council, of Amsterdam's Reformed Church had commissioned Brother Huijbertsz and his colleague, Brother Lucas van der Heiden, also in the silk trade, to represent it at the upcoming meeting of the Amsterdam regional *classis*. This was the larger district synod at which preachers from local church communities in Amsterdam and surrounding villages would regularly gather to address issues of common interest. (The Amsterdam *classis* was one of fourteen in the province of Holland.) Philips and Lucas were given the responsibility of making the members of the district synod aware of the Amsterdam consistory's worries, expressed at their meeting of June 30, about some recently published materials:

> Because some grievances now confront our church, an inquiry was undertaken in order to bring these forward to the district synod and accordingly to the provincial synod, should that be approved by the district synod and it has agreed that there is nothing new in this matter. Our church requests only that, under the old grievances, attention should especially be paid to the impudence of the papacy, Socinian and licentious book publications, and in particular the harmful book with the name *Theological-Political Treatise*.

The "old grievances" that the consistory is now asking the Amsterdam *classis* to refer to in considering these new publications is an edict that the States of Holland—the chief legislative body of the province, and arguably the most powerful body in the nation—enacted in 1653 forbidding the printing and dissemination of certain "irreligious" books. The Amsterdam church elders would like the preachers sitting in the district synod to declare that the 1653 ban should be applied in this new case. The *classis* should then refer the matter to the Synod of North Holland, the provincial church council—there was another for South Holland—in whose jurisdiction the Amsterdam district, along with five others, lay.

Amsterdam was not the first Reformed consistory to take notice of "a profane, blasphemous book titled *Theological-political treatise concerning the freedom of philosophizing in the state*." Already by May 1670 the church consistories of Utrecht, Leiden, and Haarlem had asked their town councils to seize any existing copies of the work and to take steps to prevent further publication or distribution. And the book had been published only in January of that year! Amsterdam was a bit slower in responding. However, as the most important city in the Netherlands, an urgent appeal brought forward from its Reformed leaders would certainly have great influence with the district and provincial synods.

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The presentation had its desired effect. That very afternoon, the Amsterdam district synod came to the conclusion that

> licentious book publishing and especially the harmful book titled *Theological-Political Treatise* should be dealt with under the old grievances . . . The *classis*, having heard from its committee various enormous and abominable samples contained in that book, has proclaimed that book to be blasphemous and dangerous.

It then forwarded the matter to the North Holland Synod, which was due to meet one week later. On August 5, the provincial body issued its own judgment:

> Regarding the blasphemous book, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the deputies have taken all the necessary steps against that book with the first council in the Court [of Holland], and are awaiting the outcome. The Christian Synod, heartily abominating that obscene book, gives its thanks to the honorable gentlemen from Bennebroeck for their offer to suppress this writing as much as they can, and to the Brothers from Amsterdam for their reading of their extracts from the book. Thanks also to the deputies for their performed service, and [the synod] entrusts them together with the deputies from South Holland to present all this to their honorable Mightinesses [the States of Holland] and to seek their help against [the book] with powerful suppression of it, and also to seek an edict to forbid this and all other blasphemous books.

It was just the result Philips Huijbertszoon and his colleagues from Amsterdam's consistory were hoping for.

While these machinations were taking place in Amsterdam, the author of the scandalous book that so troubled the city's church leaders was leaving behind life in the peaceful countryside and relocating to the city of The Hague, the administrative and legislative capital of the Dutch Republic. There, in some rooms on the upper floor of a house owned by the widow Van der Werve on a back wharf called (the Quiet Ferry Quay, he would quietly continue his philosophical and political writing.

Bento de Spinoza was born on November 24, 1632, to a prominent merchant family among Amsterdam's Portuguese Jews. This Sephardic community was founded by former New Christians, or *conversos*—Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—and their descendants. After fleeing harassment by the Iberian Inquisitions, which doubted the sincerity of the conversions, many New Christians eventually settled in Amsterdam and a few other northern cities by the early seventeenth century. With its generally tolerant environment and greater concern for economic prosperity than religious uniformity, the newly independent Dutch Republic (and especially Holland, its largest province) offered these refugees an opportunity to return to the religion of their ancestors and reestablish themselves in Jewish life. There were always conservative sectors of Dutch society

clamoring for the expulsion of the "Portuguese merchants" in their midst. But the more liberal regents of Amsterdam, not to mention the more enlightened elements in Dutch society at large, were unwilling to make the same mistake that Spain had made a century earlier and drive out an economically important part of its population, one whose productivity and mercantile network would make a substantial contribution to the flourishing of the Dutch Golden Age.

The Spinoza family was not among the wealthiest of the city's Sephardim, whose wealth was in turn dwarfed by the fortunes of the wealthiest Dutch. They were, however, comfortably well-off. Spinoza's father, Miguel, was an importer of dried fruit and nuts, mainly from Spanish and Portuguese colonies. To judge both by his accounts and by the respect he earned from his peers, he seems for a time to have been a fairly successful businessman.

Bento (or, as he would have been called in the synagogue, Baruch) must have been an intellectually gifted youth, and he would have made a strong impression on his teachers as he progressed through the levels of the community's school. He probably studied at one time or another with all of the leading rabbis of the Talmud Torah congregation, including Menasseh ben Israel, an ecumenical and cosmopolitan rabbi who was perhaps the most famous Jew in Europe; the mystically inclined Isaac Aboab da Fonseca; and Saul Levi Mortera, the chief rabbi of the congregation, whose tastes ran more to rational philosophy and who often clashed with Rabbi Aboab over the relevance of kabbalah, an esoteric form of Jewish mysticism.

Spinoza may have excelled in school, but, contrary to the story long told, he did not study to be a rabbi. In fact, he never made it into the upper levels of the educational program, which involved advanced work in Talmud. In 1649, his older brother Isaac, who had been helping his father run the family business, died, and Spinoza had to cease his formal studies to take his place. When Miguel died in 1654, Spinoza found himself, along with his other brother, Gabriel, a full-time merchant, running the firm Bento y Gabriel de Spinoza. He seems not to have been a very shrewd merchant, however, and the company, burdened by the debts left behind by his father, floundered under their direction.

Spinoza did not have much of a taste for the life of commerce anyway. Financial success, which led to status and respect within the Portuguese Jewish community, held very little attraction for him. By the time he and Gabriel took over the family business, he was already distracted from these worldly matters and was devoting more and more of his energies to intellectual interests. Looking back a few years later over his conversion to the philosophical life, he wrote of his growing awareness of the vanity of the pursuits followed by most people (including himself), who gave little thought to the true value of the goods they so desperately sought.

> After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.

He was not unaware of the risks involved in abandoning his former engagements and undertaking this new enterprise.

> I say that "I resolved at last"—for at first glance it seemed ill-advised to be willing to lose something certain for something then uncertain. I saw, of course, the advantages that honor and wealth bring, and that I would be forced to abstain from seeking them, if I wished to devote myself seriously to something new and different; and if by chance the greatest happiness lay in them, I saw that I should have to do without it. But if it did not lie in them, and I devoted my energies only to acquiring them, then I would equally go without it.

By the early to mid-1650s, Spinoza had decided that his future lay in philosophy, the search for knowledge and true happiness, not in the importing of dried fruit.

Around the time of his disenchantment with the mercantile life, Spinoza began studies in Latin and the classics. Latin was still the lingua franca for most academic and intellectual discourse in Europe, and Spinoza would need to know the language for his studies in philosophy, especially if he planned on attending any university lectures. He had to go outside the Jewish community for instruction in these disciplines, and found what he needed under the tutelage of Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit and political radical whose home seemed to function as a kind of salon for secular humanists, arch-democrats, and freethinkers. (Van den Enden himself was later executed in France for his participation in a republican plot against King Louis XIV and the monarchy.) It was probably Van den Enden who first introduced Spinoza to the works of Descartes, who would prove so important to Spinoza's philosophical development, and of other contemporary thinkers. While pursuing this secular education in philosophy, literature, and political thought at his Latin tutor's home, Spinoza seems also to have continued his Jewish education in the yeshiva (or academy) Keter Torah (Crown of the Law), run by Rabbi Mortera. It was probably under Mortera that Spinoza first studied Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers.

Although distracted from business affairs by his studies and undoubtedly experiencing a serious weakening of his Jewish faith as he delved ever more deeply into the world of pagan and gentile letters, Spinoza kept up appearances and continued to be a member in good standing of the Talmud Torah congregation throughout the early 1650s. He paid his dues and communal taxes, and even made the contributions to the charitable funds that were expected of congregants.

And then, on July 27, 1656, the following proclamation was read in Hebrew before the ark of the Torah in the crowded synagogue on the Houtgracht:

> The gentlemen of the *ma'amad* [the congregation's lay governing board] hereby proclaim that they have long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, and that they have endeavored by various means and promises to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving ever more serious information about the abominable heresies that he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having numerous trustworthy witnesses who have reported and borne witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they have become convinced of the truth of this matter.

The board, having consulted with the rabbis, consequently decided that the twenty-three-year-old Spinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel.

> By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse, and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

The document concludes with the warning that "no one is to communicate with him, orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof, or come within four cubits of his vicinity, or read any treatise composed or written by him."

It was the harshest writ of *herem*, or religious and social ostracism, ever pronounced on a member of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. The community leaders sitting on the *ma'amad* that year dug deep into their books to find just the right words for the occasion. Unlike many of the other bans issued in the period, this one was never rescinded.

We do not know for certain why Spinoza was punished with such extreme prejudice. That the punishment came from his own community—from the congregation that had nurtured and educated him, and that held his family in high esteem—only adds to the enigma. Neither the *herem* itself nor any document from the period tells us exactly what his "evil opinions and acts" were supposed to have been, or what "abominable heresies" or "monstrous deeds" he is alleged to have practiced and taught. He had not yet published anything, or even composed any treatise. Spinoza never refers to this period of his life in his extant letters and thus does not offer his correspondents (or us) any clues as to why he was expelled. All we know for certain is that Spinoza received, from the community's leadership in 1656, a *herem* like no other in the period.

Three relatively reliable sources, however, provide suggestive clues as to the nature of Spinoza's offense. According to the chronology of the events leading up to the *herem* provided by Jean-Maximilien Lucas, Spinoza's earliest biographer and writing just after Spinoza's death, there was much talk in the congregation about his opinions; people, especially the rabbis, were curious about what the young man, known for his intelligence, was thinking. As Lucas tells it, "among those most eager to associate with him there were two young men who, professing to be his most intimate friends, begged him to tell them his real views. They promised him that whatever his opinions were, he had nothing to fear on their part, for their curiosity had no other end than to clear up their own doubts." They suggested, trying to draw Spinoza out, that if one read Moses and the

prophets closely, then one would be led to the conclusion that the soul is not immortal and that God is material. "How does it appear to you?" they asked Spinoza. "Does God have a body? Is the soul immortal?" After some hesitation, Spinoza took the bait.

> I confess that since nothing is to be found in the Bible about the nonmaterial or incorporeal, there is nothing objectionable in believing that God is a body. All the more so since, as the Prophet says, God is great, and it is impossible to comprehend greatness without extension and, therefore, without body. As for spirits, it is certain that Scripture does not say that these are real and permanent substances, but mere phantoms, called angels because God makes use of them to declare his will; they are of such kind that the angels and all other kinds of spirits are invisible only because their matter is very fine and diaphanous, so that it can only be seen as one sees phantoms in a mirror, in a dream, or in the night.

As for the human soul, Spinoza reportedly replied that "whenever Scripture speaks of it, the word 'soul' is used simply to express life, or anything that is living. It would be useless to search for any passage in support of its immortality. As for the contrary view, it may be seen in a hundred places, and nothing is so easy as to prove it."

Spinoza did not trust the motives behind the curiosity of his "friends"—with good reason—and he broke off the conversation as soon as he had the opportunity. At first his interlocutors thought he was just teasing them or trying merely to shock them by expressing scandalous ideas. But when they saw he was serious, they started talking about Spinoza to others. "They said that the people deceived themselves in believing that this young man might become one of the pillars of the synagogue; that it seemed more likely that he would be its destroyer, as he had nothing but hatred and contempt for the Law of Moses." Lucas relates that when Spinoza was called before his judges, these same individuals bore witness against him, alleging that he "scoffed at the Jews as 'superstitious people born and bred in ignorance, who do not know what God is, and who nevertheless have the audacity to speak of themselves as His People, to the disparagement of other nations.' "

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"God exists only philosophically," "the law is not true," "the soul is not immortal." These are rather vague and indeterminate propositions. Ordinarily there is no more telling what is intended by them than what is meant by the notoriously ambiguous charge of "atheism." But in Spinoza's case we have some fair basis for knowing what he would have meant, for they are likely just the views that he would at least begin elaborating and arguing for in his written works within five years of the *herem*. To be sure, we cannot be certain that what we find in those writings is exactly what he was saying within the community. But the report by Lucas and the testimony by Brother Tomas indicate that the metaphysical, moral, and religious doctrines that are to be found in his mature philosophical works were already in his mind, and apparently also on his tongue, in the mid-1650s.

According to Lucas, Spinoza took his expulsion in good stride. "All the better," he quotes Spinoza as saying, "they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own

accord if I did not dread scandal. . . . I gladly enter on the path that is opened to me." By this point, he was certainly not very religiously observant, and must have had grave doubts about both the particular tenets of Judaism and, more generally, the value of sectarian religions. Besides the opportunity it afforded him to maintain the family business and earn a living, membership in good standing in the Portuguese community seems to have mattered little to him.

Within a couple of years, Spinoza had left Amsterdam. By 1661 he was living in Rijnsburg, a small village just outside Leiden, grinding lenses for a living and working on various elements of what he was then calling "my Philosophy." These included, in good Cartesian tradition, a treatise on philosophical method, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in which Spinoza addresses some basic problems concerning the nature and varieties of human knowledge and the proper means to achieving true understanding, all in the context of a broad conception of what constitutes "the good" for a human being. He also composed around this time his *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*, which contains in embryonic form many themes and ideas that will reappear in more mature versions and in a more orderly and perspicuous format in his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*. Spinoza did not finish these early works, and neither of them would be published in his lifetime. The *Short Treatise*, however, represents Spinoza's first serious attempt to lay out what he takes to be the metaphysics of God and nature, the proper conception of the human soul, the nature of knowledge and freedom, the status of good and evil, and the human being's relationship to nature and the means to true happiness.

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Spinoza begins the *Ethics* by arguing that at the most basic ontological level, the universe is a single, unique, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing substance. This is what is most real, and he calls it "God or Nature." Spinoza's God is not some transcendent, supernatural being. He — or, rather, It — is not endowed with the psychological or moral characteristics traditionally attributed to God by many Western religions. Spinoza's God does not command, judge, or make covenants. Understanding, will, goodness, wisdom, and justice form no part of God's essence. In Spinoza's philosophy, in other words, God is not the providential, awe-inspiring deity of Abraham. Rather, God just is the fundamental, eternal, infinite substance of reality and the first cause of all things. Everything else that is belongs to (or is a "mode" of) Nature.

All things within Nature — that is, everything — are invariably and necessarily determined by Nature. There is nothing that escapes Nature's laws; there are no exceptions to its ways. Whatever is, follows with an absolute necessity from Nature's necessary universal principles (God's attributes). There are thus no purposes for Nature or within Nature. Nothing happens for any ultimate reason or to serve any goal or overarching plan. Whatever takes place does so only because it is brought about by the ordinary causal order of Nature. And because God is identical with the universal, active causal principles of Nature — the substance of it all — it follows that the anthropomorphic conception of God that, as Spinoza sees it, characterizes sectarian religions, and all the claims about divine reward and punishment that it implies, are nothing but superstitious fictions.

Spinoza then turns to the nature of the human being and its place in Nature. Nature, as infinite substance, has infinite attributes or essences, each constituting a kind of universal nature of things. We know of only two of these attributes: Thought (or thinking essence, the stuff of minds) and

Extension (material essence, the stuff of bodies). The course of Nature is one, since Nature is one substance, a unity. But for just this reason it proceeds under each attribute in parallel coordination with its unfolding in every other attribute. Any individual thing or event is only a "mode" of Nature appearing under the different attributes. One and the same thing or event, then, manifests itself in Thought (as a mental or thinking thing or event), in Extension (as a material or bodily thing or event), and so on through the other attributes. Thus, the human mind and the human body are one and the same thing in Nature, manifesting itself under Thought and Extension, respectively. Their unity in a human being and the correlation of their respective states is a function of their ultimate metaphysical identity in Nature. The upshot is that human beings are as much a part of Nature as any other thing and do not inhabit some separate "dominion" in which they are exempt from its laws. Every individual, human or otherwise, is subject to the same causal determinism that governs all of Nature's events. This explains how Spinoza can propose to treat human thoughts, emotions, desires, and volitions "just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies."

Spinoza's account of human nature is accompanied by a psychology that reflects the various ways in which human beings are affected by the world around them and that investigates the striving to persevere in existence in the face of these external forces that characterizes human beings' (and any being's) essence. Human mental life is made up of various passions and actions. The former are our affective responses to the ways in which external objects causally impinge on us; the latter derive from our own inner resources. Both represent ways in which our powers are increased or decreased by the causal nexuses within which we exist. The picture of human life that emerges from Spinoza's catalogue of the passions is a tormented one in which a person is emotionally tossed about and at the mercy of things and forces beyond his or her control.

> The remedy for such a life mired in the passions lies in virtue, that is, in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. No human being can ever be entirely free from the passions, since all beings are necessarily a part of Nature and always subject to external influences. Human beings can, however, achieve some degree of autonomy and freedom from their turmoil to the extent that they are active and guided by reason and thereby acquire an understanding of the way in which everything in Nature must happen as it does, including acts of human volition. In this way, the power of the passive affects is at least diminished.

> Human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, i.e. the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction.

The ideal of the free, rational individual presented in the *Ethics* provides a model for a virtuous human life liberated from various illusions and seeking what is truly in its best interest (as opposed to those things that merely cause transitory pleasure).

The highest form of knowledge, "as difficult as it is rare," is a thorough understanding of Nature and its ways. This includes an intellectual intuition of how the essence of anything (especially of oneself and all of one's mental and bodily states) follows from Nature's most universal elements—or, since God and Nature are one and the same, how the essence of anything relates to God. Spinoza concludes the *Ethics* with an examination of the ultimate benefits of such deep insight. The true rewards of virtue, he insists, lie not in some otherworldly recompense for an immortal soul. There is no such thing as personal immortality; it is a fiction used by manipulative ecclesiastics to keep us in a perpetual condition of hope and fear and thus control us. Rather, "blessedness" and "salvation" consist in the well-being and peace of mind that understanding brings us in this life. The virtuous person sees the necessity of all things, and is therefore less troubled by what may or may not come his way. He regards the vicissitudes of fortune with equanimity, and his happiness is not subject to circumstances beyond his control.

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Chapter 2

The Theological-Political Problem

In the early spring of 1661, Henry Oldenburg, the corresponding secretary for the Royal Society in England, was on one of his periodic trips to the continent. He passed through Amsterdam and Leiden, visiting with old friends and making new contacts to broaden his already considerable circle of acquaintances and scientific collaborators. While in the Dutch Republic, he heard of a gifted young philosopher and lens grinder—and ostracized Jew—who used to live in Amsterdam but now resided in a small village just outside Leiden. His interest no doubt piqued, in part by what he must have heard about this fellow's work on lenses and the refraction of light, Oldenburg went out of his way to pay Spinoza a visit soon after he had settled in Rijnsburg. The two men shared many philosophical and scientific interests, including recent developments in chemistry and optics (they discussed, among other things, Robert Boyle's experiments), and soon a fruitful correspondence ensued. The first extant letters we have from Spinoza are an extended series of exchanges with Oldenburg in the fall of 1661. In one of his letters, the Englishman urges that the two of them "bind ourselves to one another in unfeigned friendship, and let us cultivate that friendship assiduously, with every kind of good will and service."

