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The "Style of God". Language as Historical Mediation and Transformation of Biblical Authority in Spinoza

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Abstract This article argues that Spinoza's notion of the "style of Scripture" provides the methodological key to his historical conception of revelation and, more broadly, to a new theory of linguistic mediation. A comparative analysis with Robert Boyle's theory of accommodation highlights two distinct early modern strategies for stabilizing scriptural authority: one grounded in divinely regulated linguistic adaptation, the other in historical-philological reconstruction. The divergence between these models reflects not a rupture between tradition and modernity, but competing attempts to account for the epistemic status of language and scriptural language in the early modern period.

Keywords Spinoza. Language. Style. Scripture. Biblical interpretation. Accommodation. Early modern philosophy. Tractatus theologico-politicus. Historical criticism. Hermeneutics.

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1 Introduction

The question of scriptural language occupies a central place in seventeenth-century debates concerning authority, interpretation, and the epistemology of texts. The emergence of philological methods and the reconfiguration of natural philosophy destabilized inherited accounts of biblical unity and divine authorship. Within this context, the notion of 'style of Scripture' became a crucial conceptual locus for rethinking the relationship between linguistic form, theological meaning and the epistemological status of revelation.

Throughout the seventeenth century, conceptions of language underwent a profound transformation that simultaneously affected the scientific, theological, and philosophical domains. The humanist rhetorical ideal, grounded in stylistic ornamentation and the imitation of classical models, was progressively replaced by a paradigm that privileged clarity, communicative effectiveness, and transparency of expression. This paradigm also came to characterize the language of the new science. Even more significant, however, was the transformation in the epistemological status of language itself. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the traditional bond between words and things began to break down: language gradually ceased to be regarded as the privileged locus for the manifestation of truth and lost the epistemic function that the tradition had attributed to it.

Spinoza's treatment of the question of style represents one of the most original and radical moments in this transformation. In his perspective, style constitutes the point of intersection between the philosophy of language, the theory of the imagination, biblical criticism, and historical method. It is no longer a property of the divine word, but rather a characteristic of the human author who conveys the revealed message.

Spinoza thus transfers the style of Scripture from God to the prophet. The stylistic diversity of the biblical texts does not reflect different modes of divine speech, but rather differences in the authors' temperament, cultural background, imagination, eloquence, and historical circumstances. This redefinition entails a profound transformation of the very notion of revelation. What varies is not the content of revealed truth, but the historical and linguistic form through which it is conveyed. Style therefore ceases to be an attribute of the word of God and becomes instead an index of the plurality of

authors, historical contexts, and cultural conditions within which revelation assumes textual form.[1]

Through a comparison with Robert Boyle's theory of accommodation, this article argues that the decisive divergence between Boyle and Spinoza does not concern the simplicity or stylistic variety of Scripture as such, but the subject of linguistic mediation. While Boyle attributes the mediation of revelation to God's intentional accommodation to human capacities, Spinoza relocates that mediation to the historical activity of prophetic authors. The notion of style is the methodological category through which this shift becomes visible and through which the historical interpretation of Scripture becomes possible.

From this perspective, the present article argues that the notion of style provides the methodological key to Spinoza's historical conception of Scripture. More specifically, it shows that, through the notion of style, Spinoza reformulates the very problem of the linguistic mediation of revelation. The question of divine language no longer concerns the way God speaks, but rather the way human beings construct the very idea of a divine language. Spinoza's historical reading of Scripture therefore constitutes not merely a new exegetical methodology, but presupposes an even more profound transformation in the theory of language.[2] It is this reconfiguration of linguistic mediation that makes possible a historical conception of revelation and, consequently, a reconceptualization of the foundation of biblical authority.

1 Spinoza does not merely propose a new exegetical method, but redefines the linguistic conditions of revelation. For this very reason, the style of Scripture becomes the theoretical locus in which the philosophy of language, the theory of imagination, historical criticism, and reflection on the authority of the biblical text converge. As I will attempt to demonstrate in this article, the discussion of style becomes the conceptual device through which Spinoza historicizes the language of revelation and makes possible the separation between theology and philosophy.

2 The expression "style of Scripture" is the traditional category that Spinoza inherits from the philosophical tradition and subjects to critique. For Augustine, for example, God possesses a distinctive style of acting and speaking. Lettieri 2001 has read this divine style as an attribute of the Word of God, particularly in the final two chapters of his monograph. In the TTP, in particular, Spinoza reconceives style as an epistemological category that identifies the historically conditioned mode of linguistic mediation through which revelation is communicated. Here Spinoza does not merely interpret the Bible historically: he can interpret the Bible historically because he first transforms the theory of language. The historicization of Scripture is the effect of the historicization of language. In this sense, Spinoza does not simply establish modern biblical criticism; rather, modern biblical criticism becomes possible because Spinoza first reconfigures the concept of language. Biblical authority itself is thus reconfigured through a new theory of linguistic mediation. Spinoza replaces, that is, a theory of revelation with a theory of mediation. This marks a fundamental transformation in early modern philosophy.

