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1

BENEDICT SPINOZA

(1632–1677)

Modernity's Changing Tide and the Dislocation of Scripture from Revelation

BENEDICT DE SPINOZA IS A WATERSHED FIGURE IN THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL interpretation. His approach to biblical studies was not born in a vacuum. Nor was his approach to biblical studies the first to raise critical questions about the Bible. Nevertheless, Spinoza is a significant figure because of his bold and bald articulation of the matter. Others before him had taken a critical approach to the historical character of Scripture and its claims — Thomas Hobbes and Isaac La Peyrère, for example. Spinoza, however, speaks directly without much clearing of his throat. The Swiss-Calvinist theologian Johann Heinrich Heidegger (1633 – 1698) recognized the erosion initiated by Hobbes and La Peyrère, “but no one,” he writes, “struck at the foundations of the entire Pentateuch more shamelessly than Spinoza.”¹ In essence, Spinoza’s approach to biblical interpretation brought together the following assumptions: (1) The Bible is a product of human history and evolution and is to be read in the light of its natural history, and (2) philosophy and theology must be understood as two distinct disciplines. The former discipline has to do with truth, and the latter with morality. For Spinoza, “the natural light of reason” became the primary lens for reading the Bible and negotiating its claims.

1. Quoted in Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 447. Steven Nadler writes, “Baruch (or Benedictus) de Spinoza (1632–77) was, without question, the most radical (and vilified) philosopher of his time” (“The Bible Hermeneutics of Baruch de Spinoza,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 2:827.

When Spinoza first published his work advancing these ideas, he did so anonymously. The book's innocuous title was *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).² The book's content was not so benign. The *Tractatus* met with immediate hostility and was formally banned in 1674.³ Even before then, it was an illegal text whose publication was hindered.⁴ In 1670, for example, the government ordered a raid on the bookshops of Leiden in a search-and-destroy mission against the *Tractatus*.⁵ Before the publication of the *Tractatus*, his local Jewish community expelled him because of the kind of ideas presented in this volume. It is an understatement, therefore, to say that Spinoza's ideas and work created a stir.

It is important to come to terms with Spinoza because his work sets a trajectory for the modern-critical approach to Old Testament exegesis. With Spinoza, the search for the text's meaning becomes equated with the search for the text's ostensive historical referent, setting, and immediate intention. Moreover, his Old Testament interpretation is set within the framework of Cartesian modes of knowing, rejection of miracles, and denial of the supernatural.⁶ As one can imagine, these modern intellectual instincts changed the rules of the interpretive game. Before turning our attention to Spinoza's work, we will explore a brief account of his life and intellectual/social context.

Crossing the Rubicon: Spinoza's Cultural and Intellectual Setting

Spinoza was born on November 24, 1632, in Amsterdam, "the most beautiful city of Europe."⁷ His parents, Michael de Espinoza and Hanna Debora, were Portuguese Jews who likely resettled in Amsterdam because of the

2. Published in English as *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. J. Israel, trans. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007).

3. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 275.

4. "The notion that Spinoza's *Tractatus* ever circulated freely is thus a myth lacking all basis in fact" (Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 276). The illegal status of the *Tractatus* makes the wide dissemination of its first Latin and French editions all the more fascinating. The clandestine efforts for the book's publication are filled with intrigue and subversion. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, chapter 16.

5. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 275 – 76.

6. The term *Cartesian* is shorthand for the rationalism associated with René Descartes. It is based on the Latin form of Descartes's name.

7. This description comes from the first biographical account of Spinoza, an account written anonymously (cited in Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 122 – 23).

Portuguese Inquisition. The Jewish community in Amsterdam during this time was composed of three subgroups, each with its own synagogue and governing board.⁸ In 1639 these three independent boards became one and were called the Talmud Torah.⁹ Before this unification, however, both Benedict's father, Michael, and his uncle, Abraham, served on the governing board of their particular community (Beth Jacob). It is worth mentioning that only five people at a time served on these governing boards; it was an elite group. After the union of the three groups, Michael served on the Talmud Torah's board from 1649 – 1650.¹⁰ The Espinoza family was respected and valued in Amsterdam's Jewish community. In time, Spinoza's rejection of the ideas and values of his community would bring shame on the Spinoza name.

