

Spinoza, Science and Scripture

The Theological-Political Treatise and its relation to the scientific revolution

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Abstract

In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), Spinoza undertakes the most ambitious attempt of his time to demythologize the Bible. He rigorously applies methods of historical and critical analysis and arrives at a radical break with the past. His for that time unique approach is, that he rejects the hitherto universally accepted assumption that Scripture ultimately must be of divine origin. Spinoza not only argues that the Bible is a collection of books of human fabrication. He also denies the supernatural character of prophecy and of miracles, and he rejects the idea of the eternal election of the Jewish people. By depriving the Bible of its divine status, Spinoza also undermines clerical authority. For if the Bible does not contain divinely revealed absolute truths, the pretension of theologians, preachers and rabbis that they have privileged access to these truths loses its foundation. As a consequence, they can no longer claim a privileged right to direct the behaviour of individuals and of governments.

Of course, such a radical break with the past does not come as a bolt out of the blue. In this thesis, it is argued that Spinoza's ideas fit into a broader pattern of change in early modern thought. Some essential preconditions had to be fulfilled to make Spinoza's undertaking possible at all. An intellectual change in "mindset" took place during the 16th and 17th century. It consisted of a *decline* in the force of traditional authorities, together with an *increase* in confidence in the power of reasoning and experience. The voyages of discovery, the Protestant Reformation and the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th century were of vital importance in bringing about these changes. Spinoza's TTP should be seen against the background of this fundamental change in outlook in 17th century Europe.

In this thesis, it is also stressed that the theological part of the TTP represents a much more important contribution to this change in views than the political part. It is argued that Spinoza's involvement in science and his indebtedness to the new scientific attitude of his time are often virtually ignored. This is the more regrettable, because Spinoza's way of interpreting the Bible is strongly rooted in the new view on science that arose during the scientific revolution. By applying scientific methods to the Bible, Spinoza more than anyone else may be seen as the originator of a revolution in the *human* sciences. Whereas the revolution in the *natural* sciences removed man from the centre of the physical universe, the revolution in the *humanities* deprived him of his self-image as the ultimate purpose of the world and of history. In this sense, Spinoza heralded the end of anthropocentrism.

Apart from being born out of science, Spinoza's TTP also fits into the pre-existing traditions of biblical interpretation, both in medieval Jewish thought and in recent Protestantism. Unique as Spinoza's approach to the Bible may be, there is also room for critique. The arguments Spinoza uses to support his naturalism and to prove his historical view on Scripture are critically evaluated. Spinoza's claim that his conclusions are exclusively based on a careful reading of Scripture itself is questioned. Finally, an evaluation is given both of the historical importance and of the present-day relevance of the TTP.

INTRODUCTION

Why did Spinoza actually write his *Theological-Political Treatise*(TTP)? A commonly heard answer is that his main goal was to demonstrate that freedom of philosophizing can be allowed in a free republic and that it is even beneficial to do so. One might think that there is much to say in favour of such a view. After all, the subtitle of the TTP states that it is “containing several discourses which demonstrate that freedom to philosophize may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself”. A letter, written to Henry Oldenburg (around October 1, 1665), corresponding secretary of the Royal Society in London, seems to confirm this impression:

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

However, as I will argue in this thesis, this is only a small part of Spinoza’s project. Both the subtitle of the Treatise and the letter to Oldenburg may put us on the wrong track. Spinoza’s statements are more revealing by what they leave out than by what they express. To be sure, it cannot be denied that the Treatise contains “several discourses” defending freedom to philosophize. However, the TTP is sailing under false colours. For when reading it, one is struck by the fact that from the 20 chapters, no less than 15 of them are not devoted to politics at all, but to the interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, from the remaining five chapters, two are about the ancient Hebrew state. Only one single chapter, namely the last one, is devoted to freedom to philosophize. But in essence, the larger part of the TTP is indeed “*a treatise on my views regarding Scripture*”. The central issue is the interpretation - or better: demythologization - of Scripture. That issue is – perhaps wisely - left out from the subtitle and from the letter to Oldenburg. If Spinoza had been completely honest, he would have added that this treatise *also* contained *many other* discourses which demonstrate that prophets and prophecies are *not* divinely inspired, that the Hebrews are *not* a people that has been chosen for all eternity, that the laws of Moses are *irrelevant* for our time, that Scripture is a work of *human* fabrication, that the books of the Bible are *not* written by the prophets to whom they are traditionally attributed, and that supernatural events (miracles) do *not* exist at all.

From this short summary one could derive that the TTP serves a much more comprehensive purpose than only a political one. For it addresses much more issues than would be necessary to support his political views. As I will argue, from the way Spinoza is undermining biblical authority and from the topics he treats it may easily be derived, that it not only attacks clerical authority, but foremost and in the first place exposes a completely new view on the nature of the world (one without supernatural events), on the origin of Scripture (a work of human authorship) and on the status of morality (autonomous instead of heteronomous). Only secondarily, it addresses political issues, and in this respect one may easily discover that it is not only directed against Calvinist orthodoxy, but also against rabbinical authority. This is quite understandable, for after all, challenging rabbinical authority was the main reason for Spinoza’s excommunication by the Portuguese Jewish community in 1656. With this background in mind, it is not surprising that assumptions arose that his TTP originated from an early Apology, possibly written immediately after

¹ Spinoza (1995), letter 30, p. 185-186.

his expulsion.² However, mindful of the device “caute” (be cautious) on his seal, Spinoza most likely preferred to stress the promotion of peace and piety on the front page of his Treatise. A complete disclosure of his intentions probably would have had no other effect than preventing it from reaching the printing press at all. To be even more cautious, when it was published in January 1670 by Spinoza’s close friend Jan Rieuwertsz from Amsterdam, it appeared anonymously, and it mentioned a fictitious printer Heinrich Künraht from Hamburg on the front page. Despite all these precautions, the name of the author became known very soon, and the publication still gave rise to a storm of protests, leading to a ban by the States of Holland in 1674. The fanatical character of these protests – a blasphemous and dangerous book, forged in hell – clearly shows how it was perceived: not as just another political pamphlet in favour of freedom and democracy, but as an attack on the core of Christian and Jewish religion itself. And perhaps this perception was well justified. Perhaps the intention of promoting freedom to philosophize was no primary goal at all, but in the first place a precondition for the dissemination of philosophical and scientific ideas (like those in the Treatise itself).

It should be noted at once that these philosophical ideas by no means intended to put an end to religion. Spinoza has no problem with religion as such. What he opposed to was the tyranny of religious institutions and their failure to grasp the central message of what he saw as the “true religion”. The philosophical ideas Spinoza wanted to communicate freely were the two issues that concerned philosophers ever since Western philosophy was born in ancient Greece: to understand the nature of the world, and to discover the true principles of morality. Investigating these issues freely was severely frustrated by the tension between the teachings of the Church and the findings of philosophy and science. This tension certainly had a long history, but up to Spinoza’s time interpreters of Scripture succeeded to solve the puzzle while remaining within the boundaries of Jewish and Christian orthodoxy. With the advance of science in the 17th century, however, it became increasingly difficult to maintain that the Bible contained the absolute truth. Spinoza’s second theme, the desire to expose a *moral* view that was both human and humane, was directed both against the legalistic application of the laws by the Jews and against the strict Calvinist orthodoxy. According to Spinoza, the Bible teaches us a very simple moral lesson, that has most succinctly been summarized by Jesus: to love God above all, and to love your neighbour as yourself.

The main purposes of this thesis are, to show how intimately Spinoza’s bold writings against biblical authority are related to the scientific revolution, how this revolution made the writing of such a treatise possible at all, and how this treatise itself in turn contributed to that revolution. I want to sketch which strategies Spinoza uses to counter biblical authority. Spinoza followed a completely new and revolutionary course to reconcile Scripture with reason and science. However, this revolutionary character of the TTP can only be fully understood when seeing it against the background of the scientific revolution as a whole. In my view, the TTP is part of this much broader intellectual transformation. What I want to show is how the TTP fits into the context of this more general 16th and 17th century “change in mindset”. Without such an intellectual “climate change”, it would not have been possible to write the TTP at all.

Several factors brought about this major shift in worldview: a) a decline in the power of the authority of ancient and Jewish-Christian traditions, b) a heightened awareness of the power of rational knowledge, closely related to c) a change in the outlook on the mission and the proper methods of philosophy and science. These factors enabled the transition from a worldview dominated by myths and magic to a worldview dominated by rationality and science. In other words,

² Salomon van Til, a professor of theology at Utrecht, provides the first written evidence for this assumption. In his *Het Voor-hof der Heydenen, voor alle ongeloovigen geopent...* (1694) he states that Spinoza has written an apology in Spanish as a “Justification for his departure from Judaism”. See Steenbakkers p. 30-31, and Mertens. Nadler (1999) p. 132-133 probably inaccurately mentions 1684 as the year of publication.

it enabled what has been called the “disenchantment of the world” (*Chapter 1*). Spinoza and his supporters rightly observed that Scripture is often explained by clerical authorities in a way inhibiting the advancement of rational knowledge and science. Spinoza emphatically states that Scripture should not be seen as a text of philosophical relevance, but only as an aid to moral behaviour. It should be interpreted in such a way that it no longer interferes with philosophical and scientific truth.

Of course, Spinoza was not the first to be critical about the Bible. There already existed a long tradition of biblical interpretation; however, it was a tradition with serious biases. First, both the Jewish rabbinical tradition and Christian theology had inserted numerous additional “meanings” for ages, “meanings” which are not at all evident when reading the Bible in an unprejudiced way. And second, doubts about the truth of every biblical sentence were seen as intolerable. The absolute truth of Scripture was an unnegotiable issue. So, “explaining away” difficulties had become common practice. Spinoza wants to make a fresh start, leaving dogmatic views behind. According to him, circumventing difficulties by postulating hidden meanings or by arbitrarily substituting literal by metaphorical meanings was not the right way to read the Bible. One should have to draw conclusions only from what becomes clear and evident by reading Scripture alone. In this insistence on clear and distinct ideas one definitely will recognize Descartes’ influence.

On the other hand, Spinoza also had learned much from the new natural sciences. I want to show to what extent Spinoza was involved in, and indebted to, this new scientific enterprise. He should be seen, and most probably he saw himself, as a man of science (*Chapter 2*). The hallmark of science, separating it from religion, is its naturalism, which I shall explain in *Chapter 3*. Spinoza starts by applying this naturalism to prophets and prophecy, phenomena without which religion based on revelation would be unthinkable. Spinoza’s views on prophets and prophecy shall be compared with those of traditional religion in general and those of Maimonides in particular, and also with those of Hobbes (*Chapter 4*). One important source of conflict between religion and science is the phenomenon of miracles, to which *Chapter 5* shall be devoted. In *Chapter 6*, the rise of historical criticism of the Bible will be considered. It will be explained that Spinoza applies this method in a much more radical way than his predecessors, and that he uses an approach that ultimately leads to a complete desacralization and naturalization of the Bible.

In *Chapter 7*, an overview shall be given of the abundance of critiques to which the TTP gave rise. In the same chapter, attention shall be paid to Spinoza’s political views. It will be argued that these are less pioneering than his theological views. For much that Spinoza has to say about politics has already been said earlier (by Machiavelli, Hobbes, Van den Enden, the brothers De la Court). And some of them had said it better and more convincingly. In *Chapter 8*, I will give a critique and evaluation of the TTP from a modern point of view. Finally, I shall explain what I see, respectively, as the historical importance of the TTP and as its relevance for the present.

CHAPTER 1: DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

1.1 A change in world view

The overriding importance of 17th century science for Spinoza's thinking, and especially for his TTP, has been grossly ignored by most authors. The full import of the TTP can only be understood when seeing it within the broader context of the changes in outlook on the world in general. The scientific revolution in particular caused a fundamental change in view on reality, marking the transition from the pre-modern to the modern era. The German sociologist Max Weber has argued that this transition essentially is characterized by a "disenchantment of the world" (German: Entzauberung der Welt). Weber possibly had in mind Balthasar Bekker's *De betoverde Weereld* (The enchanted world), a book in which this Dutch Cartesian denies the existence of witches and the ability of spirits (like angels) to act on the material world.³ In his famous lecture for students "Wissenschaft als Beruf" (Science as a Vocation, 1917) Weber states that the progress of modern science is characterized and accompanied by an increase in intellectualization and rationalization. This means "the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service".⁴ In a disenchanted world, reality no longer is guided by incomprehensible mystery and magic, but by knowable, predictable and manipulable forces. In this new world view, everything becomes – at least in principle – understandable and tameable.

Disenchantment implies secularization and the decline of magic. It implies the rationalization not only of science, but also of society, of law- and policy-making. Of course, the transition from a mythical to a scientific view of reality did not happen overnight. Moreover, it never has become a really *universal* change in experiencing the world. Mythical views have persisted worldwide until the present day, also in European culture. It even has been argued that many rituals and symbols typical for modern society may be interpreted as signs of (re-) enchantment.⁵ All the same, the concept remains useful as a model, helpful to bring order into a whole range of changes in "mindset" that unmistakably took place in Europe during the 16th and 17th century. These changes will be discussed in the following sections. I will start with a short overview of the mythical view on reality (1.2). To understand the 17th century radical break with the past, I will continue with what I see as its major precondition: the decline of authority (1.3). Then I will discuss the European transition from a mythical to a scientific view on reality, which took shape in what is generally known as the Scientific Revolution (1.4). After that (in Chapter 2), I will focus on Spinoza's involvement in the scientific achievements of his time and to his important contribution to this disenchantment.⁶ Central to

³ This controversial book appeared in 1691-1693 in four volumes and caused a huge row. See Van Bunge (2001b) p. 137-148.

⁴ Weber p. 17. Translation: H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (1946) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, pp. 129-156, New York: Oxford University Press. See: <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Science-as-a-Vocation.pdf>

⁵ Jenkins (2000).

⁶ In the following, I will use the alternative terms "demythologization" and "desacralization" as synonyms for "disenchantment".

Spinoza's contribution is the systematic elimination of all supernatural elements from reality, and more specifically, from the Bible. That will be the main topic of my thesis.

1.2 The mythical view on reality

During most of human history, mythical ways of representation of reality have been dominant.⁷ Religion was the all-embracing framework through which all aspects of nature and culture had to be understood. All ordinary events on earth should be interpreted as manifestations or reflections of events of a higher order. Their meaning could only be understood when seen as being derived from that higher order. It has been poetically phrased by saying that all premodern societies were "vaulted by the sacred canopy of religion".⁸

For Christian Europe during the 15th century, the religious overtones of everyday life have been vividly evoked in Huizinga's classic *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (The waning of the Middle Ages): "The great things: birth, marriage, dying, stood through the sacrament in the radiance of divine mystery. But also minor cases: a voyage, labour, a visit, were accompanied by a thousand blessings, ceremonies, spells, conventions".⁹ Natural events had to be explained by reference to a supernatural world. The myth (Greek: mythos = word or story) was for most pre-modern societies the authoritative source explaining the origin and purpose of all things and delivering the key to understand the world. But if all worldly phenomena were merely a symbolic representation of a higher order, it would be pointless to change the order of things. When this order was a "givenness" from the very beginning of time, a change of this pre-established order was impossible or even unimaginable. There simply was no room for modern ideas about "change" by human intervention, or about "evolution" in the natural or historical world. The social and political order also were given for all eternity.

In Christian Europe, this belief in a pre-established order was institutionalized in many ways. The Holy Scripture was the ultimate source of truth and infallible in its authority, because it represented God's word. The doctrinal authority of the Roman Catholic Church guaranteed that God's word was interpreted correctly, and individual deviations from this official interpretation could not be tolerated. The king was crowned by the pope, indicating that his royal dignity was derived from God. He ruled "by the grace of God", and because of this divine origin of his mission nobody dared to challenge the authority of the king or the legitimacy of his kingship. The course of *individual* human life should be understood in the perspectives of original sin and the ultimate purpose of salvation of the soul. The course of human history could only be understood as salvation history, determined by God's plan with regard to the Second Coming of Christ and the ultimate salvation of mankind.

In Judaism, ideas about afterlife were less outspoken, although belief in the immortality of the soul was an important issue in Spinoza's time.¹⁰ However, the first duty of all Jews has always been – and in orthodox Judaism still is - the obedience to the laws of Moses. Neglecting God's commandments was out of the question, let alone questioning their relevance openly. Heretics who challenged this had to pay the prize of losing one's part in the world to come (if not also one's part in *this* world, at least as member of the community, as was painfully demonstrated by Spinoza's excommunication in 1656). What Jews and Christians had in common, was their firm belief in a unified orderly world governed by God. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein formulates marvellously how

⁷ See for this subject in particular Van der Wal p. 39-59.

⁸ Peter Berger, quoted by Van der Wal p. 39.

⁹ Huizinga p. 1 (translated from Dutch by NV).

¹⁰ See Nadler (2001) on the complicated history of Jewish ideas on the immortality of the soul.

this old “grandly unifying cathedral of thought” was organized in predominantly Christian Europe, also stressing its essentially teleological character:¹¹

The all-inclusive view of the cosmos, laid down by Aristotle and buttressed by the medical theories of Galen, the astronomy of Ptolemy, and the theology of Christianity, had offered a way of explaining... absolutely everything. From the falling of objects to the rising of smoke; from generation and decay to the four basic personality types; from the relation between body and soul to the pathways of the planets; the supposed nature and reason for every aspect of the world could be extracted from an interlocking system that employed a homogeneous form of explanation throughout. The form of explanation had been purpose-driven, or teleological, and its scaffolding was the metaphor of human action. We explain human actions by citing the end state that the agent has in mind by undertaking it. The old system took this familiar model of explanation and expanded it to apply to the world at large.

These words clearly demonstrate that the belief in authority was crucial for adherence to the old teleological cathedral of thought. The implication is, that the *decline* of this authority would bring about the crumbling of this cathedral, as will be explained in the next section.

1.3 The decline of authority

From the foregoing, it may be clear that for centuries, the culture of Christian Europe has been dominated by a firm belief in authority. This authority had two sources. The first source was that of the Bible and its clerical interpreters, the second was the authority of ancient Greece. It may be added that in Judaism, an alternative system of authority existed, and in view of Spinoza’s opposition against this system it may be worth while to mention it. In the first place, it is based on the Hebrew Bible (in Christian terms: the Old Testament): the so-called “written Torah”. In the second place, and equally important, it relies on a long tradition of initially orally transmitted rabbinical interpretations: the “oral Torah”. The latter part of the tradition finally also was laid down in writing: in the Mishnah (around 200 CE), in the Talmud (6th century CE), and in several codifications of Jewish religious law derived from the Talmud.¹² The (written and oral) Torah became the indisputable guideline for all aspects of Jewish life, and transgressions had to be punished severely, especially when they were openly challenged.

From the 16th century onward, belief in the authority of the Bible, of the Church, and of ancient Greece came under pressure, because the European horizon of experience widened. The voyages of discovery opened up new worlds and new civilizations, not accounted for by the Bible. The Protestant Reformation showed that it was possible to read the Bible in other ways than required by the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther’s famous ninety-five theses, reportedly nailed at the church door of All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg,¹³ now five hundred years ago, demonstrated that the authority of the Pope may openly be challenged. Individualism was central to the Protestant Reformation, and the Roman Catholic Church no longer had the monopoly of the correct interpretation of the Bible. The relevance of individual judgment when reading and interpreting Scripture was stressed, and its translation from Latin into the vernacular made it accessible to the masses. However, the most important transformations undermining traditional authority are to be

¹¹ Newberger Goldstein (2010) p. 109-110.

¹² It should be noted that, in Jewish usage, the term “Torah” has several meanings. In the first place it refers to the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. In a wider sense, it refers to all the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible and all the interpretations and amplifications that have been added by generations of rabbis and that have been laid down in the Talmud and in the Midrash (a large body of exegetic and homiletic stories).

¹³ At least if we may believe Melanchton, Luther’s confidant, who wrote it down in 1518, but who was not present at the occasion.

found in the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th century. The progress of science supplied increasing evidence that the universe was arranged in another way than the biblical narrative suggested and than Greek authorities (Aristotle, Ptolemy) described. It became clear for European intellectuals that opinions about the natural and the human world no longer could be built on the authority of revelation or on that of ancient Greek civilization.

This “change of mindset” is exemplary shown by the publication of two pioneering books in 1543. In that year, both Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* and Vesalius’s *De humani corporis fabrica* were published. The first book proposed a model of heavenly bodies in which movements of the earth (rotation around its axis and revolution around the sun) could explain the (apparent) movements of the sun, the planets and the stars.¹⁴ This was evidently in conflict both with Aristotle and Ptolemy, and with clerical exegesis of the Bible (in particular with regard to Joshua 10 : 12-13). The second book proved, by demonstrating the results of Vesalius’s own anatomical dissections, that the anatomy of the Greek physician Galen of Pergamon (2nd century CE) contained many errors. Galen had been the undisputed authority on medicine and anatomy for more than a millennium, and contradicting him met with much disbelief. “Would it be possible that mankind has changed so much in the intervening 1200 years”, commented Vesalius’ former teacher.¹⁵

So, while Protestant reformers and practitioners of natural science (Copernicus, Vesalius) set the tone during the 16th century, this change of mindset became dominant during the 17th century. Kepler’s and Galileo’s careful observations and calculations in the beginning of the 17th century tipped the balance in favour of the Copernican system. It is true, as late as in 1633 Galileo was condemned by the Inquisition for defending heliocentrism in his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632) (see section 5.4). This prompted Descartes to interrupt writing his *Le Monde*, which was fully based on heliocentrism.¹⁶ However, it was too late to turn the tide. In natural philosophy, the authorities of the past no longer represented final wisdom. Reason and experience became the only legitimate arbiters of true knowledge of nature. The support by empirical evidence became mandatory. (Supposed) divine intervention no longer counted as a legitimate form of explanation of the world.

It should be noted in advance, that this is an oversimplification. As we will see, a controversy would soon arise between those who stressed the importance of experience and experimentation (Bacon, Boyle, Newton), and those who believed that reason alone can do most of the work (Descartes and, in his footsteps, Spinoza). A commonly heard opinion is that “Spinoza is a rationalist and modern science is empiricist”.¹⁷ That things are not that simple may be shown by two apparently contradictory remarks, made by Curley:¹⁸

“The view that Spinoza was a rationalist, in the sensein which knowledge is viewed as purely a priori, is not only mildly inaccurate, it is wildly inaccurate”.

“If rationalism consists in having this optimistic view of man’s ability to comprehend the world around him, then Spinoza was plainly and unequivocally a rationalist”.

As we shall see later on, there certainly was a substantial difference of opinion between the parties about the weight that should be attributed to, respectively, experience and reason. Seen from a modern perspective, the rationalist philosophers (both Descartes and Spinoza) certainly had too high expectations of what may be attained by reason alone, at the expense of empirical evidence. It

¹⁴ That Copernicus held this view already in 1514 is testified by his short manuscript “Commentariolus”.

¹⁵ Jacques Dubois Sylvius from Paris, at that time Europe’s most famous anatomist. See Broos p. 113-114.

¹⁶ Cohen (2016) p. 73-104.

¹⁷ Grene and Nails p. Xii.

¹⁸ Idem p. Xii-Xiii.

would be left to 18th century thinkers to make a clear distinction between what can and what cannot be known by reason alone. 18th century philosophers deserve the credit for fully recognizing the indispensability of experience for knowing the real world.

1.4 Transition to a scientific world view

As mentioned above, the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th century was an important component of the transition from the premodern to the modern era. The Dutch historian of science Dijksterhuis describes the transition from a religious to a scientific worldview in his *De mechanisering van het wereldbeeld* (The Mechanization of the World Picture, 1950, English translation 1959).¹⁹ The new view implied that the world can perfectly well be explained by the operation of laws of nature without divine intervention. The adoption of a mechanical world view does not at all mean that theism should be replaced by atheism. Of course, there could arise tensions between scientific understanding and religious belief. And it did; I will come back to that later on. However, many scientists of the time remained faithful Christians. When speaking of the “transition in world view”, this only refers to the fact that the description of the world in mechanical and mathematical terms transformed *science* into a discipline in which God no longer played a causal role. Or, as Laplace reportedly answered to Napoleon when asked why God was not mentioned in his *Celestial mechanics*: “Je n’avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse” (I had no need of that hypothesis).²⁰ Naturalism defines modern science.

It is worth while to consider the concept “mechanization” and its consequences in some more detail, because it will help us to understand Spinoza’s approach. Dijksterhuis distinguishes three interpretations of this concept.²¹ According to the first interpretation, the physical universe should be compared with a great machine that, once brought into action, continues to fulfill its functions all on its own. For instance, one may think of a mechanical clockwork, which performs the work for which it was constructed. This “machine-model” might easily lead to the postulation of a supernatural maker who constructed the machine consciously and intentionally, to attain a certain extra-worldly purpose. However, most early 17th century physicists refrained from imagining such a divine origin and purpose, but used this conception metaphorically. The second interpretation of the concept of “mechanization” points to hidden mechanisms that lie behind the observable phenomena. Mechanisms that are analogous to those operating in man-made instruments, but on a micocosmic scale. However, as Dijksterhuis points out, important concepts within the mechanistic framework, such as force and gravitation, are essentially “unmechanistic”: even “the most skilled mechanic would not be able to build an apparatus in which material objects move according to their mutual gravitational forces”.²² And the third meaning that should be attributed to the mechanization of the world picture is the notion of the mathematical character of all mechanics. This is the notion that characterizes classical modern physics. It is the notion that, from the 17th century onward, in the most specific way distinguishes modern from ancient and medieval physics. It not only points to the use of mathematical methods, but to a much more fundamental outlook: the view that the physical universe and its laws essentially *are* a form of mathematics. Kepler, Galileo and Huygens

¹⁹ In the original title, the term “wereldbeeld” may also be translated by “world view”. However, the latter term has a somewhat wider connotation, for it not only refers to a physical model of the world, but also to human understanding of the world as a whole (German: Weltanschauung).

²⁰ There is some dispute about the question whether this story is apocryphical or not. In any case, it illustrates perfectly well the scientific attitude that was universally adopted at the time, implying that God neither can play an explanatory role in a scientific sense, nor that he can break the laws of nature. As we shall see, Spinoza may be regarded as an early exponent of this scientific attitude.

²¹ Dijksterhuis (2006) p. 543-550.

²² Idem p. 546.

would define the fundamental concepts of physics in a mathematical way.

However, how important the concept “mechanization” may be to characterize the new science, it is not the whole story. In the next section, I will move my focus to some other essential elements: the shift from teleological to efficient causes, the importance of sound reasoning, and the significance of experience and experimentation. To make the right connection between Spinoza and the scientific revolution, we first will have to delve a little deeper into these fundamental characteristics of the new science (section 1.5).

1.5 Characteristics of the new scientific method

This thesis argues for the claim that the TTP is both a product *of* and a contribution *to* the 17th century scientific revolution. First, because Spinoza makes use of knowledge (of physics) acquired thanks to that revolution. But second, because the TTP is designed according to the scientific standards that were established during that revolution. However, which were these standards? As we have seen, in the *first* place there is no longer room for supernatural elements. Intervention “from above” does not count as a legitimate scientific explanation. Indeed, it is no explanation at all. *Second*, dogmatic certainties or authorities of the past don’t count as arguments for scientific conclusions either. “Pioneers of a radically new view on nature in the 17th century have tried to reach valid conclusions without traditionally appealing to dogmatic certainties”.²³ *Third*, there is no longer room for teleology. What counts for a scientific explanation is not the purpose that phenomena are supposed to realize (final cause), but the mechanisms which are bringing them about (efficient cause). In this sense, the new science is essentially mechanistic.

The question remains what methods are most appropriate to uncover and describe these phenomena and the mechanisms producing them. As has been mentioned already above (section 1.3), there certainly was no consensus among 17th century (natural) philosophers on that matter. Two different orientations emerged: the rationalist one, and the empiricist one. The rationalist approach relied on mathematics and abstract reasoning as the main method of providing explanations and increasing knowledge, the empiricist approach stressed experience. Descartes and Spinoza typically are exponents of the rationalist approach, with some reservations, as mentioned above. However, one should note that it is not mathematics as such, that is seen as a guarantee for certain knowledge. It is the *working of reason* that inevitably leads, by making “valid inferences”, to the correct conclusions. On the other hand, men like Francis Bacon, William Harvey and Robert Boyle typically defended an experimental approach.

