Chapter 5

Miracles

In 1714, on the occasion of his inauguration as professor of natural and mathematical philosophy at the University of Altdorf, Johann Heinrich Müller gave a lecture with the title "On Miracles." Müller defined a miracle as "a certain unusual operation . . . producing such an effect, whose cause (*ratio*) cannot in any way be explained through the ordinary laws of nature, but rather is wholly contrary to them, and therefore requires that these necessarily be suspended for a time and that others be substituted in their place."[1] He then goes on to investigate whether miracles, so defined, are possible, and in particular how the laws of motion might be suspended. He concludes that since the laws of nature are themselves freely instituted by God, such a suspension is "not absolutely impossible," and is in fact required in the light of God's absolute power, not to mention his liberty and wisdom. "No one," he says, "can be dubious as to the possibility of miracles."[2] No one, that is, except Spinoza, "the most famous restorer and propagator of the myth whereby God is not distinct from the universe" and author of an "abominable hypothesis" on the topic of miracles.[3]

There are many things that Spinoza says in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that offended religious sensibilities of the time. But nothing appeared to his contemporaries to have as far-reaching and (from a religious perspective) pernicious consequences as his discussion of miracles in chapter six of the work. As the historian Jonathan Israel has noted, "no other element of Spinoza's philosophy provoked as much consternation and outrage in his own time as his sweeping denial of miracles and the supernatural."[4] If, as

Spinoza claimed, there was no such thing as miracles, understood as divine interventions in the course of nature and human history, then it would seem to follow that divine providence is fatally undermined and Scripture's narratives of miraculous happenings are nothing but fairy tales. When Hobbes said after reading the *Treatise* that the author of the work "had outthrown him a bar's length, for he durst not write so boldly," what most likely so astounded the usually unflappable Englishman was Spinoza's account of miracles.[5]

Philosophers of a progressive persuasion in the seventeenth century were committed to the new science of nature. For thinkers such as Galileo, Descartes, Huygens, Boyle, Newton, and others, explanations of natural phenomena in the physical realm were to be framed solely in terms of matter in motion. Gone were the "occult" powers of medieval Aristotelian Scholasticism, which explained phenomena by virtue of immaterial forms or qualities that inhabit and animate bodies and, like "little minds" (to quote Descartes, a harsh critic of the Scholastic system), were supposed to move them just as the human soul moves the human body. In the new philosophy, everything was explained in mechanistic terms, through the impact, conglomeration, and separation of material parts according to fixed laws of nature.

In the world of early modern mechanism, explanations of why things ordinarily come about make no appeal to an intelligent agent that, acting with a goal in mind, willfully directs them in a certain manner.[6] But this does not mean, on the other hand, that phenomena result from some spontaneous generation out of nothing. For the mechanist—at least insofar as he is engaged in science—there are neither purposes nor randomness in nature. Rather, whatever happens, happens because of antecedent causes that necessitate their effects. For the proponents of the new science, nature behaves in lawlike ways; its processes are reduced to causal chains, each link of which is nothing but matter in motion

or at rest. They believed that this framework, which could be captured with mathematical precision, made possible perspicuous and informative theories of natural phenomena, theories with real explanatory power and predictive utility.

Still, this was the seventeenth century—a period in which Christian nations went to war with each other over religious differences, people were thrown into prison (and sometimes burned at the stake) for heresy, and books were placed on the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books if they were deemed inconsistent with the dogmas of the faith. No philosophy of nature, no matter how progressive, could dispense entirely with the divine. Nature may operate through uniform material causes behaving with nomological necessity, but it was still God's creation. The world was not an independent, self-subsisting system of mechanistic agents devoid of providential oversight. There may not be mindlike forms or qualities intelligently directing the course of events from within nature—heavy bodies no longer "seek" their natural resting place at the earth's center—but early modern philosophers and scientists were not about to adopt the Epicurean model of a world generated and governed only by blind necessity.

Thus, Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* of 1637, claimed that the most general laws of physics that govern all bodily phenomena were themselves instituted by God when he created the world. We may not be able fully to penetrate the divine wisdom and understand in all cases why God has arranged things as he did. But Descartes was not willing to deny that such arrangements testify to divine providence and benevolence.[7] Likewise, the German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of the most brilliant minds of his time and a leading physicist in the mechanistic tradition, argued that the existence itself of the world can be explained only by God's wise and determinate choice of it as the best of all possible worlds, while Newton insisted that the way in which bodies behave according to natural laws is the best evidence of God's dominion. Indeed, Newton claimed, there is no better example of supernatural providence than the

mathematically describable operation of the force of gravity. In the Age of Reason, God had as great a role to play in the regular course of nature as ever.

Still, God's creation of the world and ordinary concourse with its operations is one thing; his miraculous intervention is, at least to most philosophers of the period, quite another. Considerations about the divine will and providence need not make any significant difference in the way science is done.[8] As Leibniz insisted, such metaphysical questions, while important for establishing the foundations of physics, were not a part of physics proper. But once the possibility of miracles is allowed, the necessity of nature is threatened and its lawlike regularity open (at least in principle) to exceptions. Conversely, the alleged necessity of nature threatens the possibility of any miraculous exceptions to its operations. There was a serious tension at the heart of early modern mechanism for its more pious proponents.

A miracle is typically understood to be a divinely caused event that contravenes or at least surpasses the natural order. Such a supernatural occurrence might be an explicit violation of the laws of nature, such as a body being moved by God contrary to the laws of physics or suddenly transmogrified into another substance altogether. Thus, Scripture relates that God caused the waters of the Red Sea to part for the Israelites on the exodus from Egypt, Aaron's rod to turn into a serpent (Exodus 7.8–11), and the sun to cease its motion across the sky so that Joshua might have more time to take vengeance upon Israel's enemies (Joshua 10.12–15: "The sun stayed in mid-heaven and made no haste to set for almost a whole day"). Or, to use a distinction employed by some medieval thinkers, a miracle might be an event that, while itself not inconsistent with nature's laws, either occurs displaced from the natural order of things (the example given by Thomas Aquinas is a human being living again *after* having died), or is an extraordinary and statistically unusual event that nature *could* possibly explain but is in fact brought about not by the operation of natural causes but by God (for example, Daniel's emerging from the lions' den unscathed), or is a perfectly ordinary event that

nature *does* usually do (such as healing the sick) but that in this rare case is explained by the divine power alone.[9]

Philosophical discussions of miracles in the Middle Ages focused not only on the definition of what a miracle is but also on God's modus operandi in generating miracles. Few thinkers believed that God's causal role here consisted in multiple, ad hoc interventions tailored to particular occasions, with God acting at the proper moment to introduce a temporary change in nature's order. This might be the conception of miracles that best captures the popular imagination. However, to many medieval philosophers it seemed too fanciful and anthropomorphic (and perhaps insufficiently prescient) a conception of divine agency, one that was inconsistent with divine simplicity, omniscience, and wisdom. Rather, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers of this extended period were more likely to see miracles as having been embedded in the course of events at creation. God, operating with a preconceived plan, knows exactly what must happen and when, both according to and notwithstanding the laws of nature. He then so orders things from the start that miracles or exceptions to those laws arise on the appropriate occasion. This might happen either through God so crafting the nature of a thing (such as Aaron's rod) that at a certain point in time it will, through that nature, take on a new and unusual form (a serpent); or with God introducing into the planned course of nature, and *despite* the natures of things, temporary exceptions to those natures and suspensions of nature's laws and operations. In either case, the implanted miracle occurs as an ordained item in the series of events as this unfolds over time. As one medieval philosopher described this position,

> all miracles which deviate from the natural course of events, whether they have already occurred or, according to promise, are to take place in the future, were foreordained by the Divine Will during the six days of creation, nature being then so constituted that those miracles which were to happen really did afterward take place. Then, when such an occurrence happens at its proper time, it may have been regarded as an absolute innovation, where in reality it was not.[10]

Because the miracle has been decreed by God, it occurs of necessity; but the necessity of nature itself, as represented by its laws, is thereby disrupted.

This debate over the nature of God's activity and the generation of miracles carried over into the seventeenth century and engaged many of Spinoza's contemporaries. The French intellectual Pierre Bayle, a Calvinist refugee who would eventually settle in Rotterdam, may be one of the few in this period who believed that *if* there were miracles (and he seems to have wanted to minimize their occurrence), they were ad hoc divine interventions designed to subvert the operations of nature in a particular case.[11] Leibniz, on the other hand, insisted that a world in which God needs continuously to introduce miracles is a rather imperfect world needing constant upkeep, and is hardly worthy of God's choice.[12] Miracles, he believed, are a divinely instituted and preprogrammed part of nature's general order, not a disruption of it, although such extraordinary events surpass the natural powers of created beings.[13]

The devotion of the most progressive thinkers to mechanistic explanations in science and a nature governed by laws and causal necessity did not diminish their commitment to finding room for miracles. Indeed, since antiquity, philosophers working in Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin generally regarded it as a serious shortcoming of any philosophy of nature if it rendered miracles impossible. There is necessity, and then there is *necessity*. Aristotle's system of nature is governed by causal necessity, but it seemed to his later critics to be a necessity so extreme that miracles were impossible. The unchanging, eternal Unmoved Mover does not, cannot, intervene in nature.[14] Many religious thinkers, even those partial to Aristotelianism in general, thus reject this particular feature of the Peripatetic philosophy. They complain that Aristotle's doctrine of the uncreated eternity of the world and the consequent necessity of its existence and all its contents leaves no room for miraculous changes in things and thereby threatens God's governance of his creation.

For nearly all medieval and early modern philosophers, then, the metaphysical possibility of miracles is nonnegotiable.

Whether out of sincere piety or from a desire not to run afoul of the theological faculties, Spinoza's predecessors and contemporaries were not willing to rule out, at least in principle, divinely caused suspensions of the regular course of nature. God may not be able to do what is logically impossible—he cannot make a square circle—but he can surely do what is naturally impossible. This is because the limits of what is naturally possible—that is, the laws of nature—are established by God.

Equally important as the issue of what miracles are and how they occur is the question of what purpose they serve. And here, too, there is broad consensus across the religious and philosophical traditions. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers; Aristotelians, Platonists, and Cartesians; rationalists, empiricists, and voluntarists—they all believed that miracles do indeed serve a purpose, although not necessarily a purpose whose rationale is accessible to human understanding. Regardless of how one understood the nature of miracles—whether as on-the-spot supernatural interventions or divinely preplanted disruptions of nature's regularity—it was agreed that God does not act capriciously. Miracles are providential events and have religious and moral significance.

Thinkers may differ on the details of how exactly miracles fit into God's providential purposes. For some, miracles serve to attest to God's presence and power; for others, they are used by God to convey important messages or warnings. Miracles are often said to provide certainty for prophetic claims (anyone can pretend to be a prophet, but a true prophet establishes his credentials with a miracle), and they are sometimes seen as aiding the historical progress of God's plan when human obstinacy stands in its way. Of course, the Bible's miracles do all of these things, and the disagreement is often only about how the narrative of the miracle is to be interpreted: Is it to be read literally or metaphorically? Is the miracle to be seen as the communication of some truth or merely as a practical expedient for moving things along?

Even the most rationalistic philosophers took these questions very seriously. It may be, as one scholar notes, that the clash between religious tradition and philosophical speculation is most

acute on the question of miracles, particularly as these represent a threat to the rational understanding of the world.[15] Depending on the ancient sources a later philosopher favored and the religious tradition to which he belonged (nominally or with a deep faith), he was partial to one or another solution. But any disagreements on the nature and extent of God's miraculous and supernatural involvement in the world were strictly intramural and took place against the background of general agreement that such involvement could occur and, at least at a certain period in history, did.

In one of Spinoza's early writings, the "Metaphysical Thoughts" appended to his geometric exposition of Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* and published in 1663 under his own name, he provides a glimpse of his mature view of miracles, although he is somewhat cautious about stating things too explicitly:

> There is the ordinary power of God, and his extraordinary power. The ordinary is that by which he preserves the world in a certain order; the extraordinary is exercised when he does something beyond the order of nature, e.g., all miracles, such as the speaking of an ass, the appearance of angels, and the like.
>
> Concerning this last there could, not without reason, be considerable doubt. For it seems a greater miracle if God always governs the world with one and the same fixed and immutable order, than if, on account of human folly, he abrogates the laws which (as only one thoroughly blinded could deny) he himself has most excellently decreed in nature, from sheer freedom. But we leave this for the theologians to settle.[16]

Miracles are dubious at best, an inferior testimony to God's power, but it remains unsaid whether or not they are at least possible.

Several years later, in the *Treatise*, the caution has disappeared. Miracles in the traditional sense, Spinoza now boldly says, are an "absurdity" and the belief in them sheer "folly." Not only are they

unnecessary for, even contrary to, real piety, but they are inconsistent with the true nature of God and the proper metaphysical account of the universe. Miracle stories are convenient tools long used by ecclesiastics to manipulate the credulity of the masses. Holding up Scripture—with its tales of parting seas, talking donkeys, and the dead being brought back to life—to bolster their authority, preachers are thereby able to exercise control over people's spiritual lives and even civil society. Spinoza's attack on the belief in miracles thus represents an important element in his overall theological-political project.

According to the "multitudes" (*vulgi*), Spinoza says, a miracle occurs when "nature for that time suspended her action, or her order was temporarily interrupted." It is an event that occurs not through natural causes but through supernatural intervention. It represents the action of a transcendent God who is "lawgiver and ruler" and who is endowed with the psychological and moral characteristics of will, wisdom, justice, and mercy. According to this confused and imaginative conception, such a divinity, having created nature out of nothing, will on occasion suspend its operations for a providential purpose.

> Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature, though the latter is determined in a definite way by God, or—as is the prevailing opinion nowadays—created by God. What they mean by the two powers, and what by God and Nature, they have no idea, except that they imagine God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate, and Nature's power to be a kind of force and energy. Therefore unusual works of Nature are termed miracles, or works of God, by the common people; and partly from piety, partly for the sake of opposing those who cultivate the natural sciences, they prefer to remain in ignorance of natural causes, and are eager to hear only of what is least comprehensible to them and consequently evokes their greatest wonder.

This attitude is commonly held to be the properly devout one and the most conducive to the true awe of God.

> Naturally so, since it is only by abolishing natural causes and imagining supernatural events that they are able to worship God and refer all things to God's governance and God's will; and it is when they imagine Nature's power subdued, as it were, by God that they most admire God's power.

In fact, Spinoza insists, those who think this way "have no sound conception either of God or of nature. They confuse God's decisions with human decisions, and they imagine nature to be so limited that they believe man to be its chief part."[17] Anyone with true understanding knows that it is absolutely impossible for an event to occur that is a violation of nature's laws and processes—not because God, standing apart from nature, is impotent to transgress its order, but because that order just *is* the unique expression of God's power.

Spinoza's main argument against miracles in the *Treatise* does not presume that one accepts his own philosophical conception of *Deus sive Natura*. He begins with the claim that whatever God, by definition an eternal and necessary being, understands through the divine wisdom involves "eternal necessity and truth." But since in God will and intellect are one and the same thing—there can be no multiplicity of faculties in God—to say that God understands something is thereby to say that God wills it. Therefore, whatever God wills also must involve eternal necessity and truth. God's will, just like God's wisdom, is eternal and immutable. It cannot change. "The necessity whereby it follows from the divine nature and perfection that God understands some thing as it is, is the same necessity from which it follows that God wills that thing as it is." Since whatever is true is true only because of divine decree, "the universal laws of Nature are merely God's decrees, following from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature." Therefore, if anything were to happen contrary to Nature's laws, it would happen contrary to God's decrees. That is, God, in causing a supernatural miracle, would be acting in opposition to himself. "If anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain

that God acts contrary to His own nature—than which nothing could be more absurd."[18]

Moreover, if miracles did in fact occur, Spinoza insists, they would testify not to God's infinite and eternal power but, on the contrary, to his limitations and even impotence. For a system that requires outside interventions must be a rather imperfect system, and thus reflect the incapacities or lack of foresight of its creator. The belief in miracles implies that

> God created Nature so ineffective and prescribed for her laws and rules so barren that he is often constrained to come once more to her rescue if he wants her to be preserved, and the course of events to be as he desires. This I consider to be utterly divorced from reason.[19]

Nature, as Spinoza describes it in the *Treatise*, observes a "fixed and immutable order"; its laws involve "eternal necessity and truth," and thus they are inviolable. Whatever happens, happens with necessity, even if that necessity is not always manifest to us and we are therefore occasionally tempted to see contingency in nature.

While Spinoza speaks in the *Treatise* of the "virtue and power of Nature" being identical with "the very virtue and power of God," and of the "laws and rules of Nature" being "God's eternal decrees and volitions," he stops short of explaining exactly what this is supposed to mean. His argument here against miracles, because it refers to God's "will," "decrees," and "wisdom," seems perfectly compatible with the traditional picture of God. Spinoza is trying to show that even those who are wedded to such a conception of God, as anthropomorphic as it might be, must deny the possibility of miracles. Still, *Deus sive Natura* is never far away. It is not too difficult to see behind these claims in the *Treatise*, barely concealed, the metaphysical theology and necessitarian conception of natural phenomena more extensively presented and argued for in the *Ethics*.

As we have seen, for Spinoza, God or Nature—being one and the same thing—just is the whole, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing, active system of the universe within which absolutely everything exists. This is the fundamental principle of the *Ethics* that one might see in the *Treatise*'s claim that "the power of Nature

is the divine power." In the *Ethics*, the first necessary and eternal effects of this substance's power—in particular, the first effects of its most general "attributes" or ways of being (Thought, Extension, etc.)—are the principles and laws that govern all things; for example, within the attribute of Extension, the laws of physics governing the motion of bodies. Following from these first effects, with equal necessity from God or Nature, is the world itself, an eternal and infinite series of durationally existing finite things (that is, a series populated by the familiar items around us).[20] Because the laws of nature and the world of existing things follow with absolute necessity from an eternal and absolutely necessary being (that is, God or Nature itself), the world and its particular train of events could not have been otherwise than as it is.

Spinoza's cosmos is, in other words, a strictly deterministic, even necessitarian one. Everything, without exception, is causally determined to be such as it is; and, given its causes, no thing could possibly have been otherwise. Moreover, because the ultimate and most general causes themselves (the attributes of God or Nature and the laws that derive from them) from which all other causes follow exist with absolute metaphysical or logical necessity, Spinoza concludes there is no contingency whatsoever in the universe: not for the universe itself, and not for anything within it: "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way."[21]

In short, for Spinoza the actual world is the *only* possible world. If it is absolutely impossible for God to exist but the particular series of finite individuals and states of affairs that makes up this world not to exist; and if God's (Nature's) existence is, as Spinoza argues, absolutely necessary in itself, then this world is the only possible world.[22] This extraordinary claim is something that Spinoza seems to embrace. "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced."[23] The only way there could be a different world, for "the order of nature" to be different, is if God's nature, from which that order necessarily follows, could be different. But since God's nature is absolutely

necessary in itself, that nature could not possibly have been different. Therefore, the world of things—including the unfolding of events over time—no less than the universal features of the cosmos, has to be what it is and could not have been otherwise.

It should be clear from all this, as well, that in the *Ethics*, Spinoza is denying that there is any such thing as the *creation* of the world, if what is meant by that is that God exists before voluntarily bringing the world into being ex nihilo, from a prior state of nonbeing, and that God could also have *not* brought the world into being. If, as Spinoza claims, the world of existing things is a necessary and co-eternal effect of God's (Nature's) being, it is absolutely impossible for God to exist but the world not to exist. Spinoza thereby rejects the opening chapters of the Bible as an imaginative fiction. But, as many philosophers have recognized, where creation goes, so goes miracles. A world co-eternal with God is not open to divine interventions.

In Spinoza's metaphysics, the necessity that governs the universe—in its origins and in its inner workings—is nothing less than the absolute necessity found among the truths of mathematics. This is a conclusion that he is not shy about publicly proclaiming. In the early publication "Metaphysical Thoughts," he asserts that "if men understood clearly the whole order of Nature, they would find all things just as necessary as are all those treated in Mathematics."[24] Mathematical necessity allows for no exceptions. And without exceptions, there are no miracles.

Spinoza knows the dangerous path he is treading in the *Ethics*. After demonstrating that "all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature" and are never brought about by anything except purely natural causes, Spinoza lambasts those who resort to the will of God to explain things whose natural causes they do not understand. He complains that they thereby take refuge in "the sanctuary of ignorance" but are lauded for their piety. By contrast,

> one who seeks the true causes of miracles, and is eager, like an educated man, to understand natural things, not to wonder at them, like a fool, is generally considered and denounced as an impious heretic

> by those whom the people honor as interpreters of nature and the Gods. For they know that if ignorance is taken away, then foolish wonder, the only means they have of arguing and defending their authority is also taken away.[25]

There are serious religious, even political matters at stake in the realm of miracles.[26]

The first readers of the *Treatise* would have known nothing of Spinoza's necessitarianism and the philosophical theology on which it rests (aside from what they may have gleaned, with sufficient care, from the "Metaphysical Thoughts"). But neither did Spinoza want the message of the *Treatise* to be dependent on the more radical theological theses of the *Ethics*. Most of his audience was not sufficiently prepared for those deeper and more difficult (and possibly more disturbing) insights, and the success of the theological-political appeal being made by the *Treatise* must not be made to rest on them. Thus, Spinoza had to accommodate these readers by not revealing too much of his views on God and Nature.[27]

Still, the conclusion that Spinoza draws in the *Treatise* captures well, if in nongeometric format, the important metaphysical lessons of the *Ethics*: "Nothing happens in Nature that does not follow from her laws . . . her laws cover everything that is conceived even by the divine intellect, and . . . Nature observes a fixed and immutable order."[28] The belief in miracles is an expression not of pious insight but of ignorance. Or, as Spinoza puts it in a letter to Oldenburg, "miracles and ignorance are the same."[29]

In fact, it is precisely this perspective that allows Spinoza to concede that there is a meaningful sense in which we *can* speak of miracles. Rather than supernatural violations of nature, however, a miracle should properly be understood simply as an event whose natural causal explanation remains unknown. "The word *miracle* can be understood only with respect to men's beliefs, and means simply an event whose natural cause we—or at any rate the writer or narrator of the miracle—cannot explain by comparison with any other normal event."[30] It may be that the event can indeed be explained in accordance with the current state of

scientific knowledge, in which case the label "miracle" is relative only to the narrator's own ignorance of science and nature and to his aims in writing his narrative. The biblical writers—"men of old [*antiqui*]," Spinoza calls them—being generally unlearned in science but also desirous of instilling awe among their audience, were thus given to ascribing wonderful and unusual events to the will of God. When the rainbow appears to Noah as the flood waters recede, which Spinoza notes is "nothing other than the refraction and reflection of the sun's rays which they undergo in droplets of water," this is described by the writer of the passage as "God setting the rainbow in the cloud":

> There can be no doubt that all the events narrated in Scripture occurred naturally; yet they are referred to God because . . . it is not the part of Scripture to explain events through their natural causes; it only relates to those events that strike the imagination, employing such method and style as best serves to excite wonder, and consequently to instill piety in the minds of the masses.[31]

Because the biblical writer and his audience, "the common people," are generally unfamiliar with the physics behind the phenomenon of the rainbow, they readily refer all such phenomena that cannot be assimilated to "a similar happening [in the past] which is ordinarily regarded without wonder" to divine intervention.

Or perhaps the ignorance belongs not only to the narrator of the miracle but also to the scientific and philosophical community at-large, which has yet to fully understand the particular laws governing such phenomena or to discover the antecedent natural causes that, according to those laws, would sufficiently explain the event. Even in this case, where an event truly does "surpass human understanding," it remains the case that, in principle, there is a natural explanation for it.[32]

Spinoza's position on miracles is much more radical than the famous skepticism of David Hume half a century later. Hume, the

great philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment and generally given to doubts about grand metaphysical knowledge claims, would argue that it is exceedingly hard, even impossible, to justify the belief in a miracle. By definition, a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature, and thus something that goes against "a firm and unalterable experience."[33] The testimony on which the belief in a miracle is based is to be judged like all testimony, according to its probability. And with an overwhelming preponderance of instances to the contrary ("there must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation"), there is a high degree of improbability, even "a direct and full proof" against the event in question. Thus, all reports of miracles must remain unbelievable: the grounds for believing in a miracle are never sufficient to make its occurrence more credible than the belief either that its report was an innocent mistake or that there is deliberate deception among its witnesses.[34]

But Hume is making only an epistemological point, about what a person does or does not have good reasons to believe. Spinoza, by contrast, is making a stronger, metaphysical point, about reality. His view is not just that miracles are highly improbable and their stories implausible. Rather, he is claiming that they are absolutely impossible. "No event can occur to contravene Nature, which preserves an eternal fixed and immutable order. . . . Nothing can happen in Nature to contravene her own universal laws, nor yet anything that is not in agreement with these laws or that does not follow from them."[35] For Hume, a miracle is highly unlikely, to the point of incredibility; for Spinoza, "a miracle, either contrary to Nature or above Nature, is mere absurdity."[36]

Spinoza was not the only seventeenth-century thinker to deny the possibility of miracles. Two years before the publication of the *Treatise*, the unfortunate Koerbagh had published his "dictionary" of the Dutch language, *Een Bloemhof*. As we have seen, he used this excursion into linguistic history and usage to make subversive theological and political points. Among the terms "defined" in the book is *Mirakel*: "A work of wonder, deed of wonder. The

theologians insist that a work of wonder should be something that happens contrary to or above nature, which is false, since nothing can happen contrary to or above nature."[37] Koerbagh, however, was by this point already familiar with and converted to his friend Spinoza's philosophical principles; indeed, he elsewhere argues against miracles on the basis of his identification of God and Nature and the eternity, necessity, and immutability of God's (Nature's) infinite power.[38] That is, Koerbagh's denial of miracles stands directly on Spinozistic foundations, and so his radical position represents not so much an interesting precedent for Spinoza's view but rather a kind of foretaste of Spinoza's more thorough metaphysical articulation of it in the *Treatise* and the *Ethics*.

A more illuminating comparison in this connection involves two philosophers who *did* have a significant influence on Spinoza, and on the *Treatise* in particular: Maimonides and Hobbes.

Maimonides' attitude toward miracles is notoriously complicated. Scholars have had a good deal of difficulty deciding what exactly he believed regarding both the possibility of miracles and their actual occurrence in history.[39] Part of the problem is that, as Maimonides explicitly tells readers of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, for their own good (lest the "ignoramuses" among them be confused by its doctrines and fall into disbelief), he is intentionally hiding some of his real views amid contradictions in the text. Certain deep truths are to be revealed only to those who are sufficiently prepared (by moral, logical, philosophical, and theological training) to grasp them without risk to their faith. Apparently among these truths are those concerning miracles.

