

## **FREEDOM TO UNDERSTAND AND SERVE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF SPINOZA TO BIBLICAL RESEARCH**

Pieter de Villiers  
Department of New Testament, University of the Free State,  
Bloemfontein, South Africa

### *Abstract*

This article discusses the contribution of Spinoza to the interpretation of the Bible. After an introduction setting his research on the Bible within his time and context, it investigates several facets of his hermeneutics. The article then focuses on his methodology, the application of reason, his historical approach to the Bible and the way in which he understands both the human and divine nature of the Bible. A brief conclusion points out Spinoza's interpretation of the Bible as an attempt to promote freedom of thought.

### **1 SPINOZA'S UNRECOGNISED ROLE IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

Most historical surveys of Biblical research fail to mention or to account for the role of the Dutch scholar, Spinoza (1632-1677).<sup>1</sup> A typical example is to be found in the widely read and often quoted survey by the German New Testament scholar Kümmel (1973:40ff.).<sup>2</sup> In his section on the decisive stimuli for Biblical Studies as a discipline, Kümmel starts his discussion of the modern era with the work, published in 1678, of the French priest and scholar, Simon (1638--1712), a contemporary of Spinoza. He observes, with regard to the uncritical acceptance of the *Textus Receptus*, how "[i]n this situation a theologian, for the first time, set himself the task of investigating as a historical problem the historical facts encountered in the New Testament". Having then mentioned Simon's publications, Kümmel (1970:413) notes,

With the publication of these books the study of the New Testament was divorced for the first time from the study carried on by the ancients. More than that, by extensive

employment of the critical observations of the church fathers and by the use of all manuscripts available to him, Simon was the first to employ critical methods in a historical study of the origin of the traditional form of the text of the New Testament and of the question of the proper understanding of it. There is, therefore, good reason to call Simon “the founder of the science of New Testament introduction”.

With these remarks, Kümmel (1970:413) uncritically took over an earlier pronouncement of Zahn.<sup>3</sup> In tandem with this, mainstream scholarship linked the emergence of early biblical scholarship with later, mostly German scholars like Semler and Michaelis (Kümmel 1973:62-73). Given the German context and influence of historiographies of this period, and given the reputation of the much maligned Spinoza (cf. De Villiers 2007), one should not be too surprised about this outcome. Yet these “founding fathers” were indebted to Spinoza’s work on the Bible or, alternatively, they brought to fruition insights that Spinoza had developed earlier on in a consistent and often innovative manner. Simon, for example, published his first work, *The critical history of the Old Testament*, eight years after Spinoza produced his major publication on the interpretation of the Bible, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in 1670 (cf. also Shulman 1995). In his work, Simon explicitly referred to and acknowledged Spinoza’s research (cf. also Savan 1986:102) and the similarities are striking – despite Simon’s hostility towards Spinoza.

Another theologian from the early Enlightenment period, the German librarian Reimarus (1694-1768), in the early 1740s wrote his famous *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* – a work that is often quoted as seminal to the origins of the historical Jesus research. This work, too, reveals Spinoza’s influence in more than one way. Reimarus was aware of Spinoza’s research, as is evident from the fact that he had a copy of the *TTP* in his library and could not have escaped the uproar that Spinoza’s views created in Germany and the rest of Europe.<sup>4</sup> Reimarus, like Spinoza, criticised many aspects of traditional religion. He is best known for his attack on the supernatural portrait of Jesus in the Gospels. Though he criticised Spinoza and distanced himself from some aspects of his work, taking up a more moderate position,<sup>5</sup> an analysis of his work and of Spinoza’s insights will reveal that the similarities between

them are not coincidental. Reimarus was certainly influenced by the consistent historical method that Spinoza applied in his understanding of the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Even if the Jewish Spinoza focused more on Hebrew Scriptures, his work on the Bible contained extensive references on hermeneutics and methodology that are directly relevant to New Testament research. He often referred to New Testament passages as well.

In the following part of this essay, these aspects will be addressed by pointing out Spinoza's contribution to biblical interpretation and, consequently, his foundational role in it. Even though he wrote at a time when scholars on a wider front began to produce publications that paved the way for modern research on the Bible, an analysis of his role will help us to understand the complex dynamics that were at work at the dawn of modern scholarship. Spinoza represents a major breakthrough of, and was a key thinker in, this early Enlightenment period.

## **2 THE ROLE OF SPINOZA AS INTERPRETER AND INNOVATOR**

Spinoza's research reflects a thorough knowledge of the work of some leading Jewish and Christian thinkers in biblical scholarship before his time. He was a skilled interpreter of existing work on the Bible, but as a critical thinker he developed the implications of his predecessors' work further than anyone else before him. Before his interpretation of the Bible is discussed below, his links with preceding and other scholars will be discussed briefly. By studying him in this way, we can gain insights into the wider context in which he is to be understood, and which, in turn, also indirectly co-determined the eventual emergence of modern biblical scholarship. This discussion highlights Spinoza's indebtedness to historical developments before and in his time, but will at the same time provide a foil against which to understand how innovative he was in his own thinking.

### **2.1 Spinoza and Renaissance scholarship: interpreting and deconstructing**

Spinoza developed basic, but often controversial insights of the “revolutionary biblical scholarship of the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” (Shuger 1994:17). This earlier scholarship is characterised by, amongst others, the learned work of such intellectuals as the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457), with his impressive linguistic skills<sup>7</sup> and insights. Shuger (1994:17) makes the following interesting observation about this early period:

The chronological parameters of the *Critici sacri* reflect this historical self-consciousness; the anthology, whose selections span the two centuries separating Valla from Grotius, implicitly defines a single philosophical “moment,” distinct from both the allegorical methods of medieval exegesis and deconstructive textual criticism pioneered by Spinoza and Richard Simon.

Of special interest is the remark about historical self-consciousness and the fact that it was a new development in scholarship after mediaeval times. This historical perspective would become one of the most abiding characteristics of the Enlightenment, and it certainly is a basic feature of Spinoza’s own work. He took over this historical perspective, but then applied it in a more “deconstructive” way than his predecessors did. With that he brought the increasing historical work of biblical scholarship after mediaeval times to full fruition, spelling out with clarity and coherence some of its major consequences.