2 From Correspondence to Linguistic Mediation

Until the seventeenth century, the dominant conception of truth was grounded in the principle of *adaequatio*, understood as the correspondence between reality and the idea that the knowing subject forms of it. Truth thus consisted in the *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, that is, in the correspondence between the content of thought and external reality. Within this framework, language was not merely an instrument of representation, but the medium through which this correspondence was made manifest and secured.[3] Indeed, the very possibility of knowledge presupposed a fundamental continuity between thought, language, and the world.

The epistemological displacement of language inaugurated by Descartes provides one of the key conditions for understanding Spinoza's conception of Scripture as a historical and linguistic artifact rather than as the transparent vehicle of divine truth. Already in the *Recherche de la vérité par les lumières naturelles*, and especially in the *Le Monde ou traité de la lumière*, Descartes calls into question the traditionally assumed relationship between things and the words that designate ideas. The connection between reality and representation is no longer conceived as natural, but rather as a relation mediated by symbolic processes. At the beginning of the *Traité de la lumière*, Descartes observes that the relationship between external bodies and the ideas we have of them is analogous to that between words and the things they signify. Words, in fact, "ne signifient rien que par l'institution des hommes" and "suffisent pour nous faire concevoir des choses auxquelles elles ne ressemblent en aucune façon".[4]

This linguistic conventionalism provides one of the main preconditions for Spinoza's historical conception of scriptural language. The redefinition of the relationship between language and reality finds an important formulation in Descartes' correspondence with Marin Mersenne. On 16 October 1639, Descartes replied to a letter in which Mersenne had sent him his own translation of Edward Herbert of Cherbury's *De veritate*. While acknowledging that Mersenne's work "traite d'un sujet auquel j'ai travaillé toute ma vie",

3 The first sources of this theory can be traced back to Aristotle (*Met.*, IV, 7, 1011b, 27), but above all to medieval scholastic philosophy, as well as to Jewish and Arabic philosophy: in Thomas Aquinas, for example, in the first *quaestio* of the *De Veritate* where the expression "*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*" appears. The idea of a "correspondence", of a *convenientia* or *adaequatio*, is also found in Averroes, Gersonides, Hasdai Crescas, and other authors.

4 AT XI,3-4. For the English translation, see CSM I,81. The analogy between conventional signs (words) and natural signs (the sensations produced by bodily movements) was further developed in the *Dioptrique* (AT VI,112-13) and in the *Meditationes* (especially in the *Sixth Meditation*), becoming one of the fundamental principles of the Cartesian theory of perception.

Descartes specifies that Herbert follows a path very different from his own ("il tient un chemin fort différent de celui que j'ai suivi").[5] The divergence concerns precisely the foundation of truth.[6] For Descartes, indeed, what is true is that which is grasped through clear and distinct ideas: the criterion of truth no longer resides in an external ontological order, but in the constitutive structures of human reason.[7] The *cogito* thus becomes the foundational principle of the entire process of knowledge, not only because it guarantees the certainty of the existence of the thinking subject, but also because it constitutes the premise for affirming the existence of the external world and the validity of knowledge itself.

With Descartes and, more generally, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what comes into question is not correspondence as such, but the natural conception of the relationship between words and things. Descartes, in fact, does not abandon a theory of truth as correspondence in the contemporary sense of the term; rather, he redefines the foundation of certainty and the role of language. Truth thus ceases to be a transcendent principle to which the intellect must conform and becomes the result of the activity of reason, which assumes the role of the ultimate criterion of certainty. In the second of the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, Descartes identifies rational deduction as the foundation of certain knowledge and states that "those who seek the right road to truth should not occupy themselves with any object about which they cannot have a certainty equal to the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry".[8] The mathematical method, founded on rigorous deductive chains, thus becomes the model of authentic knowledge, whereas sensory experience, dependent on the variability of the senses, remains exposed to error and uncertainty.

5 AT II,596-8; CSM III,142.

6 Herbert and Descartes address the same problem through radically different methods: Herbert develops a theory of truth by inquiring into its nature and into the criteria that guarantee its validity; Descartes, by contrast, considers the notion of truth a primitive concept, that is, one so evident that it cannot be defined without making it more obscure. For him, the decisive question is not "what is truth?", but rather how it is possible to arrive at true judgments through method and evidence. In the Cartesian passage, words are considered conventional signs ("par l'institution des hommes"), whereas the modifications of the nerves and the brain produced by external bodies are natural signs, instituted by nature. In both cases, no resemblance between the sign and what it signifies is required. This passage is considered one of the foundational texts of the modern conception of representation and semiotics.

7 *Discours de la méthode* (AT VI,1-2; CSM I,111-12).