There is debate among the sources regarding Spinoza's formal education and how he came into conflict with his Jewish community. He is often portrayed as a young scholar who debated with his rabbi on the finer points of biblical and Talmudic interpretation in the higher level *medras-sim* (classes) of his rabbinic school. This is doubtful.¹¹ Spinoza's name does not appear on the class rolls kept during this time. This indicates a situation common to many young men of Spinoza's era. He probably joined his father's business while still an adolescent, precluding further education. In any case, it is unlikely Spinoza pursued formal, rabbinic education past the age of fourteen.¹² These events in no way cast aspersions on his gifted intellect. He had a masterful knowledge of the Hebrew language, along with specialized knowledge of the Scriptures and rabbinical sources.¹³ Still, Spinoza's intellectual curiosity was left nearly unfettered once his formal, rabbinic training ceased.¹⁴

Spinoza continued as a merchant in his father's business for many years.

8. See Frampton, *Spinoza*, 125.

9. See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 55.

10. See Frampton, *Spinoza*, 125.

11. See Frampton, *Spinoza*, 130 – 32. Rabbi Mortera's continued influence on his pupil, Spinoza, outside the Talmud Torah school has been helpfully pointed out by Nadler (*Spinoza*, 90 – 93). See also the possible influence of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, one of the most famous rabbis of the time, on Spinoza as well (Nadler, *Spinoza*, 93 – 100).

12. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 63 – 64.

13. *Ibid.*, 65. Nadler calls into question Spinoza's knowledge of the Talmud, describing it as "superficial at best" (*Spinoza*, 93).

14. This did not mean that all of Spinoza's education ceased. He most likely attended one of the community's schools for adults (*yeshiva*), but his formal, rabbinic training in the Talmud Torah school eventually came to an end (see Nadler, *Spinoza*, 89 – 91).

His business engagements with Protestant thinkers in the Netherlands may have exposed him to broader intellectual trends than the Talmud Torah community would have allowed. He also may have studied for a period at the University of Leiden (1656 – 1658), though the evidence for this is thin.¹⁵ At any rate, Spinoza began to find the dogma of Judaism problematic and pursued other intellectual options.¹⁶ He describes the immediate cause of his intellectual pursuit in his first published work, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. He says his pursuits were born out of his experience that “all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile ...”¹⁷ One can suppose Spinoza’s business life left him intellectually bored while the traditional teachings of his rabbinic community became increasingly provincial and outdated. By his early twenties, his philosophical interests had turned decidedly secular.¹⁸ His most influential tutor in this newfound intellectual freedom was René Descartes.¹⁹

Spinoza’s continued repudiation of rabbinic teaching and authority led to an inevitable conflict. Israel describes the situation: “Ruined financially, Spinoza had now definitively made up his mind to cross the Rubicon — discarding respectability, social standing, and commerce and devoting himself wholeheartedly to philosophy.”²⁰ The perfect storm came together in July 1656 as Spinoza’s financial difficulties, which left him unable to pay a promissory tax, coincided with his adoption of new and offensive ideas.²¹ A ban or *cherem* was placed against Spinoza and read out loud in the synagogue before the community.²² Nadler writes, “There is no other excommunication document of the period marked by the vitriol directed at Spinoza when he was expelled from the congregation.”²³ The cause of this hostility was most likely the controversial ideas Spinoza was embracing. As soon as four years after the ban, Spinoza’s controversial ideas began to appear in published form. Some of the notions his religious commu-

15. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 172 – 73.

16. Nadler believes this dissatisfaction began as early as the age of fifteen (*Spinoza*, 100 – 101).

17. Nadler, *Spinoza*, 101.

18. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 102.

19. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 111 – 13; see also, Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 239 – 53.

20. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 171.

21. Frampton observes that historians have to speculate regarding the exact reasons that Spinoza was expelled from the community, though financial and intellectual/theological reasons are the ones most often suggested (*Spinoza*, 149 – 50); see also Nadler, *Spinoza*, 129 – 38.

