

Spinoza and the Language of Scripture

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Abstract In his works Spinoza remarks on the relationship between Hebrew and the culture of the ancient Israelites. Thus, the more we understand Hebrew, the better we understand the Bible. Moreover, understanding the Bible is for the non-philosophical masses essential for motivating lives of virtue. However, there are irremediable gaps in our knowledge of ancient Hebrew, and this might appear to undermine the moral motivational role that the Bible is supposed to play. But I suggest that the philological deficiency and the hermeneutical impediment should not effectively thwart the Bible's properly edifying effect on non-philosophical readers.

Keywords Spinoza. Hebrew. Language. Bible. Hermeneutics. Virtue.

Index 1 Introduction. – 2 A New Kind of Hebrew Grammar? – 3 How to Read Scripture. – 4 Language and Culture. – 5 A Stumbling Block? – 6 Hermeneutics and Moral Improvement. – 7 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Sometime in the early 1670s, while dealing with the fallout over the “scandalous” *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza began writing a grammar of the Hebrew language. The impetus for this project, we are told, was his friends’ desire to learn Hebrew, presumably so that they might study the “Old Testament” in its original language, as Spinoza recommends in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP). In the *Admonitio Ad Lectorem* for the *Compendium Grammatices Linguae Hebraeae* (Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language), written by those friends for the *Opera Posthuma* they published



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the year after Spinoza's death, they say that Spinoza undertook to compose a Hebrew grammar "at the request of some of his friends, who were very eager to study the sacred language", and that "because of the untimely death of its author ...it remains incomplete" (G I,286).

The *Compendium* is undoubtedly the philosopher's least studied work, for understandable reasons. It is not a philosophical, political or theological-political treatise, and so Spinoza scholars and other historians of philosophy have not shown much interest in it. And because Spinoza, while obviously a Hebraist of some skill, was not primarily a linguist or grammarian, his work on Hebrew, while occasionally acknowledged for its historical significance, tends to be overlooked by scholars of that language in favor of the grammars of more prominent medieval and early modern Hebraists, Jewish and Christian, such as Moses Kimhi (1127-1190), Abraham ben Meir Balmes (ca. 1440-1523), Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) and Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629).¹

Still, the *Compendium* is not without philosophical interest. The work contains some very intriguing, if spare, comments by Spinoza on the nature of language itself. Thus, any investigation of Spinoza as a philosopher of language – if indeed he truly has a philosophy of language – will have to take account of the *Compendium*.² For example, this work is the source for Spinoza's conception of the role that rules play in language.

In this essay, however, I will not be concerned with what Spinoza has to say philosophically about language in general. Rather, my focus will be on a more particular set of issues.

In the *Compendium* Spinoza offers some brief remarks on the relationship between a language and its home culture – in this case, between Hebrew and the culture of the ancient Israelites for whom it was the *lingua franca* – and what the former can reveal about the latter. Thus, the more we understand Hebrew, the better we are able to understand the Bible, not just because we can read it in its original language but also because we will be better equipped to know the culture from which it arose – including something about its authors, their audience, and why they were writing – which is key for its interpretation. Moreover, understanding the Bible – grasping

1 Early studies of Spinoza's *Compendium* include Bernays 1850; Chajes 1869; Hillesum 1921; and Porges 1922, as well as, more recently, Gruntfest 1979; Klijnsmit 1986, 1988a, 1988b, 1990; and Levy 1989. Even more recently, the *Compendium*'s star has been somewhat on the rise and has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, with studies by Cassuto 1999 and 2006; Harvey 2002; Hervet 2012; Mock 2016 and 2019; Proietti 2010 and 2013; and Totaro 2019. The essays in Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach and Totaro 2019 are especially relevant.

2 See, for example, Hillesum 1921 and Porges 1922. There are also the more recent studies: Savan 1979; Bove 1991; and Vinciguerra 2006.

its universal teachings – is for most people (namely, the *vulgus* or non-philosophical masses) essential for motivating lives of virtue. Therefore, it would seem to follow that a thorough understanding of the Hebrew language should be necessary for virtuous living.

However, there may be a tension within Spinoza's account of the language of Scripture. There are significant, irremediable gaps in our knowledge of ancient Hebrew: gaps that must prevent us from using the Bible's language fully to access and understand the culture of the ancient Hebrews, and thus gaps that would seem to stand in the way of a thoroughly informed interpretation of the texts' meanings. And this hermeneutical obstacle, in turn, would appear to undermine the moral motivational role that the Bible is supposed to play for those who read it, in particular, the masses. It would be hard to be inspired by a work that you do not properly understand. Nonetheless, I suggest that, in the end, the philological deficiency and the hermeneutical impediment it represents does not, for Spinoza, effectively thwart the Bible's capacity to have its appropriately edifying effect on non-philosophical readers.