8 "Qui enim veritatis viam rectam quaerunt, de nulla re debent occupare se, circa quam non possint habere certitudinem aequalem demonstrationibus Arithmeticis et Geometricis" (AT X,366; CSM I,12-13).

3 Historical Method and the Linguistic Mediation of Scripture

Spinoza addresses the problem of the interpretation of Scripture within the framework of the broader search for a criterion of truth capable of reducing the contingent character of things to an intelligible order grounded in an internal necessity.[9] The reflection on language constitutes an essential moment in this philosophical project. Both in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* and in the *Ethica*, Spinoza insists on the intrinsically equivocal character of words and on the necessity of determining their meaning with precision, so that language does not become a source of error and confusion.[10]

In the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, this analysis takes on a more specific and systematic form. Attention is focused on the language of Scripture, on the linguistic peculiarities of the individual biblical books, and, above all, on the notiaon of the 'style of Scripture'. The composition of the *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae* also belongs to this broader philosophical project, aimed at exposing the beliefs, superstitions, and interpretative errors produced by an unreflective use of language.[11] In the author's intentions, the

9 According to Spinoza, the fortuitous and the contingent belong to the human and imaginative way of perceiving the succession of events: we perceive encounters, changes, and occurrences as isolated events because we do not know the entire causal chain. From the perspective of the intellect, however, everything appears as necessary ("res, ut necessarias, et non, ut contingentes", E II, p44d; G II,126; C I,481). See also E II, p29s (G II,114; Curley I, 471).

10 Cf. TIE, §§84-85 (G II,32-3; C I,36-7), where Spinoza attributes the conventional origin of language to the imagination. An echo of Descartes' statement in PPH I, art. 74 can also be found in E IIp40s1 (G I,121; C I,477-8), and in E I, app (G II,77-8), where it is shown that ordinary language participates in the prejudices of the imagination. According to Spinoza, philosophy requires a reform of language, since words must be traced back to determinate and adequate ideas, so that the linguistic sign does not replace the intellect. For different interpretations of Spinoza's theory of language, cf.: Deleuze 1968; Savan 1972; Robinet 1978; Pariente 1985; Bove 1991; Vinciguerra 2006.

11 I have already discussed some of these issues in my Introduction to the Italian translation of Spinoza's *Grammatica*, published in 2013. With regard to the question of whether the *Compendium* should be considered a grammar of the Hebrew language or a biblical grammar, Klijnsmit observes that "he did not include post-biblical elements in his description of Hebrew" and that "yet, although he described only Biblical Hebrew, he cannot be called 'a grammarian of the Bible'" (Klijnsmit 1992, 191). In the *Compendium*, Spinoza explains that previous authors had considered Hebrew primarily as a tool for the interpretation of the Bible, rather than as a natural language endowed with its own grammatical structure. Consequently, grammarians did not actually compose a grammar of the Hebrew language as such, but rather grammars aimed at the understanding of Scripture. This distinction is decisive, since it separates the historical-linguistic study of Hebrew from exegetical purposes, that is, from the theological study of biblical interpretation: "Plures sunt, qui Scripturae, at nullus, qui linguae Hebraeae Grammaticam scripsit" (G I,310); "Nimirum Grammaticam, uti diximus, Scripturae, non linguae scripserunt" (G I,358).

Compendium was not meant to be merely a compendium of biblical Hebrew constructed exclusively on the basis of the text of Scripture, but rather to describe the properties and functioning of a language considered as the living language of a people, a culture, and a history. The *Compendium* therefore does not constitute an ancillary grammatical work, but rather the methodological completion of the *Tractatus*. It represents the linguistic dimension of the same philosophical project that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* develops on the hermeneutical level: a kind of the linguistic laboratory of the *Tractatus*.[12]

On the basis primarily of these two works, this article argues that the historical method is not the premise of Spinoza's philosophy of language; it is the consequence of it. The historical reading of Scripture becomes possible only because Spinoza first transforms the philosophical conception of language itself. The analysis of the presumed divine language and, more precisely, of the style through which God would speak in the Bible, thus becomes an opportunity to investigate the very nature of linguistic mediation and the relationship between thought, language, and knowledge. Spinoza's biblical exegesis therefore does not constitute a separate chapter of his philosophical reflection, but rather the place where a new method of interpretation takes shape, one founded on the historical and linguistic analysis of the text. This transformation gives rise to decisive consequences not only for the hermeneutics of Scripture, but also for the redefinition of the relationships between philosophy, theology, and politics.

12 The *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae* continues Spinoza's critique of the equivocations produced by names, already developed in the TTP: if one assumes the customary meaning of words without analyzing their linguistic genesis, one risks attributing to texts meanings that derive from our own prejudices. For Spinoza, grammar therefore performs a critical function, since it prevents linguistic signs from being confused with the reality that they are only meant to express. In this sense, Spinoza claims a modern conception of grammar: Hebrew must be studied as a historical language and not simply as the sacred code of Scripture. His polemic thus also constitutes a critique of the idea that the meaning of words can be fixed once and for all through their theological use.