Maimonides does not include the belief in miracles among the thirteen essential principles of the Jewish faith. He also appears throughout the *Guide* to maintain a belief in natural causal determinism. At the same time, he is not willing to abandon miracles altogether. His conclusion seems to be that miracles are, in fact, "something that is, in a certain respect, in nature." They are simply events that, when judged by the regularities that generally characterize nature and the ordinary behavior of things, are anomalous. But such anomalies are still produced by perfectly

natural means. Maimonides suggests that miracles so understood are implanted in nature by God. Quoting approvingly the rabbinic sages, he notes that "they say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred." It was "put into the nature of water to be continuous and always to flow from above downwards except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians." The parting of the Red Sea is thus explained by the nature of the sea's water itself. "All the other miracles can be explained in an analogous manner."[40]

Of course, it should make no difference whether an event contrary to nature's regularities is inserted ad hoc into nature at a given moment in history or planted therein at the beginning of time; it is presumably still a divine intervention bringing about an exception to the constancies that characterize nature's usual ways. But Maimonides can be read as saying that these anomalies should be regarded as events that, while rare, are just as natural as those that belong to the ordinary course of nature. They arise from the laws of nature, but not in as perspicuous a manner as other things. The parting of a sea, like an earthquake or a tsunami, is brought about through natural causes and is, at least in principle, explicable in rational, scientific terms.[41]

Maimonides does downplay the value of miracles as evidence of God's providence and wisdom, which are better seen in the ordinary working of nature than in any anomalous exceptions to it. "What is the way to love and fear God? When a person contemplates God's wondrous and great works and creatures, and sees through them God's infinite wisdom, he or she immediately loves and extols and experiences a great desire to know the great God."[42] God's perfection is most evident in nature itself, in the unexceptional order of the cosmos. "The works of the deity," which Maimonides identifies with the ordinary course of nature, "are most perfect, and with regard to them there is no possibility of any excess or deficiency. Accordingly they are of necessity permanently established as they are, for there is no possibility of something

calling for a change in them."[43] Spinoza's explicit denial of miracles in the *Treatise* may represent the ultimate terminus of the naturalism that seems to undergird Maimonides' discussion in the *Guide* and elsewhere.

Given his position as rabbi and religious leader, Maimonides was understandably cautious about coming right out and denying that miracles, traditionally understood, are possible. Hobbes, with his hostility to religious authority and mocking attitude toward superstition, was willing to go further. He knows the importance granted to miracles in Scripture, including their role in determining whether or not a self-proclaimed prophet is indeed truly prophesying (although he concludes that, since the age of miracles is over, there is no longer any sure way to distinguish a prophet from a delusional madman).[44] But if the question concerns not what Scripture thinks about miracles but rather what it is reasonable to believe about them, Hobbes takes a fairly radical stance.

He describes miracles as "admirable works of God . . . therefore, they are also called *wonders*," and distinguishes two essential features of such wonders: first, they are events that are "strange," or occur very rarely, and second, those who witness them "cannot imagine [them] . . . to have been done by natural means, but only by the immediate hand of God." Thus, "if a horse or a cow should speak, it were a miracle, because both the thing is strange, and the natural cause difficult to imagine."[45] Such wonder is dispelled, however, along with the ignorance that grounds it. As soon as we determine a natural cause for the event, or, if no precise cause is discovered, when we realize that the event is not as uncommon as we originally thought, we no longer regard the phenomenon as miraculous.

> The first rainbow that was seen in the world was a miracle, because the first, and consequently strange; and served for a sign from God, placed in heaven, to assure his people there should be no more an universal destruction of the world by water. But at this day, because they are frequent, they are not miracles, neither to them that know their natural causes, nor to them that know them not.[46]

Hobbes is being careful here. He is not explicitly denying the possibility of miracles, understood as events actually brought about not through natural causes but "by the immediate hand of God." Indeed, he does at least say that there was a period in the past when miracles did occur, although there is reason to doubt that he means this seriously.[47] Some event is *called* a miracle if *we cannot imagine* how nature brings it about or if it is unusual from our perspective. That is, he makes the reports of miracles relative to the experience and knowledge of observers. "Seeing admiration and wonder is consequent to the knowledge and experience wherewith men are endued, some more, some less, it followeth that the same thing may be a miracle to one and not to another." Thus, those who are either ignorant or superstitious "make great wonders of those works which other men, knowing to proceed from nature (which is not the immediate, but the ordinary work of God) admire not at all."[48]

Does Hobbes nonetheless believe that miracles have actually occurred, or are at least possible?[49] He does not say that the rainbow that Noah saw in the sky, the "first" rainbow, was truly miraculous in the sense that it was something brought about directly and immediately by God, but only that, because of its strangeness (relative to human experience), it was regarded as a miracle. On the other hand, when Hobbes formally defines what a miracle is, he calls it "a work of God (besides his operation by the way of nature, ordained in the creation), done for the making manifest to his elect the mission of an extraordinary minister for their salvation" (for example, a prophet).[50] But, again, this seems to be his reading of the nature and role of miracles according to the narratives of Scripture, not a recognition that such events "wrought by the immediate hand of God" have indeed taken place.

Although his considered view about miracles may be no less extreme than Spinoza's, Hobbes seems be playing it a little safer in writing. Unlike Spinoza, he seems less interested in making a metaphysical point about the possibility of miracles and more concerned with showing how people are too easily enchanted and abused by those who, through performing "tricks," take advantage of their credulity. "Two men conspiring, one to seem lame,

another so to cure him with a charm, will deceive many; but many conspiring, one to seem lame, another so to cure him, and all the rest to bear witness, will deceive many more."[51] If there is a warning here, it is to put us on our guard against ecclesiastics who would take advantage of "the aptitude of mankind to give too hasty belief to pretended miracles."[52] Hobbes's official position on miracles in *Leviathan* is best described as a very strong skepticism, along with hostility toward those who use reports of miracles for the aggrandizement of their own power. This is still a radical position to take, one that no doubt explains the attacks on the work by religious authorities. But Hobbes does not adopt—or, at least, does not publicly express—the thoroughgoing, dogmatic, and more radical naturalism of Spinoza's *Treatise*; after all, he "durst not write so boldly."[53]

Maimonides and Hobbes recognized the important providential role granted to miracles in Scripture, particularly as they serve to validate a prophetic mission or move along the accomplishment of God's plan.[54] But such a conception of providential activity requires that distinction between the regular course of nature and its interruption by divine fiat that Spinoza so vigorously rejects. For him, divine providence is immediately manifest in nature's normal and mundane routine, not in any alleged supernatural exceptions to it.

It was a medieval and early modern philosophical commonplace that the existence and design of the world may be used to demonstrate God's existence. God as first cause of a contingent universe, God as intelligent designer of a well-ordered cosmos—these conclusions are supposed to follow from readily available and perfectly natural empirical premises. Some thinkers also thought that the regular order of nature might serve as a guide to understanding God's attributes—Descartes, for example, believed that the laws of nature follow from and therefore testify to the perfection, simplicity, and goodness of their author. An equally common but more powerful belief, however, was that it is the extraordinary (rather

than the ordinary) that offers the best and most striking evidence of God's power, and that it is the supernatural (rather than the natural) that most directly reveals God's providence. Nature may take its course, but God shows his providential hand when he intervenes within it. Spinoza insists that this is above all the view of "the common people," as he describes it in the *Treatise*.

> They suppose that God's power and providence are most clearly displayed when some unusual event occurs in Nature contrary to their habitual beliefs concerning Nature, particularly if such an event is to their profit or advantage. They consider that the clearest possible evidence of God's existence is provided when Nature deviates—as they think—from her proper order. Therefore they believe that all those who explain phenomena and miracles through natural causes, or who strive to understand them so, are doing away with God, or at least God's providence. They consider that God is inactive all the while that Nature pursues her normal course, and, conversely, that Nature's power and natural causes are suspended as long as God is acting.

It is those who think this way who "imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature." However, this is grounded on that false, even opaque conception of an anthropomorphic God that informs sectarian religions. "What they mean by the two powers, and what by God and Nature, they have no idea, except that they imagine God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate."[55]

For Spinoza, as we have seen, the power of God *is* the power of Nature. It follows, then, that God's providence cannot be manifested or furthered along by the exercise of extraordinary supernatural actions, by miracles. If what is meant by "divine providence" is a plan being carried out by a transcendent, intelligent, and purposive agent, then there is and can be no such thing in Spinoza's universe.

Spinoza does not categorically reject the idea (or, at least, the language) of providence. But his understanding of it is so different from the vulgar one that it would be all but unrecognizable to his contemporary readers. Providence, in Spinoza's sense, cannot possibly perform its traditional (and scriptural) function.

Since God is nothing but Nature and its lawlike, exceptionless operations, divine providence is manifest exclusively in the natural order itself. All things come about in and by Nature. To put it in the terms of the *Ethics*, all bodily things and their states follow from the attribute of Extension and its infinite modes; all mental things and their states follow from the attribute of Thought and its infinite modes. But this means that God's providence just *is* the universal causal efficacy of Nature. Providence thereby extends to *all* things, just because there is nothing that is outside Nature's dominion. Everything that happens, whether it is beneficial or harmful to an individual, is the effect of divine providence. The phrase is thereby rendered morally neutral and, from a Spinozistic perspective, theologically harmless. As Spinoza, continuing his discussion of miracles, explains,

> God's decrees and commandments, and consequently God's providence, are in truth nothing but Nature's order; that is to say, when Scripture tells us that this or that was accomplished by God or by God's will, nothing more is intended than that it came about by accordance with Nature's law and order, and not, as the common people believe, that Nature for some period has ceased to act, or that for some time its order has been interrupted.[56]

This approach allows Spinoza to at least employ the language of divine providence with little cost. As long as one is aware that such language is really only talk about Nature's necessary ways, it is empty and does not commit one to any superstitious claims about God providing rewards to the virtuous and punishments to the wicked or taking any special care for individuals. It is a reductive view of providence with no moral implications.

It also means that the surest path to the knowledge of God lies not in the cataloguing of miraculous and exceptional events but solely in the investigation of Nature's regularities.

> Knowing that all things are determined and ordained by God and that the workings of Nature follow from God's essence, while the laws of Nature are God's eternal decrees and volitions, we must

> unreservedly conclude that we get to know God and God's will all the better as we gain better knowledge of natural phenomena and understand more clearly how they depend on their first cause, and how they operate in accordance with Nature's eternal laws.

Spinoza does not believe that one must accept his metaphysical theology in order to find a valuable lesson here. He is clearly speaking not only to those who (perhaps in the light of the *Ethics*) have been persuaded by his own concept of God or Nature, but also to those who may still cling to traditional religious ideas. Even the latter, while they remain wedded to a false, anthropomorphic conception of God, need to understand at least that "God's will and decrees" (notions that, strictly speaking, Spinoza rejects) are best seen in the ordered ways of the world he causes. Events whose natural causes remain hidden, while they "appeal strongly to the imagination and evoke wonder," are less suited to providing "a higher knowledge of God" than the works of Nature that we clearly and distinctly conceive. Spinoza concludes that "from miracles we cannot gain knowledge of God, his existence and providence, and that these can be far better inferred from Nature's fixed and immutable order."[57]

Spinoza's naturalistic understanding of divine providence in the *Treatise* can also accommodate, in some sense, an important feature of the common religious view of providence, namely, that which sees God as managing a system of rewards and punishments. The providential God of the Abrahamic traditions ensures that, at least in the very long run, human virtue and vice receive their just deserts. This is the moral dimension of providence directed at individuals that earlier Jewish philosophers called "special providence," to distinguish it from the "general providence" that runs through the laws of nature and endows each species with characteristics essential for survival (for example, rationality in human beings or speed in gazelles).[58] What Spinoza cannot allow, however, is that there is a distribution of rewards for virtue carried out by an intelligent moral agent, a kind of person, freely and actively dispensing them from on high.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza shows that the virtuous person pursues and acquires true and adequate ideas, a deep rational understanding of Nature and its ways. As we have seen, this intellectual knowledge, unlike information that comes by way of the senses or the imagination, provides insight into the essences of things and especially the ways in which they depend necessarily on their highest causes in Nature. Spinoza insists that this knowledge of God or Nature and how things relate to it is of the greatest benefit to a human being in two ways.

First, he suggests that an understanding of Nature's essences and laws provides the virtuous individual with the tools needed to navigate life's obstacle course. The ways of Nature are transparent to the intellectually perfected person. His capacity to manipulate things and avoid dangers is greater than that of the person who is governed by the senses and imagination and thus subject to chance and whatever may happen. The virtuous person has greater control over events; others are more at the mercy of luck. A deep knowledge of things benefits one in this very practical manner.

Second, and more important, true knowledge is, for the virtuous person, the source of an abiding happiness and peace of mind that is resistant to the vicissitudes of fortune. When a person understands Nature, he sees the necessity of all things, and especially the fact that the objects that he values are, in their comings and goings, not under his control. More precisely, he sees, for example, that all bodies and their states and relationships—including the condition of his own body—follow necessarily from the essence of matter (Extension) and the universal laws of physics; and he sees that all ideas, including all the properties of minds, follow necessarily from the essence of Thought and its universal laws.

Such insight can only weaken the power that the irrational passions have over an individual. Herein lie the natural benefits or rewards of virtue. When a person achieves a high level of understanding of Nature and realizes that he cannot control what it brings his way or takes from him, he becomes less anxious over things, less governed by the affects of hope and fear over what may or may not come to pass. No longer obsessed with or despondent

over the loss of his possessions, he is less likely to be overwhelmed with emotions at their arrival and passing away. Such a person will regard all things with an even temper and will not be inordinately and irrationally affected in different ways by past, present, or future events. His life will be tranquil and not given to sudden disturbances of the passions. The result is self-control and a calmness of mind.