2 A New Kind of Hebrew Grammar?

Spinoza is quite clear about his goal in composing his *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*. He insists that the Hebrew grammars available in his time, composed in the Middle Ages and later – by Jews and gentiles, and including those that, like his own *Grammar*, were written primarily in Latin – all treat Hebrew in a very limited manner: as a “sacred tongue”. What he means by this is that all previous grammars regard Hebrew as a holy language of a uniquely holy book – as the language of divine Scripture alone – and thus as a special written language used by a particular literate caste for composing texts for worship and religious study. This tendency, informed as it is by certain ideologically driven but false and superstitious assumptions about Scripture itself – especially the assumption that its author is God – has had, Spinoza insists, the unfortunate result of generating significant misunderstandings of the nature of the Hebrew language. For example, by taking the Bible, which these grammarians believed to be a uniform and internally consistent work of literature (as befitting its divine author), as their sole linguistic source for Hebrew, they concluded – wrongly, Spinoza intends to show – that it is a highly irregular language, full of exceptions to incomplete rules.

Spinoza's project, on the other hand, is to write not a grammar of the Bible's Hebrew, but rather a grammar of the Hebrew that, among other things, was also used in writing the Bible. He proposes, that is, to write a guide to Hebrew as a natural language, as the vernacular of a particular historical people, which, he argues, it surely was. “There

are many who have written a grammar of Scripture, but no one who has written a grammar of the Hebrew language" (*Compendium*, G I,310). If the Bible is, as Spinoza argues in the TTP, a literary work of human hands, composed over time in the natural way in which all books are produced, then its language should be understood not as the supernatural language of some transcendent deity but as the mundane, lived language of a specific people, of a historical linguistic community. As Scripture is just another human text, so Hebrew is just another human tongue. It was used not only by prophets, scribes, priests, rabbis and other members of an exceptional class, but by all kinds of people. It functioned not only for worship and other liturgical and ceremonial practices, but in daily lives, whether at home, in the marketplace or in political and military matters. Spinoza is thus engaged in a kind of linguistic archaeology, based on extant texts but aimed at recovering the lost spoken vernacular of an ancient tribe.

Spinoza thus writes in the *Compendium*, as he is discussing the inflection of prepositions from the singular to the plural, that "in this way, many prepositions, as well as adverbs, can be formed, although in Scripture they are never found so formed" (*Compendium* X, G I,328). He takes this as evidence that the etymology and syntax he is describing is not just that of the Bible. To be sure, a reader of the *Compendium* might legitimately wonder whether Scripture is, in fact, Spinoza's sole source for his grammar. Some scholars contend that all of the Hebrew cited in the *Compendium* – every sample word, phrase or passage, whether explicitly cited as a Biblical text or not – comes from the Hebrew Bible; they then ask how Spinoza can justifiably claim to be composing a grammar of the language of the ancient Hebrews, as opposed to just the language of the Hebrew Bible.³ Other scholars, however, insist that the Hebrew texts inserted by Spinoza that do not explicitly have a Biblical citation come from later Hebrew literature, such as the Talmud (the Mishnah and the Gemara) or rabbinic commentaries.⁴

Be all that as it may, Spinoza envisions the *Compendium* as providing a kind of secularization and even re-animation of Hebrew by reconstructing its rules and practices as a living natural language, as a conversational tongue. His treatise is, he says, a work "for those who want to speak Hebrew but not chant it" (G I,300). This kind of knowledge of Hebrew, "the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which their authors were accustomed to speak", is, Spinoza insists in the TTP, essential for interpreting Scripture properly. He notes that the "history" of Scripture that needs to be compiled before the hard hermeneutical work begins must focus on

³ See Levy 1989, 159; Klijnsmit 1986.

⁴ See, for example, Mock 2016, 284-6 and Mock 2019.

all the meanings each utterance can admit in ordinary conversational usage. Because all the writers, both of the Old Testament and the New, were Hebrews, it is certain that the history of the Hebrew language is necessary above all others, not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament, which were written in this language, but also for understanding those of the New. For though they have been circulated in other languages, nevertheless they are expressed in a Hebrew manner. (TTP VII, G III,99-100/Curley II,173)

3 **How to Read Scripture**

Spinoza thus believes that his Hebrew grammar will, more than all other grammars, aid us in our attempts to discover what Scripture's texts are saying. It will help us, that is, to interpret Scripture not in order to uncover some eternal divine truths, or indeed any truths whatsoever - philosophical, theological, natural, or otherwise - but simply to learn the minds of its authors and what claims they intended to express through their sometimes ambiguous, often inconsistent sentences. The sole hermeneutical goal here is meaning, not truth.