4 Divine Language and Prophetic Imagination

4.1 The Historicization of the Language of Revelation

One of the most innovative aspects of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* consists in the radical historicization of the language of revelation. From the very first chapter, Spinoza rejects the idea, widely disseminated within the Jewish and Christian traditions, that Hebrew constitutes a sacred, original, or directly divine language. Hebrew is neither the immutable language of God nor the idiom preserved from the Adamic age, but rather the historical language of a people, formed through use and transmitted within a specific cultural community.[13] Consequently, Scripture does not represent the immediate manifestation of a divine language, but rather the result of a complex historical, linguistic, and editorial mediation.

4.2 Style as a Form of Historical Mediation

A decisive consequence follows from this premise. If there is no divine language, there can be no style of God either. The linguistic form of revelation does not in fact belong to God, but to the prophets and authors who transmit it. The stylistic differences found in the biblical books do not reflect different modes of divine speech, but rather testify to the plurality of personalities, linguistic abilities, imaginative dispositions, and historical contexts within which revelation was communicated. The notion of the 'style of Scripture' thus becomes a fundamental hermeneutical tool. It does not allow one to arrive at the nature of God, but rather at the history of the composition of the biblical text and at the human modes of its transmission.

Divine communication is instead mediated through prophetic imagination, which translates ethical and political contents into forms accessible within specific historical and cultural conditions. From this perspective, there is no such thing as a style of God: it is the prophet who imparts his own style to revelation. Style thus becomes a property of the human author and not of the divine message.

This yields a strict distinction between philosophical truth (rational, universal) and scriptural meaning (historical, imaginative, context-dependent). Scripture therefore functions not as a theoretical

13 Contemporary criticism has also emphasized Spinoza's conception of Hebrew as a living language; see, for example, Yvon 1681, who observes: "Il a esté très-versé dans tout ce qui regarde le peuple Juif" (211).

system but as a practical discourse oriented toward ethical and political instruction.

4.3 From Style to Hermeneutics

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, these principles are developed with great philological rigor on the basis of the very texts of Scripture. The knowledge of Hebrew, of the history of the people who spoke that language,[14] of rhetoric, oratory, and, more generally, of the style of the different authors thus becomes an essential instrument of exegetical inquiry. If there is no style proper to God, these elements depend exclusively on prophetic mediation. If the prophet possessed good taste, he perceived and conveyed God's thought in an elegant style (*stylo eleganti*); if, on the contrary, he was confused, he perceived it confusedly (*Dei mentem percipiebat* […] *confuse*).[15] If language varies and styles vary with the prophets, and if the images through which revelation is expressed also change with them, then the Bible must be studied like any other historical document.

A proof of this fundamental methodological consequence is provided by the absolute difference between the style proper to prophetic revelation and the style of the apostles. The prose of the apostles reflects the culture and habits of a people who lived in a completely different historical period and were shaped by subsequent political events and circumstances. The use of rational arguments and the articulated deductions (*deductiones et argumentationes*) that characterize the style of the New Testament give the text a discursive structure opposed to that adopted by the prophets and marked by the peremptory enunciation of dogmas (*dogmata*) and decrees (*decreta*):

> If we're willing to attend to the Apostles' style, we'll find it most unlike that of Prophecy. The most common practice of the Prophets was to testify everywhere that they were speaking according to God's edict: thus says God, the God of hosts says, God's edict etc. And this seems to have held good not only when the Prophets spoke in public assemblies, but also in the Letters containing revelations. This is evident from the Letter Elijah wrote to Jehoram (see 2 Chronicles 21:12), which also begins כה אמר יהוה, thus says God. In

14 On the necessity of knowing the properties of the language, see TTP VII (G III,99-102; 104-6). For an assessment of Spinoza's linguistic views, cf.: Zac 1979, 60-1; Levy 1989, especially the ch. "The problem of normativity in Spinoza's Hebrew Grammar", published in a revised form in "*Studia Spinozana*", III (1987), 351-90; Moreau 1994, especially 307-38; Cassuto 1999; Amoroso 2004, 39-62; Vinciguerra 2012, to which the reader is referred for further bibliography.