Despite this initial ardor, the intervening years saw only occasional letters. Moreover, the assiduous cultivation of friendship was complicated by the Anglo-Dutch war that broke out in March 1665. Communication between London and Voorburg, where Spinoza was now living, was difficult. Still, in April of that year Oldenburg took the initiative once again and managed to get a letter across the North Sea, looking to renew the correspondence and expressing his hope that Spinoza was "alive and well and remembered your old Oldenburg." Interested in hearing how Spinoza's work on the *Ethics* was coming along, he was probably surprised to learn that his friend had put that treatise aside and taken on an entirely different project. Writing from London in September 1665, there is some concern in his voice as he good-naturedly teases Spinoza about his decision to turn to new and potentially treacherous topics. "I see that you are not so much philosophizing as theologizing, if one may use such terms, for you are recording your thoughts about angels, prophecy, and miracles." In his reply, Spinoza explains the reason for his change of plans.

> I am now writing a treatise on my views regarding Scripture. The reasons that move me to do so are: (1) the prejudices of theologians. For I know that these are the main obstacles that prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy. So I apply myself to exposing such prejudices and removing them from the minds of sensible people. (2) The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation, too, as far as I can. (3) The freedom to philosophize and to say what we think. This I want to vindicate completely, for here it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers.

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To achieve this polemical and highly political goal, Spinoza must do some serious debunking of various dogmatic pillars of the religious establishment. He needs to undermine or at least illuminate the true meaning of those fundamental principles that were used by manipulative ecclesiastics (especially in the Dutch Republic) to gain power over public and even private life. Thus, in the *Treatise* Spinoza offers a deflationary account of prophecy and miracles, reveals the superstitious beliefs that support sectarian religions, claims that rites and ceremonies have nothing to do with "true piety," and—perhaps most audaciously of all—argues that the Bible, perhaps the most powerful tool wielded by clerics to exercise control over their flocks, is nothing but a work of human literature, one composed over time by many authors, who often disagreed with one another.

Naturally, such a project would be troubling to many of Spinoza's seventeenth-century contemporaries. What made it even more worrisome, however, was the fact that the *Treatise*, while written in Latin, was, in its conception and style, a relatively accessible and therefore highly dangerous book. While the copious quotation and analysis of Hebrew passages in certain chapters would make some of Spinoza's arguments opaque to many educated (and skilled Latin) readers of the time, it would not have been too difficult to divine his overall message.

The *Ethics* was composed for a fairly narrow audience: philosophers, primarily, particularly those schooled in the Cartesian tradition (and including Spinoza's friends in Amsterdam who had studied his treatise on Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*), but also the neo-Aristotelians and latter-day Scholastics, who occupied most of the positions on the university faculties in the Netherlands and elsewhere. They would have had the background necessary to understand the vocabulary of Spinoza's system (substance, attributes, modes, and so on) and the skills required to follow and evaluate the proofs for its propositions. In fact, the doctrines of the *Ethics* constitute, in part, a demonstration that if one adopts the most fundamental categories of earlier metaphysics, shared by Aristotelians and Cartesians, and follows them to their ultimate logical conclusions, then one will be led inexorably to Spinoza's doctrines. Thus, the classical idea that substance is what "exists in itself and not in something else," if applied strictly and consistently, ultimately implies that there is only one substance, and it is God or Nature.

The audience for the *Treatise*, by contrast, while it includes philosophers, is much broader. First, there are the theologians—not just those teaching on the university faculties but also the religious leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church (and would-be social and political leaders of the Dutch Republic). It is these doctrinal authorities whose "prejudices" are responsible for constricting the minds of citizens and whose strict moral policies would, if put into effect, constrict their everyday behavior as well. Just below them in the ecclesiastic hierarchy are the *predikanten*, the conservative Reformed foot soldiers, whose self-serving weekly sermons appeal to people's superstitious beliefs and manipulate their passions. These preachers are the ones who can inflame their congregants when the need arises—for example, to oppose a city's tolerant policies. Spinoza does at one point say that he does not "commend this treatise" to an ecclesiastic audience, "for I have no reason to expect them to approve it in any way," mainly because he knows "how deeply rooted in the mind are the prejudices embraced under the guise of piety." He was certainly not naive enough to expect a friendly reception for the book among conservative Reformed leaders and clerics; indeed, he knew they would harshly attack it. But if Spinoza did not write the *Treatise* expressly for the Reformed theologians, he must have at least composed it with them partly in mind. He would have seen them as an educated and influential audience that would certainly read

the book and possibly understand (if not accede to) its arguments. Perhaps he even nourished some small, maybe vain hope that it might have an effect—that they, like the philosophers, might "derive great profit" from it.

More important, there are the Dutch regents, the Republic's relatively liberal elite who governed many of the cities and towns in the provinces. These scions of wealthy professional, manufacturing, and merchant families in Amsterdam and elsewhere had the political upper hand in the 1650s and 1660s and, through the States of Holland and the States General (a federal body to which the provincial states sent representatives), were responsible for something resembling national policy. They tended to resent ecclesiastic meddling in public affairs. They also generally favored a tolerant attitude in intellectual, cultural, and religious matters, and are among the "sensible" people, the *prudentiorum*, whom Spinoza, in his letter to Oldenburg, sees as the work's primary audience. Although in many respects still a conservative faction wedded to the political status quo from which they profited, members of the regent class would be sympathetic to much of the theological-political message of the *Treatise*. As we shall see, if Spinoza intends the work to have practical consequences for the way the Dutch Republic is governed—and particularly for the relationship between political and religious authority and the defense of religious and intellectual toleration—this is the camp he must enlist.

Finally, the lessons of the *Treatise* are directed at, to use Spinoza's own form of address, the "philosophical reader." This means the philosopher in the strict sense, of course, including members of university faculties and independent intellectuals, although Spinoza suspects they already know and recognize the importance of what he has to say. "I believe," he says at the beginning of the book, "the main points are adequately known to philosophers." But the term also includes any learned reader who approaches the book without the prejudices that govern the minds of the multitude and make them condemn things impulsively. This is the person "who would philosophize more freely if he were not prevented by this one thought: that reason ought to serve as handmaid to theology." A relatively open-minded individual, he is ready to engage seriously in philosophy once he is reassured that it does not undermine piety and threaten his salvation. He simply needs to learn that his love of God and respect for the Bible are perfectly consistent with, even independent of, the free inquiry into truth.

This category extends as well to Spinoza's own friends and their religious and philosophical fellow travelers in Amsterdam and elsewhere. Some of these individuals were true freethinkers, secular intellectuals who had little use for religion in any guise. Most, however, were fairly devout but (from the standpoint of the Dutch Reformed hierarchy) highly unorthodox in their religious views. They have been called *Chrétiens sans église*, and belonged to some of the dissenting Reformed sects that flourished in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. These Collegiants, Quakers, Anabaptists, and Mennonites were true religious reformers, and perhaps the most sympathetic audience for Spinoza's new work. They were opposed to the authoritarian hierarchy and dogmatic sectarianism of the official church and sought a more egalitarian and inward approach to spiritual matters. They shared the belief that true Christianity was nonconfessional. In their view, it consisted in an evangelical love for one's fellow human beings and for God, as well as an obedience to the original words of Jesus Christ, unmediated by any theological commentary. The Collegiants in particular, among whom Spinoza counted several close friends, insisted that beyond the few simple and general truths contained in Jesus' teachings, each individual had the right to believe what he or she wanted and no right to harass others for what they believed.

Salvation was attained not through any superstitious rites or signs or by belonging to any organized cult but only by a heartfelt inner faith. The Collegiants had no use for pastors, and they rejected any doctrines of predestination as incompatible with Christian liberty. Anticlerical to the core, they sought to liberate Christianity from the restraints imposed on worship and deed by institutionalized religions. Moral action was, for most of these dissenting sects, more important than any set of dogmas. They had much to lose if the orthodox Calvinists—who had already effected a purge of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1618 with the condemnation of the Remonstrants at the Synod of Dordrecht—succeeded in increasing their influence and imposing their ways even further on Dutch society.

The *Treatise*, then, was intended for a diverse readership, one that included both the political leadership to which it is directly making its appeal and the religious dissenters and progressive intellectuals—actual and potential "philosophers"—who would benefit from the success of that appeal.

There is one group, however, for which the *Treatise* was definitely not intended: the masses. Or, at least, so Spinoza says.

> I know that the masses can no more be freed from their superstitions than from their fears. . . . I know that they are unchanging in their obstinacy, that they are not guided by reason, and that their praise and blame is at the mercy of impulse. Therefore I do not invite the common people to read this work, nor all those who are victims of the same emotional attitudes. Indeed, I would prefer that they disregard this book completely rather than make themselves a nuisance by misinterpreting it after their wont.

Spinoza did not fully trust the ordinary public—the retail merchants, laborers, artisans, and tavern-keepers who made up a good part of the population of cities like Amsterdam. These citizens were governed too much by the passions. Even those who could read and understand the message of the *Treatise* would not be able to make a fair and balanced judgment of it.

The breadth of Spinoza's intended audience for the *Treatise* indicates his great ambitions for the work, but it also made his task a rather complicated, even dangerous one. Composed not only of political liberals and philosophical progressives, his audience ranged from atheists to pious believers, from democrats to monarchists. It was, above all, a Christian audience. Lest he alienate any segment of it, he had to be careful in how he made his points in a work intended to effect a radical rethinking and bring about serious theological-political change.

A theological-political treatise is, in many respects, a distinctly early modern (i.e., postmedieval) product. This is because the problem it addresses—the theological-political problem—arises in Europe with the greatest urgency at the political and religious crossroads of the sixteenth century. Early modern rulers sought to use religion in the form of an official church to shore up their regimes and, through confessional uniformity, strengthen the bonds among their subjects. There was nothing new in this, of course, as it was a part of imperial and royal practice

in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. But the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a gradual transition from small kingdoms and principalities to nation-states and the centralization of political power over larger territories, while the Reformation introduced greater religious diversity (and division) among populations. This gave sovereigns all the more reason to put religion in the service of political unity and loyalty. As one historian writes, "a shared religion was supposed to weld rulers and subjects together under the Divine Protection that depended on an orderly religious life regulated by true doctrine, a well-ordered church organization, decent public worship, and pious public conduct."

The game had to be played carefully, however, and a proper balance struck. As useful as religion was for political purposes, a too powerful church could become a hindrance, even a threat, to the secular regime as an alternative dominion within a dominion. Indeed, by the mid-seventeenth century, and especially in a republic like the Netherlands and a constitutional commonwealth like England, secular institutions began to grow suspicious of ecclesiastic encroachment on civic life. Dutch liberals, for example, while upstanding members of the Reformed Church, were always on guard against their conservative and more orthodox opponents seeking to make the Republic a rigorously Calvinist state. At the same time, religious authority, which in Europe had reached the pinnacle of its political and social influence in the Middle Ages, now feared being marginalized by an increasingly independent political authority. Church leaders saw themselves losing control over the lives of ordinary citizens. The support and protection that an official religion enjoyed in a confessional state was welcome, but the clerics, jealous of political and moral influence, also struggled to regain the upper hand.

These historical developments encouraged greater theoretical attention to the role of religion in the state. In the competition between civil and religious authority for state power, as well as for the hearts and minds (and bodies) of the people, thinkers on both sides raised the question as to what ought to be the proper relationship between the theological and the political. Should the political be subservient to the theological, with a nation ultimately governed by its clerics and its laws restricted, even commanded, by theological principles? Or, on the other hand, should a polity's religious life, like its other aspects, be controlled by the secular authorities? Should the church rule the state or the state rule the church? Or should one have nothing whatsoever to do with the other?

The seventeenth century saw the publication of a number of important and influential treatises on the theological-political question. One such work, the poet John Milton's *Hill of Ares*, published in England in 1644, was primarily a plea for freedom of speech and the press. But Milton feared that the harsh attacks against an earlier treatise in which he defended divorce, as well as Parliament's subsequent promulgation of a censorship law, were religiously motivated and instigated by ecclesiastic authorities. This kind of church influence in public affairs and over the expression of ideas was much too papal for Milton's taste.

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Milton's pamphlet is subtle in its approach to the theological-political problem, and De la Court is focused primarily on the situation in the Netherlands. But there is nothing subtle or parochial about Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Published in English in 1651 (and in Dutch translation in 1667, and in a Latin edition in 1668), offers an extended examination of human

nature, political society, and religious institutions, all undertaken to show that the most secure and powerful state is one in which power is granted to a single sovereign (preferably an individual monarch). Hobbes's account, as we shall see, grounds the commonwealth in the psychology of human beings living in the state of nature, a precivil condition where anyone may do whatever he can to survive. Led by reason to seek means that will preserve their lives and secure their possessions, these individuals voluntarily enter into a covenant and transfer all their rights of self-defense to a sovereign. This sovereign, to fulfill such a role, should be all-powerful and have total control over the laws and institutions of the state. There are no freedoms other than those proclaimed by the sovereign.

Hobbes is concerned about the place of religion in the commonwealth he describes. This is because ecclesiastic institutions so often constitute a second (and allegedly higher) locus of power and loyalty in a state and thus threaten the unity that is essential to its survival. If the state is to enjoy both internal peace and a common defense against external enemies, there can be one and only one sovereign, and its authority must be absolute. There is therefore to be a "consolidation" of political and religious power in the civil sovereign.

> There are Christians in the dominions of several princes and states, but every one of them is subject to that commonwealth whereof he is himself a member, and consequently cannot be subject to the commands of any other person. . . . Temporal and spiritual government are but two words brought into the world to make men see double and mistake their lawful sovereign. It is true that the bodies of the faithful, after the resurrection, shall be not only spiritual, but eternal; but in this life they are gross and corruptible. There is, therefore, no other government in this life, neither of state nor religion, but temporal; nor teaching of any doctrine, lawful to any subject, which the governor, both of the state and of the religion, forbiddeth to be taught. And that governor must be one, or else there must needs follow faction and civil war in the commonwealth: between the Church and State . . . between the sword of justice and the shield of faith.

The monarch's authority extends to religion within his domain, and he is to function as chief pastor to all citizens; he controls the outward practices of religion and the doctrines proclaimed to be faith. He owes fealty to no other authority, not even the pope. The alternative can lead only to divided loyalties and "great troubles."

Hobbes makes his case at great length, by considering both the grounds of political obligation and the roots of religion in human psychology. In this and other respects, *Leviathan* very closely resembles Spinoza's *Treatise*. The Englishman, like his Dutch counterpart, investigates the nature of prophecy and the truth about miracles, and he takes on the ever dangerous question of the status and interpretation of Scripture. His views on many issues are, from the perspective of a seventeenth-century divine and the loyal members of his congregation, highly unorthodox, even blasphemous. A materialist about nature and human beings, Hobbes goes so far as to deny that there can be such a thing as an "incorporeal substance," thereby ruling out not only incorporeal human souls but also an incorporeal God. Hobbes's tone is often mocking, and he clearly does not have much respect for sectarian religions, especially Catholicism. Part Four of the book, titled "The Kingdom of Darkness," is not about the otherworldly domain of Lucifer but the realm of

ecclesiastics in this life, "a confederacy of deceivers that, to obtain dominion over men in this present world, endeavor by dark and erroneous doctrines to extinguish within them the light, both of nature and of the gospel, and so to disprepare them for the kingdom of God to come."

It is no wonder that so many of the attacks against Spinoza's *Treatise* also saw fit to include Hobbes's theological-political masterpiece among recent publications that should be seized and banned. As for Hobbes's own response to the *Treatise*, it is very telling. His early biographer tells us that he, the author of what is undeniably an extraordinarily bold book, was himself taken aback by Spinoza's audacity. The author of the *Treatise*, he said, "had outthrown him a bar's length, for he durst not write so boldly."

Spinoza clearly read *Leviathan* (although it would had to have been the Dutch or Latin translation), as well as De la Court's *On the Interest of Holland*. What he found in these works certainly inspired him and contributed to this thinking about the state, his view of religion, and his opinion of what needed to be done about clerical meddling in political affairs.

Spinoza does not begin the *Theological-Political Treatise* by directly addressing the theological-political question. But what he does have to say in the early chapters about a number of theological, religious, and historical matters lays the groundwork for his eventual conclusions about the proper relationship between political sovereignty and ecclesiastic power in the modern state.

The *Treatise* opens with a brief natural history of religion and an account of the psychology of traditional theism. Religion as we know it, Spinoza argues in the work's preface, is nothing more than organized superstition. Power-hungry ecclesiastics prey on the naïveté of citizens, taking advantage of their hopes and fears in the face of the vicissitudes of nature and the unpredictability of fortune to gain control over their beliefs and their daily lives. The preface of the *Treatise* both makes clear Spinoza's contempt for sectarian religions and opens the way for his reductive and naturalistic explanations of central doctrinal and historical elements of the Judeo-Christian traditions.

As we shall see, Spinoza begins his attack by targeting standard religious ways of thinking about prophecy, miracles, God's "election" of the Jewish people, and, above all, the Bible. The ancient prophets, Spinoza insists, were not especially learned or gifted individuals, and certainly not philosophers; rather, they were nothing more than charismatic figures with particularly vivid imaginations who were capable of inspiring others with their moral messages. And miracles, understood as supernatural divine interventions, are, strictly speaking, impossible. Every event has a natural cause and explanation, and the laws of nature, as the supreme expression of God's attributes, cannot possibly admit of any exceptions; the belief in true miracles is grounded in ignorance, not piety. As to the divine "vocation" of the Jews, Spinoza claims that it consists not in any special metaphysical or moral endowment but rather in an extended period of wise political organization and good fortune.

Perhaps Spinoza's boldest, most influential, and (to his contemporaries) most shocking conclusion in the *Treatise* is that Holy Scripture is, in fact, a work of human literature. It is not, therefore, necessarily a source of truth, although it is a useful tool for motivating obedience to

God—that is, for leading the masses to moral behavior. Spinoza will go on to conclude that we therefore need to examine the Bible anew and find within it the doctrine of the "true religion," namely, the very basic moral imperative that we love others and live by justice and charity. Only then will we be able to delimit exactly what we need to do to show proper respect for God and obtain blessedness.

Spinoza believes that his analyses will contribute to undermining both the practical ability of religious authorities to control our emotional, intellectual, and physical lives and the theoretical justifications they employ for doing so. The lessons of the *Treatise*, if given a fair hearing and taken to heart by the leaders of the Republic, will also, in his view, pave the way for reinstating a proper and healthy relationship between the state and religion and thus create an environment conducive to the individual pursuit of virtue and well-being.

Spinoza may have had to put the *Ethics* aside in order to compose the *Treatise*, but this does not mean that he abandoned, even temporarily, that work's metaphysical and moral concerns. If there is one theme that runs throughout *all* of Spinoza's writings, it is the liberation from bondage, whether psychological, political, or religious. The *Treatise* and the *Ethics* are part of the same overall philosophical and political project: to liberate the minds of individuals from superstition and the lives of citizens from ecclesiastic authority. His goal is a tolerant democratic society of individuals whose deeds are guided by the true (moral) religion.

Both works are devoted to the pursuit of freedom, understood as autonomy or self-government. In the case of the *Ethics*, it is freedom from irrational passions such as hope and fear and the superstitious beliefs and actions to which they give rise. As one moves toward a condition of greater rationality, toward an adequate understanding of nature and one's place in it, the power of the passive affects diminishes and one becomes a more autonomous individual. What one does results less from the random way that external things happen to affect one and more from one's grasp of the truth about the world. The free individual described in the *Ethics* acts from knowledge, not emotion.

The *Treatise* is an extended plea for freedom in the civic realm: freedom of thought and expression, and especially freedom of philosophizing and freedom of religion (at least to the extent that it does not involve public activities). These latter two freedoms are most definitely not to be confused with each other: one regards the pursuit of truth, the other is about encouraging moral behavior. The argument of the *Treatise* proceeds by undermining the various means used by religious authorities to control people's minds and actions and to usurp power in the state.

The *Ethics* and the *Treatise* thus complement each other. To the extent that a person becomes more free as an individual and more rational in his beliefs, the less likely he is to fall prey to superstition and indenture himself to religious sectarians. And the more a state is liberated from ecclesiastic influence and governed by liberal democratic principles, the more freedom there will be for citizens to engage in philosophy and discover the truths that will liberate their minds. Both the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*, in working together to make this case, offer a profound critique of religion: the former from a theological, political, and historical perspective, the latter from a metaphysical and moral one.

