

Spinoza and the Theo-Political Implications of his Freedom to Philosophize

Jeffrey Morrow

The claim is often made that modern biblical criticism, at least in its historical critical form, is neutral and objective. Even when biblical scholars concede that an individual exegete may use the historical critical method in a biased way, they often make a clear distinction between the method, which they maintain is neutral, and the specific biased exegete. Consider Joseph Fitzmyer's comments that 'the historical-critical method is per se neutral', and elsewhere that, despite the problem with how it has been used at times it remains 'an otherwise neutral method.'¹ Joseph Ratzinger pointed out, however, that what often emerges in such reconstructions, wherein the Bible is dissected into hypothetical original fragments, is a new form of secular allegory. He writes that, 'The dismemberment of the Bible has led to a new variety of allegorism: One no longer reads the text but the supposed experience of supposed communities. The result is often highly fanciful allegorical interpretation . . .'² In fact, Ratzinger challenged the ostensible objectivity of modern biblical criticism in his justly famous 1988 Erasmus Lecture, 'Biblical Interpretation in Conflict.'³

In order to examine the theo-political implications of the framework of modern historical biblical criticism, I propose taking a look at Baruch Spinoza's (1632-1677) programmatic method. The reason for turning to this seventeenth century figure is because of his significance in helping construct modern biblical criticism. His hermeneutic marks a turning point in the development of modern biblical criticism, and left its imprint on the method, in its various forms, through

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), pp. 69 and 67.

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), p. 65.

³ Idem, 'Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit: Zur Frage nach Grundlagen und Weg der Exegese heute', in idem, ed., *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), pp. 15-44.

the early years of the twenty-first century.⁴ One of the primary motivating factors for Spinoza's method is the fear of religious violence. The idea of creating one objective method that anyone, regardless of religious affiliation, can use and arrive at the same conclusions, remains one of the guiding principles of modern historical biblical criticism.

In this article, I attempt to unmask the hidden agenda implicit in Spinoza's methodology, which carries a sort of violence of its own. I begin with some comments concerning Spinoza's milieu and what he identifies as the religious violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then I turn to a brief examination of Spinoza's proposed hermeneutic, followed by situating Spinoza in the broader intellectual and historical context of the development of modern biblical criticism up to his time.⁵ Finally, I attempt to deconstruct the pretensions of neutrality of such methods. My argument is that historical criticism has not secured its desired goal of placing every exegete on equal footing, but rather privileges those scholars who are willing to privatize theological commitments within scholarship. It thus inhibits any forms of biblical interpretation that are unwilling to part from particular assumptions and commitments, other than those permitted by historical criticism's own canons and dogmas.

Spinoza and the Concern Over Religious Violence

Early in his foundational work of modern political philosophy, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, Spinoza states his reason for writing.⁶ He is motivated by the perils of disparate theologies which he blames

⁴ M.H. Goshen-Gottstein, 'The Textual Criticism of the Old Testament: Rise, Decline, Rebirth', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983), p. 376. For how Spinoza's method influenced future biblical critical hermeneutics, see Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Three Skeptics and the Bible: La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza and the Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), ch. 4.

⁵ For more thorough treatments of situating Spinoza in this broader history of the development of the historical critical method, see Morrow, *Three Skeptics and the Bible*, ch. 4; Scott W. Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2013), pp. 339-93; Dominique Barthélemy, *Studies in the Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), pp. 2-81; and Pierre Gibert, *L'invention critique de la Bible: XV^e-XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 148-75.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own. All citations of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* will be taken from Spinoza, *Ceuvres III: Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Traité théologico-politique*, 2nd ed., ed. Pierre-François Moreau, text established by Fokke Akkerman, trans. and notes by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012). Citations will be to the page number and line of the Latin text.