In the TTP, Spinoza rejects the idea that the Bible was literally authored by God. Spinoza's God (*Deus*) is Nature (*Natura*), and thus cannot write or dictate anything. The Bible as we have it is, rather, the work of human beings writing over generations in very particular historical and political circumstances. Thus, Spinoza concludes, Scripture, like any work of human literature, must be interpreted on its own terms and not by reference to anything beyond the text, the evolution of its composition and canonization, and the personal histories of its authors.

In particular, Spinoza argues against the rationalist type of exegesis proposed by Maimonides. As the twelfth-century rabbi explains in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, philosophy, broadly construed, is the touchstone for interpreting the Bible. If a literal reading of any passage is inconsistent with what can be demonstrated as philosophically true with absolute certainty, then the sentence must be read figuratively. For Spinoza, this approach is illegitimate in so far as it goes beyond Scripture itself - to an external canon of reason and philosophy - in order to interpret Scripture. He says that "to know whether Moses believed that God is a fire, we must in no way infer our answer from the fact that this sentence [taken literally] agrees with reason or is contrary to it. Instead, we must rely only on other statements Moses himself made" (TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,174). In other words, there is an important distinction between the *meaning* of Scripture - what the books say, that is, what propositions the authors

intended to convey – which is what one is after when interpreting any literary text, and what is philosophically or historically *true*.

We are concerned only with the meaning of the utterances, not with their truth. Indeed, we must take great care, so long as we are looking for the meaning of Scripture, not to be predisposed by our own reasoning, insofar as it is founded on the principles of natural knowledge (not to mention our own prejudices). In order not to confuse the true meaning with the truth of things, we must seek that meaning solely from linguistic usage, or from reasoning which recognizes no other foundation than Scripture. (TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,173)

Much of what Scripture relates is *not*, in fact, true, no more so than what is related by any other work of human literature. When we read a novel – say, *Emma*, by Jane Austen – we do not decide on the interpretation of a passage in this work of fiction by appealing to what may or may not be objectively (scientifically, philosophically, psychologically) true in the world outside the novel and its author's life and projects. Rather, we rely on Austen's language (such as her use of irony) and other things that have been happening in the story – for example, we interpret Emma's behavior in this or that instance by what we already know of her character. We may also bring in things we know about Austen herself, the milieu in which she lived, her social circle, and so on; as part of the "history" of the text, these are all relevant factors in our hermeneutical endeavor. For Spinoza, if what Scripture states does, in some cases, happen to be true, it is not, despite what Maimonides (who claims that the prophetic authors of Scripture were themselves knowledgeable philosophers) says, *necessarily* the case that what it states is true.

4 Language and Culture

One of Spinoza's most noteworthy remarks about language occurs during his discussion of Scriptural hermeneutics. Throughout the *Compendium*, Spinoza refers not only to the "Hebrew language [*lingua Hebraea*]", but to linguistic practices "among the Hebrews [*apud Hebraeos*]". For example, we are told that "the Latins divide discourse into eight parts, but it is unclear whether the Hebrews also divide it into so many parts", and "the mode that the Latins call the infinitive is, among the Hebrews, a pure and simple noun" (G I,303). It is as if Spinoza envisions more than just a linguistic archaeology and the recovery of a language, but a cultural archaeology by way of language.

Spinoza regards language as embedded in sense experience and a product of the imagination. It belongs to what in the *Ethics* he calls the “first kind of knowledge” (to be contrasted with two kinds of intellect-based knowledge: reason, the second kind, and intuition, the third kind). The first kind of knowledge comprises two ways in which we “perceive many things and form universal notions”:

- I. From singular things which have been represented to us through the senses in a way that is mutilated, confused and without order for the intellect; for that reason, I have been accustomed to call such perceptions knowledge from random experience.
- II. From signs, e.g., from the fact that, having heard or read certain words, we recollect things, and form certain ideas of them, which are like them, and through which we imagine the things. These two ways of regarding things I shall henceforth call knowledge of the first kind, opinion or imagination. (E II, p40s2)