With these distinctions in mind, we may have the right tools in our hands to understand Spinoza’s role within the larger context of the scientific revolution. The link between Spinoza and the scientific revolution probably is most easily made when taking Descartes as mediator. At the time, Spinoza counted as an expert on Descartes’ thought in the Dutch Republic, and he also critically advanced his methods. According to Descartes, the human mind works in such a way that it can produce knowledge of nature not otherwise than mathematically. Descartes was fascinated by the clarity and certainty that mathematics can provide, and so this discipline evidently served as a model for formulating his rules for the correct use of reason in science. It is not without reason that in his *Discours de la Méthode* (1637) the first rule of correct thinking is “never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgements than what presented itself to my

²³ Cohen (2007) p. 261.

mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it”.²⁴ The same exact approach to science and philosophy may easily be recognized in Spinoza, first in his exposition of *Descartes’ “Principles of philosophy”* (1663) (demonstrated in the geometric manner) and later in his *Ethics*. His decision to write an “*Ethica Ordine Geometrico demonstrata*” (demonstrated in geometric order), with definitions, axioms, propositions and demonstrations, most probably was motivated by the conviction that the mathematical method provides certain and indubitable knowledge. The same desire for clarity and exclusion of doubt may be found back in Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, although there he avoids mathematical language. In Chapter 7 “On the interpretation of Scripture”, he states:²⁵

To sum up briefly, I say that the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely. For the method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things, In the same way, to interpret Scripture, it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture, and to infer from it the mind of Scripture’s authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles. For in this way everyone - provided he has admitted no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history – everyone will always proceed without danger of error. He will be able to discuss the things which surpass our grasp as safely as those we know by the natural light. But to establish clearly that this way is not only certain, but also the only way, and that it agrees with the method of interpreting nature, we must note that Scripture most often treats things which cannot be deduced from principles known to the natural light. For historical narratives and revelations make up the greatest part of it.

This formulation clearly reveals Spinoza’s thoroughly scientific attitude. It also shows that Spinoza was not exclusively a rationalist, but that he pays due attention to empirical facts. Admittedly, this not always is the case in Spinoza’s works. In the *Ethics*, for instance, the rigorous application of the “geometrical method” not always serves clarity. It rather is “pseudo-mathematics”; it is neither pure mathematics, nor mathematics applied to really existing objects, but mathematics applied to speculative ideas. In his *The Religious Philosopher* (1718), the Dutch philosopher and medical doctor Bernard Nieuwentijt has pointed out that “the whole series of so many hypotheses and pretended demonstrations in *Spinoza’s* book..... do represent nothing else to us than only the properties of those imaginations or conceptions which that unhappy author had formed in himself”.²⁶

One may grant that in the *Ethics*, the relationship between defined entities and empirical reality is not always clear. Moreover, what counts as an axiom and what as a proposition is not at all evident, and is sometimes decided quite arbitrarily.²⁷ However, this objection applies much less to the *TTP*. In this *Treatise*, Spinoza pays due attention to the empirically given biblical text as the primary object of his investigations. He stresses that we should start with this text as it is, instead of relying on interpretations that have been handed down over a period of ages. We have to build our conclusions on these empirical facts rather than on prejudices that have been inserted from sources outside the text. In my view, this approach makes the *TTP* a more “modern”, a more “scientific” book than the *Ethics*. This achievement alone would make Spinoza a worthy member of the family of 17th century scientists. However, there are more arguments to do so, as I shall explain in the next chapter.

²⁴ Descartes (1985) p. 120.

²⁵ Spinoza (2016) p. 171.

²⁶ See Van Bunge et al. (2011) p. 121. See also section 7.3 for Nieuwentijt.

²⁷ Cf. Gabbey p. 156-157.

CHAPTER 2: SPINOZA, SCIENCE, AND THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

2.1 Philosophy, science, scholarship

Before elaborating on Spinoza's involvement in the scientific enterprise of his time, we have to explain what we mean by science and what by philosophy. To avoid misunderstandings, we should keep in mind that the terms "science" and "scientist" did not have the same meaning in the 17th century as they have today. "Philosophia" included the three *scientiae* (theoretical or contemplative philosophy): metaphysics, physics or natural philosophy, and mathematics. In a wider sense, "philosophia" also included the three *prudentiae* (branches of practical philosophy): ethics, home economy, and politics.²⁸ Men who were involved in mechanics, hydrostatics, chemistry and anatomy did not call themselves scientists. They belonged to the natural philosophers or experimental philosophers. When on 28 November 1660 the first formal meeting was held of what – in 1662 - would become the Royal Society, the dozen men present agreed to constitute themselves as a society for "the promoting of experimental philosophy".²⁹ The Society's first secretary, Henry Oldenburg, speaks in his letters to Spinoza of "our Philosophical Society".³⁰ And Newton's magnum opus, the grand finale of the Scientific Revolution, was entitled *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (The mathematical principles of natural philosophy, 1687). So whenever in this thesis is spoken of science, it should be remembered that it is present-day terminology. And whenever our 17th century ancestors are involved in philosophy, we should never forget that they include science as part of philosophy.

A second source of misunderstanding might be that the term "science" – as it is nowadays used – often is specifically applied to *natural* science, but sometimes also includes the human sciences or humanities. In the next sections, I shall use the term in its broader sense. When I am focussing on Spinoza as a scientist, I refer not only to his role in the natural sciences, but also to his significance for biblical scholarship. And Spinoza's famous call for "freedom to philosophize" should also be understood as a plea for the free and uninhibited practising of natural philosophy.

Furthermore, in modern terminology, the words "scholar" and "scholarship" often are used when speaking about students of the human sciences. I will comply with that convention. Finally, one should keep in mind that a clear distinction between the natural and the human sciences – in German, *Naturwissenschaften* und *Geisteswissenschaften* – was introduced as late as the 19th century. Wilhelm Dilthey certainly was the most famous advocate of this distinction.

2.2 Neglect of Spinoza's participation in science

It seems remarkable that Spinoza virtually has been ignored when it comes to his relation with 17th century science. Historians of science do not mention Spinoza, and specialists on Spinoza – with a few exceptions - rarely mention his involvement in science. I will give a few illustrative examples of this two-sided neglect. Gabbey (1996) points to the significant fact that Spinoza does not have an entry in the prestigious sixteen volume *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* edited by Gillispie (1970-1980). In most other histories of science, Spinoza is hardly mentioned. Some of the older historiographies pay some attention to Spinoza's contribution to psychology, and sometimes he is mentioned in encyclopedias of political science or of the social sciences. Most accounts of Spinoza's

²⁸ See for a broader discussion of terminology Gabbey p. 143-148.

²⁹ Bryson (2010) p. 18.

³⁰ Spinoza (1995) p. 183.

work give a meagre – if any - representation of his interest in optics, mechanics, chemistry and scientific methodology. Wolfson's extensive *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (1934), spelling out Spinoza's relation to Arabic Philosophy, to Jewish Philosophy, to Aristotle and other Greek Philosophers, to Cabala, to Christianity, to Descartes, to Judaism, to Maimonides, to Renaissance and modern Philosophers, to Scholasticism, to Stoicism, etcetera, does not say a word about his relation to science. The only monography – as far as I know – exclusively devoted to Spinoza in relation to science is the one edited by Gene and Nails, some thirty years ago. Perhaps this neglect should not surprise us too much. For indeed, when we compare Spinoza with the 17th century giants of the natural sciences, such as Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Huygens, Harvey and Boyle, he has done little of lasting interest.

Nevertheless, I want to argue for rehabilitation of Spinoza as a scientist. As stipulated in the end of Chapter 1, Spinoza wrote his TTP under observance of strictly scientific standards, in agreement with those of his colleagues from the natural sciences. By doing so, he may be considered as one of the most important founders of modern biblical scholarship. Although historical criticism of ancient texts has been practised for more than two centuries (see section 6.1), it may be argued that he was the first who applied historical criticism of the bible in a really scientific way, that is to say without accepting religious dogmas as a starting point. Second, the arguments Spinoza uses in the TTP to refute divine and supernatural claims are scientific arguments, derived – at least partly - from recent advances in the natural sciences such as astronomy and optics. Third, by demythologizing Scripture, Spinoza strengthens the case for naturalism, thereby consolidating a scientific world view that replaces the earlier mythical world view. Fourth, he counterattacks religious and clerical claims of having authority in scientific and philosophical matters. He draws a sharp line of demarcation between religion on the one hand, and philosophy (including science) on the other. By doing so, he establishes the authority of knowledge based on reason, the authority of science and the irrelevance of biblical authority in philosophical and scientific matters. Finally, Spinoza's active participation in the natural philosophical discourse of his time entitles him to being called a natural philosopher of honour among his more illustrious colleagues. I would conclude that neglecting Spinoza within the context of science is not just a minor omission, but a disregard for – as I see it - a central theme of his philosophy in general and his TTP in particular: demythologization of the world in general and of Scripture in particular. In the next sections, I will consider Spinoza's participation in 17th century science in some more detail.

2.3 Spinoza as natural philosopher

Spinoza was deeply interested in the scientific achievements of his time, and he must have had a profound knowledge of them.³¹ This may be derived from his correspondence and that of his contemporaries. Of the eighty-seven letters from and to Spinoza that have survived, nineteen touch on scientific or mathematical subjects (some of them are discussed in section 2.4). Of course, Spinoza needed a profound knowledge of optics to practise his profession of grinding lenses and building microscopes and telescopes. And this he certainly had, even more so, his contemporaries considered him an expert in the field. Leibniz wrote to him in October 1671:³²

Among your other achievements which fame has spread abroad I understand is your remarkable skill in optics. For this reason I venture to send this essay, such as it is, to you, than who I am not likely to

³¹ Israel (2001), p. 246-257.

³² Spinoza (1995), Letter 45, p. 245.

find a better critic in this field of study. This paper which I send you, and which I have entitled "A Note on Advanced Optics", I have published in order to communicate more conveniently.....

Christian Huygens, one of the leading physicists of the time, and himself being a skilful lense grinder, wrote on several occasions admiringly about Spinoza's lenses in letters to his brother Constantijn Huygens jr. In 1667, he noted that the lenses of "le Juif de Voorburg" had an admirable polish. In 1668 he even admitted that Spinoza was right in his opinion that smaller objectives in a microscope give a higher resolution than larger ones.³³ And the physician Dirk Kerckring, like Spinoza a former pupil of Franciscus van den Enden, remarked: "I own a first-class microscope made by that Benedictus Spinoza, that noble mathematician and philosopher, which enables me to see the lymphatic vascular bundles..."³⁴

But Spinoza was not only qualified in practical optics. He also commented on Descartes' *La Dioptrique* in an apparently expert way.³⁵ It was known in his time that Spinoza had worked on a treatise about the rainbow. Unfortunately, according to his friend Jarig Jelles, he destroyed the manuscript shortly before his death. However, the most important issue in physics for both Huygens and Spinoza was to refine and revise Descartes' laws of motion and mechanics. It is significant – as Israel notes³⁶ – that Spinoza apparently participated in Dutch scientific debates at the highest levels. This is proved – among other evidence – by a letter to Huygens, sent by a Dutch hydraulic engineer, who recalled that, when he was in Amsterdam in 1665, he had learnt much about Huygens' admirable feats in science "in many marvellous gatherings and conversations in the company of Johannes Hudde, Benedictus de Spinoza and [Burchardus] de Volder, [now] professor at the university of Leiden". Spinoza himself, in his letters to Henry Oldenburg, also comments on Descartes' and Huygens' treatment of the laws of motion, and – extensively – on Robert Boyle's chemical experiments. In quite another field, he studied insects and other objects under his microscope. From these and other facts we may conclude that Spinoza actively took part in the natural scientific discourse of his time. However, that those famous 17th century scientists considered Spinoza as being one of them can in no way be better demonstrated than by pointing to his position in the scientific variety of the "Republic of Letters" that was personified in Henry Oldenburg and that was consolidated in his Royal Society.

2.4 Spinoza as a citizen of Henry Oldenburg's "Republic of Letters"

The term "Republic of Letters" is in common use to indicate an important means of communication between intellectuals, starting in the 17th and continuing during the 18th century. It consisted of the exchange of letters, manuscripts, pamphlets and – quite soon – also of texts printed in books and in the recently established philosophical journals. Characteristically, the citizens of this "Republic" crossed many borders, although not always physically; Spinoza hardly ever traveled. And they wrote in many different languages, not only in Latin, but also in their respective vernaculars. Next to the journals, a form of institutionalization was realized by the formation of literary and scientific academies, especially in France and Britain. Spinoza became linked to the British variety, thanks to the efforts of its key figure, Henry Oldenburg. Oldenburg certainly was a remarkable man. Born in Bremen around 1619, he started as a student in theology, but ended up as a passionate promoter of natural philosophy. Originally, he was sent to London by the Bremen town council to negotiate with

³³ Nadler (1999) p. 183; Israel (2001) p. 247.

³⁴ Nadler (1999) p. 184.

³⁵ Gabbey p. 152-154.

³⁶ Israel (2001) p. 247-248.

Oliver Cromwell about the neutrality of Bremen during the first Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654). He became friendly with the poet John Milton and with Thomas Hobbes, and when in the winter of 1660-1661, a dozen men started to gather at Gresham College in London – among them Robert Boyle – with the purpose to “improve” knowledge, Oldenburg soon joined them. After a royal charter was signed in 1662, it became “The President, Council and Fellows of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge”, commonly known as the Royal Society.

Henry Oldenburg became the society’s first secretary, and he performed his task with great diligence. In 1665, he established the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, the first journal in the world exclusively devoted to science.³⁷ He succeeded in establishing an extensive network of domestic and foreign correspondents, including some six European countries. Among the correspondents from the Dutch Republic were – besides Spinoza – Christian Huygens, Reinier de Graaf, Jan Swammerdam, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek and Isaac Vossius. The most famous German correspondent certainly was Gottfried Leibniz. The most famous British core member (fellow)³⁸ of the society was Isaac Newton, elected in 1672. The very fact that Spinoza belonged to the illustrious company of corresponding members of the Royal Society proves his “scientific” status. Oldenburg and Spinoza met each other in 1661, when the first one was in Leiden visiting his friend Johannes Coccejus, professor of theology. Apparently, Oldenburg was impressed by the young philosopher, as is testified by the opening sentences of his first letter (August 1661):³⁹

With such reluctance did I recently tear myself away from your side when visiting you at your retreat in Rijnsburg, that no sooner am I back in England than I am endeavouring to join you again, as far as possible, at least by exchange of letters. Substantial learning, combined with humanity and courtesy – all of which nature has and diligence have so amply bestowed on you – hold such an allurements as to gain the affection of any men of quality and of liberal education. Come then, most excellent Sir, let us join hands in unfeigned friendship, and let us assiduously cultivate that friendship with devotion and service of every kind. Whatever my poor resources can furnish, consider as yours. As to the gifts of mind that you possess, let me claim a share in them, as this cannot impoverish you.

That these words are not just a matter of courtesy is shown by the extended correspondence that followed in the period from 1661 to 1665. It was interrupted by the second Anglo-Dutch war (1665-1667), to be resumed only in 1675. When looking at the contents of the letters they exchanged, one is struck by the number of scientific subjects that is entered upon. As mentioned above, Robert Boyle’s chemical experiments are discussed extensively. In October 1661, Oldenburg sends him *Certain Physiological Essays*, written by Robert Boyle, concerning nitre, fluidity and solidity (Letter 5). Early 1662, Spinoza sends his “humble opinion” about “the very talented Mr. Boyle’s book” (Letter 6). It is a quite extensive report, in which he criticizes Boyle for concluding prematurely that nitre – nowadays known as potassium nitrate or salpeter – is a heterogeneous substance. He argues that additional experiments are needed before drawing conclusions, and he carries out some of these experiments himself. He also does not share Boyle’s opinions on the nature and causes of fluidity. In April 1663, Oldenburg sends him Boyle’s response (Letter 11), to which Spinoza answers in July (Letter 13). Sometimes Spinoza adduces – in view of present day’s insights – rather dogmatic arguments, such as the (supposed) impossibility of a vacuum. An argument that perfectly highlights the difference between Boyle’s empirical and Spinoza’s rationalist approach. In May 1665, he reports

³⁷ It is sometimes claimed that the *Journal des sçavans* was the first academic journal. Its first issue appeared on 6 January 1665, two months earlier than the first issue of the *Philosophical Transactions*. However, the French journal certainly was not exclusively devoted to science.

³⁸ Fellows can be scientists and engineers from the United Kingdom who have made “a substantial contribution to the improvement of natural knowledge”.

³⁹ Spinoza (1995) Letter 1, p. 59.

enthusiastically to Oldenburg (Letter 26) on what Christian Huygens had told him about “a kind of shadow on Saturn as if made by a ring”, and about certain new telescopes made in Italy “with which they have been able to observe eclipses of Jupiter caused by the interposition of satellites”. Much more could be said about Spinoza’s intense involvement in natural philosophy, but this will do to support my view on Spinoza as a scientist.

2.5 Spinoza as advocate of the scientific attitude

One of my main theses is that Spinoza’s work cannot be fully understood without considering his close affinity with the new ideas that arose in the age of the scientific revolution. Let me summarize the arguments in favour of that. In Chapter 1, we have seen that the scientific revolution was not only characterized by a new model of the world, but – on a more fundamental level - by a new conception of science. This new conception consisted of several essential elements. First, true knowledge should not be based on blind trust in the authorities of the past, but on independent collection of relevant facts, careful observation, and sometimes experimentation. Second, a rigorous scientific methodology should be adopted, in which the mathematical way of thinking could serve as a classic example of how to apply *sound reasoning* to these facts and observations. And third, scientific explanations should by definition be understood in a *naturalistic* way, excluding supernatural events. Entering God into a scientific discourse no longer counted as a legitimate form of explaining the world. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza applied these new criteria for science to the Bible. So, because Spinoza adopts the *methods* of the new natural sciences, it is justified to consider this Treatise as rooted in the scientific revolution. Moreover, from the *findings* of these natural sciences he derives arguments to eliminate all supernatural elements from the Bible and to replace supernatural by natural explanations. By doing so, Spinoza transforms the Bible from a divinely inspired “Holy Scripture” into an “ordinary” historical document that has been written and compiled by a number of human authors. The same strictly scientific standards which the natural philosophers (or scientists in a strict sense) use to explain nature, Spinoza applies to the explanation and interpretation of the Bible. Because Spinoza – as I shall argue - may be seen as the most important originator of the scientific study of the Bible, his Treatise not only is a *product of*, but also an original *contribution to* and an *extension of* the scientific revolution.

Not only (physical) nature, but also subjects such as the Bible, history in general, and human nature become susceptible to a scientific (or naturalistic) approach. For Spinoza also may be seen as a central figure in a process of “naturalizing” history. From a scientific point of view, divine providence and the coming of the Messiah will have to be abandoned as causal factors determining the course of human history. Here too, God no longer counts as a legitimate form of explanation, but has to make way for natural processes. From the foregoing one may conclude that Spinoza not only was heavily *influenced* by the scientific revolution, but in a significant way *contributed* to it. His contribution may be summarized as follows: a) in the Bible no supernatural events really happen (naturalism) and b) the Bible is a historical document, no divine text. A warning in advance may be useful: although Spinoza makes use of the so-called “historical critical method”, some confusion exists about its origin and scope. These issues shall be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6. But first a few words about the tensions between science and religion (section 2.6), and about interreligious tensions (section 2.7) which, after all, were the main reasons for Spinoza to address these themes.

2.6 The tension between science and religion

In his most recent book, *Het knagende weten* (The pangs of knowing), Dutch historian of science Floris Cohen vividly describes how the development of science since the beginning of the 17th century has given rise to tensions with religion. However, he warns against over-simplified standard accounts of the “warfare of science with theology”, accounts which often have the purport to stress the supposedly poisonous influence of religion on the progress of science. Reality is much more subtle. He accurately reconstructs the life stories of eleven men who experienced these tensions on a very personal level. Some ended up in a chronic external conflict with clerical authorities (Galileo), others experienced an internal conflict between their scientific knowledge and their religious belief (Newton). Some succeeded in arriving at harmony, by reading the “book of nature” (see section 3.3) in order to understand God’s great building plan (Kepler). Others became sceptical and ended up with a loss of faith (Darwin).

In the religious camp, some “players” obstinately refused to accept scientific findings, because they were thought to be irretrievably conflicting with the only true (Calvinist) belief (Gijsbert Voet). However, as said, and as I shall show in more detail (section 5.4), it is much too simple to state that religious orthodoxy would categorically be opposed to the advancement of science. Both among Roman Catholics and among Protestants, for instance, opinions regarding Copernicanism initially were divided. And the further course of history has shown that religion ultimately has succeeded in accepting scientific findings and in accommodating its teachings to these findings. Heliocentrism, for instance, has universally been accepted by believers and unbelievers alike. Even the theory of evolution has been accepted by mainstream Christianity, in spite of its evident contradiction with the story of creation according to Genesis. To be sure, the “competing theory” of creationism is still defended, but only by a minority of fundamentalistic Christians in Western European countries. Surprisingly, in the United States more than 40% of the general population still believes in the so-called “Young Earth creationism”, holding that God created man in its present form some 10.000 year ago.⁴⁰ As a rule, this strict view goes together with a literal interpretation of Genesis, including the belief that God’s creation was completed in six days.

Things become even much more tricky and complicated when it comes to the scientific study of the Bible and its origin. As stated above (section 1.5) the new standards for science required – among other things – a) the elimination of supernatural “causal” factors as part of the explanation, b) a strict adherence to the given facts, without adding doctrinal elements, and c) sound reasoning. As I will argue, Spinoza was the first one who explicitly stated that the Bible should be studied in agreement with the same scientific standards as used for the natural sciences. And indeed, he carried out his scientific intentions in his TTP. This makes that – in spite of contrary claims - he rightly may be called the father of modern scientific bible studies (see Chapter 6).

2.7 Interreligious tensions and Spinoza’s strategies for relief

Spinoza was very well aware of the fact that in the predominantly Calvinist Dutch Republic, the tension between science and religion was less urgent than the tension between the different religious denominations. To be sure, heliocentrism was a problem for some orthodox Calvinists, perhaps even more than it was for Roman Catholics. For “literalism” of Bible interpretation in principle affected Protestants more than it did Roman Catholics. But opinions were divided; I will

⁴⁰ More “liberal” forms of creationism admit that the earth may have an age of millions of years, interpreting the “days” of creation as metaphors for long periods of time. “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night” (Psalm 90:4).

come back to that later on (section 5.4). And for Protestants in the Dutch Republic, that was not the issue that was considered as the most severe threat to the “peace and piety”. The main worries were not about heliocentrism, but about adhering to the right – that is: Calvinist – doctrines. The Calvinist orthodoxy and its leading spokesman, professor Gisbertus Voetius (Gijsbert Voet) from Utrecht University, were convinced that they possessed the only correct doctrines and the only tolerable interpretation of the Bible. For them, not heliocentrism but Socinianism was the main enemy. The denial of the Holy Trinity and of the divinity of Jesus had to be combatted by all means.⁴¹

Ironically, these same ideas of possessing a doctrinal monopoly were the very reason for Protestants to separate themselves from the Roman Catholic Church. As noted earlier, individualism and each individual’s right to read and interpret the Bible in his own way was lying at the basis of the Protestant Reformation. However, a century after the beginning of the Reformation, competing readings of the Bible had caused a further division into a host of competing Reformed denominations. Spinoza had become acquainted with a group of much more liberal and individualistic Christians. They stressed the importance of a life according to Jesus’s intentions that could easily be read from the New Testament. Spinoza felt well at home within these circles, and he was well aware of the threat the intolerant “official church of the state” posed to peace and piety, and also of the irrationality of this state of affairs.

By defusing the explosive potential of religious dogmatism and intolerance, Spinoza certainly expected to promote peace and piety. However, as mentioned in the “Introduction”, this political purpose was not Spinoza’s most urgent question. The ideal of the advancement of science and philosophy (knowledge) most probably ranked higher on his agenda. Although the practical (political) goal is on the front page of his Treatise, the theoretical one (understanding) must have been a more important matter for someone who sees the “intellectual love of God” (*amor Dei intellectualis*) as the highest source of happiness. Our awareness of our complete dependence of God leads to an acquiescence of the mind, a desirable condition for a philosopher who is so strongly influenced by Stoic ideals. This alone makes it improbable that the whole TTP should be seen from a political perspective. Nevertheless, politics undoubtedly is part of his program.

To arrive at his goal(s), Spinoza proceeds in a very systematic way, using as it were a three-stage rocket. The first stage consists of demythologization of the Bible, making its authority irrelevant. The second stage consists of drawing a radical line of demarcation between philosophy (including science) on the one hand, and religion on the other hand. Philosophy and religion are two different domains. And the third stage consists of the elimination of theocratic forces by depriving the clergy of its power to influence decisions of the highest authorities of the state (the political part). What concerns us here, in relation to science, are the first and the second one. In the next Chapter, I shall consider Spinoza’s naturalism into more detail. For naturalism is the key condition to arrive at a demythologization of the Bible.

⁴¹ The doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. However, in 325 the Council of Nicaea adopted it, claiming that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit form “one God in three persons”, that is to say that the three persons together are “one substance”.

CHAPTER 3: NATURALISM

3.1 Spinoza's naturalism: some clarifying introductory notes

Readers of Spinoza will readily admit that naturalism lies at the very basis of his philosophy. In the *Ethics*, there is only one reality, to which Spinoza applies the term God or, alternatively, Nature (*Deus sive Natura*). This is the only and necessarily existing substance. Because nature is defined in this way, of course nothing can – by definition – exist outside nature. Monotheism, on the other hand, is fundamentally dualistic, opposing a transcendental God against an immanent nature (or world, thought of as created by God). The metaphysics of Spinoza and that of traditional monotheistic religion inevitably have to clash. Whereas Spinoza also adopts the mechanistic worldview of 17th century science, his monism has as a result that the mechanistic view has to be extended to all of reality, including mental phenomena. This indeed is the consequence Spinoza explicitly accepts and applies. By doing so, Spinoza is much more mechanistic than Descartes and most of his contemporaries. Descartes excludes the thinking substance from the mechanistic laws of nature, Spinoza – by recognizing only one substance – includes them. Man is an integral part of nature, and consequently, integrally obeys to the laws of nature.

Although not explicitly stated, this metaphysical point of departure, “*Deus sive Natura*”, also lies at the basis of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The last work contains little or no explicit metaphysics, but focuses on a careful reading of the Bible, taking its text – and that text alone – as its object of study. No other conclusions should be drawn than this text itself clearly admits. However, when taking the biblical story and its terminology as the object of explanation, one inevitably has to stick to its terminology when coming to speak about God. This could give rise to the false impression that Spinoza “believes” what the Bible says about God. However, one should keep in mind that this is not the case. Spinoza describes what the Bible is telling us, without necessarily accepting its views. One may compare it with the way in which Spinoza explains accurately – in his *Expositor of Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* – what Descartes wants to demonstrate. This by no means implies that Spinoza shares Descartes' views, as Lodewijk Meyer stresses in his introduction to this work.⁴²

To make matters even more confusing, Spinoza sometimes seems to fall back into his own conception of God. For instance, when Spinoza is explaining miracles and “derives” from the Bible that God may be identified with the laws of nature. One may seriously question whether this really is what one has to conclude when reading the Bible (see for this subject also section 8.2). However, before exploring the details of Spinoza's naturalistic program, let us first have a look at the systematic way in which he carries it out, and at the preconditions which made it possible anyway.

3.2 Preconditions and program of Spinoza's naturalism

At first reading, the TTP might appear confusing to the student. Many different subjects are treated subsequently: prophecies, prophets, miracles, the purpose of the laws, the fortunes of the Hebrew people, the origin of the different Bible books, the problems with biblical chronology, the apostles, etc. What is the “Leitmotiv”, what is the common denominator? By closer consideration, it will become clear that the TTP has a very systematic and logical structure. For what exactly is the point

⁴² Quoting from Lodewijk Meyer's introduction: “Our Author has only set out the opinions of Descartes and their demonstrations, insofar as these are found in his writings.....So let no one think that he is teaching here either his own opinions, or only those which he approves of” (Spinoza *The Collected Works*, volume I, p. 229).

