# Spinoza's Contribution to Biblical Scholarship[1]

Historians of philosophy have found it hard to do justice to Spinoza's contribution to biblical scholarship. Until recently they have ignored this topic, as if the interpretation of culturally important texts was not properly part of a philosopher's business. Lately they've begun to discuss it, but have been preoccupied with Spinoza's denial that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, and how far he could claim originality for that denial.[2] They haven't discussed in any detail the method which led to this conclusion, or said much about his other conclusions. Undoubtedly the authorship of the Pentateuch was, and remains, a significant issue. Maimonides made it a fundamental principle of Judaism that God gave us the Pentateuch through Moses, "who acted like a secretary taking dictation."[3] In the gospels Jesus sometimes seems to accept this belief. So conservative Christians are often keen to defend Moses's authorship.[4] But some of the problems about thinking that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible are pretty obvious, and Spinoza was not the first to notice them. He was only the first to make the argument against the Mosaic authorship so powerfully that it became hard to reject. His real importance for the emerging discipline of critical biblical scholarship was that he developed a method for interpreting the Bible which subsequently set the norm for that field.

## *Method*

Spinoza sets out his method in Chapter Seven of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), where he argues that we should attribute to scripture nothing we have not understood as clearly as possible from its history, where a 'history of scripture' requires the following things:

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[1] In this article I synthesize, condense, and (I hope) improve on two earlier articles: "Spinoza's Contribution to Biblical Scholarship" (in *Baruch de Spinoza, Theologisch-politischer Traktat*, ed. by Otfried Höffe, Akademie Verlag, 2014) and "Resurrecting Leo Strauss" (in the proceedings of the Marburg conference on Leo Strauss, ed. by Winfried Schroeder, forthcoming from De Gruyter).

[2] See, for example, the work of Richard Popkin, whose "Spinoza and Bible Scholarship" appeared in the first edition of this *Companion*.

[3] See Isadore Twersky (ed. & tr.), *A Maimonides Reader*, West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1972, 420-21. The attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses seems to have been based on a misunderstanding of Deut. 31:9. See E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Doubleday, Anchor Bible, 1964, p. xix. It may be found in various early writers (Philo, Josephus, Augustine), but most crucially in the Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14b-15a.

[4] See, for example, Eric Lyons in an article at http://www.apologeticspress.org, citing Mark 7:10, 10:3-9, 12:26, Matthew 19:7-8, John 5:46-47. But Lyons' argument is by no means confined to that issue. He would reject critical historical scholarship on the Bible generally.

> first, an account of the nature of the language in which the books of scripture were written, and which their authors were accustomed to speak;
> second, a subject index, which would organize what scripture says so that we can easily compare what it says about the same topic in different places; and
> third, an account of the authorship of each book – who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, for what audience, for what purpose, and in what language – and of its fate – how it was first received, who preserved it, how many different readings of the text there were, and finally, who decided that it was a sacred book, and how they made that decision.[5]

With this program, as one contemporary biblical scholar has put it, Spinoza gave practitioners of the new discipline their "marching orders"[6] for the next three centuries.

Spinoza did not create this program *ex nihilo*. In the Renaissance various humanist scholars had insisted on the need to have a good understanding of the languages in which the Bible was written, and of the history of the different versions of the text, in order to establish the most accurate version possible and to correct errors in translation. In the 15th Century Lorenzo Valla undertook to compare Jerome's then standard Latin translation of the New Testament with the Greek manuscripts available to him, and to make corrections in it based on his exceptionally good knowledge of Greek and Latin.[7] Nowadays this might seem an obvious thing to do. We know that when manuscripts are copied by hand, as they had been for centuries before the invention of the printing press, mistakes are bound to creep in. But in Valla's day, this project was highly controversial. At the time Jerome's translation was generally regarded as definitive, and preferable to the Greek manuscripts on which it was based. The theory was that Jerome, who had to deal with Greek manuscripts which did not always agree (as well as with earlier Latin translations), had been divinely inspired in making his judgments about what text to translate and how to translate it.

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[5] See Spinoza's call for a proper 'history of scripture' in TTP vii, §§15-23. In references to the TTP I give first the number of the chapter, and then the Bruder section numbers, which will be provided in my forthcoming translation of this work, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Princeton University Press, Vol. II. Translations are mine. On the question of canon formation, see also TTP x, §§1-5, and 43-47.
[6] James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible, A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*, Free Press, 2007, 31.
[7] See *Humanists and Holy Writ, New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance*, Jerry H. Bentley, Princeton UP, 1983.

Valla never published his *Annotations on the New Testament*. His work circulated in manuscript and influenced later editions of the Bible, like the Complutensian Polyglot edition of 1520. But it didn't see print until Erasmus read the manuscript and arranged for its publication in 1505. Over the next ten years he extended Valla's work, making a more thorough search for Greek manuscripts than Valla had, using them as a basis for his own edition of the text, and making a new Latin translation based on that edition. During the Counter-Reformation Valla's *Annotations* were put on the *Index of Prohibited Books*.[8] And in 1546 the Council of Trent,

> considering that not a little advantage will accrue to the Church of God if it be made known which of all the Latin editions of the sacred books now in circulation is to be regarded as authentic, ordains and declares that the Old Latin Vulgate Edition, which, in use for so many hundred years, has been approved by the Church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions, held as authentic, and that no one dare or presume under any pretext whatever to reject it.[9]

Note that it's competing Latin editions of scripture the Council was worried about, not the translations into the vernacular which reformers like Luther were producing. On the face of it, the textual work of Valla and Erasmus was the sort of thing Spinoza's method called for, and the sort of thing you might have thought would be uncontroversial – though as we shall see there are various reasons why things may not be quite as they seem.

Another antecedent for Spinoza's method is found in Valla's most famous work: his unmasking of a notorious forgery, the so-called *Donation of Constantine*.[10] This document purported to record Constantine's donation to the pope of spiritual power over all Christian churches, wherever they might be, and of temporal power over all the territory he controlled in the western Roman empire. The authenticity of the *Donation* had often been suspected, notably by Nicholas of Cusa,[11] who attacked it on historical grounds:

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[8] Ulick Peter Burke, "Lorenzo Valla," *Encyclopedia Britannica*...

[9] *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,* Fourth Session, tr. & intr. by Reverend H. J. Schroeder, O. P., TAN Books, Charlotte, NC, 1978, 18.

[10] See Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, text, with translation and notes by G. W. Bowersock, Harvard University Press, 2007.

[11] See *The Catholic Concordance*, ed. by Paul Sigmund, Cambridge UP, Book III, Ch. 2. It's worth noting that Nicholas was one of the cardinals who encouraged Valla to work on the text of the New Testament.

> I have collected all the histories I could find, the acts of the emperors and Roman pontiffs, the histories by Jerome, who was very careful to include everything, those of Augustine, Ambrose, and the works of other learned men. I have reviewed the acts of the holy councils which took place after Nicaea, and I find no confirmation of what is said about that donation. (*Catholic Concordance*, 217)

Valla too attacked the *Donation* on grounds of historical improbablity: what ruler who had expended much blood and treasure enlarging his territory would, out of sheer "gracious liberality," turn over all his power to a priest? how can this be reconciled with what we know from other sources about the subsequent history of the empire? why do the earliest church histories not mention the donation? But his most decisive arguments were philological: whoever wrote the *Donation* did not write the kind of Latin we would expect from a  competent fourth century author. And that author's work contained many anachronisms, such as the use of the term *satrap* to refer to high officials in Rome, when this term did not come into use with that meaning until the eighth century, or the use of "Constantinople" to refer to the city we now call "Istanbul," which at the time of the supposed donation was called "Byzantium," and did not acquire the name "Constantinople" until after Constantine's death. Throughout most of the Middle Ages the *Donation* had been widely accepted as authentic. It was Valla who showed definitively, by a combination of historical and philological arguments, that it was a fake. Unlike his work on the text of the New Testament, Valla's exposure of the *Donation* did not deal directly with Scripture.[12] But it showed how necessary it could be to read texts carefully for internal evidence of their probable date and authorship.

So far as I have been able to discover, the work which most nearly anticipated the subject index Spinoza called for was written by a rabbi in his own synagogue, Menasseh ben Israel. In 1632

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[12] Valla does, however, make a passing reference to Scripture at one point: "When I was a boy, I remember asking someone 'Who wrote the Book of Job?' When he answered 'Job himself,' I asked the further question of how therefore he managed to mention his own death. This can be said of many other books, although it is not appropriate to discuss this here." Valla, *Donation*, 113. (Bowersock's translation, slightly modified.) I would not suggest that Valla meant to hint that there might be problems about the authorship of the Pentateuch. But it is surprising that he reports being told that Job was the author of the book bearing his name. The traditional view was that Moses wrote that book. See the Talmud, Baba Bathra 14bff.

Menasseh began publishing his *Conciliator*,[13] which undertook to identify all the passages in scripture which *seem* to contradict one another, and to explain why they are *not actually* contradictory. He assumed that because the Bible is "in the highest degree true, it cannot contain any text really contradictory of another." (p. ix) And he went through each book of the Bible in order, citing any passage which was apparently contradicted elsewhere in scripture. When he encountered a prima facie contradiction, he cited both passages (or three or four such passages), and then described the solutions previous Jewish commentators had offered to resolve the apparent inconsistency.

For example, in discussing the different accounts of the creation in Genesis (Question 3, I, 8-9), Menasseh noted the prima facie inconsistency between the first chapter – where plants are created on the third day (1:9-13), and man not until the sixth day (1:24-31) – and the second – where man is created before any plants have been created (see 2:5-9). He then surveyed the opinions various commentators took on this issue and decided in favor of Rabbis Amé, Rashi and Gersonides, against Rabbis Abarbanel and Maimonides.[14] He did not always endorse a particular explanation. Sometimes he simply set out a number of alternatives, content to say that there are various ways of resolving the apparent inconsistencies, and leaving it to the reader to decide which is most satisfactory.[15]

Menasseh's work does not really give us a subject index. It's not organized in the way a subject index would be. If you want to compare the different scriptural discussions of immortality, for example, you cannot simply look up that topic in an alphabetical list of topics covered. But if you know that there are some apparently mortalist passages in Ecclesiastes, looking at

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[13] The first part of this work, initially published in Spanish, was translated into Latin in the following year. Subsequent parts of the work appeared (in Spanish only) between 1641 and 1651. See Cecil Roth's article on Menasseh, revised by A. K. Offenberg, in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Macmillan Reference, second edition, 2007. References to *The Conciliator* are to E. H. Lindo's translation, London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1842 (reprinted in New York: Hermon Press, 1972).

[14] See Menasseh, Qu. 3, 8-9. The Amé-Rashi-Gersonides solution required that the plants grew to a level with the surface of the earth on the third day, but only broke through that surface on the sixth day, in response to rain which was granted in response to the prayer of Adam. This explanation seems difficult to reconcile with Gen. 1:12. Kugel provides a good modern discussion of the creation story, and the many problems it involves, 48-57.

[15] See his discussion of the apparent conflict between Ecclesiastes 3:19, which seems to deny the immortality of the soul, and Ecclesiastes 12:7, which Menasseh takes to affirm it. See *The Conciliator* II, 312-315.

Menasseh's discussion of that work will help you to locate other relevant texts. By re-organizing these materials into subject-index format, you could make a beginning on compiling a subject index. This would not be a simple matter. Menasseh's discussion of Ecclesiastes does not refer you to similar prima facie mortalist passages in Job, and his very brief discussion of Job does not mention this issue. Moreover, because Menasseh is preoccupied with resolving apparent inconsistencies, a version of his work which simply reorganized his textual data would not lead you to passages on topics where scripture never even *seems* to contradict itself. Consider the passages prescribing the love of God above all else, or the love of one's neighbor as oneself. That's something Spinoza would have been much interested in, wanting, as he did, to contrast the topics where Scripture is indisputably consistent with those where its teaching seems to vary from one book (or passage) to another. Menasseh's work will not help you there. Still, it might easily have suggested the need for something more systematic.