for the violent conflagrations which engulfed Europe during their long sixteenth and seventeenth century ‘wars of religion.’ In his own words: ‘this inconstancy [caused by religious superstition] has caused many disturbances and atrocious wars.’⁷ The extent of damage these conflicts caused is difficult for us to fathom. Michael Gillespie explains the severity of these wars in his insightful work, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, when he writes:

the Wars of Religion were conducted with a fervor and brutality that were not seen again until our own times. Indeed, the ferocity of the combatants may even have exceeded our own, for almost all the killing took place at close quarters, often in hand-to-hand combat, and thus without the emotionally insulating distance that modern technologies make possible. . . . During the Peasants Rebellion in the 1520s, over one hundred thousand German peasants and impoverished townspeople were slaughtered. . . . In 1572, seventy thousand French Huguenots were slaughtered in the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. . . . Cromwell’s model army sacked the Irish town of Drogheda in 1649, killing virtually everyone. They burned alive all those who had taken refuge in the St. Mary’s Cathedral, butchered the women hiding in the vaults beneath it, used Irish children as human shields, hunted down and killed every priest, and sold the thirty surviving defenders into slavery. . . . By conservative estimates, the wars claimed the lives of 10 percent of the population in England, 15 percent in France, 30 percent in Germany, and more than 50 percent in Bohemia. By comparison, European dead in World War II exceeded 10 percent of the population only in Germany and the USSR. Within our experience only the Holocaust and the killing fields of Cambodia can begin to rival the levels of destruction that characterized the Wars of Religion.⁸

Spinoza was sixteen years old when the last of these conflicts, the Thirty Years’ War, was brought to a close.

A bit closer to home, Spinoza was intimately aware of other more personal violence and severe punishments he could attribute to religious causes. The trial and arrest of his dear friend Adriaan Koerbagh (1632-1669), who languished in prison while Spinoza prepared his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* for publication, was but a recent example for Spinoza. Although Koerbagh’s actual punishment was less severe than the chief sheriff preferred, the sheriff made it quite clear what he thought should be the punishment: Koerbagh was to be dragged out in public, his right thumb was to be chopped off. After which an iron poker was to be heated and then, once heated, would

⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, p. 60.18-19.

⁸ Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 129-30.

be used to pierce his tongue, after which he would be resigned to prison for thirty years.⁹

In light of this history, it is easy to see how and why Spinoza wants to secure freedom to philosophize within the Dutch Republic, but also abroad. If so much violence and bloodshed is the result of theological disputes between different religious traditions, and these disputes find their origins in divergent biblical interpretations, then the solution must be sought in an objective and neutral biblical hermeneutic which approaches the Bible without religious bias. What is needed, thought Spinoza, is the creation of a methodology anyone can employ, regardless of their particular religious tradition, and faith commitments. Spinoza thus sought to forge a scientific historical method for interpreting the Bible in order to secure academic freedom, specifically the freedom to philosophize, but also to ensure peace from violent religious conflict more generally speaking.

Spinoza's method, and later historical critical methodologies which remain indebted to Spinoza among many others, are not neutral and objective, pure and disinterested. Rather, historical criticism—by which I mean source, form, and redaction criticism—privileges interpretations that minimize or exclude a whole host of interpretive tools that, historically, have been used in reading Scripture throughout most of the Bible's interpretive history, including: synchronic readings; use of a *regula fidei* like already established religious dogma as an aid and guide to interpretation; attention to allegorical and tropological senses of Scripture; liturgical readings of Scripture in light of the juxtaposition of Scriptural texts within liturgical celebrations; etc. Such inherent bias in modern historical biblical criticism, I maintain, is by design.

Moreover, although appearing to salvage the traditional *sensus literalis* of Christian exegetical history, or *peshat* exegesis within Jewish traditions of interpretation, the literal exegesis of historical criticism has a tendency to eviscerate such a literal sense of any direct theological content.¹⁰ Sometimes, as in the case of Spinoza, such a

⁹ On Koerbagh's punishment, see Wiep van Bunge, introduction to Michiel Wielema, ed., *Adriaan Koerbagh: A Light Shining in Dark Places: To Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 33-34; and Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 195.

¹⁰ For St. Thomas Aquinas, in contrast to many modern biblical critics, the *sensus literalis* is a theological reading that pays careful attention to what is signified by the very scriptural words themselves. See *ibid.*, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 10; *idem*, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, 4, 1; *idem*, *In psalmos Davidis expositio*, proemium; John F. Boyle, 'Authorial Intention and the *Divisio textus*', in Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, eds., *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pp. 3-8; and Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa personne*

literal exegesis amounts to little more than a secular allegory where the goal is to reconstruct the meaning of a no longer extant oral or textual original source—a source which may or may not have ever existed outside of scholarly imagination—undergirding the text as it has come down to us (in its various forms). Often such meaning is reduced to hypothetical communal politics of those in power who may use their own or their community’s theological categories either as a Machiavellian mask in which to hide their political machinations, or else as their actual political tools.