The “inadequate” ideas acquired through both sense experience and language (hearsay and literary sources) stand in contrast with the “adequate” ideas produced by reason. The former are concrete and particular ideas that reflect our random interactions with things in the world through the body (including sounds and words), and may be false; the latter are properly and logically ordered by the intellect, and necessarily are true. In the “Metaphysical Thoughts” that were published as an appendix to his *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I, & II*, a geometric summary of parts 1 and 2 of Descartes’s *Principia Philosophiae*, as Spinoza is discussing “what the true and false are, both among ordinary people and among philosophers”, he notes that

ordinary people first invent words, which afterwards are used by the philosophers, it seems desirable for one seeking the original meaning of a term to ask what it first denoted among ordinary people particularly where we lack other causes that could be used to investigate that [meaning], causes drawn from the nature of language. (G I,246/Curley I,312)

The original institution of language is thus grounded in ordinary experience. As such, language is deeply reflective both of a culture’s relationship to nature and of its quotidian affairs. What gets embodied and expressed in language – its vocabulary and grammar, along with its modes of speech and its uses – is a linguistic nation’s way of responding, conceptually and practically, to its natural and social environments, indeed, to the cosmos itself.

For this reason, Spinoza believes that the study of a lived language can tell us something about a culture's *mentalité*, its itemizing and classification of things as well as its values.⁵ Through a familiarity with language as a spoken and written medium of communication, the use of words not just in high and holy literary production but in everyday life, we can, he says, know much about the "character and concerns [*mores ac studia*]," the "spirit and mentality [*genium & ingenium*]" of its users (TTP VII, G III,102/Curley II,175)

In the case of the ancient Hebrews, certain aspects of their language are supposed to be indicative of the way in which they looked at and conceived the world. For example, from the fact that Hebrew divides all nouns into masculine and feminine, we can surmise that the Hebrews were "accustomed to giving all things human attributes, such as 'the land hears', 'it heard', etc." (*Compendium*, G I,304); and from the tenses of the Hebrew verb, we can know something about how they conceived of time and action (*Compendium*, G I,343). Then there is the wonderful claim that Spinoza offers right at the beginning of the treatise, that the Hebrews "call vowels the *souls of letters* [*literarum animae*] and letters without vowels *bodies without souls*" (G I,287), a remark that one scholar regards as of "*immense portée*".⁶ For Spinoza, such linguistic phenomena are a potentially rich source for the ancient Hebrews' metaphysical worldview.

The knowledge of Hebrew, then, is more than just a matter of being able to read the words on the Biblical page. As Spinoza claims in the TTP, the *interpretation* of Scripture requires not only a technical knowledge of its language – the *alef-bet*, the vocalizations, the rules of declension and conjugation, etc. – but also a knowledge of the historical and biographical contexts of its composition. That is, one needs to know something about its various authors, their personal, social and cultural backgrounds, and the historical and political circumstances in which they wrote. "To know which sentences [in Scripture] are put forward as laws and which as moral teachings, it is important to know the life, character, and concerns of the author. The better we know someone's spirit and mentality, the more easily we can explain his words" (TTP VII, G III,101-2/Curley II,175).

A deep and cultural knowledge of the Hebrew in which Scripture was written – the historical language of its people – thereby does important exegetical work. The *Compendium* thus functions as a kind of auxiliary to the TTP, one in which Spinoza demonstrates

⁵ As Savan puts it (1979, 61), for Spinoza "words arise from experience and refer to experience". Savan's point is that, on Spinoza's principles, ordinary language is inadequate for the communication of philosophical truth, although it does serve to express a confused understanding of things according to how one's body is affected by things in the world.

⁶ Spinoza 2013, 16.

just that knowledge of the Hebrew language that is essential for understanding Scripture, its history and its authors.

The history of the Hebrew language is necessary, above all others, not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament, which were written in this language, but also for understanding those of the New. For although they've been circulated in other languages, nevertheless they [the books of the New Testament] are expressed in a Hebrew manner (TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,173)

A grammar that treats Hebrew only as a sacred language cannot possibly meet this task, or so Spinoza insists.

5 **A Stumbling Block?**

Unfortunately, the project to uncover the *mentalité* of the ancient Hebrews through the study of their language faces some serious obstacles. There is, of course, the great chronological distance and difference in historical circumstances standing between the ancient Israelite tribes and their later kingdoms and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.

More to the point, there is our inadequate understanding of ancient Hebrew itself. Spinoza claims that the interpretation of Scripture “requires a complete knowledge of the Hebrew language” (TTP VII, G III,106/Curley II,180). But so much of that language has been lost, especially in just those areas that would be most informative about the everyday world of the Hebrews. In the TTP, Spinoza notes that the people who actually *used* Hebrew on an everyday basis have left behind no information concerning the basic principles of their language. “Those who spoke and wrote Hebrew in ancient times left nothing to posterity regarding its foundations and teaching. Or at least we have nothing from them: no dictionary, no grammar, no rhetoric” (TTP VII, G III,106/Curley II,180). Thus, there are certain irremediable problems that will necessarily plague any latter-day account of the Hebrew language and any efforts to interpret ancient Hebrew texts on that basis. For instance, we lack the words that the ancient Hebrews used for various foods, animals and other mundane items, as well as numerous idiomatic expressions and modes of speech.