To mention but one example: Renaissance scholarship and its *ad fontes* movement brought about extensive research on the text and manuscripts of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> This happened as a result of the scholars’ criticism of the Vulgate as the official Bible version of the church. Aware not only of the fact that it was a translation of the original texts but also of many linguistic problems in it, they collected and studied ancient manuscripts of the Bible in the original languages. In Spain, for example, Greek texts of the New Testament were published as part of a polyglot (1514), thus providing a treasury of research material for those who wanted to read the New Testament in its original language.<sup>9</sup> Important research on this field was taking place in Spinoza’s home country. The 1516 edition of the Bible by Dutch Renaissance author Desiderius Erasmus, edited in haste and often rather carelessly, found widespread acceptance –

especially among Protestants. By the middle of the sixteenth century it became known as the acknowledged or standard text (*Textus Receptus*).<sup>10</sup> The *Textus Receptus* became practically the Bible of the church and theology (Kümmel 1970:41). In The Netherlands it was exclusively used in theological faculties of universities that originated there during the sixteenth century (De Jonge 1980:21).<sup>11</sup> The significance of the *Textus Receptus* can only be fully appreciated when one keeps in mind the immense authority which the Vulgate had held for many centuries.<sup>12</sup> In questioning the Vulgate, readers of the Bible were now made aware of the historical distance between it and the original versions. Their attention was drawn to the fact that the Vulgate was a late product; it had no inherent authority. In fact, its authority was dubious, even though it had been a useful church document for many centuries. In this way, the very notion of the authority of Scripture came under scrutiny. Readers of the Bible were forced to reflect on such a seemingly simple historical issue as the original language of the text, before they could allocate authority to it.

A second major surge forward in the interpretation of biblical texts and textual criticism began to take place shortly before the time of Spinoza. By then the *Textus Receptus* had come under increasing pressure as a result of new manuscript finds and ongoing historical research. Scholars pointed out that these new texts revealed the dubious quality of the manuscripts used for the construction of the *Textus Receptus*. Among those who were raising concerns about this was the remarkable Scaliger, a researcher at the university in Leiden from 1593 to 1609.<sup>13</sup> He was one of the first to privately share with his students his serious concerns about the corrupt state of the existing New Testament text. He pointed out quotations of the Bible in works of the church fathers as evidence for mistakes and stressed the need to revise it (cf. De Jonge 1980:21). This was one of the stimuli that would later result in the replacement of the *Textus Receptus* with better text editions. Scholars now understood that it was not enough to read the New Testament in Greek; one had to read the best version of it in Greek. They recognised that these texts originally existed in many versions and that many of the variant readings were dubious or wrong. They began to ask historical questions about the scribes, their scribal activities, the documents and their transmission. In place of a reverential attitude towards the text, to its minutest detail, scholars realised the texts had a human

element and that their transmission should be understood in a consistent historical manner – an insight that would later permeate Spinoza’s writings.

These historical questions motivated scholars to new research. A first step towards a critical edition of the Bible within a Dutch context was taken by Stephanus Curcellaeus, who published his Greek New Testament edition in 1658 in Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup> Spinoza was by then 26 years old. Curcellaeus taught at the Remonstrant Seminary in Amsterdam – an institution with which Spinoza was in frequent contact. There were others who shared this view. Le Clerc, a teacher in the same seminary, was also critical of the *Textus Receptus* and consequently decided to use *Codex Alexandrinus* for his French translation of the New Testament (De Jonge 1980:24–25). The revision thus remained a slow and difficult process because of the special status of the *Textus Receptus*, but it was nevertheless under way, and it was certainly a point of lively discussion among intellectuals in The Netherlands who were engaged in research on the Bible.

Shuger (1994:23–24) notes how a “new sensitivity” to historical discontinuity developed towards the end of the sixteenth century. In the Renaissance view, the Bible is a historical document that “implies and elucidates late antique culture”. The Bible thus became integrated in the past. It was part of a historical and social context that was very different from modern society. Spinoza solidified the gap between contemporary life and the Bible as rooted in ancient culture, between the Bible in its original context and its use in contemporary society. In the later Enlightenment scholarship this would be a key issue.<sup>15</sup>

These two examples presuppose a rigorous intellectual climate in which scholars were confronted with concrete material that questioned some sacrosanct convictions regarding the Bible of their time. They were hesitant to discuss these issues openly; they were researching them privately or publishing about them anonymously. They understood that their work conflicted with established beliefs in the church and knew that critical pronouncements on such matters would expose them to the wrath of powerful figures in church and society. It is in this context that Spinoza undertook his research. He could not have escaped the implications and influence of this critical context. His meticulous textual and biblical criticism and his theological reflection about these matters fit well into this state of

affairs, as will become clearer below. Understanding Spinoza opens one's eyes to this intellectual context of Dutch scholarship. His work reflects this context and reveals that he is first and foremost an interpreter of what was happening in works which stood at the cutting edge of biblical interpretation. At the same time his genius is to be found in his innovation. He did not merely summarise previous research, but also managed to spell out the full consequences of previous work, deconstructing unconvincing or superficial responses, and finally replacing these with new proposals.

## **2.2 The Protestant context of Spinoza's research on the biblical text**

Closely linked to this intellectual climate and worthy of special mention is the wider religious context in which Spinoza lived. He developed his reflections on the interpretation of the Bible within a wider context in which the biblical text was regarded as the source and point of departure for theology. This was partially the result of the Reformation, with its literal and historical reading of the Bible and its claim that the interpretation of the Bible should consciously avoid dogmatic and traditional impositions on the text (cf. Kümmel 1973:20-40). The Reformation played a significant role in The Netherlands and contributed decisively to intellectual life through the establishment of theological training and universities. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, German and Dutch universities within the Protestant sphere, for example, officially taught only<sup>16</sup> the study of the Old and the New Testament to their theological students.<sup>17</sup> Professors of Protestant Theology at Dutch universities before and during his time claimed that they wanted to read biblical texts and only then, as a following step, spell out their implications for faith as "theology" (cf. De Jonge 1980). In so doing they were reacting against the way in which they thought doctrinal beliefs had previously interfered with a proper understanding of the Bible.<sup>18</sup> In addition, it was stressed that the Bible should be studied in its original languages. This approach confirmed what was happening in Renaissance circles, with its similar focus on the Bible and with its historical consciousness.