### *Applying the Method: Moses and the authorship of the Pentateuch*

The authorship of the Pentateuch, which Spinoza discusses in Ch. 8 of the TTP, is the first significant result of Spinoza's application of this method. As we've noted, some of the problems about supposing that Moses wrote those first five books are pretty obvious. The last eight verses of the last book, Deuteronomy, describe Moses's death. So the Talmud, a major source for the traditional view, says only that Moses wrote everything in the Pentateuch except those last few verses, which it assigns to Joshua instead. (Baba Bathra 15a) Luther adopted a variant of this view, ascribing the entire final chapter to either Joshua or Eleazar.[16]

These are conservative solutions, which attribute only a small portion of the text to another author, and  attribute that portion to an author roughly contemporary with Moses, who might have been an eyewitness to many of the events reported, and could at least have heard accounts of them directly from Moses himself, who was presumably an eye-witness to much of the history recorded in those books.[17] Popkin, who wrote extensively on this subject, had no trouble showing that in Spinoza's day many Christian commentators accepted such conservative solutions and did not think they presented any problem for believers.[18]

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[16] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy,* in *Luther's Works,* ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan et al., Concordia, 1960, IX, 310.

[17] Not to all of it, of course. Since Moses comes into the story only in Exodus, presumably God himself had informed him about the 'history' recorded in Genesis. Hence, Maimonides' "secretary taking dictation."

But conservative solutions don't work. One of Spinoza's contributions was to show this, in a way most subsequent scholars have found conclusive.[19] Immediately after reporting the death of Moses, Deuteronomy describes his burial, commenting that "no one knows his burial place to this day." (Deut. 34:6) Four verses later it eulogizes him, saying "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses." The language of these verses clearly implies an author writing long after Moses's death. To assign it to a contemporary, as conservative solutions do, is anachronistic. Clues like this don't occur only in the last chapter of the Pentateuch. They're scattered throughout the text in a way which defies any simple theory of its composition. For example, in Gen. 12:6, the author, describing Abraham's passage through Canaan, writes: "the Canaanite was then in the land." Whoever wrote that verse was evidently writing at a time when the Canaanite *was not* in the land. But that could not be Moses or any contemporary, like Joshua. In their days the Canaanite *was* in the land.

Those are problems of anachronism. There are also problems of point of view. Often 'Moses' speaks of himself in the first person (Deut: 2:2, "Then the Lord said to me..."). But he also often speaks of himself in the third person (Num. 12:3, "Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on... earth.") If Moses was the author of both passages, why does he go back and forth between the first person and the third? And how could a truly humble man say that he's the humblest man on earth? Yet on the theory of Mosaic authorship, that's precisely what Moses did.

One way of downplaying the significance of Spinoza's results is to say that his conclusions were well-known before he wrote. Popkin's favorite candidate for a precursor who anticipated Spinoza's arguments was Isaac La Peyrère, a 17th Century French Millenarian best known for claiming that there were men before Adam. Now it's highly probable that Spinoza read La Peyrère; he had his book in his library;[20] his modest means would not have permitted him to buy books he did not read. Moreover, La Peyrère did question Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch on some of the same grounds Spinoza did. But it's doubtful that La Peyrère had any significant influence on Spinoza. He lacked what Spinoza thought was one essential qualification for serious Old Testament scholarship: a knowledge of the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written. And his arguments against the Mosaic authorship were much more limited than Spinoza's.

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[18] Popkin, *op. cit.*, 388.
[19] See Richard Elliott Friedman's article, "Torah (Pentateuch)," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* – henceforth, "ABD" – ed. by David Noel Freedman, Doubleday, 1992, VI, 618-9.
[20] See *Catalogus van de Bibliotheek der Vereniging het Spinozahuis te Rijnsburg*, Leiden: Brill, 1965, 28.

Spinoza himself credits the 12th Century Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra with having been the first to note many of the problems about the supposed Mosaic authorship. (viii, 4) But Ibn Ezra only hinted at the problems. Spinoza thinks that's because he realized Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch, but didn't dare say so openly. This wouldn't be too surprising, if Maimonides correctly reported 12th Century Jewish views about the essentials of Judaism. Ibn Ezra's style is allusive. Modern scholars still debate what he thought about the problems he raised. In a recent translation of his commentary on the Pentateuch, the translators write that he "no doubt wanted to make his novel approach to the Pentateuch obscure to the uninformed and unintelligent," but that he was not "an anti-traditionalist in disguise," or "a forerunner of modern Biblical criticism."[21] Perhaps. Still, Spinoza clearly read Ibn Ezra as an anti-traditionalist. And the use he makes of him in Chapter 8 of the TTP – spelling out the problems Ibn Ezra had raised in a veiled way, giving him credit for being the first to call attention to these problems, and adding numerous examples of his own – suggests that Spinoza himself regarded Ibn Ezra as his true precursor. If we think Spinoza's doubts about Scripture are likely to have begun well before his excommunication in 1656, probably as early as his teens,[22] long before he could have had any contact with La Peyrère, it would be hard to find a better candidate. This was Gebhardt's view.[23]

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[21] *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, tr. & annot. by Norman Strickman and Arthur Silver, Menorah Publishing Co., 1988, 5 vols., I, xv, xx.

[22] So Lucas claimed. See *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, ed. & tr. by A. Wolf, Dial Press, 1927, 42. Two passages in the TTP confirm that Spinoza's doubts about Scripture began early: i, 13, discussing the variant accounts of the Decalogue, and ix, 31, commenting on stylistic issues. See also his friend Jarig Jelles's preface to Spinoza's *Opera posthuma*, which reports that Spinoza had occupied himself with letters from his childhood on, and spent many years in his adolescence studying theology, before his dissatisfaction with what he found there prompted him to turn to philosophy. See Akkerman, *Studies in the Posthumous Works of Spinoza*, Krips Repro Meppel, 1980, pp. 216-17.

[23] Gebhardt's edition of Spinoza's *Opera*, originally published in four volumes in Heidelberg in 1925, was supplemented in 1987 by a fifth volume, containing commentary on the TTP and TP. For discussion of this point, see V, 228-235.

By mid-17th Century Spinoza had precursors who were offering quite radical solutions, and who were open about this. In *Leviathan* Hobbes came as close to Spinoza as anyone, arguing that whoever wrote the account of Moses's burial must have been writing "long after the death of Moses," pointing out that the anachronisms are not only in the last chapter of Deuteronomy, noting the references in the Pentateuch to earlier histories of the Jewish people, now lost, and contending that only a relatively small part of the Pentateuch can reasonably be ascribed to Moses, the "Volume of the Law" set out in Deut. 11-27.[24] La Peyrère, by contrast, seems to have thought that Moses wrote most of the Pentateuch. He has no doubt, for example, that Moses gave an accurate account of the exodus from Egypt and of the laws delivered at Mt. Sinai.

On these matters Spinoza is unlikely to have been influenced by Hobbes either. *Leviathan* was not published in a language he could read until 1667, by which time the excommunication was long past, and he'd been at work on the TTP for two years. Moreover, Spinoza makes a much stronger argument for his conclusions than Hobbes had. One way he does this is by offering many more examples of anachronism. The numbers matter in cases like this, because the more anachronisms there are, the harder it will be to devise conservative hypotheses to explain them. He also raises problems Hobbes had not mentioned, like the problem of point of view. (La Peyrère did not mention this either.) But he reaches roughly the same conclusion about how much of the Pentateuch Moses actually wrote: mainly "the book of the second covenant," which he identifies with Deut. 11-26, but also the song attributed to Moses in Deut. 32. (viii, 20-30) That makes Moses' contribution to the Pentateuch a rather small part of the whole, much less than the high percentage conservative commentators insisted on.

### *Who Did Write the Pentateuch?*

The most significant point on which Hobbes and Spinoza agree is that the Hebrew Bible, *in the form in which it has come down to us*, is largely the work of Ezra, a priest in the post-exilic period. The hypothesis that Ezra did much to shape the Hebrew Bible had been around for a long time. There's a wonderfully informative account of this history in Noel Malcolm's "Hobbes, Ezra and the Bible."[25] Both Hobbes and Spinoza embrace it, though in different forms, and on quite different grounds.

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[24] See my edition of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Hackett, 1994, 252-53.

For Hobbes the Ezran hypothesis is simply the thesis that *the entire Hebrew Bible*, in its final form, was "set forth" by Ezra. (*Leviathan*, 255-56) He bases this on a passage in 2 Esdras in which the author, who presents himself as the post-exilic priest Ezra, petitions God to enable him to restore the scriptures, which are supposed to have been lost. This 'Ezra' claims to have said to God:

> Your law has been burned, and no one knows the things which have been done or will be done by you. If I have found favor with you, send the holy spirit into me, and I will write everything that has happened in the world from the beginning, the things that were written in your law, so that people may be able to find the path...[26]

2 Esdras is an odd text, and not a very credible one. When Hobbes quotes it, he reminds us that it does not have the sanction of "the church," which classifies it as apocryphal, not canonical. By "the church" here I assume that Hobbes means the Church of England, although no Christian church regards 2 Esdras as canonical. This means that the church does not endorse the use of 2 Esdras to establish any doctrine, though it does encourage reading it "for example of life and instruction of manners."[27] Modern scholarship holds that 2 Esdras was written after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, several centuries after the death of the historical Ezra.[28] If that's correct, the historical Ezra could not have been the author of 2 Esdras. Hence the scare quotes around 'Ezra,' in referring to the author of this work.

In the continuation of the passage quoted above, 'Ezra' reports that God granted his request, and that for forty days and forty nights, he dictated the scriptures to five amanuenses. The amanuenses were able to stop for nourishment and sleep. 'Ezra' stopped for neither. This process yielded ninety-four books, of which twenty-four were to be published and seventy reserved for restricted circulation "among the wise." It's hard to believe that Hobbes actually expects us to accept this tale. Not only does it posit a large body of divine revelation which is not to be made known to all of God's followers, an esoteric teaching, reserved to an elite, it also assumes that we have our present Hebrew Bible only because of a miracle. All extant manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible must derive from copies made by Ezra's amanuenses, dictated by Ezra under divine inspiration, in a superhuman feat of endurance. Elsewhere in *Leviathan* (298-300) Hobbes is skeptical about miracles, cautioning us that we're too easily deceived by false miracle stories. And in the passage quoted above, he does not endorse the Ezran hypothesis unconditionally. He writes that "*if the books of Apocrypha... may in this point be credited*, the Scripture was set forth in the form we have it in by Ezra..." (255) As Malcolm has shown, Hobbes' theory of Ezra's authorship of the Hebrew Bible became a common feature of skeptical attacks on religion in the Enlightenment.

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[25] See his *Aspects of Hobbes*, Clarendon Press, 2002, 383-431. La Peyrère does not mention the Ezran hypothesis.

[26] 2 Esdras 14: 21-22. I cite the translation given in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, *Revised Edition*, ed. by Harold W. Attridge, Harper One, 2006, 1622. Because 2 Esdras (also known, confusingly, as 4 Esdras) is not part of the canon either in the Jewish tradition or in any Christian denomination, many editions of the Bible omit it. It did often appear in mss. of the Vulgate, and modern Catholic editions of the Bible tend to print it among the Apocrypha.

[27] See the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, Art. 6, which credits St. Jerome with this understanding of the status of apocryphal works.

[28] See the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. VI, 612.

Spinoza's version of the Ezran hypothesis (viii, 42-58) is more limited, and based on an argument modern scholars might more easily regard as a serious contribution to their discipline. He does not make any appeal to 2 Esdras, a work he dismisses as containing "legends added by some trifler."[29] And he doesn't claim that his theory holds for *every* book in the Hebrew Bible. Instead he applies it only to the series of books beginning with the Pentateuch and extending through the next several books, to the end of 2 Kings, a sequence which purports to tell the history of the people of Israel from the creation down to the Babylonian Captivity. I follow Noel Freedman in calling this sequence of texts 'the Primary History' of the people of Israel.[30]

It's unclear how many books we should include in this Primary History. Spinoza thinks of himself as having argued for Ezra's authorship of twelve books. (viii, 57-58; ix, 6) He gets to that number by including the five books of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. But it's doubtful that he's entitled to include Ruth. He never really discusses its authorship, and it doesn't fit the pattern of the books he does discuss. Freedman doesn't count Ruth as part of his Primary History. So I'll count eleven books in the sequence, recognizing that Spinoza would say "twelve."

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[29] See TTP x, 28, where Spinoza represents this as a view he shares with all but the most foolish of the Pharisees.

[30] See David Noel Freedman, with Jeffrey Geohegan, "Martin Noth: Retrospect and Prospect," in *The History of Israel's Traditions, the Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. by Steven McKenzie and Patrick Graham, Sheffield Academic Press, 1994.

None of these books, Spinoza argues, could have been written by the author to whom tradition ascribed it. "Tradition" here means the account given in Tractate Baba Bathra of the Babylonian Talmud, 14b-15b. So on Spinoza's view not only did Moses not write the Pentateuch, Joshua did not write Joshua, Samuel did not write either the book of Judges or the books bearing his name, and Jeremiah did not write the books of Kings. In each case the reasons for denying these traditional ascriptions are similar to those we've already discussed, though Spinoza deals with them much more briefly.