For almost all the names of fruits, birds, fish, and many other things have perished in the injustice of the ages. Again, the meaning of many nouns and verbs that occur in the Bible is either completely unknown or is disputed. We lack not only all these things, but also and especially, a phraseology of this language. For time, the

devourer, has obliterated from the memory of men almost all the idioms and manners of speaking peculiar to the Hebrew nation. (TTP VII, G III,106/Curley II,180)

Too many features of the Hebrew language “have been consigned to oblivion by the ravages of time” to make it possible to completely reclaim this ancient tongue. The best that can be done now is to try to reconstruct the elements and rules of ancient Hebrew from what is extant in its literature. This requires a good deal of inference, reconstruction and speculation. This is the project that Spinoza has set himself in the *Compendium*.

Obviously these linguistic lacunae will have implications for the task of interpreting Scripture. We cannot grasp the meanings of passages if we are unsure of the meanings of the words that compose it. And if we lack the words for all those creatures, objects and activities that made up everyday experience for the ancient Hebrews, many dimensions of their culture and *mentalité* will be inaccessible to us. And with much of that “spirit and mentality” out of reach, there will be problems for the interpretation of Scripture.

Does it follow that the Bible will also fail in its most basic operation? Will ignorance of the Hebrew language and the consequent breakdown in interpretation mean that Scripture cannot perform what Spinoza considers to be its morally edifying role? How can a reader of Scripture be inspired to virtue if he cannot access the minds of its authors and the meanings of many of its passages – that is, if he cannot understand the text?

6 Hermeneutics and Moral Improvement

Spinoza’s early biographer, the generally unsympathetic Johannes Colerus writing at the beginning of the eighteenth century, found himself at one point occupying the same rooms in The Hague that Spinoza did in the final years of his life. Colerus spoke to his Lutheran landlord, Hendrik van der Spyck, and his family about Spinoza, and relates that the philosopher enjoyed cordial relations with them. Spinoza seems to have had a particular interest in the family’s religious observance. “When the members of the household returned from church, he often asked them what they had learned from the sermon”. Colerus himself was a Lutheran preacher, and says that Spinoza held his predecessor in the local church in high esteem, even going to hear him preach on occasion. Spinoza reportedly advised Van der Spyck and his family “not to miss any sermon of so excellent a preacher”. Spinoza even praised the Lutheran faith of his hosts, although possibly more out of politeness than anything else. One day, when Van der Spyck’s wife asked Spinoza whether he thought she

could be saved in the religion that she professed, he replied: “Your religion is good, and you need not search for another one in order to be saved, as long as you apply yourself to a peaceful and pious life”.⁷

These anecdotes are telling, in a number of ways. Spinoza’s comforting words to his landlord’s wife are a fine personal expression of his philosophical commitment to toleration, including the toleration of diversity in religious belief. It does not matter which organized sectarian faith one belongs to, or even that one’s beliefs are false and superstitious, as long as those beliefs lead to truly pious behavior. The episode also calls to mind Spinoza’s definition of piety as consisting in love of one’s neighbor, that is, justice and charity toward others, and his allowance that there can be different motivational sources of such moral behavior, including the sermons of a good preacher from which the right lessons could be gleaned. What matters is not the *why* but the *what* – that is, how one behaves and treats others.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza draws a clear distinction between *benevolentia*, benevolent behavior toward others grounded in the passions and which he defines as “the will or appetite to do good born of our pity for the thing on which we wish to confer a benefit”, and what he calls *pietas*, “the desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason” (E III, p27c3s and IV, p37s1).⁸ *Pietas* might also be called “active benevolence” (as opposed to the benevolence grounded in passive affects like pity, love or fear).