Religions, and the various theologies represented by specific religions, become the threat to freedom in modern biblical studies. Religion, in this context, is redefined, transforming from traditional notions of religion as a virtue concerning worship or pertaining to monastic discipline, and being transformed into religion as private belief, wherein all that is public is regulated by the state.¹¹ The ostensible neutrality and objectivity of modernity, and thus modern states, is just that, ostensible; it is a mask, and little more. As C.S. Lewis once wrote that the devil’s policy of the moment is to remain concealed, so Catherine Pickstock underscores how, ‘The power of modernity is the power to *disguise* itself.’¹² Spinoza himself played an important role in this transformation.

Spinoza’s Biblical Method: Inventing Scripture’s Natural History

Spinoza spells out his proposed method for interpreting the Bible in the seventh chapter of his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. At the core of Spinoza’s method is the attempt to construct a ‘natural history’ (*historia naturae*) of the Bible. This ‘authentic history’ (*sinceram historiam*) of Scripture, patterned on the natural history of nature, is to be based, according to Spinoza, ‘only from Scripture itself’ (*ex sola ipsa Scriptura*).¹³ From this reconstructed history, we will be able to

et son oeuvre, 2nd ed. (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 2002), pp. 41-45 and 84-85.

¹¹ See Morrow, *Three Skeptics and the Bible*, ch. 5; Ernst Feil, *Religio* (4 vols; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986, 1997, 2001, and 2007); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 135-40; and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 203-208.

¹² Pickstock, *After Writing*, p. 94. The Lewis reference is to C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1942), p. 31.

¹³ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, pp. 278.32-33, 280.1-6, and 30-31. Spinoza employs a number of similar *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) phrases in this passage: ‘from Scripture itself’ (*ex ipsa Scriptura*) [p. 280.9]; ‘from the same Scripture only’ (*ab ipsa Scriptura sola*) [p. 280.25]; ‘only from Scripture itself’ (*ex sola ipsa Scriptura*) [p. 280.30-31]; and ‘from Scripture alone’ (*ex sola Scriptura*) [p. 282.9].

understand what the biblical authors are trying to communicate.¹⁴ For Spinoza, only after such a study is concluded can valid interpretations be made. The bulk of Spinoza's method involves precise philological and historical investigations which, by their very essence, and by the fact of the fragmentary nature of the historical record used in such a study, are impossible to complete as exhaustively as Spinoza demands.

The first step in Spinoza's method is to exhaustively study the original languages in which each of the texts of Scripture were written, and, in addition, the main language the biblical authors spoke, when different from the language in which they wrote.¹⁵ Already this first step is an impossible task. Spinoza goes further, however, and demands knowledge of every possible 'sense' of 'every single speech and phrase in common usage that can be admitted.'¹⁶ After such an incredible scholarly feat, Spinoza moves to his second step, namely, where the would-be exegete 'Collects all the views of each book structuring them according to their main points so that we can keep in view all of the subjects.'¹⁷ Included in this stage is the notation of any statements that are 'ambiguous', 'obscure', or that 'appear to conflict with one another.'¹⁸

Spinoza's third and final step in his biblical hermeneutic is that the historical critic 'should comment on the issues involved in all the books of the prophets.'¹⁹ This is arguably Spinoza's most involved step. The biblical investigator, and would be interpreter, must study all the aspects concerning the various human authors' lives, customs, and aspirations. In order to accomplish these tasks, the exegete must discover who the author of each portion of Scripture was, what was the occasion of their writing, when they wrote, for whom they wrote, and in what language they wrote.²⁰ Furthermore, the interpreter must discover what happened to each book after it was written, including how each book was 'initially accepted', 'into whose hands each book fell', the number of variant readings for each portion, 'by which council it was accepted as sacred', and how each of the books within Scripture came to be collected into a single canon.²¹ Afterward,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 280.1-2 and 4-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 282.23-25.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 282.25-27. Here I am borrowing from the English translation in Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 100, which I have greatly modified based on the Latin text.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 282.33-35.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 282.35 and 284.1-2.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 286.20-21.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 286.21-24.

²¹ Ibid., p. 286.24-29.