15 Cf. TTP II; G III,32; Curley II,97.

> the Letters of the Apostles, on the other hand, we read nothing like this. On the contrary, in 1 Corinthians 7:40 Paul speaks according to his own opinion.[16]

The historical-philological analysis of Scripture teaches that the variety of styles found in the Bible effectively demonstrates that style depends on the diversity of the authors of the true books and that it corresponds to the different temperament (*Prophetae itaque pro vario corporis temperamento magis ad has, quam ad illas revelationes erant apti*), to eloquence (*Stylus deinde prophetiae pro eloquentia cujusque Prophetae variabat*), to the habits, and to the culture of each of them (*magnam reperiet in stylo discrepantiam*).[17] It follows that

16 "Verum si ad earum [of the Letters of the Apostles] stylum attendere volumus, eum a stylo Prophetiae alienissimum inveniemus. Nam Prophetis usitatissimum erat, ubique testari, se ex Dei edicto loqui; nempe sic dicit Deus, ait Deus exercituum, edictum Dei etc., atque hoc non tantum videtur locum habuisse in publicis Prophetarum concionibus, sed etiam in Epistolis, quae revelationes continebant, ut ex illa Eliae Jehoramo scripta patet (vide libr. 2. Paral. cap. 21. vers. 12.), quae etiam incipit sic dicit Deus. At in Epistolis Apostolorum nihil simile legimus, sed contra in I. ad Corinth. cap. 7. vers. 40. Paulus secundum suam sententiam loquitur" (TTP XI; G III,151; Curley II,240). Spinoza does not merely contrast two literary styles here, but establishes an epistemological distinction: the prophet communicates a revelation received through the imagination and grounded in divine authority; for this reason, prophetic discourse takes the form of decrees and commands, rather than demonstrations. The apostle, by contrast, presents evangelical doctrine through arguments (*ratiocinari*), that is, through reasonings addressed to the intellect. For Spinoza, this difference helps explain why Scripture should not be read as a philosophical treatise: its effectiveness does not lie in rational demonstration, but in the moral and imaginative force of its teaching. "Praeterea si ad modum etiam attendamus, quo in his Epistolis Apostoli doctrinam Evangelicam tradunt, eum etiam a modo Prophetarum valde discedere videbimus. Apostoli namque ubique ratiocinantur, ita ut non prophetare, sed disputare videantur. Prophetiae vero contra mera tantum dogmata et decreta continent, quia in iis Deus quasi loquens introducitur, qui non ratiocinatur, sed ex absoluto suae naturae imperio decernit, et etiam quia Prophetae authoritas ratiocinari non patitur […] Et denique quia Prophetae res revelatas non ex virtute luminis naturalis, hoc est, non ratiocinando percipiebant, ut in Cap. I. ostendimus. Et quamvis in quinque libris etiam quaedam per illationem concludi videantur, si quis tamen ad ea attenderit, eadem nullo modo tanquam peremtoria argumenta sumi posse videbit" (TTP XI,298; G III,152; Curley II,238-9).

17 "Pro ratione enim temperamenti variabat hoc modo, nempe, si Propheta erat hilaris, ei revelabantur victoriae, pax, et quae porro homines ad laetitiam movent; tales enim similia saepius imaginari solent; si contra tristis erat, bella, supplicia, et omnia mala ei revelabantur; et sic prout Propheta erat misericors, blandus, iracundus, severus etc., eatenus magis aptus erat ad has, quam ad illas revelationes. Pro dispositione imaginationis autem sic etiam variabat, nempe, si Propheta erat elegans, stylo etiam eleganti Dei mentem percipiebat, sin autem confusus, confuse; et sic porro circa revelationes, quae per imagines repraesentabantur, nempe, si Propheta erat rusticus, boves, et vaccae etc., si vero miles, duces, exercitus; si denique aulicus, solium regium, et similia ipsi repraesentabantur. Denique variabat Prophetia pro diversitate opinionum Prophetarum" (TTP II; G III,30; Curley II,94).

> If you weigh all these things rightly, you will easily see that God has no distinctive style of speaking, but that he is refined, succinct, and severe, unsophisticated, wordy, and obscure, according to the learning and capacity of the Prophet.[18]

This statement marks a decisive moment in the redefinition of the concept of 'style of God'. Even more importantly, it shows that style constitutes the sign of the human mediation of revelation. God has no style, since Scripture is a human, historical, and, in this sense, natural work. The real issue raised by Spinoza here is therefore not simply the demolition of the belief in a style of Scripture. All the examples cited by Spinoza demonstrate that he transfers into history everything that tradition had directly attributed to God. Everything in Scripture that appears to be directly attributable to God is revealed to be the result of the editorial history of the individual books. And editorial history is nothing other than natural history.

If there is a style of Scripture, it consists in the absolute simplicity and clarity of its teachings.[19] Miracles also conform to this principle. The narration of miracles performs an eminently rhetorical function: to move the soul of the people and induce them to obedience:

> In Ch. 2 of this Treatise we showed that the Prophets had only a special power to imagine things, not a special power to understand them, that God didn't reveal to them any secrets of Philosophy, but only the simplest matters, and that he accommodated himself to their preconceived opinions. Next, in Ch. 5 we showed that Scripture imparts and teaches things in the way which enables each person to most easily perceive them. It does not deduce them from axioms and definitions and connect them with one another. It just speaks simply. To create trust it confirms what it says only by experience – that is, by miracles and historical narratives, relating these matters in a style and with expressions most apt to move

18 "Et sic de caeteris: quae si omnia recte perpendantur, facile ostendent, Deum nullum habere stylum peculiarem dicendi, sed tantum pro eruditione, et capacitate Prophetae eatenus esse elegantem, compendiosum, severum, rudem, prolixum, et obscurum" (TTP II; G III,34; Curley II,99).