> The more this knowledge that things are necessary is concerned with singular things, which we imagine more distinctly and vividly, the greater is this power of the Mind over the affects, as experience itself also testifies. For we see that Sadness over some good which has perished is lessened as soon as the man who has lost it realizes that this good could not, in any way, have been kept. Similarly, we see that [because we regard infancy as a natural and necessary thing], no one pities infants because of their inability to speak, to walk, or to reason, or because they live so many years, as it were, unconscious of themselves.[59]

What Spinoza calls the "free person"—the virtuous individual who "lives according to the dictate of reason alone"[60]—bears the gifts and losses of fortune with equanimity, does only those things that he believes to be "the most important in life," refuses to chase after or be anxious about ephemeral goods, and is not overly concerned with death. His understanding of his place in the natural scheme of things brings him happiness and true peace of mind.

Virtue, then, has its rewards. The natural consequence of the striving for and acquisition of understanding and knowledge is well-being.[61] Our freedom, our physical and psychological flourishing are directly dependent on our knowledge of Nature, including our understanding both of the necessity of all things and of our place in the world. Virtue is a source of an abiding happiness that is free from chance. Such is the true but entirely natural benefit of virtue. This, if anything, constitutes a special kind providence within Spinoza's system, one that is available only to rational beings.

Of course, for Spinoza there is an important sense in which *everything* is the result of divine providence. There is nothing

that happens in Nature—and whatever happens must happen in Nature, for there is nothing that is outside Nature—that is not brought about by God or Nature. Therefore, *all* benefits and *all* harms that come to a person, indeed, all the benefits and all the harms that come to anything, and not just the happiness that is the natural byproduct of virtue, are the result of divine providence. When a virtuous person suffers or a vicious person prospers, this too is providence at work.

But from the point of view of human agents, it makes all the difference in the world whether benefits come haphazardly (as judged from the agent's perspective and convenience) and according to the various but all-natural ways in which he is buffeted back and forth by external things, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, are possessed in a deliberate and controlled manner.

This is the distinction that appears in the *Treatise* between God's "external help" (*auxilium externum*) and God's "internal help" (*auxilium internum*).

> Whatever human nature can effect solely by its own power to preserve its own being can rightly be called God's internal help, and whatever falls to a man's advantage from the power of external causes can rightly be called God's external help.[62]

The external help is simply the circumstances in which we find ourselves through the operation of external causes; it is, Spinoza says, often a matter of "fortune" and causes beyond our control, of providence working in a very general way. But the internal help is grounded in the God- or Nature-given power that constitutes the essential being of any individual (what Spinoza in the *Ethics* calls *conatus*, or striving to persevere). The internal help consists in a person, moved by this power under the guidance of reason, acquiring knowledge through his own resources and thereby increasing his well-being and gaining an advantage in the world.

Spinoza, then, can agree that providence has within its scope rewards or benefits for the righteous. But no supernatural interventions or violations of the laws of nature are required for this "special" providence. It is, on the contrary, a perfectly natural

process whereby, just because of the laws of nature, certain effects follow necessarily from certain causes. Any verbal concessions made in the *Treatise* to God's "will and decrees" or to divine providence are consistent with Spinoza's general naturalistic project. They are also in keeping with the absolute denial of miracles.

Chapter 6

Scripture

When Spinoza died, in February 1677, he had been living on the Paviljoensgracht in The Hague. The house was owned by Hendrik van der Spyck, a master painter, and the philosopher occupied a single room on the first floor. To pay off some of Spinoza's creditors, as well as to recoup his own expenses, Van der Spyck planned to auction off Spinoza's clothes, furniture, and other belongings. In preparation for the sale, an inventory was taken in March by the notary Willem van den Hove. Among Spinoza's possessions was a relatively large library containing works of philosophy, science, mathematics, religion, politics, and literature (including poetry). He was an eclectic and multilingual reader. There are Torah commentaries in Hebrew, classical histories and dramas in Latin, Dutch medical and political treatises, and Spanish comedies. Spinoza owned the *Observationes medicae* by Nicholas Tulp, whose anatomy lesson was immortalized by Rembrandt; a book of poems by the Spanish Golden Age writer Francisco Gómez de Quevedo; and the complete works of Machiavelli. There is even a Passover haggadah, a guide to ancient Greek, and an Italian vocabulary.

Spinoza also owned five Bibles. There are two Latin editions, one of which dates to 1541, and two Hebrew Bibles: Buxtorf's 1618 *Biblia Sacra Hebraica*, and a Venetian text published in 1639. And, like most of the members of Amsterdam's Talmud Torah congregation, Spinoza frequently read the Bible in Spanish; the translation in his library was published in Amsterdam in 1646. Among the Dutch Sephardim in the seventeenth century, domestic and business affairs were conducted in Portuguese; in their kitchens

and on the street, they spoke the language of what was, for most of them, their ancestral homeland. Even those in the community not of Iberian background—such as Rabbi Mortera, an Ashkenazic Jew originally from Venice—had to learn Portuguese if they were going to get along in this cosmopolitan but close-knit world. When it was time for sacred literature or works of high culture, however, whether Torah study or literary drama, the pages turned by Amsterdam's "Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation" (many of whom had at best only a rudimentary grasp of Hebrew) were usually in Spanish.

Whether they read the Bible in Spanish, Hebrew, Latin or Dutch, Spinoza's contemporaries, like the generations before them, all made a categorical assumption about the origin of the work. Amsterdam's Calvinists, Lutherans, and Jews, as well as the Catholics who (to avoid harassment) continued to worship in private homes, believed that the Bible had a divine source. Its author, literally, was God, and its sentences faithfully (if sometimes metaphorically) conveyed his thoughts and commands and described his actions.

There is a sense, even with this assumption, in which the Bible is a human and historical document. God's message was revealed to and transcribed by human beings at certain moments in time. The words now appearing in print before early modern readers were first written down by the ancient prophets. According to tradition, Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, while successive individuals (Joshua, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, and so on) composed the books that bear their names or the historical chronicles in which they play a major role. But in the grand scheme of things, this is a rather trivial kind of historicity. The mortal writers were merely the privileged recipients of an eternal content, *amanuenses* charged with accurately recording God's word and with relating the history of God's chosen people. Their ephemeral manuscripts conveyed a story and laid down laws that were, without exception, divine and timeless. Scripture is certainly not, in the traditional view, the product of or response to any historical contingencies.

It is precisely this view about the divine origin of Scripture that Spinoza attacks in chapters seven through ten of the *Treatise*. He will conclude that the Hebrew Bible does *not* have its source in some supernatural revelation. Rather, it is simply a work of human literature that arose from the political circumstances of the ancient Israelites. His argument is grounded in a variety of philosophical, linguistic, and historical considerations, including his own metaphysics of God or Nature (still only subtly present in the *Treatise*) and his views on prophecy and miracles.

Spinoza was not the first to insist on the historicity of the Bible. There was already a long tradition, especially after the Reformation, of critical approaches to biblical texts. Mainstream Catholic and Protestant theologians before him had urged a philological and historical study of Hebrew Scripture, particularly as they regarded the written and, later, printed document (but not the divine content it communicated) as a work of human hands subject to all the vagaries of transmission. While Reformation principles called for a return to "Scripture itself," a direct acquaintance by faithful (but not necessarily learned) readers with the pages of the Bible for the purpose of grasping its clear and accessible lessons, late Renaissance and early modern humanists pursued their philological and linguistic studies in order to determine its less obvious, more "genuine" historical meanings. By the seventeenth century there was a well-developed tradition of scholarly interest in the origin and provenance of biblical manuscripts leading up to contemporary printed editions.[1]

The sixteenth-century Dutch Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus, for example, insisted on using original language (Greek and Hebrew) sources, classical authors, and the writings of the Church fathers to evaluate and even revise Jerome's Vulgate (Latin) edition of the Gospels, as well as to compose his own commentary on the Psalms and other books. While such scholarship was not wholly to the liking of ecclesiastic authorities, especially when it was put to polemical purposes—Erasmus was strongly condemned by the Church theologians for his audacity—it certainly was not uncommon, especially within the universities. But Spinoza took

the historical study of Scripture, and especially the question of its mundane authorship, much further than earlier thinkers. More than anyone else, Spinoza, with his willingness to go wherever the textual and historical evidence led, regardless of religious ramifications, ushered in modern biblical source scholarship. To many latter-day readers of the Bible, the notion that its authors were mere humans addressing social and political contingencies of their day may seem perfectly commonplace.[2] But Spinoza's conclusions on the origins of Scripture and the history and implications of its transmission scandalized his contemporaries as much as his view on miracles.

Moses is supposed to have written every single word of the Torah. At least, as Hobbes contemptuously notes, this is a nonnegotiable principle within the Abrahamic traditions, especially among the orthodox and outside scholarly circles. It is believed, he says in *Leviathan*, "on all hands that the first and original author of [Scripture] is God."[3] More precisely, God communicated all the commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, as well as the story of the Creation, the account of the generations that lived before Moses, and the narrative of the subsequent tribulations of the Israelites. Moses alone is said to have combined all of this legal, historical, political, religious, and metaphysical material into one single work that was handed down unchanged and uncorrupted through the ages. This guarantees the divine authority, and thus eternal validity, of these books: they came directly from God to the prophet Moses, and then to the people, with no break in the transmission and thus no concerns about whether they truly represented the word of God.

It was evident to more reflective readers of various religious (and antireligious) persuasions throughout history that such a position runs up against some serious problems. A number of Jewish and Christian commentators, arguing on the basis of the text, known historical facts, and undeniable empirical principles

("Dead men tell no tales"), suggested, ever so carefully (and sometimes only implicitly), that Moses could not have written everything found in the Pentateuch. In fact, by Spinoza's time, there was nothing new about raising the question of Moses' authorship of every sentence of the Pentateuch, and even in claiming positively that he did not write absolutely all that is therein.

The most glaring problem concerns the account of the death of Moses himself. It is obviously impossible for someone to write about his own death and burial. Even the sages of the Talmud, committed as they are to the principle that all of the Torah was written by Moses, concede that the last eight verses were added by Joshua.[4]

The twelfth-century exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra took things a little further, although he was very careful not to state his opinion too boldly. In his commentary on the Pentateuch, he suggests that a number of elements in the text lead to the conclusion that there are several verses that could not have been written by Moses. In his remarks on Genesis 12.6 ("And the Canaanite was then in the land"), Ibn Ezra says that "there is a secret meaning to this text. Let the one who understands it remain silent." The "secret meaning," derived from the grammar of the sentence, seems to be that when the verse was written the Canaanite was no longer in the land, having been expelled by the Israelites (which occurred only under the leadership of Joshua); thus the verse was written at least a generation after Moses. Commenting on Deuteronomy 1.1 ("These are the words that Moses addressed to all Israel beyond the Jordan River, in the wilderness, in the desert, across the Red Sea, between Paran and Tofel, and Lavan, and Hasherot, and Di-Zahav"), Ibn Ezra speculates what the meaning of this verse might be, since Moses did not get to cross over the Jordan River. He concludes his interpretation of the passage by mysteriously noting that "if you understand the secret of the twelve and also that of 'So Moses wrote' (Deut. 31.22); 'And the Canaanite was then in the land' (Gen. 12.6); 'In the mount where the lord is seen' (Gen. 22.14); and 'behold, his [Og's] bedstead was a bedstead of iron' (Deut 3.11), then you will recognize the truth."[5] Commentators

are generally agreed that what Ibn Ezra means is that just as the last twelve verses of Deuteronomy were not written by Moses (this is "the secret of the twelve"), so neither were the other cited verses. Moses would not have referred to himself in the third person ("So Moses wrote . . ."), and he would have had no need to give evidence of the height of Og, the giant king of Bashan, by mentioning his bed, since his extraordinary size would have been known to his contemporaries. Moreover, when Moses was still alive, the Temple ("the mount where the Lord is seen") had not yet been built. The "truth," then, is that there are a number of sentences in the Torah that were not composed by Moses but were added by others coming after him.

It is a very limited claim that Ibn Ezra is hinting at (and it is something that he dare not proclaim openly, lest some readers conclude that there are many other verses, perhaps entire chapters, not written by Moses). He still believes that Moses was the author of almost all of the Pentateuch; he is certainly *not* saying what Spinoza, in the *Treatise*, takes him to be saying, namely, "that it was not Moses who wrote the Pentateuch but someone else who lived long after him."[6]

Ibn Ezra's commentary was well known to Jewish and Christian exegetes, and many thought the questions he raised were reasonable ones. A number of prominent theologians, in fact, turned his veiled hints into unambiguous conclusions. Luther, for one, did not believe it was a big deal if a few lines of the Pentateuch were not by Moses' own hand. Foreshadowing Spinoza's radical claim about the Pentateuch as a whole, some of these commentators even focused on Ezra the Scribe, in the Second Temple period, as the likely author of those verses not written by Joshua.[7]

By the seventeenth century, then, it was well within the bounds of respectability to suggest that there were passages of the Pentateuch not written by Moses himself. Not everyone subscribed to this idea, but even its critics took it seriously. Somewhat less respectable, but still apparently within the realm of legitimate debate, was the notion that all of Hebrew Scripture as we have it received its current redacted form long after Moses and the other

prophets, organized by a later editor or team of editors, although the sources they were working with were authentically Mosaic. The Catholic theologian Andreas Masius, for example, argued in his book on Joshua, *Iosuae imperatoris historia illustrata atque explicata* (Antwerp, 1574), that the Mosaic and Joshuan raw materials were "collected, arranged and united, as it were, into one volume" by Ezra, assisted perhaps by colleagues in the Great Synagogue.[8]

It was Spinoza, however, who took things to an unprecedented extreme and, in the eyes of his contemporaries, crossed the line. He was not alone in doing so. As we shall see, his view of the Bible as an all-too-human document was shared by one or two others in the period. But such company was cold comfort, and did nothing to deflect the attacks on the *Treatise*—indeed, it only inflamed them.