Spinoza emphasizes, 'All of this, I say, should be included in a history of Scripture.'²²

Now, the lines of investigation Spinoza opens up to his readers are laudable, and would likely be praised even by any of the prior exegetes who concerned themselves at all with the *sensus literalis*, from Origen and St. Augustine to St. Thomas Aquinas and beyond.²³ Learning about the original languages, Scriptural canonization process, various textual traditions and their variant readings, historical background to the authors and audience, cultural circumstances, etc., are important questions to which answers should be sought. Moreover, all of these aspects had long been areas of study. None of these particular areas for investigation originate with Spinoza; earlier intellectuals had been studying these matters for centuries.²⁴ What was unique was the way in which Spinoza gathered these methodological principles together in order to formulate a historical hermeneutic for studying the Bible.

The problem with his method is that nothing more can be done by the exegete until such an impossibly exhaustive method has been completed. Only after this all-encompassing history has been composed does Spinoza think the work of biblical interpretation can begin. Spinoza is all too aware of the difficulties involved in adhering to such a meticulous method, which he enumerates, mostly pertaining to the difficulties in acquiring the level of proficiency Spinoza demands, namely, as when he writes that his method 'requires the complete [*integram*] knowledge of the Hebrew language.'²⁵ David Dungan explains the net sum of what Spinoza was trying to accomplish when he observes:

Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground. That, however, was precisely the intended effect . . . to create an endless 'nominalist barrage', . . . an infinitely extendable list of questions directed at the physical history of the text, to the point where the clergy and the political officials allied with them *could never bring to bear their own theological interpretations* of the Bible.²⁶

²² Ibid., p. 286.29-30.

²³ Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012), especially pp. 63-67.

²⁴ Even in the area of textual criticism, we find medieval Coptic scribes, and others, engaging in very sophisticated comparison of textual variants. See, e.g., Ronny Vollandt, 'Some Historiographical Remarks on Medieval and Early-Modern Scholarship of Biblical Versions in Arabic: A *Status Quo*', *Intellectual History of the Islamic World 1* (2013), pp. 26-27.

²⁵ Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, p. 296.33-34.

²⁶ David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 172.

Contending with the Emergence of Modernity

Spinoza stands in a prominent place within a stream, into which feed many intellectual rivers, which helped create and shape the modern intellectual world we scholars inhabit. More and more intellectual historians have pointed out modernity's theological roots, particularly in late medieval nominalism and theo-political forms of Gallicanism or Erastianism.²⁷ Even in these theological positions, however, we find a secularizing trend which hands the public realm over to state rulers, relegating God, faith, religious practices, and such, to the inner recesses of the private and the individual. Prior to the seventeenth century, this secularizing trend is not so clear cut. As Andrew Jones has demonstrated in his doctoral dissertation, Church and state were intertwined so completely in the medieval period that they would be impossible to untangle. Rulers were concerned for spiritual matters, and members of the Church's hierarchy were equally concerned with temporal matters. Both kings and popes saw themselves as appointed by God, and they acknowledged God was operative in the world as well as in the monastery.²⁸ Spinoza is one figure, among many, who helps to change this, reconfiguring the secular, banishing the Spirit to the newly created private realm.

One understudied influence on Spinoza was medieval Muslim thought. Over the past century, a handful of scholars have begun to recognize the deep indebtedness of Spinoza's thought to medieval Muslim philosophical precursors. In some cases a direct relationship may be maintained, for many others the route was indirect.²⁹ One of these important influences was Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), known to the Latin West as Averroës, whose works translated into Latin exerted a tremendous influence in the late medieval world, particularly among Aristotelian philosophers, for whom his commentary on Aristotle became a primary source.³⁰ Although St. Thomas Aquinas was by no means an Averroist, in his work he often referred to Averroës simply

²⁷ E.g., Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Gillespie, *Theological Origins*; and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2007).

²⁸ See Andrew W. Jones, 'A Most Christian Kingdom: Saint Louis IX, Pope Clement IV, and the Construction of France in the Thirteenth Century', (Ph.D. diss., Saint Louis University, 2012).

²⁹ Youcef Djedi, 'Spinoza et l'islam: un état des lieux', *Philosophiques* 37 (2010), pp. 275-98; Carlos Fraenkel, 'Could Spinoza Have Presented the *Ethics* as the True Content of the Bible', *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* 4 (2008), pp. 1-50; and Roger Arnaldez, 'Spinoza et la pensée arabe', *Revue de Synthèse* 99 (1978), pp. 151-74.