All these books were 'written,' he thinks, by Ezra. What's the evidence for Ezra's authorship? And what does 'written' mean here? Spinoza's argument is essentially a literary one. First, if we pay careful attention to the way these books are written, we'll see that they had a single author, trying to tell a coherent story, the history of the Jews, beginning with their origin in the creation and ending with the first destruction of Jerusalem and their captivity in Babylon. (viii, 42-47) One sign of this is the way the books are linked together. As soon as the author has stopped narrating the life of Moses, he passes to the history of Joshua, using these words: "And it came to pass, after Moses, the servant of God, died, that God said to Joshua..." (Josh. 1:1) Similar transitional formulas are used to tie the other books together. What's more, the author evidently wants to tell his story in chronological order. And most crucially, there's a common theme to the narrative: the history of the Jewish people is the history of God's providential dealings with them. Moses promulgated laws, and made certain predictions about what God would do for (or to) the people of Israel, depending on whether or not they obeyed his laws. If they obeyed, he would see that they flourished. If they disobeyed, they would be punished. The subsequent history of the Jewish people is the story of how these predictions were fulfilled. When they were obedient, they prospered. When they were disobedient, they did not. The author ignores things which don't contribute to his case for that perspective, or refers us to other historians for an account of them.

(viii, 46) The failure of Ruth to contribute to this narrative is one reason for doubting that that book really belongs in the group Spinoza ascribes to Ezra.

So far we have an argument for a single author. But why Ezra? First, the author carries the story into the period of the Babylonian Captivity; the last event the Primary History mentions is Jehoiachin's release from prison in the thirty-seventh year of the exile. So if there was only one author, it can't be anyone earlier than that period. (viii, 48) Spinoza is apparently mistaken about Ezra's dates, taking him to have flourished in the time right after the return from Babylon, in the second half of the 6th Century BCE. (x, 1) Modern scholarship makes Ezra a contemporary of Artaxerxes I, who reigned in the mid-5th Century. (ABD II, 726-27) But whatever Ezra's dates were, the single-author theory, combined with the scope of the history recorded in these books, sharply limits the candidates for its author to people who lived in the time of the captivity or later.

Second, Scripture describes Ezra as someone who zealously studied God's law, became skilled in it, honored it, and tried to teach it to the people of his time, amplifying it with explanations, to make it more intelligible to them. (See Ezra 7:1-10; Neh. 8:1-8) Spinoza can cite canonical scripture in favor of these propositions. He does not need to appeal to the Apocrypha. Furthermore, scripture does not mention anyone else in the post-exilic period who possessed all these qualifications: a zealous student of the law, who tried to explain it to the people, amplifying it as necessary. Spinoza does not advance his claim about Ezra's authorship of these books as something we can be certain of. He says he will assume that Ezra was their author "until someone establishes another writer with greater certainty." (ix, 2) But if Ezra was not the author, Spinoza's arguments at least make it probable that the author was someone like Ezra, particularly as regards the relatively late date at which he was writing. Perhaps that's enough for us to know.

### *What, Exactly, Did Ezra Do?*

What does Spinoza mean when he says that Ezra was the writer of these books? So far I've used the words "author" and "writer" as if they were synonyms. But Spinoza makes a distinction between the Latin terms I translate this way. When he's discussing Moses, he frames the question the way the literature typically does, as when he writes that "no one has any basis for saying that

Moses was the author [*autor*] of the Pentateuch" and that it's completely contrary to reason to say that. (viii, 30) But when he's advancing his hypothesis about Ezra, he uses the term *scriptor*: Ezra was, as I would put it, the *writer* of those books. (e.g., at ix, 2) I take it that Spinoza uses *autor* to refer to someone who is the originator of a work, whereas *scriptor* is a more general term, which *might* refer to a work's originator, but might also refer to an editor who reworks materials originally written by one or more other people. Spinoza really thinks of Ezra's role as more akin to that of an editor than to that of an author in the strict sense. He did not just make up the stories he told, as some polemicists against Judaism and Christianity inferred from 2 Esdras. (Malcolm 2002, 400-402) He had at his disposal manuscripts of the works of earlier historians, works now lost, which he collected and organized as best he could, sometimes adding material of his own to explain things which needed explanation and to make the overall story more coherent. (viii, 56-58; ix, 1-3)

It was not news that the writers of our present scriptures knew, and used, the works of earlier historians now lost. Our present scriptures sometimes mention these works, as when 1 Kings sends the reader to the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah for information about the life of Rehoboam, which the author of Kings chooses not to get into. (1 Kings 14:29) In *Leviathan* Hobbes had noted this. (*Leviathan*, p. 254) So does La Peyrère. But neither Hobbes nor La Peyrère used this information the way Spinoza does, to give us insight into the way Ezra worked when he constructed the Primary History. Given Hobbes' at least nominal acceptance of 2 Esdras, he could hardly have presented Ezra as having edited previously existing materials. La Peyrère never says anything about the Ezran hypothesis.

Spinoza does not give Ezra high marks as an editor. In TTP ix he writes that Ezra

> did not put the narratives contained in these books in final form, and did not do anything but collect the narratives from different writers, sometimes just copying them, and that he left them to posterity without having examined or ordered them. (§2)

What's most interesting about this passage is that in supporting his criticism of Ezra, Spinoza is led to discuss numerous passages in which the Hebrew Bible, as it has come down to us, contains inconsistencies. He takes this as evidence that however much Ezra may have wanted to tell a coherent story, he didn't succeed in doing so. Spinoza speculates that this was because he did not live long enough to complete the daunting project he had embarked on.

### *Doublets*

One important kind of evidence for this theory involves what modern scholars call 'doublets,' i.e., repetitions of similar passages, which differ in ways scholars take to show that the passages in which they occur originated in different sources. (See Speiser, *Genesis*, pp. xxxi-xxxiii) One example would be the alternate versions of the creation story in Gen. 1-2:4a and Gen. 2:4b-3:24. Another would be the various versions of a story in which a patriarch visits a foreign country, and pretends to the king that his wife is his sister, thinking that his wife's beauty would be a danger to a husband, but not a brother. This is a triplet, really, since there are three such anecdotes in Genesis.[31]

Spinoza's example involves David's entry into Saul's court in 1 Samuel. (ix, 15) In one version David went to Saul because Saul had called him, on the advice of his servants, when he wanted a skillful musician to play the lyre for him. (1 Sam. 16: 17-21) In the other the events were initiated by David's father, Jesse, who sent David to attend his brothers, soldiers in Saul's camp; David became known to Saul only when he asked questions which suggested a willingness to fight Goliath; he was taken into the court as a result of his victory in that battle. In the first story David is said to be a warrior, a man of valor. In the second, he's just a boy, who has no experience in battle. (1 Sam. 17: 17-8, 31-3, 38-9, 18:1-2) Inconsistencies of this sort occur, Spinoza says, because the editor has collected stories from different historians, "piling them up indiscriminately, so that afterwards they might be more easily examined and reduced to order." (ix, 13)

Sometimes the doublets get a different treatment. The fact that there are two different versions of the Decalogue evidently made an early and deep impression on Spinoza. He brings the issue up first in TTP i, where he writes:

> In the opinion of certain Jews, God did not utter the words of the Decalogue. They think, rather, that the Israelites only heard a sound, which did not utter any words, and that

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[31] In Gen. 12: 10-20, involving Abraham, Sarah, and the Pharaoh of Egypt; in Gen. 20:1-18, involving Abraham, Sarah and Abimelech; and in Gen. 26: 6-11, involving Isaac, Rebekah and Abimelech.

> while this sound lasted, they perceived the Laws of the Decalogue with a pure mind. At one time I too was inclined to think this, because I saw that the words of the Decalogue in Exodus are not the same as those of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy. Since God spoke only once, it seems to follow from this [variation] that the Decalogue does not intend to teach God's very words, but only their meaning. (i, 13)

Spinoza does not say here what the differences between the two versions were, and goes on to give reasons for rejecting his earlier opinion. But the problem had apparently bothered him long before he began to write the TTP. It's easy to understand why this might be so, since the Decalogue is likely to figure prominently in any young Jewish student's introduction to the Torah. It's also a problem Menasseh ben Israel discussed in his *Conciliator*.

Spinoza returns to the Decalogue at the end of Chapter viii,  where he enumerates three differences between the two versions (viii, 55). In Deut. 5:21 the tenth commandment orders the prohibitions differently, commanding the Israelites first not to covet their neighbor's wife, and only then not to covet his house and other possessions, altering the order of Exod. 20:17. This shows, at least, that we're not dealing in these passages with a stenographic transcript of God's words. More significant, though, are the differences concerning the commandment to keep the sabbath. In Deuteronomy, not only is this commandment stated more fully, with more emphasis on the application to slaves, but the fundamental reason for observing it is different: not because it was on the seventh day that God rested after creating the world (as in Exod. 20:8-11), but to commemorate God's bringing his people out of bondage in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 5:12-15)

Spinoza does not explain these differences as he had those in the story of David and Saul. He does not present them as arising simply because Ezra reproduced different sources, without reconciling the inconsistencies between them. Instead he postulates that Ezra was responsible for the variations in Deuteronomy, which he introduced as he was trying to explain the law of God to the men of his time. (viii, 56) On this theory Ezra gives a reason for this commandment which is more consistent with his overall theological perspective, emphasizing God's providential relation with the people of Israel. Spinoza thinks this was probably because Deuteronomy was the first book Ezra wrote. After the return from exile, the people urgently needed to have the law explained to them. Only after that did Ezra undertake the task of writing a complete history of the

Hebrew people, from the creation to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in the early sixth century.

### *Chronological Issues*

For many the truth of Scripture is a fundamental principle. So it may be helpful to consider another kind of inconsistency Spinoza discusses. Much of Chapter 9 in the TTP is devoted to problems of chronology. His most detailed example – involving the statement in 1 Kings 6:1 that 480 years passed between the Exodus and Solomon's construction of the temple – is too complicated to discuss here.[32] But he has another, more manageable example.

The last fourteen chapters of Genesis tell the story of Joseph and his brothers. Gen. 37 reports how the brothers sold Joseph to the Egyptians. Gen. 38 interrupts the story of Joseph with a story about Judah and Tamar, in which Judah first marries a Canaanite woman, Shua's daughter, then arranges for his first son by Shua's daughter to marry Tamar. When that son dies without having fathered a child, he arranges for his second son to marry Tamar. After that son also dies without children, Judah promises Tamar that when his third son grows up, he will fulfill the brother-in-law's duty and marry her. But Tamar does not trust his promise. When she sees that the third son has grown up, but still has not been given to her in marriage, she disguises herself as a prostitute, and has intercourse with Judah. This produces two children, one of whom has fathered two children by the time Judah moves to Egypt. Gen. 38 does not tell that part of Judah’s story. It ends with the birth of Judah's children by Tamar. Then Gen. 39 goes back to the story of Joseph in Egypt.

The problem is that all these things are supposed to have happened within a definite – and all too short – time period: between the time Joseph was sold into bondage and the time he was reunited with his father in Egypt. Gen. 38 begins the story of Judah and Tamar by saying "It happened *at that time* that Judah went down from his brothers..." Our normal narrative expectations would dictate that the italicized phrase refers to the time at issue in the immediately preceding verse, which describes Joseph being sold into bondage. In Gen. 46 Jacob moves his whole family to Egypt, to be reunited with Joseph. Judah is part of this move, as are his surviving son by Shua's daughter, the children he had by Tamar, *and* the two grandchildren he had through one of Tamar's sons. But according to calculations generally agreed on, only twenty-two years passed between the time Joseph was sold into bondage and the time of his reunion with his family.[33]

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[32] Briefly: that total is inconsistent with the total you would get it you added up the numbers of the years in the accounts of the different periods in Israel's history: the 40 years Moses governed the people in the wilderness, the reign of Joshua, etc. This was a traditional problem for Jewish biblical commentators, discussed by Menasseh in his comment on Judges 11:26.