19 "…res tantum simplicissimas, quae vel a quovis tardissimo possunt percipi" (TTP XIII; G III,167; Curley II,257). The comparison between the style of the prophets and that of the apostles shows that those who act according to reason can transmit teachings that are just as fundamental as those transmitted by those who follow faith. Prophetic revelation is recognizable through its style; the apostles' letters do not possess the style of prophecy, since the apostles write as teachers who argue, rather than as mere instruments of the divine voice. Their authority, therefore, does not derive from the fact that each of their statements constitutes an immediate revelation, but from the moral content and effectiveness of their teaching. To understand a sacred text, it is therefore necessary to consider its literary genre, style, historical context, and the modes of production of discourse, regardless of its supernatural origin.

> ordinary people's hearts. […] Finally, in Ch. 7 we showed that the difficulty of understanding Scripture lies only in its language, not in the loftiness of its theme.[20]

Even particular linguistic expressions must be analyzed through the tools of philology and rhetoric and cannot be understood literally, since they belong to human language. In this regard, Spinoza cites, for example, the Hebrew linguistic custom of referring every event that stands out for its exceptional nature and force to God, as in the passages of the Bible where one finds references to the "wind of God", "spirit of God", "trees of God".[21] Similarly, in *Psalm* 147:18 quoted in the same contexts, the natural action of the wind and of heat, "by which frost and snow are melted", is called the "word of God", and in verse 15 the wind and the cold are called the "decree" and the "word of God", just as the wind and fire are defined in *Psalm* 104:4 as "messengers" and "ministers of God".

Spinoza also devotes particular attention to metaphor. The use of expressing moral teachings through material images constitutes a characteristic feature of ancient Hebrew culture (*omnia spiritualia corporaliter expresserint*). It appears in the language of the prophets when, *parabolice et enigmatice*, they speak of doves, tongues of fire, and great light. Likewise, the expressions "mount of God", "tents", and "dwelling", contained in Psalms 15 and 24, must be interpreted according to a symbolic-metaphorical reading and not in a cultic or metaphysical sense.[22] These and other similar expressions, which are found in abundance in the Bible, indicate that

> the decree, order, dictate and word of God are nothing but the very action and order of nature. So there is no doubt that everything

20 "In Cap. II. hujus Tractatus ostendimus, Prophetas singularem tantum potentiam imaginandi, sed non intelligendi habuisse, Deumque nulla Philosophiae arcana, sed res simplicissimas tantum iisdem revelavisse, seseque eorum praeconceptis opinionibus accommodavisse. Ostendimus deinde in Cap. V. Scripturam res eo modo tradere, et docere, quo facillime ab unoquoque percipi possunt; quae scilicet non ex axiomatibus, et definitionibus res deducit, et concatenat, sed tantum simpliciter dicit, et ad fidem faciendam, sola experientia, miraculis scilicet, et historiis dicta confirmat, quaeque etiam tali stylo, et phrasibus narrantur, quibus maxime plebis animus commoveri potest" (TTP XIII; G III,167; Curley II,257).

21 TTP I; G III,24; Curley II,88. For the expressions quoted in the following lines, see note 29. In Biblical Hebrew, the expression "of God" (*Dei*) often functions as an idiomatic superlative and does not indicate divine possession or causality. In the same ch. I of the TTP, Spinoza also emphasizes the affinity with other linguistic traditions that share with the ancient Hebrews the use of the expression "of God": "Quin etiam apud Latinos nihil frequentius; nam quae affabre facta sunt, dicunt ea divina manu fuisse fabricata, quod si quis Hebraice transferre vellet, deberet dicere, *manu Dei fabricata*, ut Hebraizantibus notum" (G III,24).

22 TTP V; G III,78; Curley II,143.

> related in Scripture happened naturally, and yet is referred to God, because, as we've already shown, the purpose of Scripture is not to teach things through their natural causes, but only to relate those things which fill the imagination, and to do this by that Method and style which serves best to increase wonder at things, and consequently to impress devotion in the hearts of the common people.[23]

All the difficulties encountered in Scripture therefore depend solely on the correct understanding of the language of the ancient Hebrews and of the true purposes of the sacred text. Its sacred character, in fact, does not consist in the theoretical superiority and philosophical excellence of its contents: "From all this it follows – concludes Spinoza –, that the doctrine of Scripture does not contain lofty speculations [*sublimes speculations*], or philosophical matters [*res philosophicas*], but only the simplest things, which anyone, no matter how slow, can perceive".[24] The idiomatic expressions found in the texts are not sacred because they were written *digito Dei*, but because they are bearers of a teaching of wisdom and love. Words, Spinoza writes, acquire meaning only on the basis of their use (*verba ex solo usu certam habent significationem*) and therefore, if they are 'arranged' in such a way as to move the soul of the reader to devotion, then those words and the book in which they are written are sacred. On the contrary, if their use becomes corrupted or is lost to the point that those words no longer have any meaning (*ut verba nulla habeant significationem*), then both the words and the book will lose all sacredness, and nothing will remain of them but paper and ink.[25]

23 "Dei decretum, jussum, dictum, et verbum nihil aliud esse, quam ipsam naturae actionem, et ordinem…" (TTP VI; G III,89; Curley II,162).