Spinoza's work, as will be pointed out below, reflects this historical consciousness from beginning to end, but his opposition to external authorities and his strong criticism of ecclesiastical abuse of

power reflects the Protestant context of The Netherlands. At stake was the fundamental issue of intellectual integrity: external authority cannot steer the generation of knowledge about the Bible. In order for it to be understood properly, the Bible itself should be investigated.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3 Spinoza and his contemporaries

In historiographies, the name of Spinoza consistently appears among those of the best-known intellectuals of his time. Several contemporary writers and an intellectual climate of anti-authoritarianism influenced Spinoza in his work on the Bible. These writers include such well-known thinkers as Hobbes (1588-1679), La Peyrère (1596-1676), Bodin (1530-1596), Grotius (1583-1645) and others who were known for their critical and advanced work, also on biblical interpretation.<sup>20</sup> The attempts to clarify specific influences on Spinoza still continue. Popkin (2003:215), for example, traces Spinoza's ideas to Hobbes, but finds that the *real* founder of modern critical Bible scholarship was La Peyrère, a French Millenarian who questioned the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in his publication of 1655.<sup>21</sup> He writes,

Very soon after Hobbes, the problem of the Mosaic authorship quickly became a central issue in biblical criticism, and the denial of the Mosaic authorship of every line of the Pentateuch became the opening wedge in developing a skepticism about Jewish or Christian revealed religion, with Samuel Fisher and La Peyrère ... arguing that Moses could not be the author of the present mixed-up text. And it was the reading of Hobbes and La Peyrère by young Spinoza that transformed the historical, critical and philological research into skepticism about religion. Spinoza owned a copy of La Peyrère's *Prae-Admitae*, and apparently knew of its shocking theses by the time of his excommunication. And Spinoza read Hobbes before he formulated his views in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

These remarks give some insight into the intellectual context in which Spinoza lived and worked. They reflect the fact that biblical



interpretation was the focus of discussion and co-determined the intellectual debate of those times.

Worthy of special mention is the Jewish community in which Spinoza grew up and some of its prominent thinkers. The community had a cosmopolitan nature and flourished in one of the major cities of the world, so that it was exposed to many different perspectives and views. Its leaders were aware of problems in biblical interpretation. The teacher of Spinoza was Menasseh ben Israel, whose work, *Conciliator*, was first published in Spanish in 1632 and then translated into Latin. In the Lindo translation the author is praised for his profound and intimate acquaintance with the Hebrew Scriptures. The introduction notes that the work procured for him esteem and admiration among Christian and Jewish intellectuals. In this work, Ben Israel systematically notes conflicting pronouncements in Scripture, although his point of departure was that the Bible is true and therefore could not contain contradictory statements. He nevertheless wrote about these issues and thus exposed other scholars and also his student, Spinoza, to critical thinking and debate.

## 2.4 Conclusion

These remarks give us the first insights into Spinoza's interpretation of the Bible: he stands for the Renaissance tradition that values philology and history, a tradition that claims for itself higher authority than the church and established doctrine. He is furthermore part of a movement in biblical interpretation that is liberating itself from external authorities and is claiming the freedom to search for inherent authority – that is, authority that appeals to reason and argumentation and not to fear and superstition. The preface of the *TTP* confirms how high this is on his agenda, with its sharp criticism of unenlightened religious leaders who secured their positions through hostile and violent infighting and power games.

This section concludes with a brief note about the fact that Spinoza wrote mainly about philosophical questions, such as the nature and role of the state in human life. Yet his philosophical interests should not detract attention from his contribution to biblical research. He investigated theological questions like the divine nature of the Bible, its text, the literal reading of its contents and

history (including miracles), theological assumptions about the divinity of Jesus, and the theistic, providential nature of God in such a profound manner that he helped open up avenues of thinking that stimulated and promoted later Enlightenment thinking. In addition, he understood that it was not a matter of a few isolated, uncertain passages in Scripture that were being debated. At stake was the deeper issue of interpreting the Bible as Scripture – as will be discussed below.

### 3 SPINOZA'S INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Spinoza extensively discussed the interpretation of the Bible in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (A Theologico-Political Treatise)*. In it he discussed political, social, philosophical and theological issues. A substantial part of the work is, however, focused on the interpretation of specific biblical texts.<sup>22</sup> The following are some of the more important aspects of his hermeneutics that are developed in it.

#### 3.1 Hermeneutics

One of the most pertinent contributions of Spinoza to the study of the Bible is to be found in his hermeneutics. It is an indication of his critical and logical mindset that he spelled out the methodology with which he wanted to approach biblical texts and the principles he wanted to see applied in biblical interpretation. Spinoza thus understood that exegesis is more than simply explaining a text; that it must be done in a theoretically responsible manner. He therefore allocated significant space to hermeneutical observations before engaging in actual exegesis.

##### *3.1.1 The Bible interprets itself*

Spinoza first of all insisted as a ground rule that the Bible is its own interpreter. At the beginning of his section on biblical interpretation he is adamant about this (*TTR* 7:5; Shirley 1989:142; italics added):

... all knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone... This, then, is the *universal rule* for the interpretation of Scripture, to ascribe no teaching to

Scripture that is not clearly established from studying it closely.

This point of departure is then qualified further. It is only the original text that must be the authoritative source. What one studies in biblical interpretation is “the meaning of the words of the Hebrew language”. This, to him, included the New Testament, whose authors, he argued, thought in Hebrew. This original text must control all later interpretation (*TTP* 7:16; Shirley 1989:148).

It was pointed out above that Spinoza’s research on the Bible is to be understood within the context of the Renaissance and his Dutch Protestant setting. Spinoza takes over their conviction that the interpretation of the Bible should be based on Scripture, but elevates it to his first principle of interpretation and describes this as a “universal” rule.

### *3.1.2 Rejection of traditional impositions*

With these observations about Scripture as its own interpreter, Spinoza combines another one that in reality represents its counterpart. He repeatedly rejects any external authority that is imposed on scriptural interpretations. One reason for this requirement was the biased and manipulative power of church leaders. Spinoza openly directed the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* against orthodox “theologians” of his time (Gregory 1989:24) with their biased, illogical ideas on scripture that they fabricated to shore up and promote their own authority. They had a hidden agenda (*TTP* 9:14; Shirley 1989:179-80).<sup>23</sup>

There are many who deny the possibility of any fault having occurred even in the other texts; they maintain that God by some singular act of providence<sup>24</sup> has preserved all the Sacred Books uncorrupted.

Spinoza was consistent in his criticism of external authority, as is clear from his comprehensive rejection of traditional readings of the Bible by early groups such as the Pharisees and marginal readings. He argued that these highly-regarded readings were in fact later additions to the biblical documents that should be approached with

suspicion. The comments in the margins represent insights of much later commentators (cf. *TTP* 9:20; Shirley 1989:182), and were attempts to harmonise contradictions or difficulties in the original texts.

