

## On miracles

[1] Just as men habitually call that knowledge which surpasses human understanding 'divinity', so they likewise classify any phenomenon whose cause is unknown by the common people 'divine' or a work of God. For the common people imagine that the power and providence of God are most clearly evident when they see something happen contrary to the usual course of things and their habitual views about nature, especially should it turn out to their benefit or advantage. They also suppose the existence of God is proven by nothing more clearly than from what they perceive as nature failing to follow its normal course. For this reason they suppose that all those who explain or attempt to explain phenomena and miracles by natural causes, are doing away with God or at least divine providence. They evidently hold that God is inactive whilst nature follows its normal course and, conversely, that the power of nature and natural causes are superfluous whenever God is active. Hence, they imagine that there are two powers, distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of natural things, and that the latter is determined by God in some way or, as most men think in our day, created by him. But what they understand by these powers, and what they understand by God and nature, they certainly do not know, except that they imagine the power of God to be like the authority of royal majesty, and the power of nature to be like a force and impetus.

The common people therefore call unusual works of nature miracles or works of God and do not want to know the natural causes of things, partly from devotion and partly from zeal to oppose those who pursue natural philosophy. They desire only to hear about that of which they are most ignorant and consequently about which they marvel most. Evidently, this is because they can only adore God, and ascribe all things to

his will and governance, by ignoring natural causes and evincing wonder at what is outside the normal course of nature, and revere the power of God best when they envisage the power of nature as if it were subdued by God. This attitude seems to originate among the first Jews. They narrated miraculous stories to convince the pagans of their day, who adored visible gods, like the sun, the moon, water, air, and so on, that those gods were weak and inconstant or mutable, and subordinate to the invisible God. They also wanted to show that the whole of nature was directed by the governance of the God whom they adored solely for their own benefit. People have always been so drawn to this idea that to this day they have not ceased to invent miracles, in order to foment the belief that they are dearer to God than others and are the ultimate reason for God's creation and continual governance of all things. What will the common people not arrogate to themselves in their foolishness! They have no sound conception of either God or nature and, confusing God's decrees with human decisions, consider nature to be so limited that they believe men are its most important part.

[2] But this is quite enough about the opinions and prejudices of the common people regarding nature and miracles. We should now put this question into proper order. I will show:

(1) that nothing happens contrary to nature, but nature maintains an eternal, fixed and immutable order, and at the same time demonstrate what should be understood by the term 'miracle'

(2) that from miracles we cannot know about either the essence or the existence or the providence of God, but rather that all three are much better grasped from the fixed and unchangeable order of nature.

(3) I will show from some examples in the Bible that by the decrees, volitions and providence of God, Scripture itself means nothing other than the order of nature which necessarily follows from his eternal law.

(4) Finally, I will discuss the method required for [correctly] interpreting the miracles narrated in the Bible and what we should particularly notice in such miracle narratives. These are the chief points in the argument of this chapter, and I think that they are also very relevant to the aim of the work as a whole.

[3] (1) The first point is easily demonstrated from what we proved in chapter 4 about the divine law, namely, that all that God wills or determines involves eternal necessity and truth. From the fact that God's understanding

is not distinct from God's will, we showed that we are asserting the same thing when we say that God wills something as when we say that God understands it. Hence by the same necessity by which it follows from the divine nature and perfection that God understands some thing as it is, it also follows that God wills it as it is. But since nothing is necessarily true except by divine decree alone, it most clearly follows that the universal laws of nature are simply God's decrees and follow from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature. If anything therefore were to happen in nature that contradicted its universal laws, it would also necessarily contradict the decree and understanding and nature of God. Or if anyone were to assert that God does anything contrary to the laws of nature, he would at the same time be compelled to assert that God acts contrary to his own nature, than which nothing is more absurd. The same thing can also easily be shown from the fact that the power of nature is the divine power and virtue itself, and the divine power is the very essence of God, but this I am happy to leave aside for the time being. 83

[4] Consequently, nothing happens in nature<sup>1</sup> that contradicts its universal laws; and nothing occurs which does not conform to those laws or follow from them. For whatever happens, happens by God's will and his eternal decree, i.e., as we have already shown, whatever happens, happens according to laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth. Nature therefore always observes laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth – albeit not all are known to us – and therefore also a fixed and immutable order. No sound reasoning convinces us that we should attribute only a limited power and virtue to nature or believe its laws are suited to certain things only and not to all. For, since the virtue and power of nature is the very virtue and power of God and the laws and rules of nature are the very decrees of God, we must certainly believe that the power of nature is infinite, and its laws so broad as to extend to everything that is also conceived by the divine understanding. For otherwise what are we saying but that God has created a nature so impotent and with laws and rules so feeble that He must continually give it a helping hand, to maintain it and keep things going as He wills; this I certainly consider to be completely unreasonable.

<sup>1</sup> Spinoza's footnote: note that here I mean not only matter and its properties, but other infinite things besides matter.

84

[5] From these premises therefore – that in nature nothing happens which does not follow from its laws, that its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine understanding, and finally that nature maintains a fixed and unchangeable order – it most evidently follows that the term ‘miracles’ can be understood only with respect to human beliefs, and that it signifies nothing other than a phenomenon whose natural cause cannot be explained on the pattern of some other familiar thing or at least cannot be so explained by the narrator or reporter of the miracle.

I could in fact say that a miracle is something whose cause cannot be explained from the principles of the natural things known to us by the natural light of reason. But since miracles were produced according to the capacity of the common people who were completely ignorant of the principles of natural things, plainly the ancients took for a miracle whatever they were unable to explain in the manner the common people normally explained natural things, namely by seeking to recall something similar which can be imagined without amazement. For the common people suppose they have satisfactorily explained something as soon as it no longer astounds them. Hence, for the ancients and the vast majority of men down to our own time, this was the only criterion for defining what was miraculous. Clearly, many things are therefore related as miracles in the Bible whose causes may readily be explained from the known causes of natural things, as we have already suggested in chapter 2 above, when we spoke of the incident of the sun’s standing still in the time of Joshua<sup>2</sup> and its moving backwards in the time of Ahaz.<sup>3</sup> But we will consider these passages at greater length below, when we discuss the interpretation of miracles which I promised to deal with in this chapter.

[6] (2) It is now time for me to pass to the second issue and show that we cannot infer from miracles either the essence or the existence, or the providence, of God, but on the contrary that these are far better inferred from the fixed and immutable order of nature. To demonstrate this I proceed as follows. Since the existence of God is not known of itself,<sup>4</sup> it must necessarily be deduced from concepts whose truth is so firm and unquestionable that no power capable of changing them can exist, or be conceived. At any rate they must appear so to us from the moment we infer God’s existence from them, if we want to derive this from them

<sup>2</sup> Joshua 10.    <sup>3</sup> Isaiah 38:7–8.    <sup>4</sup> Spinoza’s footnote: see Annotation 6.

without risk of doubt. For if we could conceive that the axioms themselves might be modified by whatever power then we could doubt their truth, and hence also our conclusion concerning God's existence, and could never be certain about anything. Furthermore, we know nothing conforms to nature or conflicts with it, except what we have shown to agree or conflict with those [evident] principles. Therefore if we could conceive that anything in nature could be brought about by any power (whatever power that might be) which conflicts with nature, it would be in conflict with those primary principles and therefore would have to be rejected as absurd, or else there would be doubts about those primary principles (as we have just shown) and, consequently, about God and about all our perceptions of whatever kind. It is far from true, therefore, that miracles – in so far as the word is used for a phenomenon that conflicts with the order of nature – prove for us the existence of God. On the contrary, they would make us call into doubt that very point, since, without them, we could be absolutely certain of it, because we know that all things follow the certain and unchangeable order of nature. 85

[7] But let it be supposed that a miracle is something that cannot be explained by natural causes. This can be understood in two ways: either it does indeed have natural causes though they cannot be discovered by human understanding, or it admits no cause but God or the will of God. But because all things that happen by natural causes also happen by the sole power and will of God, we must necessarily conclude, finally, that whether a miracle has natural causes or not, it is a phenomenon that cannot be explained by a cause, that is, it is a phenomenon that surpasses human understanding. But we can understand nothing of a phenomenon, or of anything at all, that surpasses our understanding. For whatever we understand clearly and distinctly, must become known to us either by itself or by means of something else that is understood clearly and distinctly. Therefore, we cannot understand from a miracle, or work which surpasses our understanding, the essence of God or his existence, or anything about God and nature.