Because the two works were composed around the same time—after completing the *Treatise* Spinoza went back to working on the *Ethics*—it is not surprising to find the doctrines of each reflected in the other. The political propositions in Part Four of the *Ethics*, for example, constitute a truncated version of the account of the state in the *Treatise*; it is unlikely that these propositions would have been formulated as they are without Spinoza in the interim having read Hobbes and written the *Treatise*. On the other hand, Spinoza's conception of God in the *Ethics* informs his explanation of divine providence in the *Treatise*: "God's decrees and commandments, and consequently God's providence, are in truth nothing but Nature's order." The *Treatise*, in effect, draws out the theological, religious, and political implications of what the *Ethics* has established about God, nature, the human being, and society. What Spinoza wants to see is a politics of hope (for eternal reward) and fear (of eternal punishment) replaced by a politics of reason, virtue, freedom, and moral behavior. The *Treatise* and the *Ethics* each makes its own particular contribution to this goal.

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Unlike the cool and detached tone of the *Ethics*, however, the *Treatise* is a very passionate, even angry work. One cannot help but notice a zeal and an urgency subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) running through its chapters. This is because the *Treatise* is a response to recent developments that both touched him personally and, in his eyes at least, represented an ominous sign of deterioration in the Dutch Republic's commitment to its own fundamental principles. Dark clouds were forming on the political horizon in late 1665, and things would soon get much worse.

Chapter 4

Gods and Prophets

The Wars of Religion that ravaged Europe in the aftermath of the Reformation may have been over by the middle of the seventeenth century, at least according to signed treaties and various social-political accommodations, but their repercussions extended for many more decades. Political rivalries among the superpowers of the period—especially France, England, Spain, and the Netherlands—were stoked by religious differences, and vice versa. It seems that the only thing Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists agreed on was that the real threat to society and the souls of its members lay in "godless" works such as Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

To the charge that he was an irreligious man, a dangerous atheist whose goal was to subvert piety and morality, Spinoza believed he had a ready philosophical response. Like the *Ethics*, the *Treatise* is a defense of what Spinoza considers "true religion." As we shall see, this turns out to be a simple code of moral behavior accompanied by an understanding of what constitutes the best condition for a human being and how to achieve it. However, rather than rigorously establishing by geometric demonstration the metaphysical, cognitive, and ethical grounds of authentic piety (the love of God), as he does in the *Ethics*, Spinoza approaches the issue in the *Treatise* by considering in a critical manner what passes for religion among his contemporaries. His focus is especially on the major organized religious traditions that seem to have been a source not of peace and happiness but of strife and misery throughout history (and especially in early modern Europe). Thus, more so than the *Ethics*, the *Treatise* is a polemical work that addresses the historical, psychological, textual, and political foundations of traditional or popular religion.

The religions that Spinoza is primarily interested in, of course, are Christianity and Judaism, two of three major Abrahamic traditions. Since the final expulsion of the Muslims from Spain in the fifteenth century, Christianity governed the spiritual (not to mention the worldly) life of Western Europe. And while Jews were still officially banned from many European countries for most of the seventeenth century (including England, France, and Spain), significant Jewish communities existed in Italy, the Netherlands, and the German lands, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe. These traditions, he explains in the preface to the *Treatise*, where he offers a brief natural history of religion, are basically nothing but organized superstition. They are grounded not in reason but in ignorance and the emotions—in particular, the passions of hope and fear.

A particular feature of life for human beings in this world that has been consistently remarked upon by philosophers and poets since antiquity is the role that fortune plays in our happiness. We do not have very much control over the conditions of our existence, and particularly whether various goods and evils come our way. It is generally not up to us whether we shall have prolonged enjoyment of the people to whom we are attached and the external things we value. Death quickly robs us of a loved one, while wealth or honor gained one day is easily lost the next. Moreover, the pursuit of the goals we set ourselves and hope to accomplish is often frustrated by circumstance. In short, the world poses innumerable and often unpredictable obstacles to our well-being, and the achievement of happiness and a good life is subject to good and bad fortune. Even if one should

be fortunate enough to obtain some degree of satisfaction, there is no guarantee that it will last. As the ancient Greek tragedians recognized, there is a good deal of luck in human flourishing.

As Spinoza sees it, our natural response in the face of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune is superstition. As long as things are going well, we are content to rely on our own resources; a person who is satisfied with his lot does not generally seek supernatural aid, or even the help of other mortals. "If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition." But once our hopes are dashed and our fears realized, as we are "reduced to such straits as to be without any resource," we quickly turn to certain modes of behavior calculated to reverse the course of events and make things go our way again.

When fortune smiles at them, the majority of men, even if quite unversed in affairs, are so abounding in wisdom that any advice offered to them is regarded as an affront, whereas in adversity they know not where to turn, begging for advice from any quarter; and then there is no counsel so foolish, absurd or vain which they will not follow.

To those down on their luck or afraid of what lies ahead, the most trivial occurrences will appear as harbingers of good or bad fortune, while unusual phenomena will be taken to reveal the beneficent or malevolent will of the deities. "They read extraordinary things into Nature as if the whole of Nature were a partner in their madness." The course of events as directed by hidden powers appears to such individuals as something that they can, with a little effort, manipulate, and they will even regard it as pious to do so. They thus offer sacrifices to avert impending disaster and make vows that they hope will bring back whatever goods they have lost. As Spinoza says, "fear . . . engenders, preserves and fosters superstition" and is the origin of "spurious religious reverence."

But fear and hope are very unstable emotions. Thus, the superstitions grounded in them are inconstant and variable. As soon as things start going well again, people will typically cease those practices they had believed would bring better circumstances in their train. Those who have the most to gain from the continuation of such superstitious practices—diviners, soothsayers, priests—therefore take great pains to stabilize them and give them some permanence. They do this primarily by exaggerating the importance of these activities and surrounding them with impressive and dignified ceremonies. This will ensure that, even when things are going well, people will continue to pay due respect to the gods and, more important, to their earthly ministers. The result is organized sectarian religion.

> This inconstancy [in superstitious practices] has been the cause of many terrible uprisings and wars, for . . . "the multitude has no rule more potent than superstition." So it is readily induced, under the guise of religion, now to worship its rulers as gods, and then again to curse and condemn them as mankind's common bane. To counteract this unfortunate tendency, immense efforts have been made to invest religion, true or false, with such pomp and ceremony that it can sustain any shock and constantly evoke the deepest reverence in all its worshippers.

For the adherents of these codified superstitions, life is a state of "bondage," coerced obedience in body and in mind. They live in a state of "deception" and are prevented (sometimes by force) from exercising free judgment. True worship has been replaced by flattery of God, the pursuit of knowledge by servitude to false dogma, and freedom of thought and action by persecution of heterodoxy and nonbelievers. "Piety and religion . . . take the form of ridiculous mysteries, and men who utterly despise reason, who reject and turn away from the intellect as naturally corrupt—these are the men (and this is of all things the most iniquitous) who are believed to possess the divine light!" Spinoza concludes that if these self-appointed guardians of piety "possessed but a spark of the divine light, they would not indulge in such arrogant ravings, but would study to worship God more wisely and to surpass their fellows in love, as they now do in hate."

To those of his contemporaries who were already familiar with Hobbes's description of the origins of religion in his *Leviathan*, Spinoza's account in the *Treatise* would sound very familiar (which no doubt explains why the two works were so often condemned in the same breath by ecclesiastic authorities). Like Spinoza, Hobbes locates the motivation toward religious devotion in irrational human emotions—above all, "anxiety," or fear and hope in the face of uncertainty about the future—as well as in ignorance of the true causes of things. The superstitious beliefs and practices to which these passions give rise are easily manipulated by secular and sectarian leaders for the sake of "keeping the people in obedience and peace." Indeed, as Hobbes sees it, the credulity of the masses is extremely useful for political authorities, who prefer to see their subjects occupied by religious obligations. This keeps them distracted from political affairs and unable to engage in too close an examination of the governance of the state. The ancient Romans, for example, knew well that "by these [ceremonies, supplications, sacrifices, and festivals, by which they were to believe the anger of the gods might be appeased] and such other institutions," rulers can ensure that "the common people in their misfortunes, laying the fault on neglect or error in their ceremonies, or on their own disobedience to the laws, were the less apt to mutiny against their governors. And being entertained with the pomp and pastime of festivals and public games, made in honor of the gods, need nothing else but bread to keep them from discontent, murmuring, and commotion against the state."

While Hobbes's most critical remarks are reserved for Roman Catholicism—he examines its structures and ceremonies in Part Four of *Leviathan*, provocatively titled "The Kingdom of Darkness"—he clearly has no more respect for organized religion in general than does Spinoza.

In Spinoza's account, behind the major organized religions lies a certain convenient but ultimately irreverent and harmful conception of God. The superstitious rites and ceremonies of Judaism and Christianity, calculated to win God's favor and avoid his wrath, rest on the false assumption that God is very much a rational agent, endowed as we are with a psychological life and moral character. God is, in other words, supposed to be a kind of person, possessed of intelligence, will, desire, and even emotion. The Judeo-Christian deity is a wise and just God, a transcendent providential being who has purposes and expectations, makes commands and judgments, and is capable of great acts of mercy and vengeance.

It is precisely this traditional religious picture of God that Spinoza elsewhere rejects as foolish anthropomorphism. In the *Ethics*, he inveighs against "those who feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions. But how far they wander from the true knowledge of God, is sufficiently established by what has already been demonstrated." Having established that Nature is an indivisible, infinite, uncaused, substantial whole—in fact, the *only* substantial whole; that outside of Nature there is nothing; and that everything that exists is a part of Nature and is brought into being by and within Nature with a deterministic necessity through Nature's laws, Spinoza concludes that God and Nature—the substantial, unique, unified, active, infinitely powerful, necessary cause of everything—are one and the same thing.

When Spinoza draws out the religious implications of this metaphysical theology in the subsequent propositions of the *Ethics*, it becomes clear that his *God or Nature* is totally unsuitable for the role that the Judeo-Christian deity is ordinarily called on to play. Because of the necessity inherent in Nature, there are no purposes for or within the universe, outside the projects that human beings may set for themselves. God or Nature does not act for any ends, and things within Nature are not created for the sake of anything. God or Nature does not *do* things to achieve any goals. The order of things just follows from God's (Nature's) attributes with necessity. All talk of God's intentions, preferences, or aims is just a pernicious fiction.

> All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God.
>
> God is not some goal-oriented planner who then judges things by how well they conform to his purposes. Things happen only because of Nature and its laws. "Nature has no end set before it. . . . All things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature." To believe otherwise is precisely what leads to those superstitions that are so easily manipulated by preachers and rabbis.
>
> [People] find—both in themselves and outside themselves—many means that are very helpful in seeking their own advantage, e.g., eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish. . . . Hence, they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use. And since they had never heard anything about the temperament of these rulers, they had to judge it from their own. Hence, they maintained that the Gods direct all things for the use of men in order to bind men to them and be held by men in the highest honor. So it has happened that each of

> them has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshipping God, so that God might love them above all the rest, and direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed. Thus this prejudice was changed into superstition, and struck deep roots in their minds.

In a letter to one of his more troublesome correspondents, a rather pietistic grain merchant and regent from Dordrecht named Willem van Blijenburgh, Spinoza emphasizes the absurdity of conceiving of God in this way. The language of traditional theology, he says, represents God "as a perfect man" and claims that "God desires something, that God is displeased with the deeds of the impious and pleased with those of the pious." In all philosophical rigor, however, "we clearly understand that to ascribe to God those attributes which make a man perfect would be as wrong as to ascribe to a man the attributes that make perfect an elephant or an ass." Some years later, in another letter, this time to Hugo Boxel, the former pensionary of Gorinchem, Spinoza turns to sarcasm to make his point:

> When you say that you do not see what sort of God I have if I deny him the actions of seeing, hearing, attending, willing, etc. and that he possesses those faculties in an eminent degree, I suspect that you believe that there is no greater perfection than can be explicated by the aforementioned attributes. I am not surprised, for I believe that a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God's nature is eminently circular.

A judging God who has plans and acts purposively is a God to be obeyed and placated. Spinoza's God, by contrast, is shorn of the anthropomorphic fantasies that, he insists, are unworthy of the kind of being God is. "This doctrine [which would have God act as humans act] takes away God's perfection." There is no comfort to be found in Spinoza's God. It is not a being to which one would turn in times of trouble, or to which one would pray for the satisfaction of one's hopes or the avoidance of what one fears.

This, at least, is the God of the *Ethics*. None of the early readers of the *Treatise* would have read the *Ethics* (there was no opportunity to do so until 1678, when it was posthumously published with Spinoza's other writings). And Spinoza is more cautious in the *Treatise* about revealing his considered philosophical view about God. He is prepared in this work to speak of God's will and providential care, of God doing things and having thoughts, plans, and preferences. However, as we shall see, these ways of speaking can be given a proper Spinozistic reading. The God of the *Ethics*—what Spinoza considers the true conception of God—does indeed inform the *Treatise* in many important and unmistakable ways. And Spinoza often makes this clear to the reader, even if he is, for the sake of accommodating his Christian audience, hesitant to proclaim it too loudly.

The organized religions that, in Spinoza's view, have brought so much trouble to society and so enslaved the minds of individuals are also grounded in a particular view of the source of religious knowledge and the communication of divine truths. Central to all faiths in the Abrahamic tradition is prophecy, or the idea that certain people are endowed with the special gift to receive

and pass on the word of God. Like the power of diviners and seers of pagan antiquity, this endowment is usually construed as the ability to access information not available to others or by ordinary means. The prophet may be someone who is the direct recipient of divine revelation, a beneficiary of angelic mediation, or simply an inspired interpreter of signs that God has placed before humankind. He may have a real foreknowledge of the future, or a less infallible but still reliable ability to predict what the outcome of events will be, based perhaps on special interpretive powers to read the significance of past and present states of affairs. Prophetic power may, on some accounts, be a supernatural gift or it may be grounded in natural faculties. The information can come to the prophet by way of visions or dreams, or (in the rarest instance) it might result from an unmediated encounter with God himself.

Among the prophets of Judaism, only Moses is supposed to have spoken directly to God, face to face; the other prophets received their prophecies in visions or dreams, through images or voices. According to Islamic tradition, Mohammed's initial revelation came through the archangel Gabriel. In Christianity, Jesus' possession of prophetic powers is regarded as unique because he, while human, is to be identified with God. Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed were each charged with bringing the supreme law from God to the people, while other prophets served as interpreters of those principles, foretold the rewards that come from its observance, and issued warnings of the doom that follows disobedience. Thus, Ezekiel, speaking on behalf of God, proclaims that the kingdom of Judah will suffer for its "rebellious ways" and "abominable deeds," and particularly for the idolatry that its people, like their ancestors, continue to practice. He predicts the certain downfall of Jerusalem and the exile of the Israelites from the land, a fact accomplished by the Babylonians in 586 BCE:

> These are the words of the Lord God: Are you defiling yourselves as your forefathers did? Are you wantonly giving yourselves to their loathsome gods? . . . I will pass you under the rod and bring you within the bond of the covenant. I will rid you of those who revolt and rebel against me. I will take them out of the land where they are now living, but they shall not set foot on the soil of Israel. Thus shall you know that I am the Lord. (Ezekiel 20.30–38)

The prophet tells the people of God's anger and the harsh punishment that is coming their way.

> These are the words of the Lord: I am against you; I will draw my sword from the scabbard and cut off from you both righteous and wicked. It is because I would cut off your righteous and your wicked equally that my sword will be drawn from the scabbard against all men, from the Negev northwards. All men shall know that I the Lord have drawn my sword; it shall never again be sheathed. Groan in their presence, man, groan bitterly until your lungs are bursting. (Ezekiel 21.3–6)

Ezekiel reminds the children of Israel, however, that God is merciful and faithful to his covenant. He foresees that they will return to the land and that the city of Jerusalem will be restored and the Temple rebuilt.

A prophet, then, has a kind of wisdom. He knows many things of great importance for the flourishing of those to whom he is speaking, and one disregards him at great risk. His words should

be heeded because what he says is reliable and relevant. But what exactly is the nature of that wisdom? Is the prophet a philosopher? Does he have theological knowledge about the nature of God? Does he have scientific understanding of the cosmos and of the natural world? Is he an authority on human nature and an expert in politics and history? In short, what kind of truths, if any, does a prophet convey in his prophecies?

These are precisely the questions that Spinoza addresses in the opening chapters of the *Treatise*. While they are also dealt with by many medieval and early modern thinkers, there is one earlier philosopher who is of particular importance for Spinoza's discussion of prophecy. Spinoza clearly intends his analysis to be a direct critique of the view of Maimonides, the twelfth-century rabbi and physician and the author of perhaps the most important work in the history of Jewish philosophy, the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Spinoza was greatly influenced by Maimonides in many ways: his metaphysics, his philosophical theology, and his moral philosophy all reflect a close reading of the *Guide* and other writings. Sometimes what Spinoza has to say—in the *Ethics*, for example, about the relationship between virtue, reason, and happiness, or about the connection between knowledge and immortality—seems like a logical, if radical, extension of Maimonides' own intellectualist views. On other occasions, Spinoza turns Maimonides' account on its head and uses it to attack his Jewish rationalist forbear and the philosophically (if not religiously) more conventional position he represents; this is the case with Spinoza's discussion of prophecy in the *Treatise*.

In the *Guide*, Maimonides insists that there are several conditions that must obtain before an individual becomes a prophet. First, he must be in good physical condition, enjoying a "perfection of his bodily faculties"; this is both because an infirm body and a disruptive temperament will cause too many distractions from the life of the mind and because the imagination, which is central to prophecy as Maimonides understands it, is a part of the body (namely, the brain). Second, he must have perfected his moral character and attained a high state of virtue; a wicked or even an imperfectly ethical person can never be a prophet. A prophet must be a moral paragon and be able to lead others toward goodness. He must show the requisite "renunciation of and contempt for bodily pleasures." Indeed, one sure way of determining that a person is, despite his pretensions, *not* a prophet is if he does not lead an ethically austere life, if he is easy prey for worldly temptations.

Possession of the best temperament and bodily constitution and supreme moral virtue, however, are not sufficient to make one a prophet. If they were, then prophecy would be a relatively easy and, in principle, widespread phenomenon. Two further conditions are necessary:

> Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consist in its being an overflow from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate term of perfection for the imaginative faculty. This is something that cannot by any means exist in every man. And it is not something that may be attained solely through perfection in the speculative sciences and through improvement of moral habits, even if all of them have become as fine and good as can be. There still is needed in

> addition the highest possible degree of perfection of the imaginative faculty in respect of its original disposition.

A person of fine body and outstanding morality becomes a prophet only when he also reaches perfection in his intellect and his imagination. He perfects (or "actualizes") his intellect through the pursuit of "knowledge and wisdom"—that is, science and philosophy. In acquiring "a perfect and accomplished human intellect," this individual has connected with and comes to enjoy the intellectual bounty that overflows from God, who is the supreme intellect of the universe. The speculative knowledge belonging to the Creator now reaches his rational faculty. If this is where it ended, if the overflow went only so far as the rational faculty, then such a person, with his perfected intellect, would belong to "the class of men of science engaged in speculation"—that is, he would be a philosopher.

However, if this individual is also perfect in his imagination, which is therefore capable in turn of receiving the overflow from the rational faculty, then he is endowed with the ability to prophesize. Prophecy itself occurs when the senses are at rest and the onrush of material from the external world is quieted. This allows the imagination to receive the overflow from the rational faculty and rework its content and translate it into images. The result is visions and "veridical dreams" informed by the speculative knowledge of the overflow.

> Now there is no doubt that whenever—in an individual of this description—his imaginative faculty, which is as perfect as possible, acts and receives from the intellect an overflow corresponding to his speculative perfection, this individual will only apprehend divine and most extraordinary matters, will see only God and His angels, and will only be aware and achieve knowledge of matters that constitute true opinions and general directives for the well-being of men in their relations with one another.

A prophet, in other words, is someone who knows everything that the philosopher knows but grasps it by way of concrete images. (The only exception to this is Moses, who communicated with God directly and not by means of images.) He also has the additional skill of being able to communicate such matters to others in the more accessible form of imaginative narratives (such as parables), rather than in abstract theories.

> The case in which the intellectual overflow overflows only toward the rational faculty and does not overflow at all toward the imaginative faculty—either because of the scantiness of what overflows or because of some deficiency existing in the imaginative faculty in its natural disposition, a deficiency that makes it impossible for it to receive the overflow of the intellect—is characteristic of the class of men engaged in speculation. If, on the other hand, this overflow reaches both faculties—I mean both the rational and the imaginative . . . and if the imaginative faculty is in a state of ultimate perfection owing to its natural disposition, this is characteristic of the class of prophets.