Now the paragon of virtue, rationality and activity that Spinoza calls the “free person [*homo liber*]” is moved by *pietas*, not *benevolentia*. She treats others in benevolent and life-improving ways not out of pity or sympathy or love or hope for benevolence in return, but because reason directs her to do so. The person who is acting according to the dictates of reason will promote the virtue and rationality of other human beings so that their natures will be more like her own. That is, she will treat others in such a way that they become more rationally virtuous, and that their life is thereby improved. And she will do so because she, motivated by the rational pursuit of her own flourishing, recognizes through reason alone that it is to her own benefit. She knows that other individuals that share her rational nature are good for her (E IV, p35c1) and that she is better off surrounded by and living cooperatively with other rationally virtuous individuals, all of whom are striving for the same thing: the maximization of the true

⁷ Freudenthal, Walther and Czelinski 2006, I,124. For a discussion of this report and both its reliability and its consistency with Spinoza’s philosophy, see Cook 1995.

⁸ Spinoza also uses the term *generositas* – generosity or (in Curley’s translation) nobility – for practically the same phenomenon, “the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship” (E III, p59s).

human good – which Spinoza equates with the understanding of God or Nature. The free person will therefore undertake, through her actions, to help others reach this condition of rational virtue. That is, she will treat other human beings with active benevolence.

Spinoza's account of rational benevolence in the *Ethics* covers two virtues that typically make the canonical list: justice and charity.

Men who are governed by reason i.e., men who, from the guidance of reason, seek their own advantage want nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men. Hence, they are just [*justos*], honest and honorable. (E IV, p18s)

Thus, the free and virtuous person – the person who is rationally motivated – will treat others with justice and charity because she sees, through reason, that it is good and right to do so, that it is in her own best interest and serves her well in her project of perseverance. She sees that dealing with others justly and charitably, working to improve their lives, is what is most supportive of her own *conatus* or power.

There is, however, another, less epistemically rigorous route to justice and charity in one's ongoing comportment with others, a route to benevolence that, while not rationally motivated and active in the manner of *pietas* but grounded in the imagination, is the best most people can do. It is accessible to the multitude who are not – or, at least, not yet – at the level of true freedom and virtue.

In the TTP, Spinoza explains that “true religion” and the “divine law” have nothing to do with ceremonies, dietary rituals or other superstitious activities. Rather, they consists in a simple moral practice, namely, “to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself” (TTP VIII, G III,165/Curley II,255). The divine law, that is, commands us to treat other human beings with justice and charity. And true religion is just obedience to that law. As he puts it, “the whole law consists only in this: loving one's neighbor” (TTP XIV, G III,173-4/Curley II,264-5).

As with the free and rationally virtuous person, then, what Spinoza considers to be “the practice of piety and religion” consists only in justice and charity. “A person believes something piously only insofar as his opinions move him to obedience [to God's law]” (TTP XIII, G III,172/Curley II,263). The difference is that, whereas the free and virtuous person is guided by reason in her actions, the multitude are led to obey the divine law not through reason but through imaginative and inspiring narratives and by accepting certain fundamental but (depending on how they are interpreted) not necessarily true beliefs about God. Spinoza sums these up as the “doctrines of universal faith”: God, a supremely just and merciful being, exists; God is unique; God is present everywhere; God has the supreme right and

dominion over all things; the worship of God and obedience to him consist only in justice and loving-kindness [*charitas*] or in love toward one's neighbor; everyone who obeys God by living in this way is saved; and God pardons the sins of those who repent (TTP XIV, G III,177-8/C II,268-9). It does not really matter how one interprets these doctrines; from a Spinozistic perspective, they seem very difficult to reconcile with what is philosophically true. But it does not matter whether they are true or not. As long as one believes them, one will act in the correct ways and "practice justice and loving-kindness toward his neighbor". As Spinoza puts it, even "if [a person] becomes obedient [to God's law] by believing falsehoods, he has a pious faith" (TTP XIII, G III,172/Curley II,263).

To adapt a now-familiar distinction, the multitude who, inspired by stories, sermons, and admirable role models, follow the divine law and treat others with justice and charity out of "obedience" are acting merely *in accordance with* virtue. The rationally virtuous person, by contrast, is acting justly and charitably not from "obedience" to some imagined (divine) lawgiver but from a deep understanding of what is good and right. The free person, that is, is just and charitable *from* virtue, from an abiding disposition to seek his own advantage under the guidance of reason. The philosopher knows, without aid of the imagination or edifying storytelling, that she should treat other human beings in certain ways – precisely the treatment of others embodied in the virtue of rational benevolence. These philosophical folk, then, unlike the multitude, have no need of imaginative stories for motivating their pious lives; they come to piety, to moral behavior, through reason alone.

Now it turns out that the imaginative stories that Spinoza thinks are best suited for conveying those doctrines of universal faith and thus moving the non-philosophical crowd to virtuous behavior are found in the Bible. While the rationally virtuous do not need the Bible to motivate their piety, the multitude do.