This raises an awkward question: how could all the things related in Gen. 38 have happened in twenty-two years? How could Judah have produced three sons by Shua's daughter, all of whom grew up to be of marriageable age, and then two sons by Tamar, one of whom became old enough to have children, in that time? The rabbis had been worried about this for a long time. As early as the 2nd Century C.E., *Seder Olam*, a rabbinic work on Biblical chronology managed to squeeze all these events into that twenty-two year period by assuming that all of Judah's sons married at the age of seven.[34] Later commentators found this implausible. For example, Ibn Ezra rejected *Seder Olam's* theory, arguing that the earliest possible age of procreation (and hence, of marriage) is twelve. His solution is that the phrase "at that time" in Gen. 38:1 does not refer to the time in the immediately preceding verse – when Joseph was sold – but to an earlier time. He doesn't say when that earlier time was, or explain how Judah's absence in Canaan (assumed in Gen. 38) would have been consistent with the role he is supposed to have played in the sale of Joseph in Gen. 37.[35]

To some extent Spinoza accepts this solution. Like Ibn Ezra, he doesn't think "at that time" can refer to the time when Joseph was sold into bondage. But he gives more weight than Ibn Ezra did to our normal narrative expectations. He hypothesizes that the narrative of Gen. 38 has been taken from another book and inserted into the Joseph narrative, without having been properly integrated into its new surroundings. Since not all these events can be related to the time in question in Genesis, they must be related to another time, *treated just previously in another book*. Ezra, then, has merely copied this story, and inserted it among the others, without having examined it. (ix, 11).

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[33] The traditional calculation is assumed in Ibn Ezra's commentary on Gen. 38. Spinoza reproduces it in TTP ix, §§8-9.

[34] *Seder Olam, The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology*, tr. with comm. by Heinrich Guggenheim, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, 32-36.

[35] See Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, tr. & annot. by Norman Strickman and Arthur Silver, Menorah Publishing Co., 1988, Vol. I, pp. 354-355.

### *The Rabbis Are Crazy*

Spinoza is critical of Ezra's editorial work, but he reserves his most caustic words for the rabbis who have tried to persuade us that the apparent inconsistencies in the text are not real inconsistencies:

> If anyone wants to compare the narratives of the book of Chronicles with those of the books of Kings, he will find numerous similar discrepancies, which I don't need to recount here. Much less do I need to discuss the devices authors use to try to reconcile these accounts. For the rabbis are completely crazy. The commentators I have read indulge in idle fancies and hypotheses, and in the end, completely corrupt the language itself. (ix, §28)

For example, 2 Chron. 22:2, says that Ahaziah was forty-two when he began to reign. This conflicts with the claim in 2 Kings 8:26, that he was twenty-two at that point. This was one of the nearly two dozen discrepancies between the narratives of Kings and Chronicles which Menasseh discussed in his *Conciliator*. (Menasseh, *Conciliator*, II, 94-5) Menasseh mentions two ways commentators have tried to resolve this conflict, without expressing a preference for one over the other. Spinoza discusses only one of those solutions: Gersonides' proposal that the author of Chronicles was calculating Ahaziah's age from the reign of Omri, not from Ahaziah's birth. Spinoza comments that

> If they could show that this was what the author of the books of Chronicles meant, I wouldn't hesitate to say that he didn't know how to express himself. And they invent many other things of this kind. If these things were true, I would say, without qualification, that the ancient Hebrews were completely ignorant both of their own language and of how to tell a story in an orderly way. (ix, §29)

Gersonides' hypothesis flouts the way we normally calculate someone's age. If this sort of explanation is permissible, then we are playing a game which has no rules. As Spinoza puts it, "there will be no principle or standard for interpreting Scripture. We can invent anything we like."

Spinoza not only denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, he also challenges the traditional view of the authorship of all the other books which make up Freedman's 'Primary History' of the people of Israel, and has a plausible theory about who did write them. He doesn't claim to be certain of that writer's identity, but he can at least tell us approximately when he lived, how he proceeded in constructing his history, and what his theological perspective on the history of Israel was. Developing this theory, based on internal evidence in the text itself, occupies most of Chapters VIII and IX of the TTP. Here we see Spinoza operating in ways which have no parallel in La Peyrère or Hobbes, making use, not only of arguments from anachronism, but also from the consideration of doublets and chronological problems which demonstrate his knowledge of the tradition of Jewish biblical commentary, a tradition closed to predecessors like La Peyrère and Hobbes by their lack of Hebrew.

### *Implications of Spinoza's Theory*

Why do these questions of authorship matter? If Spinoza is right, we can't assume that the books making up the Primary History provide a reliable account of that history. In their present form they are essentially the work of Ezra (or some other editor writing in the post-exilic period), working with chronicles written centuries earlier, which were not consistent with one another, have not survived to be examined, and which, for all we know, may themselves have been second- or third- hand accounts. Spinoza's theory tends to diminish the authority of the Hebrew Bible as an historical work. It may be correct in what it says happened; but its saying that is not much reason to believe what it says.

Spinoza does not make these skeptical implications of his work explicit. He leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions. But he doesn't conclude, and wouldn't want us to think, that the Bible is without value. It may be unreliable as a work of history.[36] But it does contain important moral teachings. Spinoza would insist particularly on its teaching that we must pursue justice and seek to love our neighbors. (See, e.g., xiv, 24) I don't think Spinoza wanted to endorse *all* the moral teachings of Scripture. In TTP xvii he quotes Ezekiel's claim that God said "I gave them statutes which were not good, and laws they could not live by." (xvii, 96) In context (20:25-6) Ezekiel seems to be referring to laws requiring the sacrifice of the first-born (e.g. Exod. 22:28-29). Perhaps Spinoza would extend his use of this passage to other problematic commands, such as those which require the killing of witches (Exod. 22:18), or the extermination of the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1-2). But whatever laws he thinks the people could not live by, this much is clear: Spinoza doesn't wish to endorse every command God is represented in Scripture as having given. If we are generally skeptical about the accuracy of Scripture as an historical record of God's dealings with his people, then we are not bound to accept as a genuine divine command everything Scripture represents as a divine command. Spinoza's hermeneutics permits us to pick and choose, relying on our own judgment about what a just God might have commanded. The cost of this is that in obeying Biblical commands, we may not be able to justify our actions by saying that we are merely obeying the will of a higher power. But considering the use which is sometimes made of such appeals, we might think that a price worth paying.

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[36] Unreliable also as a work from which we can learn about the nature of God. Space limitations do not permit a discussion of this aspect of Spinoza's critique of religion. That would require treating his chapters on prophecy and prophets, on the calling of the Hebrews, on the divine law, on ceremonies, and on miracles. I leave the discussion of these topics for another time.

### *The Need for a History of the New Testament*

At the end of TTP x, concluding his account of the composition of the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza writes:

> It would now be time to examine the books of the New Testament in the same way. But because I'm told that this has been done by men most learned both in the sciences and especially in the languages, because I do not have such an exact knowledge of the Greek language that I might dare to undertake this task, and finally, because we lack the original texts of the books written in the Hebrew language, I prefer to refrain from this difficult business... (x, 48)

This might arouse some suspicion. Spinoza says *he's been told* that men learned in the sciences and the relevant languages have already examined the New Testament in the way his method requires, by constructing a 'history' of the text. That's vague, and apparently based on hearsay, a kind of evidence well-known to be not generally reliable. Who are these men? So far I have not been able to identify any plausible candidates.[37]

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[37] This is not to say that Spinoza did not have precursors. The first section of this paper has called attention to the ones who seem to me most important. But none of the figures mentioned there did *everything* Spinoza's method requires. Scholars learned in the history of New Testament scholarship – e.g., David Dungan in his *History of the Synoptic Problem*, Anchor Bible, 1999 – have not been of much help here.

The other reasons Spinoza offers for not pursuing a critical history of the New Testament raise intriguing questions. He says he doesn't know Greek well enough to undertake the task, and then adds that he refrains from it because "we lack the original texts of the books written in the Hebrew language." The first of these reasons might pass muster. Although Spinoza evidently knows enough Greek to make intelligent use of the Septuagint translation when he thinks it can shed light on the Hebrew of the Old Testament, and to challenge existing translations of the Greek New Testament into Latin,[38] the example of Valla reminds us that the level of linguistic competence required for a truly critical history of a text is quite high. But the third reason he offers is puzzling. How many of the New Testament books does he think were actually written in Hebrew anyway?

The traditional answer, alluded to in vii, 64, was that there were just two: the gospel of Matthew and the epistle to the Hebrews.[39] But if those are the only works problematic for this reason, this is a weak justification for not critically examining the New Testament. The New Testament contains twenty-seven books. If only two are translations of a (lost) Hebrew original, that still leaves twenty-five books whose history might be examined without worrying about the lack of the original text.

### *What is the Original Language of the New Testament?*

But in fact it seems that Spinoza thinks most – if not all –the books of the New Testament were written, not in Hebrew exactly, but in a related language nowadays usually called Aramaic. We see this in a note Spinoza added to the TTP in the last months of his life. There are thirty-nine such notes, known from several different sources. They did not appear in any edition of the TTP

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Though Dungan has no great affection for Spinoza, he does present him as essentially original in formulating the historical-critical method of interpreting scripture and applying it to the New Testament.

[38] See Annotation XXI, attached to x, 1, and Annotation XXVI, attached to xi, 3.

[39] The tradition goes back to Eusebius, *Church History*, III, xxiv, 6; III, xxxix, 16; and VI, xiv, 2-3, but had been questioned in the Reformation. Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* (1689) gives an interesting account of the debate, discussed below.

published in Spinoza's lifetime. But most were published shortly after his death, in a French translation of the TTP by St. Glain.[40]

The note in question deals with a passage in Paul's letter to the Romans. Spinoza considers two possible translations into Latin, and prefers one to the other because, he says,

> it agrees best with the Syriac text. For the Syriac translation – *if indeed it is a translation, which is doubtful*, since we don't know the translator, or when [the supposed translation] was circulated [*vulgata*], and the native language of the Apostles was Syriac – renders this text of Paul thus etc.[41]

I'm not interested in the question of how to translate Paul's letter. What I am interested in is the fact that Spinoza gives heavy weight to the 'Syriac' text in evaluating the Latin translations.

To see why this matters, we need to clear up some mistakes Spinoza makes.[42] First, what we now call Syriac, and is the language of the translation Spinoza is referring to, is a dialect of Aramaic. The native language of the apostles (and of most Jews in first century Palestine) was also a dialect of Aramaic. So far so good. But the Aramaic of first century Palestine was a different dialect of Aramaic than the one used in the Syriac translation. If Spinoza thinks that the Syriac translation may give us what the apostles actually wrote, he's wrong.

This would be an understandable mistake to make. When the first printed edition of the Syriac New Testament was published in 1555, many scholars thought it might give us the original of Matthew and Hebrews. Some also argued that Syriac was the language spoken by Jesus. This seems to have been one motivation for Tremellius' translation of the Syriac New Testament into

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[40] For a discussion of the notes and the textual problems they present, see *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Traité théologico-politique*, text established by Fokke Akkerman, translation and notes by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau, PUF, 1999, 28-35.

[41] Adnotatio XXVI, attached to TTP xi, 3, my emphasis.

[42] On the claims made in this paragraph and those immediately following it, see the *Cambridge History of the Bible, The West From the Reformation*, 73; Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament, Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, Oxford UP, 4th edition, 2005, 96-100; Arnold Meyer, *Jesu Mutter-sprache: Das Galiläische Aramäisch in seiner Bedeutung für die Erklärung der Reden Jesu und der Evangelien überhaupt* (Freiburg/Leipzig, 1896), Ch. 1; and Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, Cambridge UP, 1998, Ch. 1.

Latin in 1569.[43] We know now that this version of the New Testament was an early fifth century translation from the Greek into Syriac, *not* the original text of the New Testament. But for a long time there was confusion about how to classify the various languages involved in the transmission of the New Testament. When the 2nd Century bishop Papias[44] said that Matthew had originally written his gospel in Hebrew, the language he was attributing to Matthew was pretty certainly the Palestinian dialect of Aramaic, not what we would now call Hebrew. What Papias evidently meant was that Matthew had originally written his gospel in the language spoken by Hebrew in first century Palestine.[45] By the first century that language was no longer Hebrew, but Aramaic. Biblical Hebrew was so little understood in first century Palestine that observant Jews needed a translation of the Torah into Aramaic to understand the requirements of the law. This led to the creation of the Targums, Aramaic paraphrases of the ancient Hebrew text, which later played an important role in medieval Jewish liturgy and Biblical studies, and were often printed in the polyglot Bibles which began to appear in the 16th Century.[46] Spinoza's knowledge of these Targums and the reasons why they had been created no doubt helped him see that the language of the Apostles must have been a dialect of Aramaic.