The role that the imagination plays actually gives the prophet an advantage over the philosopher. Because of the imaginative way in which he receives the content of the overflow,

through dreams and visions, he perceives things that the more abstract and theoretically inclined philosopher does not. He can see "what will happen and [apprehend] those future events as if they were things that had been perceived by the senses." The imagination allows the prophet to grasp connections between things that the philosopher might miss, "for all things bear witness to one another and indicate one another," although in ways not always perspicuous to, or as quickly grasped by, the merely speculative individual.

Maimonides' prophet is therefore, no less than the philosopher, a conveyer of truths: moral truths intended to improve our characters, but also "speculative" metaphysical, theological, and scientific truths intended to improve us intellectually. He communicates both practical principles for our personal and social well-being and "correct opinions" that are philosophically demonstrable. The prophet can tell us how we ought to behave, but also what we ought to believe—about God, the universe, and ourselves.

Moreover, like the philosopher's wisdom, the prophet's visionary skill is a natural outgrowth of the development or perfection of his native faculties. Or, as Maimonides puts it, "prophecy is a certain perfection in the nature of man." Maimonides thus naturalizes the phenomenon of prophecy. A person is not chosen arbitrarily or even deliberately by God to prophesize. There is no supernatural act, gratuitous or otherwise, by which God confers prophecy on an individual. Maimonides explicitly rejects the view that "God, may He be exalted, chooses whom He wishes from among men, turns him into a prophet, and sends him with a mission," regardless of how well or ill prepared he may be for this vocation. For Maimonides, a person becomes a prophet through his own endeavors, working on whatever gifts in his material and spiritual faculties he may have from nature.

In the *Treatise*, Spinoza is deeply concerned to combat this notion of the prophet-philosopher. One of the goals of the work is to secure the separation of the domains of religion and philosophy so that philosophers might be free to pursue secular wisdom unimpeded by ecclesiastic authority. In Spinoza's view, philosophical truth and religious faith have nothing in common with one another, and one must not serve as the rule of the other. Philosophy should not have to answer to religion, no more than religion should have to be consistent with any philosophical system.

However, to the extent that Maimonides is correct in his account of prophecy—and his analysis of the role of the intellect and the imagination is found among other medieval philosophers—the content of prophecy *is*, at least in part, philosophical. The philosopher and the prophet, in Maimonides's view, both convey truths—indeed, the *same* truths. And because one truth necessarily coheres with other truths, philosophy and prophecy must, when properly understood, always be consistent. For Maimonides, philosophical truth and revealed truth will never clash. Thus, prophetic texts must be read in such a way that they do not contradict a demonstrated philosophical principle. In turn, the philosopher must always respect the products of revelation, although the prophets' words may sometimes have to be read figuratively if a literal reading goes against an established philosophical truth.

To achieve his aim, then, Spinoza needs to show that there is a substantive (and not just presentational) difference between the information conveyed by revelation or prophecy and the knowledge which is the product of philosophy.

There is one very important point on which Spinoza agrees with Maimonides, and he uses it to his own polemical advantage. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza argues, were indeed, as Maimonides says, men of great imagination. They were not, however, philosophers, or even very learned. They did not have training in the speculative sciences; in fact, many of them were uneducated. For this reason, their pronouncements should not be regarded as sources of theological, philosophical, scientific, or historical truth. The goal of Spinoza's discussion of prophecy, then, is to downgrade its epistemological status, particularly in relationship to philosophy and science. Revelation, as portrayed in the Bible, while it has a very important social and political function to play, is not a source of truth.

Spinoza defines "prophecy or revelation" as "the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man." On the face of it, this seems perfectly traditional, although somewhat puzzling for anyone acquainted with Spinoza's philosophical and religious project. Spinoza's rigorous naturalism will not allow for any supernatural facts. Whatever happens, happens in and through Nature. Thus, any knowledge that comes to a person must come in an entirely natural way; there are and can be no exceptions to this. In Spinoza's system there is no transcendent God exercising supernatural, ad hoc communications. There is room for divine revelation, but only in a very particular sense. Because for Spinoza God is identical with Nature, and all human knowledge is natural, it follows that all human knowledge is also divine. If God is Nature understood as the active, substantial cause of all things, then whatever is brought about by Nature and its laws is, by definition, brought about by God. The human mind being as much a part of Nature as anything else is, its cognitive states all follow ultimately from "God or Nature." "Prophetic knowledge is usually taken to exclude natural knowledge. Nevertheless, the latter has as much right as any other kind of knowledge to be called divine, since it is dictated to us, as it were, by God's nature insofar as we participate therein, and by God's decrees."

Moreover, the highest form of knowledge available to human beings is what Spinoza, in the *Ethics*, calls "the third kind of knowledge." This is an intuitive grasp of the essences of things, a deep causal understanding that situates them in their necessary relationships to each other and, more important, to higher, universal principles. "This kind of knowing proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things." In the third kind of knowledge, one grasps the nature of a thing or an event in such a way that one sees why it is as it is and could not possibly have been otherwise. But the universal causal principles of Nature just are God's (or Nature's) attributes of Extension (for physical things and their states) and Thought (for minds and their ideas). When a person connects the idea of a thing with the idea of the relevant attribute of God—when his idea of a body, for example, is properly cognitively situated with respect to the idea of the nature of extension and the laws of motion and rest—he has a thoroughly adequate knowledge of that thing. God's nature thus makes possible human knowledge because its concept serves as the foundation of our ultimate understanding of things. "Natural knowledge can be called prophecy"—that is, it can be called divine revelation—"for the knowledge that we acquire by the natural light of reason depends solely on knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees." Only when we have knowledge of God or Nature do we truly have knowledge.

When "prophecy" or "divine revelation" is correctly understood in this broad sense, as whatever knowledge causally and cognitively depends on God, then it includes natural knowledge. More specifically, it includes philosophy and science, as well as other products of the intellect, and is therefore "common to all men." And while God is, in these ways, the ultimate cause of true knowledge, the proximate cause or the subject to which human knowledge immediately belongs is always a natural one: the human mind itself.

> Since, then, the human mind contains the nature of God within itself in concept, and partakes thereof, and is thereby enabled to form certain basic ideas that explain natural phenomena and inculcate morality, we are justified in asserting that the nature of mind, insofar as it is thus conceived, is the primary cause of divine revelation. For as I have just pointed out, all that we clearly and distinctly understand is dictated to us by the idea and nature of God—not indeed in words, but in a far superior way and one that agrees excellently with the nature of mind, as everyone who has tasted intellectual certainty has doubtless experienced in his own case.

As Spinoza says, however, his aim in the *Treatise* is not to examine the nature of prophecy properly understood—something that, it might be said, he does in the *Ethics*—but to consider prophecy as it is portrayed and proclaimed in Scripture, the primary source of latter-day ecclesiastic authority and, consequently, of religious meddling in political affairs. And in Scripture, a very different picture of prophecy emerges, one that represents it as an affair not of the intellect but of the imagination.

Spinoza notes that all prophecy in the Hebrew Bible occurs by way of words or images. The prophets hear voices and behold flashes of light; they confront talking animals and angels bearing swords; some even apprehend God in bodily form. Of course, not all the sights and sounds perceived by the prophets are real. According to tradition, only Moses heard real words from God. By contrast, Spinoza explains, the voice of God perceived by Samuel, Avimelech, Joshua, and others was illusory; it occurred either in a dream or in a vision. What he believes this shows, then, is that, according to Scripture, prophecy came not through the intellect but through the imagination, since that is the human faculty responsible for the visual and auditory phenomena in unreal dreams and visions. "Hence it was not a more perfect mind that was needed for the gift of prophecy, but a more lively imaginative faculty."

The fact that biblical prophecy is a function of the prophet's imagination accounts for both the way in which the prophet apprehends the divine message and the narrative form in which he communicates it to others. Unlike the philosopher, whose material is intellectual and abstract and can be formulated in demonstrated propositions, the prophet receives and works with concrete appearances. "We shall no longer wonder why Scripture, or the prophets, speak so strangely or obscurely of the Spirit, or mind, of God . . . and again, why God was seen by Micaiah as seated, by Daniel as an old man clothed in white garments, by Ezekiel as fire." What the prophet sees are visions, and the insights that he gleans from those visions are, in turn, passed on through parables and allegories. Such imaginative stories, while they may be an obstacle to intellectual understanding, are naturally suited for the products of the prophetic faculty and, just as important, for the prophet's audience.

Indeed, Spinoza insists, contrary to Maimonides, the intellect has nothing whatsoever to contribute to biblical prophecy. The prophets were not particularly learned individuals. They were usually simple men from common, even lowly backgrounds. They did not have philosophical wisdom, theological training, or scientific knowledge, and therefore they are not necessarily to be believed when they pronounce on such topics. Prophecy as Spinoza sees it is not a cognitive discipline. If, as Spinoza says, "the gift of prophecy did not render the prophets more learned," it is also true that listening to a prophet will not make one any more intelligent.

This is, in part, because prophecy is a highly subjective affair. It is an individualistic product shaped by both nature and nurture. What a prophet says on this or that matter, how the message is rendered by his imagination, and what kind of vision or dream he has are a function of the prophet's native faculties and his upbringing. It all depends on the life he leads, the ideas that occupy his mind, the social status he holds, even his manner of speaking, his temperament, and his emotional condition. The visions of a prophet who comes from the countryside will contain images of oxen and cows, while a more urbane individual will have a prophetic experience with very different content. And there is no reason why the preconceptions that inform and shape a prophet's revelation, like the beliefs acquired by anyone over the course of a lifetime, should necessarily be true. "I shall show . . . that prophecies or revelations also varied in accordance with the ingrained beliefs of the prophets, and that the prophets held various, even contrary beliefs, and various prejudices." Since Joshua was no astronomer, he believed that the earth does not move and that the sun goes around the earth. Thus, when he saw the daylight lasting longer than usual during a battle, rather than attributing this to various meteorological phenomena he simply proclaimed that the sun stood still in the sky:

> If a prophet was of a cheerful disposition, then victories, peace and other joyful events were revealed to him; for it is on things of this kind that the imagination of such people dwells. If he was of a gloomy disposition, then wars, massacres and all kinds of calamities were revealed to him. And just as a prophet might be merciful, gentle, wrathful, stern and so forth, so he was more fitted for a particular kind of revelation.

Spinoza admits that the fact that prophets were not learned does not mean that they were undistinguished from other individuals. On the contrary, while they may not have had perfected intellects (as Maimonides had claimed), their supremely vivid imaginations were, as Maimonides said, rather extraordinary. Spinoza also shares Maimonides' view that the prophet's imaginative abilities give him something of an advantage over the philosopher. "Since the prophets perceived the revelations of God with the aid of the imaginative faculty, they may doubtless have perceived much that is beyond the limits of the intellect." In the *Ethics*, Spinoza generally denigrates the epistemological value of the imagination in favor of the intellect. The ideas of the imagination, like those of the senses, are not a source of adequate knowledge, and serve mainly to foster the passions. Nothing Spinoza says in the *Treatise* challenges this position. But he does grant that the strength of the prophet's imagination confers on him remarkable, if short-lived, perspicuity. The prophet has a certain quickness of insight, an intuitive ability to envision the ramifications of things that is not available to the person guided solely by the rational intellect and limited to only logical tools. "Many more ideas can be constructed from words and images than merely from the

principles and axioms on which our entire natural knowledge is based." The prophet, because of the strength of his imagination, is a very perceptive person. He may not have the learning and deep metaphysical understanding of the philosophical sage, and he may never be able to achieve the condition of rational virtue and true *eudaimonia* of the intellectually perfected individual, but sometimes he can see things—practical things—that the latter cannot. Spinoza does not elaborate on this particular gift of the prophet, but what he appears to have in mind is the fact that sometimes people who work with images and concrete ideas have a quickness of mind and depth of insight into ethical situations that the more abstract thinker lacks. Perhaps the prophet, with his practical judgment enhanced by the imagination, is better able than an intellectual to size up a concrete situation, or to see how a general principle is to be applied in particular case.

More important—and Spinoza and Maimonides are in agreement about this as well—the prophets were ethically superior people. The prophets of Hebrew Scripture had a finely honed sense of right and wrong and a keen understanding of practical matters. "The minds of prophets were directed exclusively toward what was right and good . . . they won praise and repute not so much for sublimity and pre-eminence of intellect as for piety and faithfulness." The prophets were better able than most people to resist the temptations of sensual pleasures and concerned above all with righteous action. They thus have important lessons to impart about charity and justice. If the parables of the prophets are of any value—and Spinoza agrees that they are—it is because of the moral message they convey so effectively. The prophets, with their virtuous characters and creative narrative gifts, were thus particularly good ethical teachers. As we shall see, Spinoza insists that if there is a common theme—a "divine message"—running throughout the Bible's prophetic writings, it is a very simple one: Love your neighbor. On this point, and this point alone, the prophets should be obeyed. The practical path to virtue provided by the prophetic writings may not be as exalted and transformative as the intellectual one offered by philosophy, but for most people it is the best one available.

The ancient Israelites recognized the imaginative talent and moral superiority of the prophets, and accordingly elevated them above ordinary human beings. But, according to Spinoza, because they could not find a way to explain through natural means how these individuals could be so virtuous and so perceptive, they attributed the prophets' powers to divine—that is, supernatural—inspiration. "Whatever the Jews did not understand, being at that time ignorant of its natural causes, was referred to God." Like unusual works of nature ("called works of God") and unusually strong men ("called sons of God"), so the prophets, who surpassed other human beings in certain ways and whose powers "evoked wonder" among the people, were said to possess the spirit of God.

> The following Scriptural expressions are now quite clear: the Spirit of the Lord was upon a prophet, the Lord poured his Spirit into men, men were filled with the Spirit of God and with the Holy Spirit and so on. They mean merely this, that the prophets were endowed with an extraordinary virtue exceeding the normal, and that they devoted themselves to piety with especial constancy.

Although there is indeed something divine about their message, Spinoza wants to make it clear that the prophets did not literally receive some supernatural communication from an anthropomorphic deity such as the God that is portrayed in the Bible. This would be in keeping

neither with the true nature of God nor with the true basis of prophecy. Prophecy is a perfectly natural, if unusual, phenomenon and arises from the excellence of certain human faculties. Again, here we find Spinoza in agreement with Maimonides.

As great as the prophets were, however, and as important a role as their writings may play in society and history—and, as Spinoza will explain, they do play a very important role—it remains the case that from an intellectual point of view they were inferior individuals. It is not just that they happened not to be as wise or as learned as philosophers. Rather, their prophesizing abilities rendered them constitutionally unsuited for the rational pursuit of knowledge. In this regard, they fell below the human norm. In a prophet, the overly strong imagination gets in the way of the intellect. Its images interfere with the clear and distinct apprehension of adequate ideas. This is precisely what, in Spinoza's view, Maimonides got wrong. You cannot perfect *both* the intellect and the imagination. The improvement of one necessarily entails the weakening of the other. A strong intellect is an obstacle to imagination, and vice versa. "Those with a more powerful imagination are less fitted for purely intellectual activity, while those who devote themselves to the cultivation of their more powerful intellect, keep their imagination under greater control and restraint, and they hold it in rein, as it were, so that it should not invade the province of intellect."

As Spinoza sees it, the subjective, imaginative, variable, and non-cognitive character of prophecy has important consequences for the prophet's audience. The prophet's domain is highly circumscribed. His authority extends only to moral matters, to the way in which we pursue various goods, organize society, and treat other human beings.

> [The prophets] may well have been ignorant of matters that have no bearing on charity and moral conduct but concern philosophic speculation, and were in fact ignorant of them, holding conflicting beliefs. Therefore knowledge of science and of matters spiritual should by no means be expected of them. So we conclude that we must believe the prophets only with regard to the purpose and substance of the revelation; in all else one is free to believe as one will.

When the prophet speaks about justice and charity, he knows what he is talking about and should be heeded (although unlike the philosopher, he is incapable of providing demonstrations for these truths). On any other subject, he has no legitimate claim to obedience at all.

The *Treatise*'s opening chapters on prophecy go far toward achieving Spinoza's primary aim in the work: to demonstrate the independence of intellectual matters from religious affairs, and to defend the freedom to philosophize against political and religious encroachment. They beautifully set up the remaining elements of his case: the bold account of the origins of Scripture and the proper way to interpret it, the distinction between "true religion" and mere ceremonial observance, his reading of the lessons of Israelite history for the contemporary Dutch political scene, and his argument for broad toleration and state control over public religious practices. The prophetic writings—including Moses' Torah—are the core of Scripture and the source of its authority throughout the ages. By showing that their insights are strictly moral, and that their narratives are

the product of the imagination and not the intellect, Spinoza has crafted an important tool with which to undermine ecclesiastic control over people's public and private lives.

It is true that prophecy points a way toward what Spinoza understands as salvation—that is, toward virtue, happiness, and well-being in this world. Thus, the lessons of the prophets are of significant value. But they are directed primarily toward the masses, who—unlike the philosophically educated—are not capable of the more difficult intellectual path toward human flourishing. The more accessible and colorful narratives of the prophets will indeed help inspire people toward at least an external conformity to the demands of justice and charity. In this way, their worth is strictly practical. The end of the prophetic writings, Spinoza insists, is obedience: getting people to observe proper ethical behavior. That same behavior can, to be sure, find a deeper and more stable foundation in rational knowledge, in a grasp of certain philosophical truths about God, nature, and human beings—above all, just those truths that are found in the ordered propositions of the *Ethics*. But while such deep understanding is not to be found in the Bible's prophetic texts, neither is it necessary for the success of those texts in motivating good behavior. Sometimes a few good fictional stories are more effective than a host of rigorously demonstrated philosophical truths.

Chapter 5

Miracles

In 1714, on the occasion of his inauguration as professor of natural and mathematical philosophy at the University of Altdorf, Johann Heinrich Müller gave a lecture with the title "On Miracles." Müller defined a miracle as "a certain unusual operation . . . producing such an effect, whose cause cannot in any way be explained through the ordinary laws of nature, but rather is wholly contrary to them, and therefore requires that these necessarily be suspended for a time and that others be substituted in their place." He then goes on to investigate whether miracles, so defined, are possible, and in particular how the laws of motion might be suspended. He concludes that since the laws of nature are themselves freely instituted by God, such a suspension is "not absolutely impossible," and is in fact required in the light of God's absolute power, not to mention his liberty and wisdom. "No one," he says, "can be dubious as to the possibility of miracles." No one, that is, except Spinoza, "the most famous restorer and propagator of the myth whereby God is not distinct from the universe" and author of an "abominable hypothesis" on the topic of miracles.

There are many things that Spinoza says in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that offended religious sensibilities of the time. But nothing appeared to his contemporaries to have as far-reaching and (from a religious perspective) pernicious consequences as his discussion of miracles in chapter six of the work. As the historian Jonathan Israel has noted, "no other element of Spinoza's philosophy provoked as much consternation and outrage in his own time as his sweeping denial of miracles and the supernatural." If, as Spinoza claimed, there was no such thing as miracles, understood as divine interventions in the course of nature and human history, then it would seem to follow that divine providence is fatally undermined and Scripture's narratives of miraculous happenings are nothing but fairy tales. When Hobbes said after reading the *Treatise* that the author of the work "had outthrown him a bar's length, for he durst not write so boldly," what most likely so astounded the usually unflappable Englishman was Spinoza's account of miracles.

Philosophers of a progressive persuasion in the seventeenth century were committed to the new science of nature. For thinkers such as Galileo, Descartes, Huygens, Boyle, Newton, and others, explanations of natural phenomena in the physical realm were to be framed solely in terms of matter in motion. Gone were the "occult" powers of medieval Aristotelian Scholasticism, which explained phenomena by virtue of immaterial forms or qualities that inhabit and animate bodies and, like "little minds" (to quote Descartes, a harsh critic of the Scholastic system), were supposed to move them just as the human soul moves the human body. In the new philosophy, everything was explained in mechanistic terms, through the impact, conglomeration, and separation of material parts according to fixed laws of nature.