³⁰ Carlos Fraenkel, 'Reconsidering the Case of Elijah Delmedigo's Averroism and its Impact on Spinoza', in Anna Akasoy and Guido Guigliani, eds., *Renaissance Averroism and its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), pp. 213-36; and idem, 'Spinoza on Philosophy and Religion: The Averroistic Sources', in

as ‘the commentator.’³¹ Spinoza, like Averroës, saw the highest truth as something only accessible to enlightened philosophers.³² The significant Muslim jurist, poet, philologist, polemicist, and all around polymath, Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064), who died about 60 years prior to Averroës’s birth, may also have been influential on Spinoza’s work, particularly in his criticism of the Pentateuch.³³ Functioning in a similar way to the Averroist thought in Spinoza, is the voluntarist and nominalist influence coming from Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, which exerted such an influence on the Protestant Reformation itself.³⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli’s reading of Scripture and of Christianity as a religious veil for political power likewise influenced Spinoza who was ‘one of Machiavelli’s most perceptive readers.’³⁵

Late medieval and later scholasticism played its role as well on Spinoza, as it had on Descartes.³⁶ Unlike Descartes, however, who may very well be one of the last of the scholastics in the early modern period, Spinoza is even more so one of the first of the early modern thinkers. Spinoza’s appropriation and reworking of scholasticism is mediated through his use of Francis Bacon and his Baconian scientific method for studying nature.³⁷ Dungan emphasizes that, ‘Nothing is rightly understood about the rise of modern biblical criticism if close attention is not paid to the shifting meanings given to the term “nature” throughout this period.’³⁸ This is important to keep in mind, especially with regard to Spinoza, as Matthew Levering observes:

Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti and Justin Smith, eds., *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), pp. 58-81.

³¹ See the comments in, e.g., David B. Burrell, C.S.C., ‘Thomas Aquinas and Islam’, *Modern Theology* 20 (2004), pp. 71-89.

³² See, e.g., comments in Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, pp. 360-62; and Fraenkel, ‘Could Spinoza’, p. 43.

³³ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 45 and 74; and R. David Freedman, ‘The Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship’, *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989), pp. 31-38.

³⁴ Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, p. 299 n. 3.

³⁵ Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 22.

³⁶ See Étienne Gilson, *Index scolastico-cartésien* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1912); and J. Feudenthal, ‘Spinoza und die Scholastik’, in *Philosophische Aufsätze. Eduard Zeller zu seinem fünfzigjährigen Doctor-Jubiläum gewidmet* (Leipzig: Fues’s Verlag, 1887), pp. 84-138.

³⁷ On Bacon’s influence on Spinoza, see Juan Francisco Manrique Charry, ‘La herencia de Bacon en la doctrina spinocista del lenguaje’, *Universitas Philosophica* 54 (2010), pp. 121-30; J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 38, 159, 161-68, 181, and 195; and Sylvain Zac, *Spinoza et l’interprétation de l’Écriture* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965), pp. 29-32.

³⁸ Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, p. 149.

Spinoza's key principle corresponds, in a certain way, to the parallel that the medieval (and some patristic) theologians had drawn between 'the book of Nature' and 'the book of Scripture.' He argues that one must interpret nature and Scripture by using the same methods... The difference with patristic-medieval interpretation thus begins with a different understanding of 'nature': for the patristic-medieval tradition, nature is a created participatory reality that signifies its Creator and possesses a teleological order; for Spinoza nature simply yields empirical data within the linear time-space continuum. It is not that the medieval rejected empirical study of nature; rather the difference is that Spinoza's 'nature' is metaphysically thin.³⁹

In some ways Bacon is more important to Spinoza's biblical method than is Descartes, whose methodic doubt Spinoza applied to Scripture, and with whose philosophy he was intimately familiar.⁴⁰

When it comes to the specifics of Spinoza's biblical criticism, a number of roughly contemporary intellectuals and even, in some cases, intimate friends, may have played a role in helping to shape Spinoza's thinking prior to publishing his *Tractatus*. The former French Huguenot-turned Catholic lay Oratorian, Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676), made a number of similar observations nearly thirty years earlier, in his work *Prae-Adamitae*.⁴¹ A copy of La Peyrère's work continues to sit on the shelf in Spinoza's well-preserved library in the Netherlands.⁴²

Spinoza was also influenced by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), at least by Hobbes' *De Cive*, which also finds a place in Spinoza's library, if not also by Hobbes' *Leviathan* (which he could have had access to in its 1667 Dutch translation or its 1668 Latin translation), which is more significant concerning biblical interpretation than *De Cive*.⁴³ Spinoza's friend Lodewijk Meyer (1629-1681), and his book

³⁹ Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 115.