Paul would undoubtedly have known Palestinian Aramaic. But no competent scholar would now think that he wrote his epistle to the Romans in that language. He was a Jew of the diaspora, not Palestine, raised in the Jewish community in Tarsus, in the south central region of modern Turkey. He wrote good Greek, quoted the Hebrew Scriptures from the Septuagint translation, and when he visited Athens, addressed the Athenians in Greek. Greek was a language in which he felt perfectly at home, and the language he would have used in writing to the Christian community in Rome.[47] So Spinoza was simply mistaken if he thought that Paul might have written his letter to the Romans in Syriac.

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[43] Tremellius was a 16th Century Jewish convert to Christianity, who translated the Bible into Latin. When he translated the Old Testament, he translated from Hebrew; when he translated the New Testament, he translated from Syriac. See Kenneth Austin's biography, *From Judaism to Calvinism: the life and writings of Immanuel Tremellius*, Ashgate, 2007

[44] Papias was the source of the tradition reported in Eusebius. See his *Church History* III, xxxix, 16.

[45] Richard Simon understood this. See his *Histoire critique*: "On ne peut pas nier, à moins que de s'opposer à toute l'antiquité, que Saint Matthieu n'ait écrit son Evangile en Ebreu, *c'est-à-dire, dans la langue que parloient alors les Juifs de Jerusalem, qui étoit Caldaique ou Syriaque*." (p. 47, my emphasis) In the late 16th Century Joseph Scaliger began the process of sorting out the different dialects of Aramaic, and that Grotius continued this work in the 17th Century. (On this, see Meyer, Ch. 1)

[46] On the Targums, see the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI, 320-21. (ABD) The Buxtorf Bible, which Spinoza used, reproduced these paraphrases.

But Spinoza does grasp some important truths: the native language of the Palestinian apostles – the twelve apostles who had personally experienced the ministry of Jesus – was not Greek, but a dialect of Aramaic. What's more, that dialect was almost certainly the native language of Jesus and of most of his audience. So *Palestinian Aramaic was almost certainly the language Jesus would have used in his preaching*.[48]

### *Why This Matters*

These facts have significant implications. At a minimum they imply that whenever English Bibles report what are supposed to be the words of Jesus – the words these Bibles often emphasize by printing them in red – what they give us is *an English translation of a Greek translation of a lost Aramaic original*. Not necessarily an Aramaic original *text*, because the original authors of the gospels may have been relying on oral sources when they reported what Jesus is supposed to have said. But whether they were relying on a text or an oral tradition, at the origin were utterances in Aramaic. So even if the gospel authors could rely on the testimony of eyewitnesses for their knowledge of what Jesus said – even if they themselves *were* eyewitnesses[49] – at some point in the composition of the NT text there is a translation from Aramaic into Greek, a translation whose accuracy we cannot now verify in the way we might ordinarily verify the accuracy of a translation, since we have no copy of the original text being translated.

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[47] On this see Raymond Brown, *Introduction*, 423-26.

[48] I say "almost certainly" because there is still some dispute about the languages Jesus can be presumed to have known and used. The best discussion of this that I know is John Meier's in *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Doubleday, Vol. I, 1991, 255-68. After a careful sifting of the evidence, Meier concludes that Jesus "regularly and perhaps exclusively taught in Aramaic, his Greek being of a practical, business type, and perhaps rudimentary to boot."  See also Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth, An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching*, T&T Clark, 108-120.

[49] The traditional view was that the gospels of Matthew and John were written by eyewitnesses (two of the original twelve disciples), Mark by an author who got his information from Peter, an eyewitness, and Luke by an associate of Paul's who made a conscientious search for reliable sources. Modern critical scholarship has cast doubt on most of these assumptions. See Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-61, 208-12, 267-69, 368-71.

This fact would seem to warrant a certain caution in drawing conclusions about what Jesus said from what the gospels report him as having said. Of course we also have the normal uncertainties which arise whenever we take one person's word for what another person said: is he giving us, to the best of his memory, the most accurate account he can of what the person said? did he understand what was said when it was said? how good is his memory of what was said? did he make a contemporary record of it? is his account influenced by what others who were also present told him about what they remember having heard? or by his beliefs about what the person is likely to have said in those circumstances? But in addition to these uncertainties, we have an uncertainty arising from the need at some point for a translation by an unknown person whose competence in the relevant languages we cannot evaluate.[50]

*Hints of These Problems*

Now so far I've been commenting on a brief note which did not appear in any version of the TTP published in Spinoza's lifetime, but was added to the text shortly before his death, and first published shortly after his death. Spinoza may not have intended it for publication in his lifetime. Nevertheless, there are, in versions of the TTP published in his lifetime, passages which hint at the conclusions I've drawn from this note. For example, in explaining the first element in the history of scripture he calls for, Spinoza writes that

> it must contain the nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which their authors were accustomed to speak. In this way we'll be able to find out all the meanings each utterance can admit in ordinary conversational usage. And because all the writers, both of the Old Testament and the New, were Hebrews, it's certain that the history of the Hebrew language is necessary above all others, not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament, which were written in this language, but also for understanding those of the New. For though they've been made available in other languages, nevertheless they're expressed in a Hebrew manner. (vii, 15)

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[50] It is some help, in this situation, that sometimes we have three independent sources – the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke – which tell largely the same story. So we may think that in those cases, translation issues did not distort the original account. But there is at least one important case where this does not help: Matt. 16:13-20, where Jesus is reported as giving Peter the keys of the kingdom. The parallel versions in Mark 8:27-30 and Luke 9:18-20 lack anything equivalent to Matt. 16:17-19. So for that part of the story we have no confirmation from the other synoptics.

I take it that Spinoza's insistence on regarding the NT as a document which gives evidence of Jewish ways of thinking comes from his awareness that the Greek of that work contains many Hebraisms or Aramaisms, ways of speaking natural in one of these semitic languages, but not natural in Greek. He mentions no examples, but readers familiar with Tremellius' translation of the Syriac text would have found its annotation a source of many examples.[51]

Spinoza's quotational practices also suggest his attitude toward the Greek text. When he quotes the Hebrew Bible, he usually gives the Hebrew text first, and then makes his own translation into Latin. When he quotes the New Testament, he *never* gives the Greek, and the text he quotes is usually Tremellius's Latin translation of the Syriac text. He calls our attention to his use of Tremellius' translation at the end of Chapter IV, when he quotes a passage from Romans in which Tremellius' version differs from the Vulgate. He never says, in any version of the TTP published in his lifetime, why he prefers that translation, nor does he explain, in those versions of the text, why that is the translation he routinely uses. But his quotational practices, in conjunction with his emphasis on the importance of knowing the original language of the text, naturally invite the question: why this difference in his practices regarding the two testaments?

Perhaps Spinoza did not have had a firm opinion about the original language of the NT. In Annotation 26 he doesn't actually *say* that the Syriac version gives us the original language; he just says it's doubtful that it's a translation from the Greek. And he gives us a reason for thinking that the Greek text was probably not original: that wasn't the native language of the apostles. Doubt about what the original language of the NT actually was – inability to say, with confidence, whether it was Greek or Aramaic – might be reason enough for Spinoza not to want to get into an extended discussion of the history of the NT, particularly if he was inclined to the view that its original language wasn't Greek. But he might also have wished to avoid the criticism he would invite if he came out strongly for a non-Greek original text.

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[51] See *From Judaism to Calvinism*, Ch. 7. An important example would be the phrase *ho huios tou anthrōpou*, commonly translated "the son of man," which Jesus frequently uses to refer to himself, and which, because of the theological weight attached to it, has been the subject of much discussion. This is apparently a very unnatural expression in Greek. But the Aramaic it probably translates, *bar* ($^{e}$)*nash*(*ā*), is apparently quite an ordinary Aramaic term for 'man.' See Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth, An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching*, T&T Clark, 358-61. Meier (I, 265-266) gives other examples of Aramaisms.

### *Debates About the Original Language*

Though Spinoza represents the claim that Matthew originally wrote his gospel in 'Hebrew' as "the common opinion," this view had at one point been quite controversial.[52] Some argued that if the original had been in Hebrew, the church would have been careful to preserve it. But none of the church fathers claims to have even seen it. They also argued that Matthew must have written in Greek, because an audience of Palestinian Jews would not have understood a work written in Hebrew (as if knowledge of Greek was so widespread in 1st Century Palestine that a work in Greek would have had a wider audience). Though this view had prominent Catholic defenders, like Erasmus and Cajetan, most of its advocates were Protestant (most notably, Calvin).

Richard Simon argued that Papias' testimony was not contradicted by any of the church fathers, that when Papias said the gospel was written in 'Hebrew,' he didn't mean Biblical Hebrew, but Palestinian Aramaic, and that when Jerome reports having consulted "the Gospel of the Nazarenes" in preparing his Vulgate translation, what he's referring to is the lost 'Hebrew' original of Matthew. The arguments for a Greek original of Matthew are so weak, Simon thinks, that they should embarrass the defenders of that view. The real reason for their position is their fear that acknowledging that the original version of Matthew has been lost would lead people to conclude that we don't have 'the true gospel' of Matthew. In the case of Protestants, committed to regarding Scripture as the ultimate authority in deciding matters of religious dispute, it would be embarrassing to admit that our record of the teachings of Jesus is based even in part on a translation of a lost original. Imagine the fuss Spinoza would have stirred up if he had said, publicly, that we don't have the originals of *any* of the gospels, at least insofar as they claim to report what Jesus *said*.[53]

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[52] I draw here on Richard Simon's *Histoire critique*, Ch. 5.

[53] The issue of a lost Aramaic original does not affect only the gospel reports of what Jesus *said*. There will also be a question about those portions of the gospel which report what he *did*. If the gospel authors depended on eye-witnesses for their narratives of what happened in the life of Jesus, and if the eye-witnesses were Aramaic speakers who knew little or no Greek (as most of the original apostles presumably were), there will have to have been translation at some point in the process of getting from the eye-witness reports to the Greek gospel narrative.

*Skeptical Implications of the Method*

Earlier I inferred from Annotation 26 that if the Greek text of the NT was a translation of a lost Aramaic original, that might properly encourage skepticism about our ability to know exactly what the teachings of Jesus were. In versions of the TTP published in his lifetime Spinoza does not go quite so far as that. But he does hint at such a result. Toward the end of Ch. VII, he considers various objections which he thinks people might make to his method of interpreting scripture:

> There's one final difficulty in interpreting certain books of Scripture according to this method: we don't possess them in the same language in which they were first written. For according to the common opinion, the Gospel of Matthew, and no doubt also the Letter to the Hebrews, were written in Hebrew. Nevertheless, the [original texts] are not extant... (vii, 64, 110-11)

Now if Spinoza thinks the Syriac version of the NT gives us the original text of the books it includes, he has an easy solution to this objection, at least as regards the NT. He could say that we *do* possess the texts of the NT in the language in which they were first written. That language is just not the Greek it has generally been thought to be. So his method does not really face this difficulty.

But Spinoza does not take that way out. Perhaps he regards it as too uncertain just what the original language of the NT was. Or perhaps he doesn't mind conceding the objection. At any rate, he accepts the common opinion, at least for the sake of the argument – that only Matthew and Hebrews were written originally in Hebrew, the rest having been written in Greek – *and* he accepts the skeptical implications his methodology leads to on that theory. So in response to the objection quoted above he writes:

> I consider [the objections which might be raised against this method] so great that I don't hesitate to say this: in a great many places either we don't know what Scripture really means or we're just guessing about its meaning without any certainty. (vii, 65)

And though this concession might be very provocative, it would probably not be quite as troubling to a Christian who thought the lack of an original text raised problems only for two books in the NT (one of the four gospels and one of the twenty-one epistles) as it would to a Christian who thought it raised problems for all four gospels (*and* any epistles written by Palestinian apostles).