22. The exact and stark wording of the ban can be found in Nadler, *Spinoza*, 120.

23. Nadler, *Spinoza*, 127.

nity found most offensive were the mortality of the soul, the denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the rejection of the revelatory character of the Torah, and the dismissal of Israel's status as the elect of God.²⁴ Though religious apathy may have been tolerated in the Talmud Torah community, such heretical ideas as Spinoza's were a threat to the very fabric of their existence. After the ban, Baruch took the Christian name Benedictus. He no longer identified with his Jewish roots.

Our engagement with Spinoza is not meant to give a full biographical treatment.²⁵ To do so would take us too far afield. Our interest in Spinoza has to do primarily with his ideas and how they influenced biblical studies. But it is important to understand, even if somewhat minimally, the community values Spinoza was reacting against and the intellectual currents of the day that influenced his thought. Modernity's most cherished claims — autonomous intellectual pursuits, dismissal of dogmatic tradition, naturalism, and affirmation of the Cartesian "I" (I think therefore I am) — were advanced by Spinoza's philosophical and hermeneutical outlook. Because of these intellectual commitments, Spinoza inevitably clashed with his religious community, which valued divine revelation as the highest source of metaphysical and ethical knowledge.

Wood Stoves and the Autonomous I: Descartes's Early Influence on Spinoza

As mentioned above, Descartes was Spinoza's early teacher par excellence. As an aside, it is worth noting that Spinoza's philosophical system, "Spinozism," was the product of his own first-rate mind and should not be understood as "Descartes regurgitated." Jonathan Israel's discipline-defining work *Radical Enlightenment* identifies Spinoza as *the* major figure in the making of modernity. Nevertheless, Descartes's lasting influence on Spinoza is not questioned. Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), and the well-known *Discourse on Method* (1637) provided for Spinoza the philosophical grammar he needed to engage the dogmatism of his Jewish community and the larger Calvinist world he inhabited.²⁶ In many ways, Spinoza was more radical than Descartes because of his application of a Cartesian epistemology to the study

24. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 131–32.

25. For such a treatment, see Nadler, *Spinoza*, and, especially, Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.

26. See Nadler, *Spinoza*, 166.

of the Bible.²⁷ A brief overview of Descartes’s theory of knowledge will help situate Spinoza’s epistemological instincts.

From a “stove-heated room” in Germany, as the story goes, a twenty-three-year-old Descartes decided to rework the entirety of the Aristotelian philosophical tradition handed down to him in the schools — a system of thought already castigated by the medieval nominalists who preceded him.²⁸ Descartes’s philosophical efforts were ambitious as he attempted to provide a secure foundation for knowledge. Where does authority reside in the sciences, and how is knowledge received? When everything else can be called into question, what is the unquestionable premise or foundation of reality and knowledge (e.g., *metaphysics*)? The unambiguous answer Descartes gives to this question is as follows: Whatever reality is or whatever I am, I can be certain that I am a thinking self. Our thinking, our ordering of knowledge — whether it corresponds to reality or not — is the foundation for metaphysical claims about reality and knowledge. This philosophical idea lead to Descartes’s famous *Cogito: I think therefore I am (cogito ergo sum)*.

In Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* he raises the question, “What am I?” This question for Descartes is really about the broader and more important issue he is exploring, namely, “Of what can we be assured?” Before raising this question, Descartes reveals his willingness to tear down the edifice of knowledge handed down to him as he calls into question everything previously assumed.²⁹ Doubt creeps in at every level

27. See Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 242.

28. See Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 224; Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), 188. Gillespie’s account is especially illuminating and helpful. His work shows that Descartes was not the first to counter Aristotelianism or the belief that particular forms such as trees exist because of a prior universal form — a universal form that includes the variety present in the particulars, e.g., “treeness.” Rather, Descartes is working within the skeptical fallout created by the medieval nominalist attacks on Aristotelian metaphysics and theology already established by the end of the fourteenth century. The nominalists challenged the Aristotelian notion of universals and sought to ground being in particulars and individuals. Descartes rejected the Aristotelian universal in favor of the governing and imposing categories of the mind. In other words, the mind, not universals, made sense of the multiplicity in the observable world (*Theological Origins*, ch. 1). See also Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 16–17.

29. “It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences” (quoted in E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, eds., *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 1144.