On the contrary, since we know that all things are determined and ordained by God, and that the operations of nature follow from the essence of God, and the laws of nature are the eternal laws and volitions of God, we must conclude, unconditionally, that we get a fuller knowledge of God and God's will as we acquire a fuller knowledge of natural things and

86

more clearly understand how they depend on their first cause and how they behave according to the eternal laws of nature. From the perspective of our understanding, hence, we have much more right to term those phenomena which we understand clearly and distinctly works of God and attribute them to the will of God, than works of which we are wholly ignorant, however strongly they grip the imagination and make us marvel. For it is only the phenomena of nature we understand clearly and distinctly that enhance our knowledge of God and reveal as clearly as possible the will and decrees of God. Therefore, those who have recourse to the will of God when they are ignorant of something are clearly talking nonsense: what a ridiculous way to acknowledge one's ignorance!

[8] Furthermore, even if we could draw conclusions from miracles, we certainly could not derive [from them] the existence of God. Given that a miracle is a limited phenomenon, and never reveals anything more than a fixed and limited power, it is certain that from such an effect we cannot infer the existence of a cause whose power is infinite, but at most a cause whose power is fairly large. I say 'at most', for a phenomenon may also follow from several simultaneously concurring causes whose force and power is less than the power of all these causes together but much greater than that of each individual cause. Whereas the laws of nature (as we have already shown) extend to infinity, and are conceived by us as having something of the character of eternity and nature proceeds according to them in a fixed and unalterable order, so that they themselves to that extent give us some indication of the infinity, eternity and immutability of God.

We therefore conclude that we cannot come to know God and his existence and providence from miracles, the former being much better inferred from the fixed and unalterable order of nature. In reaching this conclusion I am speaking of a miracle understood simply as a phenomenon which surpasses, or is thought to surpass, human understanding. For in so far as it is conceived to destroy or interrupt the order of nature or conflict with its laws, to that extent (as we have just shown) not only would it give us no knowledge of God, it would actually take away the knowledge we naturally have and make us doubt about God and all things.

[9] Neither do I acknowledge any difference between a phenomenon which is contrary to nature and a phenomenon which is above nature (i.e., as some define it, a phenomenon that does not conflict with nature

but cannot to be made or produced by it).<sup>5</sup> For since a miracle does not occur outside of nature but within nature itself, even if it is said to be above nature, it must still necessarily interrupt the order of nature which otherwise we conceive to be fixed and unalterable by God's decrees. If therefore something happened in nature which did not follow from its laws, this would necessarily conflict with the order that God established in nature for ever by the universal laws of nature; it would hence be contrary to nature and its laws and, consequently, it would make us doubt our faith in all things and lead us to atheism. 87

Hence, I think that I have proved with sufficiently strong arguments the second point that I proposed to discuss, and thus we may conclude again on additional grounds that a miracle, whether contrary to nature or above nature, is a plain absurdity. Therefore, the only thing that we can understand by a miracle in Holy Scripture is, as I have said, a phenomenon of nature that surpasses human understanding, or is believed to do so.

[10] Now, before turning to my third point, I should like first to confirm my claim that we cannot achieve a knowledge of God from miracles with Scripture's authority. Even though Scripture nowhere explicitly tells us this, it may readily be inferred, especially from the command of Moses in Deuteronomy 13 to condemn a false prophet to death even if he performs miracles. He says: (even though) 'the sign and the wonder that he foretold to you shall come to pass, etc., do not' (nevertheless) 'listen to the words of that prophet, etc., for the Lord your God is testing you', etc. It plainly follows from this that miracles can also be performed by false prophets, and that unless men are duly strengthened by a true knowledge and love of God, they may just as easily embrace false gods as a consequence of miracles as the true God; for he adds: 'since Jehovah your God is testing you so as to know whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul'. The Israelites, moreover, were unable to form a sound conception of God despite all those miracles, as experience itself testified. For when they were convinced Moses was away, they asked Aaron for visible gods, and the idea of God which they finally arrived at

<sup>5</sup> It was basic to Spinoza's system that nothing can be postulated to be 'above' nature or 'above' reason which is not also 'contrary to nature' and 'contrary to reason'; in this he is closely followed by Bayle but directly opposed by Locke, Leibniz and Malebranche, who all accept the principle that there are 'mysteries' above reason and 'above nature' which, however, are not contrary to nature or to reason.

as a result of so many miracles was a calf. This was shameful! Asaph despite having heard of so many miracles, nevertheless still doubted God's providence and would have turned from the true path had he not finally understood the true happiness (see Psalm 73). Solomon too, in whose time the affairs of the Jews were at their most flourishing, suspects all things happen by chance: see Ecclesiastes 3:19–21, 9:2–3 etc. Finally, it was thoroughly obscure to most prophets how the order of nature and human affairs was consistent with the conception of God's providence which they had formed. However, this was always entirely clear to the philosophers who seek to understand things not from miracles but from clear concepts, or at any rate to those [philosophers] who place true happiness in virtue and peace of mind alone, and do not attempt to make nature obey them but rather strive to obey nature themselves. They have certain knowledge that God directs nature not as the particular laws of human nature urge but as its universal laws require and, hence, that God takes account not just of the human race but of nature in its entirety.

[11] It is thus also evident from Scripture itself that miracles do not yield true knowledge of God and do not clearly demonstrate the providence of God. The incidents frequently encountered in the Bible where God performs wonders to make himself known to men (as in Exodus 10.2 where God deceived the Egyptians and gave signs of himself so that the Israelites might know that he was God), do not show that the miracles really proved this; they only show that the beliefs of the Jews were such that they could readily be convinced by these miracles. We clearly proved above in chapter 2 that prophetic arguments, or arguments derived from revelation, are not drawn from universal and basic concepts but from the preconceptions and beliefs, no matter how absurd, of those to whom the revelations are made or whom the holy spirit seeks to convince. We illustrated this by many examples and by the testimony of Paul, who was a Greek to the Greeks and a Jew to the Jews.

While these miracles could persuade the Egyptians and Hebrews because of their prior beliefs, yet they could not yield any true idea and knowledge of God. Miracles could only bring them to acknowledge that there is a deity more powerful than all things known to them, and that he watched over the Hebrews, for whom at that point in time everything had succeeded beyond their expectations. Miracles could not demonstrate to them that God cares equally for all men: only philosophy can teach this.



This is why the Jews and all who adopted their notion of God's providence only from the varying condition of human affairs and men's unequal fortunes, persuaded themselves that the Israelites were dearer to God than other men, even though they did not surpass other men in human perfection, as we showed above in chapter 3.

[12] (3) I now turn to my third point: I will show from Scripture that the edicts and commands of God, and hence of providence, are nothing other than the order of nature. That is, when the Bible says that this or that was done by God or by the will of God, it simply means that it was done according to the laws and order of nature, and not, as most people think, that nature ceased to operate for a time or that its order was briefly interrupted. But the Bible does not directly teach things which do not concern its doctrine; nor is it its intention (as we have already shown with regard to divine law) to explain things by natural causes or teach purely philosophical things. Consequently our point has to be derived by inference from certain narratives in Scripture which, as it happens, are given at some length and in considerable detail. I will cite some of them. 89

[13] 1 Samuel 9.15–16 tells us that God revealed to Samuel that he would send Saul to him. But God did not send Saul to him as human beings are accustomed to send one man to another; this sending by God occurred simply according to the order of nature. Saul was searching (as is mentioned in the [previous chapter](#)) for the asses he had lost, and at last, as he was wondering whether to return home without them, his servant advised him to approach the prophet Samuel, so as to learn from him where he could find them. Nowhere in the story is it evident that Saul received any other command from God apart from this natural procedure of approaching Samuel. In Psalm 105.24 it is stated that God turned the hearts of the Egyptians to hate the Israelites; this too was a natural change, as emerges from the [first chapter](#) of Exodus which reports the urgent reason that motivated the Egyptians to reduce the Israelites to slavery. At Genesis 9.13 God informs Noah that he will put a rainbow in the clouds. This action of God's is assuredly no other than the refraction and reflection affecting sun rays seen through drops of water. At Psalm 147.18 the natural action and heat of the wind by which frost and snow are melted is termed the word of God, and in verse 15 wind and cold are called the utterance and word of God. In Psalm 104.4 wind and fire are

90 styled the the envoys and ministers of God, and there are many other things in the Bible to this effect, showing very clearly that the decree of God, his command, his utterance, his word are nothing other than the very action and order of nature. Without doubt, therefore, everything narrated in Scripture actually happened naturally, and yet it is all ascribed to God, since it is not the intention of the Bible, as we have shown, to explain things in terms of natural causes but only to speak of things that commonly occupy people's imaginations, and to do so in a manner and style calculated to inspire wonder about things and thus impress devotion upon the minds of the common people.