Spinoza is well aware of the risky stand he is taking in the *Treatise*. "The author [of the Pentateuch] is almost universally believed to be Moses, a view so obstinately defended by the Pharisees[9] that they have regarded any other view as a heresy."[10] It is important to his theological-political project, however, that he address this dogma. Troubled by the expansion of ecclesiastic power in the Dutch Republic, and especially the meddling of Calvinist preachers in public affairs and in the lives of private citizens, Spinoza recognized that one of their most effective tools for justifying their usurpations was the Bible.[11] They proclaimed their actions to be backed by the word of God and held up the Bible as the source of their moral, social, and even political authority. Moreover, they set themselves up as the sole qualified interpreters of Scripture and read it to suit their purposes. Thus Spinoza:

> On every side we hear men saying that the Bible is the Word of God, teaching mankind true blessedness, or the path to salvation. . . . We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using

> religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority.[12]

Waving the Bible was (and still is) a powerful means of persuading the masses, not to mention the ruling elites, that the way of the *predikanten*—sectarian, intolerant, and (in terms of Dutch politics) conservative as it is—is God's way.

By showing that the Bible is not, in fact, the work of a supernatural God—"a message for mankind sent down by God from heaven," as Spinoza mockingly puts it—but a perfectly natural human document; that the author of the Pentateuch is not Moses; that Hebrew Scripture as a whole is but a compilation of writings composed by fallible and not particularly learned individuals under various historical and political circumstances; that most of these writings were transmitted over generations, to be finally redacted by a latter-day political and religious leader—in short, by naturalizing the Torah and the other books of the Bible and reducing them to ordinary (though morally valuable) works of literature, Spinoza hopes to undercut ecclesiastic influence in politics and other domains and weaken the sectarian dangers facing his beloved Republic: "In order to escape from this scene of confusion, to free our minds from the prejudices of theologians and to avoid the hasty acceptance of human fabrications as divine teachings," he insists, it is necessary to see what exactly Scripture is and the "true method" by which it should be read. "For unless we understand this we cannot know with any certainty what the Bible or the Holy Spirit intends to teach."[13]

Spinoza begins where he believes his illustrious medieval predecessor left off. Building on Ibn Ezra's subtle message, Spinoza marshals additional evidence to show that the author of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible was not Moses but "someone who lived many generations later." He cites the fact that the writer of those books refers consistently to Moses in the third person, compares Moses to the prophets that came after him ("declaring that he excelled them all"), narrates events that occurred after the death

of Moses ("the children of Israel did eat manna forty years until they came to a land inhabited, until they came unto the borders of the land of Canaan" [Exodus 16.35]—that is, Spinoza notes, "until the time referred to in Joshua 5.12"), and uses the names of places that they did not bear in Moses time but acquired much later (for example, where the Bible says that Abraham "pursued the enemy even unto Dan" [Genesis 14.14], Spinoza notes that the city did not have that name "until long after the death of Joshua"). Spinoza's conclusion is (despite what he says) much stronger than anything Ibn Ezra, or anyone else up to that time, explicitly says or even envisions: "From the foregoing it is clear beyond a shadow of doubt that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived many generations after Moses."[14]

There is, Spinoza says, an authentic Mosaic core to the text of the Pentateuch. He believes, on the basis of the Bible's own testimony, that Moses himself wrote three items: an account of the war against Amalek and of the journeying of the Israelites (called the "Book of the Wars of God"), an abbreviated rendering of God's "utterances and laws" (called "Book of the Covenant"), and a more extensive explanation of God's commandments and of the covenant between God and his chosen people ("Book of the Law of God"). None of these books, of course, is extant, and none can be identified with the Pentateuch itself. Rather, the true author of the Pentateuch had access to at least the "Book of the Law of God" and "inserted [it] in proper order in his own work."[15]

In similar fashion, Spinoza argues that Joshua was not himself the author of the book that bears his name ("some events are narrated that happened after Joshua's death") but that it was "written many generations after Joshua"; that "nobody of sound judgment can believe that [the book of Judges] was written by the judges themselves"; and that, "inasmuch as the history is continued long after his lifetime," neither were the books of Samuel composed by Samuel, nor the book of Kings composed by the monarchs that appear in it, but all of these were in fact drawn from a number of ancient chronicles. "We may therefore conclude that all the books [of the Hebrew Bible] that we have so far considered are

the works of other hands, and that their contents are narrated as ancient history."[16]

Who, then, did write (or at least did the bulk of the editorial work) on Hebrew Scripture? Spinoza is convinced that it was "a single historian who set out to write the antiquities of the Jews from their first beginnings until the first destruction of the city." The books of the Torah and other writings, despite their distinct and varied sources, are so thematically connected with each other and so skillfully constructed into one well-ordered and continuous (but not seamless) narrative—with relatively smooth transitions from one historical period or political regime to the next—that, he concludes, "there was only one historian," working many generations after the events he narrates, "with a fixed aim in view." And from the narrative itself it is quite clear what that historian's aim was: "To set forth the words and commandments of Moses," the first and most important leader of the Israelites, "and to demonstrate their truth by the course of history."[17]

Spinoza concedes that it cannot be determined with absolute certainty who the historian was. But in his view, as others before him had suggested, all the evidence points to Ezra. The text makes it clear that the writer could not have lived before the mid-sixth century BCE, since he tells of the liberation of Jehoiachim, the king of Judah, from Babylonian captivity, an event that occurred ca. 560 BCE. Moreover, Spinoza notes, Scripture itself says that Ezra, "alone of all men of his time," was devoted to establishing and setting forth the law of God (Ezra 7.10) and was a scribe learned in the law of Moses (Ezra 7.6). "Therefore," he concludes, "I cannot imagine anyone but Ezra was the writer of these books."[18] Ezra called the first five books of his work after Moses because the life of Moses is their main subject. For the same reason, he called other books after Joshua, the Judges of Israel, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings.

Ezra obviously did not compose all of these works from scratch. Neither was he able to complete his project. Rather, he collected histories written by various ancient Hebrew authors, sometimes simply copying their accounts word for word, with the intention of ultimately revising them and weaving them into a

single polished narrative. Material from Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, and others were "collected indiscriminately and stored together with a view to examining them and arranging them more conveniently at some later time."[19] Spinoza speculates that Ezra may have died before he had a chance to put the finishing touches on his book. The selection of certain writings for canonization into Scripture, and the rejection of other, equally ancient works, was, in Spinoza's view, done many generations after Ezra, and certainly no earlier than the Maccabean period (ca. second century BCE), but probably even later. The Pharisees are the most likely candidates, and Spinoza suggests that their decisions were grounded in defending their tradition and their position on the law against their opponents, the Sadducees. "Men learned in the Law summoned a council to decide what books should be received as sacred and what books should be excluded."[20] It was, in other words, a very human, and politically motivated, process.

The result—as is clear from the present state of the text of Hebrew Scripture, with its many repetitions, omissions, fragmentary stories, chronological discrepancies, and outright inconsistencies—is a "mutilated" (*truncatum*), incomplete, insufficiently edited anthology. There are two accounts of the creation of the world that differ in important and irreconcilable respects; Philistine armies that, in one chapter (1 Samuel 7), are so defeated by the Israelites that they are said to be incapable of ever invading again, only to reappear shortly thereafter (1 Samuel 13), launching yet another attack; kings with indeterminate but occasionally overlapping reigns; and implausible chronologies. "In 1 Kings 6 we are told that Solomon built his temple 480 years after the exodus from Egypt, but the narratives themselves require a much greater number of years."[21] Even the most casual reader of the Bible cannot help but be struck by the apparently haphazard way in which it is organized. "It must be admitted that these narratives were compiled from different sources, without any proper arrangement or scrutiny."[22]

Making things even more difficult are numerous scribal errors and variant readings that, Spinoza insists, have crept into the text

as the original manuscript was copied again and again and handed down through the generations. Spinoza, like most of the young men of his generation born into the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish community (but not necessarily their Iberian-born fathers), knew Hebrew well—he composed a grammar of that language for his gentile friends in the late 1660s—and he was a careful reader of the Hebrew Bible. His conclusions are based on close analysis of that text and technical linguistic considerations, including "doubtful readings" due to missing or mistaken words, copying errors made between similarly formed letters (the *resh* and the *dalet*, for example, might be taken for each other), and changes in vocalization.

> That the text is mutilated cannot be doubted by anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the Hebrew language, for it [1 Samuel 13.1] begins thus, "Saul was in his __ year when he began to reign, and he reigned for two years over Israel." Who can fail to see, I repeat, that the number of years of Saul's age when he began to reign has been omitted? And I do not think that anyone can doubt too that the narrative itself requires a greater number for the years of his reign. For chapter 27 v. 7 of the same book tells us that David sojourned among the Philistines, to whom he had fled for refuge from Saul, a year and four months. By this calculation the other events of his [Saul's] reign must have occupied eight months, a conclusion which I imagine no one will accept.[23]

Spinoza was not alone among his contemporaries in using textual evidence and historical considerations, including the works of ancient writers such as Josephus, to draw radical conclusions—ones that went well beyond what earlier scholars had been willing to claim—about the human origins of the Bible. But neither did he have much company. And those few who, some years before, had published similar views certainly did not prepare a more receptive environment for Spinoza's theses; on the contrary, they probably put the authorities on greater alert against such blasphemies

against Scripture, although it is unlikely that there could be any circumstances in the seventeenth century under which the claim that the Pentateuch is not at all the work of Moses might get an unbiased hearing.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes had argued that Scripture as we have it is not uniformly and literally the word of God—that it is, in important respects, a very human and historical document. He grants that "God is the first and original author" of Scripture. Through supernatural revelation, God conveyed his word to the prophets. But it follows from this that those prophets are the only individuals who can be certain as to what exactly the word of God is. Only the direct recipient of a revelation has a chance of truly knowing both *what* was revealed and *that* it was revealed by God. Since the writings now canonized as Scripture are many times removed from those original revelations and from whatever was immediately written down by the prophets who received them, the firsthand knowledge of revelation is lost.

Working, like Spinoza (and Ibn Ezra),[24] from the obvious problems raised by a Mosaic authorship ("It were a strange interpretation to say *Moses* spake of his own sepulcher . . . that it was not found to that day wherein he was yet living"), Hobbes concludes that Moses did not write all or even most of the Pentateuch, although he did write everything in it that he is explicitly said to have written, particularly the Mosaic law (for example, Hobbes believes that Deuteronomy 11–26 are by Moses' own hand). Neither did Joshua write the book of Joshua; it was composed "after his own time," just as Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and other books were written much later than the events they narrate. In fact, Hobbes concludes, the "Old Testament" is a compilation of writings "by divers men," though "all endued with one and the same spirit, in that they conspire to one and the same end, which is the setting forth of the rights of the kingdom of *God*, the *Father*, *Son* and *Holy Ghost*." These inspired writings were put together "long after the Captivity," and Hobbes's opinion as to its author-editor is the same as Spinoza's: "Scripture was set forth in the form we have it in by Ezra."[25]

What has come down through the generations as the Hebrew Bible, then, is, as Spinoza would assert in the *Treatise*, a work of human literature that carries a divine message.[26] However, in no way can this natural product justifiably be identified with the supernatural word of God as this was originally revealed to the prophets. Too much time has gone by since that act of divine communication, and the post-exilic documents that are "the true registers of those things which were done and said by the prophets" have subsequently passed through too many scribal hands under various regimes, for us to be able to say with any confidence that what we have is, in all of its particulars, the word of God.

This is where Hobbes puts his analysis of the Bible—including the Christian Gospels—to political use. For he concludes that whatever authority the text of Scripture has must come not from any sure knowledge about its divine origin (which, absent a special revelation to confirm this, cannot be had) but solely from the sovereign who governs the land (or, more precisely, its official church) and proclaims the text of Scripture to be God's word.

> None can know they [Scriptures] are God's word (though all true Christians believe it) but those to whom God himself hath revealed it supernaturally. . . . He, therefore, to whom God hath not supernaturally revealed that they are his, nor that those that published them were sent by him, is not obliged to obey them by any authority but his whose commands have already the force of laws (that is to say, by any other authority than that of the commonwealth, residing in the sovereign, who only has the legislative power).[27]

Hobbes first published *Leviathan* in English in 1651. His discussion of the problem of biblical authorship in that work is relatively brief, and, while it anticipates the arguments of the *Treatise*, does not match the scope and detail of Spinoza's discussion. Four years later, a book published in Amsterdam in Latin (but probably written in the 1640s), reviewed the case in somewhat more extensive terms than Hobbes. It was quickly condemned as a "blasphemous" and "Godless" work, as *Leviathan* and the *Treatise* themselves would be in the 1670s.