Spinoza's position reflects a basic tenet of the Enlightenment era, with its emphasis on science as an activity that liberated people from ignorance and falsehood. He shared this outlook with others such as, for example, Bentley, who criticised both the special status of the Vulgate in the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant veneration of Stephanus's Greek edition of the New Testament of 1550. He wrote (cf. *TTP* 9:20; Shirley 1989:182; italics added):

By taking two thousand *errors* out of the Pope's Vulgate and *as many* out of the Protestant Pope Stephen's, I can set out an edition of each in columns, without using any book under nine hundred years old, that shall so exactly agree, word for word, and order for order, that no two tallies, nor two indentures, can agree better.

Spinoza thus explicitly rejected the way in which clerical and authoritarian positions (such as that of the pope) stood in the way of biblical research and prevented Bible readers from understanding its true meaning. Such errors or falsehoods did not, in his mind, call into question the authority of the Bible: they simply necessitated a different understanding of this authority (see further below).

Spinoza's criticism of the status quo was quite daring.<sup>25</sup> Scholars in those times were so intimidated that their publications appeared anonymously – as, in fact, was the case with the *TTP* itself (cf. Shirley 1989:27, also for example Fell's edition; cf. Metzger 1992:107).<sup>26</sup> Spinoza and other members of this intellectual movement were under strong pressure from orthodox powers – something not surprising in the light of the fact that he was born in the same year that Galileo was denounced for his teaching by the Inquisition (1632). He had every right to question these powers. Shirley (1989:27) observed that his work “provoked some of the most violent reactions to any published work of the seventeenth century”. For Spinoza's critics, much was at stake. The irony is that the violent reaction came not only from church leaders, but from the more enlightened thinkers of his time.<sup>27</sup> The Englishman Kidder, for example, reproved Hobbes, La Peyrère and Spinoza for undermining

revealed religion (Israel 2001:600-601), and many others followed suit. Even someone like the influential Leibniz, himself not an orthodox figure, described Spinoza as a real threat to the church and theology.

### 3.2 Historical approach

Spinoza, as was briefly pointed out above, was especially convinced that the desired approach to the study of the Bible had to be historical in nature. An example of what such “historical study” meant to him is found in *TTP 7:11* (Shirley 1989:144). To approach the Bible historically meant to learn more about the life, character and interests of a biblical author, “detailing who he was, on what occasion and at what time and for whom and in what language he wrote”. This detailed analysis of each individual book had to be complemented by similar analyses of all the other books of the Bible. The books then had to be compared and grouped, for example as products of one particular author or period.<sup>28</sup> He thus had in mind the historical context in which the different texts originated. This had to be discovered in the first place by a close reading of the language, style and genre of biblical texts. This approach demanded precise linguistic, philological work on the original languages in which the biblical authors wrote their texts. This linguistic work then enabled specialists to establish fitting historical contexts for biblical books.

Practical examples will illustrate this principle and how consistently Spinoza applied it in his work. Concentrating on the traditional theory of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in *TTP 8*, he lists four reasons why Moses could not have written it.<sup>29</sup> There are, firstly, the indirect references to and historical description of Moses (e.g. Num.12:3; 31:14, etc);<sup>30</sup> secondly, the references to the life of Moses and, more significantly, the comparison between him and the later prophets. Thirdly, there are anachronistic place names (Dan is used in Gen.14 for a place that, according to Judg.18:29 is named thus only after the death of Joshua); and fourthly there is the inclusion of events that took place after the death of Moses (Ex.16:35; cf. 8:9ff.; Shirley 1989:164-165). Extending his investigation to the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel and Kings, Spinoza arrives at the conclusion that they were all composed by one author who “set out to write the antiquities of the Jews from

their first beginnings until the first destruction of the city”, intending “to set forth the works and commandments of Moses and to demonstrate their truth by the course of history” (*TTP* 8:24-25; Shirley 1989:169). Each of the books in the Pentateuch is linked to individuals that play a prominent role in them. They contain histories that were produced by earlier writers in an almost unedited form.<sup>31</sup> Their contents are “set forth with no distinction or order and with no regard to chronology,<sup>32</sup> and frequently the same story is repeated, with variations” (*TTP* 9:5; Shirley 1989:175).

Spinoza further argued that the present form of the Old Testament historical books could be traced to Ezra, who ordered a number of sources available to him and finally reworked them. Spinoza then offered a theological explanation of his analysis of Ezra’s texts. Ezra’s aim was to point out to his readers that the calamities they had experienced were a result of their disobedience to the law (*TTP* 8:42-58). Spinoza also drew attention to Ezra’s literary competence, and the fact that his final product comprised passages that were duplications or that were incoherent.

This discussion reveals how meticulous literary analysis based on minute linguistic observations formed the material from which Spinoza reconstructed the historical nature and context of biblical books. At the same time, these observations lead him to a synthetic presentation of an overall trend, predominantly a rejection of Mosaic authorship and a presentation of an alternative, general theory. Spinoza not only rejected Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. He also refuted claims that other books in Hebrew Scriptures under the names of such well-known historical figures as Joshua and Samuel were actually written by them. However, as Curley (1993:120) pointedly remarks, it was

the denial of Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch that seems to have captured people’s imaginations in a way the other denials didn’t, partly because those first five books of the Bible are so important to the Judaeo-Christian story of man’s relationship to God, partly because denying that Moses was the author of these books is denying that they were written by the prophet to whom, according to the Bible itself, God revealed himself more clearly than to any other prophet, “not in dark speech,” but “mouth to mouth,” or “face to face”

(Deuteronomy 34:10, Numbers 12:6-8). By comparison, denying that Samuel wrote the books of Samuel is a small matter.

All these remarks illustrate the fact that Spinoza was consistent in his approach to biblical texts. He did not work eclectically on certain issues such as Mosaic authorship. His work on the interpretation of the Bible from a historical point of view led him to research the Bible in a general way as a historical book and to question its historical claims in a comprehensive manner. Even more consistently, the historical to him related not only to individual books and their origins or their relationship with other books, but also to their later fate. The historical study of the Bible, he felt, should give attention to the process of reception, that is to “what happened to each book, how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many variants there were, by whose decision it was received into the canon, and, finally, how all the books, now universally regarded as sacred, were united into a single whole” (*TTP* 7:11; Shirley 1989:144). In this approach, the authority and inspiration of the Bible were moot. In his reflection on the canonical value of the Bible and the process of canonisation, he is consistently historical: he thus argued that there was no canon before Maccabean times, and that the canon itself was the product of rabbinical decision making, determined by the ideological make-up of the rabbis. In this way he spelled out the perspectival nature of the canon and the ideological agendas that shaped the formation of Judaeo-Christian scriptures.