The prophetic writings of the Bible are, in Spinoza's view, especially good at inspiring readers to justice and charity. This is because their authors, though not especially learned, were nonetheless gifted in certain ways. Moses and other prophets did not enjoy a high level of education or intellectual sophistication. They certainly were not physicists or astronomers, so there are no truths about nature or the cosmos to be found in their writings; Joshua apparently did believe that the sun revolved around the earth. But neither were the ancient prophets philosophers, and so the Bible is not to be read as a source of metaphysical or even theological truths. The prophets often had simple, naïve, even philosophically false beliefs about God. But they were indeed above the ordinary in two respects. First, they were especially virtuous and "cultivated piety with exceptional constancy of heart ... and perceived God's mind or judgment" (TTP I, G III,27/

Curley II,91). The prophets, Spinoza says, “had a heart inclined only to the right and the good ... the Prophets are praised, and so greatly commended, not for the loftiness and excellence of their understanding but for their piety and constancy of heart” (TTP II, G III,31,37/G II,96,102). Second, the prophets had especially vivid imaginations, “a power of imagining unusually vividly” (TTP II, G III,29/Curley II,93). This means they were exceptional storytellers. These two traits taken together mean that the ancient prophets were good at crafting inspiring and morally edifying narratives, stories that could move those of us not living under the guidance of reason to piety. As Spinoza puts it, because of the special powers of the prophets, especially “to imagine things”, their narratives proceed “in a style and with expressions most apt to move ordinary people’s hearts” (TTP XIII, G III,167/Curley II,257).

Spinoza insists that informing all of Scripture’s stories – all of the things its prophetic authors say about God, human characters, the world, and so on – and despite all the linguistic gaps and textual problems that the Bible as we have it presents, there is a straightforward message or meaning that Spinoza says comes through loud and clear and in a “non-mutilated” form. The ultimate teaching of Scripture, whether the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Gospels, is the rather simple one that constitutes the divine law itself: Practice justice and loving-kindness to your fellow human beings – again, precisely the same message that the philosophically gifted person understands through reason alone.

That basic moral message – “to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself” – is the point of all the commandments and the consistent lesson of all the narratives of Scripture, surviving whole and unadulterated through all the differences in language and all the copies, alterations, corruptions, and scribal errors that have crept into the text over the centuries. It is, Spinoza insists, there in the Hebrew prophets and it is in Paul’s letters. Spinoza writes that “this I can certainly affirm: that I have not noticed, concerning moral teachings, any error, or any alternative reading, which could make them obscure or doubtful” (TTP IX, G III,135/Curley II,217). The moral doctrine is the clear and universal message of the Bible, at least for those who are not prevented from reading it properly by prejudice, superstition, or a thirst for power. It is, in short, the sum of revelation.

Scripture conveys this moral message not only through the visions of the prophets, but especially through what Spinoza sees as its portrayal of God as a just, wise, and merciful being. Spinoza allows that there is no expectation that everyone is to come to know God’s true attributes, his essential nature; this “intellectual or exact knowledge of God” is for an elite, for philosophers who, for example, can follow the demonstrations offered by Spinoza in his *Ethics*. But

it is incumbent upon even the non-philosophical masses to *obey* “the word of God”, and this means believing in God’s justice and charity and emulating those traits in their own actions. “Obedience to God consists only in the love of your neighbor ... [T]he knowledge that God, through the prophets, has demanded of everyone, without exception, is nothing but knowledge of his divine justice and loving-kindness” (TTP XIII, G III,168/Curley II,258-9).

Spinoza claims that those who, in the right frame of mind, read Scripture and its account of a God who “exercises and delights in loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the world”, a God who is “supremely just and supremely merciful”, both (a) come to a proper (if not deep philosophical) knowledge of God and his actions; and (b) are, through Scripture’s literary portrayal of this exemplary moral character and related stories, inspired to act with similar justice and charity toward others. “The teaching of loving-kindness”, in particular, is something that “both Testaments commend everywhere, in the strongest terms” (TTP XII, G III,166/C II,256), and attentive and properly prepared readers cannot but be moved toward pious actions themselves.

Spinoza’s account of the role that Scripture can play in individuals’ moral lives, and in society generally, suggests that despite the shortcomings in our knowledge of the Hebrew language and the consequent impediment to our gaining a deeper understanding of ancient Israelite culture and *mentalité*, all of which undermines the possibility of a thorough “historical” hermeneutics of Scripture, the Bible can still do what it does best.