The author of the *Prae-Adamitae* (Pre-Adamites) was one of those peripatetic figures who populate the landscape of the early modern Republic of Letters. Isaac La Peyrère went wherever his work as secretary to the Prince of Condé took him: Bordeaux, Paris, Amsterdam, London, Spain, even Scandinavia. In the process, he expanded not only his official business contacts but his intellectual acquaintances as well, and it is possible that he met both Spinoza and Hobbes.[28]

The primary thesis of La Peyrère's work was that Adam was not the first man. Rather, there was a lineage of human beings existing before Adam. The evidence that La Peyrère marshals for this thesis includes contemporary scientific developments, such as the discovery of new lands with heretofore unknown peoples who "did not descend from Adam," and recently uncovered ancient histories describing civilizations not accounted for in the Bible. La Peyrère also points to evidence internal to Scripture. Where, he asks, would Cain's wife have come from if there were not other people besides Adam's own progeny? The book of Genesis, he concludes, is the history of the origin not of all humankind but only of the Jewish people, and the creation of Adam was simply the creation of the first *Jewish* man.

In the course of pursuing this theory, La Peyrère argues that the text of the Hebrew Bible as we have it is not by the hand of Moses—again, Moses could not have written about his own death or about events that took place after he died—or by the prophets themselves, but is an edited document that draws on a variety of ancient writings. "I need not trouble the Reader much further to prove a thing in itself sufficiently evident, that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses, as is thought."[29] In fact, "these things were diversely written, being taken out of several authors."[30] The final author-editor did not do a very skilled job, in La Peyrère's estimation, and the extant product is an inconsistent collection that varies in quality among its parts and whose manuscript tradition—involving numerous "careless transcribers"—exhibits an inordinate number of variant readings. "Nor need anyone wonder after this, when he reads many things confused

and out of order, obscure, deficient, many things omitted and misplaced, when they shall consider with themselves that they are a heap of copie confusedly taken."[31] La Peyrère doubts that this corrupt text, what he disparagingly calls a "heap of copie of copie," is an accurate source for what is to be found in the original, "real" Bible and a reliable record of what God revealed to the prophets.

Despite embedding his account of the Bible's origins in the context of his "shocking" pre-Adamite theory, La Peyrère, as one scholar puts it, "was not just a nut-case." His book was widely read, and "he was known to many of the leading Bible scholars of the time."[32] Spinoza owned a copy of the *Prae-Adamitae*. He also had in his library Hobbes's *De Cive* (*The Citizen*), in which the Englishman's views regarding Scripture's origin and Mosaic authorship are only hinted at—he notes in *De Cive*, for example, that the Bible is "that which God hath spoken" not completely but only in "innumerable places."[33] It cannot be doubted, however, that Spinoza also read *Leviathan* while composing the *Treatise*, either in his friend Abraham van Berckel's 1667 Dutch translation or in the 1668 Latin translation published in Amsterdam. It is impossible to say whether Hobbes or La Peyrère exercised any influence on Spinoza.[34] Spinoza was well acquainted with Ibn Ezra and other medieval Jewish commentators on Torah and the rest of Hebrew Scripture, and probably needed no help from Hobbes or La Peyrère (neither of whom knew Hebrew[35]), or any other contemporary thinker, for that matter, in forming his views on biblical authorship.[36]

For Spinoza (and for Hobbes and La Peyrère), then, the Hebrew Bible is a jumble of texts by different hands, from different periods and for different audiences. Just as significant—and this seems to be a point original with Spinoza—there was much contingency and even some arbitrariness to the inclusion of some sources but not others. The original, Second Temple–era author-editor of the texts was able only partially to synthesize his sources and create a single work out of them. Moreover, this imperfectly composed collection was then subject to the changes that naturally creep into writings during the transmission process as they

are copied and recopied again and again, over many generations. It is a "faulty, mutilated, adulterated and inconsistent" piece of work, a mixed breed by its birth and corrupted by its descent and preservation. The Hebrew Bible is full of passages that are, as Spinoza is fond of saying, clearly *truncata*, and it shows its less obvious fault lines to someone who knows how to look for them. "That the text is mutilated cannot be doubted by anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the Hebrew language."[37]

What is not *truncatum*, however, is the ultimate teaching of Scripture, whether the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Gospels. It is, in fact, a rather simple one: Practice justice and loving kindness to your fellow human beings. The point of all the commandments and the lesson of all the stories, surviving whole and unadulterated throughout the divergencies, errors, ambiguities, and corruptions of the text, is that basic moral message. It is, Spinoza insists, there in the Hebrew prophets ("Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19.18]) and it is in the Gospels ("He who loves his neighbor has satisfied every claim of the law" [Romans 13.8]). "I can say with certainty, that in the matter of moral doctrine I have never observed a fault of variant reading that could give rise to obscurity or doubt in such teaching."[38] The moral doctrine is the clear and universal message of the Bible, at least for those who know how to read it properly. But the question is, what is the proper way to read it?

When Spinoza's exposition of Descartes's philosophy, *René Descartes' Principles of Philosophy, Parts I and II, Demonstrated According to the Geometric Method*, appeared in 1663, it was accompanied by a preface by one of his good friends, Lodewijk Meijer. Meijer, slightly older than Spinoza, was a Lutheran, although probably not a very pious one. Most of his energies were devoted to intellectual and artistic matters. He had degrees in philosophy and medicine from the University of Leiden, and by the early 1660s

had published some poetry and drama of his own. He would go on to become the director of the Amsterdam Municipal Theater, from 1665 to 1669, and the founder of the dramatic and literary society Nil Volentibus Arduum (Nothing Is Difficult to Those Who Are Willing).

In 1663, however, Meijer was just another medical doctor in Amsterdam who also happened to have a deep interest in philosophy. He wrote the preface to Spinoza's first publication to alert its audience to the precise nature of his friend's goal in setting forth the basic metaphysical and epistemological principles of Cartesian thought, and to warn the reader not to confuse the contents of this work with the author's own philosophy. "I should like it to be particularly noted that in all these writings . . . our Author has only set out the opinions of Descartes and their demonstrations, insofar as these are found in his writings, or are such as ought to be deduced validly from the foundations he laid. . . . So let no one think that he is teaching here either his own opinions, or only those which he approves of."[39] Spinoza's exposition of his own principles would be reserved for the *Ethics*, which he was working on at the same time as he composed this Cartesian manifesto but which would not be published until after his death, and (although Meijer could not yet have known this) the *Treatise*.

Meijer was interested in more than just shepherding Spinoza's ideas into print. He had philosophical views of his own, ones that his many contemporary critics found rather objectionable. Three years after introducing Spinoza's book to the public, Meijer published in Amsterdam his *Philosophy, Interpreter of Scripture* (*Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres*; a Dutch edition appeared a year later) in which he makes the radical proposal that philosophy, or reason, is to be the touchstone in interpreting the Bible. Philosophy, according to Meijer, was not the handmaiden of religion, forced to conform its conclusions to theological dogma and the literal word of the Bible; on the contrary, Scripture had to answer to philosophy. Indeed, the exact same truths proclaimed by Scripture were accessible to human reason alone, without the need of any special acts of divine revelation.

In his book, Meijer distinguishes between the simple meaning of a sentence (what it literally and strictly means when the words are read according to common usage), the "true meaning" of that sentence (what the author of the sentence intends to convey by it), and the truth (the correspondence of the meaning of the sentence with reality). Authors often express their thoughts using words in metaphorical ways, and in such cases the literal meaning will differ from the true meaning, "the ideas and concepts in the mind of the one who has produced the sentence." And just because an author says (and means to say) that something is the case, it does not follow that it truly is the case, that it is "in agreement with the facts as they exist in actuality independent of the speaker's understanding."[40] The literal meaning of the sentence "God is king of nations" may be quite different from the meaning that its speaker intends to convey by it (God is all-powerful). And it is a yet further question as to whether or not the sentence, so understood, is true.

This tripartite distinction holds for all human utterances and almost all works of literature . . . except one, the Bible. In the case of the Bible, the true meaning of any sentence is necessarily identical with the truth. This is because the author of Scripture is an omniscient, omnipotent, wise, and essentially veracious being—God, "who can neither deceive nor be deceived." And it is inconceivable that the proposition intended by God to be conveyed by a sentence is not also the absolute truth.

> The Holy Writings have for their author God himself who, in making use of scribes, led them by the hand, as it were, on the road of truth; and in these scribes was ever present the Spirit of Truth, on whom not even a shadow of falsity or error could fall. It is therefore quite certain that whatever is inscribed in Scripture contains nothing but the purest truth, completely free from any taint of falsity and error. Thus the true meanings of the divine utterances are always in accord with truth.[41]

In the case of Scripture, every true meaning will be a truth. Moreover, since God is infinite in intellect and power and incapable of deceit, there is no reason why each of the sentences of Scripture

needs to be univocal and have only one true meaning. All the truths successfully expressed by any passage in the Bible are to count among its true and intended meanings. God can pack as many truths into a sentence as he wants, and all of them will be true and legitimate ways to interpret that sentence. "Since the reader or listener encounters no truths in Scripture which the Spirit of God has not foreseen he will encounter—indeed, has provided for this—and since the reader or listener may encounter all these, it follows that all these truths in that passage were deliberately intended by him, and that they are therefore also true meanings."[42]

Meijer concludes from this account of the author and nature of Scripture that philosophy is "the norm and rule for interpreting and judging [Scripture]."[43] Deciding what the true meaning of a scriptural passage is, is a matter of determining which of the possible candidates is true and demonstrable; and determining what is true and demonstrable is precisely the task of philosophy. By "philosophy" Meijer does not mean the particular philosophical system of this or that thinker—whether it be Plato, Aristotle, or even Descartes—but reason itself, our rational faculty for discovering, through rigorous demonstrations, what is true and what is false. God is the author of both Scripture *and* human reason; therefore, the pronouncements of both must be true and mutually consistent. As Meijer, like many philosophers before him, insists, "truth cannot be contrary to itself."

For Meijer, then, "philosophy is the sure and infallible norm both for interpreting the Holy Writings and for examining interpretations."[44] Any proposed interpretation of Scripture must pass the test of objective, independent reason. If an interpretation, no matter how well grounded in the text it may be, is inconsistent with what reason tells us with certainty to believe—that is, with philosophical truth—then that interpretation must be rejected. For example, reason tells us that God cannot be "agitated" by human emotions; that would be inconsistent with a perfect and infinite Being. Therefore, any sentence in the Bible that describes God as being angry or sad or disappointed cannot be read literally;

the "simple meaning" cannot be the true meaning of the passage. In this case, only a figurative or metaphorical interpretation will do, one that reads the sentence in such a way that it ascribes to God only properties that reason agrees are consistent with the divine nature. Similarly, philosophy has proven that "nothing comes from nothing"; therefore, the scriptural account of God's ex nihilo creation of the world cannot be taken at face value. In this way, Meijer says, "the more difficult texts of Scripture are explained with the help of philosophy."

In fact, Meijer goes further and says that, strictly speaking, Scripture is not necessary for discovering religious truths. Because Scripture's true meanings are truths plain and simple, a rational person could, in principle, discover all of them for himself, without ever reading Scripture. Scripture does indeed teach the truth, but there are other means to it as well. The function of Scripture is "only to rouse its readers and to impel them to think about the matters set out therein, to look into them and consider whether the facts are as there set out. . . . Its function is to provide occasion and material for our thinking, thinking about things on which perhaps we would never otherwise have reflected."[45] The Bible may be an effective means for stimulating us to think true thoughts about God, but philosophy can do just as good a job on its own.

Unsurprisingly, Meijer was widely condemned for the "innovations" and "heresies" in his "atheistic" and "licentious" book. In 1666, immediately after publication, the Haarlem *classis* of the Reformed Church proclaimed the work to be filled with "godlessness and blasphemy," while among the propositions explicitly condemned by the curator of the University of Leiden in 1676 is that *philosophiam esse S. Scripturae interpretem* (philosophy is the interpreter of Holy Scripture).[46] Meijer was clearly aware of the reaction his book would provoke, since he had taken the precaution of publishing it anonymously. A 1674 edition would be printed in a single volume with Spinoza's *Treatise*, and for a long time some believed Spinoza to be the author of both works. In fact, the true identity of the author would remain a mystery until after Meijer's death in 1681.

The leadership of the Reformed Church in particular, with its devotion to Scripture as the foundation of its own interpretation (*sola Scriptura*), was incensed by Meijer's arguments that their position was incoherent and easily refutable. To these clerics, the idea that we need to go *outside* Scripture to some independent standard of truth, and especially philosophy or secular reason, was intolerable. So was the idea that a scriptural passage might have many legitimate and equally justified readings, some of which are literal but others figurative or allegorical. The standard position among Reformation theologians of the time was that Scripture has only one meaning, and it is the literal one (Meijer's "simple meaning"). Luther himself had insisted that "only the true principal meaning that is provided by the letters can produce good theologians." It may take some significant textual, linguistic, and historical work to discover what that "principal" meaning is; or, as Calvin claimed, the proper, literal interpretation of Scripture might require special illumination by the "Divine Spirit"—a view equally ridiculed by Meijer. But Luther, at least, is clear that "even though the things described in Scripture mean something further, Scripture should not therefore have a twofold meaning. Instead, it should retain the one meaning to which the words refer. . . . It is much more certain and much safer to stay with the words and the simple meaning."[47]

It was hardly an innovative or novel thesis that Meijer was propounding. Galileo, for one, insisted on it when defending the claim that Copernicanism is not inconsistent with Scripture.[48] Indeed, it was a view that Spinoza himself may have held at one point—in a book for which Meijer had written the preface! In the "Metaphysical Thoughts" that appeared just a few years before Meijer's treatise and in some elements of which Spinoza offers glimpses of his own views on metaphysical and theological matters, he notes that "Scripture teaches nothing which contradicts the natural light." He then uses this principle as a basis for the interpretation of Scripture.