[14] Consequently, if we find certain things in the Bible for which we cannot attribute a cause, and which seem to have occurred beyond or even contrary to the order of nature, these things should not represent a problem for us; rather we should be fully persuaded that whatever really happened, happened naturally. This is also confirmed by the fact that some of the details of miracles are sometimes omitted in the telling, especially in a poetic narrative. These details of such miracles, however, plainly show that they involve natural causes. For instance, in order for the Egyptians to be afflicted with boils, it was necessary for Moses to throw ashes up into the air (see Exodus 9.10). The locusts reached the land of Egypt by a natural command of God, namely by means of a wind from the east that blew for a whole day and a night; later they left because of a very strong wind from the west (see Exodus 10.14, 19). It was by the same command of God that the sea opened up a path for the Jews (see Exodus 14.1), namely because of an east wind that blew very strongly for a whole night. To raise the boy who was believed to be dead, Elisha needed to lie over him for some time, until he first grew warm and finally opened his eyes (see 2 Kings 4.34–35). Lastly, in the Gospel of John ch. 9, circumstances are mentioned of which Christ made use to heal the blind man. We find many other things in Scripture which all evidently show that miracles require something other than what is called the absolute command of God. This is also clear from Exodus 14.27, where it is merely stated that the sea rose again, at a mere gesture from Moses, and there is no mention of any wind whereas, in the Song of Songs (15.10), we learn that it happened because God blew with his wind (i.e., with a very strong wind); this detail is omitted in the first telling, and owing to that it appears to be a greater miracle.

91

[15] Yet someone may perhaps object that we find a whole host of things in Scripture which do not seem capable of being explained by natural causes at all, for example, that men's sins and prayers can be a cause of rain or of the earth's fertility, or that faith can heal the blind, and other things of this sort narrated in the Bible. But I think I have already answered this; for I showed that Scripture does not explain things by their immediate causes, but rather relates things in a style and language that will encourage devotion, especially among the common people. For this reason, it speaks in a wholly inexact manner about God and things precisely because it is not seeking to sway men's reason but to influence and captivate their fancy and imagination. For if Scripture related the destruction of an empire in the way political historians do, it would not appeal to the common people; but it is very appealing to them when everything is narrated poetically and all things are ascribed to God, as the Bible normally does. When therefore Scripture says that the earth was sterile due to men's sins, or that blind men were healed by faith, it should move us no more than when it says that God is angry or saddened by men's sins or repents of a promise or favour he has given, or that God remembers his promise because he sees a sign – and a whole host of other things which are either expressed poetically or have been related according to the author's beliefs and preconceptions.

Thus, we conclude without reservation that all things that are truly reported to have happened in Scripture necessarily happened according to the laws of nature, as all things do. If anything is found which can be demonstrated conclusively to contradict the laws of nature or which could not possibly follow from them, we must accept in every case that it was interpolated into the Bible by blasphemous persons. For whatever is contrary to nature, is contrary to reason, and what is contrary to reason, is absurd, and accordingly to be rejected.

[16] (4) It remains only to make a few remarks about the interpretation of miracles, or rather to recapitulate these (for the major points of this have already been given), and illustrate them with one or two examples, as I promised to do here as my fourth goal. I need to do this, so that no one giving a defective interpretation of some miracle, will leap to the unfounded conclusion that he has hit on something in Scripture that does contradict the light of nature.

[17] It happens very rarely that men report something straightforwardly, just as it occurred, without intruding any judgment of their own into the telling. In fact, when people see or hear something new, they will, unless  
92 very much on their guard against their own preconceived opinions, usually be so biased by these that they will perceive something quite different from what they actually saw or heard had happened, especially if the event is beyond the understanding of the reporter or his audience, and most of all if it is in his interest that it should have happened in a certain way. This is why authors of chronicles and histories speak more about their opinions than about the actual events, and one and the same event can be so differently narrated by two persons with different beliefs that they seem to be reporting two different events. And, finally, it is often not very difficult to trace the beliefs of the chroniclers and historians just from their histories.

I could offer many examples confirming this, both from philosophers who have written natural histories, and from chroniclers, except that I think this would be superfluous. I will just give one from the Bible; the reader may then judge for himself of others.

[18] In Joshua's time (as we have already mentioned above) the Hebrews, along with everyone else, believed that the sun moves by its so-called own diurnal motion while the earth remains at rest, and they adapted to this preconceived belief a miracle that occurred to them when they were fighting the five kings. They did not simply say that that day was longer than usual, they said that the sun and the moon stood still or ceased their motion. This greatly helped them at the time to confirm by experience, and persuade the gentiles who adored the sun, that the sun operates under the government of another deity at whose command it had to change its natural regular movement. Thus partly owing to religion, and partly from preconceived beliefs, they conceived of the thing happening in a totally different way from how it actually occurred, and that is how they reported it.

[19] Hence, to interpret the biblical miracles correctly, and to understand from the reports of them how these things really happened, it is essential to know the beliefs of those who first reported them and have left them to us in writing and to distinguish their beliefs from what their senses could represent to them. For otherwise we shall confuse their beliefs and judgments with the miracle as it really happened.

But this is not the sole reason why it is necessary to know their beliefs. We must also know them so that we will not confuse what really happened with imaginary things and prophetic visions. For many things are reported in Scripture as real, and were actually believed to be real, 93 though they were nothing but apparitions and imaginary things, for instance that God (the supreme being) came down from heaven (see Exodus 19.18 and Deuteronomy 5.19), and that Mount Sinai was smoking because God had descended upon it surrounded by fire, and that Elijah went up to heaven in a fiery chariot with fiery horses. All these were undoubtedly only visions, adapted to the beliefs of those who passed them on to us as they appeared to them, namely as actual events. For anyone whose knowledge rises even slightly above the common level knows that God does not have a right hand or a left hand, and does not move or stay still, and is not in space but is absolutely infinite, and all perfections are contained in him. These things, I say, are known to those who judge things from what is gathered by pure intellect, and not as the imagination is affected by the external senses, as the common people do, who therefore imagine God as corporeal and as holding royal power and seated on a throne which they suppose is in the dome of the sky above the stars, whose distance from the earth they do not think to be very great. Many events in the Bible have been adapted to these and similar beliefs (as we have said), and accordingly they must not be accepted as real by philosophers.

[20] Finally for understanding miracles as they really happened one must know the phrases and figures of speech of the Hebrews. Anyone who does not pay sufficient attention to this will find numerous miracles in the Bible which its authors never intended to be understood as such, and therefore will be completely ignorant not only of the events and the miracles as they really occurred but also of the mentality of the authors of the sacred books. For example, Zechariah 14.7, speaking of some future war, says: 'And there shall be one day, known only to God', (for it will) 'not' (be) 'day or night, but in the evening time there shall be light'. By these words he seems to predict a great miracle, and yet he means to convey merely that the war will be doubtful throughout the whole day, its outcome known only to God, but that in the evening they will obtain the victory. For it was with such language that the prophets were accustomed to foretell and describe the victories and disasters of nations.

94 In the same way, we find Isaiah depicting the destruction of Babylon in chapter 13: 'For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not illuminate with their light, the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not give out the splendour of its light'.<sup>6</sup> I certainly do not think that anyone believes that these things actually happened at the fall of that empire, nor what he adds just after: 'therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth shall be moved from its place'.<sup>7</sup> So too in Isaiah 48, in the last verse but one: 'And they did not thirst, he led them through the desert, he made water flow for them from the rock, he cleft the rock, and the waters gushed out'. By these words assuredly he simply means to say that the Jews will find springs in the desert (as sometimes happens) to assuage their thirst; for when they made their way to Jerusalem, with Cyrus' consent, it is agreed that no such miracles occurred. There are any number of things like this in the Bible which were merely figures of speech of the Hebrew, and there is no need to detail them here.

I would though like to make the general point that the Hebrews were not only accustomed to use these phrases for rhetorical adornment but also and particularly for the sake of devotion. This is why we even find in Scripture, 'bless God' for 'curse God' (see 1 Kings 21.10 and Job 2.9). It was for the same reason that they ascribed all things to God, and this is why the Bible appears to relate nothing but miracles even when it is talking of the most natural things, of which we have already given some examples above. So when Scripture says that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, we have to understand that it simply means that Pharaoh was inflexible.<sup>8</sup> And when it is said that God opened the windows of the heavens, it just means that a lot of rain fell, and so on.<sup>9</sup> If one attends carefully to such details and notes that many things are reported in Scripture only very briefly, without detail, almost in an abbreviated manner, one will find virtually nothing in the Bible that can be shown to contradict the light of nature. On the contrary, in this way one will be able to grasp and readily interpret, with just a modest intellectual effort, many things which at first seem extremely obscure. With this I think I have fully enough demonstrated what I proposed.