The grandeur of this programme is astounding, given the fact that he wrote at the dawn of critical scholarship and long before critical studies of the canon and modern-day reception aesthetics. While others were engaging in the detail of text criticism, Spinoza was developing the ideological and theological implications of this primary phase of biblical studies and was opening the door to future fields of studies, as had no one else before him.

#### **4 METHODOLOGY**

Of special interest, and closely linked to the above hermeneutical observations, are Spinoza’s theoretical remarks about the proper methodology to be followed in biblical interpretation.<sup>33</sup> Spinoza not

only spelled out the principles that guided his exegesis of the Bible; he also clarified the method that he planned to apply.

In his introduction to his work on the Bible, he stressed that he wanted to investigate the Bible impartially (*TTP* 7:35). One of the succinct passages in this regard is found in *TTP* 7:9–11, where he states,

I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature – in fact, it is almost the same. For as the interpretation of nature consists in the examination of the history of nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain fixed axioms, so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its authors as a legitimate conclusion from its *fundamental principles*. By working in this manner everyone will always advance *without danger of error* – that is, if they admit no *principles for interpreting Scripture*, and discussing its contents save such as they find *in Scripture itself* – and will be able with equal security to discuss what surpasses our understanding, and what is known by the *natural light of reason*<sup>34</sup> (italics added).

This methodology is consistent with his hermeneutics and comprises, as the italicised remarks indicate, key motifs in his thought. Once again his method demands that understanding be based on the inherent quality of research objects without any outside interference, that it should work with principles, that it should focus on truth and that it should be rational.

Though he likened his biblical work to what may be called an empirical approach that is normally associated with natural science, his method is better seen as phenomenological. Spinoza's work entailed the careful collection of data, noting variations and changes in the data, comparing and then cross-checking them. One could also describe his method as paradigmatic – that is, taking a concrete example (paradigm) as the basis for investigation and reflection and then developing this in a theoretically sound manner. In this way he anchored his investigation in the material itself, moving inductively from it towards description and interpretation. It is also a complex



method. Several paradigmatic investigations must be undertaken in order to come to certain results.

The meticulous, thick nature of Spinoza's work is confirmed by his many analyses of biblical examples. While someone like Hobbes would cite only three texts against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, Spinoza used nearly twenty passages to argue his case against it (cf. also Curley 1993). Spinoza thus investigated different manuscript traditions of biblical texts, their character, their variant readings and even the marginal notes in manuscripts (cf. e.g. *TTP* 9:37-6; 7:93-106 and 136:13-140:34). Spinoza did not mean to overstate his case. His method demanded precise and extensive evidence in order to provide ample proof and adequate answers.<sup>35</sup> The numbers matter in a case like this, since the more passages there are, the more difficult it is to devise a hypothesis to explain them (cf. also Curley 1993:120).

As a further indication of his careful methodology, Spinoza stated that the researcher must be sensitive to the fact that data can also yield inconclusive results or that explanatory hypotheses are tentative and doubtful. His observations in *TTP* 7:26 (Shirley 1989:152) illustrate his careful historical reflections on and tentative conclusions about the data that he researched. The data yields many versions and uncertain results:

... we do not know into whose hands all these books fell, or in whose copies *so many different readings* were found, nor yet again whether there were not *many other versions* in other hands (italics added).

All these remarks illustrate a methodological self-consciousness that characterises the work of an innovative mind. Whilst Spinoza takes over the empirical approach of the natural sciences, he is careful to modify and explain this approach in terms of the Bible as the object of research. In this way he consistently takes the Bible as the point of departure for his research, rather than imposing a method on it.

## 5 RATIONAL RESEARCH

For Spinoza, empirical research had to have a rational, logical nature. In his emphasis on the importance of reason, Spinoza

establishes himself as one of the most prominent earlier Enlightenment thinkers. In *TTP* 4:42, Spinoza summarises his research by pointing out that he found nothing in Scripture or in the prophets that does not agree with or contradicts understanding, and concludes that “the Bible leaves reason absolutely free, that it has nothing in common with philosophy, in fact, that Revelation and Philosophy stand on different footings” (*TTP* 4:42; Elwes translation).

As a result, firstly, the interpretation of a biblical text must be liberated from theological additions and overgrowth which promote superstition at the cost of reason. The role of reason is under threat when external considerations determine the interpretation of the Bible (Trapnell 1988:32-33). In this regard, Spinoza specifically attacks those who have discovered hidden mysteries in the Bible that are “emotionally defended” because these beliefs “spring from the emotions” (*TTP* 140; Shirley 1989:141). Over and against reason stands superstition, which is, in turn, based on fear and unbridled emotions (e.g. *TTP* 4:13). In *TTP* 7:6 he describes superstition as that which “teaches men to despise reason and nature”.

Secondly, the role of reason, in Spinoza’s thinking, should not be misunderstood. The biblical perspective on reason is not identical to the reason that operates in philosophy. Once again the Bible determines one’s understanding of reason. He explicitly regards revelation and philosophy as standing “on different footings” (*TTP* 4:42). A theological reading interprets the Bible in terms of obedience and faith. Reason, characterising philosophical activity, cannot “demonstrate the truth or falsity of this fundamental principle of theology, that men may be saved simply by obedience”. Obedience as a theological principle is based on revelation given in the Bible and confirmed by signs. Faith thus cannot be proven by reason or with mathematical certainty (*TTR* 15:14; Shirley 1989:234):

It would be folly to refuse to accept, merely on the grounds that it cannot be proven with mathematical certainty, that which is abundantly confirmed by the testimony of the prophets, that which is the source of so much comfort to those less gifted with intelligence, and of considerable advantage to the state, and which we can believe without incurring any peril or hurt.

However, one also cannot sever philosophical reason from religion; when one analyses reason, it is evident that it merely corroborates what is already present as revelation in biblical texts. "It is no accident that the Word of God proclaimed by the prophets agrees in all respects with the Word of God that speaks in our hearts" (*TTP* 15:13; Shirley 1989:234). There is a fixed relationship, though, with biblical reason enjoying the primary position. It is only when the theological contents of the Bible have been established that philosophy may function as an aid. If there is any role for philosophical reason, it is to fill in this notion of obedience with more substance.<sup>36</sup>

Spinoza was a most influential thinker in this regard, and certainly a key figure in the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason as a necessary instrument for the interpretation of the Bible and religion (Savan 1986:99). His contribution in this regard is even more significant because it was based on theoretical reflection.