Spinoza wants to make? On closer reading it becomes perfectly clear that Spinoza is questioning the very authority of the Bible, by casting doubt on its divine authorship. For ages, it has been taken for granted by religious leaders (rabbis, priests, preachers, theologians) and their followers that the Bible contains God's word and will. Therefore, its unshakeable truth could and should not be doubted, because it was revealed to the prophets by God himself. The proof of this divine origin – making it a revelation – was that the Bible said so. Spinoza wanted to get out of this circular argument by stating that it is not allowed to postulate that the Bible is God's word without proving it from the Bible itself. The authority of the church no longer counted as proof. As we have seen (section 1.3), the 16th century was an age of new discoveries which promoted a decline in the reliance on the authorities of the past. The Protestant Reformation also played an important role in this decline. The reformers made clear that the monopoly the Roman Catholic Church claimed on possessing the key to the correct interpretation of Scripture was not warranted. Although Calvinist orthodoxy ultimately ended up with an analogous claim, the more liberal groups – like Collegiants and Anabaptists - with whom Spinoza became friendly, continued to study the Bible in an individualistic way, averse from institutionalized Christianity. That does not mean that they doubted the Bible's divine authorship. But they tended to reject dogmatic views for which no clear biblical evidence could be presented, such as – for instance – the dogma of the Holy Trinity.⁴³

Spinoza certainly must have been influenced by the way his Protestant friends studied the Bible. He certainly felt himself at home by their aversion against clerical doctrines, and by their sincere drive to understand the original message of Jesus. Spinoza proceeded on the road his Protestant friends had taken, but on a much more radical level. He not only contested the – often competing – Christian views, he questioned the divine authorship of the Bible itself. Before concluding that the Bible is God's word, Spinoza reasoned, there has to be found out on what scriptural evidence this assumption is based. When it is the case – as has always been assumed - that God's word was revealed to the prophets, the first task an investigator of the Bible finds on his way is to figure out what evidence may be found in the Bible itself that the prophecies really were of divine origin and that the prophets really had certain capabilities to perceive these divine words. Does the Bible itself clearly indicate that the prophets were directly addressed by God? Are there really miracles- proving divine intervention – in the sense of events which violate of the laws of nature? Is there a sound basis for believing that such miracles present final evidence for God's existence and supreme power? Is the good fortune of the Hebrew people a sign of God's special election of this people? Next, if this all might not be the case, may the phenomena that are described perhaps be explained by alternative, natural causes?

What Spinoza intends to show in his TTP, and in a systematic way, is that all these assumptions regarding supernatural origins are not warranted. In all instances, it can be made plausible that there is a natural explanation. Spinoza simply eliminates all supernatural elements. Prophecies no longer are to be understood as divinely inspired, but as naturally explainable events. They spring from individuals of outstanding morality with an extraordinarily vivid imagination. Miracles – in the sense of deviations from the laws of nature – do not exist. Their "existence" is due to the fact that we – or the witnesses of these events - don't (yet) understand their natural causes. The good fortune of the Hebrews and their preservation for ages is not a sign of God's election, but follows from natural causes. The hatred of the nations held them together. The Bible itself is not a document containing divine revelation, but is a collection of books of human authorship. Moral laws are no commands given by God, but human prescriptions invented by a wise law giver. They have to

⁴³ That is not to say that all Collegiants within Spinoza's circle were anti-Trinitarians. Their central issue was that they rejected the authority of Calvinist doctrines and that they stressed the paramount importance of the study of the Bible individualistically in order to understand the true message of Jesus Christ.

be obeyed not because they represent God's will, but to establish order in a lawless community.

One might argue that this outcome could have been expected in advance, given Spinoza's impersonal concept of God. This may be true; however, the heart of the matter is that Spinoza wants to support his case by exclusively referring to the Bible itself. Moreover, his next aim is to show – also with support of the Bible – that its central message is a moral one, a simple set of moral doctrines. Moral doctrines which, by the way, also may be attained by means of reason alone. The Bible is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient condition for becoming a moral person. In the Chapters 4 to 6, Spinoza's naturalistic views will be treated in more detail. In *Chapter 4*, I shall treat Spinoza's naturalism with regard to prophets and prophecy, with critical comments where it seems appropriate. The traditional versus the naturalistic approaches to "Miracles" will be considered in *Chapter 5*, whereas in *Chapter 6* I intend to treat the question whether the Bible is God's word or simply a historical document that should be studied scientifically in exactly the same way as any other ancient source. But before doing so, I shall explain (in section 3.3) that the observation of nature allows for two completely opposite interpretations. On the one hand, the scientific description of nature may reduce God to "a hypothesis we don't need" (Laplace, cf. section 1.4). On the other hand, the natural order may be interpreted as giving convincing evidence for the existence of God. This order may be "read" as if it were the by God given "Book of Nature", which next to the "Book of Scripture" also leads to knowledge of God's power and providence.

3.3 Naturalism and the Book of Nature

In the preceding sections, the principles of Spinoza's naturalistic view on the world in general and on the Bible in particular were discussed. Of course, much more could be said about the relationship between nature and divinity. Whereas Spinoza sees everything that happens in the world as determined by the workings of immutable laws of nature alone, there are others who interpret these very workings just in the opposite way, namely as the most convincing evidence for the existence of God. The metaphor of the Book of Nature goes back to late Antiquity, but became popular in early modern history, probably under influence of the Protestant Reformation.⁴⁴ The influential *Confessio Belgica* (1561)⁴⁵ already speaks of nature "as a most elegant book" which clearly teaches the "invisible things of God". The reason for this shift of attention to the "book" of nature may be, that Protestantism transformed the visual context of religious worship into a worship focused on the preaching of the word.⁴⁶ Roman Catholic worship was focused upon the visual drama, supported by sacramental performances, images, statues, vestments, miracles, and visions of the virgin, demons and angels. Protestantism, on the other hand, considered this visual experience to be intrinsically unreliable. The visual realm was said to promote idolatry, superstition, self-delusion, imposture, and an illicit curiosity in matters of science. It was a realm in which satanic deceits easily could occur. However, if the realm of nature could be argued to be another religious authority, that shared some features with the book of revelation, then the study of nature could become respectable. This may, at least in part, explain the popularity of the metaphor among 17th century natural philosophers. A classical example is the Dutch entomologist Jan Swammerdam (1637-1680), who exclaimed when he was describing the anatomy of the bee:⁴⁷

⁴⁴ See Van Berkel and Vanderjagt, p. ix.

⁴⁵ The Belgic Confession became an integral part of the Three Forms of Unity, the dogmatic basis of continental Calvinism as established by the synod of Dort in 1618-1619.

⁴⁶ Harrison p. 2-4.

⁴⁷ Jorink (2006) p. 45, quoting from Swammerdam's *Bybel der Natuure of historie der insecten*.

“Look, so all-wonderful is God, so that I dare say, that in the insects God’s countless wonders are sealed up, which seals are revealed as one diligently turns over the leaves of the Book of Nature, the Bible of Natural Theology, in which God’s invisibility becomes visible”.

Not only the complex structures of living organisms, but also the qualities of more “simple” inanimate bodies gave rise to the use of the metaphor. Both Kepler and Galileo suggested that the Book of Nature had been written in mathematical language. In the Preface of his *Mysterium Cosmographicum* (1596), Kepler explicitly wrote “that the pages of nature had been written by God in the language of geometry”.⁴⁸ To be sure, not all natural philosophers were equally committed to the metaphor of the Book of Nature. As Jorink points out,⁴⁹ physicists like Christiaan Huygens and Simon Stevin showed little interest in religious and metaphysical backgrounds. Even more so, understanding nature as nothing but matter-in-motion or as a giant clockwork, may have the opposite effect of considering God as superfluous. As a rule, practitioners of natural history were more inclined to find evidence for God’s revelation in the *liber naturae* than their mathematically oriented colleagues.

It is not surprising at all that practitioners of mechanics and optics are “reading” nature in another way than those who study the biological world.⁵⁰ For it is with regard to the complexity and purposeful structure of the living organism that the “argument from design” (or teleological argument) seems to be most powerful. This argument for the existence, power and providence of God has a long and complicated history, and its treatment in this thesis would grossly exceed its limits. But for my purpose it will do when I underline that the disciplines which became successively known as physico-theology, natural theology and – in recent times – intelligent design, all depend on the assumption, *first*, that the high degree of harmony, complexity and purposeful organization of nature (and of life in particular) require an explanation. And *second*, that the only plausible explanation would be the existence of an intelligent Designer who acts in a purposeful way. In other words: the study of nature proves the existence of God as the author of the book of nature.

From the 18th century onward, this argument from design has been worked out extensively, first of all and most famously by William Derham in his *Physico-Theology* (1713), by Bernard Nieuwentijt (see section 7.3) in his *The Religious Philosopher* (1718) and by William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802). However, this argument is not as self-evident as some proponents of natural theology suggest. The problems that arise from this “explanation” have been articulated most eloquently by David Hume in his famous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Even if we conceive of God as a “necessarily existing Being” (whatever that may be), “why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being....We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter”.⁵¹ Moreover, as already mentioned briefly (sections 1.5 and 2.5), introducing the concept of God does not explain anything at all, when seen from a scientific point of view. On the contrary, it increases the number of entities in need of an explanation. That would be at variance with Ockham’s razor, the principle that “entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity” (*Non sunt multiplicanda entia sine necessitate*). And one should keep in mind that the “necessity” for introducing such an entity is – in the case of the argument from design – based on the unproved assumption that matter as such consists of no more than particles in motion, incapable of any creative and self-organizing activity in itself. It is the consequence of an “inborn error” of the mechanistic world view, an error Hume correctly exposes when he states that “we dare not affirm

⁴⁸ Harrison p. 23-24.

⁴⁹ Jorink (2006) p. 46.

⁵⁰ It should be noted that the term “biology” arose only in the 19th century. It originated from disciplines earlier classified as “natural history”.

⁵¹ Hume p. 92.

that we know all the qualities of matter". So, Hume already has shown that the argument from design is no sound argument, because it is based on unproved premises.

One may add that this "inborn error" of the mechanistic world view has been exposed already by Spinoza, when he postulates that Nature includes both its causes (*Natura naturans*) and its effects (*Natura naturata*). In other words, creativity could very well be located inside Nature; there is logically no need for introducing a transcendent initiator of creativity.

CHAPTER 4: PROPHETS AND PROPHECY

4.1 Prophets and prophecy as seen by tradition⁵²

Belief in prophecy is the cornerstone of the monotheistic religions. As far as Judaism is concerned, prophecy is a phenomenon with a distinct beginning and a distinct end in history. The prophets *appear* concurrently with the Sinai theophany, where Moses, the first and greatest of all prophets, received God's word. Prophecies come to an abrupt *end* shortly after the Babylonian exile (sixth century B.C.E.), with the figures of Zechariah and Malachi. With the single exception of Elijah as the messianic herald, prophecy in Judaism is a phenomenon of the distant past.⁵³ In contrast, Christianity accepts prophets occurring in the New Testament and persons with prophetic qualities for a much longer period of time. As William James puts it in his classical *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:⁵⁴

Saint Paul had his visions, his ecstasies, his gift of tongues, small as was the importance he attached to the latter. The whole array of Christian saints and heresiarchs, including the greatest, the Bernards, the Loyolas, the Luthers, the Foxes, the Wesleys, had their visions, voices, rapt conditions, guiding impressions, and 'openings'. They had these things, because they had exalted sensibility, and to such things persons with exalted sensibility are liable.

The traditional view on prophecy is founded on the basic premise that God makes his will known to chosen individuals in successive generations. A prophet is a charismatic person who possesses the divine gift to receive and to impart the message of revelation. As a spokesman of the deity, he does not choose his profession but is chosen, often against his own will, to convey the word of God to his people. This "being called" may be found back in the Hebrew word for prophet, *navi*, "one who has been called". Becoming a prophet does not depend on certain inborn or acquired faculties, nor is prophecy a science to be learned or mastered. The prophet is selected by God and is irresistibly compelled to deliver His message and impart His will, even if he personally disagrees with it. He speaks when commanded, but once commanded, must speak (Amos 3:8). As an appointed messenger, he must translate his revelatory experience into the idiom of his people.

The prophetic experience should not be confused with the mystical one. The prophet, although conscious of being overwhelmed by the divine word and of being involved in an encounter with God, is still capable of reacting and responding and may even engage God in a dialogue. The individuality of the prophet is never curtailed; no two prophets prophesied in the same style. Although the classical prophets are more "hearers" than "seers", visions are often reported, for instance the vivid ones of Ezekiel (chapters 1-3, 8-10) and Zechariah (chapters 5-6). Moses is the prophet par excellence, distinguished by God's revealing Himself directly to him, "from mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles". According to established tradition, he counts as the author of the

⁵²See for an overview from a Jewish point of view the article "Prophets and Prophecy" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, volume 13, p. 1150-1181. For the Christian perspective see: Chapter III C. "De boeken der Schriftprofeten" in *Bijbels Handboek deel II A*, p. 362-427. A shorter summary in "Prophets and Prophecy" in Coggins and Houlden *The SCM Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 556-561.

⁵³ See Cohen and Mendes-Flohr p. 731-734. Curley makes the somewhat curious remark: "Whether prophecy had actually ceased in some point of history has been a matter of dispute in both the Jewish and the Christian tradition. Certainly claims of prophecy did not cease, as the case of Sabbatai Zevi illustrates" (*The Complete Works, volume II*, p. 78). However, Curley refers to the fact that Judaism allows one exception: the Messiah. And Sabbatai Zevi claimed to be the Messiah, and one of his followers, Nathan of Gaza, claimed to be the risen Elijah (cf. *The Complete Works, volume II*, p. 24).

⁵⁴ James p. 478.

five books of Moses, the Pentateuch (or the Torah proper), dictated to him by God on mount Sinai.

To the other prophets, God revealed Himself only in visions or dreams. The so-called *Former Prophets* are seen as the authors of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, while the *Latter Prophets* are the authors of the books named after them: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets.⁵⁵ The outstanding feature of the message of the prophets is that they consider the cultic obligations to be secondary to the moral laws. Over and over again, the ruler or the people is castigated for not obeying principles of morality. The prophet Nathan rebukes king David for his conduct with Bath-Sheba, Uriah's wife. As will be remembered, David wrote to Joab, his army commander: "Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed" (II Samuel 11:15). The prophet Elijah forecasts disaster on king Ahab and his house for killing Naboth, whose vineyard he wanted to grab (I Kings 21). And the prophet Isaiah exclaims, in the name of God, that the fast is of no avail when compassion for your neighbour is lacking:

Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush, and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when the Lord is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, , and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin (Isaiah 58:5-7).

Signs and wonders sometimes were used by prophets to authenticate their speaking as a "mouthpiece" of God. They predicted impending events, as in the case of Moses, who announced the ten plagues in front of the Pharaoh of Egypt (Exodus 7-12). The prophet Isaiah gives a sign to king Hezekiah to prove that the Lord has heard his prayer and would add 15 years to his life: "behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps" (Isaiah 38:8). In calling to the people as a whole, both Amos, Hosea and Isaiah foretold exile and destruction of the kingdom of Israel. The latter prophet called Assyria the rod of God's wrath.

In these, and many more examples, the purpose is not "to predict the future", but to show the authenticity and urgency of the prophet's call, and ultimately, to bring the people back to a righteous life. In other words, to bring about "teshuvah". This concept has two meanings: repentance (for transgressions) and return (to God). The ultimate aim of the prophets was to establish piety and faithfulness to the covenant between God and Israel. "The objective of the prophetic threat of dire punishment was that it should not take place. Paradoxically, the prophets wished to make their own calling self-defeating by persuading man to return to God".⁵⁶

Contrasting sharply with the Jewish perception of prophecy, in Christianity the predictive powers of the prophets were highlighted. They were believed to have foreseen the coming of the messiah.⁵⁷ Christianity turned the ethical reading into an eschatological one. In medieval Jewish philosophy, prophets and prophecy became a major theme. Not surprising, taking into account the central role of prophecy in the monotheistic religions. For if there had been no prophet, then also no Torah, no people of Israel, and no monotheism. No medieval philosophical writing has addressed this subject more extensively than Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. Because Spinoza also elaborates on this subject, thereby heavily drawing on and opposing to Maimonides, it seems necessary to dwell upon the view of Maimonides a bit longer.

⁵⁵ Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malacii.

⁵⁶ *Encyclopaedia Judaica volume 13*, p. 1173.

⁵⁷ Coggins and Houlden p. 556.

4.2 Maimonides on prophets and prophecy

Maimonides (1138-1204) is generally acclaimed as the greatest Jewish scholar of all times. His fame is equally based on his work as a philosopher and on his authority with regard to Scripture and rabbinical literature. In Jewish literature, he is often called the Rambam, an acronym for the name Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon. Among his some thirty works, two of them are outstanding in their contribution to the spread of his reputation: his great rabbinic Code *Mishneh Torah* (The Teachings of the Tradition, also known as “The Code of Jewish Law”)⁵⁸, and his major philosophical work *The Guide for the Perplexed*. While the first - which has remained authoritative until the present day – established his fame throughout the Jewish world, the second made him universally famous. It has been said that Maimonides’ *The Guide* was “the first book, written by a Jew, after the Bible, to become part of world literature”.⁵⁹ Originally written in Arab and completed in 1190, it almost overnight became a classic, soon translated into Hebrew (“Moreh Nebuchim”) and Latin. The Latin version circulated all over Christian Europe and became an important source for medieval Christian thinkers, anxious to found a Christian Aristotelian philosophy. It was quoted copiously, among others, by Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Roger Bacon.

Many elements in Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* may also been found in Maimonides’ *The Guide*. It has even been argued that “Spinoza’s insistence upon the love of God as the highest quality of human reason, his views on prophecy, miracles, immortality, interpretation and general meaning of the Bible, as well as his strongly intellectual theory of ethics, although written in ostensible opposition to Maimonides, are completely dependent on his arguments”.⁶⁰ This certainly is an exaggeration. Spinoza opposes against Jewish tradition, and Maimonides happens to be the one he quotes most often, because he treats the subjects in which Spinoza is interested in the most extensive and most “philosophical” way. However, this does not make him “dependent” on Maimonides. On the other hand, assertions as if Spinoza never would have taken the trouble to study Maimonides thoroughly⁶¹ also are unjustified. The *TTP* gives ample evidence that Spinoza knew the *Guide* perfectly well. He was inspired and motivated by what he read in the *Guide* and – to a lesser degree – in the *Mishneh Torah*, and he definitely made use of these sources. A copy of the *Guide* was present in his library.⁶²

Apart from Spinoza’s engagement, *The Guide* without doubt is a singular achievement in medieval thought. It aims at establishing a rational philosophy of Judaism, incorporating Aristotelian philosophy and trying to reconcile religion with reason. The common people were advised against reading it, for it “might prove a guide to some perplexed minds; but there was also the possibility that (it) would create perplexities and doubts in the minds of readers who previously had none”.⁶³ One may note the resemblance with the *Theological-Political Treatise*, for Spinoza writes that “I don’t ask the common people to read these things, nor anyone else who is struggling with the same affects as the common people. Indeed I would prefer them to neglect this book entirely”.⁶⁴ Exactly the same applies to Maimonides’ *Guide*. It was meant for the intellectual elite who, although religious and observant, was “baffled by the anthropomorphic words and passages in the Bible which they could not reconcile with God’s absolute spirituality.... They were puzzled and confused by the inconsistency they thought to exist between the demands of reason and the requirements of

⁵⁸ See Introduction by Arthur Hertzberg in Minkin p. V.

⁵⁹ Minkin p. 106.

⁶⁰ Leon Roth, as quoted by Minkin p. 111.

⁶¹ Niewöhner p.24; Van Bunge (2001a) p. 17

⁶² Van Sluis & Musschenga p. 24.

⁶³ Abraham Cohen p. 28.

⁶⁴ Spinoza (2016) p. 75.

religion”.⁶⁵ These “perplexed” had to be satisfied, so that they could continue philosophizing and reading Aristoteles without fear that at the same time they were rejecting the fundamental principles of the Torah.

The Guide, consisting of three parts, treats many subjects. Part I is – among other things - about the figurative expressions in the Bible, and the attributes and knowledge of God. Part II considers the existence, unity and incorporeality of God, the spheres, angels, and Aristotle’s theory of creation. This part is also about prophecy and prophets, the mental, moral and physical faculties of the latter, and the exceptional position of Moses among them. Part III treats subjects such as the problem of Evil and God’s relation to it, God’s omniscience, freedom of will, providence, and finally, an analysis of the rationality of the precepts of the Torah.

The attentive reader may have noticed that some of these subjects also figure prominently in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. But my main focus in this section is on Maimonides’ opinions on prophets and prophecy. He circumspectly avoids explicit judgements about the miraculous or supernatural character of prophecy. Prophecy is a natural and intelligible device by which divine wisdom – however understood – secures obedience to the law and, consequently, the perfection of the human species. Its purpose is the promulgation of a divine law or, in its lower form, popular instruction or urging to adhere to the divine law. Maimonides gives the following definition of prophecy:⁶⁶

Prophecy is, in truth, and reality, an emanation⁶⁷ sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect⁶⁸, in the first instance to man’s rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty. It is the highest degree and greatest perfection man can attain; it consists in the most perfect development of the imaginative faculty. Prophecy is a faculty that cannot in any way be found in a person, or acquired by man, through a culture of his mental and moral faculties; for even if these latter were as good and perfect as possible, they would be of no avail, unless they were combined with the highest natural excellence of the imaginative faculty.

It is important to stress that, according to Maimonides, prophecy is a *natural* faculty, in principle attainable for every man with the right psychological disposition. As a modern commentator summarizes it: “the Rambam understood prophecy as natural, not miraculous; it is a human achievement, not a divine initiative; and the prophet is a superlative human being, but not more than that. In addition, prophecy takes place within the prophet and not outside”.⁶⁹ For a man to prophesy requires that both the rational and the imaginative faculty are perfect. Besides that, he must be morally perfect, free from a concern for physical pleasure and domination, so that he can be utterly preoccupied with divine things. If the influence of the Active Intellect only reaches the logical faculty (as is the case in philosophers), or only the imaginative faculty (as is the case in statesmen, lawgivers, diviners, charmers etc.), the persons concerned can never become prophets. Some persons of the last category may have dreams and confused images, when awake, in the form of a prophetic vision. They then believe that they have become prophets, that they “have acquired wisdom without training. They fall into grave errors as regards important philosophical principles, and see a strange mixture of true and imaginary things. All this is the consequence of the strength of their imaginative faculty, and the weakness of their logical faculty, which has not developed, and has not passed from

⁶⁵ Minkin p. 113.

⁶⁶ Maimonides part II Chapter XXXVI (p. 225).

⁶⁷ “Emanation” clearly points to Neoplatonic views which are strongly represented in the *Guide* (Ivry p. 62-63).

⁶⁸ “Active Intellect” is an originally Aristotelian concept, that got different interpretations in medieval philosophy. Sometimes it was an aspect of the human soul, sometimes an external entity independent of man. Maimonides understood it in this last, “external” way, as the lowest of the ten emanations descending from the celestial spheres.

⁶⁹ Goodman p. 29.

potentiality to actuality”.⁷⁰ So Maimonides believes that prophets needs three capacities: the (logical) wisdom of a philosopher (which only can be acquired by study)⁷¹, an exceptionally high imagination, and a high moral standard. He also believes that prophets are not able to prophesy “when they mourn, are angry, or are similarly affected. Our Sages say, Inspiration does not come upon a prophet when he is sad or languid”.⁷²

It is worth noting in advance the similarities and differences with Spinoza’s understanding of prophecy. Similarities with regard to imagination and high moral standards, differences when it comes to intellectual qualities and the absence of prophecy in a sad or angry state. Maimonides elaborates on the importance of imagination in the following words:⁷³ “Part of the functions of the imaginative faculty is, as you well know, to retain impressions by the senses, to combine them, and chiefly to form images. The principal and highest function is performed when the senses are at rest and pause in their action, for then it receives, to some extent, divine inspiration in the measure as it is predisposed for this influence. This is the nature of those dreams which prove true, and also of prophecy.....The action of the imaginative faculty during sleep is the same as at the time when it receives a prophecy, only in the first case it is not fully developed, and has not yet reached its fullest degree”. The real essence of prophecy is, that it is a perfection acquired in a dream or in a vision; “the imaginative faculty acquires such an efficiency in its action that it sees the thing as if it came from without, and perceives it as if through the medium of bodily senses”.⁷⁴

4.3 Questioning prophetic truth: Hobbes and Spinoza

One may wonder whether Thomas Hobbes was equally informative for Spinoza as Maimonides for his theological thoughts. I believe he was not. To be sure, Spinoza probably was well acquainted with the British philosopher’s work, as is testified by his political philosophy (Spinoza shares much of Hobbes’ ideas on the state of nature and on the social contract) and by his library (containing the 1647 Latin edition of *De Cive*⁷⁵). Undoubtedly, Spinoza had also read *Leviathan* (1651) after it had been translated from English into Dutch (1667)⁷⁶ and Latin (1668). Remarkably enough, this last book often shares the fate of the *TTP*: it is primarily seen as a book of political theory. However, much alike the *TTP*, it is much more multifaceted. To be sure, the second part - “Of Common-wealth” - treats the rationale of sovereign power. The first part, “Of Man”, is about human faculties such as sense, imagination, speech, reason and the intellectual virtues, while the third part - “Of a Christian Common-wealth” - treats (among other things) the Books of Holy Scripture, the word of God and of the Prophets, and Miracles.

Of course, it is very difficult to establish beyond doubt what Spinoza derived from earlier writers, and what he figured out all on his own. It is very likely that Spinoza had already formed his own ideas about the Bible in the mid-1650s, before he had the occasion to take notice of Hobbes and some of his other contemporaries.⁷⁷ After all, because of his Jewish childhood education Spinoza was well-informed about the Hebrew Bible, supplemented by some instruction in Mishnah, Gemara (the

⁷⁰ Minkin p. 303. Cf. Maimonides part II Chapter XXXV-XXXVII (p. 223-229). Mark the Aristotelian terminology.

⁷¹ Maimonides p. 226.

⁷² Maimonides p. 227.

⁷³ Maimonides p. 225; cf. Abraham Cohen p. 132-133.

⁷⁴ Maimonides p. 225-226.

⁷⁵ Van Sluis & Musschenga p. 72.

⁷⁶ The Dutch translation has been produced by Spinoza’s friend Abraham van Berckel, a medical doctor. See Nadler (1999) p. 119, Israel (2001) p. 185-186. Spinoza knew no English.

⁷⁷ Nadler (1999) p. 134.

both together forming the Talmud) and medieval Jewish commentaries (Rashi, Ibn Ezra). He mastered the Hebrew language more thoroughly than most of his Christian sympathizers, putting him in a better position for critically evaluating the Bible.

Whatever Hobbes' influence may have been, it is instructive to compare the two philosophers' views on prophets and prophecy. It is noteworthy that Hobbes does not categorically deny the possibility that the word of God was revealed to the prophets in a supernatural way. His account in Chapter 36 of *Leviathan*⁷⁸ starts with a warning: the expression "Word of God" may be meant literally (the words God actually has spoken to his prophets) or metaphorically (the doctrine of the Christian religion; or also: God's wisdom, power and decree). In the latter sense the whole Scripture may rightly be called the word of God, in the former sense not necessarily. Concerning prophecy, Hobbes notes that Scripture says many times that "God spake to this or that person, without declaring in what manner; yet there be again many places, that deliver also the signes by which they were to acknowledge his presence, and commandement; and by these may be understood, how he spake to many of the rest".⁷⁹ Starting with Abraham, God often made his presence manifest by an *apparition* or a *vision*, or by a *voice* from heaven. In other cases, when the person was asleep, God appeared in a *dream*. "Only to Moses hee spake in a more extraordinary manner in Mount *Sinai*, and in the *Tabernacle*; and to the High Priest in the *Tabernacle*, and in the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the Temple. But Moses, and after him the High Priests were Prophets of a more eminent place, and degree in Gods favour".⁸⁰ While to the other prophets God spoke in dreams and visions, to Moses he spoke "mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord" (Nueri 12:8). "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another" (Exodus 33:11). Hobbes concludes that in most cases "the Prophets extraordinary in the Old Testament took notice of the word of God no otherwise, than from their dreams or visions; that is to say, from the imaginations which they had in their sleep, or in an extasie; which imaginations in every true prophet were supernaturall; but in false prophets were either naturall, or feigned".⁸¹

Besides these "extraordinary" prophets, Hobbes distinguishes a category of prophets "of perpetual calling, but subordinate", to whom God did not speak supernaturally, but "by the graces, or gifts of the Holy Spirit". In Hobbes's vocabulary, this implies that we should "attribute nothing to him supernaturall"; it only means that these subordinate prophets were men of particular piety, belief and righteousness.⁸² Although all special gifts, dreams and visions ultimately are from God, "there is need of reason and judgment to discern between naturall and supernaturall gifts, and between naturall and supernaturall visions, or dreams".⁸³ To summarize: for Hobbes, the matter of questioning prophetic truth comes down to making the right distinction between false and true prophets. In the Old Testament, the decisive test is whether the prophet has the miraculous power of foretelling what God would bring to pass. In the New Testament, there was but one mark, namely the preaching that Jesus is the Christ as promised in the Old Testament.