> It suffices that we demonstrate those things [that we can grasp most certainly by natural reason] for us to know that Sacred Scripture

> must also teach the same things. For the truth does not contradict the truth, nor can Scripture teach such nonsense as is commonly supposed. For if we were to discover in it anything that would be contrary to the natural light, we could refute it with the same freedom which we employ when we refute the Koran and the Talmud. But let us not think for a moment that anything could be found in Sacred Scripture that would contradict the natural light.[49]

If Spinoza is indeed presenting his own "thoughts" here, it is tempting to conclude that Meijer learned his lessons on scriptural interpretation from Spinoza, before his friend completely changed his mind on this topic.

Meijer's book certainly made an impression on his contemporaries. But perhaps the most important defender of this kind of rationalist approach to the interpretation of Scripture was Maimonides, although even the great philosopher came in for harsh attacks from medieval rabbis and gentile critics on just this point.

In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides is concerned to combat the anthropomorphization of God to which common people, and even the learned, are prone. An infinite, eternal being cannot have anything in common with finite creatures; there can be no analogy drawn between human beings and God, and nothing about the divine nature can be known by considering human nature. This is obviously true in the case of body, and many chapters of the *Guide* are devoted to dispelling the notion that God has any physical features (fingers, face, feet, etc.). But Maimonides also believes that the true understanding of God, such as we can obtain it, must exclude attributing to God features of human psychology as well: anger, jealousy, envy, and other mental states familiar to us from introspection.

However, the Bible repeatedly refers to God in both psychological and physical terms. The reader is told of God's wrath, regret, and forgiveness, as well as his sitting down and rising up, his coming and going, even his looking and hearing. Read literally, these passages encourage, even demand, an anthropomorphizing of God. It is just this kind of "perplexity" generated by an

apparent inconsistency between reason and faith that the *Guide* is intended to cure.

Maimonides believes that a literal reading of the writings of the Hebrew prophets is the primary or default reading. Unless there are compelling reasons not to, one should opt for a straightforward, simple interpretation of the text. However, if such an interpretation yields a meaning that is inconsistent with a demonstrable philosophical truth, then a figurative or metaphorical interpretation *must* be adopted. Thus, reason tells us that God cannot possibly have a body. The principle "God is one" is the most important principle in all of Judaism—indeed, a fundamental theological truth for any monotheistic faith. And it can be rationally demonstrated with absolute certainty that a being that is essentially one, a simple unity, cannot possibly be corporeal. "There is no profession of unity unless the doctrine of God's corporeality is denied. For a body cannot be one, but is composed of matter and form, which by definition are two; it is also divisible, subject to partition."[50] Thus, a reading of a scriptural passage that involves attributing corporeal parts to God runs up against a demonstrated philosophical truth and, for that reason, must be rejected. Any mention of God's "eye" is to be read as referring to his watchfulness, his providence, or his intellectual apprehension; while prophetic talk of God's "heart" is to be understood as referring to his thought or his opinion (although what God's thought or opinion is like cannot be inferred from what our human thoughts or opinions are like).

On the other hand, when a literal reading of a passage, however odd it may seem, does not contradict any demonstrated truth, it should be adopted. Thus, Maimonides insists that although some philosophers (including Aristotle) firmly believe that the world is eternal and necessary, no one—including, he insists, Aristotle—has yet offered a conclusive proof of this. Therefore, there is no justification for reading the Bible's account of creation figuratively.

> That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively. . . .

> However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments.[51]

Maimonides is committed to this rationalist principle of interpretation because, as we have seen, he believes that prophecy, biblical or otherwise, is essentially the communication of scientific, metaphysical, and moral truths in concrete and imaginative form. The prophet is like the philosopher in that the content of what he proclaims comes to him as an "intellectual overflow" or emanation from God. Thus, there is a sense in which prophetic utterances are of the same nature, derive from the same source, and have the same cognitive stature as philosophical or rational statements. The prophet, like the philosopher, has achieved perfection in his speculative or rational faculties (the difference between the two is that the prophet has also achieved perfection in his imaginative faculty). It follows that what the prophet communicates is, in its substance, rational knowledge, and reason will therefore be the key to interpreting true prophetic writings.[52]

In his mature philosophical writings, Spinoza rarely names other philosophers, either those with whom he agrees (such as Descartes) or those with whom he differs (also, on occasion, Descartes). Such personal touches would not be in keeping with the geometric format of the *Ethics*. In the *Treatise*, there is the occasional mention of Plato or Aristotle, and his admiring review of Ibn Ezra's discussion of Mosaic authorship. However, such exceptions tend to prove the rule about Spinoza's normal reserve in referring to the thought of others. In his discussion in the *Treatise* of the interpretation of Scripture, however, he makes a major exception to this general policy.

Spinoza's theory of biblical hermeneutic is presented in explicit and highly critical contrast with that of Maimonides (and,

by implication, that of his friend Meijer as well). Unlike the more subtle engagement with Maimonides in his discussion of prophecy, where Spinoza exhibits Maimonidean tendencies of his own, in his examination of "the views of those who disagree with me" on the matter of scriptural interpretation he goes to great lengths to show that "the method of Maimonides is plainly of no value [*inutilis*]."[53] Among other things, that method twists the meanings of biblical passages to make them fit independent philosophical doctrines. "[Maimonides] assumes that it is legitimate for us to explain away and distort the words of Scripture to accord with our preconceived opinions, to deny its literal meaning and change it into something else even when it is perfectly plain and absolutely clear."[54] This is especially inappropriate in the case of the prophetic writings, whose authors were not philosophically learned and who were more concerned with encouraging moral obedience than with communicating intellectual truths.

Moreover, Spinoza insists, Maimonides' hyper-rationalist method, which demands that one know the truth value of a proposition in order to determine whether or not it is being expressed by a biblical passage, makes the meaning of the Bible inaccessible to ordinary people without philosophical training and absolutely certain knowledge of highly speculative doctrines. "For as long as we are not convinced of the truth of a statement, we cannot know whether it is in conformity with reason or contrary to it, and consequently neither can we know whether the literal meaning [of a biblical passage] is true or false." The interpretation of Scripture would need "a light other than the natural light," and only philosophers would be qualified to determine what the Bible is trying to say.

> If this view were correct, it would follow that the common people, for the most part knowing nothing of logical reasoning or without leisure for it, would have to rely solely on the authority and testimony of philosophers for their understanding of Scripture, and would therefore have to assume that philosophers are infallible in their interpretations of Scripture. This would indeed be a novel form

> of ecclesiastical authority, with very strange priests or pontiffs, more likely to excite men's ridicule than veneration.[55]

For these reasons, Spinoza concludes, "we can dismiss Maimonides' view as harmful, unprofitable and absurd."

A proper method of interpreting Scripture—one that is accessible to all who are endowed simply with the natural light of reason—is, for Spinoza, of the utmost importance, particularly because of contemporary tendencies to manipulate the meanings of biblical passages for political and social ends. Seventeenth-century Dutch theologians and religious leaders in particular are given to finding in Scripture exactly what will suit their purposes. They justify their convenient but unwarranted readings by appealing to "the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." This, for certain Calvinists, is the supernatural illumination that is supposed to be the true guide for understanding what the prophets are saying; it is, however, like divine grace, available only to the favored few.[56]

> We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God's Word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority. . . . They imagine that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Bible, and they exhaust themselves in unraveling these absurdities while ignoring other things of value. They ascribe to the Holy Spirit whatever their wild fantasies have invented, and devote their utmost strength and enthusiasm to defending it.[57]

So pursued, the interpretation of Scripture is without an anchor. These theologians, guided only by their mysterious faculty, try to pass off "human fabrications as divine teachings." The results are ungrounded in any objective method and, thus, unverifiable. Their readings reflect nothing but the prejudices they hold and the superstitions they hope to encourage in others. The inevitable consequence, as history has shown again and again, is religious feuding and the disruption of civil peace.

The true way to interpret Scripture and discover what exactly it teaches and what it does not teach—and Spinoza believes this to be practically a trivial claim—is to seek the meanings intended by its authors. Lodewijk Meijer was absolutely right to distinguish the meaning of a passage from the question of its truth. Where he went wrong was in identifying the two in the case of the Bible. He and many others

> suppose, as a foundation for understanding Scripture and unearthing its true meaning, that it is everywhere true and divine. So what we ought to establish by understanding Scripture, and subjecting it to a strict examination, and what we would be far better taught by Scripture itself, which needs no human inventions, they maintain at the outset as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture.[58]

The goal of the interpreter of Scripture, like the goal of a sincere interpreter of any work of human literature, is to discover what the work means, and this—for Spinoza, at least—is simply what message the author wants to convey through his writing. "The point at issue is merely the meaning of the texts, not their truth."[59] It is one thing to ask whether it is true that God is subject to emotions such as anger and jealousy; this is an inquiry best left to philosophers. It is quite another thing to determine whether Moses believed (and wanted others to believe) that God can be angry or jealous, and this is the task of the interpreter. His goal is to know "what was, or could have been, the author's intention . . . concentrating [his] attention on what the author could have had in mind."[60]

Spinoza, with astonishing boldness, compares the proper procedure for interpreting Scripture (and, presumably, any literary work) with the methods of natural science. "I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it."[61] And just as a scientific knowledge of nature must be sought "from Nature itself," without presupposing any substantive, a priori metaphysical or theological principles, so "all the contents of Scripture . . . must be sought from Scripture alone [*ab ipsa Scriptura sola*]."[62]

What Spinoza has in mind, in particular, are the elements of an empirical scientific method, such as those described in Francis Bacon's *New Organon* (1620).[63] The scientist's initial step is "a detailed study of Nature" that involves gathering all the relevant facts through raw and, more important, controlled observation—the compilation of what Bacon called "natural and experimental histories" and what Spinoza labels "assured data." From this collection of data, which are the phenomena that the scientist hopes to understand, he will ultimately derive (presumably by induction and the experimental testing of hypotheses) "definitions of the things of Nature". By "definitions," Spinoza means essences or natures, or the basic properties constitutive of kinds of things. A very specific example of such a definition is Spinoza's explanation of the homogeneous particulate composition of niter (potassium nitrate, or saltpeter), found in his letters to Oldenburg in which he disputes Robert Boyle's claim that niter is composed of heterogeneous particles.[64]

The discovery of these essences proceeds by first formulating (on the basis of the controlled observational data) the universal principles that govern natural phenomena, such as the laws of motion that cover all bodies. These are the primary "teachings" that the natural philosopher discovers from his critical study of nature. From such universal principles it is possible to move to less global laws of nature, those that explain only certain kinds of phenomena.

> In examining natural phenomena, we first of all try to discover those features that are most universal and common to the whole of Nature, to wit, motion-and-rest and the rules and laws governing them which Nature always observes and through which she constantly acts; and then we advance gradually from these to other less universal features.[65]

Individual phenomena are then subsumed under these principles, generating clear causal conceptions of them. Like the adequate knowledge that the *Ethics* holds out as our highest intellectual achievement, the essences of natural phenomena discovered by the

scientist provide a perspicuous understanding of the constitution of things and why they are as they are.[66] Such essences are the equivalent within natural science of what meanings are for hermeneutic science. And as Spinoza sees it, at no point in this process does the natural scientist go *outside* nature itself—for example, to theological principles about God, such as Descartes had done in formulating the most general laws of nature in his *Principles of Philosophy*.[67]

Similarly, the interpreter of Scripture must not go outside Scripture itself in order to discover its "principles," that is, the teachings its authors intended to convey. Whatever religious lessons and ethical maxims the prophets wanted their readers to learn from their writings must be sought from those writings alone, with the aid of "the natural light."

> The task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture . . . allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture.[68]

The moral principles propounded by Scripture can indeed be known independently of Scripture, by reason alone, much as Spinoza shows in the *Ethics*. They are, after all, purely rational principles that "can be demonstrated from accepted axioms."[69] However, *that* Scripture teaches this or that principle cannot be discovered except by looking at Scripture itself in a critical manner.

By "Scripture alone" (*sola Scriptura*), Spinoza certainly means to exclude both the Maimonidean-rationalist recourse to an external philosophical canon and Calvin's appeal to special divine illumination (the Holy Spirit). On the other hand, he also wants to avoid the individualistic, highly subjective approach to the reading of Scripture favored by certain dissident Reformed sects. Quakers and Collegiants, for example, among whom Spinoza counted

many friends, leave it up to the individual to interpret Scripture as his conscience or "inner light" leads. For Spinoza, there is an objective method for interpreting Scripture, one that should guide its practitioner, despite the many difficulties standing in his way, to at least an approximate understanding of its authors' intended meanings in many—and among them, the most important—of its passages.

To be sure, Spinoza has a rather extended understanding of *sola Scriptura*. The proper approach to the Bible will require examining not only the text itself and the language in which it was written but also factors such as the social and political circumstances of its composition and the biographies of its authors. Examining Scripture "from Scripture alone" apparently means studying it from exclusively, but *all*, relevant scriptural considerations. It is as if to say that by "Bible" is meant the *world* of the Bible. What Spinoza is demanding is a historical approach to Scripture, and it involves looking at the diverse contexts within which the writings were originally created.