24 TTP XIII; G III,167; Curley II,257. In one of the most explicit passages against esoteric hermeneutics, Spinoza rejects the idea that Scripture contains secret meanings accessible only to a few initiates. The meaning of the text does not depend on the graphic or symbolic details of letters, nor does revelation constitute a repository of metaphysical mysteries: "idem […] contendunt, imo in ipsis apicibus literarum magna arcana contineri" (TTP IX; G III,135; Curley II,216); "varias autem lectiones signa profundissimorum mysteriorum esse dicunt" (TTP IX; G III,136; Curley II,217). The variants of reading (*variae lectiones*) derive from the history of manuscript transmission, from scribal errors, or from circumstances proper to the textual tradition. They do not imply any divine intention to conceal arcane meanings.

25 "Hac itaque ratione Scriptura etiam tamdiu sacra est, et ejus orationes divinae, quamdiu homines ad devotionem erga Deum movet: sed si ab iisdem prorsus negligatur […] nihil est praeter chartam, et atramentum, et ab iisdem absolute profanatur, et corruptioni obnoxia relinquitur" (TTP XII; G III,161; Curley II,268). A proposito dell'esegesi spinoziana di questi passi, si sono espressi in studi recenti: Nadler 2018; Verbeek 2003; James 2012; Curley 2021; Arbib 2021. The present article focuses specifically on the theory of *style*.

In conclusion, all the events narrated in Scripture occurred naturally, and the phenomena described therein are nothing other than representations adapted to the opinions of those who transmitted them to us, just as they were represented to them, namely as actual realities.[26] The naturalization of religious language thus becomes the principle that makes Spinoza's entire biblical exegesis possible.[27]

5 Miracle, Language, and Historical Mediation

The concept of style is not merely a descriptive feature of Scripture but the methodological device through which Spinoza historicizes revelation itself. Spinoza does not use the concept of style in a literary sense, but rather as an epistemological category.

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, he does not merely propose a historical-philological reading of the Bible. The category of 'style', as it is defined in the work, constitutes in fact the theoretical device through which Spinoza transforms the language of revelation into a historical phenomenon. Style does not simply indicate a form of writing, but rather a mode of mediation. In this sense, 'style' serves precisely to explain the way in which revelation is historically mediated.

The critique of the concept of miracle, developed in chapter 6 of the *Tractatus*, shows that miracles belong to the same linguistic regime. If style constitutes the sign of the human mediation of revelation, the miracle too assumes an analogous function. Just as

26 Cf. TTP VII; G III,99; Curley II,171. Scripture thus describes events as they appeared to the witnesses, not necessarily as they occurred within the natural order. This thesis is central to Spinoza's critique of the supernatural conception of miracles.

27 In this context, Spinoza also addresses the problem of translations of texts from other languages. This is a particularly delicate issue, upon which centuries of interpretations and different configurations of religious sects and traditions have been based. In ch. X of the TTP, for example, he does not discuss the theological content of the Book of Job, but rather its origin, composition, literary genre, and authorship, referring to Abraham Ibn Ezra, according to whom the book had been translated from another language ("ex alia lingua in Hebraeam fuisse translatum") (G III,144; Curley II,230). The possibility that the Bible contains translations from other languages allows one to affirm that the Gentiles too possessed sacred books ("we could infer that the gentiles too had sacred books") and that the Bible "seems to aspire to the poetic art of the Gentiles" (G III,144; Curley II,230). Here Spinoza advances, in an extraordinarily innovative way, not only the necessity of separating the original biblical language from later grammatical and theological interpretations, but also the idea that religious revelation does not constitute a monopoly of Israel. Ultimately, the question posed in ch. X of the TTP is no longer "who inspired that particular book?", but rather "who wrote it? When? For what purpose? Within which literary tradition?". In this sense, ch. X reinforces the method systematically formulated in ch. VII: Scripture must be interpreted like any other historical document, reconstructing its language, author, context, and literary genre. Curley observes that "Spinoza's comment on the style of Job echoes Hobbes' observation in *Leviathan* XXXII,12" (Curley II,230).