For Spinoza, the matter is a completely different one. For him, attributing any supernatural quality to prophets and to their prophecies is out of the question. Interestingly, Spinoza comes much closer to Maimonides than to Hobbes when evaluating the character of prophecy. Whereas Hobbes ultimately attributes prophecy – at least in some cases – to a supernatural cause, because it is the word of God that comes in dreams or visions, Maimonides is much more cautious. He ascribes prophecy to "emanations of the Divine Being", overflowing into the Active Intellect and indirectly

⁷⁸ Hobbes p. 287-300.

⁷⁹ Hobbes p. 292.

⁸⁰ Hobbes p. 293.

⁸¹ Hobbes p. 294.

⁸² Hobbes p. 295.

⁸³ Hobbes p. 297.

affecting the natural intellectual and imaginatory capacities of the prophet. He extensively considers the rational, imaginative and moral capacities that are required to become a prophet, psychological considerations which are absent in Hobbes's account of the subject.

It seems perfectly clear that Spinoza elaborates on Maimonides' views, not on those of Hobbes. However, in two respects Spinoza differs from Maimonides most definitely. The first is the supernatural origin of prophecy, which Maimonides not explicitly rejects (although he attributes it to the emanation of a very abstract Divine Being). The second is the supposed rational and intellectual superiority of the prophets. In the next paragraph, Spinoza's naturalistic approach of prophecy is considered in some more detail. It may be seen as another example of Spinoza's scientific attitude. He argues that whenever one wants to explain prophecy, it has to be a natural explanation.

4.4 Explaining prophecy: Spinoza's naturalistic approach

In all of his biblical interpretations, Spinoza employs the principle of "Sola Scriptura" (by Scripture alone). As noted earlier, Spinoza has borrowed this principle from his liberal Protestant friends. For this is one of the central points of departure of the Protestant Reformation: God's Word can be known by the study of Scripture alone, and in this way – in principle – is accessible for everyone. This contrasts sharply with the view of the Roman Catholic Church, which holds that the Bible can only be properly interpreted within the context of the sacred tradition. And this sacred tradition can only be properly understood by the "magisterium", the church's authority or office to establish authentic teachings (invested by the pope and the bishops). It should be noted that the individual freedom to interpret Scripture in one's own way, initially characteristic for the Protestant Reformation, was soon forgotten. Within a century, both Calvinist and Lutheran orthodoxy had drawn sharp boundaries between interpretations that were allowed and those that were not.

However, within the circle of Spinoza's liberal Protestant friends, the aversion for ecclesiastical doctrines which obscured the authentic message of Jesus Christ was prevalent. Spinoza definitely felt at home within these circles, and his *TTP* mirrors his adoption of the "Sola Scriptura" principle. Spinoza starts by explaining why we have to rely on Scripture anyway. For isn't it the case that the nature of the human mind – because it contains God's nature⁸⁴ – is the first cause of divine revelation? That may be so, but *in this Treatise* Spinoza has given himself the task to investigate whether the prophets possessed this capacity of the human mind in an extraordinary way. And because we have no prophets today, "our only option is to expound the sacred books left to us by the Prophets. But with this precaution: we should not maintain anything about such matters, or attribute anything to the Prophets themselves, which they did not say clearly and repeatedly".⁸⁵

In his subsequent account of where prophecies consist of Spinoza largely agrees with traditional accounts and with those of Maimonides and Hobbes. However, he considers the matter in much more detail. In the exceptional case of the prophet Moses, the Bible clearly states that God spoke with a real voice to him, and face to face. But in most other cases, visions and dreams are the stuff prophecies are made on, products of the imagination. This should not necessarily be equated with fantasy or fancy, as if it were mere illusions. The term "imaginatio" refers primarily to the faculty of the mind to form visual representations of external objects, whether they are present or not. Remember what Maimonides said about it (section 4.2): "part of the functions of the imaginative faculty is, as you well know, to retain impressions by the senses, to combine them, and

⁸⁴ Spinoza's motto for the *Treatise* refers to this idea of divine presence in all of nature (including the human mind, which is part of nature), in other words, the identity of God and Nature: "By this we know that we remain in God and that God remains in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (I John 4:13).

⁸⁵ Spinoza (2016) p. 78.

chiefly to form images. The principal and highest function is performed when the senses are at rest and pause in their action, for then it receives, to some extent, divine inspiration in the measure as it is predisposed for this influence".⁸⁶ However, Spinoza clearly departs from his predecessors when it comes to the source of these dreams and visions. Whereas the others presuppose or at least leave open the possibility of an ultimately divine origin or inspiration, Spinoza fundamentally denies the possibility of such a supernatural revelation. Or, to be more accurate, he does realize that "the power of God" is an empty term which in no way deserves the name "explanation".⁸⁷

By what laws of nature was this (revelation) made? I confess I don't know. I could say, as others do, that it was made by the power of God. But then it would look as though I was just babbling. That would be like trying to explain the form of a singular thing by some transcendental term. For all things are made through the power of God. Indeed, because the power of Nature is just God's power itself, insofar as we're ignorant of natural causes, we certainly don't understand God's power. So it's foolish to fall back on that power of God when we don't know the natural cause of a thing, i.e., when we don't know God's power itself. But there's no need now for us to know the cause of prophetic knowledge. For as I've already indicated, here we're just trying to learn what Scripture teaches, so that we can draw our conclusions from those teachings as we would draw conclusions from the data of nature.

This quotation shows the essence of Spinoza's approach to Scripture, turning the *TTP* into a scientific enterprise. A scientific explanation should by very definition – as understood since the scientific revolution of the 17th century – be a naturalistic one, and it should take the given facts (the data) seriously.

How does Spinoza apply these principles to prophecy? His account of prophecy starts with an analysis of the language the Bible uses, and in particular of the characteristic idiom which has to be understood in order to understand how the Bible conceives of prophecy. So first we should have to find out what is meant when the Bible speaks of the prophets' having "ruach Elohim" (the Spirit of God). Spinoza shows that in most cases where the expression "ruach Elohim" is used in the Bible, it does not have a literal, but a metaphorical meaning. It simply means that a certain quality is present to a higher extent than usual. After having given a large number of examples of the use of the term, Spinoza concludes what is meant when the Bible applies the term "ruach Elohim" to the prophets. Often it is said that "*the Spirit of God was in the Prophet, God infused his Spirit into men, men were filled with the Spirit of God, and with the Holy Spirit*, etc. In all these cases, nothing else is meant than that the Prophets had a singular virtue, beyond what is ordinary, that they cultivated piety with exceptional constancy of heart, and that they perceived God's mind, *or*, judgment".⁸⁸ In the same way, the imagination of the Prophets is called the mind or Spirit of God, because the prophets had an unusually vivid imagination through which God's decrees, as it were, became revealed to them. In an "adnotatio", Spinoza stresses that "although certain men have certain things nature does not impart to others, nevertheless, they are not said to exceed human nature".⁸⁹ So if "some may, with their

⁸⁶ See for this concept also P. Steenbakkers "Imaginatio" in Van Bunge et alii (2011) p. 231-233. It treats Spinoza's use of the term in the *Ethics* and in his *Letters*, often in the sense of "the lowest form of knowledge" (also called opinion) and contrasted with reason and intuitive knowledge. It would be the sole source of inadequate ideas and of errors. This account, however, is not very informative when it comes to its use in the *TTP*, where it has a much more positive connotation. By virtue of their imagination prophets have the capacity to convey important messages in a way that may be understood by ordinary people, not used to discursive thought.

⁸⁷ Spinoza (2016) p. 92.

⁸⁸ Spinoza (2016) p. 91.

⁸⁹ Adnotatio III, Spinoza (2016) p. 91.

eyes open, imagine certain things so vividly that it's as if they had those things before them"⁹⁰, that does not mean that they possess some special sense which is outside the range of human nature.

In the Bible, the subjective character of revelation – because it depends on the prophets' imagination – is well recognized. Prophecies as such gave no certainty, and the prophets themselves were not always sure that their "revelation" really came from God. Therefore, they often asked a "sign" as proof of divine origin. Abraham asked for a sign (Genesis 15:8), and so did Gideon (Judges 6:17). Moses received a sign that he had been sent by God (Exodus 3:12), and Hizkia wanted a proof that the continuation of his life really was promised by God (2 Kings 20:8). Spinoza concludes that the prophetic certainty as explained by the Bible rests on three things: 1) that the prophets imagined the things revealed to them very vividly, 2) that there was a sign, and 3) "finally – this is the chief thing – that they had a heart inclined only to the right and the good".⁹¹ An extra guarantee of authenticity was the fact that the prophets only prophesied what was contained in the Law.

In spite of all that, prophecy never could provide a mathematical certainty, but only a moral one. "The difference between mathematical and moral certainty corresponds to the difference between ideas that prove their own truth and those that need external confirmation".⁹² And the necessary signs varied, depending on the opinions and character of the prophets. The prophecies as such also bear the stamp of the prophets' personality: their more or less strong imagination, their bodily condition, their temperament, their literary qualities, the opinions they already had in mind, their social background, and their strong moral convictions. Their revelations often are rather a reflection of the kind of *person* the prophet is than of (impending) real events. Different prophets provide us with different and sometimes conflicting prophecies. Let us take just a few examples of these subjective elements: "Micaiah never prophesied anything good to Ahab, though other true prophets did...But his whole life he prophesied evils....The prophets, therefore, were more ready for one kind of revelation than another, according to the variations in their bodily temperament."⁹³ With regard to the style of the prophecy you will also find great differences. If someone is skilled in Hebrew, Spinoza advises, he should take the trouble to compare different prophets speaking of the same subject. "Let him compare, for example...the courtier Isaiah...with the rustic Amos...the order and reasons of the prophecy of Jeremiah...with the order and reasons of Obadiah...Let him also compare Isaiah.. with Hosea".⁹⁴ Spinoza concludes, a bit ironically: "If you weigh all these things rightly, you will easily see that God has no distinctive style of speaking, but that he is refined, succinct, and severe, unsophisticated, wordy, and obscure, according to the learning and capacity of the Prophet".⁹⁵

It will be noted that Spinoza has much in common with Maimonides when attributing specific psychological characteristics to prophets: vivid imagination, and high morality. However, he disagrees with him in some other respects. The high intellectual qualities and thorough learning and education Maimonides attributes to prophets (section 4.2) are categorically denied. Scripture gives ample evidence that men who excelled in wisdom (like Solomon) were no prophets, and that prophets only excelled in their imagination, not in their wisdom. "Countryfolk, without any education, and even simple women, like Hagar, Abraham's handmaid, were given the gift of

⁹⁰ Idem. Note the resemblance with Maimonides' account.

⁹¹ Spinoza (2016) p. 96.

⁹² Van Bunge (2012) p. 107. The difference might also correspond to Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, between propositions that are logically true and those that are empirically true. Empirical knowledge always leaves some room for doubt or uncertainty.

⁹³ Spinoza (2016) p. 98.

⁹⁴ Spinoza (2016) p. 99.

⁹⁵ Idem.

prophecy”.⁹⁶ Spinoza even postulates an inverse relationship between imagination and intellect. “For those who have the most powerful imaginations are less able to grasp things by pure intellect. On the other hand, those who have more powerful intellects, and who cultivate them most, have a more moderate power of imagining, and have it more under their power”.⁹⁷ So one will look in vain in the prophetic books for natural or spiritual wisdom. For imagination as such gives no certainty, it has to be supplemented by reasoning. At least no mathematical certainty, only a moral one. Another matter of disagreement is settled in a few words: “Some say that God is not revealed to those who are angry or sad. They are surely dreaming”.⁹⁸ Spinoza is clearly lashing out at Maimonides (see section 4.2), at the same time demonstrating his lack of reverence for authorities of the past (see section 1.3). Spinoza has enough opposite examples: Moses who was angry when God revealed the slaughter of the first-born, Jeremiah who prophesied the Jews’ calamities when he was very mournful and weary of life, etc.

From all the foregoing, Spinoza’s naturalistic conclusions may become clear: if you read the Bible carefully and if you leave behind all the prejudices that generations of rabbis and theologians have attached to it, you will arrive at the simple conclusion that the prophets do *not* literally hand over to us the words as dictated by or inspired by God. Scripture contains accounts of what the prophets *experienced* and what they *perceived* or *imagined* as words and images produced by God. In other words: the Bible should not be read as the *objective* truth as given by God, but as the *subjective* “truth” as understood by the prophets. From the Bible itself it may be derived that what the prophets are telling us is not an accurate account of what actually took place. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, from the fact that the prophets only taught moral lessons, no philosophical ones, we should draw the conclusion that theology and philosophy are completely different domains that should remain strictly separated. The prophets certainly were no learned men, no philosophers, no astronomers. On the contrary, they were ignorant in philosophical matters, and therefore they should not be read as if they were experts in these fields.

⁹⁶ Spinoza (2016) p. 93.

⁹⁷ Spinoza (2016) p. 94.

⁹⁸ Spinoza (2016) p. 98.

CHAPTER 5: MIRACLES

5.1 Miracles as seen by tradition⁹⁹

In the last Chapter, it has been pointed out that signs and wonders often accompanied the pronouncements of the prophets. Their function was a matter of authentication; a proof was needed to acquire certainty about the divine origin of these pronouncements. A specific category of miracles, in Hebrew called “otot” (signs), is sometimes used in the Bible to demonstrate God’s power and will in certain situations, in order to convince men. Classical examples of miracles are those of Moses, whose staff turned into a serpent to show that he was sent by God (Exodus 4:2-5); the ten plagues coerced Pharaoh to accept the divine command and let the people go (Exodus 7-12). Some miracles go beyond the mere proof of divine power. Israel was saved and Egypt’s army destroyed by the splitting and coming back of the waters of the sea (Exodus 14). The people were given food and water in the desert by miraculous acts, for instance when God causes the raining down of bread from the sky (Exodus 16). Miraculous divine interventions in the outcome of historical events also take place according to biblical accounts. Both Samaria (II Kings 6:8-7:20) and Jerusalem (II Kings 19:35) miraculously escaped conquest by besieging armies. In the first case, God had made the Arameans hear the (illusionary) sound of chariots and horses; they abandoned their tents and horses and fled for their lives. In the second case, “an angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp, and the following morning they were all dead corpses”. One case of miraculous divine intervention deserves special attention, because it has become a classic example of the clash between science and religion. It concerns the famous story of Joshua who is fighting the five Amorite kings at Gibeon (Joshua 10). On that occasion, Joshua addressed the Lord and asked Him to halt the sun and the moon, because he needed more time (and daylight) to defeat his enemies. “And the sun stood still, and the moon halted, while a nation wreaked judgment on its foes”. I will come back to this case more extensively (section 5.4).

In the New Testament, of course, miracles are so closely connected to the life stories of Jesus as told in both the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the fourth gospel (John), that no comprehensible story would remain when these miracles would be left out. One should only think of Jesus’ healing of the blind, the lame, lepers, and the deaf; of his walking on the water and calming the sea; of his exorcisms; of the miraculous multiplication of bread and fish; etc. In some cases, there is a close connection between the miracles of the New Testament and those of the Old Testament. The analogy between Jesus feeding the throng and Moses providing the bread from heaven is obvious in Mark and Matthew, but is made explicit in John’s version of this story, to which he appends the discourse on Jesus as the bread of life (John 6:22-65).

The problem of whether miracles are “natural” or “supernatural”, which was of concern to scholars of later ages, does not bother Bible writers. There is in Scripture no notion of laws of nature determining how the universe works. Therefore, miracles may be described as extraordinary, but never are seen as violations of laws of nature. Man just has to know that God can do anything, whenever and wherever He chooses.

⁹⁹ See for an overview from a Jewish point of view the article “Miracles” in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, volume 12, p. 73-81. For the Christian perspective see: Chapter 2 VI. “Jezus’ wonderen” in *Bijbels Handboek deel III*, p. 83-88. A shorter summary in the articles “Miracles in the Biblical World” and “Miraculous, Interpretation of the” in Coggins and Houlden *The SCM Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 461-467.

5.2 Attempts to naturalize miracles

The sages of the Talmud unquestionably accepted the biblical miracles. However, they realized that events such as the parting of the Red Sea would involve a breach in the way God created the world. The solution of the rabbis was that the miracles should be seen as preordained and provided for in the act of creation. In the beginning, God commanded heaven and earth that they should be silent before Moses; the sun and moon that they should stand still before Joshua; etc. This Talmudic view was also adopted by Maimonides, who stated that miracles are predetermined at the time of creation and thus do not indicate a change in God's will or wisdom at a certain moment in history. The difference between the act of nature and the miracle should be seen as a difference between the regular and the unique, although the unique is also governed by some law of God.

Maimonides did not see the miracle as a violation of the laws of nature either. In the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea, for instance, the nature of the water was not changed but was affected by another natural force, the wind. As we will see later, this view comes close to that of Spinoza. However, Maimonides did not deny that miracles could be events of a special kind. For instance, he considered the revelation at Mt. Sinai as a special category, a particular act of creation, establishing an ideal legislation for human conduct. It may be seen as an *addition* to nature rather than an abrogation thereof. Many other biblical episodes, on the other hand, which when understood literally would indeed be miraculous, should be interpreted allegorically.

This latter view was also adopted in early Christianity. It limits the number of miracles that otherwise would have to be taken into account. Augustine already allowed for allegorical interpretations of miracles. In *On Christian Doctrine* and *The Trinity*, he developed a sign-theory, explaining in which cases a figurative interpretation of Scripture would be tolerable or appropriate.¹⁰⁰ He made clear that the Bible is no textbook of astronomy, and that one should not – for instance – refute the spherical shape of the earth because Scripture seems to imply so. The main purpose of the Bible is to promote salvation, and its use of expressions which are adapted to common ways of speech (“accommodation”) are subordinate to that purpose.¹⁰¹ That remained the general trend in medieval Christian thought, and the Council of Trent (1545-1563) had explicitly reaffirmed Augustine's “accommodation principle”.

However, it were the Protestant Reformers who brought back the primacy of the literal sense of Scripture. Unfortunately, this led to increasing tensions caused by the advance of science. Two diametrically opposed responses may be recognized. On the one side, a strict adherence to the literal meaning of Scripture and, consequently, the rejection of all conflicting science. As mentioned before, this response was advocated by some orthodox Calvinists, in the Dutch Republic headed by Gijsbert Voet (Voetius). On the other extreme of the spectre, the rigorous application of the naturalistic approach, advocated by Spinoza. His approach will be treated in section 5.3.

But first of all a short look at Hobbes' position. His chapter “Of Miracles” in his *Leviathan*¹⁰² is not of much help in answering the question whether miracles are of a “natural” or a “supernatural” character. He reminds us of the fact that we are used to call “miracles” all those events which men wonder at. And such events are thought to be “strange”, because we have rarely or never seen them before, and we cannot imagine them to have been caused by natural means. This makes that what is a “miracle” for the one may not be a miracle for the other, depending on earlier experiences and existing knowledge. The first man who saw a rainbow thought it a miracle, while nowadays it is common and is not seen as a miracle, whether we understand its causes or not. The term “miracle” is often used within a religious context, and then it may be defined as “a work of God, (besides his

¹⁰⁰ Morton (2006), see <http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1041&context=curej>

¹⁰¹ Cohen (2016) p. 80.

¹⁰² Hobbes Chapter XXXVII, p. 300-306.

operation by the way of Nature, ordained in the Creation) done, for the making manifest to his elect, the mission of an extraordinary Minister for their salvation".¹⁰³

It may be clear that this is in several respects a rather "Christian" definition. It gives miracles the specifically Christian purpose of making manifest the mission of the Messiah. Moreover, it deviates from the Talmudic and Maimonidean notion that miracles *also are ordained in the creation* (and not, as Hobbes has it, are produced by the *immediate* hand of God). Finally, Hobbes points out that men are easily deceived and often take for miracles what in reality are the work of impostors, illusionists and magicians. Hobbes does not make clear whether he believes in real miracles of divine, supernatural origin. He "durst not write so boldly".¹⁰⁴ Spinoza, on the contrary, leaves not the slightest room for doubt. Whereas he categorically denies the possibility of supernatural events (by definition), this of course also applies to so-called miracles.

5.3 'The common people call unusual works of nature miracles' ¹⁰⁵

One of the main purposes of my account is, to show that Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* is firmly rooted in the scientific revolution. To support this view further, I proceed by demonstrating that Spinoza was adopting the new standards for science that were under construction during that period. At the time, an increasing consensus among natural philosophers arose, implying that scientific explanations have to fulfill – among others - the following criteria: 1. Only natural causes may count as real causes, supernatural ones may not. 2. Only efficient causes are acceptable, no final ones. 3. Understanding efficient causes means that one is able to analyse the chain of "mechanisms" that leads to the phenomenon that has to be explained. 4. To make an appeal to authorities does not count as a valid argument, and 5. When "mechanisms" are not (yet) clear, one should admit this, instead of inventing causes in an arbitrary way to fill up the explanatory gaps.

When we consider Spinoza with regard to prophets and prophecy, he certainly complies much better with the new scientific standards than his predecessors. He explains prophecies in a natural way, without leaving any room for supernatural elements (as Maimonides and Hobbes still did). He tries to find efficient causes, such as psychological mechanisms and historical circumstances, and he honestly admits that he does not always understand how certain phenomena come about. He avoids arguments based on authority, such as "our Sages say" or "Aristotle says", but respects the facts as given in Scripture itself. That does not mean that Spinoza always succeeds in staying on the scientific road. As mentioned before, the right standards still had to be found during the scientific revolution, and the controversy between rationalists and empiricists would prove to become a stumbling block for remaining on that scientific road. As noted earlier, the right balance between empirical observations and reasoning had yet to be discovered. Spinoza quite often was inclined to attach too much weight to "pure reason".

Let us now consider how Spinoza uses scientific arguments when it comes to the interpretation of miracles. Like Hobbes, he considers miracles as events that amaze us, because we are not able to explain them in the way we are used to explain things: by analogy with other things with which we are familiar. Common people falsely think that miracles are events of a very special kind, events outside the range of what is natural, and this feature – they think - make these events a unique proof of God's existence. However, Spinoza argues, the only reason why common people have these false ideas is that they have no sound concept either of God or of nature. They don't

¹⁰³ Hobbes p. 303.

¹⁰⁴ According to the biographical data, to be found in *Brief Lives, chiefly of contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 and 1696*, Hobbes's response to the TTP was: "I durst not write so boldly".

¹⁰⁵ Spinoza (2016) p. 153.

understand that the common order of the natural world is the same as the will and power of God (which in turn are identical with God's understanding).¹⁰⁶ So if common people think that miracles more than anything else are caused by God, they create an artificial opposition between God's power on the one hand, and the power of nature on the other hand. But because all the laws of nature are the same as the power and energy of God, you would have to assume that God sometimes has to intervene in his own laws, in order to make things happen that otherwise would not be possible. This is a very strange way of thinking, Spinoza argues. If God really has made his laws of nature so weak that he has to intervene from time to time to correct them, then a belief in miracles would rather weaken our belief in the power of God than strengthen it. However, Spinoza explains that a miracle does not occur outside nature at all, but is as much part of nature as all the other (natural) events. Spinoza concludes "that we cannot know God, his existence, or his providence, by miracles; but we can infer these things far better from the fixed and immutable order of nature".¹⁰⁷ The only way we can sensibly speak of miracles is when we see them as "a work which surpasses, or is believed to surpass, men's power of understanding"¹⁰⁸, not a work that destroys or interrupts the order of nature, or is contrary to nature's laws.

Spinoza continues to argue that Scripture itself shows us that miracles do not give a true idea and knowledge of God. On the contrary, many miracles put us on the wrong track, because they show nothing else – to the Egyptians, for instance – than that there apparently is a divinity more powerful than theirs. Miracles do not reveal anything at all about God's nature or about God's decrees and commands, which are nothing else but exactly the order of nature. Spinoza then gives a number of examples where God is thought to act in a miraculous way, whereas it may be shown that in reality he acts according to the laws of nature. For instance, God says to Noah that he will put a rainbow in the clouds (Genesis 9:13), but this action of God "is certainly nothing but the refraction and reflection of the rays of sun, which the rays undergo in the drops of water".¹⁰⁹ Sometimes, when Scripture says that things happen by the word or command of God, it is clear that it is just a poetical way of describing natural events. For instance, take Psalm 147:15-18:¹¹⁰

He sends forth His word to the earth; His command runs swiftly. He lays down snow like fleece, scatters frost like ashes. He tosses down hail like crumbs – who can endure His icy cold? He issues command – it melts them; He breathes – the waters flow.

Spinoza rightly infers that what is meant is the natural action of the wind, and the heat by which frost and snow are melted. Other examples: the locusts attacked the country of the Egyptians "by a natural command of God, i.e., by an east wind blowing a whole day and night, and they left it again by a very strong west wind (see Exodus 10:14, 19)".¹¹¹ The splitting of the Red Sea also was caused by an east wind which blew very strongly all night (Exodus 14:21). To revive the boy believed to be dead, the prophet Elisha "had to lie upon him several times, until first he became warm and finally he opened his eyes (see 2 Kings 4:34-35)".¹¹² Curiously enough, Spinoza omits that Elisha "put his mouth

¹⁰⁶ Here Spinoza seems to smuggle in some metaphysical thoughts, not derived from Scripture. Apparently, he ascribes will and intellect to God, and then declares the two properties to be identical, without explaining how this should be understood. Cf. Spinoza (2016) p. 154 notes 2 and 3. See also Section 8.2 for my critique.

¹⁰⁷ Spinoza (2016) p. 158.

¹⁰⁸ Idem.

¹⁰⁹ Spinoza (2016) p. 161. An explanation taken from Descartes' essay on Metereology (Discourse 8: The rainbow), which is an addition to his *Discourse on the Method* (1637).

¹¹⁰ Tanakh p. 1282-1283.

¹¹¹ Spinoza 2016 p. 162. Curley rightly remarks that Exodus 10:13 would be more exact with regard to the east wind bringing the locusts in (note 15). Most translations retain Spinoza's inexact reference to Exodus 10:14 (Spinoza 1991 and 2007), but Akkerman incorporates the correction within the tekst (Spinoza 2008, p. 200).

¹¹² Spinoza (2016) p. 162.

on its mouth”, which is even stronger support for the assumption that he used mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Against the objection that there still remain many events in Scripture which cannot be explained naturally, for instance the influence of men’s sins and prayers on the falling of rain, Spinoza answers that the Bible often mentions the (supposed) remote causes, not the proximate ones. For the Bible has not as its aim to teach us natural causes (proximate causes), but to move ordinary people to devotion. And natural events do not stir ordinary people at all; the more so do events that appear amazing. Moreover, one should be very careful before assuming that men relate things just as they happened, without mixing them with their own preconceived opinions. A classical example of such a preconceived opinion is the supposed movement of the sun and the supposed rest of the earth. The impact of this issue grossly exceeds the narrow limits of finding the correct interpretation of miracles. Little subjects have more heavily stirred the imagination and provoked more objections than Copernicanism. A separate treatment therefore seems justified. (section 5.4).

5.4 ‘And the sun stood still’ ¹¹³

Apart from Darwin’s theory of evolution, no issue has acquired a higher status as a symbol for the supposed victory of science over religion than Copernicanism. The supposed battle between science and religion has been grossly exaggerated and has been supported by oversimplified accounts, as the Dutch historian of science Hooykaas, and his pupil Floris Cohen, have demonstrated convincingly. Hooykaas has summarized this prevailing view as follows, not without irony: “A science based on observation triumphed over clerical dogmatism; the Earth was removed from its central position, and its human inhabitants thereby lost the privileged position accorded them by the Bible – whose authority in its turn was severely damaged. In short, with Copernicus fact triumphed over faith and fiction”.¹¹⁴ As often is the case, reality is much more subtle and complicated. Copernicus was no revolutionary at all, and his system was initially praised for its mathematical skill. The church did not oppose to his system as one unified block, but opinions initially were divided. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church finally saw reasons to prosecute Galileo, an outcome that by no means was inevitable, as Floris Cohen convincingly argues.¹¹⁵ The matter not only occupied Galileo, but also Descartes, Spinoza and many of their contemporaries.