For Spinoza, there is clear distinction between, on one hand, the interpretation of Scripture as this should ideally be practiced by the properly equipped scholar using Spinoza’s historical method – the same method of gathering data and drawing and testing general conclusions from them that, he insists in the TTP, is employed in natural science (TTP VII, G III,98/Curley II,171) – and, on the other hand, the more basic and edifying reading of Scripture’s narratives by common folk. The multitude who are supposed to be inspired to virtuous lives by the stories are unlikely to have the intellectual resources and scholarly tools that Biblical hermeneutics call upon. But this is not a problem. All they really need to get from their reading of the Bible are some basic theological beliefs – those doctrines of universal faith – that are necessary and sufficient for obedience to God’s law, that is, for the practice of justice and charity. These beliefs do not require any real knowledge of Hebrew – a vernacular translation will do – or understanding of ancient Israelite attitudes toward the cosmos. Referring to those doctrines, he says that “scripture teaches these and similar things everywhere, so clearly and explicitly that there has never been anyone who disputed the meaning of Scripture concerning these things” (TTP VII, G III,102/C II,176).

No deep hermeneutic method is required for finding in the Bible its “universal [moral] teaching” and the basic principles that ground it. There is a simple path to virtue for simple minds. It is only for more complicated and detailed matters – including such questions as “what [the prophets believed] God is, and in what way he sees all things and provides for them”, and especially when “we find any things which are contrary to one another” – that the more concentrated historical approach is required. But as to what Scripture says about “the way we should conduct our lives [...] this can be investigated more easily” (TTP VII, G III,104/Curley II,178).

Spinoza compares the reading of Scripture in this regard to reading Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry*.

Euclid wrote only about things quite simple and most intelligible. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language. To grasp his intention and be certain of his true meaning we do not need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in, but only a quite ordinary almost childish! knowledge. Nor do we need to know about his life, concerns and customs, or in what language, to whom and when he wrote or the fate of his book, or its various readings, or how and by whose deliberation it was accepted.

Likewise, he continues,

what I have said here about Euclid must be said about everyone who has written about things by their nature perceptible. So we conclude that the history available to us is enough to easily grasp the intention of Scripture concerning moral teachings. In that area we can be certain of its true meaning. For the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most familiar words, since they are very ordinary and no less simple and easy to understand. (TTP VII, G III,111/Curley II,185)

Indeed, if Spinoza’s sophisticated historical method for interpreting the Bible was required for getting the book’s primary message and being inspired to justice and charity, then Spinoza’s account would fall prey to the same objection he raises against Maimonides’ view, which he insists is detrimental to the Bible’s effectiveness in motivating obedience to God’s law. If Maimonides is right, Spinoza complains, then most ordinary people cannot have any access to much of the meaning of Scripture. “His [Maimonides’] method completely takes away all the certainty the common people can have about the meaning of Scripture from a natural reading of it”. The multitude do not have the philosophical training and speculative knowledge that would allow them to evaluate whether the reading of this or that Biblical passage is consistent with what is demonstrably true; they would

therefore have no idea when to stick with a literal interpretation and when to opt for a figurative one. Spinoza's judgment is that "we condemn Maimonides' opinion as not only useless, but harmful and absurd" (TTP VII, G III,116/Curley II,190).

But, of course, if a knowledge of Hebrew and the corresponding exegetical skills and erudition were required for getting even the most basic message of the Bible and reading it in a morally edifying way, then only learned scholars would be able to do it. Spinoza's method would, by his own criteria, be no better off than Maimonides' method.

7 Conclusion

Spinoza's discussion of the language of Scripture in both the *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* highlights a duality in the reading of the Bible. There is the "meaning [of] the whole of Scripture", which he insists is "to be determined only from its history", that is, a scholarly study of its language, texts, authors, composition, etc. (TTP XV, G III,185/C II,278). This approach confronts serious hermeneutical difficulties, especially given our inadequate knowledge of Hebrew. Fortunately, there is also the more superficial but effective reading to be practiced by ordinary folk. This is why Spinoza draws a distinction between a study of Scripture based on the history of the texts (broadly construed) – which allows us to "infer [...] the mind of Scripture's authors" and thus grasp the various meanings of their passages (for example, whether Moses really believed "that God is a fire and that God is jealous" [TTP VII, G III,100/Curley II,173]) – and a reading which conveys "the moral teachings also contained in the Bible" (TTP VII, G III,99/Curley II,171). The former is an important enterprise; the latter is a more urgent one.

Abbreviations

Curley = Spinoza, B. (2016). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. Edited and translated by E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitaetsbuchhandlung.

E = *Ethica*.

TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:

c = *Corollarium*.

s = *Scholium*.

p = *Propositio*.

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