## 6 THE HUMAN NATURE OF THE BIBLE

Not surprising, in the light of the above remarks, is how prominently Spinoza focuses on the human nature of the Bible. This perspective is not unexpected, because of the orthodox position of most scholars about the Bible as a divine book. This focus is best illustrated from the *TTP 11*, where he discusses the different styles in individual and groups of biblical texts. Once again the investigation is on a concrete matter. Style is clearly recognisable and provides hard evidence. As an example, he stresses how as a collection of texts, the apostolic writings in the New Testament differ in their didactic nature<sup>37</sup> from the prophetic writings. Not only are Hebrew and Christian texts different in their style, but the texts within these two collections further reveal differences. He refers to James focusing more on works than Paul. Spinoza further traced the reason for the unique character of the apostolic letters to their conscious attempt to adapt their message to the audience they were addressing. Other texts also have this rhetorical function. There were four Gospels, because each author explained the life of Christ in a specific manner to a particular audience. Each biblical book is therefore the result of the "imagination and temperament" of its author (*TTP* 2.3; Shirley 1989:73).

Through concrete study of the form, function and contents of biblical texts, Spinoza questioned the traditional view that the Bible was a monolithic unit, reflecting divine authorship. There is not one uniform revelation in the Bible, but it contains different perspectives that resulted in presentations to audiences over many centuries. Spinoza observes in *TTP* 14:2 (Shirley 1989:220) that biblical texts were

not the work of a single writer, nor were they written for a people of a single age; they were written by a number of men of different character and different generations over a period of time which, taking them all into account, will be found to extend to about two thousand years, and perhaps much longer.

Linguistic, cultural and historical remarks are joined together to illustrate the human nature of the Bible. Once again Spinoza is almost eerily modern in his analysis. He reveals insights that redactional and, later on, rhetorical criticism of the Bible would develop in a major manner, but he also stresses the variety in the Bible – something that would become a hallmark of the historical-critical method in the twentieth century. The unique and different natures of individual texts are emphasised and their differences directly linked to historical contexts in which they originated and to their consistent attempts to communicate a particular rhetorical effect in their writings.

Spinoza was outspoken about the authors and the normal, even fallible human behaviour that can be recognised in their texts (*TTP* 9:14-17; Shirley 1989:179-80). In *TTP* 2:125-126, for example, he writes that the prophets could be, and in fact were, ignorant and held conflicting opinions. The biblical authors had limited knowledge, spoke and wrote according to the particular insights conditioned by their time and produced their documents subject to their fallibilities. Thus he notes (*TTP* 2:20; Shirley 1989:80), “Solomon, Isaiah, Joshua and the others were indeed prophets: but they were also men, subject to human limitations”.

Spinoza was not the first scholar to draw attention to the human nature of the Bible. Renaissance scholars like Valla and Erasmus emphasised how biblical texts reflected historical and human processes (Bentley 1983:142). Erasmus, for example, ascribed

problems in a biblical text to the failing memory of its author. According to him, Matthew 2:6 incorrectly cites Micah 5:2 because the evangelist did not remember the text well. As Bentley (1983:142) observes, this was for that time a “daring suggestion, that the original authors of scripture themselves introduced error into their work”.

Unlike the Renaissance authors, Spinoza was more consistent in his emphasis on the human nature of the Bible. The hard empirical realities of the text guided his research, and rational explanations based on human behaviour determined his position. He rejected all theological attempts to defend the message of the Bible by denying, ignoring or misrepresenting the problems in the biblical text or by resorting to theological truths. One would seek in vain in his work for a remark like the one of his teacher, Ben Israel, that the Bible is “in the highest degree true, it cannot contain any text really contradictory of the other” (cited above).

## 7 THE DIVINE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

If the authors are human and their products reflect fallible human activities, does this raise the question of the authority of the Bible? One of the harshest forms of criticism against Spinoza was that he promoted atheism (cf. Shirley 1989:17-32) and undermined the divine nature of Scripture. Despite such accusations by his opponents (even from someone like Leibniz), Spinoza was convinced that the Bible indeed had a divine nature and as such it was authoritative.

Given the limitations of biblical authors, the Bible does not divulge authoritative knowledge about natural phenomena and is therefore not an authority on natural phenomena. The biblical authors merely reflect the existing knowledge of their times. The authority of the Bible is to be found in its spiritual nature. The only aspect of the Bible that transcends its human, fallible nature is its moral teaching. It is divine in teaching true virtue (*TTP* 7:15-18). We read it in the first instance to be guided in terms of morality. The Bible has to do with the right lifestyle, with justice and charity (*TTP* 7:46).

Though he was a philosopher, Spinoza underlined the fact that neither philosophy nor even reason reveals the divine nature of Scripture. Its authority is also not to be found in the fact that it is the divine revelation of a personal God or because of any claim of biblical

inspiration. Its divine nature is obvious from the moral contents of biblical texts (*TTP* 7:5; Shirley 1989:142):

Indeed if we want to testify, without any prejudice, to the divinity of Scripture, it must be made evident to us from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrine; for it is on this basis alone that its divinity can be proved. We have shown that the chief characteristic which established the certainty of the prophets was that their minds were directed to what was right and good; hence this must be made evident to us, too, before we can have faith in them... Therefore the divinity of Scripture must be established solely from the fact that it teaches true virtue.

One can raise many questions about puzzling, controversial and provocative aspects of Spinoza's understanding of the divine and of the Bible. In many ways his religious convictions reflect a naturalism and rationalism that does not do justice to important facets of the Bible. But at the same time it is clear that there is an almost mystical quality to his writings – something that has been often observed by his interpreters (Krop & Van Bunge 1992:26; Steward 2006)[Stewart in Works Consulted: Please correct whichever is incorrect]. For Spinoza, the revealed word of God does not only exist in biblical books, but also in the divine spirit disclosed in the prophets. Revealed religion is about obeying God with one's whole heart and by living righteously and lovingly. The preface to the *TTP* reveals someone who regards the art of living righteously and lovingly in the service of God as the heart of prophetic religion. Philosophy, it tells the reader, confirms this seminal message, and the duty of the state is to protect this message of the church.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Spinoza's historical and critical analyses of the Bible are truly striking and daring, especially within the context in which he wrote. His comments on the Hebrew Scriptures and on the New Testament are of decisive importance to the understanding of the history of biblical interpretation. With his attack on external censure of interpretation, his emphasis on rational enquiry and the principle of *Scriptura sui interpres*, and with his phenomenological methodology, he indirectly

also contributed to academic freedom in the study of religion. It took centuries before many of his ideas and proposals became part of mainstream society.