What was at stake? To summarize in a few words: at the one side, the authority of the Bible, of the Church, and of Aristotle. At the other side: the freedom to philosophize and to advance science, without clerical surveillance. The arguments against Copernicanism were threefold: 1. Some biblical texts which, when understood literally, would indicate that the earth is at rest and that the sun moves around the earth. 2. The predominant Aristotelian world system (later refined by the Ptolemaic one), postulating a resting earth in the centre of the universe. This system, like Aristotelian philosophy as a whole, was – largely thanks to Thomas Aquinas – highly incorporated in scholasticism and in Christian theology. 3. Common experience, which did not notice any movement of the earth at all, neither daily rotation around its axis, nor yearly revolution around the sun. The biblical text most frequently quoted against Copernicanism is the famous episode in Joshua 10: 12-14, in which Joshua asks the Lord to help him in his battle against the five Amorite kings who attacked the city of Gibeon:

“Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the valley of Aijalon!” And the sun stood still, and the moon halted, while a nation wreaked judgment on its foes – as is written in the Book of Jashar. Thus the sun

¹¹³ Joshua 10:13. See in particular Hooykaas Chapter VI.

¹¹⁴ Hooykaas p. 147.

¹¹⁵ Cohen (2016) p. 73-104.

halted in midheaven, and did not press on to set, for a whole day; for the Lord fought for Israel. Neither before nor since has there ever been such a day, when the Lord acted on words spoken by a man.¹¹⁶

Equal importance has been attributed to Isaiah's prophecy (already mentioned in section 4.1), in which God's promise to king Hezekiah to add fifteen years to his life is communicated. The relevant passage (Isaiah 38: 7-8) reads as follows:¹¹⁷

And this is the sign for you from the Lord that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised. I am going to make the shadow on the steps, which has descended on the dial of Ahaz because of the sun, recede ten steps. And the sun's shadow receded ten steps, the same steps as it had descended.

Some other biblical texts – a little less well-known – are brought forward by (among others) the earlier mentioned Gijsbert Voet, the famous champion of Dutch Calvinist orthodoxy. After having been appointed to the first chair in theology (1634) at the *Athenaeum Illustre* (soon to become University) at Utrecht, one of the theses he advances in his first disputation is the following:¹¹⁸

That heaven is resting and the earth rotates in daily movement can at any rate not be proved by Scripture; yes, it is clear that it is conflicting with it. Psalms 19: 6-7 and 104: 5; Eccl. 1: 4-5.

The texts to which Voet is referring read as follows:¹¹⁹

His rising-place is at one end of heaven, and his circuit reaches the other; nothing escapes his heat (Psalms 19:7)

He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter (Psalms 104: 5)

One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever. The sun rises, and the sun sets – and glides back to where it rises (Eccl. 1: 4-5).

Voet's opinion by no means is characteristic for Calvinism in general. On the contrary, many Calvinists were sympathetic with regard to the new world system and saw no problem in reading the Bible in a less literal way. Many admitted that the Bible is no textbook of astronomy, and that its speech is adapted to the way ordinary people commonly are using language. Even today, we speak of sunrise and sunset, although we know that the daily movements of the sun are only appearance, caused by the rotation of the earth around its axis. This kind of arguing was already adopted by Augustine in his "accommodation principle" (the Bible adapts its language to common usage). This principle was explicitly confirmed by the Council of Trent (see also section 5.2). Even Calvin himself frequently applied the principle of accommodation, an example that often was followed by science-cultivating ministers of the Reformed Churches.¹²⁰ The Roman Catholic Copernicus thought that his system was compatible with the Bible. And the Lutheran Johannes Kepler uses the accommodation argument in the introduction of his pioneering *Astronomia nova* (1609). Galileo, in his famous *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615)¹²¹ – who was worried about the apparent contradiction between Joshua 10 and the new astronomy – explicitly refers to the Augustinian perspective. He wanted to convince her of the compatibility of Copernicanism with Scripture. Curiously, to save the miracle, he suggested that God rather halted the rotation of the sun around its axis.

In spite of all this, the Roman Catholic Church ultimately decided against the Copernican

¹¹⁶ Tanakh p. 352.

¹¹⁷ Tanakh p. 695.

¹¹⁸ Cohen (2016) p. 62. Translated from Dutch by NV.

¹¹⁹ Tanakh p. 1126, 1230 and 1441.

¹²⁰ Hooykaas p. 152.

¹²¹ Christina of Lorraine, the mother of Galileo's patron Cosimo II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany.

system. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, chief advisor of the pope on church doctrine, wrote that one should not abandon Holy Scripture as interpreted by the Holy Fathers as long as there is no true demonstration that the sun is at the centre of the world. And in his opinion, such a demonstration had not yet been produced. In other words, the Church would have been prepared to change its mind, if only sufficient evidence would have been produced! Shortly thereafter, Bellarmine told Galileo (1616) that the Church had decided that his opinion was against Holy Scripture and therefore should neither be supported nor defended.¹²² After the Florentine cardinal Barberini had become pope (Urban VIII) in 1623, Galileo had several interviews with him from which he inferred that it would be permissible to write a new book on the (moving or not moving) earth. However, the book should be fully impartial, only representing the arguments for and against a rotating and a resting earth. And it should mention the pope's opinion that God might have arranged the universe completely different after all, for the power of our reason is limited. When Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* finally was published in 1632, it appeared to be far from impartial, but biased in favour of Copernicanism. Moreover, the pope's argument about our limited power of reason is put forward by Simplicio, the rather simple-minded defender of the Aristotelian system. Small wonder that the pope was not amused, and that a special committee, instituted by the pope, concluded that Galileo had not been impartial at all. The Roman Inquisition found Galileo "vehemently suspect of heresy", he should renounce his Copernican conviction (which he did) and he was sentenced to indefinite imprisonment (1633). In practice, he was kept under house arrest until his death in 1642.

The insistence of the Church on geocentrism not only affected Galileo. Descartes, who was working on his *Traité du monde et de la lumière* (The World) from 1629 to 1633, based on heliocentrism, decided not to release the book when he heard of Galileo's condemnation. In a letter to Mersenne,¹²³ dated November 1633, Descartes expresses his fear that were he to publish *The World*, the same fate that befell Galileo would befall him.¹²⁴ Part of the material from *The World* he later used in his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), in which the heliocentrism was disguised by a half-hearted attempt to save the required stationary position of the earth. Parts of *The World* were finally published in 1662 and 1664, the complete work only in 1677.

A full account of the reception of the Copernican system in the 17th century would grossly exceed the available space.¹²⁵ With respect to our subject, however, it is important to make a clear distinction between three kinds of response to the heliocentric view. The first one saves the miracle at the expense of sacrificing heliocentrism. If one wants to hold on to the literal reading of the Bible, heliocentrism has to be rejected. This ultimately became the official response of the Roman Catholic Church.¹²⁶ This was also the position of the "literalists" – like Voet – among the orthodox Calvinists. The second response tries to save both the miracle and heliocentrism, by giving an allegorical interpretation or an alternative description of the miraculous event. This position was taken by – for instance – Kepler and Galileo, and by all Christians who were prepared to adopt the accommodation principle for this case. Finally, heliocentrism may be saved while sacrificing the miracle. This, of course is the case whenever the possibility of miracles – in the sense of events contrary to or violating the laws of nature – is denied. It should be noted that, when Spinoza follows this third road, he is not satisfied by simply applying allegorical interpretations. Certainly these also would have the

¹²² For a full account see Cohen (2016) p. 73-104.

¹²³ Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), the famous French theologian, philosopher and mathematician. He started to be a key figure in the "Republic of Letters" some forty years before Henry Oldenburg.

¹²⁴ Kurt Smith (2014) "Descartes' Life and Works". In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

¹²⁵ For the reception, in particular the Calvinist one, in the Dutch Republic see Vermij (2002).

¹²⁶ The Roman Catholic position easily could have become different if it were not for the quite hastily taken decision about Galileo. Under these circumstances, there was no way back.

potential of denying, or at least circumventing, the miracle problem. But it is a too easy solution to interpret a biblical event allegorically whenever it conflicts with reason. In Spinoza's view, Maimonides and other interpreters often take this easy road, inventing figurative interpretations without showing due respect for what the biblical text really is trying to convey, and without taking into account "the Hebrews' expressions and figures of speech".¹²⁷ I will come back to this exegetical difference of opinion in chapter 6.

With regard to the "Joshua 10 problem", Spinoza clearly tries to remain true to his "Sola Scriptura" principle. As mentioned above, Spinoza warns us that "it is quite rare for men to relate a thing simply, just as it happened, without mixing any of their own judgment into the narration."¹²⁸ A mixing of observations with preconceived ideas will even be more likely when something happens that surpasses the grasp of the narrator. In the time of Joshua – and not only then, one would like to add – everyone thought that the sun moves around the earth and that the earth is at rest. In the story of the battle at Gibeon, it is not simply related that the day was longer than usual, but we are told that the sun and the moon stood still. The Hebrews conceived and recounted the affair far differently than it really could have happened. "They did not consider that a refraction greater than usual could arise from the large amount of ice then in that part of the air (see Joshua 10:11) – or from some other cause".¹²⁹

So far about the debate on heliocentrism. The question remains whether Spinoza really has succeeded in explaining miracles naturally, purely on the basis of Scriptural text. I will come back to that question and my doubts about that (section 8.2). For the moment, it will do to conclude from all the foregoing that the Bible itself is an unreliable source of information on astronomy and other sciences. Scripture is not of divine origin, but of human fabrication. This means that a better analysis of the text does not generate a better understanding of the truth. The text may only be properly understood when we reject traditional claims that it literally contains God's word, and when we investigate it just as we would do with any other historical document. This approach heralds the desacralization of Scripture (see Chapter 6) and may be seen as part of the larger process described in Chapter 1: disenchantment of the world.

¹²⁷ Spinoza (2016) p. 166.

¹²⁸ Spinoza (2016) p. 164.

¹²⁹ Spinoza (2016) p. 101. In Joshua 10:11 it is related that the enemy flees for the Israelites, and that "the Lord hurled huge stones on them from the sky....more perished from the hailstones than were killed by the Israelite weapons". Spinoza does not say that this explains the "miracle", but only that natural causes were not considered.

CHAPTER 6: DESACRALIZATION OF SCRIPTURE

6.1 Historical criticism and its application to the Bible

“In our time,” writes Leo Strauss (1899-1973), “scholars generally study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book. As is generally admitted, Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of Biblical study. In the seventh chapter of his *Theologico-Political Tractate*, he determines the fundamental themes and goals of the new discipline; in the subsequent chapters he arrives at fundamental results which remained accepted in the later development of the discipline”.¹³⁰

Strauss obviously is referring to the new discipline of historical criticism, applied to the Bible. That is not to say that Spinoza would be the inventor of historical criticism as such. The critical study of ancient texts has already been an essential part of the humanist tradition for more than two centuries. The art of discerning authentic texts from forgeries and corruptions, and of reading texts within the framework of their historical context originated among 15th century Italian Renaissance humanists. Lorenzo Valla became famous for his textual analysis that proved that the “Donation of Constantine” was a forgery (1440). This document suggested that emperor Constantine I “donated” the Western Roman Empire to the Roman Catholic Church, as an act of gratitude for being cured of leprosy. However, Valla showed that it could not have been written in the 4th century at all, but that its style definitely pointed to the 8th century.

In his *Miscellanea* (1489) and other works, the Italian humanist Angelo Poliziano arrived at a set of principles by which to judge the authenticity and reliability of sources. He insisted that a genealogy of literary works and manuscripts should be established, in order to discover the “archetype” of these sources. This method makes it superfluous to take into account a host of “derived” documents. Poliziano was the first to formulate the general rule that sources “should be weighed rather than counted up and that derivative ones should be ignored”.¹³¹ However, his most important contribution to the advancement of historical scholarship consists of the fact that he set ancient works back into their historical context.¹³² He eliminated whatever contemporary relevance they might have had, he removed any moral function for the present, but tried to recover their original meaning and intention.

The interest of the early humanists mentioned above was primarily directed towards the ancient classics. Their primary concern was the literature of ancient Rome. Poliziano’s works are about Virgil, Catullus and Ovid, about Pliny, Tacitus and Suetonius, but not about the Bible. However, it seems obvious that the Bible would not escape critical examination. This was done, for instance, by Erasmus of Rotterdam. He undertook the task of purifying doctrine and Scripture by turning to the sources in their original languages. After having mastered Hebrew, Latin and Greek, he collected all available Vulgate manuscripts to produce a new, critical edition of a Latin New Testament. He also added a fresh Greek New Testament (1516). The appearance of the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin heralded the beginning of another critical approach to the Bible. Not only the text as such, but also its interpretation and meaning became once more object of study. The Protestants were much more inclined to stress the “literal” sense, as opposed to the “spiritual” sense which characterized the traditional Roman Catholic approach (see also section 6.3). Moreover, according to Protestants each individual has the capability to interpret the Bible. The monopoly which the Roman Catholic clergy claimed with regard to the correct exegesis was denied. This, of course, opened the door for a multitude of competing interpretations and, unfortunately, for a host of religious denominations opposing each other in an atmosphere of animosity.

¹³⁰ Strauss p. 35.

¹³¹ Grafton p. 64.

¹³² Grafton p. 73.

However, the new impetus that Protestantism gave to a critical examination of the Bible was not only a matter of opposition against the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Criticism was also fed by the discovery of new lands and people in the New World and by the recently uncovered ancient histories of Egypt, Babylonia and China. This showed the existence of cultures and people, but also of animals that were not mentioned at all in the Bible. The linguist and clergyman Abraham van der Mijle wrote in 1630 that it was hard to reconcile the existence of these newly discovered animals with the Pentateuch account.¹³³ Another problem arose from biblical chronology. The great expert on this subject, Joseph Scaliger, who from 1593 until his death in 1609 lived in the Dutch Republic, compared this chronology with ancient Babylonian and Egyptian sources. He “published and defended Manetho’s shocking lists of the kings of ancient Egypt, which began – by Scaliger’s computation – before time itself did”.¹³⁴

Scaliger kept silent about the implications of his findings, but that was not the case with the French Huguenot Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676). In his *Praeadamitae* (1655), he argued that there had existed men before Adam (see section 6.4). His views already circulated in manuscript in the 1640s and were read by Hugo de Groot, who refuted them in his *De origine gentium Americanarum* (1643). Grotius tried to prove with linguistic arguments that the inhabitants of northern America were descendants of Noah.¹³⁵ Far more critical than Grotius about the historical reliability of the Bible was the philologist Isaac Vossius (1618-1689), a son of the famous humanist Gerardus Vossius. Isaac Vossius tried to avert the preadamite danger by claiming that the creation took place 1440 years earlier than 3950 B.C., the date Scaliger had computed. However, this does not make him a defender of the orthodox view on the Bible. On the contrary, Vossius went on by arguing that the Flood had not been a world-wide phenomenon, and that not all the languages of the world had their origin in Babel. He even denied the authenticity of the Books of Moses, the original text of which had been lost. What we possess are corrupted translations, copies of copies, a view which objects the one claiming that “the Bible comes straight from heaven”.¹³⁶ In essence, the Bible is a text like any other source from antiquity. The Old Testament should rather be seen as a narrative of the history of one of the ancient peoples.

With this focus on the “historicity” of the Bible, Vossius comes dangerously close to the view of more radical “dissidents” such as Thomas Hobbes, Isaac La Peyrère, Adriaan Koerbagh and Samuel Fisher (I will come back to them in section 6.4). So the question arises: if Spinoza is neither the originator of historical criticism in general, nor of historical criticism of the Bible in particular, what then is so special about Spinoza’s approach? The answer is quite simple: Spinoza is the first one who categorically denies the divinity of Scripture as such, and not only of the copies we possess. So there is nothing more “behind” Scripture than history alone. Consequently, the Bible may be treated in *literally* the same way as any other historical document (as Strauss has asserted). In the *TTP*, Spinoza explains that traditional exegesis of the Bible rests on two prejudices. The first is that it contains mysteries we cannot grasp, but which we must accept purely on the authority of the church. The second is that, because Scripture is supposed to be the word of God, it must be everywhere true and divine. However, this is wrongly taking “as a foundation for understanding Scripture” what still has to be proved. “So what we ought to establish by understanding Scripture, and subjecting it to a strict examination, and what we would be far better taught by Scripture itself, which needs no human inventions, they maintain at the outset as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture”.¹³⁷ The consequence of these prejudices is “a dubious principle of scriptural interpretation.....If we find in it passages which seem false or inconsistent, we must assume that we don’t understand them, and seek an interpretation which makes them not only consistent, but true”.¹³⁸ This is a completely

¹³³ Jorink p. 62.

¹³⁴ Grafton p. 209.

¹³⁵ Jorink p. 62-63.

¹³⁶ Cf. Jorink p. 65.

¹³⁷ Spinoza (2016) p. 71 (Preface).

¹³⁸ Edwin Curley “Editorial Preface”, in Spinoza (2016) p. 46.

wrong procedure. According to Spinoza, we must analyze the text of Scripture with the same methods as we use for other ancient texts. However, “Spinoza is under no illusion: reconstructing the context from which the Bible arose in order to understand its meaning is an immensely difficult task”.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, we should try. We have to study the history of the texts, the languages in which they were originally written, how the texts were composed and who wrote them. From the texts itself, not from tradition, we should try to find out for what audience and for what purpose they were written. We should investigate what manuscripts were used and what the history of these manuscripts was, whether they could have been corrupted, who decided which parts belong to the sacred canon and which don’t, etc.

Spinoza’s critical examination is primarily directed at the Old Testament. He explains that he does not dare to undertake the task of examining the New Testament because he would not have enough knowledge of Greek, and because he thought that the texts in the original language (probably Aramaic) were lacking. It will be clear immediately for the attentive reader that Spinoza’s program for interpreting Scripture is not only very ambitious, but also very radical. For because it questions the truth – and by implication the divine origin – of the Bible, it amounts to desacralization of Scripture. Spinoza not just introduces *historical criticism*. As shown above, many scholars within the church were applying philological and historical methods to solve exegetical problems and inconsistencies in the Bible. However, their ultimate goal was, as the Groningen professor of theology Johannes Braun formulated it, to provide posterity with a “perfect version of the Word of God”.¹⁴⁰ Spinoza goes much further: he wants to explore whether the assumption that the Bible contains the word of God *can be proved* by closely reading the Bible. And by giving a negative answer to that question, he deprives the Bible of its *sacred* character and of its authority. And undermining the authority of the Bible means taking away both the power of the church and the very basis for belief. The implications both for seculars and for believers will be sketched in the next section.

6.2 The promise and agony of historical criticism

The story of historical criticism of the Bible is a tricky one. It is not just another scholarly enterprise, like studying ancient Egypt, but a much more touchy subject. There is much more at stake than just settling differences of opinion about the history of the Bible. For it concerns the very nature of what religious people consider as being divine revelation. This inevitably affects the way in which the scientific study of the Bible is practised. For “seculars” like Spinoza it is a matter of liberation. It is a matter of release from the historical burden of clerical doctrines and dogmas, which had turned the Bible into a tool of oppression and persecution. Undermining the authority of the Bible means undermining the authority of the church. When the Bible is not God’s word, but a product of human authorship, the sound basis for theologians and for the church to exercise power is lost. They no longer have a justification for urging governments to institute laws to protect their specific doctrines,¹⁴¹ and for persecuting or excommunicating individuals for their heretic opinions.

For the theologians, on the other hand, historical criticism is potentially threatening. It not only undermines the basis of their authority, but also the basis of their belief. And this may become a problem, not only for the orthodox factions being in power, but also for the liberal ones who sincerely believe the Bible is the revealed word of God. Up to the present day, even the most “enlightened” theologians will almost inevitably experience a field of tension between the demands of responsible scholarship on the one hand, and loyalty to the doctrines and dogmas of the church to

¹³⁹ Van Bunge (2012) p. 108.

¹⁴⁰ Touber (2016) p.171.

¹⁴¹ That this is not just a theoretical threat is demonstrated by the ban on the TTP, issued by the States of Holland in 1674, and based on an earlier edict of 1653 forbidding the printing and dissemination of “irreligious” books.

which they belong on the other hand. Harrisville and Sundberg for instance, having a Christian (Lutheran) background, write in *The Bible in Modern Culture. Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (1995, 2002) with sincere concern about “The agony of historical criticism”. Students at seminaries and church colleges are exposed to the use of the historical-critical method. While the mainline church recognizes its necessity, at the same time it is noted that:

the average scholar does not appreciate how devastating his critical analysis can be to the preacher.....for a disturbing number of students and preachers, critical analysis fosters a tendency to treat the Bible as an atomized reality divided into a series of seemingly endless, discrete texts reflecting the points of view of particular authors, but not the sweep and grandeur of God’s word.¹⁴²

Throughout all the chapters, the authors do their utmost to give an objective account of the history of the historical-critical method. However, they keep in sight all the time the fundamental doctrinal conflict between historical criticism and the dogmatic tradition of the church. They honestly confess that as Protestants they aim at reconciling critical study of the Bible with “the obedient hearing of its message as the word of God”. They propose for consideration “a faithful stance that a biblical interpreter might take that discloses, for the life of the church and its mission, the content of Scripture as the revelation of God.”¹⁴³

The dilemma is perfectly clear. One could imagine the response Spinoza most probably would give: theologians *still* give in to the same prejudices as in the 17th century. They take “as a foundation for understanding Scripture” what still has to be proved by reading Scripture (see section 6.1). Christian theologians, on the other hand, attempt to disarm this “one-sided rationalist approach” by disqualifying “the autonomous scholar whose private ideological commitment is disguised as objective scientific research”. These “private opinions” should give way for those of “a community of faithful memory that forthright acknowledges the Scriptures as its divinely inspired authority”.¹⁴⁴ One lesson should be learned from these conflicting points of view: to evaluate the abundance of literature on biblical interpretation properly, one has to bear in mind all the time the belief or religion to which the authors confess themselves. Quite often, their stance towards strains of biblical scholarship is determined by their belief. Now, before considering Spinoza’s views on Scripture in more detail, I will give a survey of traditional biblical exegesis and of the earlier critical approaches that have been applied.

6.3 Traditional biblical interpreters and their discontents

According to the traditional view, both in Judaism and in Christianity, every word that has been written in the Bible is of divine origin. The ultimate author is God, and the text of the Bible contains God’s word as revealed to the prophets. Because of this divine origin, every word of the Bible - often taken literally, sometimes taken metaphorically - must be true. To be sure, the text as we have it was written down by humans, by the prophets. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible – the Torah or Pentateuch – were written down by Moses from the very beginning to the very end. The other books were written by the prophets whose name they bear (Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc.) or by the protagonists figuring in these books (David, Solomon). However, there cannot be the slightest doubt that they have accurately recorded God’s word. So the *truth* of The Bible remains an unnegotiable issue. Of course, it often is the case that the Bible contains texts that contradict reason or experience, or texts that seem to contradict each other. However, because the Bible is true, these

¹⁴² James Smart, quoted in Harrisville and Sundberg p. 10.

¹⁴³ Harrisburg and Sundberg p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ The Lutheran Carl Braaten, quoted by Harrisburg and Sundberg p. 330.

apparent contradictions have to be explained away. It may be that our reason is too weak to understand the real, hidden meaning. Or it may be that certain passages should not be taken literally, but figuratively. The strategy of a metaphorical interpretation has a long history, both in Christianity and in Judaism. In Christianity, it is referred to as accommodation, the principle that God communicates with humanity in a way that humans can understand. As an alternative to biblical literalism, it has been adopted in the patristic period by Augustine (see sections 5.2 and 5.4).

During the 16th century Protestant Reformation, the medieval system of allegorization was largely abandoned. As we have seen before (section 5.2 and 5.4), the “adaptation principle”, allowing for non-literal interpretations, was not left behind completely. However, the right of the biblical text, literally interpreted, to speak for itself was strategically important. For the reformers, literal exegesis was a primary weapon to free themselves from church dogma and ecclesiastical customs. It could be shown that many of these customs were without biblical warrant. Luther asserted that the Bible alone is to be trusted because it is “through itself most certain, most easily accessible, comprehensible, interpreting itself, proving, judging all the words of all”.¹⁴⁵

In Judaism, there also has been a long rabbinical tradition of sometimes highly imaginative interpretations. The authoritative biblical commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) was the first who defended a more disciplined, scientific approach. Other commentators are heavily criticized for the arbitrary way in which they apply allegorical interpretations, using Scripture at random, adding or leaving out meanings, depending on their own thoughts or their intelligence.¹⁴⁶ Ibn Ezra finds them guilty of ignorance of science, philology, linguistics and grammar. He asserts that as a rule, we should stick to the *peshat* (the plain, surface meaning). To uncover this meaning, we should have a profound knowledge of the Hebrew philology and grammar of the time. Nevertheless, it sometimes may be necessary to “engage in non-literal interpretation of Scripture, (but) only in those cases when *peshat* contradicts what we know through reason or experience”.¹⁴⁷

As we shall see, Spinoza – whether or not influenced by Ibn Ezra – adopts much of these linguistic principles.¹⁴⁸ During the 12th century, Ibn Ezra’s view was shared by the great philosopher Maimonides. In his *The Guide for the Perplexed*, already mentioned before (see section 4.2), he also stresses that biblical writings as a rule should be read literally, unless reason forbids such a straightforward reading. An important source of concern for Maimonides is the common anthropomorphization of God that we find in the Bible. Reason tells us that God cannot have a body, or human emotions. So whenever the Bible speaks of God’s physical features, (fingers, face, feet) or of his psychological features (anger, jealousy, envy), a figurative or metaphorical interpretation should be sought. The following quotation from *The Guide* shows the close resemblance with the Christian accommodation principle mentioned before:¹⁴⁹

You, no doubt, know the Talmudical saying, which includes in itself all the various kinds of interpretation connected with our subject. It runs thus: “The Torah speaks according to the language of man”, that is to say, expressions which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator. Hence the description of God by attributes implying corporeality, in order to express His existence; because the multitude of people do not easily conceive existence unless in connection with a body, and that which is not a body nor connected with a body has for them no existence.

¹⁴⁵ Harrisville and Sundberg p. 16-17.

¹⁴⁶ Zac p.37.

¹⁴⁷ Rudavsky (2014) p. 66.

¹⁴⁸ At that time, Protestantism also had adopted a new, critical view towards the literal Scriptural texts. Spinoza may as well have been influenced by his close Protestant environment. I suspect that both Jewish and Christian sources converged toward the same end-point.

¹⁴⁹ Maimonides p. 34-35.

Spinoza totally disagrees with Maimonides' rationalist approach. He blames him for arbitrarily twisting the meaning of biblical passages so as to make them fit into his own preconceived philosophical ideas. From Maimonides' words "it clearly follows that he thought we must interpret Scripture so as to make it consistent with reason. For if he thought it was established by reason that the world is eternal, he would not hesitate to twist Scripture and to smooth it out so that in the end it would seem to teach this very thing".¹⁵⁰ Such an approach would make the Bible totally inaccessible for ordinary people, who for the most part are no philosophers. These ordinary people would have to rely on the authority of philosophers. "They'd have to suppose that the Philosophers can't err concerning the interpretation of Scripture. This would obviously introduce a new authority into the Church, and a new kind of priest, or a High Priest, which the people would mock rather than venerate".¹⁵¹

Undoubtedly, Spinoza could have addressed the same kind of reproach to his friend Lodewijk Meyer, a medical doctor in Amsterdam, writer of the preface to Spinoza's *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy*. In 1666, Meyer published in Amsterdam his *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres (Philosophy, Interpreter of Scripture)*.¹⁵² There are many similarities between Meyer's and Maimonides's method of interpreting Scripture, although Meyer probably was not aware of that.¹⁵³ Just like Maimonides, Meyer insists that "philosophy is the only and infallible rule by which to interpret Scripture".¹⁵⁴ In general, when reading a text, one should distinguish between the simple meaning (what the words literally mean), the true meaning (what the author intends to convey), and the truth (whether what is said truly is the case). However, in the case of the Bible, the true meaning and the truth are identical, because God is the author. What remains to be discovered is the true meaning. Up to this point, there is no difference of opinion with Maimonides. Meyer differs from him when he asserts that sentences in the Bible may have *many* meanings, each of them corresponding with the truth. For "God can pack as many truths into a sentence as he wants".¹⁵⁵ And, in agreement with Maimonides, Meyer states that deciding what the true meaning of a scriptural passage is, is a matter of philosophy, a matter of the correct application of reason. Any interpretation that is inconsistent with reason should be rejected. Meyer even contends that Scripture is not really necessary for discovering religious truths. In principle, reason could discover them all on its own.

So it may be clear that Meyer does not go as far as Spinoza; he does not deny the truth of Scripture. Nevertheless, his book was widely accused of "godlessness and blasphemy" for its view that philosophy should be the legitimate interpreter of Scripture. Moreover, the Reformed Church did not tolerate the view that Scripture could have many meanings instead of only one. In 1674, his book was banned by the States of Holland, together with Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. To be sure, not only orthodox Calvinists opposed to Meyer's interpretation of Scripture by philosophy alone, or to Spinoza's way of explaining it by Scripture alone. "Liberal" Christians from Spinoza's circle, like the Collegiant Petrus Serrarius, insisted that "the Holy Spirit alone – not scripture – is the

¹⁵⁰ Spinoza (2016) p. 188.