In the world of early modern mechanism, explanations of why things ordinarily come about make no appeal to an intelligent agent that, acting with a goal in mind, willfully directs them in a certain manner. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that phenomena result from some spontaneous generation out of nothing. For the mechanist—at least insofar as he is engaged in science—there are neither purposes nor randomness in nature. Rather, whatever happens, happens because of antecedent causes that necessitate their effects. For the proponents of the new science, nature behaves in lawlike ways; its processes are reduced to causal chains, each link of which is nothing but matter in motion or at rest. They believed that this framework, which could be captured with mathematical precision, made possible perspicuous and informative theories of natural phenomena, theories with real explanatory power and predictive utility.

Still, this was the seventeenth century—a period in which Christian nations went to war with each other over religious differences, people were thrown into prison (and sometimes burned at the stake) for heresy, and books were placed on the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books if they were deemed inconsistent with the dogmas of the faith. No philosophy of nature, no matter how progressive, could dispense entirely with the divine. Nature may operate through uniform material causes behaving with nomological necessity, but it was still God's creation. The world was not an independent, self-subsisting system of mechanistic agents devoid of providential oversight. There may not be mindlike forms or qualities intelligently directing the course of events from within nature—heavy bodies no longer "seek" their natural resting place at the earth's center—but early modern philosophers and scientists were not about to adopt the Epicurean model of a world generated and governed only by blind necessity.

Thus, Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* of 1637, claimed that the most general laws of physics that govern all bodily phenomena were themselves instituted by God when he created the world. We may not be able fully to penetrate the divine wisdom and understand in all cases why God has arranged things as he did. But Descartes was not willing to deny that such arrangements testify to divine providence and benevolence. Likewise, the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of the most brilliant minds of his time and a leading physicist in the mechanistic tradition, argued that the existence itself of the world can be explained only by God's wise and determinate choice of it as the best of all possible worlds, while Newton insisted that the way in which bodies behave according to natural laws is the best evidence of God's dominion. Indeed, Newton claimed, there is no better example of supernatural providence than the mathematically describable operation of the force of gravity. In the Age of Reason, God had as great a role to play in the regular course of nature as ever.

Still, God's creation of the world and ordinary concourse with its operations is one thing; his miraculous intervention is, at least to most philosophers of the period, quite another. Considerations about the divine will and providence need not make any significant difference in the way science is done. As Leibniz insisted, such metaphysical questions, while important for establishing the foundations of physics, were not a part of physics proper. But once the possibility of miracles is allowed, the necessity of nature is threatened and its lawlike regularity open (at least in principle) to exceptions. Conversely, the alleged necessity of nature threatens the possibility of any miraculous exceptions to its operations. There was a serious tension at the heart of early modern mechanism for its more pious proponents.

A miracle is typically understood to be a divinely caused event that contravenes or at least surpasses the natural order. Such a supernatural occurrence might be an explicit violation of the

laws of nature, such as a body being moved by God contrary to the laws of physics or suddenly transmogrified into another substance altogether. Thus, Scripture relates that God caused the waters of the Red Sea to part for the Israelites on the exodus from Egypt, Aaron's rod to turn into a serpent (Exodus 7.8–11), and the sun to cease its motion across the sky so that Joshua might have more time to take vengeance upon Israel's enemies (Joshua 10.12–15: "The sun stayed in mid-heaven and made no haste to set for almost a whole day"). Or, to use a distinction employed by some medieval thinkers, a miracle might be an event that, while itself not inconsistent with nature's laws, either occurs displaced from the natural order of things (the example given by Thomas Aquinas is a human being living again *after* having died), or is an extraordinary and statistically unusual event that nature *could* possibly explain but is in fact brought about not by the operation of natural causes but by God (for example, Daniel's emerging from the lions' den unscathed), or is a perfectly ordinary event that nature *does* usually do (such as healing the sick) but that in this rare case is explained by the divine power alone.

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For nearly all medieval and early modern philosophers, then, the metaphysical possibility of miracles is nonnegotiable. Whether out of sincere piety or from a desire not to run afoul of the theological faculties, Spinoza's predecessors and contemporaries were not willing to rule out, at least in principle, divinely caused suspensions of the regular course of nature. God may not be able to do what is logically impossible—he cannot make a square circle—but he can surely do what is naturally impossible. This is because the limits of what is naturally possible—that is, the laws of nature—are established by God.

Equally important as the issue of what miracles are and how they occur is the question of what purpose they serve. And here, too, there is broad consensus across the religious and philosophical traditions. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers; Aristotelians, Platonists, and Cartesians; rationalists, empiricists, and voluntarists—they all believed that miracles do indeed serve a purpose, although not necessarily a purpose whose rationale is accessible to human understanding. Regardless of how one understood the nature of miracles—whether as on-the-spot supernatural interventions or divinely preplanted disruptions of nature's regularity—it was agreed that God does not act capriciously. Miracles are providential events and have religious and moral significance.

Thinkers may differ on the details of how exactly miracles fit into God's providential purposes. For some, miracles serve to attest to God's presence and power; for others, they are used by God to convey important messages or warnings. Miracles are often said to provide certainty for prophetic claims (anyone can pretend to be a prophet, but a true prophet establishes his credentials with a miracle), and they are sometimes seen as aiding the historical progress of God's plan when human obstinacy stands in its way. Of course, the Bible's miracles do all of these things, and the disagreement is often only about how the narrative of the miracle is to be interpreted: Is it to be read literally or metaphorically? Is the miracle to be seen as the communication of some truth or merely as a practical expedient for moving things along?

Even the most rationalistic philosophers took these questions very seriously. It may be, as one scholar notes, that the clash between religious tradition and philosophical speculation is most acute on the question of miracles, particularly as these represent a threat to the rational

understanding of the world. Depending on the ancient sources a later philosopher favored and the religious tradition to which he belonged (nominally or with a deep faith), he was partial to one or another solution. But any disagreements on the nature and extent of God's miraculous and supernatural involvement in the world were strictly intramural and took place against the background of general agreement that such involvement could occur and, at least at a certain period in history, did.

. . .

According to the "multitudes," Spinoza says, a miracle occurs when "nature for that time suspended her action, or her order was temporarily interrupted." It is an event that occurs not through natural causes but through supernatural intervention. It represents the action of a transcendent God who is "lawgiver and ruler" and who is endowed with the psychological and moral characteristics of will, wisdom, justice, and mercy. According to this confused and imaginative conception, such a divinity, having created nature out of nothing, will on occasion suspend its operations for a providential purpose.

> Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature, though the latter is determined in a definite way by God, or—as is the prevailing opinion nowadays—created by God. What they mean by the two powers, and what by God and Nature, they have no idea, except that they imagine God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate, and Nature's power to be a kind of force and energy. Therefore unusual works of Nature are termed miracles, or works of God, by the common people; and partly from piety, partly for the sake of opposing those who cultivate the natural sciences, they prefer to remain in ignorance of natural causes, and are eager to hear only of what is least comprehensible to them and consequently evokes their greatest wonder.
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> This attitude is commonly held to be the properly devout one and the most conducive to the true awe of God.
>
> Naturally so, since it is only by abolishing natural causes and imagining supernatural events that they are able to worship God and refer all things to God's governance and God's will; and it is when they imagine Nature's power subdued, as it were, by God that they most admire God's power.

In fact, Spinoza insists, those who think this way "have no sound conception either of God or of nature. They confuse God's decisions with human decisions, and they imagine nature to be so limited that they believe man to be its chief part." Anyone with true understanding knows that it is absolutely impossible for an event to occur that is a violation of nature's laws and processes—

not because God, standing apart from nature, is impotent to transgress its order, but because that order just *is* the unique expression of God's power.

Spinoza's main argument against miracles in the *Treatise* does not presume that one accepts his own philosophical conception of *God or Nature*. He begins with the claim that whatever God, by definition an eternal and necessary being, understands through the divine wisdom involves "eternal necessity and truth." But since in God will and intellect are one and the same thing—there can be no multiplicity of faculties in God—to say that God understands something is thereby to say that God wills it. Therefore, whatever God wills also must involve eternal necessity and truth. God's will, just like God's wisdom, is eternal and immutable. It cannot change. "The necessity whereby it follows from the divine nature and perfection that God understands some thing as it is, is the same necessity from which it follows that God wills that thing as it is." Since whatever is true is true only because of divine decree, "the universal laws of Nature are merely God's decrees, following from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature." Therefore, if anything were to happen contrary to *Nature's* laws, it would happen contrary to God's decrees. That is, God, in causing a supernatural miracle, would be acting in opposition to himself. "If anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain that God acts contrary to His own nature—than which nothing could be more absurd."

Moreover, if miracles did in fact occur, Spinoza insists, they would testify not to God's infinite and eternal power but, on the contrary, to his limitations and even impotence. For a system that requires outside interventions must be a rather imperfect system, and thus reflect the incapacities or lack of foresight of its creator. The belief in miracles implies that

> God created Nature so ineffective and prescribed for her laws and rules so barren that he is often constrained to come once more to her rescue if he wants her to be preserved, and the course of events to be as he desires. This I consider to be utterly divorced from reason.

Nature, as Spinoza describes it in the *Treatise*, observes a "fixed and immutable order"; its laws involve "eternal necessity and truth," and thus they are inviolable. Whatever happens, happens with necessity, even if that necessity is not always manifest to us and we are therefore occasionally tempted to see contingency in nature.

While Spinoza speaks in the *Treatise* of the "virtue and power of Nature" being identical with "the very virtue and power of God," and of the "laws and rules of Nature" being "God's eternal decrees and volitions," he stops short of explaining exactly what this is supposed to mean. His argument here against miracles, because it refers to God's "will," "decrees," and "wisdom," seems perfectly compatible with the traditional picture of God. Spinoza is trying to show that even those who are wedded to such a conception of God, as anthropomorphic as it might be, must deny the possibility of miracles. Still, *God or Nature* is never far away. It is not too difficult to see behind these claims in the *Treatise*, barely concealed, the metaphysical theology and necessitarian conception of natural phenomena more extensively presented and argued for in the *Ethics*.

As we have seen, for Spinoza, God or Nature—being one and the same thing—just is the whole, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing, active system of the universe within which absolutely

everything exists. This is the fundamental principle of the *Ethics* that one might see in the *Treatise*'s claim that "the power of Nature is the divine power." In the *Ethics*, the first necessary and eternal effects of this substance's power—in particular, the first effects of its most general "attributes" or ways of being (Thought, Extension, etc.)—are the principles and laws that govern all things; for example, within the attribute of Extension, the laws of physics governing the motion of bodies. Following from these first effects, with equal necessity from God or Nature, is the world itself, an eternal and infinite series of durationally existing finite things (that is, a series populated by the familiar items around us). Because the laws of nature and the world of existing things follow with absolute necessity from an eternal and absolutely necessary being (that is, God or Nature itself), the world and its particular train of events could not have been otherwise than as it is.

Spinoza's cosmos is, in other words, a strictly deterministic, even necessitarian one. Everything, without exception, is causally determined to be such as it is; and, given its causes, nothing could possibly have been otherwise. Moreover, because the ultimate and most general causes themselves (the attributes of God or Nature and the laws that derive from them) from which all other causes follow exist with absolute metaphysical or logical necessity, Spinoza concludes there is no contingency whatsoever in the universe: not for the universe itself, and not for anything within it: "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way."

In short, for Spinoza the actual world is the *only* possible world. If it is absolutely impossible for God to exist but the particular series of finite individuals and states of affairs that makes up this world not to exist; and if God's (Nature's) existence is, as Spinoza argues, absolutely necessary in itself, then this world is the only possible world. This extraordinary claim is something that Spinoza seems to embrace. "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced." The only way there could be a different world, for "the order of nature" to be different, is if God's nature, from which that order necessarily follows, could be different. But since God's nature is absolutely necessary in itself, that nature could not possibly have been different. Therefore, the world of things—including the unfolding of events over time—no less than the universal features of the cosmos, has to be what it is and could not have been otherwise.

It should be clear from all this, as well, that in the *Ethics*, Spinoza is denying that there is any such thing as the *creation* of the world, if what is meant by that is that God exists before voluntarily bringing the world into being ex nihilo, from a prior state of nonbeing, and that God could also have *not* brought the world into being. If, as Spinoza claims, the world of existing things is a necessary and co-eternal effect of God's (Nature's) being, it is absolutely impossible for God to exist but the world not to exist. Spinoza thereby rejects the opening chapters of the Bible as an imaginative fiction. But, as many philosophers have recognized, where creation goes, so goes miracles. A world co-eternal with God is not open to divine interventions.

In Spinoza's metaphysics, the necessity that governs the universe—in its origins and in its inner workings—is nothing less than the absolute necessity found among the truths of mathematics. This is a conclusion that he is not shy about publicly proclaiming. In the early publication "Metaphysical Thoughts," he asserts that "if men understood clearly the whole order of Nature, they would find all things just as necessary as are all those treated in Mathematics." Mathematical necessity allows for no exceptions. And without exceptions, there are no miracles.

Spinoza knows the dangerous path he is treading in the *Ethics*. After demonstrating that "all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature" and are never brought about by anything except purely natural causes, Spinoza lambasts those who resort to the will of God to explain things whose natural causes they do not understand. He complains that they thereby take refuge in "the sanctuary of ignorance" but are lauded for their piety. By contrast,

> one who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man, to understand natural things, not to wonder at them, like a fool, is generally considered and denounced as an impious heretic by those whom the people honor as interpreters of nature and the Gods. For they know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority is also taken away.

There are serious religious, even political matters at stake in the realm of miracles.

The first readers of the *Treatise* would have known nothing of Spinoza's necessitarianism and the philosophical theology on which it rests (aside from what they may have gleaned, with sufficient care, from the "Metaphysical Thoughts"). But neither did Spinoza want the message of the *Treatise* to be dependent on the more radical theological theses of the *Ethics*. Most of his audience was not sufficiently prepared for those deeper and more difficult (and possibly more disturbing) insights, and the success of the theological-political appeal being made by the *Treatise* must not be made to rest on them. Thus, Spinoza had to accommodate these readers by not revealing too much of his views on God and Nature.

Still, the conclusion that Spinoza draws in the *Treatise* captures well, if in nongeometric format, the important metaphysical lessons of the *Ethics*: "Nothing happens in Nature that does not follow from her laws . . . her laws cover everything that is conceived even by the divine intellect, and . . . Nature observes a fixed and immutable order." The belief in miracles is an expression not of pious insight but of ignorance. Or, as Spinoza puts it in a letter to Oldenburg, "miracles and ignorance are the same."

In fact, it is precisely this perspective that allows Spinoza to concede that there is a meaningful sense in which we *can* speak of miracles. Rather than supernatural violations of nature, however, a miracle should properly be understood simply as an event whose natural causal explanation remains unknown. "The word *miracle* can be understood only with respect to men's beliefs, and means simply an event whose natural cause we—or at any rate the writer or narrator of the miracle—cannot explain by comparison with any other normal event." It may be that the event can indeed be explained in accordance with the current state of scientific knowledge, in which case the label "miracle" is relative only to the narrator's own ignorance of science and nature and to his aims in writing his narrative. The biblical writers—"men of old," Spinoza calls them—being generally unlearned in science but also desirous of instilling awe among their audience, were thus given to ascribing wonderful and unusual events to the will of God. When the rainbow appears to Noah as the flood waters recede, which Spinoza notes is "nothing other than the refraction and reflection of the sun's rays which they undergo in droplets of water," this is described by the writer of the passage as "God setting the rainbow in the cloud":

> There can be no doubt that all the events narrated in Scripture occurred naturally; yet they are referred to God because . . . it is not the part of Scripture to explain events through their natural causes; it only relates to those events that strike the imagination, employing such method and style as best serves to excite wonder, and consequently to instill piety in the minds of the masses.

Because the biblical writer and his audience, "the common people," are generally unfamiliar with the physics behind the phenomenon of the rainbow, they readily refer all such phenomena that cannot be assimilated to "a similar happening [in the past] which is ordinarily regarded without wonder" to divine intervention.

Or perhaps the ignorance belongs not only to the narrator of the miracle but also to the scientific and philosophical community at-large, which has yet to fully understand the particular laws governing such phenomena or to discover the antecedent natural causes that, according to those laws, would sufficiently explain the event. Even in this case, where an event truly does "surpass human understanding," it remains the case that, in principle, there is a natural explanation for it.

Spinoza's position on miracles is much more radical than the famous skepticism of David Hume half a century later. Hume, the great philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment and generally given to doubts about grand metaphysical knowledge claims, would argue that it is exceedingly hard, even impossible, to justify the belief in a miracle. By definition, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and thus something that goes against "a firm and unalterable experience." The testimony on which the belief in a miracle is based is to be judged like all testimony, according to its probability. And with an overwhelming preponderance of instances to the contrary ("there must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation"), there is a high degree of improbability, even "a direct and full proof" against the event in question. Thus, all reports of miracles must remain unbelievable: the grounds for believing in a miracle are never sufficient to make its occurrence more credible than the belief either that its report was an innocent mistake or that there is deliberate deception among its witnesses.

But Hume is making only an epistemological point, about what a person does or does not have good reasons to believe. Spinoza, by contrast, is making a stronger, metaphysical point, about reality. His view is not just that miracles are highly improbable and their stories implausible. Rather, he is claiming that they are absolutely impossible. "No event can occur to contravene Nature, which preserves an eternal fixed and immutable order. . . . Nothing can happen in Nature to contravene her own universal laws, nor yet anything that is not in agreement with these laws or that does not follow from them." For Hume, a miracle is highly unlikely, to the point of incredibility; for Spinoza, "a miracle, either contrary to Nature or above Nature, is mere absurdity."

. . .

A more illuminating comparison in this connection involves two philosophers who *did* have a significant influence on Spinoza, and on the *Treatise* in particular: Maimonides and Hobbes.

Maimonides' attitude toward miracles is notoriously complicated. Scholars have had a good deal of difficulty deciding what exactly he believed regarding both the possibility of miracles and their actual occurrence in history. Part of the problem is that, as Maimonides explicitly tells readers of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, for their own good (lest the "ignoramuses" among them be confused by its doctrines and fall into disbelief), he is intentionally hiding some of his real views amid contradictions in the text. Certain deep truths are to be revealed only to those who are sufficiently prepared (by moral, logical, philosophical, and theological training) to grasp them without risk to their faith. Apparently among these truths are those concerning miracles.

Maimonides does not include the belief in miracles among the thirteen essential principles of the Jewish faith. He also appears throughout the *Guide* to maintain a belief in natural causal determinism. At the same time, he is not willing to abandon miracles altogether. His conclusion seems to be that miracles are, in fact, "something that is, in a certain respect, in nature." They are simply events that, when judged by the regularities that generally characterize nature and the ordinary behavior of things, are anomalous. But such anomalies are still produced by perfectly natural means. Maimonides suggests that miracles so understood are implanted in nature by God. Quoting approvingly the rabbinic sages, he notes that "they say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred." It was "put into the nature of water to be continuous and always to flow from above downwards except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians." The parting of the Red Sea is thus explained by the nature of the sea's water itself. "All the other miracles can be explained in an analogous manner."

Of course, it should make no difference whether an event contrary to nature's regularities is inserted ad hoc into nature at a given moment in history or planted therein at the beginning of time; it is presumably still a divine intervention bringing about an exception to the constancies that characterize nature's usual ways. But Maimonides can be read as saying that these anomalies should be regarded as events that, while rare, are just as natural as those that belong to the ordinary course of nature. They arise from the laws of nature, but not in as perspicuous a manner as other things. The parting of a sea, like an earthquake or a tsunami, is brought about through natural causes and is, at least in principle, explicable in rational, scientific terms.

Maimonides does downplay the value of miracles as evidence of God's providence and wisdom, which are better seen in the ordinary working of nature than in any anomalous exceptions to it. "What is the way to love and fear God? When a person contemplates God's wondrous and great works and creatures, and sees through them God's infinite wisdom, he or she immediately loves and extols and experiences a great desire to know the great God." God's perfection is most evident in nature itself, in the unexceptional order of the cosmos. "The works of the deity," which Maimonides identifies with the ordinary course of nature, "are most perfect, and with regard to them there is no possibility of any excess or deficiency. Accordingly they are of necessity permanently established as they are, for there is no possibility of something calling for a change in them." Spinoza's explicit denial of miracles in the *Treatise* may represent the ultimate terminus of the naturalism that seems to undergird Maimonides' discussion in the *Guide* and elsewhere.