95 [21] But before ending the chapter, there is something more I need to mention: I have used a very different method here than I followed in the case of prophecy. There I asserted nothing concerning prophecy which

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 13.10.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 13.13.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 4.21; 7.3.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 7.11.

I could not infer from principles revealed in Scripture. But here I have drawn particular conclusions only from principles known by the natural light of reason and done this deliberately. Since prophecy is beyond human understanding and is a purely theological issue, I could not say or know what it is in itself, as such, except on the basis of revealed principles. I was therefore obliged there to construct a history of prophecy and to derive certain dogmas from it which would show me its nature and characteristics, so far as that can be done. But with regard to miracles, the question we are investigating (namely, whether we may concede that something happens in nature which contradicts its laws or which does not conform to them) is wholly philosophical. Therefore I did not need a similar approach. I thought it more advisable to elucidate this question from principles known by the natural light of reason since these are the best known. I say that 'I thought it more advisable'; for I could also readily have dealt with it solely on the basis of biblical dogmas and principles, and I will expand on this here in a few words, so that it will be clear to everyone.

[22] In some passages Scripture says of nature in general that it preserves a fixed and immutable order, as in Psalm 148.6 and Jeremiah 31.35–6. Furthermore, the philosopher in his book of Ecclesiastes 1.10 very clearly explains that nothing new happens in nature; and in verses 11 and 12, in illustration of the same thing, he says that, although sometimes something happens which appears to be new, it is actually not new but occurred in past times of which there is no memory. For, as he himself says, there is no remembrance of former things among those who live today, nor will there be any memory of today's affairs among those who are to come. Then, at 3.11, he says that God has ordered all things properly, in their time, and at verse 14 he says that he knows that whatever God does endures for ever, nor can anything be added to it nor anything taken away. All this evidently proves that nature maintains a fixed and immutable order, that God has been the same in all ages known and unknown to us, and that the laws of nature are so perfect and so fruitful that nothing can be added to or detracted from them, and miracles only seem to be new owing to men's ignorance. This, then, is what is explicitly taught in Scripture; nowhere does it teach us that anything happens in nature that contradicts nature's laws or cannot follow from them; and we should not attribute any such doctrine to it. 96

In addition, miracles require causes and circumstances (as we have already shown). They do not follow from the kind of autocratic government the common people ascribe to God but rather from divine decree and government which (as we have also shown from Scripture itself) signifies the laws of nature and its order. Finally, miracles may also be performed by impostors, as is proved from Deuteronomy 13 and Matthew 24.24.

It follows, further, and with the utmost clarity, that miracles were natural events and therefore must be explained so as not to seem ‘new’ (to use Solomon’s word) or in conflict with nature, but as close to natural realities as possible; and I have given some rules derived from Scripture alone in order that anyone should be capable of doing this fairly easily.

[23] Although I say that Scripture teaches these things, however, I do not mean that the Bible promotes them as doctrines necessary for salvation, but only that the prophets embraced them just as we do. Therefore it is up to every man to hold the opinion about them that he feels best enables him to subscribe with all his mind to the cult and religion of God. This is also the opinion of Josephus. Here is what he writes at the end of book 2 of his *Antiquities*: ‘Let no one disbelieve this talk of a miracle occurring among men of the distant past, innocent of evil as they were, for whom a path to safety opened through the sea, whether this happened by God’s will or of its own accord. For in more recent times the Pamphylian sea divided for the troops of Alexander, king of Macedon, and afforded them a passage through it when they had no other way to go, since it was God’s will to destroy the Persian kingdom by means of him. This is admitted by everyone who has written about the deeds of Alexander; everyone therefore should think as he pleases about these things’.<sup>10</sup> These are Josephus’ words and his judgement about belief in miracles.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.347–8. We have rendered the Greek text of Josephus, since the Latin translation used by Spinoza is unintelligible at one point (*antiquitus a resistentibus*). The final clause of the quotation is a phrase which Josephus uses several times when recounting an extraordinary event.



## On the interpretation of Scripture

[1] All men are ready to say that Holy Scripture is the word of God that teaches us true happiness or the way of salvation, but their actions betray a quite different opinion. For the common people, the last thing that they appear to want is to live by the teaching of Scripture. We see them advancing false notions of their own as the word of God and seeking to use the influence of religion to compel other people to agree with them. As for theologians, we see that for the most part they have sought to extract their own thoughts and opinions from the Bible and thereby endow them with divine authority. There is nothing that they interpret with less hesitation and greater boldness than the Scriptures, that is the mind of the Holy Spirit. If they hesitate at all, it is not because they are afraid of ascribing error to the Holy Spirit or straying from the path of salvation, but rather of being convicted of error by others and seeing themselves despised and their authority trodden underfoot.

If people truly believed in their hearts what they say with their lips about Scripture, they would follow a completely different way of life. There would be fewer differences of opinion occupying their minds, fewer bitter controversies between them, and less blind and reckless ambition to distort our interpretation of the Bible and devise novelties in religion. On the contrary, they would not dare to accept anything as biblical teaching which they had not derived from it in the clearest possible way. Sacrilegious persons, who have not been afraid to corrupt the Scriptures in so many places, would have been careful to avoid committing such a dreadful offence and kept their impious hands off them. But vice and ambition have in the end exercised so much influence that religion has been made to consist in defending purely human delusions

rather than in following the teachings of the Holy Spirit. Far from consisting of love, it has been turned, under the false labels of holy devotion and ardent zeal, into the promotion of conflict and dissemination of senseless hatred.

98 These bad things have been aggravated by superstition, which teaches people to despise reason, and nature, and revere and venerate only such things as conflict with these both. So it is hardly surprising that to enhance their admiration and reverence for scripture, men seek to interpret it in such a way that it seems to conflict altogether with reason and with nature. They imagine that the most profound mysteries are hidden in Holy Scripture and put all their energy into investigating these absurd issues while neglecting other matters which are useful. The fantasies they come up with they ascribe to the Holy Spirit, attempting to defend them with all the force and power of their passions. For this is how human beings are constructed: whatever they conceive purely with their intellects, they also defend purely with intellect and reason while, on the other hand, whatever opinions they derive from their passions, they defend with their passions.

[2] To extricate ourselves from such confusion and to free our minds from theological prejudices and the blind acceptance of human fictions as God's teaching, we need to analyse and discuss the true method of interpreting Scripture. For if we do not know this, we can know nothing for certain regarding what the Bible or the Holy Spirit wishes to teach. To formulate the matter succinctly, I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture, does not differ from the [correct] method of interpreting nature, but rather is wholly consonant with it. The [correct] method of interpreting nature consists above all in constructing a natural history, from which we derive the definitions of natural things, as from certain data. Likewise, to interpret Scripture, we need to assemble a genuine history of it and to deduce the thinking of the Bible's authors by valid inferences from this history, as from certain data and principles. Provided we admit no other criteria or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing its contents than what is drawn from Scripture itself and its history, we will always proceed without any danger of going astray, and we shall have the same assuredness in discussing things that surpass our understanding as in discussing things that we learn by the natural light of reason.

[3] But in order to be perfectly clear that this method is not only the sure way but also the only way, and is consistent with the method of interpreting nature, we should note that the Bible is very often concerned with things that cannot be deduced from principles known by the natural light of reason. For the greater part of it is composed of historical narratives and revelations. In particular, these histories contain miracles, that is (as we showed in the [previous chapter](#)), narratives of things unknown to nature adapted to the beliefs and judgments of the chroniclers who compiled them. Revelations likewise are adjusted to the beliefs of the prophets, as we showed in the [second chapter](#), and really do transcend human understanding. Consequently, knowledge of all these things, that is, of almost everything in Scripture, must be sought from the Bible itself, just as knowledge of nature has to be sought from nature itself. 99

[4] As for the moral teachings contained in the Bible, these can indeed be demonstrated from general concepts, but it cannot be demonstrated from general concepts that Scripture teaches them; this can only be made evident from Scripture itself. In fact, if we want to attest the divine character of Scripture objectively, we must establish from the Bible alone that it offers true moral doctrines. This is the only ground on which its divine character can be proven. For we have shown that this is principally what the assurance of the prophets derived from, that their minds were attuned to the right and the good; and this is what we need to be convinced of ourselves, if we are to have confidence in them. We have also already proven that God's divinity cannot be attested by miracles, not to mention the fact that miracles could also be performed by false prophets. Hence, the divine character of the Bible must needs be established by this one thing alone, that it teaches true virtue, something which can only be established from Scripture itself. Were this not the case, we could not acknowledge the Bible and its divine character without massively prejudging the issue. All of our knowledge of the Bible, hence, must be derived only from the Bible itself. Finally, Scripture does not offer definitions of the things which it speaks of, any more than does nature. Such definitions must be drawn from the various narratives about different things in Scripture just as definitions of natural things are deduced from the different actions of nature.