¹⁵¹ Spinoza (2016) p. 189.

¹⁵² Published by the same printer Rieuwertsz who also published Spinoza's TTP (cf. Israel 2001, p. 200). Initially, the true author was unknown, and the book was often attributed to Spinoza. Only after Meyer's death in 1681 the real author became known.

¹⁵³ Preus p. 37, note 12. It has been suggested that Spinoza's critique on Maimonides's Bible interpretation is directed in part against Meyer. According to Lagrée, Spinoza "is writing the TTP with Meyer's book in front of him". However, she does not mention the fact that Maimonides's *The Guide* also was in front of him, and that Spinoza's view on prophecy and prophets is directed exclusively against Maimonides.

¹⁵⁴ See: Nadler (2011) p. 120-126; Israel (2001) p. 196-217. Meyer's rule goes directly against the view of the Reformed Church that Scripture should be explained by Scripture. Remonstrants and Socinians held that obscure places in Scripture should be enlightened by the Holy Spirit (cf. Thijssen-Schoute p. 18-19).

¹⁵⁵ Nadler (2011) p. 123.

infallible interpreter of scripture, and the norm of interpretation".¹⁵⁶ In fact, this represents the classic Protestant position that there was "no infallible *human* person or group who interprets scripture for others, whether pope or philosopher (although Protestant creeds and confessions and synods had been doing so for more than a century). Infallibility belongs to the Spirit alone (Serrarius insists), who interprets for us 'either immediately, opening our hearts for the understanding of scripture, or mediately by explicating scripture by scripture'".¹⁵⁷

6.4 Questioning the truth and reliability of Scripture

So far, none of Spinoza's predecessors or contemporaries had questioned the truth or the reliability of Scripture explicitly. Nevertheless, some doubts had been raised with regard to traditional authorship attributions. For instance, a number of Jewish and Christian commentators has suggested – very cautiously – that Moses could not have written literally every word of the Pentateuch.¹⁵⁸ Could Moses have written the story of his own death and burial (Deuteronomy 34: 1-12)? The famous 12th century Bible commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra, mentioned before (section 6.3), thought that it could not have been the case. And he added some other verses that shared in "the riddle of the twelve" ("mysterium duodecim", referring to the last 12 lines of Deuteronomy).¹⁵⁹ The opening five verses of Deuteronomy, for instance, refer to Moses in the third person. In a verse such as "the Canaanites were then in the land" (Genesis 12: 6), the word "then" would be out of place when it had been written by Moses. For in Moses' time the Canaanites were *still* in the land. Ibn Ezra's view that the last lines of Deuteronomy must have been written after the lifetime of Moses was easily adopted by 17th century theologians.¹⁶⁰ However, when Spinoza comes to authorship questions in Chapter 8 of his TTP, he goes much further than Ibn Ezra and his supporters. He suggests that Ibn Ezra would agree with a complete refutation of the "prejudice" of the Pharisees that Moses would have been the author of the Pentateuch (and that anyone who thinks otherwise would be an heretic).¹⁶¹

That's why Ibn Ezra, a Man with an independent mind and no slight learning, who was the first of all those I've read to take note of this prejudice, didn't dare to explain his thought openly, but only disclosed the problem in rather obscure terms. I won't be afraid to make them clearer here, and to show the thing itself openly.

Spinoza's annexation of Ibn Ezra as one who would support him is counterfactual. He probably projects his own view on Ibn Ezra, when ascribing to him the opinion that Moses would *not* have been the author of (almost all of) the Pentateuch.¹⁶² What *is* true, however, is that both Ibn Ezra and Spinoza make use of scientific discourse in their analysis of the Bible (cf. section 6.3). Both stressed the importance of the philological examination of the Hebrew language and of the scriptural texts".¹⁶³ However, Ibn Ezra's influence on Spinoza should not be overestimated. Claims that "Ibn

¹⁵⁶ Preus p. 89.

¹⁵⁷ Preus p. 90.

¹⁵⁸ Nadler (2011) p. 107-110.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Harvey p. 42.

¹⁶⁰ Popkin (1996) p. 387-388.

¹⁶¹ Spinoza (2016) p. 193.

¹⁶² Whether Ibn Ezra really wanted to suggest doubts about the authorship of the Pentateuch in its entirety, or that he thought that only a few lines were changed by later editors, is a matter of dispute, according to Curley. However, Curley is too cautious. For almost all experts think that Ibn Ezra only hinted at a few sentences: the "Preface to Deuteronomy", and the last twelve lines of it (cf. Harvey). He remains completely within the boundaries of Jewish orthodoxy (cf. Zac p. 38).

¹⁶³ Rudavsky (2014) p. 59.

Ezra provided the fertile seeds” for the destruction of traditional “religion as a whole insofar as it is grounded on the truth of revelation”¹⁶⁴ are grossly exaggerated.

With regard to the authorship of the Bible, Thomas Hobbes goes much further than Ibn Ezra. In his *Leviathan* (see sections 4.3 and 5.2), he subscribes to the opinion that verses “concerning the sepulchre of Moses, *that no man knoweth of his sepulchre to this day*, that is, to the day wherein those words were written”¹⁶⁵ (Deuteronomy 34: 6) evidently could not have been written by Moses himself. Moreover, there are many other passages in the Pentateuch from which it is clear that they could not have been written during Moses’ lifetime. He concludes that it is “sufficiently evident that the five Books of Moses were written after his time”.¹⁶⁶ And also the other books of the Old Testament must have been written long after the lifetime of their subjects. They must have been “set forth in the form we have it, after the return of the *Jews* from their Captivity in *Babylon*, and before the time of Ptolemaus Philadelphus”.¹⁶⁷ However, Hobbes not only questions the authorship of the Bible much more radically than his predecessors. He also criticizes the certainty we pretend to have that Scripture really is God’s word. Although “it is beleaved on all hands, that the first and originall *Author* of them is God”, none but “those to whom God himself hath revealed it supernaturally”¹⁶⁸ (that is: the Prophets) can know they are God’s Word. Hobbes’s skepticism with regard to miracles has already been mentioned (section 5.2). Despite all those doubts, Hobbes nowhere goes as far as to deny that the Bible is (always) true. Hobbes “durst not write so boldly” as Spinoza would do.

Still bolder than Hobbes in his attack on the truth and the supposed authorship of the Bible is Isaac La Peyrère (already mentioned in section 6.1), born in Bordeaux from well-to-do Protestant parents. In his book *Prae-Adamitae (Pre-Adamites)* (1655), he puts forward the theory that Adam could not have been the first man. The discovery of new lands and people in the New World (the Aztecs of Mexico, the Eskimo¹⁶⁹) and the recently uncovered ancient histories of Egypt, Babylonia and China showed that the lineage of these people don’t fit into the biblical chronology. Some of their history must go back to times before Adam. La Peyrère was not the first one to notice this. As we have seen (section 6.1), Joseph Scaliger, professor at Leiden University round 1600, already found that the Egyptian records of the pharaonic dynasties go back to some 1300 years before the Creation according to biblical chronology. However, Scaliger was not as bold as La Peyrère, who concluded that “Adam is the father of the Jews, but not the father of all mankind”.¹⁷⁰ The assumption that there existed men before Adam resolved many puzzles, for instance the question were Cain, Adam’s only surviving child, found his wife. La Peyrère next developed a daring biblical criticism, in which he argued that there must be different authors for different portions of Scripture. “That what has come down to us is a product of divine and human history, revelation transmitted through fallible human copiers and transcribers. Because of the human element we now have an inaccurate text”.¹⁷¹ Like Hobbes, La Peyrère concludes that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses. The Hebrew Bible as a whole is a compilation of books written by different authors in different times. The result is a “heap of copie of copie” that hardly can represent what God revealed to the prophets. The author combined his pre-Adamite theory with messianic ideas. The theory will lead the Gentiles to

¹⁶⁴ Rudavsky (2014) p. 78.

¹⁶⁵ Hobbes p. 261.

¹⁶⁶ Hobbes p. 262.

¹⁶⁷ Hobbes p. 265. Ptolemy II Philadelphus was king of Egypt from 283 to 246 BCE. Under his reign the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint).

¹⁶⁸ Hobbes p. 267.

¹⁶⁹ Sometimes the opinion is heard that the term “Eskimo” would be offensive and should be replaced by “Inuit”. This, however, is a myth. The people of Alaska, northern Canada and northern Siberia don’t feel offended at all. Those of Alaska *would* be offended if they were called Inuit. For they are no Inuit, but Yupik.

¹⁷⁰ Popkin (1987) p. 45.

¹⁷¹ Popkin (1987) p. 49.

become Christians, and will unite the Jews with the Christians. “To La Peyrère’s alleged surprise, neither the Jews, the Catholics, nor the Protestants liked his theory”.¹⁷² He was arrested in 1656, interrogated over and over again, but finally he was forgiven by repenting, apologizing to the Pope and becoming a Catholic.¹⁷³ A copy of *Prae-Adamitae* was in Spinoza’s library, and it seems reasonable to assume that he took some of his biblical criticism from La Peyrère.¹⁷⁴

Among those who were very critical about authorship and truth of the Bible, the Dutch Adriaan Koerbagh certainly should be mentioned. In 1668, he published *Een Bloemhof van allerly lieflykheyd sonder verdriet* (A Flower garden of all kinds of loveliness without sorrow). In this book, and in his unpublished *Een Ligt schijnende in duystere plaatsen, om te verlichten de voornaamste saaken der Godgeleerdheyd en Godsdienst* (A Light shining in dark places, to enlighten the main matters of theology and religion)¹⁷⁵

“Koerbagh attacked the irrationality of most religions, with their superstitious dogmas, rites and ceremonies. The real teaching of God, the “true religion”, is simply a knowledge of and obedience to his word and a love of one’s neighbor. Fearlessly inviting the charge of Socinianism – an antitrinitarian movement that initially enjoyed a strong following in Poland but slowly made inroads across Europe – Koerbagh denied that Jesus was literally divine. God, he argued, is one, being nothing but the eternal substance of the universe. Indeed, God, on Koerbagh’s view, is identical with nature itself understood as a necessary and deterministic system. Miracles, considered as divinely caused departures from the laws of nature, are thus impossible, and divine providence is just the ordinary course of nature”.

No-one can fail to notice the striking resemblance with Spinoza’s ideas. One might wonder whether Spinoza has taken some of his ideas from Koerbagh, or whether the reverse is the case. However, one should keep in mind that he belonged to the same group of friends, the “men around Spinoza”. They undoubtedly discussed about many subjects with one another, and it is impossible – in the case of Koerbagh as much as in the case of Meijer - to distinguish who of those friends “influenced” the other.¹⁷⁶ Unfortunately, Koerbagh was not as cautious as Spinoza. He published in Dutch, and under his own name. In 1668, he was arrested and sentenced to ten years of imprisonment, followed by another ten years of expulsion from Amsterdam. A year later, he died in jail – an annex of the Amsterdam “Rasphuis” – at the age of 36.¹⁷⁷

Finally, in England the Quaker Samuel Fisher also was very critical about Scripture’s reliability. His *The Rustick’s Alarm to the Rabbies* (1660) was published a decade before the TTP.¹⁷⁸ Fisher, like La Peyrère, stresses the corruptness of the written text, “which has been preserved in hundreds of divergent manuscripts, transcripts, and translations”.¹⁷⁹ He distinguishes sharply between the word of God (light, spirit, conscience) and Scripture (letter). The Quaker inner light contains the infallible truth, Scripture does not. As mentioned before (section 6.3 on Serrarius), this emphasis on the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in understanding Scripture often was found in liberal Christian circles.

¹⁷² Popkin p. 59.

¹⁷³ Popkin (1987) p. 14.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Popkin (1987) p. 84-87.

¹⁷⁵ Nadler (2011) p. 40.

¹⁷⁶ Klever p. 106. Cf. Leeuwenburgh p. 149-161.

¹⁷⁷ See Leeuwenburgh; Israel (2001) p. 185-196. Adriaan’s brother Johannes had a lucky escape, because his involvement could not be proved.

¹⁷⁸ Frampton p. 273-280.

¹⁷⁹ Frampton p. 276.

6.5 Principles of Spinoza's biblical research

As noted before, Spinoza was not the first one who used philological and historical methods to explain the Bible. In Judaism, Abraham Ibn Ezra insisted that a right understanding of Scripture required an excellent knowledge and analysis of the Hebrew language as used in biblical times. Catholics like the humanist Erasmus studied the Bible in the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) to evaluate and possibly revise the existing Latin translation (the Vulgate). And in Protestant circles, scholars belonging to the more moderate factions of the Calvinist church (like the Cocceians in the Dutch Republic) highly appreciated philological and historical biblical scholarship. They “insisted on continuing the humanist tradition of studying the biblical source texts as the authentic Word of God”.¹⁸⁰ However, Spinoza went much further than all his predecessors. Not only by consistently applying the historical and critical method to all of the Hebrew Bible, but also by pointing to the human origin of the Bible. To be sure, as I have shown, critical minds like Thomas Hobbes and Isaac La Peyrère also had argued that the Bible is a collection of books *handed down to us* by generations of fallible human beings, which has resulted in “a heap of copies of copies”. However, nobody before Spinoza had explicitly denied that the Bible, although corrupted by human intervention, ultimately was of *divine origin*. The *original* foundation of the Bible *still* was a divine one; it once had been – long ago – God’s revelation to the prophets. And the prophets were the infallible receivers of that revelation; they had a privileged status, as testified by their miracles or their correct predictions.

Spinoza’s radical step was that he categorically denied the divine nature of the Bible. As we have seen in the earlier chapters of his *Treatise*, he had already denied common opinions about prophets and prophecies. He strongly opposed to Maimonides’ view that prophets would have supernatural capabilities, an extraordinary degree of wisdom and a privileged access to divine revelation. He also had denied the possibility of miracles, understood as supernatural events violating the laws of nature. In chapters seven to ten of his *Treatise*, Spinoza continues on the same track by categorically denying the supernatural (divine) origin of *Scripture itself*. The Bible is a work of human fabrication, a collection of historical texts made by man. This was another new and radical step that scandalized his contemporaries as much as the denial of miracles. However, it was a logical conclusion, for no other possibly could result from his essentially scientific approach. Such an approach leaves no room for supernatural phenomena. For the first and most fundamental characteristic of science is its *naturalism*: no phenomenon whatsoever at any time can be explained by supernatural causes. The very simple reason is that a supernatural “explanation” is no explanation at all (cf. section 1.5). The Bible forms no exception to this ground rule of all scientific endeavors. The second ground rule on which science is built is its reliance on empirical facts and sound reasoning instead of on authorities of the past. Both ground rules immediately raise the question whether theologians dispose of the attitude indispensable for a scholarly study of the Bible. For *first*, it is their business to explain “the word of God” (theos = God, logos = word), and *second*, they are expected to rely on the authority of the dogmas, doctrines and tradition of the church to which they belong. Spinoza’s scholarly approach necessarily is at variance with that of the theologians. That he gives natural explanations follows logically from the fact that he wants to practise science. In the *TTP*, Spinoza contends that the Bible should be studied in the same way as the natural sciences are studied. The theologians clearly are on the wrong track from a scientific point of view. For “they maintain at the outset as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture” what still has to be established by “subjecting it to a strict examination”.¹⁸¹ (cf. section 6.1). The sound principles for interpreting Scripture are spelled out in Chapter 7 of the *TTP*. “To free our minds from theological prejudices, and

¹⁸⁰ Toubert (2016) p. 174.

¹⁸¹ Spinoza (2016) p. 71.

to stop recklessly embracing men's inventions as divine teachings, we must treat the true method of interpreting Scripture and discussing it.....

To sum up briefly, I say that the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely. For the method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature....In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture.... The universal rule in interpreting Scripture is to attribute nothing to its teachings which we have not understood as clearly as possible from its history. What sort of history must that be?.....First, 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....Second, it must collect the sentences of each book and organize them under main headings so that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject. Next, it must note all those which are ambiguous or obscure or which seem inconsistent with one another.....Finally, this history must describe fully, with respect to all the books of the prophets, the circumstances of which a record has been preserved, viz. the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book, who he was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, for whom and finally, in what language. Next, it must relate the fate of each book: how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different readings of it there were, by whose deliberation it was accepted among the sacred books, and finally, how all the books which everyone now acknowledges to be sacred came to be unified into one corpus.

The history of Scripture, I say, must contain all these things. For to know which sentences are put forward as laws and which as moral teachings, it's important to know the life, character and concerns of the author".¹⁸² From the quotations above we may also derive another important point of departure: all conclusions that are drawn should be taken from *Scripture itself*. Everything the Bible wants to convey to us is in the Bible. This principle strongly limits the freedom to apply metaphorical interpretations.

What Spinoza strongly condemns in Maimonides' – and by implication also in Meyer's – interpretation is the way in which he permits himself to give figurative readings whenever he thinks that certain passages are at variance with reason. As we have seen above (section 6.3), Spinoza blames him for arbitrarily twisting the meaning of biblical passages so as to make them fit into his own preconceived philosophical ideas. It is very easy to introduce figurative readings every time a text seems to contradict reason, so as to make it consistent with reason, *and* to make it true. However, that is forcing your own opinion on the Bible, without any guarantee that your own opinion is the correct one. Moreover, such an approach would make the Bible totally inaccessible for ordinary people, who for the most part are no philosophers. These ordinary people would have to rely on the authority of philosophers. "They'd have to suppose that the Philosophers can't err concerning the interpretation of Scripture. This would obviously introduce a new authority into the Church, and a new kind of priest, or a High Priest, which the people would mock rather than venerate".¹⁸³ Spinoza stresses that metaphorical interpretations should be justified not by one's own reason, but by studying biblical use of language and idiom. Only by looking in the Bible itself whether certain expressions are used metaphorically on different occasions one may draw conclusions about the validity of attributing these figurative explanations.

¹⁸² Spinoza (2016) p. 171-175.

¹⁸³ Spinoza (2016) p. 189.

6.6 Naturalizing Scripture

The essence of Spinoza's scientific approach to the Bible is that it reverses the relationship between Bible and history. To summarize it in one sentence: Spinoza does not see history through the lenses of the Bible, but the Bible through the lenses of history. In other words, human history is not the fulfilling of a divine plan that can be extracted from the Bible. On the contrary, the Bible itself is a product of human history. And the proofs for that historical character should not be sought in some external source, but may be found in the Bible itself. These proofs are the subject of Chapters 8 to 10 of the *TTP*. The title of Chapter 8, "In which it is shown that the Pentateuch, and the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel and Kings are not autographs"¹⁸⁴ is clear enough. With regard to the Pentateuch, Spinoza argues - like Hobbes before him (and, in obscure terms, also Ibn Ezra) - that Moses could not have written the story of his own death and burial.¹⁸⁵ Spinoza quotes Ibn Ezra's acute comments about the passages that clearly must have been written after Moses' death (see also section 6.4). "Moses wrote the law" (Deuteronomy 31: 9) can't be the words of Moses; they must be those of another writer, relating the deeds and writings of Moses.¹⁸⁶ Genesis 12: 6 relates that Abram passed through the land of Canaan and adds: "the Canaanites were *then* in the land". "So these words must have been written after the death of Moses, when the Canaanites had already been driven out".¹⁸⁷ A little later, it is said that Abram "pursued the enemy even unto Dan" (Genesis 14: 14). However, that city did not have that name until long after the death of Joshua. In Genesis 22: 14 mount Moriah is called the mountain of God, a name it didn't have until after it was dedicated to the building of the temple. Spinoza adds many other places where it is obvious that the historian who is telling the story about Moses, and not Moses himself, is the writer. All the time, the writer of these books speaks of Moses in the third person. Sometimes, the histories are extended beyond the time of Moses' life. "From all of this, then, it's clearer than the noon light that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived many generations after Moses".¹⁸⁸ Only a few items may have been written by Moses himself, and these probably were inserted into the larger framework of the Pentateuch by its true author.

In the same way, Spinoza shows that Joshua himself was not the author of the book of Joshua, that the book of Judges was not written by the judges themselves, neither the book of Samuel by Samuel, nor the books of the Kings by the monarchs of whom they relate. In the books of Samuel, for instance, once more the story is extended far past his life. Who then, in fact, was the real author of the Hebrew Bible? After putting all the pieces of evidence together, Spinoza concludes: "So I cannot suspect anyone but Ezra of having written these books".¹⁸⁹ Moreover, Scripture itself says that "Ezra alone of all men of his time" was devoted to the task of setting forth the law of God (Ezra 7: 10), and he was a scribe learned in the law of Moses (Ezra 7: 6). That is not to say that Ezra was the final editor, or that he wrote all the books that are now in the Hebrew Bible. The project must have been finished many generations after Ezra. In Chapter 10 of the *TTP*, "The remaining books of the Old Testament examined in the same way as above", Spinoza shows that the books of Chronicles, the Psalms, and the books of the Prophets also were written long after the events of which they relate,

¹⁸⁴ Akkerman explains "autographa" as: primary, original sources, written by the protagonists themselves. See Spinoza (2008) p. 484.

¹⁸⁵ Some orthodox Jewish sources nevertheless hold on to this reading, claiming that God dictated the story to Moses. They add that Moses wept when he learned about his own death.

¹⁸⁶ Spinoza (2016) p. 194.

¹⁸⁷ *Idem*.

¹⁸⁸ Spinoza (2016) p. 197-198.

¹⁸⁹ Spinoza (2016) p. 203.

some of them “long after Judas Maccabee restored worship in the temple”.¹⁹⁰ Spinoza states that from his reconstruction of the history of the Hebrew Bible:¹⁹¹

“we readily infer that before the time of the Maccabees there was no canon of the Sacred Books, but that the ones we now have were selected from many others by the Pharisees of the second temple, who also instituted the formulas for prayers, and that these books were selected only because of their decision. So those who want to demonstrate the authority of Holy Scripture are bound to show the authority of each book; proving the divinity of one is not enough to establish the divinity of all. Otherwise we would have to maintain that the council of Pharisees could not have erred in this choice of books, something no one will ever demonstrate.”

This reconstruction of the history of the Bible alone, pointing to the arbitrary decision of the Pharisees on what to include in the canon and what not, would be sufficient to completely undermine the authority of Scripture. However, as if this were not enough, Spinoza describes the many chronological discrepancies, repetitions, omissions and inconsistencies which make it impossible to escape the conclusion that the Bible as we have it is a very imperfect compilation, taken from different sources and made by fallible humans.

6.7 Naturalism leads to irrelevance of biblical authority

In the preceding sections it was shown that Spinoza, by undermining the authority of the Bible, takes away the cornerstone of both Judaism and Christianity. He proceeds methodically: first, *prophecies* should not be understood in a supernatural way, not as divine revelation. They had their origin in natural phenomena such as visions and dreams, occurring in men with an extraordinarily vivid imagination. *Prophets* were no philosophers with extraordinary wisdom, but men with a high moral standard who – with the support of dreams and visions attributed to God - were successful in conveying a moral message. Second, *miracles* were no supernatural phenomena demonstrating that God could violate the laws of nature, but unexpected phenomena of which the natural causes were not (yet) understood. Third, *Scripture* itself is not written, dictated or inspired by God, but is a collection of books written by a number of authors with different backgrounds over a long period of time. These books were passed down over generations, and therefore corruptions inevitably took place. Finally, a quite arbitrary selection of these books was put together in the Second Temple period by a council of Pharisees. What resulted is a rather corrupted, mutilated composition of human literature, the Hebrew Bible as we know it now.

The effect of Spinoza’s analysis can - as seen from the point of view of established religions – only be disastrous. Naturalizing prophecy, miracles and Scripture itself can have no other effect than to destroy the basis of all revealed religion. It leads to the collapse of the supposedly divine historical and moral order. In absence of a heavenly father who guides mankind through history and who gives laws, our view on the structure of the world, on the position of mankind, on the course of history and on the rationality of morality change dramatically. Spinoza shows us a few of these consequences. *First*, in Chapter 3, “On the Calling of the Hebrews”, he argues that the gift of prophecy was not uniquely given to the Jews, and that they were not chosen for all times to play a privileged role in history. *Second*, in Chapter 5, Spinoza shows that the larger part of the laws and ceremonies that were commanded to the Jews in the Bible are no divine, but human laws not meant for all eternity,

¹⁹⁰ Spinoza (2016) p. 233. The Maccabees were the leaders of the Judean revolt against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes from 167 to 164 BCE. The restoration of Jewish worship at the temple in Jerusalem, which the feast of Hanukkah commemorates, took place in 164 BCE.

¹⁹¹ Spinoza (2016) p. 237-238.

but only applied to the period that the Jews had their own state. *Third*, and most importantly: when morality does not depend on a divine lawgiver, man himself has to establish a moral order. In principle, it is possible to found morality on reason alone. For reason in itself is able to discover the main message that can also be extracted from the Bible: Love God above all, and love your neighbour as yourself. However, for the majority of ordinary people this is asked too much. For these, obedience to the biblical commandments remains the only and indispensable road to a moral life.

It would grossly exceed the space limits of this thesis if I would dwell on each of these subjects extensively. I will come back to the role of Scripture in founding morality in section 6.8. In this section I want to draw attention to the first and second point. These points once more demonstrate how Spinoza extends the exchange of a supernatural by a natural order also to the sphere of human history. A history that is not guided by God and does not pass off according to his plan, but also is determined by natural causes.

As far as the *first* point concerns, the election of the Jews, one should remember that according to Jewish – and Christian – tradition and reading of the Bible, God made a special Covenant with the Hebrew nation. God chose the Hebrews above all other nations, to be a holy people, to receive and obey the laws that were exclusively given to them at Mount Sinai. When the Hebrews would obey these laws, they would be a privileged people in the eyes of God, and they would prosper in the land that God had promised them. Spinoza denies – on the basis of what is written in Scripture – that the Jews are a chosen people, privileged in the eyes of God for all eternity. This claim of the Jews is not justified. He argues that God is well-disposed and equally kind to all men. The Hebrews were “chosen” only temporarily, and only by reason of their society and state. Their good fortune only applies to the period when they had their own state, and their good fortune during that period can perfectly well be explained by natural causes. It rests partly on a good organisation of their state, and partly on good luck. However, “today the Jews have absolutely nothing which they could attribute to themselves beyond all the Nations”.¹⁹² The fact that the Jews kept their identity despite dispersion for ages can also easily be explained by natural causes. After separating themselves of other nations by their different rites and their sign of circumcision, they caused the resentment of the gentiles, which in turn caused their preservation.

With regard to the *second* point, the origin of the laws, Spinoza insists that we should make a sharp distinction between human law and divine law. “By human law I understand a principle of living which serves only to protect life and the republic; by a divine law, one which aims only at the supreme good, i.e., the true knowledge and love of God. I call this law divine because of the nature of the supreme good, which I shall show here as briefly and clearly as I can”.¹⁹³ The divine law is universal and common to all men, it may be deduced from human nature and does not require belief in any specific historical narrative. Scripture itself indicates that this universal law may be discovered “if you make your ear attentive to wisdom, and your mind open to discernment” (Proverbs 2: 2). And also: “For the Lord grants wisdom; knowledge and discernment are by His decree” (Proverbs 2: 6). In these words, Spinoza says, Scripture very clearly shows that a) wisdom or understanding alone teaches us to fear God wisely, and b) that “wisdom and knowledge flow from the mouth of God, and that God grants them....viz. that our understanding and our knowledge depend only on the idea or knowledge of God, arise only from it, and are perfected only by it”.¹⁹⁴ In Chapter 5 of the TTP, “The reason why ceremonies were instituted, and on faith in historical narratives, for what reason and for whom it is necessary”, Spinoza strongly argues against the relevance of Mosaic law for the present. He contends that the ceremonies that are treated in the Old Testament were only meant for the

¹⁹² Spinoza (2016) p. 124.

¹⁹³ Spinoza (2016) p. 127.

¹⁹⁴ Spinoza (2016) p. 136-137.