⁴⁰ On Descartes's influence on Spinoza see, e.g., Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 9-11 and 144-47; and Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 34-121.

⁴¹ See Morrow, *Three Sceptics and the Bible*, ch. 2; Andreas Nikolaus Pietsch, *Isaac La Peyrère: Bibelkritik, Philosemitismus und Patronage in der Gelehrtenrepublik des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 89-105; and Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), pp. 42-59 and 80-93.

⁴² J. Freudenthal, ed., *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's: In Quellenschriften, Urkunden und nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* (Leipzig: Veit, 1899), pp. 160-64.

⁴³ Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 30-31, 34, 92, 94-96, 119, 188, 190, and 193; Edwin Curley, "I Durst Not Write So Boldly" or How to Read Hobbes' *Theologico-Political Treatise*, in Daniela Bostrenghi, ed., *Hobbes e Spinoza: Scienza e politica* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992), pp. 497-593; and William Sacksteder, 'How

Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres, may have been an influence, and was almost certainly someone against whom a portion of the *Tractatus* was aimed.⁴⁴ It is possible Koerbagh may have influenced Spinoza.⁴⁵ The Quaker Samuel Fisher (1605-1665) may also have been a contemporary influence on Spinoza's work.⁴⁶ These are just some of the potential sources of influence on Spinoza's *Tractatus*, both in the more theoretical hermeneutical portions of chapter seven, but also in the more specific exegetical moves he makes throughout the *Tractatus*' pages.

It must be emphasized that, for Spinoza, his formulation of a scientific historical method for interpreting the Bible was intended to be a lethal weapon in the political battles of his day; not merely a weapon of defense, but one of attack, not to maim, but to kill.⁴⁷ The hermeneutic's intended victim was what Michael Legaspi has called the scriptural Bible, but also religious communities like the Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam, the Calvinist politicians throughout the Dutch Republic, the Catholic Church more broadly speaking, and any religious tradition that is unwilling to privatize.⁴⁸ Yirmiyahu Yovel maintains that Spinoza's exegetical method was 'primarily' intended to be used as 'a weapon in combating historical religion and a vehicle in constructing a purified substitute for it.'⁴⁹

Historical Criticism and the Enlightenment Project

Like the Enlightenment project itself, and the attendant mathematicization of modern rationality, the historical critical method is interested scholarship, notwithstanding protestations of objective

Much of Hobbes Might Spinoza Have Read?' *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1980), pp. 25-39.

⁴⁴ Manfred Walther, 'Biblische Hermeneutik und historische Erklärung: Lodewijk Meyer und Benedikt de Spinoza', *Studia Spinozana* 11 (1995), pp. 227-300; J. Samuel Preus, 'A Hidden Opponent in Spinoza's *Tractatus*', *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995), pp. 361-38; and Jacqueline Lagrée, 'Sens et vérité: philosophie et théologie chez L. Meyer et Spinoza', *Studia Spinozana* 4 (1988), pp. 75-92.

⁴⁵ Michiel Wielema, 'Adriaan Koerbagh: Biblical Criticism and Enlightenment', in Wiep van Bunge, ed., *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic, 1650-1750: Selected Papers of a Conference held at the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel 22-23 March 2001* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 61-80.

⁴⁶ Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza and Samuel Fisher', *Philosophia* 15 (1985), pp. 219-36; idem, 'Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam', *Quaker History* 73 (1984), pp. 14-28; and idem, 'Spinoza, the Quakers and the Millenarians, 1656-1658', *Manuscripta* 6 (1982), pp. 113-33.

⁴⁷ See Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics II: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 3 and 11.

⁴⁸ Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), e.g., p. viii.