[5] The universal rule then for interpreting Scripture is to claim nothing as a biblical doctrine that we have not derived, by the closest possible

scrutiny, from its own [i.e. the Bible's] history.<sup>1</sup> What sort of thing a history of Scripture needs to be and what are the principal things it must deal with have now to be explained.

100 (1) Firstly, such a history must include the nature and properties of the language in which the biblical books were composed and which their authors were accustomed to speak. We can then investigate all the possible meanings that every single phrase in common usage can admit; and because all the writers of both the Old and the New Testament were Hebrews undeniably the history of the Hebrew language is more essential than anything else not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament which were first written in this language, but also those of the New Testament. For while the latter were propagated in other languages, they are full of Hebrew idioms.

(2) [Such a history] must gather together the opinions expressed in each individual book and organize them by subject so that we may have available by this means all the statements that are found on each topic. We should then make note of any that are ambiguous or obscure or seem to contradict others. By obscure expressions I mean those whose sense is difficult to elicit from the context of a passage while those whose meaning is readily elicited I call clear. I am not now speaking of how easily or otherwise their truth is grasped by reason; for we are concerned here only with their meaning, not with their truth. Moreover, in seeking the sense of Scripture we must take care especially not to be blinded by our own reasoning, in so far as it is founded on the principles of natural knowledge (not to mention our preconceptions). In order not to confuse the genuine sense of a passage with the truth of things, we must investigate a passage's sense only from its use of the language or from reasoning which accepts no other foundation than Scripture itself.

To make all this more clearly understood, I will give an example. Moses' statements, 'God is fire' and 'God is jealous' are as plain as possible so long as we attend exclusively to the meaning of the words, and therefore I class them as clear expressions, even though, with respect to truth and reason, they are exceedingly obscure. Moreover even though their literal sense conflicts with the natural light of reason, unless it is also clearly in conflict with the principles and fundamentals derived from investigating the history of Scripture we must still stick to this, the literal sense. Conversely, if the literal sense of these expressions is found to conflict with the principles drawn from Scripture, even if they are fully in agreement with reason, they will nevertheless need to be interpreted differently (i.e., metaphorically).

<sup>1</sup> *Ex ipsius historia.*

In order to know whether or not Moses believed that God is fire, we certainly must not argue on the basis of whether this statement agrees or conflicts with reason but only from other statements made by Moses himself. For example, since Moses also plainly teaches, in many passages, that God has no similarity with visible things in the sky or on earth or in the water, we must conclude that either this statement or all the others have to be interpreted metaphorically. But we should depart as little as possible from the literal sense, and therefore we must first ask whether this unique expression, 'God is fire', admits any but a literal sense, i.e., whether the word 'fire' has any other meaning apart from natural fire. If we do not find it signifying anything else in normal linguistic usage, that is how we must interpret the expression, however much it may conflict with reason. All the others, however much they agree with reason, will have to be accommodated to this one. Where linguistic usage does not permit this, such statements are irreconcilable, and hence we must suspend judgment about them. Now the word 'fire' also stands for anger and jealousy (see Job 31.12), and therefore Moses' statements are readily reconciled, and we are justified in concluding that they are one and the same. Again, Moses plainly teaches that God is jealous and nowhere teaches that God lacks emotions or mental passions. Hence, we must evidently deduce that this is what Moses believed, or at least what he wanted to teach, however much we may think this statement conflicts with reason. For, as we have already shown, we are not permitted to adjust the meaning of Scripture to the dictates of our reason or our preconceived opinions; all explanation of the Bible must be sought from the Bible alone. 101

(3) Finally our historical enquiry must explain the circumstances of all the books of the prophets whose memory has come down to us: the life, character and particular interests of the author of each individual book, who exactly he was, on what occasion he wrote, for whom and in what language. Then the fate of each book: namely how it was first received and whose hands it came into, how many variant readings there have been of its text, by whose decision it was received among the sacred books, and finally how all the books which are now accepted as sacred came to form a single corpus. All this, I contend, has to be dealt with in a history of the Bible.

It is important to know of the life, character and concerns of each writer, so that we may know which statements are meant as laws and which as moral doctrine; we are more readily able to explain someone's words, the better we know his mind and personality. It is also crucial to know on what occasion, at what time and for what people or age the various texts were written so that we may not confuse eternal doctrines with those that are merely temporary or useful only to a few people. It is essential, finally, to 102

know all the other things mentioned above, so that, apart from the question of authorship, we may also discover, for each book, whether it may have been contaminated with spurious passages or not; whether mistakes have crept in, and whether the mistakes have been corrected by unskilled or untrustworthy hands. It is vital to know all this, so that we will not be carried away by blind zeal or just accept whatever is put in front of us. We must acknowledge exclusively what is certain and unquestionable.

[6] Only when we have this history of Scripture before us and have made up our minds not to accept anything as a teaching of the prophets which does not follow from this history or may be very clearly derived from it, will it be time to begin investigating the minds of the prophets and the Holy Spirit. But this also requires a method and an order like we use for explaining nature on the basis of its history. In setting out to research natural history, we attempt first of all to investigate the things that are most universal and common to the whole of nature, *viz.* motion and rest and their laws and rules which nature always observes and by which it continually acts; from these we proceed by degrees to others that are less universal. Similarly we must first seek from the biblical history that which is most universal, the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture, something affirmed by all the biblical prophets as eternal doctrine of supreme value for all men: for example, that there is a God, one and omnipotent, who alone is to be adored and cares for all men, loving most those who worship Him and love their neighbour as themselves, etc. These and similar things, I contend, Scripture teaches so plainly and so explicitly throughout that no one has ever called its meaning into question in these matters. But Scripture does not teach expressly, as eternal doctrine, what God is, and how he sees all things and provides for them, and so on. On the contrary, as we have already seen above, the prophets themselves have no agreed view about these matters, so that on these questions nothing can be regarded as the teaching of the Holy Spirit, even if they can be decided very well by the natural light of reason.

[7] Once we have adequately got to know this universal doctrine of Scripture, we should then proceed to other less universal things which concern matters of daily life, flowing like rivulets from the universal teaching. Such are all the particular external actions of true virtue which can only be done when the opportunity arises. Anything found in the

Scriptures about these things which is obscure and ambiguous, should be explained and decided only by the Bible's universal doctrine, and where such passages are self-contradictory, we must consider on what occasion, when, and to whom they were written.

When Christ says, 'blessed are those who mourn, for they shall receive consolation', for example, we do not know from the text what he means by 'those who mourn'. But later he teaches that we should be anxious about nothing but the kingdom of God alone and its justice, and this is what he commends as the supreme good (see Matthew 6.33). From this it follows that by 'those who mourn' he means only those who mourn that the kingdom of God and justice are neglected by men; for only those can mourn this who love nothing but God's kingdom and justice, and wholly despise all fortune besides.

So too when he says, 'but to him who strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also', etc. Had Christ given these commands to judges as a legislator, he would have destroyed the Law of Moses by this edict. But he openly commends that Law (see Matthew 5.17); consequently, we must examine who it was exactly that said these things, to whom and at what time. Certainly, it was Christ who uttered them, but he was not laying down ordinances as a legislator. Rather he was offering doctrine as a teacher, because (as we showed above) it was less external actions that he sought to correct than people's minds. He pronounced these words to people who were oppressed and living in a corrupt state where justice was completely neglected, and he saw that the ruin of that state was imminent.

This very doctrine that Christ taught at a time when the city's desolation was imminent, we see that Jeremiah had also expounded at the time of the first destruction of the city (see Lamentations 3, letters Tet and Yod<sup>2</sup>). Hence, the prophets offered this teaching only at a time of oppression, and it is nowhere promulgated as a law. On the contrary, Moses (who did not write at a time of oppression, but, it should be noted, was striving to construct a well-ordered state) issued the edicts to pay an eye for an eye, even though he too condemned vengeance and hatred of one's neighbour. Thus, it most evidently follows from the very principles of Scripture itself, that the doctrine of suffering injury and giving way to impious men in everything, is appropriate only in places

104

<sup>2</sup> *Lamentations* 3.25–30.

where justice is neglected and in times of oppression, but not in a well-ordered state. Indeed in a viable state, where justice is protected, everyone is obliged, if he wants to be considered just, to prosecute wrongs before a court (see Leviticus 5.1), not so as to secure revenge (see Leviticus 19.17–18) but to defend justice and his country's laws and to ensure that wrongdoing does not pay. All of this fully accords with natural reason. I could give many other examples pointing in the same direction, but consider these sufficient to explicate my meaning and the usefulness of this method, which is what concerns me at present.