Given his position as rabbi and religious leader, Maimonides was understandably cautious about coming right out and denying that miracles, traditionally understood, are possible. Hobbes,

with his hostility to religious authority and mocking attitude toward superstition, was willing to go further. He knows the importance granted to miracles in Scripture, including their role in determining whether or not a self-proclaimed prophet is indeed truly prophesying (although he concludes that, since the age of miracles is over, there is no longer any sure way to distinguish a prophet from a delusional madman). But if the question concerns not what Scripture thinks about miracles but rather what it is reasonable to believe about them, Hobbes takes a fairly radical stance.

He describes miracles as "admirable works of God . . . therefore, they are also called *wonders*," and distinguishes two essential features of such wonders: first, they are events that are "strange," or occur very rarely, and second, those who witness them "cannot imagine [them] . . . to have been done by natural means, but only by the immediate hand of God." Thus, "if a horse or a cow should speak, it were a miracle, because both the thing is strange, and the natural cause difficult to imagine." Such wonder is dispelled, however, along with the ignorance that grounds it. As soon as we determine a natural cause for the event, or, if no precise cause is discovered, when we realize that the event is not as uncommon as we originally thought, we no longer regard the phenomenon as miraculous.

> The first rainbow that was seen in the world was a miracle, because the first, and consequently strange; and served for a sign from God, placed in heaven, to assure his people there should be no more an universal destruction of the world by water. But at this day, because they are frequent, they are not miracles, neither to them that know their natural causes, nor to them that know them not.

Hobbes is being careful here. He is not explicitly denying the possibility of miracles, understood as events actually brought about not through natural causes but "by the immediate hand of God." Indeed, he does at least say that there was a period in the past when miracles did occur, although there is reason to doubt that he means this seriously. Some event is *called* a miracle if *we cannot imagine* how nature brings it about or if it is unusual from our perspective. That is, he makes the reports of miracles relative to the experience and knowledge of observers. "Seeing admiration and wonder is consequent to the knowledge and experience wherewith men are endued, some more, some less, it followeth that the same thing may be a miracle to one and not to another." Thus, those who are either ignorant or superstitious "make great wonders of those works which other men, knowing to proceed from nature (which is not the immediate, but the ordinary work of God) admire not at all."

Does Hobbes nonetheless believe that miracles have actually occurred, or are at least possible? He does not say that the rainbow that Noah saw in the sky, the "first" rainbow, was truly miraculous in the sense that it was something brought about directly and immediately by God, but only that, because of its strangeness (relative to human experience), it was regarded as a miracle. On the other hand, when Hobbes formally defines what a miracle is, he calls it "a work of God (besides his operation by the way of nature, ordained in the creation), done for the making manifest to his elect the mission of an extraordinary minister for their salvation" (for example, a prophet). But, again, this seems to be his reading of the nature and role of miracles according to the narratives of Scripture, not a recognition that such events "wrought by the immediate hand of God" have indeed taken place.

Although his considered view about miracles may be no less extreme than Spinoza's, Hobbes seems be playing it a little safer in writing. Unlike Spinoza, he seems less interested in making a metaphysical point about the possibility of miracles and more concerned with showing how people are too easily enchanted and abused by those who, through performing "tricks," take advantage of their credulity. "Two men conspiring, one to seem lame, another so to cure him with a charm, will deceive many; but many conspiring, one to seem lame, another so to cure him, and all the rest to bear witness, will deceive many more." If there is a warning here, it is to put us on our guard against ecclesiastics who would take advantage of "the aptitude of mankind to give too hasty belief to pretended miracles." Hobbes's official position on miracles in *Leviathan* is best described as a very strong skepticism, along with hostility toward those who use reports of miracles for the aggrandizement of their own power. This is still a radical position to take, one that no doubt explains the attacks on the work by religious authorities. But Hobbes does not adopt—or, at least, does not publicly express—the thoroughgoing, dogmatic, and more radical naturalism of Spinoza's *Treatise*; after all, he "durst not write so boldly."

Maimonides and Hobbes recognized the important providential role granted to miracles in Scripture, particularly as they serve to validate a prophetic mission or move along the accomplishment of God's plan. But such a conception of providential activity requires that distinction between the regular course of nature and its interruption by divine fiat that Spinoza so vigorously rejects. For him, divine providence is immediately manifest in nature's normal and mundane routine, not in any alleged supernatural exceptions to it.

It was a medieval and early modern philosophical commonplace that the existence and design of the world may be used to demonstrate God's existence. God as first cause of a contingent universe, God as intelligent designer of a well-ordered cosmos—these conclusions are supposed to follow from readily available and perfectly natural empirical premises. Some thinkers also thought that the regular order of nature might serve as a guide to understanding God's attributes—Descartes, for example, believed that the laws of nature follow from and therefore testify to the perfection, simplicity, and goodness of their author. An equally common but more powerful belief, however, was that it is the extraordinary (rather than the ordinary) that offers the best and most striking evidence of God's power, and that it is the supernatural (rather than the natural) that most directly reveals God's providence. Nature may take its course, but God shows his providential hand when he intervenes within it. Spinoza insists that this is above all the view of "the common people," as he describes it in the *Treatise*.

> They suppose that God's power and providence are most clearly displayed when some unusual event occurs in Nature contrary to their habitual beliefs concerning Nature, particularly if such an event is to their profit or advantage. They consider that the clearest possible evidence of God's existence is provided when Nature deviates—as they think—from her proper order. Therefore they believe that all those who explain phenomena and miracles through natural causes, or who strive to understand them so, are doing away with God, or at least God's providence. They consider that

God is inactive all the while that Nature pursues her normal course, and, conversely, that Nature's power and natural causes are suspended as long as God is acting.

It is those who think this way who "imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature." However, this is grounded on that false, even opaque conception of an anthropomorphic God that informs sectarian religions. "What they mean by the two powers, and what by God and Nature, they have no idea, except that they imagine God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate."

For Spinoza, as we have seen, the power of God *is* the power of Nature. It follows, then, that God's providence cannot be manifested or furthered along by the exercise of extraordinary supernatural actions, by miracles. If what is meant by "divine providence" is a plan being carried out by a transcendent, intelligent, and purposive agent, then there is and can be no such thing in Spinoza's universe.

Spinoza does not categorically reject the idea (or, at least, the language) of providence. But his understanding of it is so different from the vulgar one that it would be all but unrecognizable to his contemporary readers. Providence, in Spinoza's sense, cannot possibly perform its traditional (and scriptural) function.

Since God is nothing but Nature and its lawlike, exceptionless operations, divine providence is manifest exclusively in the natural order itself. All things come about in and by Nature. To put it in the terms of the *Ethics*, all bodily things and their states follow from the attribute of Extension and its infinite modes; all mental things and their states follow from the attribute of Thought and its infinite modes. But this means that God's providence just *is* the universal causal efficacy of Nature. Providence thereby extends to *all* things, just because there is nothing that is outside Nature's dominion. Everything that happens, whether it is beneficial or harmful to an individual, is the effect of divine providence. The phrase is thereby rendered morally neutral and, from a Spinozistic perspective, theologically harmless. As Spinoza, continuing his discussion of miracles, explains,

> God's decrees and commandments, and consequently God's providence, are in truth nothing but Nature's order; that is to say, when Scripture tells us that this or that was accomplished by God or by God's will, nothing more is intended than that it came about by accordance with Nature's law and order, and not, as the common people believe, that Nature for some period has ceased to act, or that for some time its order has been interrupted.

This approach allows Spinoza to at least employ the language of divine providence with little cost. As long as one is aware that such language is really only talk about Nature's necessary ways, it is empty and does not commit one to any superstitious claims about God providing rewards to the virtuous and punishments to the wicked or taking any special care for individuals. It is a reductive view of providence with no moral implications.

It also means that the surest path to the knowledge of God lies not in the cataloguing of miraculous and exceptional events but solely in the investigation of Nature's regularities.

Knowing that all things are determined and ordained by God and that the workings of Nature follow from God's essence, while the laws of Nature are God's eternal decrees and volitions, we must unreservedly conclude that we get to know God and God's will all the better as we gain better knowledge of natural phenomena and understand more clearly how they depend on their first cause, and how they operate in accordance with Nature's eternal laws.

Spinoza does not believe that one must accept his metaphysical theology in order to find a valuable lesson here. He is clearly speaking not only to those who (perhaps in the light of the *Ethics*) have been persuaded by his own concept of God or Nature, but also to those who may still cling to traditional religious ideas. Even the latter, while they remain wedded to a false, anthropomorphic conception of God, need to understand at least that "God's will and decrees" (notions that, strictly speaking, Spinoza rejects) are best seen in the ordered ways of the world he causes. Events whose natural causes remain hidden, while they "appeal strongly to the imagination and evoke wonder," are less suited to providing "a higher knowledge of God" than the works of Nature that we clearly and distinctly conceive. Spinoza concludes that "from miracles we cannot gain knowledge of God, his existence and providence, and that these can be far better inferred from Nature's fixed and immutable order."

Spinoza's naturalistic understanding of divine providence in the *Treatise* can also accommodate, in some sense, an important feature of the common religious view of providence, namely, that which sees God as managing a system of rewards and punishments. The providential God of the Abrahamic traditions ensures that, at least in the very long run, human virtue and vice receive their just deserts. This is the moral dimension of providence directed at individuals that earlier Jewish philosophers called "special providence," to distinguish it from the "general providence" that runs through the laws of nature and endows each species with characteristics essential for survival (for example, rationality in human beings or speed in gazelles). What Spinoza cannot allow, however, is that there is a distribution of rewards for virtue carried out by an intelligent moral agent, a kind of person, freely and actively dispensing them from on high.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza shows that the virtuous person pursues and acquires true and adequate ideas, a deep rational understanding of Nature and its ways. As we have seen, this intellectual knowledge, unlike information that comes by way of the senses or the imagination, provides insight into the essences of things and especially the ways in which they depend necessarily on their highest causes in Nature. Spinoza insists that this knowledge of God or Nature and how things relate to it is of the greatest benefit to a human being in two ways.

First, he suggests that an understanding of Nature's essences and laws provides the virtuous individual with the tools needed to navigate life's obstacle course. The ways of Nature are transparent to the intellectually perfected person. His capacity to manipulate things and avoid dangers is greater than that of the person who is governed by the senses and imagination and thus subject to chance and whatever may happen. The virtuous person has greater control over events; others are more at the mercy of luck. A deep knowledge of things benefits one in this very practical manner.

Second, and more important, true knowledge is, for the virtuous person, the source of an abiding happiness and peace of mind that is resistant to the vicissitudes of fortune. When a person understands Nature, he sees the necessity of all things, and especially the fact that the objects that he values are, in their comings and goings, not under his control. More precisely, he sees, for

example, that all bodies and their states and relationships—including the condition of his own body—follow necessarily from the essence of matter (Extension) and the universal laws of physics; and he sees that all ideas, including all the properties of minds, follow necessarily from the essence of Thought and its universal laws.

> Such insight can only weaken the power that the irrational passions have over an individual. Herein lie the natural benefits or rewards of virtue. When a person achieves a high level of understanding of Nature and realizes that he cannot control what it brings his way or takes from him, he becomes less anxious over things, less governed by the affects of hope and fear over what may or may not come to pass. No longer obsessed with or despondent over the loss of his possessions, he is less likely to be overwhelmed with emotions at their arrival and passing away. Such a person will regard all things with an even temper and will not be inordinately and irrationally affected in different ways by past, present, or future events. His life will be tranquil and not given to sudden disturbances of the passions. The result is self-control and a calmness of mind.
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> The more this knowledge that things are necessary is concerned with singular things, which we imagine more distinctly and vividly, the greater is this power of the Mind over the affects, as experience itself also testifies. For we see that Sadness over some good which has perished is lessened as soon as the man who has lost it realizes that this good could not, in any way, have been kept. Similarly, we see that [because we regard infancy as a natural and necessary thing], no one pities infants because of their inability to speak, to walk, or to reason, or because they live so many years, as it were, unconscious of themselves.

What Spinoza calls the "free person"—the virtuous individual who "lives according to the dictate of reason alone"—bears the gifts and losses of fortune with equanimity, does only those things that he believes to be "the most important in life," refuses to chase after or be anxious about ephemeral goods, and is not overly concerned with death. His understanding of his place in the natural scheme of things brings him happiness and true peace of mind.

Virtue, then, has its rewards. The natural consequence of the striving for and acquisition of understanding and knowledge is well-being. Our freedom, our physical and psychological flourishing are directly dependent on our knowledge of Nature, including our understanding both of the necessity of all things and of our place in the world. Virtue is a source of an abiding happiness that is free from chance. Such is the true but entirely natural benefit of virtue. This, if anything, constitutes a special kind providence within Spinoza's system, one that is available only to rational beings.

Of course, for Spinoza there is an important sense in which *everything* is the result of divine providence. There is nothing that happens in Nature—and whatever happens must happen in Nature, for there is nothing that is outside Nature—that is not brought about by God or Nature. Therefore, *all* benefits and *all* harms that come to a person, indeed, all the benefits and all the harms that come to anything, and not just the happiness that is the natural byproduct of virtue, are

the result of divine providence. When a virtuous person suffers or a vicious person prospers, this too is providence at work.

But from the point of view of human agents, it makes all the difference in the world whether benefits come haphazardly (as judged from the agent's perspective and convenience) and according to the various but all-natural ways in which he is buffeted back and forth by external things, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, are possessed in a deliberate and controlled manner.

This is the distinction that appears in the *Treatise* between God's "external help" and God's "internal help."

> Whatever human nature can effect solely by its own power to preserve its own being can rightly be called God's internal help, and whatever falls to a man's advantage from the power of external causes can rightly be called God's external help.

The external help is simply the circumstances in which we find ourselves through the operation of external causes; it is, Spinoza says, often a matter of "fortune" and causes beyond our control, of providence working in a very general way. But the internal help is grounded in the God- or Nature-given power that constitutes the essential being of any individual (what Spinoza in the *Ethics* calls "striving to persevere." The internal help consists in a person, moved by this power under the guidance of reason, acquiring knowledge through his own resources and thereby increasing his well-being and gaining an advantage in the world.

Spinoza, then, can agree that providence has within its scope rewards or benefits for the righteous. But no supernatural interventions or violations of the laws of nature are required for this "special" providence. It is, on the contrary, a perfectly natural process whereby, just because of the laws of nature, certain effects follow necessarily from certain causes. Any verbal concessions made in the *Treatise* to God's "will and decrees" or to divine providence are consistent with Spinoza's general naturalistic project. They are also in keeping with the absolute denial of miracles.

Chapter 6

Scripture

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Whether they read the Bible in Spanish, Hebrew, Latin or Dutch, Spinoza's contemporaries, like the generations before them, all made a categorical assumption about the origin of the work. Amsterdam's Calvinists, Lutherans, and Jews, as well as the Catholics who (to avoid harassment) continued to worship in private homes, believed that the Bible had a divine source. Its author, literally, was God, and its sentences faithfully (if sometimes metaphorically) conveyed his thoughts and commands and described his actions.

There is a sense, even with this assumption, in which the Bible is a human and historical document. God's message was revealed to and transcribed by human beings at certain moments in time. The words now appearing in print before early modern readers were first written down by the ancient prophets. According to tradition, Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, while successive individuals (Joshua, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, and so on) composed the books that bear their names or the historical chronicles in which they play a major role. But in the grand scheme of things, this is a rather trivial kind of historicity. The mortal writers were merely the privileged recipients of an eternal content, *amanuenses* charged with accurately recording God's word and with relating the history of God's chosen people. Their ephemeral manuscripts conveyed a story and laid down laws that were, without exception, divine and timeless. Scripture is certainly not, in the traditional view, the product of or response to any historical contingencies.

It is precisely this view about the divine origin of Scripture that Spinoza attacks in chapters seven through ten of the *Treatise*. He will conclude that the Hebrew Bible does *not* have its source in some supernatural revelation. Rather, it is simply a work of human literature that arose from the political circumstances of the ancient Israelites. His argument is grounded in a variety of philosophical, linguistic, and historical considerations, including his own metaphysics of God or Nature (still only subtly present in the *Treatise*) and his views on prophecy and miracles.

Spinoza was not the first to insist on the historicity of the Bible. There was already a long tradition, especially after the Reformation, of critical approaches to biblical texts. Mainstream Catholic and Protestant theologians before him had urged a philological and historical study of Hebrew Scripture, particularly as they regarded the written and, later, printed document (but not the divine content it communicated) as a work of human hands subject to all the vagaries of transmission. While Reformation principles called for a return to "Scripture itself," a direct acquaintance by faithful (but not necessarily learned) readers with the pages of the Bible for the purpose of grasping its clear and accessible lessons, late Renaissance and early modern humanists pursued their philological and linguistic studies in order to determine its less obvious, more "genuine" historical meanings. By the seventeenth century there was a well-developed tradition of scholarly interest in the origin and provenance of biblical manuscripts leading up to contemporary printed editions.

The sixteenth-century Dutch Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus, for example, insisted on using original language (Greek and Hebrew) sources, classical authors, and the writings of the Church fathers to evaluate and even revise Jerome's Vulgate (Latin) edition of the Gospels, as well as to compose his own commentary on the Psalms and other books. While such scholarship was not wholly to the liking of ecclesiastic authorities, especially when it was put to polemical purposes—Erasmus was strongly condemned by the Church theologians for his audacity—it certainly was not uncommon, especially within the universities. But Spinoza took the historical study of Scripture, and especially the question of its mundane authorship, much further than earlier thinkers. More than anyone else, Spinoza, with his willingness to go wherever the textual and historical evidence led, regardless of religious ramifications, ushered in modern biblical source scholarship. To many latter-day readers of the Bible, the notion that its authors were mere humans addressing social and political contingencies of their day may seem perfectly commonplace. But Spinoza's conclusions on the origins of Scripture and the history and implications of its transmission scandalized his contemporaries as much as his view on miracles.

Moses is supposed to have written every single word of the Torah. At least, as Hobbes contemptuously notes, this is a nonnegotiable principle within the Abrahamic traditions, especially among the orthodox and outside scholarly circles. It is believed, he says in *Leviathan*, "on all hands that the first and original author of [Scripture] is God." More precisely, God communicated all the commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, as well as the story of the Creation, the account of the generations that lived before Moses, and the narrative of the subsequent tribulations of the Israelites. Moses alone is said to have combined all of this legal, historical, political, religious, and metaphysical material into one single work that was handed down unchanged and uncorrupted through the ages. This guarantees the divine authority, and thus eternal validity, of these books: they came directly from God to the prophet Moses, and then to the people, with no break in the transmission and thus no concerns about whether they truly represented the word of God.

It was evident to more reflective readers of various religious (and antireligious) persuasions throughout history that such a position runs up against some serious problems. A number of Jewish and Christian commentators, arguing on the basis of the text, known historical facts, and undeniable empirical principles, suggested, ever so carefully (and sometimes only implicitly), that Moses could not have written everything found in the Pentateuch. In fact, by Spinoza's time, there was nothing new about raising the question of Moses' authorship of every sentence of the Pentateuch, and even in claiming positively that he did not write absolutely all that is therein.

The most glaring problem concerns the account of the death of Moses himself. It is obviously impossible for someone to write about his own death and burial. Even the sages of the Talmud, committed as they are to the principle that all of the Torah was written by Moses, concede that the last eight verses were added by Joshua.