### *Did the Apostles Speak as Prophets?*

I turn now to two passages in the TTP which come as close to a critical history of the New Testament as anything you will find explicitly developed in that work. The first is Chapter XI, where Spinoza takes up the question whether the apostles wrote their letters as prophets or as teachers? Spinoza begins by saying that no one familiar with the NT can doubt that the apostles *were* prophets. (xi, 1) The only question is whether they were *acting as* prophets when they wrote their letters, or whether they wrote their letters merely as teachers. The argument is fairly straightforward: if we compare the characteristic style of the prophets with that of the apostles in their letters, we find them to be quite different. The prophets don't typically reason with their audience; they make authoritative judgments. They claim to speak on behalf of God. "Thus says the Lord" is the typical way a prophet begins his prophecy. The apostles, on the other hand, don't speak that way. They reason with the people they're writing to. Sometimes they express uncertainty about what they're saying. They may apologize for their boldness. They don't claim to speak with authority.[54]

I say this argument is "fairly straightforward." It does raise certain questions. Although what Spinoza says about the style of the prophets may be generally true, it's not true that the apostles *never* spoke with prophetic authority.[55] More seriously, all of Spinoza's examples of apostolic style come from letters attributed to Paul. He gives no examples from other New Testament letter writers. So what he says is the characteristic style of the apostles may just be the characteristic style of Paul. I make no attempt to decide that now. Even if the style Spinoza attributes to all the apostles is just the style of Paul, that's a significant point. The main purpose of Chapter XI seems to be to weaken the authority of the apostles by arguing that they were just trying to work out the truth using their own human capacities, not acting as spokesmen for God. If it succeeds only in weakening the authority of Paul, that would not be a trivial result. The 'Pauline' letters – that is, the letters written either by Paul or by someone claiming to be Paul[56] – are undoubtedly the ones which exercised the greatest influence on the subsequent development of Christianity and the churches which gave it institutional form.

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[54] Among the examples Spinoza cites are Romans 3:28, 15:15, 1 Cor. 7:6, 7:25, 7:40, 10:15.

[55] In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul writes: "For this we declare to you *by the word of the Lord*, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died."My emphasis. Unless otherwise stated, I quote Biblical texts from the New Revised Standard Version, as given in the *HarperCollins Study Bible*, revised edition, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006.

*Disagreements Among the Apostles*

The most interesting point of this chapter, though, comes at the end, where Spinoza discusses the conflict between Paul and James over the path to salvation. The text is important enough to quote rather fully:

> If we survey these letters attentively, we'll see that in religion itself the Apostles indeed agree. But they differ greatly in the foundations. For to strengthen men in religion, and show them that salvation depends only on God's grace, Paul taught that no one can boast of his works, but only of his faith,  and that no one is justified by works (see Romans 3:27-28)...  James, on the other hand, taught... that man is justified by works and not by faith alone (see James 2:24). Setting aside all Paul's arguments, he expressed succinctly the whole doctrine of religion. (xi, 21)

This disagreement about the foundations of religion, Spinoza says, is the source of

> the many disputes and schisms which have tormented the church incessantly from the time of the Apostles to the present day, and will surely continue to torment it forever, until at last someday religion is separated from philosophic speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple doctrines Christ taught his followers. (xi, 22)

Though Spinoza often seems to be sympathetic to Paul,[57] here he identifies himself with James, who "expressed succinctly the whole doctrine of religion" when he rejected Paul's position, and

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[56] According to Brown, of the thirteen letters traditionally ascribed to Paul only seven – 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans – are now generally accepted as actually having been written by Paul. The other six are thought to be not by Paul, but by authors who took themselves to be expressing Pauline ideas. Spinoza's examples come almost exclusively from the seven letters scholars regard as genuinely Pauline.

[57] Yitzhak Melamed has gone so far as to describe Paul as "Spinoza's true Biblical hero," in "'*Christus secundum spiritum*': Spinoza, Jesus, and the Infinite Intellect," in *The Jewish Jesus*, ed. by Neta Stahl, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 147. Similarly Graeme Hunter in *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*, Ashgate, 2005, pp. 54-5.

I suggest that we need some nuance here.  Spinoza is certainly sympathetic to some of the things Paul says. E.g., he frequently comments favorably on Rom. 9:10-18, a key text for the doctrine of predestination. (Cf. TTP ii, 51, iv, 36, xvi, 53, ADN. XXXIV, and Letters 75 and 78.) He also likes very much taught that man is justified by works. Spinoza criticizes Paul for having introduced philosophical speculations into religion, as part of his effort to accommodate the unfamiliar gospel message to his Gentile audience (citing 1 Corinthians 9:19-20). The other apostles, who were preaching only to a Jewish audience, unreceptive to philosophizing, did not engage in such speculations. "How happy our age would surely be now," he concludes, "if we saw religion again free of all superstition!" Here Spinoza moves from suggesting that Paul's teaching is 'philosophical speculation' to calling it a form of superstition. But he doesn't say explicitly what particular teachings he objects to. He leaves that for us to figure out.

### *The Universality of Sin*

Let's try to do that, focusing on passages where Paul seems to provide reasons for thinking that our salvation depends on faith, not works. Essentially what Paul argues in his epistle to the Romans is that we are all woefully sinful; so if we had to depend for our salvation on our works – on our compliance with God's law – a just God would condemn us to damnation; fortunately for us, God is merciful; so he's provided another way, the way of faith. If we have the right faith, we will be saved. Let's examine this reasoning a little more closely.

First, the doctrine that *sin is universal*: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23) This might mean no more than that everyone fails to achieve perfection, not that everyone is profoundly wicked. It's easy enough to believe that much. Our common experience of the world suggests that everyone who reaches adulthood is guilty, at some point, of some transgression against the commandments. Most people don't commit murder. More, I would guess, commit adultery, though perhaps most don't. Reliable information seems hard to come by in that area. But many steal. And many children fail to respect their parents. And how many of us, children or adults, consistently refrain from coveting our neighbors' possessions?

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Paul's doctrine that there is no sin before the law, which he interprets to mean that there is no sin in the state of nature. (Cf. TTP xvi, 6, with Romans 4:15) But as TTP xi, 21-24, demonstrates, he's not sympathetic to the doctrine of justification by faith. Nor can he be if he wishes to defend religious liberty. As I'll argue below, that doctrine is central to the traditional Christian argument against religious liberty.

Still, some people's transgressions seem to be relatively few and relatively minor, compared with the horrendous crimes others sometimes commit. It would be consistent with holding that we are all sinful, in the sense of failing to achieve perfection, to add that there are still some people, perhaps many, who do the right thing most of the time, and who, when they do the wrong thing, don't do anything truly awful. Call that the cheerful interpretation of the doctrine that sin is universal.

Paul's version of the doctrine does not seem so cheerful:

> 3:9... we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,[58] 10 as it is written, "there is no one who is righteous, not even one, 11... there is no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."

Paul goes on in this vein for several more verses (3:13-18), which I won't quote here. Suffice it to say that this passage seems to express a deep pessimism about our moral nature. Paul would deny, it seems, that there is *anyone* who does the right thing most of the time, and even that there is *anyone* who genuinely seeks God, or demonstrates his love for his fellow men by sometimes showing them kindness. We are all *worthless*.

It's not so easy to believe that everyone is *that* wicked. So scholars are divided about how Paul could have come to accept such an extreme view of human sinfulness. Brown writes that "Paul's view of the universality of sin and death stems from observing the existing world." (p. 580) Sanders, on the other hand, argues that "both the Gentile and the Jewish worlds contained 'saints,' people whose lives were *largely beyond reproach*. It is unlikely that Paul's view of universal heinous transgression rested on empirical observation."[59] That seems plausible. But if empirical observation won't support such pessimism, how did Paul come to embrace it?

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[58] There are translation issues here. The King James version is more literal: "we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all *under sin*." (my italics) More recent translations introduce the notion of being *under the power of sin*. (Cf. the RSV and NRSV, or Joseph Fitzmyer in the Anchor Bible edition of Romans, Doubleday, 1992) Sanders defends these translations (*Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI, 44) pointing to a number of passages in Romans 5-7 in which Paul treats sin as an active power which has 'dominion' over us, enslaves us, and alienates us from God.

[59] The quote comes from his *Paul*, p. 44. The emphasis is mine. He expressed a similar view in his article on "Sin, Sinners (NT)" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. In both these works Sanders offers suggestions about how Paul could have some to his pessimism about our moral nature.

### *How Paul Became a Pessimist*

I'll sketch here the answer which seems to me to emerge most naturally from Paul's letters. It's a pretty traditional answer, I think, though in conflict with the view of Paul many scholars would defend nowadays.[60] The first point is that in the passage cited earlier (Romans 3: 9-18) Paul supports his doctrine that sin is universal by appealing to various Biblical passages. Both in the verses I quoted, and in the continuation I omitted, Paul is citing scripture, mostly the Psalms, though Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Isaiah all provide some of his quotes. So the dark view of human nature expressed in Romans is not peculiarly Paul's. It's a view he finds expressed frequently in the Hebrew Bible.[61] It may not be the *consistent* view of the Bible. Sanders contends that

> In the Jewish view, God had created the world and declared it good, a teaching which is not easily reconcilable with the view that Sin is a power strong enough to wrest the law from God's control or to render humans powerless to do what is good. (*Paul*, p. 43)

Let's suppose this is broadly true. Still, the argument Paul uses in Chapter 3 of Romans shows him responding to a different, darker side of the Jewish religion. Why is Paul drawn toward the dark side of scripture?

The best answer I can find is that at some point Paul came to believe in his own sinfulness, as measured by what he had come to think was the appropriate standard. Later in Romans he will write:

> 7:14... I am of flesh, sold in bondage to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For I do not do what I want to do, and what I detest, that I do. 16 Yet if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But as it is, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18 I know that no good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. I can desire what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I desire, but instead the evil that I do not desire. 20 Yet if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells

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[60] I have in mind here the scholars associated with what is called the "new perspective on Paul" movement, of which E. P. Sanders and Krister Stendahl are prominent members.

[61] Specifically, Eccles. 7:20, Ps. 14:2-3, 5:10, 140:4, 10:7, Isa. 59:7-8, Prov. 1:16, Ps. 36:2b. See the Anchor Bible Romans, pp. 334-6. The article on "Sin, Sinners (OT)" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* demonstrates that there are many other passages he might have cited.

> in me. 21 So I discover this principle at work: when I want to do right, evil is ready at hand. 22 For in my inmost self I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law in my members battling against the law that my mind acknowledges, and making me captive to the law of sin that is in my members.  24 Wretch that I am, who will rescue me from this doomed body?[62]

This passage is well-known, and central to the interpretations of Paul which dominated Christian theology for a long time.

Recent discussions of Paul have argued that the traditional interpretation profoundly misunderstood him. I am rather old-fashioned in reading it as expressing what Stendahl called "the anguish of a plagued conscience."[63] Stendahl himself doesn't think Paul actually suffered this anguish, pointing out that in Philippians he had written:

> 3:4 ... If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel... as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; *as to righteousness under the law, blameless*. (my emphasis)

Stendahl observes that the statements in Romans "about the impossibility of fulfilling the Law stand side by side with the one just [quoted]." (p. 81) On this reading Paul did not think the law impossible to fulfill, because he believed he himself had fulfilled it. But if Paul did not think the law impossible to fulfill, and did not feel that he personally had great difficulty obeying it, why did he think sin – serious sin – was universal?

Here's a possible answer: it's not true that these statements literally "stand side by side." They occur in different letters, and there seems to be no consensus about their relative dates. Romans is generally thought to be one of Paul's last letters, if not the last. Philippians is apparenty hard to date.[64] Maybe it's later than Romans. Maybe it's earlier. But if it *is* earlier than Romans, it could represent a different stage of Paul's thought about sin, where he is optimistic, not only about his own ability to fulfill the law, but about the ability of the Philippians as well:

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[62] Here I use Fitzmyer's translation from the Anchor Bible edition of Romans, but mainly for stylistic reasons. I don't see any substantive difference between it and the RSV/NRSV.

[63] Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, Fortress Press, 1976, p. 81. Among recent works influenced by Stendahl's interpretation is Garry Wills' *What Paul Meant* (Penguin, 2006). Wills writes that Paul "says repeatedly that he has done nothing for which his conscience could reproach him," citing a number of passages to that effect, the most pertinent of which (apart from Phil. 3:6) is 1 Cor. 4:4. See also Brown, 568n.

> 2:14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing, 15 so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

Here blamelessness appears to be a condition the Philippians can attain by *doing the right thing in the right spirit*: without murmuring and arguing. Paul does not think this is easy. If the Philippians behave as he recommends, they will be rare specimens of virtue. Still, it's possible for them to be blameless and innocent. Does Paul, then, at this stage of his career, think sin is universal? On the hypothesis I propose he started out as a comparative optimist, and ended as a deep pessimist.[65]

### *Interiorizing the Law*

But why the change of heart? Earlier I suggested that in Romans Paul was conscious of his own sinfulness *as measured by what he had come to think was the appropriate standard*. What I had in mind was that Paul may have come to think that when he declared himself blameless, he wasn't setting the bar high enough. By this I don't mean that he came to recognize that the moral requirements of the law were more crucial than its ceremonial requirements, that everyone is obliged not to kill, say, but that not everyone (or not every male) needs to be circumcised. What I'm postulating is a more significant change: Paul may have come to think that fulfilling the moral requirements of the law would take more than just correct external behavior.