Hebrews, and only for a specific period in their history. They clearly belong to the category of “human law”, not to the divine law. For they contribute nothing to the supreme good, to blessedness and virtue. They only concerned “the temporal happiness of the body and the peace of the state. For that reason, they could be useful only so long as their state lasted”.¹⁹⁵ Spinoza goes at length to show why and how the ceremonies served to stabilize and preserve the Jewish state. Moses gave these laws to promote their well-being as long as their state existed. Finally, he ends with the – from a Jewish point of view – very sensitive conclusion that “there is no doubt that after their state was dissolved the Jews were no more bound by the law of Moses than they were before their social order and Republic began”.¹⁹⁶ It should be noted that observance of the laws of Moses is at the very heart of Judaism. To be a Jew means to live as a Jew, that is to observe the laws. Declaring that these laws no longer are relevant would in itself be a more than sufficient reason for excommunication.¹⁹⁷

6.8 The “divinity” of Scripture ¹⁹⁸

In the preceding sections, it was shown that Spinoza totally rejects all authority that has been attributed to the Bible for centuries, both by Jews and Christians. It has no scientific authority, for the prophets were no learned individuals. Their pronouncements should not be taken as authoritative in scientific matters, and most of the Bible cannot be read as source of truth. Most of the Bible also has no moral authority, for the commandments it contains were made by human lawgivers, with the purpose to stabilize and preserve the Jewish state. With the downfall of this state, most of these laws lost their relevance.

Nevertheless, the prophets were men with a vivid imagination and a high moral standard. These properties enabled them to convey a basic moral message which pervades both the Old and the New Testament. When reading the Bible carefully, Spinoza argues, one cannot fail to grasp this central moral message, the “divine law” of eternal value that surpasses the “human law” of temporary value. That basic moral message – “to love God above all else, and to love your neighbour as yourself” – is the one that survived all the alterations and corruptions of the Bible; it comes back over and over again. It is not only spoken out by the prophets, but also demonstrated by portraying God as a just, wise and merciful Being. All moral precepts may easily be derived from the command to love your neighbour as yourself: to strive for justice and charity, to be righteous and merciful, to help the poor, to give shelter to the homeless, not to murder, not to steal etc. The “true religion” – as Spinoza calls it – consists in the pursuit of such a virtuous life. In principle, this “true religion” may be found by reason alone. The understanding of it is not dependent on a supposed will of God, but is inscribed into the human mind. From that it follows that the reading of Scripture is no necessary condition to achieve a virtuous life. However, the great majority of people does not possess the philosophical qualities to discover the principles of the “true religion” by reason alone. From a practical point of view, Scripture therefore remains an indispensable source of moral inspiration for most ordinary people. The laws of Scripture only require obedience, and this goal is much easier to attain by the great majority of people than the use of reason. For most people Scripture remains a

¹⁹⁵ Spinoza (2016) p. 138.

¹⁹⁶ Spinoza (2016) p. 142.

¹⁹⁷ It is often said that it is unknown what exactly were the reasons for Spinoza’s excommunication in 1656. His “evil opinions and acts”, his “wicked ways”, his “abominable heresies which he practised and taught”, his “monstrous deeds” of which we read in the text of the cherem (cf. Nadler 1999, p. 120) are explained in many ways (cf. Nadler 2008). His proclaiming of the irrelevance of Mosaic law seems to me by far the most probable reason.

¹⁹⁸ A valuable overview may be found in Nadler (2016).

holy book. But it can only rightly be called a holy book insofar as it motivates one to lead a virtuous life. If it does not promote piety, nothing holy is left about Scripture. It then is no more than paper and ink. It is possible that one follows all the commands of Scripture and nevertheless fails to capture the central message of love to one's neighbour. Or even worse, it is possible to find an excuse in it to promote hate. So Spinoza is very clear in explaining in what way Scripture – or anything else – ought to be called sacred and divine, and in what way not:¹⁹⁹

What is called sacred and divine is what is destined for the practice of piety and religion. It will be sacred only so long as men use it in a religious manner. If they cease to be pious, at the same time it too ceases to be sacred. And if they dedicate the same thing to impious purposes, then what before was sacred is made unclean and profane.

In principle, any work of literature may promote piety and, insofar as it does so, may be called sacred and divine. However, whereas Scripture – from time to time – has been exceptionally good in motivating people to a pious and virtuous life, it has been divine “par excellence”.

¹⁹⁹ Spinoza (2016) p. 250,

CHAPTER 7: CRITICAL VOICES

7.1 A book forged in hell²⁰⁰

Did Spinoza achieve his goals as outlined in his letter of autumn 1665 to Henry Oldenburg? It is hard to believe so. Far from removing the prejudices of theologians “from the minds of sensible people”,²⁰¹ most of them, on the contrary, were outraged by the attack on these prejudices. Far from averting the accusation “by the common people” that he was an atheist, this accusation on the contrary seemed to be confirmed by the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. And far from assuring the freedom to philosophize and restricting the excessive authority of preachers, these preachers on the contrary went out of their way to get a ban on the TTP and other “irreligious books”.

It is sufficient to take a superficial look at the first emotionally charged responses to become convinced of that. Although the TTP appeared anonymously in January 1670, mentioning a fictitious printer on the front page²⁰², the real author became known very soon. The leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church continuously tried to persuade the authorities to forbid the TTP and some other dangerous books. As mentioned earlier, hardline Calvinists led by Voetius were very much preoccupied with what they considered the most severe threat to Christianity: Socinianism, which denied the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, and original sin. As part of what has been called “The anti-Socinian campaign”,²⁰³ the States of Holland had enacted an edict in 1653, forbidding the printing and dissemination of certain “irreligious” books. Referring to this edict, the church leaders asked the authorities for “a prompt and effective remedy” against “various blasphemous books”, and²⁰⁴

“especially (against) the Theological-Political Treatise, which contains many blasphemous thoughts, as Your Noble Great Mightiness can see from the enclosed excerpts, we are of the opinion that....the printing, importing, and dissemination of such blasphemous books directly contradicts Your Noble Great Mightinesses’ edict of 19 September 1653”.

Initially being reluctant to do so, the States of Holland finally issued a ban against the TTP – and also against Meyer’s *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* – in 1674.

However, not only the clerical authorities were alarmed. The influential German philosopher Jakob Thomasius called the TTP “a godless document” that should be immediately banned from all countries, while his famous pupil Leibniz considered it “intolerably licentious”. Not only conservative Aristotelian thinkers, but also modern Cartesian philosophers reacted indignantly. Reinier van Mansvelt, Cartesian professor at the University of Utrecht (see below, section 7.2), said that this book was harmful to all religions and “ought to be buried forever in an eternal oblivion.” One of Spinoza’s correspondents, the Dutch grain merchant Willem van Blijenbergh, wrote that “this atheistic book is full of abominations... which every reasonable person should find abhorrent”. One critic even spoke of “a book forged in hell”, written together with the devil. When reading all these emotional responses, one becomes anxious to know what objections exactly were raised against the

²⁰⁰ The title of a book by Steven Nadler (2011) on the TTP.

²⁰¹ It is a matter of dispute who belonged, according to Spinoza, to these “sensible people”. He was not so naive as to expect a friendly reception among conservative Reformed leaders. The relatively liberal Dutch regents, influential in politics, his liberal Christian sympathizers, and the *philosophical reader* (the philosopher in the strict sense, university teachers and independent intellectuals) are the more likely candidates for such a “sensible” audience.

²⁰² A certain Heinrich Künraht from Hamburg, instead of Jan Rieuwertsz from Amsterdam.

²⁰³ Israel (1998) p. 909-916.

²⁰⁴ Nadler (2011) p. 225.

TTP as regards content. What kind of arguments are put forward, and are they persuasive? In the following sections, I will first pay attention to some of Spinoza's early critics and give my view on their objections (section 7.2 and 7.3). Thereafter, I will turn to objections of more topical interest with regard to his biblical (section 7.4) and political (section 7.5) views. Finally, I will try to come to a final evaluation (Chapter 8).

7.2 A critical view on Spinoza's earliest critics

Between the publishing of the TTP in 1670 and that of the *Opera Posthuma* in 1678, some seven writings may be identified that were meant to refute the TTP. It would be too laborious to treat them all.²⁰⁵ The main purpose of the following is to give an idea of the general character of these objections, and to explore briefly whether they possess some persuasiveness. One of the first critics of the TTP is Lambert van Velthuysen (1622-1685), "a radical Cartesian who imported Hobbes's philosophy into the Netherlands".²⁰⁶ He studied philosophy, theology, and medicine at the university of Utrecht. In a letter written on 24 January 1671, and passed on to Spinoza by mediation of the surgeon Jacob Ostens, he gives – on request of the latter – "my opinion and the verdict I pronounce on the book entitled *Discursus Theologico-Politicus*".²⁰⁷ The author's letter primarily consists of a quite meagre and inaccurate summary of the TTP's philosophy. He attacks Spinoza's image of God, implying that "the form, appearance and order of the world are wholly necessary, equally with God's nature and the eternal truths, which he holds to be established independently of God's control".²⁰⁸ He rightly infers from Spinoza's exposition that, if God no longer is thought of as being transcendent in relation to the world, there is no rationale for prayer, no "reward or punishment which must be allotted to men by the judge of the universe", no last judgment. When all is attributed to fate, and when it is asserted "that all things emanate from God by an ineluctable necessity, or rather, when he asserts that this universe in its entirety is God", then you arrive according to Van Velthuysen at an atheistic doctrine. A doctrine which "in my judgment banishes and thoroughly subverts all worship and religion, prompts atheism by stealth, or envisages such a God as can not move men to reverence to his divinity.....So I (am not) unfair to the author, if I denounce him as teaching sheer atheism with furtive and disguised arguments".²⁰⁹

What seems most remarkable in Van Velthuysen's letter is the absence of any real philosophical arguments. He restates some of Spinoza's views, ascertains that they are at variance with standard theology and from that concludes that they subvert religion and reveal atheism. It is only a repetition of exactly the same "prejudices of the theologians" Spinoza wanted to disprove, and it demonstrates Van Velthuysen's lack of understanding of Spinoza's conception of the "true religion". Not surprisingly, Spinoza was rather annoyed, as is testified by his response to Ostens²¹⁰ in which he writes that "I can hardly bring myself to answer that man's letter". What may surprise the modern reader is the argument with which Spinoza clears himself of the charge of atheism: "For atheists are usually inordinately fond of honours and riches, which I have always despised, as is known to all who are acquainted with me". However, one should keep in mind that in 17th century

²⁰⁵ For an overview, see Van Bunge (2001b) p. 108-122; Krop p. 147-175.

²⁰⁶ Steenbakkens p. 32.

²⁰⁷ Spinoza (1995) Letter 42, p. 225-236. *Discursus* should be *Tractatus*.

²⁰⁸ *Idem* p. 226.

²⁰⁹ *Idem* p. 236.

²¹⁰ Spinoza (1995) Letter 43, p. 237-242.

language, the term “atheism” was almost synonymous with immorality.²¹¹ And clearing himself of the accusation of atheism (immorality) exactly was one of the objectives of writing the TTP. To be fair towards Van Velthuysen, in his later *Opera Omnia* (1680) he addresses the issues of “Spinoza’s intellectualist notion of virtue, his denial of the freedom of the will, his materialistic and deterministic notion of God, his reduction of the human mind to a modus of the attribute ‘Cogitatio’ “²¹² more seriously.

Also in 1671, the Calvinist theologian Johannes Melchior produced an *Epistola ad amicum, continens censuram libri, cui titulus Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. It contains hardly any philosophy, but treats primarily grammatical differences of opinion. Philosophically of more interest is *Vindiciae Miraculorum* (In Defense of Miracles, 1673), written by Jacob Batelier, a Remonstrant minister in The Hague. His purpose is to demonstrate the value of miracles as proof for the truth of revelation and Christian belief. He opposes against the causal determinism of the TTP, which undermines both divine and human freedom and which makes it impossible for God to manifest himself by means of miraculous events. Batelier definitely has an interesting point. By assuming that everything happens according to the *immutable* laws of nature, and by assuming that these laws of nature work in a strictly *deterministic* way, one logically blocks the road to miracles and to freedom of the will at the same time. However, the correctness of these metaphysical assumptions remains to be proved. Anyway, as I will argue (section 8.2), Spinoza’s account of miracles remains a weak point, if one wants to maintain that it can be refuted *by Scripture alone*.

In 1674 two refutations were published, one in Dutch by Willem van Blijenbergh (mentioned before, section 7.1) and one in Latin by Reinier van Mansvelt (see below). In 1675 Johannes Bredenburg, a Collegiant wine merchant from Rotterdam, wrote his *Enervatio Tractatus Theologico-Politicum*. In this refutation of the TTP, written in the same geometrical order as Spinoza’s *Ethics*, he tries to prove that God is *not* identical with nature. In the following year (1676) Frans Kuyper, a Socinian from Amsterdam – and a publisher of radical books himself - viciously attacked the TTP in his *Arcana atheismi revelata*.

However, the most interesting of the seven “refutations” mentioned above is that of Regnier (or Reinier) van Mansvelt (1639-1671), Cartesian professor of philosophy at the University of Utrecht.²¹³ In his *Adversus Anonymum Theologico-politicum liber singularis* (published posthumously in 1674), Van Mansvelt calls Spinoza’s separation between theology and philosophy a fatal mistake. Both disciplines lead to knowledge of God, he argues, but because they relate to the same perfect object, they cannot contradict each other. Spinoza should be positioned in a tradition of human blinding and over-confidence, that does not reckon with the limitations of the human mind after the Fall of man. The consequences of Spinoza’s misconception are serious: he reduces religion to obedience and mere ethics. When religion only is judged by its social consequences, there would be no essential difference between the belief of Christians, Jews, Muslims and pagans. However, Van Mansvelt argues, moral behaviour is only possible on the basis of true knowledge, and a Christian acts better because he knows God better. There is a vast difference between the deeds of a Christian and those of Jews, Turks and pagans. Unfortunately, in practice Christians also often act badly. However, Cartesianism continues the work of the Reformation and – in theory – will enable a return to the pure Christianity of the Church fathers. Van Mansvelt also attacks the fact that Spinoza does not explicitly mention his “hidden assumptions”, namely the idea that “God and the physical nature

²¹¹ Cf. Psalms 1:1 “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners”. In a modern translation: “Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners”. The Hebrew word “resha’ah” (plural “resha’im”) means both “ungodly” and “wicked”.

²¹² Van Bunge (2001b) p. 111-112.

²¹³ Krop p. 162-175.

are one and the same”.²¹⁴ Finally, Van Mansvelt criticizes Spinoza’s thesis that Scripture should be explained in the same way as we study nature. From the study of selected texts from the Bible we can never conclude to the existence of an eternal teaching that is valid for all mortals, in the same way as we conclude to the existence of the eternal laws of motion.

In my view, the weak point both in Van Mansvelt’s account and in that of most of the other critics mentioned is that they take the truth of Christian doctrines and dogmas for granted. When Christianity by definition should be the only true religion, any morality or any interpretation of Scripture contradicting it becomes impossible. In this respect, these critics all show the appropriateness of Spinoza’s objection that the theologians start with taking for true and self-evident what still has to be proved by a meticulous investigation of Scripture itself. Christian dogmas are no arguments, of course. However, Van Mansvelt adds some really substantial points worth considering. Spinoza indeed needs “hidden metaphysical assumptions” about the nature of God to support his argument (see also section 8.2). The critique on the application of the inductive method outside natural science also makes sense. Spinoza’s response to Van Mansvelt’s book perhaps was not free of arrogance, as may be derived from a letter (2 June 1674) to his friend Jarig Jelles:²¹⁵

“The book which the Utrecht Professor wrote against mine and has been published after his death, I have seen in a bookseller’s window. From the little that I then read of it, I judged it not worth reading through, and far less answering. So I left the book lying there, and its author such as he was. I smiled as I reflected that the ignorant are usually the most venturesome and most ready to write”.

7.3 Opinions on atheism: Pierre Bayle and Bernard Nieuwentijt

Much paper and ink has been spent on the question whether Spinoza was an atheist or not. Spinoza himself forcefully denied this. Indeed, more than that, one of his motives to write the TTP was “the opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation, too, as far as I can”. But as we have seen, Spinoza considered atheism as almost synonymous with immorality (see section 7.2). Besides that, he had a conception of God and of the “true religion”, and he sincerely believed in both of them. However, the term “atheism” has been and still is used in quite another sense. It is used to indicate the absence of a belief in a transcendent and more or less personal God who guides collective human history and individual human fate, and who may be addressed by prayers and ceremonies. Spinoza certainly was an atheist in the last sense. Among the many early critics of Spinoza, two in particular focused on his atheism, albeit from very different points of view: Bayle and Nieuwentijt. I will consider them insofar as they appear of relevance with regard to the TTP.

The French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), who became most famous for his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), undoubtedly was the most influential of these early critics. Bayle makes some refreshing remarks on the relationship between religion and moral behaviour which very probably would have pleased Spinoza. He acknowledges that, whereas many believers act and live immorally, atheists may live a moral life. It may even be the case that “atheists are moral persons not *in spite*, but *because* of their atheism.”²¹⁶ Religion is not only independent from morality, but may even be dangerous for a moral life. For religious persons may appeal to their “conscience” to justify the most horrible acts, believing that they are serving God. Atheists, on the other hand, are not in need of serving divinity and cannot hide behind the supposed will of God to

²¹⁴ Van Mansvelt, quoted by Krop p. 169.

²¹⁵ Spinoza (1995) Letter 30, p. 260.

²¹⁶ Van Bunge et al. (2011) p. 86.

cover their immoral behaviour. They also are not in need of persecuting others because of their supposed heresies. Bayle sees Spinoza as a good example of a virtuous atheist. So Bayle is Spinoza's ally insofar as atheism is seen as a moral position. However, he rejects the metaphysical part of atheism. For he considers the doctrine of the unity of substance as an absurd one. For Bayle's judgment of the TTP this should not matter very much. After all, he appears to subscribe to one of the TTP's main conclusions: that reading Scripture or adhering to a specific religion is not necessary to discover the principles of a virtuous life (the "true religion", according to Spinoza).

Bernard Nieuwentijt (1654-1718) certainly deserves more attention than he usually receives, if only to demonstrate how the new science may be used, but also may be misused for theological purposes. This Dutch medical doctor, mathematician, philosopher, and for some time mayor of the town of Purmerend, became famous for two very sizeable books against atheism. To a large extent, they focus on Spinoza. The first one was *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen, ter overtuiging van ongodisten en ongelovigen* (1715), translated into English (*The Religious Philosopher*) in 1718. The second one was *Gronden van zekerheid* and appeared two years after his death (1720).²¹⁷ The last book aims at a refutation of Spinoza's way of reasoning in the *Ethics*. Many people believe – so Nieuwentijt argues – that Spinoza proves his propositions in a mathematical way, so they cannot be false. However, what Spinoza uses is only an outward appearance of mathematics. Real mathematics may be applied to pure ideas (lines or triangles for instance) or to really existing objects (stars or planets, for instance). But Spinoza creates his own fictitious "objects" by means of arbitrarily chosen definitions, without any guarantee that something in reality corresponds to these definitions. For instance: by substance *I understand*, by mode *I understand*, by God *I understand*. He describes nothing but what he draws up in his own mind, and his conclusions are about these fantasies instead of about empirical reality.²¹⁸

Even more relevant in relation to Spinoza, and in particular to his TTP, is Nieuwentijt's first book. The author had a profound knowledge of the natural sciences of his time, and ample evidence for that may be found in his illustrated book of nearly thousand pages, *Het regt gebruik der werelt beschouwingen*. It counts as the first comprehensive handbook on physico-theology, the discipline which – like its successor, the natural theology – intends to prove God's existence by means of the study of nature. The most remarkable about his approach is the fact that the very same science which Spinoza uses to *disprove* the supernatural is used by Nieuwentijt to *prove* it. His line of thought is twofold: a) the empirical sciences show increasing evidence for the astonishing order, complexity and beauty of nature, which cannot be explained by accidental movements of particles, but only by a purposeful acting creator, and b) everything these new sciences teach us may already be found in the Bible, so its Writer possesses a perfect knowledge of everything. So the Bible is God's Word. A larger contrast with Spinoza is hardly conceivable. And a more controversial way of explaining Scripture is also hard to imagine. The next examples illustrate Nieuwentijt's way of combatting atheism by proving that the Bible is God's Word:²¹⁹

Job 6:9 reads: "that he would let loose his hand, and cut me off!" Explanation: This proves that the Bible already knew about Newton's law of gravitation.

Jeremiah 6:22 reads: "Thus saith the Lord: Behold, a people cometh from the north country, and great nation shall be raised from the sides of the earth". Explanation: This proves that the Bible already knew that the diameter of the earth is smaller in the north-south direction than in the east-west direction.

²¹⁷ Not translated into other languages.

²¹⁸ See Nieuwentijt p. 77-122.

²¹⁹ Cf. Krop p. 229; Cohen (2016) p.176.

The modern reader – and even Nieuwentijt’s contemporaries – probably would find it difficult *not* to suspect him of parodying the arbitrariness of biblical interpretations. The physico-theological part of his work is of much more interest. The “argument from design” became very popular, as evidenced by the huge literature on “natural theology”, and by its modern branch, the “Intelligent Design” movement. For most modern readers, Nieuwentijt’s opinion that science supports the revelatory character of the Bible has lost much of its persuasiveness. Nevertheless, the question of the authorship of the Bible remains a matter of dispute until the present day. It has become increasingly clear that the answers that have been given and are still being given are inextricably connected to one’s pre-existing metaphysical beliefs. That raises the question whether Spinoza ever can be persuasive for everyone. However, that doesn’t alter the fact that Spinoza may rightfully be considered as the father of modern historical criticism of the Bible. In the next section I will review some modern opinions regarding Spinoza’s achievements in this discipline.

7.4 Modern critics of Spinoza’s biblical criticism

As I have mentioned earlier, quoting Leo Strauss (section 6.1), Spinoza is seen by many as the founding father of the scientific study of the Bible. Steven Nadler characterizes the TTP as “one of the most important and influential books in the history of philosophy, in religious and political thought, and even in Bible studies. More than any other work, it laid the foundation for modern critical and historical approaches to the Bible”.²²⁰ A similar opinion is expressed by Edwin Curley in the General Preface to volume II of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, in which he explains why he had called the TTP “a neglected masterpiece” in earlier essays:²²¹

There are few works in the history of philosophy which can claim to have laid the foundations for a whole new discipline, as the TTP did for the science of biblical interpretation. Add to that the fact that the TTP is also the first work by a major philosopher in the Western tradition to defend democracy as the most natural form of government, which best preserves the freedom and equality of the state of nature. Add further the facts that the TTP’s powerful critique of revealed religion made a major contribution to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and that it offers a forceful defense of freedom of thought and expression.....

As I will explain later, for the most part I do share in the admiration that authors like Strauss, Nadler and Curley show toward Spinoza. However, I disagree with them with respect to the character of Spinoza’s pioneering role. With regard to historical criticism, some authors raise objections to the “neglect” of what Spinoza’s predecessors already had achieved in this field of study. Others object to Spinoza’s historical criticism altogether, claiming that it is a too rationalistic approach, undermining the essence of revealed religion. As mentioned above (section 6.2), for religious people historical criticism may be a very touchy subject which potentially threatens the very basis of their belief. This raises the question whether “believers” and theologians belonging to a specific religious denomination are sufficiently qualified to practice biblical science. Without trying to answer this question, I will now turn to some modern comments on Spinoza’s TTP, keeping in mind that these comments may be “coloured” by the religious background of the authors. Harrisville and Sundberg, with their Lutheran background, make a good attempt to reproduce Spinoza objectively.²²² They observe, *first*, that Spinoza clearly represents the rise of modern historical consciousness. As a result, he recognizes the anachronisms which arise when we implant biblical views into the present time.

²²⁰ Nadler (2011) p. 240.

²²¹ Spinoza (2016) p. XV.

²²² Harrisburg and Sundberg p. 30-45.

This becomes manifest when he points to the cultural habit of the Hebrew people to ascribe all things immediately to God's activity. The reason why he sees this as anachronistic "follows from his radical philosophical demand that all meaning must be found immanent to reality".²²³

Commenting on Harrisburg and Sundville, one may wonder whether calling immanence a "radical philosophical demand" does not already suggest the authors' religious bias: transcendence would be the better explanation. *Second*, the authors state, Spinoza rejects the dogmatic tradition of exegesis. By declaring that all knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone, Spinoza plants himself firmly in the Reformation tradition. However, Spinoza goes one step further by declaring that a literal interpretation should be a profane one. When the text declares directly that "God speaks", one should go behind the text to explain it as human speech. Literal interpretation means going "in back of" a text to its human components. "The assumption is that God never speaks 'immediately' through any text. Research into biblical meaning is pursued *ut si Deus non daretur* – as if there were no God".²²⁴ *Third*, the "truth" of Scripture is that which is recognizable by unaided human reason.²²⁵ But, *fourth*, unfortunately only an educated elite is fit to judge what is and what is not reasonable. Summarizing, in Spinoza's view the historical science of the Bible "is unalterably opposed to the proposition that the foundation of biblical study is revealed religion. The only proper foundation of religion is human reason".²²⁶ The motives behind this kind of historical criticism, the authors argue, are political. Spinoza has an eye on the social effects. He wants to free society from the destructive force of religious passions. Although there is certainly some kernel of truth in this criticism, it also highlights a major problem, as already indicated earlier. The authors clearly suggest that there *do* exist different brands of historical criticism, some of them based on reason, others on revelation. But are these equivalent forms of science? It reminds me of the claim of orthodox Christians that there would be two rivalling theories on the origin of species: one based on Darwin's theory of evolution, the other on creation.

Apart from criticisms with regard to the *content* of the TTP, there are authors who object to the claim that Spinoza would have been the progenitor of historical criticism of the Bible. They point to the fact that this historical approach is not "the brainchild of one irreligious, left-Cartesian rationalist philosopher who had been expelled from his religious community for unorthodoxy".²²⁷ The context to which it belongs is not the critique of revelation as attempted by the radical enlightenment, as Strauss and others contend. Rather than being the founding father of a new critical method of studying the Bible, influencing liberal Protestant thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spinoza himself was influenced by the ideas of heterodox Protestants from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Several rational arguments accepted by historical critics emerged from within – rather than from outside – the confines of Christianity (Frampton 2004; Touber 2016). Frampton extensively treats the heterodox Christian writings of Isaac La Peyrère, antedating the TTP.²²⁸ He also points to the English Quaker Samuel Fisher and his *The Rustick's Alarm to the Rabbies* (1660), a significant contribution to the rise of biblical criticism published a decade before the TTP.²²⁹ Both La Peyrère and Fisher were mentioned before (section 6.4).

Touber also belongs to those who questions the central role which in recent literature is attributed to Spinoza. He mentions Jonathan Israel as someone who "gives pride of place to Spinoza

²²³ Idem p. 41.

²²⁴ Harrisville and Sundberg p. 42.

²²⁵ "Unaided human reason" is a concept from Christian theology, referring to the belief that – according to Augustine – after the Fall reason is too weak to attain truth on its own. It needs the assistance of revelation.

²²⁶ Idem.

²²⁷ Frampton p. 1-2.

²²⁸ Frampton p. 259-273.

²²⁹ Frampton p. 273-280.

for his departure from all traditional sources of authority in Western Europe: the Bible and the clergy in the religious sphere, Aristotelianism in the philosophical and scientific spheres, monarchy and aristocratic privileges in the political sphere".²³⁰ Touber wants to demonstrate an imbalance in historiography. That is to say, too little attention is paid to what earlier biblical scholarship, both in England and in the Dutch Republic, had already achieved. The bottom line of all these comments is the following: Spinoza receives too much praise; this should be tempered. His predecessors and contemporaries should receive the honour they deserve.

Although I fully subscribe to the importance of Spinoza's predecessors, I fail to see the imbalance that Frampton and Touber think to observe. At least, as far as his biblical interpretation is concerned (with his politics, things are different). As I have shown in this thesis, Spinoza indeed is indebted to both Jewish and Christian predecessors and contemporaries. However, modern commentators like Israel and Nadler fully appreciate these facts. For instance, there cannot be the slightest doubt that the habit of accurately reading the Bible in its literal and historical sense found its origin in the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church has claimed for centuries that the right meaning of Scripture is not the literal, but the spiritual one, a meaning that only can rightfully be exposed by the Church (see section 6.3). Against this claim, the Protestant Reformers adopted the "Sola Scriptura" principle: every individual may discover the Bible's true meaning by carefully reading it, without clerical mediation. However, as I have pointed out before, within a century this principle was undermined by Calvinist and Lutheran orthodoxy by demanding adherence to fixed confessions and synodal decisions. Within Calvinism, the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) decided that the Three Forms of Unity (including the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgian Confession) would have to be accepted as the only authoritative source of Calvinist doctrines. Against this Protestant orthodoxy, several heterodox groups rebelled, while trying to remain faithful to the original Protestant ideal: to find their way back to the original teachings of Jesus Christ. To these heterodox groups of Mennonites, Anabaptists and Collegiants belonged the "men around Spinoza", mentioned earlier. Within this group of liberal Christian friends Spinoza quite probably found his inspiration when introducing his own brand of the "Sola Scriptura" principle into the TTP. As I also have shown in this thesis, Spinoza also owes much to his Jewish predecessors like Ibn Ezra and, in particular, Maimonides. In spite of all these "influences", there remains a core in Spinoza which definitely makes him unique. Before focussing on this uniqueness, I shall first give a short summary of Spinoza's political thoughts, which I consider to be less original than his theological ones. In my final chapter (Chapter 8) I shall make an attempt to evaluate the weaknesses, the strength and the ultimate significance of the TTP.