The twelfth-century exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra took things a little further, although he was very careful not to state his opinion too boldly. In his commentary on the Pentateuch, he suggests that a number of elements in the text lead to the conclusion that there are several verses that could not have been written by Moses. In his remarks on Genesis 12.6 ("And the Canaanite was then in

the land"), Ibn Ezra says that "there is a secret meaning to this text. Let the one who understands it remain silent." The "secret meaning," derived from the grammar of the sentence, seems to be that when the verse was written the Canaanite was no longer in the land, having been expelled by the Israelites (which occurred only under the leadership of Joshua); thus the verse was written at least a generation after Moses. Commenting on Deuteronomy 1.1 ("These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel beyond the Jordan River"), Ibn Ezra speculates what the meaning of this verse might be, since Moses did not get to cross over the Jordan River. He concludes his interpretation of the passage by mysteriously noting that "if you understand the secret of the twelve and also that of 'So Moses wrote' (Deut. 31.22); 'And the Canaanite was then in the land' (Gen. 12.6); 'In the mount where the lord is seen' (Gen. 22.14); and 'behold, his [Og's] bedstead was a bedstead of iron' (Deut 3.11), then you will recognize the truth." Commentators are generally agreed that what Ibn Ezra means is that just as the last twelve verses of Deuteronomy were not written by Moses (this is "the secret of the twelve"), so neither were the other cited verses. Moses would not have referred to himself in the third person ("So Moses wrote . . ."), and he would have had no need to give evidence of the height of Og, the giant king of Bashan, by mentioning his bed, since his extraordinary size would have been known to his contemporaries. Moreover, when Moses was still alive, the Temple ("the mount where the Lord is seen") had not yet been built. The "truth," then, is that there are a number of sentences in the Torah that were not composed by Moses but were added by others coming after him.

It is a very limited claim that Ibn Ezra is hinting at (and it is something that he dare not proclaim openly, lest some readers conclude that there are many other verses, perhaps entire chapters, not written by Moses). He still believes that Moses was the author of almost all of the Pentateuch; he is certainly *not* saying what Spinoza, in the *Treatise*, takes him to be saying, namely, "that it was not Moses who wrote the Pentateuch but someone else who lived long after him."

Ibn Ezra's commentary was well known to Jewish and Christian exegetes, and many thought the questions he raised were reasonable ones. A number of prominent theologians, in fact, turned his veiled hints into unambiguous conclusions. Luther, for one, did not believe it was a big deal if a few lines of the Pentateuch were not by Moses' own hand. Foreshadowing Spinoza's radical claim about the Pentateuch as a whole, some of these commentators even focused on Ezra the Scribe, in the Second Temple period, as the likely author of those verses not written by Joshua.

By the seventeenth century, then, it was well within the bounds of respectability to suggest that there were passages of the Pentateuch not written by Moses himself. Not everyone subscribed to this idea, but even its critics took it seriously. Somewhat less respectable, but still apparently within the realm of legitimate debate, was the notion that all of Hebrew Scripture as we have it received its current redacted form long after Moses and the other prophets, organized by a later editor or team of editors, although the sources they were working with were authentically Mosaic.

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It was Spinoza, however, who took things to an unprecedented extreme and, in the eyes of his contemporaries, crossed the line. He was not alone in doing so. As we shall see, his view of the Bible as an all-too-human document was shared by one or two others in the period. But such company was cold comfort, and did nothing to deflect the attacks on the *Treatise*—indeed, it only inflamed them.

Spinoza is well aware of the risky stand he is taking in the *Treatise*. "The author [of the Pentateuch] is almost universally believed to be Moses, a view so obstinately defended by the Pharisees that they have regarded any other view as a heresy." It is important to his theological-political project, however, that he address this dogma. Troubled by the expansion of ecclesiastic power in the Dutch Republic, and especially the meddling of Calvinist preachers in public affairs and in the lives of private citizens, Spinoza recognized that one of their most effective tools for justifying their usurpations was the Bible. They proclaimed their actions to be backed by the word of God and held up the Bible as the source of their moral, social, and even political authority. Moreover, they set themselves up as the sole qualified interpreters of Scripture and read it to suit their purposes. Thus Spinoza:

> On every side we hear men saying that the Bible is the Word of God, teaching mankind true blessedness, or the path to salvation. . . . We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority.

Waving the Bible was (and still is) a powerful means of persuading the masses, not to mention the ruling elites, that the way of the *predikanten*—sectarian, intolerant, and (in terms of Dutch politics) conservative as it is—is God's way.

By showing that the Bible is not, in fact, the work of a supernatural God—"a message for mankind sent down by God from heaven," as Spinoza mockingly puts it—but a perfectly natural human document; that the author of the Pentateuch is not Moses; that Hebrew Scripture as a whole is but a compilation of writings composed by fallible and not particularly learned individuals under various historical and political circumstances; that most of these writings were transmitted over generations, to be finally redacted by a latter-day political and religious leader—in short, by naturalizing the Torah and the other books of the Bible and reducing them to ordinary (though morally valuable) works of literature, Spinoza hopes to undercut ecclesiastic influence in politics and other domains and weaken the sectarian dangers facing his beloved Republic: "In order to escape from this scene of confusion, to free our minds from the prejudices of theologians and to avoid the hasty acceptance of human fabrications as divine teachings," he insists, it is necessary to see what exactly Scripture is and the "true method" by which it should be read. "For unless we understand this we cannot know with any certainty what the Bible or the Holy Spirit intends to teach."

Spinoza begins where he believes his illustrious medieval predecessor left off. Building on Ibn Ezra's subtle message, Spinoza marshals additional evidence to show that the author of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible was not Moses but "someone who lived many generations later." He cites the fact that the writer of those books refers consistently to Moses in the third person, compares Moses to the prophets that came after him ("declaring that he excelled them all"), narrates events that occurred after the death of Moses ("the children of Israel did eat manna

forty years until they came to a land inhabited, until they came unto the borders of the land of Canaan" [Exodus 16.35]—that is, Spinoza notes, "until the time referred to in Joshua 5.12"), and uses the names of places that they did not bear in Moses time but acquired much later (for example, where the Bible says that Abraham "pursued the enemy even unto Dan" [Genesis 14.14], Spinoza notes that the city did not have that name "until long after the death of Joshua"). Spinoza's conclusion is (despite what he says) much stronger than anything Ibn Ezra, or anyone else up to that time, explicitly says or even envisions: "From the foregoing it is clear beyond a shadow of doubt that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived many generations after Moses."

There is, Spinoza says, an authentic Mosaic core to the text of the Pentateuch. He believes, on the basis of the Bible's own testimony, that Moses himself wrote three items: an account of the war against Amalek and of the journeying of the Israelites (called the "Book of the Wars of God"), an abbreviated rendering of God's "utterances and laws" (called "Book of the Covenant"), and a more extensive explanation of God's commandments and of the covenant between God and his chosen people ("Book of the Law of God"). None of these books, of course, is extant, and none can be identified with the Pentateuch itself. Rather, the true author of the Pentateuch had access to at least the "Book of the Law of God" and "inserted [it] in proper order in his own work."

In similar fashion, Spinoza argues that Joshua was not himself the author of the book that bears his name ("some events are narrated that happened after Joshua's death") but that it was "written many generations after Joshua"; that "nobody of sound judgment can believe that [the book of Judges] was written by the judges themselves"; and that, "inasmuch as the history is continued long after his lifetime," neither were the books of Samuel composed by Samuel, nor the book of Kings composed by the monarchs that appear in it, but all of these were in fact drawn from a number of ancient chronicles. "We may therefore conclude that all the books [of the Hebrew Bible] that we have so far considered are the works of other hands, and that their contents are narrated as ancient history."

Who, then, did write (or at least did the bulk of the editorial work) on Hebrew Scripture? Spinoza is convinced that it was "a single historian who set out to write the antiquities of the Jews from their first beginnings until the first destruction of the city." The books of the Torah and other writings, despite their distinct and varied sources, are so thematically connected with each other and so skillfully constructed into one well-ordered and continuous (but not seamless) narrative—with relatively smooth transitions from one historical period or political regime to the next—that, he concludes, "there was only one historian," working many generations after the events he narrates, "with a fixed aim in view." And from the narrative itself it is quite clear what that historian's aim was: "To set forth the words and commandments of Moses," the first and most important leader of the Israelites, "and to demonstrate their truth by the course of history."

Spinoza concedes that it cannot be determined with absolute certainty who the historian was. But in his view, as others before him had suggested, all the evidence points to Ezra. The text makes it clear that the writer could not have lived before the mid-sixth century BCE, since he tells of the liberation of Jehoiachim, the king of Judah, from Babylonian captivity, an event that occurred ca. 560 BCE. Moreover, Spinoza notes, Scripture itself says that Ezra, "alone of all men of his time," was devoted to establishing and setting forth the law of God (Ezra 7.10) and was a scribe learned in the law of Moses (Ezra 7.6). "Therefore," he concludes, "I cannot imagine anyone but Ezra was the writer of these books." Ezra called the first five books of his work after Moses because the life

of Moses is their main subject. For the same reason, he called other books after Joshua, the Judges of Israel, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings.

Ezra obviously did not compose all of these works from scratch. Neither was he able to complete his project. Rather, he collected histories written by various ancient Hebrew authors, sometimes simply copying their accounts word for word, with the intention of ultimately revising them and weaving them into a single polished narrative. Material from Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, and others were "collected indiscriminately and stored together with a view to examining them and arranging them more conveniently at some later time." Spinoza speculates that Ezra may have died before he had a chance to put the finishing touches on his book. The selection of certain writings for canonization into Scripture, and the rejection of other, equally ancient works, was, in Spinoza's view, done many generations after Ezra, and certainly no earlier than the Maccabean period (ca. second century BCE), but probably even later. The Pharisees are the most likely candidates, and Spinoza suggests that their decisions were grounded in defending their tradition and their position on the law against their opponents, the Sadducees. "Men learned in the Law summoned a council to decide what books should be received as sacred and what books should be excluded." It was, in other words, a very human, and politically motivated, process.

The result—as is clear from the present state of the text of Hebrew Scripture, with its many repetitions, omissions, fragmentary stories, chronological discrepancies, and outright inconsistencies—is a "mutilated," incomplete, insufficiently edited anthology. There are two accounts of the creation of the world that differ in important and irreconcilable respects; Philistine armies that, in one chapter (1 Samuel 7), are so defeated by the Israelites that they are said to be incapable of ever invading again, only to reappear shortly thereafter (1 Samuel 13), launching yet another attack; kings with indeterminate but occasionally overlapping reigns; and implausible chronologies. "In 1 Kings 6 we are told that Solomon built his temple 480 years after the exodus from Egypt, but the narratives themselves require a much greater number of years." Even the most casual reader of the Bible cannot help but be struck by the apparently haphazard way in which it is organized. "It must be admitted that these narratives were compiled from different sources, without any proper arrangement or scrutiny."

Making things even more difficult are numerous scribal errors and variant readings that, Spinoza insists, have crept into the text as the original manuscript was copied again and again and handed down through the generations. Spinoza, like most of the young men of his generation born into the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish community (but not necessarily their Iberian-born fathers), knew Hebrew well—he composed a grammar of that language for his gentile friends in the late 1660s—and he was a careful reader of the Hebrew Bible. His conclusions are based on close analysis of that text and technical linguistic considerations, including "doubtful readings" due to missing or mistaken words, copying errors made between similarly formed letters (the *resh* and the *dalet*, for example, might be taken for each other), and changes in vocalization.

> That the text is mutilated cannot be doubted by anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the Hebrew language, for it [1 Samuel 13.1] begins thus, "Saul was in his __ year when he began to reign, and he reigned for two years over Israel." Who can fail to see, I repeat, that the number of years of Saul's age when he began to reign has been omitted? And I do not think that anyone can doubt too that the

> narrative itself requires a greater number for the years of his reign. For chapter 27 v. 7 of the same book tells us that David sojourned among the Philistines, to whom he had fled for refuge from Saul, a year and four months. By this calculation the other events of his [Saul's] reign must have occupied eight months, a conclusion which I imagine no one will accept.

Spinoza was not alone among his contemporaries in using textual evidence and historical considerations, including the works of ancient writers such as Josephus, to draw radical conclusions—ones that went well beyond what earlier scholars had been willing to claim—about the human origins of the Bible. But neither did he have much company. And those few who, some years before, had published similar views certainly did not prepare a more receptive environment for Spinoza's theses; on the contrary, they probably put the authorities on greater alert against such blasphemies against Scripture, although it is unlikely that there could be any circumstances in the seventeenth century under which the claim that the Pentateuch is not at all the work of Moses might get an unbiased hearing.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes had argued that Scripture as we have it is not uniformly and literally the word of God—that it is, in important respects, a very human and historical document. He grants that "God is the first and original author" of Scripture. Through supernatural revelation, God conveyed his word to the prophets. But it follows from this that those prophets are the only individuals who can be certain as to what exactly the word of God is. Only the direct recipient of a revelation has a chance of truly knowing both *what* was revealed and *that* it was revealed by God. Since the writings now canonized as Scripture are many times removed from those original revelations and from whatever was immediately written down by the prophets who received them, the firsthand knowledge of revelation is lost.

Working, like Spinoza (and Ibn Ezra), from the obvious problems raised by a Mosaic authorship ("It were a strange interpretation to say *Moses* spake of his own sepulcher . . . that it was not found to that day wherein he was yet living"), Hobbes concludes that Moses did not write all or even most of the Pentateuch, although he did write everything in it that he is explicitly said to have written, particularly the Mosaic law (for example, Hobbes believes that Deuteronomy 11–26 are by Moses' own hand). Neither did Joshua write the book of Joshua; it was composed "after his own time," just as Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and other books were written much later than the events they narrate. In fact, Hobbes concludes, the "Old Testament" is a compilation of writings "by divers men," though "all endued with one and the same spirit, in that they conspire to one and the same end, which is the setting forth of the rights of the kingdom of *God*, the *Father, Son* and *Holy Ghost*." These inspired writings were put together "long after the Captivity," and Hobbes's opinion as to its author-editor is the same as Spinoza's: "Scripture was set forth in the form we have it in by Ezra."

What has come down through the generations as the Hebrew Bible, then, is, as Spinoza would assert in the *Treatise*, a work of human literature that carries a divine message. However, in no way can this natural product justifiably be identified with the supernatural word of God as this was originally revealed to the prophets. Too much time has gone by since that act of divine

communication, and the post-exilic documents that are "the true registers of those things which were done and said by the prophets" have subsequently passed through too many scribal hands under various regimes, for us to be able to say with any confidence that what we have is, in all of its particulars, the word of God.

This is where Hobbes puts his analysis of the Bible—including the Christian Gospels—to political use. For he concludes that whatever authority the text of Scripture has must come not from any sure knowledge about its divine origin (which, absent a special revelation to confirm this, cannot be had) but solely from the sovereign who governs the land (or, more precisely, its official church) and proclaims the text of Scripture to be God's word.

> None can know they are God's word (though all true Christians believe it) but those to whom God himself hath revealed it supernaturally. . . . He, therefore, to whom God hath not supernaturally revealed that they are his, nor that those that published them were sent by him, is not obliged to obey them by any authority but his whose commands have already the force of laws (that is to say, by any other authority than that of the commonwealth, residing in the sovereign, who only has the legislative power).

Hobbes first published *Leviathan* in English in 1651. His discussion of the problem of biblical authorship in that work is relatively brief, and, while it anticipates the arguments of the *Treatise*, does not match the scope and detail of Spinoza's discussion. Four years later, a book published in Amsterdam in Latin (but probably written in the 1640s), reviewed the case in somewhat more extensive terms than Hobbes. It was quickly condemned as a "blasphemous" and "Godless" work, as *Leviathan* and the *Treatise* themselves would be in the 1670s.

The author of the *Pre-Adamites* was one of those peripatetic figures who populate the landscape of the early modern Republic of Letters. Isaac La Peyrère went wherever his work as secretary to the Prince of Condé took him: Bordeaux, Paris, Amsterdam, London, Spain, even Scandinavia. In the process, he expanded not only his official business contacts but his intellectual acquaintances as well, and it is possible that he met both Spinoza and Hobbes.

The primary thesis of La Peyrère's work was that Adam was not the first man. Rather, there was a lineage of human beings existing before Adam. The evidence that La Peyrère marshals for this thesis includes contemporary scientific developments, such as the discovery of new lands with heretofore unknown peoples who "did not descend from Adam," and recently uncovered ancient histories describing civilizations not accounted for in the Bible. La Peyrère also points to evidence internal to Scripture. Where, he asks, would Cain's wife have come from if there were not other people besides Adam's own progeny? The book of Genesis, he concludes, is the history of the origin not of all humankind but only of the Jewish people, and the creation of Adam was simply the creation of the first *Jewish* man.

In the course of pursuing this theory, La Peyrère argues that the text of the Hebrew Bible as we have it is not by the hand of Moses—again, Moses could not have written about his own death or about events that took place after he died—or by the prophets themselves, but is an edited document that draws on a variety of ancient writings. "I need not trouble the Reader much further to prove a thing in itself sufficiently evident, that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses, as is thought." In fact, "these things were diversely written, being taken out of several

authors." The final author-editor did not do a very skilled job, in La Peyrère's estimation, and the extant product is an inconsistent collection that varies in quality among its parts and whose manuscript tradition—involving numerous "careless transcribers"—exhibits an inordinate number of variant readings. "Nor need anyone wonder after this, when he reads many things confused and out of order, obscure, deficient, many things omitted and misplaced, when they shall consider with themselves that they are a heap of copie confusedly taken." La Peyrère doubts that this corrupt text, what he disparagingly calls a "heap of copie of copie," is an accurate source for what is to be found in the original, "real" Bible and a reliable record of what God revealed to the prophets.

Despite embedding his account of the Bible's origins in the context of his "shocking" pre-Adamite theory, La Peyrère, as one scholar puts it, "was not just a nut-case." His book was widely read, and "he was known to many of the leading Bible scholars of the time." Spinoza owned a copy of the *Pre-Adamites*. He also had in his library Hobbes's *The Citizen*, in which the Englishman's views regarding Scripture's origin and Mosaic authorship are only hinted at—he notes in *The Citizen*, for example, that the Bible is "that which God hath spoken" not completely but only in "innumerable places." It cannot be doubted, however, that Spinoza also read *Leviathan* while composing the *Treatise*, either in his friend Abraham van Berckel's 1667 Dutch translation or in the 1668 Latin translation published in Amsterdam. It is impossible to say whether Hobbes or La Peyrère exercised any influence on Spinoza. Spinoza was well acquainted with Ibn Ezra and other medieval Jewish commentators on Torah and the rest of Hebrew Scripture, and probably needed no help from Hobbes or La Peyrère (neither of whom knew Hebrew), or any other contemporary thinker, for that matter, in forming his views on biblical authorship.

For Spinoza (and for Hobbes and La Peyrère), then, the Hebrew Bible is a jumble of texts by different hands, from different periods and for different audiences. Just as significant—and this seems to be a point original with Spinoza—there was much contingency and even some arbitrariness to the inclusion of some sources but not others. The original, Second Temple–era author-editor of the texts was able only partially to synthesize his sources and create a single work out of them. Moreover, this imperfectly composed collection was then subject to the changes that naturally creep into writings during the transmission process as they are copied and recopied again and again, over many generations. It is a "faulty, mutilated, adulterated and inconsistent" piece of work, a mixed breed by its birth and corrupted by its descent and preservation. The Hebrew Bible is full of passages that are, as Spinoza is fond of saying, clearly *truncata*, and it shows its less obvious fault lines to someone who knows how to look for them. "That the text is mutilated cannot be doubted by anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the Hebrew language."

What is not *truncatum*, however, is the ultimate teaching of Scripture, whether the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Gospels. It is, in fact, a rather simple one: Practice justice and loving kindness to your fellow human beings. The point of all the commandments and the lesson of all the stories, surviving whole and unadulterated throughout the divergencies, errors, ambiguities, and corruptions of the text, is that basic moral message. It is, Spinoza insists, there in the Hebrew prophets ("Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19.18]) and it is in the Gospels ("He who loves his neighbor has satisfied every claim of the law" [Romans 13.8]). "I can say with certainty, that in the matter of moral doctrine I have never observed a fault of variant reading that could give rise to obscurity or doubt in such teaching." The moral doctrine is the clear and universal message of the Bible, at least for those who know how to read it properly. But the question is, what is the proper way to read it?

. . .

In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides is concerned to combat the anthropomorphization of God to which common people, and even the learned, are prone. An infinite, eternal being cannot have anything in common with finite creatures; there can be no analogy drawn between human beings and God, and nothing about the divine nature can be known by considering human nature. This is obviously true in the case of body, and many chapters of the *Guide* are devoted to dispelling the notion that God has any physical features (fingers, face, feet, etc.). But Maimonides also believes that the true understanding of God, such as we can obtain it, must exclude attributing to God features of human psychology as well: anger, jealousy, envy, and other mental states familiar to us from introspection.