In the passage leading up to that description of his inner conflict in Chapter 7 of Romans, Paul focuses attention on one commandment in particular: the commandment not to covet.

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[64] Brown's suggested dates for Philippians range from 56 to 63 CE, depending on where Paul is thought to have written that letter. (p. 484) His suggested dates for Romans cover a narrower range, from 55 to 58. (p. 560) Without attempting to be specific about dates, Wills suggests a chronology for Paul's letters which makes Romans the last of the genuine Pauline letters (pp. 15-16). The HCSB proposes an essentially similar chronology (p. 1908). See also Sanders, *Paul*, pp. 39-40)

[65] Of course, if you think that Paul's letters were written under divine inspiration, you may not be open to considering the possibility that he might have changed his mind on important theological issues. In the spirit of Spinoza, I suggest bracketing the assumption that he must be consistent on such matters.

> 7:7 ... If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'

Now some of the commandments seem to require nothing more than a certain external behavior: "you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal." The commandment not to covet looks like it requires more than that. What is it to covet? It is to desire, especially, to desire strongly, to long for. This aspect of the tenth commandment is particularly clear in the version given in Deuteronomy:

> 5:21 Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

You can't fulfill this commandment merely by not sleeping with your neighbor's wife and not stealing his possessions. You have to not *want* to do those things. And this looks like much more of a challenge than avoiding the external acts would be.

The Sermon on the Mount, for many Christians, is the epitome of Jesus' teaching. There Matthew reports him as saying:

> 5:27 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

In his life of Jesus Sanders comments that these verses – and others in that context – illustrate an "idealistic perfectionism" which "marks substantial portions of the Sermon on the Mount."[66] And he questions whether Jesus ever said such things:

> The reader of Mark and Luke would not know that Jesus prohibited anger and lustful thoughts. Admonition to eliminate feelings that are common to humanity is not a characteristic of Jesus' teaching generally, but occurs only in this section of Matthew... the overall tenor of Jesus' teaching is compassion towards human frailty. (*ibid.*, p. 202)

I don't wish, at this point, to get into the difficult business of sorting out which of the teachings attributed to Jesus in the gospels actually go back to Jesus. I'll limit myself to three points.

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[66] See *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Penguin, 1993, 201.

First, whatever Jesus himself may have taught, and whatever Paul may have believed that Jesus taught, the interiorization of the moral law we find in the Sermon on the Mount is not entirely foreign to the Jewish tradition. As we've seen, it's present in the Torah itself. Second, if Paul did come to think of the law as requiring the absence of certain desires, then it becomes much easier to understand why he might also have come to think that he was in bondage to sin. By that standard, it's so hard to be good that one might easily think it impossible. Third, if Paul did think of the law as making these demands on our desires, it's easier to understand why empirical observation of people would not settle the matter for him. Our everyday experience of others may not lead us to believe that they are horrendously wicked. We may find that some even lead lives which are "largely beyond reproach." But what we see is only what is external. By introspection we may learn that blameless external behavior can co-exist with desires a strict moralist would condemn. We may be able to conceal these desires from human judges. But in the end we will have to answer to God for our secret thoughts. (Rom. 2:14-16) Paul's recognition of this point would explain why he might not regard everyday observation of others as settling the matter.

### *Philosophical Speculation*

So far I don't think we find anything in Paul which deserves to be called 'philosophical speculation.' He believes that sin is universal, that everybody sins frequently and seriously, and (if my interpretation of this is correct) that part of the explanation for the ubiquity of serious sin is that the law makes demands on us which ordinary human beings will frequently fail to fulfill, demands even saints will often find challenging. To the extent that this view is not based on empirical observation, it seems to be based at least partly on introspection, and partly on scripture. Perhaps it is also based partly on literary and philosophical accounts of human experience. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid gives Medea the following lines:

> A new force drags me against my will; desire urges one thing, my mind another; I see the better and approve it; but I choose the worse. (*Metamorphoses* VII, 19-21)

The act she contemplates in this version of the story is betraying her father by helping Jason steal the golden fleece.[67] Ironically, if we interiorize the moral law, it does not matter what Medea chooses. She is condemned even if she just *wants* to help Jason.

Ovid did not invent the problem of weakness of will. He merely gave crisp epigrammatic expression to a common human weakness which philosophers have puzzled about since Plato's *Protagoras*. So far Spinoza might have had some sympathy with Paul's view. He himself holds a moderate, secularized form of the view. He can't accept the traditional notion of sin. He thinks it's unintelligible to conceive God as a lawgiver. So if sin is defined as a transgression of the laws of God, he will deny that there is such a thing. Who can defy the will of an omnipotent being?[68] But he redefines "sin" as disobedience to the laws of the state. In that sense there is no doubt that sin is possible and all too common, if not universal. And because he thinks the state is an institution whose function is to enable people to pursue their rational self-interest – giving them additional incentives to engage in cooperative behavior and avoid anti-social behavior, incentives which go beyond those nature provides, and should make it clearer what it is in our interest to do – he will sometimes equate sin with irrational behavior. (Cf. TP ii, 20-21 with E IV P54S)

Suppose we think of sin as irrational action, action in which reason succumbs to the passions, yielding anti-social action contrary to the agent's interests, broadly understood. On that conception, I think Spinoza would grant that sin is universal, frequent in the life of most, though not all, human beings. In the *Political Treatise* he writes that "it's not in anyone's power to always use reason and be at the highest peak of human freedom." (TP ii, 8) We are all subject to affects like anger, envy, or some other form of hatred. These pull us in different directions, and make us naturally enemies to one another. (TP ii, 14) This is not to say that no one is virtuous. But Spinoza does think that the truly virtuous – let's say, those who are guided by reason *most* of the time – are very few:

> Everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, has always been the same. In every age virtue has been extremely rare. (xii, 7)

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[67] Euripedes attributed a similar sentiment to his Medea, though in a different, and more troubling context, where what she was on the point of doing was unambiguously appalling, avenging Jason's betrayal of her by killing their children. See *Medea*, 1076-1080.

[68] TTP iv, 23-37. Cf. E IV P37S2 with TP ii, 18.

We may have an allusion here to Romans 3:9. But if so, Spinoza has moderated Paul's pessimism. He does *not* join Paul in saying with the Psalmist that no one is righteous, not even one.

### *Where Paul Went Astray*

If Spinoza accepts a more moderate version of Paul's teaching, what is the philosophical speculation he thinks so unfortunate? I think it lies in Paul's account of the ultimate cause of sin. Paul may not have fully articulated the doctrine of original sin which the Church subsequently adopted, but he did a great deal to get it started. The traditional doctrine maintains that God created us with free will, with an ability either to sin or not to sin, but that the first man, Adam, chose to sin, and that as a result of his choice, sin passed to all his descendants, who were henceforth unable not to sin.[69] Though those descendants might *now* be under the power of sin, unable to order their lives as they should, the fact that they lack this power is a consequence of an act of Adam's which he could have avoided.

When the church fathers offered scriptural support for this view, they emphasized a passage in Romans which the Vulgate rendered:

> ...as through one man sin entered the world (and through sin death), and so [death] passed into all men, *in whom* all have sinned.[70]

It's not clear what this means, but Augustine offered a way of reading it which became official church doctrine for a long time. He took the italicized phrase as a reference to Adam, the 'one man' mentioned in the first clause, who brought sin into the world. His idea was that the *first* sin, Adam's sin, involved all of his descendants, who somehow sinned in his act of sin. Hence the lines in the *New England Primer*: "In Adam's fall we sinnèd all." Augustine put the matter as follows:

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[69] Unless cleansed by baptism. See Denzinger's *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, tr. by Roy Deferrari, Loreto Publications, 2007, entries in the Systematic Index for "Original Man," "Original Sin" and "Fallen Man." For an Augustinian statement of the doctrine, see his *City of God*, XII, xxii; XIII, i-iii, xiv; and XIV, i-iii, xi-xvi.

[70] Romans 5:12, as translated by Deferrari in Denzinger, my emphasis. This is a pretty literal translation of the Vulgate, which still has some currency, though it is problematic on both linguistic and philosophical grounds. The Vulgate puts all the responsibility on Adam, not only for his own sin, but also for those of his descendants, in a way many moderns find uncomfortable. The RSV, like most recent translations, assigns responsibility for the descendants' sins to the descendants themselves: "As sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men have sinned."

Fitzmyer has argued that both these translations face linguistic difficulties and that the context does not permit us to evade the philosophical issue by amending the Vulgate translation: "No matter how one understands 5.12d, the universal causality of Adam's sin is presupposed in 5.15a, 16a, 17a, 18a, 19. Hence it would be false to the thrust of the whole Pauline paragraph to interpret 5.12 as though it implied that the sinful human condition before Christ's coming were due solely to individual personal conduct, as Pelagius advocated..." See Fitzmyer, "The Consecutive Meaning of ΕΦ' Ω in Romans 5:12," *New Testament Studies* 39 (1993): 321-39.

> God, who is the author of natures, and certainly not of vices, created man morally upright. But man, corrupted willingly, and justly condemned, produced corrupted and condemned descendants. For we were all *in* that one man, since we all *were* that one man, who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him before they sinned.[71]

Here we have what can only be described as philosophical speculation. To say things like "we were all *in* that one man... we all *were* that one man" is to make metaphysical claims which it's very hard to understand. And these seem to be philosophical speculations foreign to the Old Testament tradition, which does not need to engage in them. However much the Hebrew Bible may believe in the universality of sin, it does not try to explain its universality by a doctrine of inheritance from Adam.[72]

The problem of explaining human sinfulness – in the secular sense in which Spinoza can accept the idea of sin – is central to the latter parts of his *Ethics*. Part IV is called "Of Human Bondage," a phrase Spinoza glosses as "man's lack of power to moderate and restrain [his] affects," manifested in the fact that often, though he sees the better, he cannot help but follow the worse. That allusion to the words of Ovid's Medea occurs in the Preface to Part IV, and the passage is quoted in E IV P17S. Spinoza's project is to account for our irrationality through natural causes, through the laws of nature, "according to which all things happen." (E III Pref) In the *Ethics* he avoids polemic against the traditional religious explanation. In the *Political Treatise* he is more confrontational:

> The theologians don't remove this difficulty [that people don't organize their lives wisely, but are carried away by blind desire] when they claim that the cause of this weakness is a vice of human nature, *or* a sin, originating in the fall of our first ancestor. If the first man had it in his power to either stand firm or fall, and if he was in possession of his faculties and unimpaired in his nature, how could he have fallen, knowingly, and with eyes

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[71] Augustine, *City of God*, XIII, xiv, my emphasis, my translation.
[72] See the article cited above, "Sin, Sinners (OT)" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

> open?... They say he was deceived by the Devil. But who deceived the Devil?... And how could that first man, who was of sound mind and the master of his will, be seduced and undergo the loss of his mental faculties? If he had the power to use reason correctly, he couldn't be deceived. He necessarily strove, as far as he could, to preserve his being and keep his mind sound. It's supposed that he had this in his power. So he must have kept his mind sound and could not have been deceived. The story of the first man shows that this is false. So it must be granted that it wasn't in the first man's power to use reason correctly. Like us, he was subject to affects. (TP ii, 6)

In the end, Paul, Augustine, and the long line of  theologians who follow them have no credible explanation for Adam's sin.

*What Jesus Taught*

Spinoza contrasts the philosophical speculations Paul engaged in with "the very few and very simple doctrines Christ taught his followers." (TTP xi, 22) By this I take it he's referring to a quite short list of ethical teachings hardly anyone would object to. Sometimes he identifies the true religion with the commandments to practice justice and love your fellow human beings. (xix, 9) I can understand a Christian objecting that this list is *too* short, that these are mere platitudes, which everyone might agree with, but which are not meaningful without more specifics about what constitutes being just and loving your fellow human beings.[73]

Spinoza might concede that. But toward the end of Chapter XII, he responds to this objection in advance. He has just claimed that the most important requirements of scripture are the commandments "to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself." (xii, 34)
This recalls the saying attributed to Jesus in Matthew:

> 22:35 One of [the Pharisees], a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is greatest?" 37 He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your

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[73] I take it that Dungan makes a version of this objection in his *History of the Synoptic Problem*, pp. 216, 240, 242.

> neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."[74]

This last verse suggests that the rest of the law can be derived from these two commandments. So does Spinoza:

> The remaining moral precepts must be held to be no less uncorrupted, since they follow with utmost clarity from this universal foundation: to defend justice, to aid the poor, to kill no one, to covet nothing belonging to another, and so on. (xii, 37)

Spinoza will certainly allow that the short list can be expanded. But not indefinitely. The principle governing the expansion – that things which follow clearly from the universal foundation are part of the moral law – also limits it. Things which don't follow clearly from that foundation are without compelling justification and not required. Spinoza's doubts about how far we can know what Jesus actually taught come into play here.

### *The True Religion*

Spinoza thinks that a short list is crucial to the claim of Christianity to be the universal religion. Before Jesus the prophets preached the true religion, relying on the covenant Moses entered into at Mt. Sinai, but they preached it only to the people of Israel, as the law of their country. After Jesus the Apostles also preached the true religion, but preached it to everyone, as a universal law. (xii, 24) If the religion Jesus and the apostles preached was the true religion, and the religion Moses and the prophets preached was also the true religion, then both the prophets and the apostles preached the same religion. So no doctrine peculiar to either Testament can be part of the true religion.

> Even if we had fewer books than we do, either of the Old Testament or of the New, we would still not be deprived of the word of God, by which we ought to understand the true religion. (xii, 25)

One crucial implication of this is that insofar as the books of the New Testament teach doctrines not present in the Hebrew Bible, they don't teach anything essential for salvation.

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[74] There are alternative versions of this story in the other synoptic gospels (Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28), with interesting variations. These gospel passages, of course, go back to various passages in the Hebrew Bible: Deut. 6:4-9, 10:12-22; Lev. 19:18.

Spinoza takes his principle – that even if we had fewer books of the Bible than we do, we would not be deprived of God's word – to entail that if we lacked one of the present four gospels, we wouldn't lack anything essential for our salvation:

> It's true that some things are contained in one gospel which are not there in another, so that one often aids in understanding the other. Still, we should not conclude from that that everything related in these four works was necessary for men to know... (xii, 30)

To see why this is important, let's compare the gospels to see how they bear on the issue between Paul and James: is salvation by faith or by works? This will be an application of Spinoza's historical-critical method, which requires us to "collect the sayings of each book and organize them under main headings, to that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject... noting all those which are ambiguous or obscure or seem inconsistent with one another." (vii, 16) What conclusions does the method lead to in this case?

### *Salvation in the (Synoptic) Gospels*

Suppose a thorough examination of the gospels yields the following result: three gospels agree, roughly, in telling the same story: the path to salvation is by works, obeying the commandments; one gospel rejects that answer, arguing that faith in Jesus is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. On that gospel's view, obedience to the commandments would be a very good thing, of course, if it were possible; but it's not possible, and not necessary for salvation. On Spinoza's principle that no one gospel is essential to our determining the word of God, we should reject the outlier and follow the three gospels which agree in recommending salvation by works. Our hypothetical examination would support Spinoza's preference for James over Paul.

I cannot undertake a thorough examination of the gospels on this issue. But I can discuss a few relevant texts. Consider the following story, told, with minor variations, in Matthew, Mark and Luke. A rich young man came to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said that he needed to obey the commandments. The young man said he had done that since his youth. Jesus then said that he must do one thing more: he must sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor; then he would have treasure in heaven.[75] The young man went away sad, because he was very rich. This story, on its face, seems to support James's reading of the path to salvation.

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[75] Cf. Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-25. It seems likely, from the context, that the requirement of extraordinary charity applies to the rich only, not to everyone. Christians with whom I've

*Salvation in John*

The gospel of John, on the other hand, clearly sides with Paul. It provides the principal, perhaps the only, support in the gospels for the view that what's required for salvation is faith *and only faith*. The text which states this most clearly and concisely is John 3:

> 16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life... 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the only Son of God.

Belief in Jesus – I assume this means belief in Jesus as the son of God, whose sacrificial death on the cross redeemed mankind from sin, not just belief in Jesus as a wise and charismatic preacher, whose message of love and justice we would do well to follow – is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. A number of other passages in John endorse a similar view.[76] So far as I can see, there are no similar passages in the synoptic gospels.[77]

Now it might be objected that we don't need Spinoza's principle – if it's in only one gospel, it's not essential – to exclude John from consideration when we're trying to determine what Jesus taught about salvation. There are many reasons, well-known to biblical scholars, for regarding John as unreliable.[78] Evaluating the primary sources for our knowledge of Jesus, E. P. Sanders has concluded that John's picture of Jesus is so different from that offered in the synoptics that

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discussed this passage, and who are inclined to emphasize the importance of having faith in Jesus, often fasten on a verse at the end of the story, in which Jesus is represented as saying: "come, follow me," as if it implied that in addition to following the commandments, and extraordinary charity, one thing more was still necessary: having faith in Jesus. This seems to me an implausible reading of the story, particularly if the faith in Jesus is supposed to involve believing in his redemption of mankind through his death on the cross, which is presumably the faith contemplated in John.

[76] See, for example, 6:44-51, 14:6.

[77] The best counter-example to this claim that I know occurs in what is called 'the longer ending of Mark': "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned." But the longer ending of Mark is apparently "missing from the earliest, most reliable Greek manuscripts." (HCSB, p. 1758n.) Textually conscientious Bibles bracket it as dubious.

[78] See, for example, Maurice Casey's *Is John's Gospel True?* (Routledge, 1996) or the appendix to his *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 511-525.

> for the last 150 or so years scholars have had to choose. They have almost unanimously, and I think entirely correctly, concluded that the teaching of the historical Jesus is to be sought in the synoptic gospels and that John represents an advanced theological development, in which meditations on the person and work of Christ are presented in the first person, as if Jesus had said them. (*The Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 71)

Sanders goes on to say that John is aiming at a different kind of truth, which does not require historical accuracy. This seems to be a diplomatic way of saying: if you care about what Jesus actually taught, the best place to go is to the synoptic gospels; if you don't care that much about historical truth, but are interested in theological speculation, you can find that in John.[79] This seems to me right. We don't *need* Spinoza's principle to think John is historically unreliable. But if there are other paths to his conclusion, that only strengthens his argument.

### *Spinoza's Political Agenda*

At the beginning of this paper I noted that historians of philosophy have not done justice to Spinoza's contribution to biblical scholarship. Historians of biblical scholarship have often done better in recognizing the significance of Spinoza's accomplishment. Earlier I mentioned Kugel's praise for Spinoza in *How to Read the Bible*. In a similar vein, E. A. Speiser wrote that "it required... the penetrating probing of Spinoza... to launch 'higher' biblical criticism... on a truly productive course." (*Genesis*, p. xx) But lately there has been a tendency among historians of biblical scholarship to acknowledge Spinoza's seminal importance, but decry his influence. Critical historical scholarship claims to be objective, disinterested, and impartial, we are told, but it has its roots in the work of a renegade Jewish philosopher, who was biased by his antisupernaturalist view of the world, and who had a political agenda: to "disembowel the Bible," rendering it useless as a support for traditional religion.[80]

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[79] State or church censorship of heterodox opinions may be largely dead in the anglophone world, but self-censorsip seems still to be very much alive. Diplomacy is no doubt a wise policy for Christian biblical scholars who wish to have their work read sympathetically by its primary audience. It does not pay to be too candid about John. See Casey's explanation, in *Jesus of Nazareth*, of the reasons why the scholarly community, which has largely accepted the arguments against the historicity of John, has been unwilling to make those arguments accessible to the general public.

[80] The phrase "disembowel the Bible" comes from the most vitriolic of these works, David Laird Dungan's *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, Doubleday, 1999. Similar in its general argument and tone is Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker's *Politicizing the Bible, The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*, Crossroad Publishing, 2013. More temperate and accurate, but much

Now Spinoza certainly did have a political agenda in writing the TTP, though that may be a rather tendentious way of characterizing his agenda. His agenda is not hidden. He's quite open about it in his preface:

> I believed I would be doing something neither unwelcome, nor useless, if I showed not only that [complete freedom of judgment and worship] can be granted without harm to piety and the peace of the republic, but also that it cannot be abolished unless piety and the peace of the republic are abolished with it. That's the main thing I resolved to demonstrate in this treatise. To do this it was necessary to indicate the main prejudices regarding religion, i.e., the traces of our ancient bondage. (Pref, 12-13)

In a letter he wrote to Oldenburg as he was beginning on the TTP, he described his goals thus:

> I am composing now a treatise on my opinion regarding scripture. The considerations which move me to do this are the prejudices of the theologians (for I know that they are the greatest obstacle to men's being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent)... and the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think, which I want to defend in every way. Here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness. (Letter 30, Gebhardt IV/166)

Critical scholarship aids the cause of freedom because it calls into question the view – surely one of the prejudices Spinoza had in mind in these passages – that you must have the right faith to be saved (where having the right faith is understood as requiring some very metaphysical views about Jesus). To the extent that Spinoza is successful in doing that, he deprives religious authorities of a crucial part of their rationale for using force to secure conversions and to repress dissent. If having the correct faith is not necessary to achieve the eternal blessings of salvation, and avoid the eternal torment of damnation, then the persecutors of religious dissent cannot claim, as they typically do, to be acting for the good of the dissenters when they coerce them or of more orthodox members of society, when they profess to protect them from dangerous voices. [81]

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briefer, is Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg's *The Bible in Modern Culture, Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd edition, Eerdmans, 2002.

[81] I've discussed the traditional Christian arguments against religious liberty in a number of papers which are mostly in print, in one place or another, but currently most easily available on my website: http://sitemaker.umich.edu/emcurley. The most pertinent of these is one which is not yet in print, "From Augustine to Spinoza and Locke," forthcoming in a collection of essays on religious toleration edited by

Does the fact that Spinoza has this political goal compromise the integrity of his biblical scholarship? That's what his critics argue. But would we think the work of a medical researcher was compromised just because we learned that he also had some other goal, apart from the search for truth? if we learned, for example, that he hoped his research would lead to a cure for cancer? Scientists often have agendas, in the sense of goals which go beyond the pursuit of truth, but which they hope their pursuit of truth will enable them to realize. What protects us (and them) from the danger that their agendas will lead them to become purveyors of plausible falsehood, rather than seekers of truth, is the fact that, to succeed in their aims, they generally have to persuade an audience of their peers that they have made genuine discoveries. They must submit their reasoning to those critics. The fact that Spinoza succeeded, in the long run, in getting his method widely accepted, often by people who found its conclusions quite uncomfortable,[82] is one reason to think that his agenda did not compromise the integrity of his scholarship.

But in the end what we must do is to examine his arguments, to see whether or not he argues well for his conclusions. It's a notable feature of this criticism of Spinoza that his critics pay no attention to his arguments, emphasizing instead his naturalistic metaphysics, to prove the bias they allege.[83] In this paper I've tried to lay out the basic argument of Spinoza's biblical criticism, pointing out its weaknesses where I think it is weak, its strengths where I think it is strong, and some of the conclusions which "the oppressiveness of the times"[84] in which he was writing per-

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Allen Speight. In Augustine, the emphasis is on saving the heretic's soul. See his letters 93 and 185. In Aquinas the emphasis is on protecting the faithful from corruption by nonbelievers. See his *Summa theologiae*, II-II, Qu. 10, art. 1, art. 3.

[82] Kugel is an interesting case here. He is an orthodox Jew, "who has spent most of his life studying and teaching modern biblical scholarship," who nevertheless believes that "modern biblical scholarship and traditional Judaism are and must always remain completely irreconcilable." (Kugel 2007, pp. 45, 681) His last chapter explains how he deals with the tensions among these positions.

[83] Dungan is typical. In a chapter of some sixty pages, he devotes just a page and a half to outlining Spinoza's method of biblical interpretation and deliberately omits "all detailed biblical illustration," on the ground that it is not essential to his analysis. And that outline comes only after he has spent over thirty pages describing Spinoza's life and philosophy. (Dungan 1999, 217, 234-35) One might think Dungan himself had a political agenda: to discredit historical scholarship by showing that it originated in a philosopher whose philosophy and life experiences made him hostile to scripture. Hahn and Wiker do no better.

[84] This language is suggested by one of the annotations Spinoza added to the TTP in the last months of his life, saying that he preferred to pass over in silence certain issues about the dating of Chronicles because "the oppressiveness of our times" did not permit him to explain them. See Annotation XXI, attached to x, 1.

suaded him not to state explicitly. I cannot see that either his naturalistic metaphysics or his political goals played any significant role in the articulation of that argument. This is what we should expect if we accept the biographical evidence (cited in n. 22) indicating that he had developed his doubts about scripture well before he turned to philosophy.