[8] So far we have explained only how to explore the meaning of biblical statements about questions of daily life. These are issues which are relatively easy to investigate since none of this was ever a subject of controversy for biblical writers. But other matters to be found in the Bible concerning purely philosophical questions, cannot be so easily resolved. The path to be followed here is thus more arduous. As we have already seen, the prophets disagreed among themselves in philosophical matters, and their narratives of things are very much adapted to the presuppositions of their respective times, and therefore we may not infer or explain the meaning of one prophet from clearer passages in another, unless it is absolutely evident that they both held exactly the same opinion. I will therefore now briefly explain how the mind of the prophets in such matters is to be investigated by an enquiry into Scripture.

Here too we must again begin from the most universal things, by inquiring first of all, from the clearest scriptural expressions, what prophecy or revelation is, and what it chiefly consists in. Then we must ask what a miracle is, and continue thus with the most general questions. From these we must descend to the opinions of each individual prophet, and from these in turn proceed finally to the sense of each particular  
105 revelation or prophecy, of each narrative and miracle. We have given many examples above, in the appropriate places, showing how much care is needed not to confuse the minds of the prophets and historians with the mind of the Holy Spirit, so I do not think I need to discuss this at greater length. I should remark, however, with regard to the meaning of revelations, that our method only teaches us to investigate what the prophets actually saw or heard, not what they intended to signify or represent by these visions; that we can only conjecture, since we certainly cannot deduce it from the principles of Scripture.



[9] We have offered a method for interpreting Scripture and at the same time demonstrated that this is the most certain and only way to uncover its true meaning. I grant that certainty about this last is easier to find for those, if they exist, who possess a solid tradition or a true exegesis inherited from the prophets themselves, such as the Pharisees claim to have, or those who possess a Pope who cannot err in the interpretation of scripture, as Roman Catholics proclaim. Since, however, we cannot be certain either about that tradition or papal authority, nothing certain can be grounded on either of these. The latter was denied by the earliest Christians and the former by the most ancient Jewish sects; further, if we then examine the chronology (apart from any other arguments) which the Pharisees inherited from their rabbis by which they trace this tradition back to Moses, we shall find that it is false, as I show in another place.<sup>3</sup>

This is why such a tradition should be altogether suspect to us. And although we are obliged, by our method, to consider one Jewish tradition as uncorrupt, namely the meaning of words in the Hebrew language we have received from them, we can still fairly have doubts about the former tradition while accepting the latter. For it could never have been of any use to change a word's meaning, but it might quite often have been useful to someone to alter the meaning of a passage. In fact it is extremely difficult to alter the meaning of a word; anyone who tried it would have at the same time to interpret in his own way and manner all the authors who have written in that language using that term in its accepted sense, or else with the greatest wariness corrupt the text. Again, the learned share with the common people in preserving a language, but the learned alone preserve books and the meanings of texts. Accordingly, we can easily conceive that the learned could have altered or perverted the sense of a passage in a very rare book which they had under their control, but not the significance of words. Anyone who attempts to change the meaning of a word to which he is accustomed will have great difficulty in afterwards sticking consistently to the change in his speech and writing. We are thus wholly convinced, for these and other reasons, that it could never have entered into anyone's head to corrupt a language but might certainly occur to someone to misrepresent the meaning of a writer by doctoring his texts or interpreting them wrongly.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 10 para. 17 below. pp. 153–4.

[10] Since our method, based on the principle that knowledge of the Bible is to be sought from Scripture alone, is the only true method, wherever it is unable to yield what is needed for a complete knowledge of Scripture, we must simply give up. I must now therefore point out the limitations and difficulties in this method's capacity to guide us towards a full and certain knowledge of the sacred books.

[11] Firstly, a major obstacle in this method is that it requires a perfect knowledge of the Hebrew language. But where is this to be sought? The ancient scholars of Hebrew have left nothing to posterity about the principles and structure of the language; at least we have absolutely nothing from them: no dictionary, no grammar, no book of rhetoric. The Jewish people have lost all their cultural and artistic accomplishments – no wonder, after suffering so many massacres and persecutions – and have held on to nothing but a few fragments of their language and a few books. Almost all the names of fruits, birds, fish, and very many other words, have perished through the ravages of time. Thus the meaning of many nouns and verbs occurring in the Bible is either completely unknown or disputed. Not only do we lack all this but, worst of all, we have no phrase-book of the language; for almost all the idioms and modes of speech peculiar to the Hebrew people have been erased from man's memory by all-devouring time.<sup>4</sup> We cannot therefore always discover, as we should, all the meanings of each and every phrase which usage of the language might yield, and there will be many statements expressed in distinctly known words whose sense will nevertheless still be highly obscure or utterly incomprehensible.

107 [12] Besides our inability fully to reconstruct the history of Hebrew, the very nature and structure of the language create so many uncertainties that it is impossible to devise a method<sup>5</sup> which will show us how to uncover the true sense of all the statements of Scripture with assurance. For besides the usual causes of ambiguity common to all tongues, there are certain other features of this language that produce a whole host of ambiguities. I think it is worth mentioning them here.

Firstly, a frequent source of vagueness and obscurity of expression in the Bible arises from the fact that all the letters of each single organ of speech are used interchangeably. Hebrew divides all the letters of the alphabet into

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.234 *tempus edax rerum*. <sup>5</sup> Spinoza's footnote: see Annotation 7.

five classes, according to the five organs of the mouth involved in pronunciation, i.e. the lips, the tongue, the teeth, the palate and the throat. For example, *alef*, *het*, *ayin* and *hē* are called gutturals, and one is used for another without any distinction, at least so far as we know. Similarly, *el*, which means 'to', is often used for *al*, which means 'above', and vice versa. This often renders all the parts of a phrase ambiguous or turns them into sounds devoid of meaning.

A second major source of ambiguity of phrases arises from the fact that conjunctions and adverbs have multiple significations. For instance, *vav* serves indifferently as a conjunction and disjunction: it can mean 'and', 'but', 'because', 'moreover' and 'then'. *ki* has seven or eight meanings: 'because', 'although', 'if', 'when', 'just as', 'that', 'burning', etc. It is the same with nearly all the particles.

The third ambiguity, that generates many others, is that verbs in the indicative have no present, imperfect, pluperfect, future perfect or other tenses which are usual in other languages; in the imperative and the infinitive they lack all but the present tense, and in the subjunctive they have no tenses at all. All these deficiencies of tense and mood can indeed be compensated for, very readily and neatly, from basic features of the language, following certain rules. But the earliest writers completely ignored them, and indifferently used the future tense for the present and past, and the past for the future, as well as the indicative for the imperative and subjunctive, and this has caused a good deal of uncertainty.

[13] Besides these three causes of obscurity in Hebrew, two others should be noted both of which are far more important. The first of these is that Hebrew has no letters for vowels. The second is that the Hebrews did not use punctuation marks to separate clauses or for any kind of expression or emphasis. While both these things (both vowels and signs) are normally indicated by points and accents, we cannot accept these uncritically because they were invented and inserted by critics of a later period, whose authority ought not to weigh with us. It is clear from an abundance of evidence that the ancient writers wrote without points (i.e., without vowels and accents). Later generations added these two features in accordance with their own interpretations of the biblical books. Hence, accents and points which we now have are merely recent interpretations, and deserve no more credit or authority than other explanations of these authors.