⁴⁹ Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics II*, p. 3.

disinterested neutrality.⁵⁰ When we examine the foundations of Spinoza's contribution to the modern biblical criticism of the Enlightenment period, we find just one example of how this plays out in the context of Europe's 'religious' wars. In his 1995 article, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State', and his expansion of this argument in his 2009 *The Myth of Religious Violence*, William Cavanaugh demonstrates the difficulties inherent in labeling such wars as 'religious.'⁵¹ Cavanaugh counters the popular modern myth that European state centralization was made necessary by the doctrinal strife of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. He shows, in contrast, how: state centralization preceded these conflicts by hundreds of years; these conflicts were not primarily fought over rival theological doctrines but in fact often involved Catholics at war with other Catholics with Protestant soldiers on both sides; and that the very modern notion of 'religion' as a private set of beliefs was created during this time and only gained widespread acceptance later, and thus would be anachronistic as a modifier to these conflicts.

Such conflicts, Cavanaugh explains, were often examples of temporal rulers using communal loyalties to orchestrate battles on behalf of their attempts to secure sovereign rule. In his words, such conflicts 'were fought largely for the aggrandizement of the emerging State over the decaying remnants of the medieval ecclesial order.'⁵² Spinoza himself played a prominent role in Cavanaugh's account of the modern redefinition of 'religion' and of helping to found the corresponding myth of 'religious wars' to enable the newly formed secular realm to declaw ecclesiastical authority.⁵³

The stories surrounding such conflicts, identified as religious in origin, would be reshaped during the Enlightenment to justify separating theological enquiry from other forms of scholarship. The seemingly intractable divergences between rival theological communities in the Christian world made theology appear unable, not only to function as Queen of the Sciences, but unable even to be considered scholarship at all. Alasdair MacIntyre makes the following observation, in light of the vastly disparate and apparently irreconcilable assumptions and guiding principles of any and virtually every contemporary discipline in the humanities: 'It is ironic that the wholly secular humanistic

⁵⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 6.

⁵¹ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and idem, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State', *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), pp. 397-420.

⁵² Idem, 'Fire Strong Enough', p. 398.

⁵³ Idem, *Myth of Religious Violence*, pp. 124-25 and 129.

disciplines of the late twentieth century should thus reproduce that very same condition which led their nineteenth-century secularizing predecessors to dismiss the claim of theology to be worthy of the status of an academic discipline.⁵⁴ MacIntyre links this incommensurable disparity in part with the elimination of religious tests at the university, using the case of William Robertson Smith as an example.⁵⁵

For my part, bringing up such objections has nothing to do with going after professors on heresy charges, or seeking to get professors fired from their jobs. Rather, it is to question the assumption that modern historical biblical criticism is an objectively neutral method. This is not to say that I think there is an alternate method that yields purely objective results in biblical interpretation. The attempt to find and utilize a method of biblical interpretation that is wholly disinterested, purely neutral and objective, in the Enlightenment sense, is, to borrow from Peter Novick, akin to attempting to nail jelly to a wall.⁵⁶ John Collins has praised modern historical biblical criticism for having ‘created an arena where people with different faith commitments can work together and have meaningful conversations.’⁵⁷ And yet, Jon Levenson explains the problem behind such apparently level-playing field assumptions: ‘Like citizens in the classical liberal state, scholars practicing historical criticism of the Bible are expected to eliminate or minimize their communal loyalties, to see them as legitimately operative only within associations that are private, non-scholarly, and altogether voluntary.’⁵⁸

Conclusion

In his Gifford Lectures, MacIntyre asserted that, ‘The ghosts of the Ninth Edition [of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*] haunt the contemporary academy. They need to be exorcized.’⁵⁹ His reference is to the rationalistic and positivistic Enlightenment ethos which pervades western scholarly guilds, including the university. By and large

⁵⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition: Being Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 7.

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 16.

⁵⁶ The allusion to ‘nailing jelly to the wall’, is taken from Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁵⁷ John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 10.

⁵⁸ Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 118.

⁵⁹ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 171

MacIntyre is correct in his assessment, and Spinoza is one figure who contributed to this academic *Zeitgeist*.⁶⁰ What we have in contemporary biblical studies is, ‘an endless multiplication of ever larger technical commentaries focused on ever-shrinking textual shards’, and, although often unrecognized by Spinoza scholars, this result was by design.⁶¹

Jeffrey Morrow
jeffrey.morrow@shu.edu

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 23 and 65; and Jonathan Israel, ‘The Early Dutch and German Reaction to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: Foreshadowing the Enlightenment’s More General Spinoza Reception?’ in Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Michael A. Rosenthal, eds., *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 72-73.

⁶¹ Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, p. 377.