Moreover, while Spinoza's Bible hermeneutics is not a rationalism in the Maimonidean (or Meijerian) sense, reason nonetheless has an important role to play in it. The interpretation of Scripture does require the use of one's rational faculties working methodically on textual and historical material. Again, like the science of nature, which requires no supernatural insight,

> it is now obvious to all that this method [of interpreting Scripture] demands no other light than the natural light of reason. For the nature and virtue of that light consists essentially in this, that by a process of logical deduction that which is hidden is inferred and concluded from what is known, or given as known.[70]

In *Philosophy, Interpreter of Holy Scripture*, Meijer distinguishes two ways in which reason might play a role in the interpretation of the Bible. According to one approach, which he (and Maimonides) adopts, reason is "the norm and rule for interpreting and judging"; any proposed interpretation that is inconsistent with "true and indubitably certain knowledge which reason . . . draws forth

and arranges under the most certain light of truth"—that is, with true philosophy—is to be rejected.[71] In this view, reason provides the *content* against which proposed readings are to be assessed.

On the other hand, Meijer notes, reason may be only "the means and instrument for tracing and eliciting the meaning of the Holy Writings," and not "the norm according to which all interpretation must be directed and decided."[72] Spinoza is sensitive to this distinction between reason as a body of doctrine and reason as a tool of discovery. He knows that, subtle as it may be, it is essential to grasping the difference between his rationalism with respect to Scripture and the kind of rationalism characteristic of Maimonides' and Meijer's account. Above all, it is what allows him to claim that anyone endowed with reason—that is, anyone—has what it takes (at least in principle) to understand Scripture's most important messages.

> Since the supreme authority for the interpretation of Scripture is vested in each individual, the rule that governs interpretation must be nothing other than the natural light that is common to all, and not any supernatural light, nor eternal authority. Nor must this rule be so difficult as not to be available to any but skilled philosophers; it must be suited to the natural and universal ability and capacity of mankind.[73]

Like the science of nature, the "science" of interpreting the Bible begins with the gathering of data. In the case of Scripture, the main relevant data are the various pronouncements themselves: what one biblical writer says about God, as these statements may be found in the books he is said to have composed; what another writer says about divine providence; and, most important of all, what different writers have to say about ethical matters, about what is right and good. Once collected, all of this material should be properly organized by author and subject matter. "The pronouncements made in each book should be assembled and listed

under headings, so that we thus have to hand all the texts that treat of the same subject."[74] At the same time, the interpreter, who needs to be well-versed in ancient Hebrew—since "all the writers of both the Old and the New Testaments were Hebrews"—should note any ambiguities or obscurities (defined as "the degree of difficulty with which the meaning can be elicited from the context, and not . . . the degree of difficulty with which its truth can be perceived by reason") among the passages he has collected, as well as any inconsistencies or contradictions that are found in material both by the same writer and among different writers.

In addition to this textual data, the interpreter needs to gather everything that can be known about the writers of the Bible. He needs to inquire into the biographical, historical, political, even psychological background of each book's author.

> Our historical study should set forth the circumstances relevant to all the extant books of the prophets, giving the life, character and pursuits of the author of every book, detailing who he was, on what occasion and at what time and for whom and in what language he wrote . . . for in order to know which pronouncements were set forth as laws and which as moral teaching, it is important to be acquainted with the life, character and interests of the author. Furthermore, as we have a better understanding of a person's character and temperament, so we can more easily explain his words.[75]

Spinoza is saying that in many cases you cannot know what a person is trying to say unless you know who that person is, what he cares about, why he is writing, and to whom he is communicating. "It is essential for us to have some knowledge of the authors if we seek to interpret their writings."[76] This applies as much to the biblical prophets as it does to the author of *Oliver Twist*, all of whom are engaged in creating imaginative literature with a moral and social message, though of different literary genres and for different kinds of audiences. Indeed, it is a particularly important rule for understanding the prophets, who lived many centuries ago and in historical and cultural circumstances far removed from those of a seventeenth-century Dutch burgher.

The final set of crucial data involves the history of the transmission of the biblical texts. This is essential for determining their authenticity and for discovering, when possible, any corruptions or "mutilations" they may have suffered over generations. The interpreter will need to know "whether or not [the books] have been contaminated by spurious insertions, whether errors have crept in, and whether these have been corrected by experienced and trustworthy scholars."[77]

With all this at hand, the interpreter, like the scientist, can now proceed to discover the general principles that govern the phenomena. Or, in this case, he is ready, on the basis of the literary data, to discern the doctrines that are proclaimed throughout all the prophetic writings by their authors. If the natural scientist is seeking the laws of nature, the Bible scholar is after "that which is most universal and forms the basis and foundation of all Scripture; in short, that which is commended in Scripture by all the prophets as doctrine eternal and most profitable for all mankind."[78]

Spinoza believes that there are such universal principles expressed everywhere by Scripture, regardless of a book's author: that God exists, that God is one, that God should be worshipped, and that God cares for everyone and loves above all those who worship him and love their neighbors as themselves. This is the simple message of all of Scripture. In fact, Spinoza believes—somewhat incredibly—that these propositions are so clearly the meaning of many of Scripture's passages that very little interpretive work is needed to find them. "These and similar doctrines . . . are taught everywhere in Scripture so clearly and explicitly that no one has ever been in any doubt as to its meaning on these points."[79]

Not everything in Scripture is so explicit and unambiguous, however. Spinoza rejects the view held by many of his Protestant contemporaries that Scripture's entire meaning is fairly obvious and needs practically no interpretation. (The French-Dutch Reformed theologian Samuel Desmarets [or Maresius], for example, believed that the Bible's passages are so perspicuous that a literal reading, according to the common usage of the words and "their public and ordinary sense," will yield its one true meaning.)[80] A

good deal of serious hermeneutic work on the data is required for determining, as far as we can, precisely what each author thinks on such metaphysical and theological matters as what God is, how God exercises providence, and the nature of miracles. These are the more restricted principles that correspond to the more particular laws formulated by the natural scientist. They differ from the universal laws in that there is no agreement among the biblical authors on these questions. Moreover, when it comes to principles that are "of less universal import but affect our ordinary daily life"—namely, the particularities of moral conduct and the different sorts of actions recommended by each prophet as constituting justice and charity—many obscurities, contradictions, and ambiguities will be found. While these are supposed to "flow from the universal doctrine like rivulets from their source," their derivation may not come easy. Among other things, the interpreter must consider the occasion on which the passage was written and to whom its content was directed.

Spinoza provides the example of Moses, who is reported in the Torah as saying that God is fire and that God is jealous. How to interpret such statements, and especially determining whether to read them literally or figuratively, is not a matter of deciding whether or not a literal reading is consistent with demonstrated philosophical truths about God. Rather, it involves looking at the relevant passages in the light of the basic principles of Scripture already derived from the data, along with other things that Moses says and the circumstances in which he is saying them. Since Moses does clearly and consistently state elsewhere that God has no resemblance to visible things, the sentence in which he says that God is fire must be read metaphorically. "The question as to whether Moses did or did not believe that God is fire must in no wise be decided by the rationality or irrationality of the belief, but solely from other pronouncements of Moses."[81] The Hebrew word for "fire" can be used to refer to anger, and because a leader would find such imagistic language to be more effective for motivating others to obey God, it can be concluded that Moses did not mean to assert that God is literally flamelike. As Spinoza says to

van Blijenburgh some years earlier, in a letter from early 1665, sometimes the authors of Scripture tailored their language to the understanding of the masses. "Scripture, being particularly adapted to the needs of the common people, continually speaks in merely human fashion, for the common people are incapable of understanding higher things."[82]

On the other hand, because Moses is nowhere reported as saying that God does not have emotions, the sentence in which he says that God is jealous can be read literally. Although such a reading is opposed to reason—at least, so Spinoza argues in the *Ethics*—it is not inconsistent either with the universal proclamations of Scripture ("God is one," etc.) or with any more particular principles espoused by Moses himself.[83]

Similarly, Jesus is reported in the Gospel of Matthew to have said, "If a man strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the left also." If this is understood to be a literal direction to judges and lawgivers, such toleration of injustice and submission to wrongdoing would, Spinoza argues, be inconsistent with the law of Moses, which demands that every crime deserves a corresponding and just punishment ("an eye for an eye").

> Therefore we should consider who said this, to whom, and at what time. This was said by Christ, who was not ordaining laws as a lawgiver, but was expounding his teachings as a teacher, because . . . he was intent on improving men's minds rather than their external actions. Further, he spoke these words to men suffering under oppression, living in a corrupt commonwealth where justice was utterly disregarded, a commonwealth whose ruin he saw to be imminent.[84]

The result of Spinoza's interpretive method is not a subjective or even relativistic reading of Scripture; there is an objective meaning to be gotten out of the text by using the proper tools. Rather, what Spinoza offers is a contextual reading, one that looks at Scripture for what it is: a very human document composed at a particular time for very human purposes.

There are, Spinoza admits, many obstacles to deciphering the Bible's true meaning. While it is relatively easy to grasp the

work's general moral message—"we can understand the meaning of Scripture with confidence in matters relating to salvation and necessary to blessedness"—grasping its less universal principles and exhortations and revealing many of the beliefs of the prophets proves to be more difficult. In many instances, we can in fact only conjecture what a prophetic author is trying to say.

This is due to a number of factors. First, there is the poverty of our understanding of the biblical languages, or what Spinoza calls "our inability to present a complete account of Hebrew." So much linguistic information has been lost over the millennia, including certain grammatical rules and common vocabulary, that we now have at best a fragmentary knowledge of Hebrew. "The men of old who used the Hebrew language have left to posterity no information concerning the basic principles and study of this language. At any rate, we possess nothing at all from them, neither dictionary nor grammar nor textbook on rhetoric." With the disappearance of native speakers of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, much information ordinarily possessed by the daily users of a language has disappeared. "Nearly all the words for fruits, birds, fishes have perished with the passage of time, together with numerous other words."[85] Moreover, even when the meanings of particular words are known, what is lacking is an idiomatic and colloquial knowledge that would allow us to make sense of an obscure passage.

There are also, Spinoza insists, ambiguities in the Bible that are due to certain peculiarities of ancient Hebrew. These include the multiple meanings of words, especially particles and adverbs (the *vav*, for example, can be conjunctive or disjunctive); letters that look the same (such as the *resh* and *dalet*); and the lack of a clear and precise tense system among the verbs. More significant is the absence of vowels and punctuation in the original Hebrew text (the vocalization marks were added in the Middle Ages by the Masoretes, whom Spinoza calls "men of a later age whose authority should carry no weight with us," since their insertions reflect their own interpretations of Scripture).

Finally, there is the sheer difficulty of accurately reconstructing the history surrounding such ancient writings. About most of

Scripture's authors we either have no knowledge whatsoever, or only partial and dubious information. Their social stature, political persuasion, and audience must be inferred on the basis of very slim evidence. Their psychological lives are hidden from us, and we can only speculate on their motives in writing.

All of these difficulties, Spinoza concludes, are "so grave that I have no hesitation in affirming that in many instances we either do not know the true meaning of Scripture or we can do no more than make conjecture."[86]

Spinoza's naturalization of Scripture and his historical approach to its interpretation, while deflationary to some degree, is not meant to rob the Bible of all of its authority. On the contrary, Spinoza believes that it is those who focus too much on the words of Scripture and not its message that have betrayed it. By promoting myths about the supernatural origin of the Bible, sectarian religions have fostered the worship of letters on a page rather than the ethical doctrines that its authors hoped to spread. And this, Spinoza contends, is idolatry. "Instead of God's Word, they are beginning to worship likenesses and images, that is, paper and ink."[87]

In fact, it is the moral content alone in which the true authority—indeed, the *divinity*—of Scripture consists.

> If we want to testify, without any prejudgment, to the divinity of Scripture, it must be made evident to us from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrine; for it is on this basis alone that its divinity can be proved.[88]

What makes something divine is not that it has its origin in an alleged act by God. (This is especially the case for Spinoza, whose identification of God and Nature means that everything is caused by God.) Rather, something is divine if and only if it moves people to act according to justice and charity, if it leads them to love God and their fellow human beings. "A thing is called sacred and divine only for as long as men use it in a religious way"—that is,

insofar as it is associated with pious behavior.[89] Thus, "the divinity of Scripture must be established solely from the fact that it teaches true virtue." And Spinoza does believe that there really is something special about the Bible in this regard. Because of the ethical superiority and imaginative gifts of its prophetic authors, the Bible, when properly read, truly is an excellent teacher of virtue and piety.

Spinoza thereby self-consciously relativizes what is sacred about the Bible. Nothing is sacred or divine in itself, "in an absolute sense," but "only in relation to the mind."[90] A book, considered alone, is just a book. Were Scripture to lose its moral efficacy, its power of bringing people toward devotion to God and love of their neighbors, then it would be, like any book, "nothing more than paper and ink . . . their neglect [would] render it completely profane."[91] (Conversely, just as the mere acquaintance with Scripture, without any understanding of its true moral message, is not *sufficient* for bringing people to blessedness, so a reading of Scripture is not *necessary* for piety and religious virtue—these can be achieved by someone who has never even heard of the Bible. "He who is totally unacquainted with the Biblical narratives, but nevertheless holds salutary beliefs and pursues the true way of life, is absolutely blessed.")[92]

For this reason, Spinoza insists—in yet another audacious statement that must have incited the rage of his critics—that any book can be called divine, as long as its message is the proper one and it is effective in conveying it. "Books that teach and tell of the highest things are equally sacred, in whatever language and by whatever nation they were written."[93] Thus, it is still true, in a sense, that God is "the author of the Bible—not because God willed to confer on men a set number of books, but because of the true religion that is taught therein."[94] But the Word of God can, at least in principle, be found in many books. There is no reason why one particular work of human literature, written by the Hebrews several millennia ago, should have a monopoly on the teaching of true religion.