However, the Bible repeatedly refers to God in both psychological and physical terms. The reader is told of God's wrath, regret, and forgiveness, as well as his sitting down and rising up, his coming and going, even his looking and hearing. Read literally, these passages encourage, even demand, an anthropomorphizing of God. It is just this kind of "perplexity" generated by an apparent inconsistency between reason and faith that the *Guide* is intended to cure.

Maimonides believes that a literal reading of the writings of the Hebrew prophets is the primary or default reading. Unless there are compelling reasons not to, one should opt for a straightforward, simple interpretation of the text. However, if such an interpretation yields a meaning that is inconsistent with a demonstrable philosophical truth, then a figurative or metaphorical interpretation *must* be adopted. Thus, reason tells us that God cannot possibly have a body. The principle "God is one" is the most important principle in all of Judaism—indeed, a fundamental theological truth for any monotheistic faith. And it can be rationally demonstrated with absolute certainty that a being that is essentially one, a simple unity, cannot possibly be corporeal. "There is no profession of unity unless the doctrine of God's corporeality is denied. For a body cannot be one, but is composed of matter and form, which by definition are two; it is also divisible, subject to partition." Thus, a reading of a scriptural passage that involves attributing corporeal parts to God runs up against a demonstrated philosophical truth and, for that reason, must be rejected. Any mention of God's "eye" is to be read as referring to his watchfulness, his providence, or his intellectual apprehension; while prophetic talk of God's "heart" is to be understood as referring to his thought or his opinion (although what God's thought or opinion is like cannot be inferred from what our human thoughts or opinions are like).

On the other hand, when a literal reading of a passage, however odd it may seem, does not contradict any demonstrated truth, it should be adopted. Thus, Maimonides insists that although some philosophers (including Aristotle) firmly believe that the world is eternal and necessary, no one—including, he insists, Aristotle—has yet offered a conclusive proof of this. Therefore, there is no justification for reading the Bible's account of creation figuratively.

> That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively. . . . However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and

figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments.

Maimonides is committed to this rationalist principle of interpretation because, as we have seen, he believes that prophecy, biblical or otherwise, is essentially the communication of scientific, metaphysical, and moral truths in concrete and imaginative form. The prophet is like the philosopher in that the content of what he proclaims comes to him as an "intellectual overflow" or emanation from God. Thus, there is a sense in which prophetic utterances are of the same nature, derive from the same source, and have the same cognitive stature as philosophical or rational statements. The prophet, like the philosopher, has achieved perfection in his speculative or rational faculties (the difference between the two is that the prophet has also achieved perfection in his imaginative faculty). It follows that what the prophet communicates is, in its substance, rational knowledge, and reason will therefore be the key to interpreting true prophetic writings.

In his mature philosophical writings, Spinoza rarely names other philosophers, either those with whom he agrees (such as Descartes) or those with whom he differs (also, on occasion, Descartes). Such personal touches would not be in keeping with the geometric format of the *Ethics*. In the *Treatise*, there is the occasional mention of Plato or Aristotle, and his admiring review of Ibn Ezra's discussion of Mosaic authorship. However, such exceptions tend to prove the rule about Spinoza's normal reserve in referring to the thought of others. In his discussion in the *Treatise* of the interpretation of Scripture, however, he makes a major exception to this general policy.

Spinoza's theory of biblical hermeneutic is presented in explicit and highly critical contrast with that of Maimonides. Unlike the more subtle engagement with Maimonides in his discussion of prophecy, where Spinoza exhibits Maimonidean tendencies of his own, in his examination of "the views of those who disagree with me" on the matter of scriptural interpretation he goes to great lengths to show that "the method of Maimonides is plainly of no value." Among other things, that method twists the meanings of biblical passages to make them fit independent philosophical doctrines. "[Maimonides] assumes that it is legitimate for us to explain away and distort the words of Scripture to accord with our preconceived opinions, to deny its literal meaning and change it into something else even when it is perfectly plain and absolutely clear." This is especially inappropriate in the case of the prophetic writings, whose authors were not philosophically learned and who were more concerned with encouraging moral obedience than with communicating intellectual truths.

Moreover, Spinoza insists, Maimonides' hyper-rationalist method, which demands that one know the truth value of a proposition in order to determine whether or not it is being expressed by a biblical passage, makes the meaning of the Bible inaccessible to ordinary people without philosophical training and absolutely certain knowledge of highly speculative doctrines. "For as long as we are not convinced of the truth of a statement, we cannot know whether it is in conformity with reason or contrary to it, and consequently neither can we know whether the literal meaning [of a biblical passage] is true or false." The interpretation of Scripture would need "a light other

than the natural light," and only philosophers would be qualified to determine what the Bible is trying to say.

> If this view were correct, it would follow that the common people, for the most part knowing nothing of logical reasoning or without leisure for it, would have to rely solely on the authority and testimony of philosophers for their understanding of Scripture, and would therefore have to assume that philosophers are infallible in their interpretations of Scripture. This would indeed be a novel form of ecclesiastical authority, with very strange priests or pontiffs, more likely to excite men's ridicule than veneration.

For these reasons, Spinoza concludes, "we can dismiss Maimonides' view as harmful, unprofitable and absurd."

A proper method of interpreting Scripture—one that is accessible to all who are endowed simply with the natural light of reason—is, for Spinoza, of the utmost importance, particularly because of contemporary tendencies to manipulate the meanings of biblical passages for political and social ends. Seventeenth-century Dutch theologians and religious leaders in particular are given to finding in Scripture exactly what will suit their purposes. They justify their convenient but unwarranted readings by appealing to "the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." This, for certain Calvinists, is the supernatural illumination that is supposed to be the true guide for understanding what the prophets are saying; it is, however, like divine grace, available only to the favored few.

> We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's Word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority. . . . They imagine that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Bible, and they exhaust themselves in unraveling these absurdities while ignoring other things of value. They ascribe to the Holy Spirit whatever their wild fantasies have invented, and devote their utmost strength and enthusiasm to defending it.
>
> So pursued, the interpretation of Scripture is without an anchor. These theologians, guided only by their mysterious faculty, try to pass off "human fabrications as divine teachings." The results are ungrounded in any objective method and, thus, unverifiable. Their readings reflect nothing but the prejudices they hold and the superstitions they hope to encourage in others. The inevitable consequence, as history has shown again and again, is religious feuding and the disruption of civil peace.

The true way to interpret Scripture and discover what exactly it teaches and what it does not teach is to seek the meanings intended by its authors.

. . .

The goal of the interpreter of Scripture, like the goal of a sincere interpreter of any work of human literature, is to discover what the work means, and this—for Spinoza, at least—is simply what message the author wants to convey through his writing. "The point at issue is merely the meaning of the texts, not their truth." It is one thing to ask whether it is true that God is subject to emotions such as anger and jealousy; this is an inquiry best left to philosophers. It is quite another thing to determine whether Moses believed (and wanted others to believe) that God can be angry or jealous, and this is the task of the interpreter. His goal is to know "what was, or could have been, the author's intention . . . concentrating [his] attention on what the author could have had in mind."

Spinoza, with astonishing boldness, compares the proper procedure for interpreting Scripture (and, presumably, any literary work) with the methods of natural science. "I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it." And just as a scientific knowledge of nature must be sought "from Nature itself," without presupposing any substantive, a priori metaphysical or theological principles, so "all the contents of Scripture . . . must be sought from Scripture alone."

. . .

> The task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture . . . allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture.

The moral principles propounded by Scripture can indeed be known independently of Scripture, by reason alone, much as Spinoza shows in the *Ethics*. They are, after all, purely rational principles that "can be demonstrated from accepted axioms." However, *that* Scripture teaches this or that principle cannot be discovered except by looking at Scripture itself in a critical manner.

By "Scripture alone," Spinoza certainly means to exclude both the Maimonidean-rationalist recourse to an external philosophical canon and Calvin's appeal to special divine illumination (the Holy Spirit). On the other hand, he also wants to avoid the individualistic, highly subjective approach to the reading of Scripture favored by certain dissident Reformed sects. Quakers and Collegiants, for example, among whom Spinoza counted many friends, leave it up to the individual to interpret Scripture as his conscience or "inner light" leads. For Spinoza, there is an objective method for interpreting Scripture, one that should guide its practitioner, despite the many difficulties standing in his way, to at least an approximate understanding of its authors' intended meanings in many—and among them, the most important—of its passages.

To be sure, Spinoza has a rather extended understanding of *Scripture alone* in which it was written but also factors such as the social and political circumstances of its composition and the biographies of its authors. Examining Scripture "from Scripture alone" apparently means studying it from exclusively, but *all*, relevant scriptural considerations. It is as if to say that by "Bible" is meant the *world* of the Bible. What Spinoza is demanding is a historical approach to Scripture, and it involves looking at the diverse contexts within which the writings were originally created.

Moreover, while Spinoza's Bible hermeneutics is not a rationalism in the Maimonidean sense, reason nonetheless has an important role to play in it. The interpretation of Scripture does require the use of one's rational faculties working methodically on textual and historical material.

. . .

Since the supreme authority for the interpretation of Scripture is vested in each individual, the rule that governs interpretation must be nothing other than the natural light that is common to all, and not any supernatural light, nor eternal authority. Nor must this rule be so difficult as not to be available to any but skilled philosophers; it must be suited to the natural and universal ability and capacity of mankind.

Like the science of nature, the "science" of interpreting the Bible begins with the gathering of data. In the case of Scripture, the main relevant data are the various pronouncements themselves: what one biblical writer says about God, as these statements may be found in the books he is said to have composed; what another writer says about divine providence; and, most important of all, what different writers have to say about ethical matters, about what is right and good. Once collected, all of this material should be properly organized by author and subject matter. "The pronouncements made in each book should be assembled and listed under headings, so that we thus have to hand all the texts that treat of the same subject." At the same time, the interpreter, who needs to be well-versed in ancient Hebrew—since "all the writers of both the Old and the New Testaments were Hebrews"—should note any ambiguities or obscurities (defined as "the degree of difficulty with which the meaning can be elicited from the context, and not . . . the degree of difficulty with which its truth can be perceived by reason") among the passages he has collected, as well as any inconsistencies or contradictions that are found in material both by the same writer and among different writers.

In addition to this textual data, the interpreter needs to gather everything that can be known about the writers of the Bible. He needs to inquire into the biographical, historical, political, even psychological background of each book's author.

> Our historical study should set forth the circumstances relevant to all the extant books of the prophets, giving the life, character and pursuits of the author of every book, detailing who he was, on what occasion and at what time and for whom and in what language he wrote . . . for in order to know which pronouncements were set forth as laws and which as moral teaching, it is important to be acquainted with the life, character and interests of the author. Furthermore, as we have a better understanding of a person's character and temperament, so we can more easily explain his words.

Spinoza is saying that in many cases you cannot know what a person is trying to say unless you know who that person is, what he cares about, why he is writing, and to whom he is communicating. "It is essential for us to have some knowledge of the authors if we seek to interpret

their writings." This applies as much to the biblical prophets as it does to the author of *Oliver Twist*, all of whom are engaged in creating imaginative literature with a moral and social message, though of different literary genres and for different kinds of audiences. Indeed, it is a particularly important rule for understanding the prophets, who lived many centuries ago and in historical and cultural circumstances far removed from those of a seventeenth-century Dutch burgher.

The final set of crucial data involves the history of the transmission of the biblical texts. This is essential for determining their authenticity and for discovering, when possible, any corruptions or "mutilations" they may have suffered over generations. The interpreter will need to know "whether or not [the books] have been contaminated by spurious insertions, whether errors have crept in, and whether these have been corrected by experienced and trustworthy scholars."

With all this at hand, the interpreter, like the scientist, can now proceed to discover the general principles that govern the phenomena. Or, in this case, he is ready, on the basis of the literary data, to discern the doctrines that are proclaimed throughout all the prophetic writings by their authors. If the natural scientist is seeking the laws of nature, the Bible scholar is after "that which is most universal and forms the basis and foundation of all Scripture; in short, that which is commended in Scripture by all the prophets as doctrine eternal and most profitable for all mankind."

Spinoza believes that there are such universal principles expressed everywhere by Scripture, regardless of a book's author: that God exists, that God is one, that God should be worshipped, and that God cares for everyone and loves above all those who worship him and love their neighbors as themselves. This is the simple message of all of Scripture. In fact, Spinoza believes—somewhat incredibly—that these propositions are so clearly the meaning of many of Scripture's passages that very little interpretive work is needed to find them. "These and similar doctrines . . . are taught everywhere in Scripture so clearly and explicitly that no one has ever been in any doubt as to its meaning on these points."

Not everything in Scripture is so explicit and unambiguous, however. Spinoza rejects the view held by many of his Protestant contemporaries that Scripture's entire meaning is fairly obvious and needs practically no interpretation.

. . .

When it comes to principles that are "of less universal import but affect our ordinary daily life"—namely, the particularities of moral conduct and the different sorts of actions recommended by each prophet as constituting justice and charity—many obscurities, contradictions, and ambiguities will be found. While these are supposed to "flow from the universal doctrine like rivulets from their source," their derivation may not come easy. Among other things, the interpreter must consider the occasion on which the passage was written and to whom its content was directed.

Spinoza provides the example of Moses, who is reported in the Torah as saying that God is fire and that God is jealous. How to interpret such statements, and especially determining whether to read them literally or figuratively, is not a matter of deciding whether or not a literal reading is consistent with demonstrated philosophical truths about God. Rather, it involves looking at the relevant passages in the light of the basic principles of Scripture already derived from the data, along with other things that Moses says and the circumstances in which he is saying them. Since Moses does clearly and consistently state elsewhere that God has no resemblance to visible things, the sentence in which he says that God is fire must be read metaphorically. "The question as to

whether Moses did or did not believe that God is fire must in no wise be decided by the rationality or irrationality of the belief, but solely from other pronouncements of Moses." The Hebrew word for "fire" can be used to refer to anger, and because a leader would find such imagistic language to be more effective for motivating others to obey God, it can be concluded that Moses did not mean to assert that God is literally flamelike. As Spinoza says to van Blijenburgh some years earlier, in a letter from early 1665, sometimes the authors of Scripture tailored their language to the understanding of the masses. "Scripture, being particularly adapted to the needs of the common people, continually speaks in merely human fashion, for the common people are incapable of understanding higher things."

On the other hand, because Moses is nowhere reported as saying that God does not have emotions, the sentence in which he says that God is jealous can be read literally. Although such a reading is opposed to reason—at least, so Spinoza argues in the *Ethics*—it is not inconsistent either with the universal proclamations of Scripture ("God is one," etc.) or with any more particular principles espoused by Moses himself.

Similarly, Jesus is reported in the Gospel of Matthew to have said, "If a man strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the left also." If this is understood to be a literal direction to judges and lawgivers, such toleration of injustice and submission to wrongdoing would, Spinoza argues, be inconsistent with the law of Moses, which demands that every crime deserves a corresponding and just punishment ("an eye for an eye").

> We should consider who said this, to whom, and at what time. This was said by Christ, who was not ordaining laws as a lawgiver, but was expounding his teachings as a teacher, because . . . he was intent on improving men's minds rather than their external actions. Further, he spoke these words to men suffering under oppression, living in a corrupt commonwealth where justice was utterly disregarded, a commonwealth whose ruin he saw to be imminent.

The result of Spinoza's interpretive method is not a subjective or even relativistic reading of Scripture; there is an objective meaning to be gotten out of the text by using the proper tools. Rather, what Spinoza offers is a contextual reading, one that looks at Scripture for what it is: a very human document composed at a particular time for very human purposes.

There are, Spinoza admits, many obstacles to deciphering the Bible's true meaning. While it is relatively easy to grasp the work's general moral message—"we can understand the meaning of Scripture with confidence in matters relating to salvation and necessary to blessedness"—grasping its less universal principles and exhortations and revealing many of the beliefs of the prophets proves to be more difficult. In many instances, we can in fact only conjecture what a prophetic author is trying to say.

This is due to a number of factors. First, there is the poverty of our understanding of the biblical languages, or what Spinoza calls "our inability to present a complete account of Hebrew." So much linguistic information has been lost over the millennia, including certain grammatical rules and common vocabulary, that we now have at best a fragmentary knowledge of Hebrew. "The men of old who used the Hebrew language have left to posterity no information concerning the basic principles and study of this language. At any rate, we possess nothing at all from them, neither dictionary nor grammar nor textbook on rhetoric." With the disappearance of native

speakers of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, much information ordinarily possessed by the daily users of a language has disappeared. "Nearly all the words for fruits, birds, fishes have perished with the passage of time, together with numerous other words." Moreover, even when the meanings of particular words are known, what is lacking is an idiomatic and colloquial knowledge that would allow us to make sense of an obscure passage.

There are also, Spinoza insists, ambiguities in the Bible that are due to certain peculiarities of ancient Hebrew. These include the multiple meanings of words, especially particles and adverbs; letters that look the same; and the lack of a clear and precise tense system among the verbs. More significant is the absence of vowels and punctuation in the original Hebrew text (the vocalization marks were added in the Middle Ages by the Masoretes, whom Spinoza calls "men of a later age whose authority should carry no weight with us," since their insertions reflect their own interpretations of Scripture).

Finally, there is the sheer difficulty of accurately reconstructing the history surrounding such ancient writings. About most of Scripture's authors we either have no knowledge whatsoever, or only partial and dubious information. Their social stature, political persuasion, and audience must be inferred on the basis of very slim evidence. Their psychological lives are hidden from us, and we can only speculate on their motives in writing.

All of these difficulties, Spinoza concludes, are "so grave that I have no hesitation in affirming that in many instances we either do not know the true meaning of Scripture or we can do no more than make conjecture."

Spinoza's naturalization of Scripture and his historical approach to its interpretation, while deflationary to some degree, is not meant to rob the Bible of all of its authority. On the contrary, Spinoza believes that it is those who focus too much on the words of Scripture and not its message that have betrayed it. By promoting myths about the supernatural origin of the Bible, sectarian religions have fostered the worship of letters on a page rather than the ethical doctrines that its authors hoped to spread. And this, Spinoza contends, is idolatry. "Instead of God's Word, they are beginning to worship likenesses and images, that is, paper and ink."

In fact, it is the moral content alone in which the true authority—indeed, the *divinity*—of Scripture consists.

> If we want to testify, without any prejudgment, to the divinity of Scripture, it must be made evident to us from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrine; for it is on this basis alone that its divinity can be proved.

What makes something divine is not that it has its origin in an alleged act by God. (This is especially the case for Spinoza, whose identification of God and Nature means that everything is caused by God.) Rather, something is divine if and only if it moves people to act according to justice and charity, if it leads them to love God and their fellow human beings. "A thing is called sacred and divine only for as long as men use it in a religious way"—that is, insofar as it is associated with pious behavior. Thus, "the divinity of Scripture must be established solely from

the fact that it teaches true virtue." And Spinoza does believe that there really is something special about the Bible in this regard. Because of the ethical superiority and imaginative gifts of its prophetic authors, the Bible, when properly read, truly is an excellent teacher of virtue and piety.

Spinoza thereby self-consciously relativizes what is sacred about the Bible. Nothing is sacred or divine in itself, "in an absolute sense," but "only in relation to the mind." A book, considered alone, is just a book. Were Scripture to lose its moral efficacy, its power of bringing people toward devotion to God and love of their neighbors, then it would be, like any book, "nothing more than paper and ink . . . their neglect [would] render it completely profane." (Conversely, just as the mere acquaintance with Scripture, without any understanding of its true moral message, is not *sufficient* for bringing people to blessedness, so a reading of Scripture is not *necessary* for piety and religious virtue—these can be achieved by someone who has never even heard of the Bible. "He who is totally unacquainted with the Biblical narratives, but nevertheless holds salutary beliefs and pursues the true way of life, is absolutely blessed.")

For this reason, Spinoza insists—in yet another audacious statement that must have incited the rage of his critics—that any book can be called divine, as long as its message is the proper one and it is effective in conveying it. "Books that teach and tell of the highest things are equally sacred, in whatever language and by whatever nation they were written." Thus, it is still true, in a sense, that God is "the author of the Bible—not because God willed to confer on men a set number of books, but because of the true religion that is taught therein." But the Word of God can, at least in principle, be found in many books. There is no reason why one particular work of human literature, written by the Hebrews several millennia ago, should have a monopoly on the teaching of true religion.