7.5 Is Spinoza's political philosophy exceptional?

It will be noticed that all critiques that have been considered up to now are concerned with Spinoza's views regarding Scripture, not with his political philosophy. Although this thesis is primarily about the theological part, it is important for a final evaluation of the TTP to take a short look at the political part. The view I want to defend is that Spinoza's political philosophy is of relatively minor importance when compared with his theology. This becomes clear when we *first*, take into consideration the TTP's reception and impact. *Second*, some of his contemporaries made important contributions to political philosophy that might surpass those of Spinoza. In the beginning of this thesis, I already indicated why the Theological-Political Treatise's significance primarily should be sought in its view on the Bible. Although the subtitle on the front page and some parts of the text itself suggest otherwise, I believe that the import of the political part is only secondary. To be sure, it is not that Spinoza's political views are not important in itself. On the contrary, subjects such as freedom of thought and expression of thought, the recognition that the civil and not the religious authorities are the exclusive bearers of state power, the defence of democracy are of the utmost importance.

However, when studying the TTP, its history and its reception, one is struck by several facts. First, Spinoza himself writes in his letter to Henry Oldenburg in 1665 that he is working on a treatise

²³⁰ Touber p. 159.

on “my views regarding Scripture”. That is his *theological subject*. He then adds that the *purpose* of treating this subject is, a) to remove the prejudices of the theologians from the minds of the people, b) to avert the accusation of being an atheist (two *theological purposes*) c) to promote the freedom to philosophize and to say what we think, and d) to eliminate the excessive power of the preachers (two *political purposes*). However, these political purposes are explained quite briefly in the last Chapters of the TTP. From the twenty chapters, fifteen are devoted to the Bible. And in the remaining five Chapters, the (biblical) Hebrew state is often taken as an example to illustrate his political views. My feeling is that Spinoza himself thought that the Bible was his main topic, and that the subtitle of his Treatise was chosen out of caution, to divert the attention from its more explosive content. The political part is rather limited, not only in volume, but also in force and number of arguments. For instance, only chapter twenty is about the freedom to philosophize, and the main arguments to support this are, that the supreme powers are not at all able to control our thoughts, and that it is very difficult *not* to talk about our opinions. “Not even the wisest know how to keep quiet, not to mention ordinary people”.²³¹ So it’s impossible to take this freedom away completely, people always continue to form and express their own judgements, and it would require much violence to suppress this.

With regard to Spinoza’s theory on the origin and legitimacy of government: this is not very spectacular either. His thought experiment on the state of nature and the resulting social contract resemble very much the ideas of Hobbes. Spinoza shares his grim view on human beings, essentially motivated by self-interest, ready to pursue anything that lies within their power and contributes to increase of that power. Remember that he owned Hobbes’s *De Cive* and certainly read a translation of his *Leviathan*. Spinoza agrees with all the other social contract thinkers that the origin and legitimacy of government are not based on God’s will, but on human consent. With regard to foreign policy, Spinoza adopts Machiavelli’s view that everything is allowed that increases the power of the state.

Spinoza’s ideas on democracy are not very revolutionary either, in spite of Curley’s praise of Spinoza’s defence of it. To demonstrate that, it may be instructive to make a comparison with some of the other early advocates of democracy in the Dutch Republic. Among them the brothers Johan and Pieter de la Court, cloth merchants from Leiden, should be mentioned, although their conception of democracy is a quite limited one. They became known as the most radical republicans in Dutch history. In their political books, the *Politike Discoursen*, the *Politike Weeg-schaal* and *Interest van Holland*, all published in 1662, they wrote that the best monarchy still is worse for its subject than even the worst republic. By “republic” they mean a state without a king, a state in which sovereignty is founded on the people and is exercised by an assembly of citizens subject to the law. As the main advantage of a “republican” government they consider the large number and diversity of its members. Many people always see, hear and know more than one person. They show a diversity of passions which keep another in balance, so that reason finally will triumph. A democratic, popular government comes closest to man’s natural inclination to rule over himself. It most probably guarantees that the general interest will be pursued, instead of the personal interest. It makes use of the knowledge and capacities of all people, there is no loss of potential. Finally,²³²

“...in popular governments it is clear that all citizens who excel in knowledge, virtue and wealth, only for that reason will be chosen to become magistrate, without being hated or persecuted for that excellence, as in an aristocracy; or being killed, as in monarchical governments. So each one will use his utmost diligence in order to collect knowledge and goods”.

²³¹ Spinoza (2016) p.345.

²³² Johan en Pieter de la Court *Politike Weeg-schaal* III.I.4, p. 531-534. Quoted in Weststeijn p. 148, translated from Dutch by NV.

Of course, history shows many earlier examples of democracy in one way or another. However, in Western Europe the word “democracy” had become associated with an objectionable form of government by the mob, or simply as synonymous with anarchy. It should be noted that the brothers De la Court did not defend a participation of every *individual* in government, but of every *citizen*. And citizenry was reserved for a limited number of persons. Furthermore, De la Court’s ideas about democracy were inspired by the classical forms of direct democracy, and have little to do with the notion of representative democracy that arose at the end of the 18th century. Interestingly, they argue that a democratic government “comes closest to man’s natural inclination to rule over himself”. Apparently, the De la Courts share Hobbes’s (and Spinoza’s) ideas about the state of nature.

Another early champion of democracy in the Dutch Republic was Franciscus van den Enden. Originally educated to become a Jesuit, he ended as being well-known for his “atheistic Cartesianism”. He started a Latin School in Amsterdam, where Spinoza became – at the age of 22 – his most famous pupil. His political ideas are most extensively explained in his *Vrye Politijke Stellingen*, published by the clandestine press in 1665. Unlike Hobbes, Van den Enden does not presuppose that man in a state of nature is a wolf for all his fellow human beings, inclined to rob or kill others if it is to his advantage. People decide to form social and political associations, not to guarantee their safety, but for the purpose of sustaining their lives and providing for their needs. Man is not bad by nature, but acquires bad passions and bad character traits when he is treated bad and when he has bad experiences. The reason to associate with one another lies in the fact that

*each individual on his own experiences himself as too weak and impotent to provide even for his most humble needs. Moreover, he notices that he is ridden with sexual desire and other affections, considering also the memory of the loving education and care enjoyed in youth, humans, both man and woman, become aware of the many disadvantages of being alone, so that they see themselves compelled to look for mutual help of fellow men, and to choose together with them a common and permanent place to live.*²³³

According to Van den Enden, the only form of political association that leads to general well-being is democracy. The reason for this is that a society of inequals – masters and slaves – inevitably will be undermined by the uninhibited self-interest and ambition of the ruler. Supreme rulers arrange everything to their own advantage, their desires will never be satisfied and the people will be the victim. Only complete equality can prevent this. Van den Enden strongly argues against those who consider the common people to be stupid, and ignorant in matters of government. Why should that be a reason to hand oneself over to the views of individuals or the caprices of the ruling class? The people is wise and able enough to govern itself, and if they hold stupid opinions, they should be educated and brought to better understanding by educating them and by convincing them by means of reasoning. As may become clear from this account, and comparing it with the following account of Spinoza’s defence of democracy, Van den Enden is exceptionally modern and egalitarian in his views.

Like Hobbes, but in contrast with Van den Enden, Spinoza has a pessimistic view on human nature. The reason to enter into a social contract is a matter of security, not – as Van den Enden has it – a matter of cooperation and affection. For in the state of nature no one can feel safe:²³⁴

There’s no one who does not desire to live securely, and as far as possible, without fear. But this simply can’t happen so long as everyone is permitted to do whatever he likes, and reason is granted no more right than hatred and anger. There is no one who lives among hostilities, hatreds, anger and deceptions, who does not live anxiously, and who does not strive to avoid these things, as far as he can

²³³ Quoted by Klever p. 35. Translated from Dutch by NV.

²³⁴ Spinoza (2016) p. 284.

However, unlike Hobbes, Spinoza does not advocate a monarchy, but a democracy as the best form of government. For democracy is the only form of government in which one transfers his natural rights without giving them up completely. For it is the collectivity who has the sovereign power to do all that it has the power to do.²³⁵

The democratic state (is)the one which approached most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone. In it no one so transfers his natural rights to another that in the future there is no consultation with him. Instead he transfers it to the greater part of the whole Society, of which he makes one part. In this way everyone remains equal, as they were before, in the state of nature.

An additional advantage of democracy is the fact that decisions are made not by one person or by a small number of people, but by many. That makes it more unlikely that decisions will be taken contrary to reason. The attentive reader may recognize an echo of De la Court's arguments.

In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza intended to give a more comprehensive defence of democracy. Unfortunately, this work remained unfinished because of his untimely death. In the part that has been finished, Spinoza stresses the danger of leaving decisions of general interest to one or to few persons. Neither monarchs nor aristocrats are immune for weak moments of corruption or omissions. Therefore, the institutions of the state should be organized in such a way that the administrators are forced to be incorruptible. Large councils which represent the whole people are the best guarantee against the weaknesses as mentioned. However, Spinoza wants to exclude from government "women and servants, who are under the power of their husbands and masters, and also children and pupils, so long as they are under the power of their parents and tutors".²³⁶ The reason why Spinoza wants to exclude women is that experience teaches that "wherever we find men and women (living together), they have never ruled together. What we see is that there the men rule and the women are ruled....If women were by nature equal to men, both in strength of character and in native intelligence.....surely among so many and such diverse nations we would find some where each sex ruled equally.....But since this has not happened anywhere, we can say without reservation that women do not, by nature, have a right equal to men's, but that they necessarily submit to men".²³⁷ Spinoza undoubtedly takes a remarkably conservative position, not only in this respect, but in his views on the power of the state in general. The decrees of the supreme powers of the state should be obeyed under all circumstances, even with regard to their interpretation of religion. I am inclined to conclude that Van den Enden is a much more "progressive" political thinker than Spinoza.

²³⁵ Idem p. 289.

²³⁶ Spinoza (2016) p. 603.

²³⁷ Idem.

CHAPTER 8: A MODERN EVALUATION

8.1 How to judge Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise?

Are there generally accepted criteria for judging classical works from the history of philosophy? I am not aware of any. Nevertheless, opinions abound, and in particular with regard to Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, there is certainly no shortage of judgments. An attempt to add to them may therefore seem over-confident. But as we have seen in Chapter 7, existing opinions widely vary in content and in quality. Some highly praise the Treatise, others do little more than expressing contempt or pointing to incompatibilities with specific religious doctrines. A new attempt to bring some balance in our judgment may therefore be worth while. Whereas I am for the most part enthusiastic about Spinoza, there might be some risk to overestimate his achievements. However, it certainly is not my intention to write a hagiography, for I have some reservations. What I shall try to do in the next sections is, *first*, to select some issues for which there are – in my view – good reasons for criticism (sections 8.2 and 8.3). *Second*, to give a summary of what I see as the *historical importance* of the TTP (section 8.4). And *third*, to speculate in which respect the TTP still may be *relevant for the present time* (section 8.5). But first a few words about the quality of some of the earlier critiques as mentioned in Chapter 7. Many of them are outdated. Critiques that consist merely of pronouncing outrage because of the incompatibility of Spinoza's views with certain religious doctrines or dogmas will hardly convince any modern reader. Authors who attack the TTP because it is “blasphemous” or “scandalous”, because it is incompatible with the doctrine of the Trinity, because it would threaten the foundations of the Christian belief, or because it denies the divine nature of Jesus Christ, cannot expect to be applauded by 21st century readers, irrespective of their religious background. For the modern mind, these opinions have nothing to do with serious arguments that might lead to refutation of (some aspects of) the TTP. Critiques such as those from Lambert van Velthuysen's letter, in which it is explained that the TTP makes prayers useless, makes the expectation of reward and punishment powerless, subverts religion and betrays the atheism of the author belong to this category. The same qualification deserve Van Mansvelt's arguments, when he reproaches Spinoza for neglecting the weakness of reason after the Fall, or for overlooking the knowledge of Christ as a necessary condition for morally good behaviour. On the other hand, among the early critics both Pierre Bayle and Bernard Nieuwentijt in my view deserve serious consideration. Bayle may be appreciated for his recognition that atheism is no obstacle to morality, but perhaps even might promote it. And Nieuwentijt may be praised for his defence of Boyle's and Newton's empirical method. Some consider his *Gronden van zekerheid* as a milestone in the history of the philosophy of science, because he argued convincingly that experience, not reason, should be the point of departure in the natural sciences.²³⁸ That Spinoza sometimes has a tendency to neglect empirical evidence may become clear from the two issues which I want to criticize in the next sections (8.2 and 8.3).

8.2 Critical view on Scripture's naturalism

As mentioned earlier, Spinoza assures us that in explaining Scripture he wants to adopt the “Sola Scriptura” principle. As he formulates it in the *Preface* of the *TTP*, “I resolved earnestly to examine Scripture afresh, with an unprejudiced and free spirit, to affirm nothing about it, and to admit

²³⁸ See “Inleiding” by R.H. Vermij in Nieuwentijt, p. 13-39.

nothing as its teaching, which it did not very clearly teach me”.²³⁹ However, did Spinoza hold on to his resolve? As far as miracles are concerned, this clearly is not the case. His deviation from this principle is already evident on a very fundamental level. As we have seen in section 5.3, people falsely think that miracles are events of a supernatural character, not obeying the laws of nature. The reason that people think so, Spinoza argues, is that they have no sound conception of either God or nature. They don’t understand that the power of God and the laws of nature are the same, and that by acting against the laws of nature God would contradict himself.

Of course, Spinoza is free to postulate the identity of God and nature, and some of us in the secular world might share this metaphysical position. However, this has nothing to do with the empirical evidence that may be obtained by carefully reading Scripture. Nowhere in Scripture is God identified with the laws of nature. Scripture does not and could not say anything at all about laws of nature. This concept only arose in the 17th century. God may or may not act by intervention in natural processes, but that is quite another thing than identifying God with these processes. On nearly all occasions where God appears in the Bible as acting, he acts in a very human-like way, according to his own free will, and not as if he were a set of laws. The hallmark of God as portrayed by Scripture is his anthropo-morphism, not his naturalism. Genesis explicitly confirms this: “And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him” (Genesis 1: 27).

But this naturalistic doctrine is not the only one which is not supported by a “fresh examination” of Scripture. If one takes the miracles at face value, strictly following the biblical description - as Spinoza wants us to do - one often has to resort to quite implausible explanations. For instance, it would be very difficult to understand how “the sun halted in midheaven...*for a whole day*” (Joshua 10: 13) just by a change of refraction caused by a hailstorm. Or to explain how the waters of the Red Sea were split, “the waters forming a wall for them *on their right and on their left*” (Exodus 14: 22), just by a strong east wind. Wouldn’t such a wall, in the best of cases, produce only a wall at *one* side? Not to mention the fact that the sea split *just in time*, when the Israelites needed to escape, and that the waters came back on the Egyptians *at the right moment*, when the Egyptian army had reached the middle of the sea. And what about the ten plagues of Egypt? Take only the tenth one: Moses predicts that the Lord will go forth among the Egyptians, “and every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of pharao who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones” (Exodus 11: 4-5). And that is exactly what happened, according to the biblical account: “In the middle of the night, the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt...” (Exodus 12: 29). What natural explanation would Spinoza have in mind?

An even more stubborn problem Spinoza would have to face when he would try to explain the miracles mentioned in the New Testament. What about the raising of the dead Lazarus (John 11), the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fish (John 6), the miraculous transformation from water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1-11)? My conclusion is that a strict adherence to the naturalistic approach and at the same time remaining true to the biblical text is bound to fail. To save naturalism, it is necessary to abandon the “*sola Scriptura*” claim. Conversely, to remain true to what the biblical text really says, it is necessary to accept miracles. Neither Spinoza’s view on miracles, nor his view on God is supported by Scripture. He reads Scripture very selectively.

8.3 Critical view on Scripture’s moral message

As we have seen earlier (section 6.8), Spinoza argues that a basic moral message pervades both the Old and the New Testament. In spite of all alterations and corruptions, this central message, a divine

²³⁹ Spinoza (2016) p. 72.

law of eternal value, has survived. Whereas human law “serves only to protect life and the republic,a divine law (is) one which aims only at the supreme good, i.e., the true knowledge and love of God”.²⁴⁰ The first is only of temporary value and applied to the Hebrew people only as long as they had their own state. The last is of eternal value and of universal application. Next to the message “to love God above all”, the decree “to love your neighbour as yourself” also belongs to this divine law. All other moral precepts may easily be derived from that.

However, one may wonder whether this really is the message that strikes us as the outstanding one when reading the Bible carefully. Is it plausible at all that a collection of books, written over a period of more than a thousand years, would maintain a constant and unalterable moral core in spite of substantial changes in moral outlook? Let us have a closer look at the central message claim. “To love God above all, and to love your neighbour as yourself” are, according to Spinoza the eternal values that have survived the ages. As may be well-known, the source of this summary of the Law is to be found in Matthew 22: 37-40, and is repeated in Mark 12: 30-31. One of the Pharisees asks Jesus: “Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?” Jesus said to him:²⁴¹

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets too.

Notice that these two “greatest commandments” are only very modestly represented in the Old Testament. The first is taken from Deuteronomy 6: 5, the second from Leviticus 19: 18:²⁴²

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6: 5). “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen.”²⁴³ Love your fellow²⁴⁴ as yourself: I am the Lord. (Lev. 19: 18)

In the Pentateuch, the command to “love your neighbour” is only mentioned very casually, as one of the 613 mitsvoth (commandments) that according to Jewish tradition - and to Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* - are mentioned in the Torah. It certainly does not belong to the Ten Commandments. Reading the Torah alone does not convince the reader of the overriding significance of this specific command.

One might argue that the command to “love your neighbour” is implicitly present in and the ultimate purpose of all the other commands. However, many commands have nothing to do at all with love, and others are contrary to love as envisaged by later generations. When turning to the next chapter (Leviticus 20), one may be shocked by instances that seem to limit this love. Criminal law certainly does not conform to what by modern standards would be seen as proofs of compassion or love for your “neighbours”. For instance, Israelites who insult their father or their mother, who commit adultery, or men who have intercourse with men or with a beast, shall be put to death. These in modern eyes quite hard-hearted forms of punishment were mentioned earlier in Exodus 21 and 22. This illustrates the Pentateuch’s stress on retribution at the expense of rehabilitation or forgiveness. These virtues would arise only in a much later stage of biblical (and human) history. Of course, there are also many laws prescribing a friendly attitude towards members of the people. Not to mention the command that “the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt...” (Leviticus 19:

²⁴⁰ Spinoza (2016) p. 127.

²⁴¹ The New Jerusalem Bible p. 1173 and p. 1198.

²⁴² Tanakh p. 284 and p. 185.

²⁴³ The New Jerusalem Bible translates: the members of your race. “The Old Testament, Hebrew & English”: the children of thy people, which is closest to the Hebrew “bne-amcha”.

²⁴⁴ The New Jerusalem Bible translates: your neighbour.

34). However, many commands are harsh in the eyes of later generations, not at all testifying of love. And a vast majority of the commandments of the Pentateuch is about rituals, about how to bring the right offerings, about the penalties awaiting them who are serving the wrong gods, dietary laws, etc. As mentioned earlier (section 4.1), it was only during the *Latter Prophets* – Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel being the most important of them – that the idea emerged that the cultic obligations might be secondary to the moral laws. Isaiah taught that the fast is of no avail when compassion for your neighbour is lacking.

However, it took another five hundred years of moral evolution to put issues such as love for one's neighbour, compassion, mercy and forgiveness high on the moral and religious agenda. Up to that time, it was generally held that only God has the power to forgive. Hannah Arendt is probably right when she points out that Jesus of Nazareth discovered the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs. When arguing on the role of forgiveness as a "necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action", she observes:²⁴⁵

It is decisive in our context that Jesus maintains against the "scribes and Pharisees" first that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive,²⁴⁶ and second that this power does not derive from God – as though God, not men, would forgive through the medium of human beings – but on the contrary must be mobilized by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also. The reason for the insistence on a duty to forgive is clearly "for they know not what they do" and it does not apply to the extremity of crime and willed evil, for then it would not have been necessary to teach: "And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him" (Luke 17: 3-4)..... In this respect, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course".

The important point I want to stress here is that the moral message which the Bible very clearly conveys is not – as Spinoza wants us to believe - a single, unambiguous and eternal one. On the contrary, what the Bible *does* demonstrate very clearly is that morality – over a period of more than a thousand years – shows an evolution. Human beings change over time, and so do their moral convictions. Tolerance toward human failure increases over time.

The same increase in tolerance toward human failure that we meet in the teachings of Jesus, also may be found back – a little later in time – in rabbinical Judaism. The Judaism of the Rabbis,²⁴⁷ also called "Talmudic", because the Talmud is the creation of this period and the chief source of our information about it, often is perceived as being overly legalistic. There may be some truth in that, for one of the main concerns of the rabbis of that period was to produce a staggering body of commentary on the Written Law (the Hebrew Bible). This so-called "Oral Law" not only contained a clarification of the Written Law, but also extensions of it. It added popular customs and traditions which are not mentioned in the Torah, legislation on matters not covered in the Torah, and *modification of biblical laws in accordance with changing standards of ethics and culture.*²⁴⁸ In other words: evolution of morality. Not only Jesus, but also the more traditional teachers wanted a Jewish reformation of morality. They felt the need to adapt ethical prescripts to changing moral views. A

²⁴⁵ Arendt p. 239-240.

²⁴⁶ This is stated emphatically in Luke 5: 21-24, where Jesus performs a miracle to prove that "the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins," the emphasis being on "upon earth". It is his insistence on the "power to forgive," even more than his performance of miracles, that shocks the people, so that "they sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgives sins also?" (Luke 7: 49).

²⁴⁷ This form of Judaism developed out of the teachings of the Pharisees (1st century CE) and has become the mainstream of Judaism after the Talmud has been completed (6th century CE).

²⁴⁸ See Bamberger p. 107-149 for the history of Judaism during this period. Italics by NV.

classic example is the law “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Leviticus 24: 19-21)²⁴⁹, which was felt to be barbaric and which was reinterpreted by saying that the Bible meant the payment of compensation in money. The increased tolerance of human failure found its most marked expression in the concept of “te’sjuva” (repentance or return). God expects us to obey His law, but:²⁵⁰

when we fail – as fail we must sometimes – we should recognize our shortcomings, confess them with honest regret, and return to God and his Torah. Sincere repentance will not be rejected by God, the loving Father of mankind. If the sinner has even the smallest impulse to do better, God’s grace will strengthen that weak effort at improvement.

The point I want to demonstrate with all the foregoing is, that Spinoza is wrong when attributing a monolithic and unchanging moral message which may be derived from a close reading of the Bible. On the contrary, when studying the Bible carefully, it reveals a continuous change and an adaptation to changing moral views. An adaptation that finds its successor in the ever changing interpretations of rabbinical Judaism. So here also Spinoza is reading Scripture very selectively, and his “central message” seems rather wishful thinking than reality.

8.4 Historical importance of the TTP

Specialists on Spinoza, like Curley or Nadler, appear to have a tendency to overestimate Spinoza’s pioneering role in too many different fields. In my view, Spinoza *indeed is* a key figure, but not as a political theorist, as a defender of democracy or even as the founder of the *method* of historical criticism of the Bible. In political theory, Spinoza has borrowed much from Hobbes and Machiavelli. Democracy has been defended earlier by the brothers De la Court, and in a much more “progressive” way by Franciscus van den Enden. What remains of lasting import is Spinoza’s defence of freedom of thought and of expression of thought, although his arguments in favour of that could have been more powerful. Of paramount importance are what I would call his demarcation theses: religion and religious authorities should be withheld from meddling in matters of state authority and from interference in scientific and philosophical matters. However, Spinoza’s most fundamental contribution should not be sought in politics, but in theology. Or, to be more precise, in his contribution to our change in world view. More than any other thinker, Spinoza was instrumental for bringing about the transition from a religious to a secular, or, in other words, from a mythological to a scientific view on the world. It is true, natural philosophers like Copernicus, Galileo and Newton drove man away from the centre of the physical world. However, Spinoza expelled man from the centre of history, deprived him from his privileged role as the crown on God’s creation and the ultimate purpose of that creation. For the ultimate consequences of Spinoza’s radically naturalistic view on the Bible were twofold. The *first* consequence is the recognition that history does not proceed according to a given divine “master plan”, from original sin to Last Judgment, from damnation to salvation. Man is just a part of nature, like everything else in the universe. The *second* consequence is, that morality is not a quality that depends on (obedience to) God, but is an inborn human capacity, inscribed into the human mind. The refutation of a) biblical authority on truth and b) biblical monopoly on morality opened the road both to free scientific research (not limited by religious dogma) and to an autonomous morality (not dependent on supposed divine will). By naturalizing the human sciences, Spinoza in my view *disenchanted the world* more than anyone else. For that reason, he certainly deserves the title “father of the scientific revolution of the humanities”.

²⁴⁹ This biblical law, also found in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, was meant to *restrict* earlier, even more barbaric forms of retribution.

²⁵⁰ Bamberger p. 126

Of course, he also raised biblical historical criticism – initiated by the Protestant Reformation – to a much higher level. But the fundamental difference with his Protestant friends was that he *naturalized* Scripture, not considering it as ultimately from divine, but from human origin. In my opinion, Spinoza’s “secular synthesis” entitles him to being called the Copernicus of the humanities.

8.5 Relevance of the TTP today

In the last section, it was argued that Spinoza’s historical importance lies primarily in his contribution to the disenchantment of the world. Spinoza showed as no other of his contemporaries that both the structure of the world and the founding of morality should be explained in a natural way, without the intervention of a supposed divine being. However, when the question is posed what the relevance of Spinoza is for the present, nearly always a political issue is raised. Spinoza, it is said, is the great champion of political freedom, of tolerance, of democracy, of freedom of thought and of speech, of the separation of church and state. An explanation may be that people ordinarily are more interested in practical than in theoretical issues. They are more interested in what affects them in their daily life, than in the position they occupy in the order of the universe and in the course of history. Moreover, the naturalistic view on history and on the world has become so widely accepted in secularized Western countries, that hardly anyone feels compelled to point to Spinoza’s crucial role in establishing this view. Political issues, on the other hand, remain unrelentingly topical in a world in which democracy and freedom of speech continuously are threatened by leaders or regimes with dictatorial tendencies.

Even if Spinoza was not the first or not the most forceful defender of all these political issues, he certainly was the one who most definitely united them in one single volume of his work, the TTP. For that reason, it is justified to honour Spinoza as the symbol of political freedom, as much as considering him the founder of the secular world view. The part of that secular world view that deserves special appreciation is the naturalistic origin of morality. Spinoza explained that morality is inscribed into the human mind, and Pierre Bayle already recognized that atheists can be moral persons. In religious circles, the view that atheism would be synonymous with immorality – “godlessness” - is sometimes still heard. It is in particular to this view that modern secular humanists oppose. Spinoza undoubtedly would subscribe to the following statements, taken from Articles 1, 2 and 5 of the so-called Amsterdam Declaration (2002) of the International Humanist and Ethical Union:

Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.

Humanism is rational. It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world’s problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare

Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world’s major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

These humanist principles²⁵¹ correspond quite well with Spinoza's major concerns: freedom and autonomy, morality as an intrinsic part of human nature, the absence of divine intervention, rationality, the importance of the methods of science, and the refutation of all dogmatic religion and all claims based on revelations fixed for all time. Therefore it seems appropriate to argue that Spinoza may be considered as the first modern secular humanist. What separates him from modernity, however, is his insistence on eternally valid principles of knowledge and of morality, principles which reason alone would be able to discover. The rationalist's weakness consists of the fact that he does not recognize "that reliable knowledge of the world and of ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision".

I have now completed the task I set myself in this thesis. It only remains for me to state expressly that it contains nothing that I would not willingly submit to the scrutiny and judgment of my university's teachers and instructors. If they consider any part of my writing to be contrary to the truth, I retract it. I know that I am human, and may have erred. Yet I have taken great pains not to err, and I have made it my prime objective that whatever I have written should be in complete accord with my university's standards of good philosophical professional skill.

²⁵¹ See <http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

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