In his publication on the textual criticism of the New Testament, Metzger (1992:149-55) surveys the origins of the discipline by discussing text-critical work done at the library in Alexandria in Hellenistic times, and by the Theodotians, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, some scholars in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (one paragraph). He concludes his survey with a short discussion of the work of Simon. Simon, he notes (1992:155), was the one who laid the scientific foundations of the discipline with his four monumental publications:

Disregarding the traditional and dogmatic presuppositions of his age, Simon examined critically the text of the Bible as piece of literature. His works are full of acute observation and reasoning, and anticipate in detail many of the conclusions of scholars two and three centuries later.

What is true of Simon is valid also for Spinoza, if not more so. He had the special gift of understanding that biblical interpretation demands new principles and methods, but he ultimately understood that this work cannot be done where ignorance and superstition reign. With his interpretation of the Bible, Spinoza ultimately wanted to promote a proper understanding of it, but he also argued that peace and piety will only flourish where there is freedom, as the following quote from *TTP6* illustrates:

Now, seeing that we have the rare happiness of living in a republic, where everyone's judgment is free and unshackled, where each may worship God as his conscience dictates, and where freedom is esteemed before all things dear and precious, I have believed that I should be undertaking no ungrateful or unprofitable task, in demonstrating that not only can such freedom be granted without prejudice to the public peace, but also, that without such freedom, piety cannot flourish nor the public peace be secure.

There are few other remarks in biblical research that spell out so profoundly what is really at stake in understanding the Bible.

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#### ENDNOTES

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- 1 Cf. De Villiers 2007 for a discussion on why Spinoza has been a much neglected figure in contemporary historiography and theology. This article continues that introductory essay.
  - 2 This neglect of Spinoza's role is partially due to the general failure to account for the special role and influence of Dutch scholarship on the history of Biblical scholarship by German historiographers. There is a larger issue here that affects more than merely a neglected contribution of an individual

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- scholar. De Jonge 1980:17 observed how publications by Grant, Scholder and Furnish on the history of the origins of biblical scholarship failed to give proper recognition to sixteenth and seventeenth biblical research in The Netherlands. Exceptions to the rule to some extent are Pfeiffer, who regarded Spinoza and Simon as the two founders of modern Biblical criticism, and Popkin (1979:215), who argued for La Peyrère as pioneer of modern biblical scholarship. Cf. regarding the latter hypothesis the critical remarks of Curley 1994.
- 3 Cf. also the remarks of Metzger 1992:155) and the discussion further below.
- 4 Apart from Spinoza's works, the library also included English writings by Toland, Collins and Mandeville - all often associated with deist thinking. In his discussion of private libraries in Germany, Israel (2001:131-132) refers to Dutch and ("most unusually") English books in Reimarus's library. It is, however, not quite so strange when one considers the remarks by Shuger (1994:13ff) about Renaissance intellectuals as a closely-knit community. She writes (1994:13), "In the Renaissance, biblical scholarship took place within a textual community. Although there were endless 'readings' of the Bible in the Renaissance - cabbalist, hermetic, Socinian, Lutheran, rabbinic, Miltonic - the practitioners of biblical *scholarship* for the most part formed a self-conscious community, bound by personal and professional ties." She also (1994:16-17) makes illuminating remarks on the prominent role of England in this community. Reimarus and his use of Spinoza's books should be understood in the context of such community life, which certainly continued after the Renaissance period. In general, though, one must remember that Spinoza's texts were even more accessible to his colleagues in different countries, because he wrote in Latin, the academic and ecclesiastical *lingua franca* of his time. That he did so for more than academic reasons is evident from his fear that the translation of the *TTP* may lead to its prohibition.
- 5 He accepted, for example, a providential deity, supported "the 'argument from design' and rejected the Epicureans' concept of natural evolution in an eternal universe that was not 'created' by God" (Israel 2001:472). This perspective on Reimarus, out of step with what is normally written about him in biblical scholarship, also provides some fresh material for evaluating the early Enlightenment. For the rest, it is not unusual for scholars who promoted deist insights to hold beliefs that some scholars would regard as incompatible with it. Those who are regarded as deists were in fact often devout, even theistic believers. On this cf. [www.adherents.com/largecom/fam\\_deist.html](http://www.adherents.com/largecom/fam_deist.html), with interesting examples.
- 6 The question of to what extent Reimarus was influenced by discussions and arguments of Spinoza about the nature and meaning of the Bible cannot be pursued here, but it deserves more attention.
- 7 His standard work is *De Elegantia Linguae Latinae*, which was the first scientific study of Latin and which reflects his close philological approach. He worked on it from 1435 until it was finally published in 1444.
- 8 For a discussion of the place and role of the Bible in the Renaissance, cf. De Villiers 2002. Israel (2001:134-136) discusses the rather forced manner in

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- which Bayle's famous *Dictionnaire* of 1697 argued that Spinozism was already pervasive in Renaissance thought. The link between the two should, however, not be underestimated. That the Renaissance excelled in its work on textual criticism is clear from, for instance, Metzger (1992:95-106; 155).
- 9 Cf. the discussion of Bentley (1983:70-111) on the Complutensian Polyglot.  
10 For the name, cf. Bentley (1983:112).  
11 Cf. also Shuger (1994:19), who notes the influence of Valla in this regard: "Even in the decade after Dort and the revenge of scholasticism, the Dutch Hebraist Amama could convince the Friesian Synod to make Greek and Hebrew requirements for all aspiring ministers."
- 12 Metzger (1992:106) notes, "So superstitious has been the reverence accorded the *Textus Receptus* that in some cases attempts to criticize or emend it have been regarded as akin to sacrilege."
- 13 Cf. Shuger (1993:13-14) for a description of Scaliger as an influential figure. He was the teacher of Grotius, "probably the greatest of the Renaissance exegetes" (Shuger 1993:13), but his reputation extended beyond the Netherlands across the whole of Europe. Curley (1993) notes that Scaliger was an editor of classical texts. It seems very likely that, as a student of classical literature, Spinoza knew at least his work as an editor.
- 14 Waltons' edition of the Polyglot Bible was published in 1655-57 in London. Metzger (1992:106) describes this as "the first systematic collection of variant readings." This edition confirms the growing conviction in major centres of Europe that the *Textus Receptus* needed revision and corroborates the situation in The Netherlands.
- 15 Funk (1964:164) would later summarise the problem of the relationship between historical criticism and interpretation by noting, "Is historical criticism the arbitrator, from an autonomous and objective locus, in the theological interpretation of Scripture, deciding what is and what is not allowable? Or, is historical criticism in the service of, and subservient to, theological exegesis, which ultimately decides what meaning can be assigned to a text? We should ask rather, can historical criticism be taken up into the theological task in such a way that it does not lose its independent critical powers but nevertheless functions positively in the service of theology?" Cf. also further below.
- 16 De Jonge (1980) does, however, draw attention to the later reintroduction of dogmatic issues as a discipline in universities (as *loci communes*) or their incorporation in exegetical courses.
- 17 For an explanation of the roots of this approach, cf. Shuger (1994:17-21) on the influence of Erasmus on Reformers like Calvin, Zwingli and Beza.
- 18 It is not difficult to argue that their own position is not less tenuous, even if it does set up more distance between the church and academic research. This is an analysis that should be pursued elsewhere.
- 19 Spinoza repeatedly insisted on a similar approach – e.g. *TTP* 7:14ff. – though, obviously with major differences.
- 20 Cf. further Israel 2001:453; Curley 1993; Savan 1986.