108

Those who do not know this criticize the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (11.21) for giving an interpretation of the text of Genesis 47.31 which is very wide of the reading of the pointed Hebrew text – as if the apostle should have learned the meaning of Scripture from those who inserted the points. My view is that it is, rather, the ‘pointers’ who are to blame. I will give both interpretations here, so that everyone may see this, and realize that the difference arises specifically from the lack of vowels. The ‘pointers’ interpreted this text, their points show, as meaning: ‘and Israel leaned over’ (or, changing *ayin* into *alef* which is a letter of the same organ of speech, ‘towards’) ‘the head of the bed’. But the author of the Letter interprets: ‘and Israel leant over the head of the stick’, because he is reading *mate* where others read *mita*, a difference arising solely from the vowels. Now this narrative is about the old age of Jacob, not about his sickness which comes in the [next chapter](#), and it therefore seems more likely that the historian meant that Jacob leaned on the head of the stick (which of course very old people use to support themselves) and not of the bed, especially since in this way there is no need to suppose any substitution of letters. My aim in giving this example is not just to reconcile the passage of the Letter to the Hebrews with the text of Genesis, but, more importantly, to show how little we should trust modern points and accents. Consequently, anyone who sets out to interpret Scripture without preconceptions is obliged to be sceptical about them and to study the text with fresh eyes.

109 [14] To return to our point, one may easily discern from the structure and nature of the Hebrew language that numerous ambiguities are inevitable, and that no method will resolve them all. We cannot hope for this to be completely achieved by comparing expressions with each other which we have shown is the only way of distinguishing the true sense from the many senses which an expression may admit in ordinary usage. This is because comparison of expressions can only throw light on an expression accidentally, since no prophet wrote with the intention of deliberately explaining either another’s words or his own. It is also because we can only infer the mind of one prophet, Apostle etc. from the mind of another in common, everyday matters, as we have already clearly shown but not when they speak about philosophical things or when they narrate miracles or historical events. I could also give some examples to show that many expressions that occur in Holy Scripture are inexplicable, but I prefer to

pass this over for the present, and proceed to make some further remarks about the difficulties and limitations of this the true method of interpreting Scripture.

[15] A further problem with this method is that it requires a history of the vicissitudes of all the biblical books, and most of this is unknown to us. For either we have no knowledge whatever of the authors, or (if you prefer) the compilers, of many of the books – or else we are uncertain about them, as I will demonstrate fully in the next chapters. Also, we do not know under what circumstances these books whose compilers are unknown were composed or when. Nor do we know into whose hands all these books subsequently came, or in whose copies so many variant readings occur, nor whether there may not have been many additional readings in others. I touched upon the need to know all this at one point but purposely omitted a few things which we should deal with now. If we read any book that contains incredible or incomprehensible things, or is written in very obscure language, and if we do not know its author or when and under what circumstances he wrote it, our efforts to get at its true sense will be fruitless. For if all this is unknown, we cannot ascertain what the author intended or might have intended. When, on the other hand, all these things are adequately known, we determine our thoughts so as not to make prejudicial judgments or attribute to the author, or person on whose behalf he wrote, either more or less than is correct, or take anything else into consideration but what the author could have had in mind, or what the period and context demanded.

110

This I think will be clear to everyone. It frequently happens that we read very similar stories in different books, about which we make quite contrasting judgments, depending on the different views we have of the writers. I remember once reading in a certain book that a man whose name was Orlando Furioso<sup>6</sup> was wont to drive a winged monster through the air and fly over any regions he wished, single-handedly killing large numbers of men and giants, and other fantasies of this kind, which are totally incomprehensible to our intellect. I have read a similar story in Ovid about Perseus,<sup>7</sup> and another in the books of Judges and Kings<sup>8</sup> about Samson (who alone and unarmed killed a thousand men) and Elijah,<sup>9</sup> who flew

<sup>6</sup> Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* 10.66.

<sup>7</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.600ff.

<sup>8</sup> Judges 15.9–16.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 2.11.

through the air and finally went off to heaven in a fiery chariot and horses. Yet although these stories, as I say, are very much alike, we nevertheless make a very different judgment about each of them. We persuade ourselves that the first writer intended to write only fables, the second poetical themes,<sup>10</sup> and the third sacred matters, and the only reason for such [differentiation] is the opinion we have about the writers. Thus it is vitally important to have some knowledge of the authors who have written things which are obscure or incomprehensible to the intellect, if we want to interpret their writings. For the same reasons, it is likewise vital, if we are to be able, when a passage is unintelligible, to reach a true reading from all the variants, to know in whose copy these readings were found and whether other readings have ever been encountered in the copies of other scribes of greater authority.

[16] Another and final difficulty in interpreting some biblical books by our method is that we do not now have them in the same language in which they were originally written. The Gospel of Matthew and without doubt also the Letter to the Hebrews are commonly believed to have been composed in Hebrew, but these versions are not extant. There is also some doubt in what language the book of Job was written. Ibn Ezra<sup>11</sup> asserts in his commentary that it was translated into Hebrew from another language and that this is the cause of its obscurity. I will not discuss the apocryphal books, since they are of very different authority.

[17] All these, then, are the difficulties of this method of interpreting Scripture on the basis of its own history which I undertook to describe. I think these difficulties are so great that I do not hesitate to affirm that in numerous passages either we do not know the true sense of Scripture or can only guess at it without any assurance. However, we must also stress that all these problems can only prevent our understanding the minds of the prophets in matters that are incomprehensible and which we can only imagine, and not those topics that are accessible to the intellect and of which we can readily form a clear conception.<sup>12</sup> For matters that by their nature are easily grasped can never be so obscurely phrased that they cannot be readily understood, according to the saying, a word is enough for

<sup>10</sup> Accepting the emendation 'res poeticas' for 'res politicas'.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Job*, 2.11. <sup>12</sup> Spinoza's footnote: see Annotation 8.

a wise man.<sup>13</sup> Euclid, who wrote nothing that was not eminently straightforward and highly intelligible, is easily explained by anyone in any language. In order to see his meaning and be certain of his sense there is no need to have a complete knowledge of the language in which he wrote, but only a very modest, even schoolboy, acquaintance with it, nor does one need to know the life, interests and character of the author, nor in what language he wrote, to whom and when, nor the subsequent fate of his book or its variant readings, nor how or by what Council it was authorized.

What is true of Euclid we may also say about all who have written about things that are intelligible via their own nature. We thus conclude that we can readily discover the meaning of the Bible's moral teaching from the history of it that we are able to reconstruct, and can be certain about its true sense. For the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most everyday language, since they are very common and extremely simple and easy to understand. And since true salvation and happiness consists in our intellect's genuine acquiescence [in what is true] and we truly acquiesce only in what we understand very clearly, it most evidently follows that we can securely grasp the meaning of Scripture in matters necessary for salvation and happiness. Consequently, there is no reason why we should be concerned to the same extent about the rest, given that for the most part we are unable to grasp it by reason or the intellect and it is therefore something more curious than useful.

112

[18] I have now explained, I think, the true method for interpreting Scripture, and sufficiently expounded my view of it. Moreover, I do not doubt that everyone now sees that this method requires no other light than that of natural reason. For the special character and excellence of this light chiefly consists in deducing and concluding by valid inferences from things known or accepted as known, matters that are imperfectly understood and this is all that our method requires. Admittedly, this procedure does not suffice to achieve certainty about everything in the biblical books, but this is due not to any defect in our methodology but because the path it shows to be the true and right one was never cultivated, or even ventured on, by men, so that owing to the passage of time, it became arduous and almost impassable, as is eminently clear, I think, from the difficulties that I have pointed out.

<sup>13</sup> Terence, *Phormio* 541, Plautus, *Persa* 729.

[19] It remains now to examine the views of those who disagree with us. First, I shall consider the opinion of those who hold that the natural light of reason does not have the power to interpret Scripture and that for this a supernatural light is absolutely essential.<sup>14</sup> What this light is which is beyond nature, I leave to them to explain. I, for my part, can only surmise that they have been trying to admit, in very obscure terms, that they are generally in doubt about the true sense of Scripture; for if we examine their interpretations, we shall find that they contain nothing supernatural, indeed nothing more than mere conjectures. Compare them if you will with the interpretations of those who frankly admit that they have no light beyond the natural light – they will be found to be entirely comparable to them; that is, they are just human conceptions, the result of hard work and much thought.

As for their claim that the natural light of reason is not adequate for this task, it is evident that this is false. We have already proved that none of the difficulties in the interpretation of Scripture arises from the inadequacy of the natural light, but only from human carelessness (not to mention malice) in neglecting to construct the history of the Bible when it would have been possible to do so. It is also due (as everyone, I think, would admit) to this supernatural light being a divine gift bestowed only on the faithful. But the prophets and Apostles used to preach not only to the faithful but, primarily, to unbelievers and impious persons, who were thus enabled to understand the meaning of the prophets and Apostles. Otherwise the  
113 prophets and Apostles would have appeared to be preaching to little children and infants, not to people endowed with reason; it would have been pointless for Moses to make laws if they could be understood only by the faithful who need no law. Hence those who postulate the need for a supernatural light to interpret the minds of the prophets and Apostles truly seem to be lacking in natural light themselves; so I am very far from believing that such men have a divine supernatural gift.

[20] Maimonides' view, though, was very different. He thought that every passage of Scripture yields various, even contradictory, senses and that we cannot be certain of the truth of any of them unless we know that

<sup>14</sup> Presumably, Spinoza is chiefly thinking here of such Dutch Collegiant Bible critics as Petrus Serrarius (1600–9), Jan Pietersz. Beelthower (c. 1603–c. 1669), and his close friend Jarig Jelles (c. 1620–83), all of whom he knew well since his early years in Amsterdam and with whom he had doubtless often debated.



that passage which we are interpreting, contains nothing that is contrary to or that does not accord with reason. If its literal sense is found to conflict with reason, no matter how evident that may seem to be in itself, he insists it should then be construed differently. He makes this absolutely plain in his *More Nebuchim*<sup>15</sup> Part II, Chapter 25, where he says: 'Know that we do not refrain from saying that the world has existed from eternity on account of texts in Scripture about the creation of the world. For the passages teaching that the world was created are no more numerous than those which teach that God is corporeal. None of the ways by which we might explain the texts on the creation of the world are barred to us or even obstructed; indeed, we could have used the same method to interpret these as we used to reject the corporality of God. It might even have been much easier. We might have been able to explain these texts more naturally and find more support [in Scripture] for the eternity of the world than we found for the view that the blessed God is corporeal, which, on our interpretation, Scripture excludes. But two reasons persuade me not to do this and not to believe this' (namely, that the world is eternal). 'Firstly, because there is clear proof that God is not corporeal, and it is necessary to explain all the passages whose literal sense is in conflict with this proof, for it is certain that they will have an explanation' (other than the literal one). 'But there is no proof of the eternity of the world; and therefore it is not necessary, in quest of such a conception, to do violence to Scripture for the sake of an apparent opinion since we would accept its contrary if we found a convincing argument for it. The second reason is that to believe that God is incorporeal is not in conflict with the fundamentals of the Law, etc. But to believe in the eternity of the world in the manner in which Aristotle held destroys the Law from its foundations, etc.'

114

These are the words of Maimonides, from which what we have just said plainly follows. For if it was clear to him on the basis of reason that the world was eternal, he would not hesitate to bend Scripture to devise an interpretation that would ultimately render it saying apparently the same thing. In fact, he would be immediately convinced that Scripture intended to teach the eternity of the world, despite the fact that it everywhere says the opposite. Hence, it is impossible for him to be certain of the Bible's true meaning, however plain it may be, as long as he can doubt the truth of

<sup>15</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.25.

what is stated there, or as long as its truth is not fully evident to him. For while the truth of a thing is not evident we will not know whether it agrees with reason or contradicts it and, consequently, will also not know whether the literal sense is true or false. Were this approach indeed the correct one, I absolutely agree that we would then need something beyond the natural light for interpreting Scripture. For there is almost nothing in the Bible that can be deduced from principles known by the natural light of reason (as we have already shown), and therefore we simply cannot be certain about their truth by means of the natural light. Hence, we could not be certain about the true meaning and sense of Scripture either, and we would necessarily need another light.

Again, were this conception [of Maimonides] correct, it would follow that the common people, who for the most part do not understand proofs or do not have time to examine them, will only be able to reach any conclusion at all about Scripture on the sole authority and testimony of philosophers, and consequently would have to suppose that philosophers cannot err in interpreting Scripture. This would surely produce a new ecclesiastical authority and a novel species of priest or pontiff, which would more likely be mocked than venerated by the common people.

115 While our method requires a knowledge of Hebrew and the common people likewise have no time to study that, no such objection weakens our position. For the Jewish and gentile common people for whom in their day the prophets and Apostles preached and wrote, understood their language so that they also grasped the prophets' meaning. Yet they did not understand the reasons for what the prophets preached, though, according to Maimonides, they needed to know them if they were going to grasp their meaning. Under our methodological scheme, hence, it need not follow that the common people must accept the testimony of interpreters. I can point to the common people who understood very well the language of the prophets and Apostles, but Maimonides will not be able to point to any common people who understand the causes of things and grasp their meaning on that basis. As far as the common people of today, are concerned, we have already shown that they can readily grasp in any language everything necessary for salvation as this is all entirely normal and familiar, even if they are ignorant about the reasons for what is required; and the common people rely on this understanding, and certainly not on the testimony of interpreters. As for everything else, there they are in the same position as the learned.

[21] But let us return to Maimonides' stance and look at it more carefully. Firstly, it presupposes that the prophets agreed among themselves in everything and were consummate philosophers and theologians; for he insists that they reached conclusions from the truth of things which we showed in chapter 2 to be false. Then his position assumes that the sense of Scripture cannot be established from the Bible itself; for the truth of things is not established from Scripture since it offers no demonstration of anything, and does not teach the things about which it speaks by means of definitions and their own first causes. According to Maimonides, therefore, its true sense cannot be established from itself and should not be sought from the Bible itself. But it is evident from this chapter that this too is incorrect. We have shown by both reason and examples that the sense of Scripture is established from the Bible itself and, even when it speaks about things known by the natural light of reason, is to be sought from the Bible alone. Finally, his view assumes that we are permitted to explain and distort the words of Scripture according to our own preconceived opinions, and to reject the literal sense, even when it is perfectly lucid and explicit, and bend it to some other sense. Apart from the fact that such liberty is diametrically opposed to what we have proved in this and other chapters, nobody can fail to see that it is excessively audacious.

But suppose we granted such great freedom, what does it achieve? Assuredly, nothing at all. For those things that are indemonstrable and which compose the larger part of Scripture cannot be investigated by this procedure nor explained or interpreted by this approach. Whereas, on the other hand, by following our method, we can explain many such things and discuss them with assurance, as we have already shown both by reason and by the fact itself. As for whatever is comprehensible from its nature, its sense, as we have already shown, can readily be derived from the context of what is said. Hence the method [of Maimonides] is plainly useless. It also utterly deprives the common people of the assurance they derive from conscientious reading and which everyone can have of the sense of Scripture by following a different method. This is why we dismiss this opinion of Maimonides as harmful, useless and absurd. 116

[22] As for the tradition of the Pharisees, we have already noted above that it is inconsistent with itself while the authority of the Roman Popes requires clearer evidence, and for this reason alone I reject it. For if they could prove [their authority] to us from Scripture itself and with the same

certainty as the Hebrew high priests could once do, it would not worry me that among the Roman Popes there have been a number of heretics and impious men. For formerly among the Hebrews heretics and impious men were also to be found who acquired the supreme pontificate by dubious means and yet nevertheless wielded, by edict of Scripture, the supreme power of interpreting the law. See Deuteronomy 17.11–12 and 33.10 and Malachi 2.8. But as they produce no such testimony, their authority remains wholly suspect.

117 In case anyone is misled by the example of the Hebrew High Priest to believe that the Catholic religion too requires a high priest, one must remark that the laws of Moses were the public laws of a country and necessarily needed therefore a public authority for their preservation. If every individual had the liberty to interpret the public laws at his own discretion, no state could survive; it would immediately be dissolved by this very fact, and public law would be private law. It is wholly different with religion. Since it does not consist so much in external actions as in simplicity and truth of mind, it does not belong to any public law or authority. For simplicity and truth of mind are not instilled in men by the power of laws or by public authority, and absolutely no one can be compelled to be happy by force of law. It requires rather pious and fraternal advice, a proper upbringing and, more than anything else, one's own free judgment. Since therefore the supreme right of thinking freely, about religion also, belongs to each and every individual, and it cannot be conceived that anyone could surrender this right, every individual will also possess the supreme right and authority to judge freely about religion and to explain it and interpret it for himself. The reason why the supreme authority in interpreting the laws and the supreme judgment on public questions lie with the magistrate is simply because they are matters of public right. For the same reason the authority to interpret religion and make judgments about it, will lie with each individual man, because it is a question of individual right.

It is therefore far from being the case that the authority of the Roman Pontiff to interpret religion can be inferred from the authority of the Hebrew High Priest to interpret the laws; on the contrary, one may more readily conclude from this that it is principally the individual who possesses this authority. And as the highest authority to interpret Scripture rests with each individual, the rule of interpretation must be nothing other than the natural light of reason which is common to all men, and

not some light above nature or any external authority. The criterion should not be so difficult that it cannot be applied by any but the most acute philosophers, but should be adapted to the natural and common intelligence and capacity of [all] human beings, as we have shown that our norm is; for we have seen that the difficulties which it continues to present have their origin not in the nature of the method but in men's carelessness.