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- 21 Curley (1993), on the other hand, questions a link between Spinoza and La Peyrère, because Spinoza never cites him and because he thinks La Peyrère had an uncritical mind.
- 22 Cross (1995) elaborated on other influences in Spinoza's work, but correctly stresses that this does not discount his exegetical motivation in writing his treatise.
- 24 In *TTP* 4:32 he casts the net wider to include Platonist and Aristotelian readings that some interpreters impose on the Bible.
- 23 This is a telling term in Spinoza's thought. He rejects the notion of a providential God.
- 25 For a discussion of the relationship between religion and politics in the political theory of Spinoza, cf. Den Uyl (1995), who argues that Spinoza's politics is grounded in power and that he understands how both politics and religion contribute to the power of the state. Spinoza did not seek to undermine religion, but regarded it as a necessary feature of political life.
- 26 One of the best-known examples of this power and the fear it provoked among academics (which continued well after Spinoza's time) is the fragments of Reimarus that were known to a few friends, but which were only published after his death by Lessing. Other examples from an English context are provided by Metzger (e.g. 1992:108), who mentions the emotional response of Whitby to Mill's extensive text edition of the Bible in 1707. Whitby argued that "the authority of Scripture was in peril, and that the assembling of critical evidence was tantamount to tampering with the text." Shirley (1989:17-32) provides many examples of the violent reactions to Spinoza's work.
- 27 Cf. the remarks against him by a progressive thinker like Van Limborch, in Shirley 1989:28-29.
- 28 Some of the conclusions that he reached in this way are striking. He dated, for example, Daniel in Maccabean times (*TTP* 10:12; Shirley 1989:191) – a progressive position for those times.
- 29 On this, cf. also Gregory 1989:35.
- 30 Note, however, that Luther thought similarly, ascribing the entire final chapter of Deuteronomy to either Joshua or Eleazar. Luther, unlike Spinoza, does allow the possibility that Moses himself described his death in this way, "as if foreseen."
- 31 "The history of Hezekiah (2 Kings ch.18 from v.17 on) was copied from Isaiah's account just as it appeared in the chronicles of the kings of Judah, for we have it in its entirety in the book of Isaiah – which was included in the chronicles of the kings of Judah (see 2 Chron. ch 32 v.32) – in exactly the same words as in the other narrative, with a few exceptions. Similarly there are various versions of Isaiah. The ending of 2 Kings is repeated in the last chapter of Jeremiah v.31-34). In addition, we find that 2 Sam. ch. 7 is repeated in 1 Chron. ch. 17; but in a number of places the words are seen to have undergone such a remarkable change that it is obvious that the two chapters are taken from two different copies of the story of Nathan." In a

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- footnote Spinoza carefully lists the changes in Hebrew. Cf. *TTP* 9:2ff.; Shirley (1989:173-174).
- 32 The nature of Spinoza's reading of the biblical books is illustrated by his chronological sums. In 7:7 (Shirley 1989:176) he adds chronological references in the narratives to obtain a total of 580 years, which, he observes, questions the remark in 1 Kings 6 that Solomon built his temple 480 years after the exodus. His own sum is conservative, since some evidence indicates an even longer period of time.
- 33 In *TTP* 2:66-67, for example, he writes in general about "facts of natural experience": "If anyone wishes to persuade his fellows for or against anything which is not self-evident, he must deduce his contention from their admissions, and convince them either by experience or by ratiocination; either by appealing to facts of natural experience, or to self-evident intellectual axioms. (67) Now unless the experience be of such a kind as to be clearly and distinctly understood, though it may convince a man, it will not have the same effect on his mind and disperse the clouds of his doubt so completely as when the doctrine taught is deduced entirely from intellectual axioms – that is, by the mere power of the understanding and logical order, and this is especially the case in spiritual matters which have nothing to do with the senses" (Elwes translation).
- 34 Elwes translation.
- 35 His meticulous work is illustrated in his discussion about the trend in manuscripts to mistake a Hebrew letter for a similar looking one (b for k, y for w, d for r, cf. also *TTP* 9:25; Shirley 1989:184; *TTP* 7:96-102). He also pointed out that Hebrew had five classes of alphabet letters according to the five organs of the month employed in pronouncing them, namely, the lips, the tongue, the teeth, the palate, and the throat. Gutturals, for example, are barely distinguishable from each other. Thus the Hebrew for "to" is often taken for the word "above" (and vice versa). The data is investigated empirically and as natural, physical phenomena. Variants in biblical manuscripts, he thus argued, were the results of simple mistakes people made when they wrote and read. Thus he gave "natural" explanations for different readings. In this way he uses the linguistic peculiarities of Hebrew to explain the ambiguous variants in manuscripts. Similarly he used cultural and social explanations for these variants. Prejudices of later readers provide a logical explanation for variants in the biblical text. They propose more acceptable readings for what were regarded as vulgarisms (for sexual intercourse and excrement) or as obsolete readings.
- 36 The relationship of philosophy and religion, or reason and faith, needs more discussion. I shall evaluate this relationship in another essay.
- 37 He determines their didactic character from literary evidence as well. It can be established from the fact that the letters of the apostles "each began by affirming the credentials of his apostleship" (*TTP* 11:9; Shirley 1989:201).