the terms *decretum*, *jussum*, *dictum*, and *verbum* indicate nothing other (*nihil aliud esse*) than natural manifestations, so too the events narrated in Scripture belong to the ordinary order of nature.[28] The biblical narratives show that God has always accommodated himself entirely to nature and that he has never acted above or against it. The error consists, in fact, in failing to pay sufficient attention to the "idiomatic expressions and rhetorical figures proper to the Hebrews" and in neglecting the way in which the events considered miraculous actually occurred, as well as the thought of the sacred authors themselves.[29]

Even the apparently inexplicable events (*quorum causas reddere nescimus*) narrated in Sacred Scripture, and which seem to have occurred contrary to the order of nature (*quae praeter, imo contra ordinem naturae videntur contigisse*), in fact occur according to natural laws and follow the common order of nature (*id, quod revera contigit, naturaliter contigisse*). If Scripture often omits the circumstances accompanying such events, this depends on the poetic style through which they are described. These very circumstances

28 "Ventus et ignis vocantur in Psalmo 104. vs. 4. legati, et ministri Dei, et alia ad hunc modum plura in Scriptura reperiuntur, quae clarissime indicant, Dei decretum, jussum, dictum, et verbum nihil aliud esse, quam ipsam naturae actionem, et ordinem. Quare] non dubium est, quin omnia, quae in Scriptura narrantur, naturaliter contigerint, et tamen ad Deum referuntur, quia Scripturae, ut jam ostendimus, non est, res per causas naturales docere, sed tantum eas res narrare, quae imaginationem late occupant, idque ea Methodo, et stylo, qui melius inservit ad res magis admirandum, et consequenter ad devotionem in animis vulgi imprimendum" (TTP VI; G III,89; Curley II,161-2).

29 "Refert denique ad miracula, ut realiter contigerint, intelligendum Hebraeorum phrases et tropos scire; qui enim ad ipsos non satis attenderit, multa Scripturae affinget miracula, quae ejus scriptores nunquam enarrare cogitaverunt, adeoque non tantum res et miracula, prout revera contigerint, sed mentem etiam authorum sacrorum codicum plane ignorabit" (TTP VI; G III,93; Curley II,166). It should be noted here that Spinoza attributes great importance to an exact knowledge of the language of Scripture, which is necessary not only for understanding how the events narrated actually took place, but also for knowing the *mens* of the biblical authors. Spinoza therefore maintains that miracles are not immediate and neutral data, but events narrated through a human perspective that depends on the narrator's mentality. In this sense, prophetic revelation is doubly mediated: God communicates through the prophet's imagination, and the concrete form of revelation depends on the prophet's culture, opinions, and imaginative disposition. Ch. VII likewise states that: "At historiae miracula potissimum continent, hoc est (ut in superiore capite ostendimus) narrationes rerum insolitarum naturae, opinionibus et judiciis historicorum, qui eas scripserunt, accommodatas; revelationes autem opinionibus etiam prophetarum accommodatae sunt" (G III,98-9; Curley II,171). Scripture and the history of miracles must therefore be interpreted by considering the human mediation of religious experience: not only what is narrated, but also the way in which it is imagined and transmitted.

show, on the contrary, that the miracle can always be reduced to natural causes.[30]

But Spinoza's argument extends beyond the naturalization of miracles. The decisive point is that miraculous narratives obey the same linguistic logic as prophetic discourse. Style does not serve to describe events scientifically *per causas*, but to produce images capable of directing the imagination. In this sense, Spinoza connects the miracle to his own conception of prophetic imagination and, therefore, to language and style, within a single theoretical framework. The biblical writers employed the figurative forms of language, namely the rhetorical instruments of imagination, not for properly stylistic purposes, but for the purposes of devotion. For this reason, Spinoza observes that "it seems that Scripture narrates nothing but miracles even when it speaks of entirely natural events".[31]

The emphasis on the *phrases* and *tropoi Hebraeorum* as a recurring element in the *Tractatus* is certainly not an exclusive peculiarity of Spinoza. The tradition of grammatical studies offers numerous examples of reflection on the particular locutions of biblical language, regularly collected and classified.[32] However, Spinoza proceeds from a conception of the Hebrew language that is profoundly different from that adopted by many other authors. Unlike the numerous Christian Hebraists who engaged in sacred philology, he excludes apologetic aims and esoteric implications, directing instead the linguistic analysis of the Old and New Testaments toward the definition of the true nature (*vera divinitas*) of Scripture.[33]

30 A miracle does not constitute an exception to the laws of nature, but a natural event narrated according to the categories of religious imagination. "Si igitur quaedam in Sacris Literis reperiuntur, quorum causas reddere nescimus, et quae praeter, imo contra ordinem naturae videntur contigisse, ea moram nobis injicere non debent, sed omnino credendum, id, quod revera contigit, naturaliter contigisse; quod etiam ex hoc confirmatur, quod in miraculis plures circumstantiae reperiebantur, quamvis tamen non semper narrentur, praecipue cum stilo Poëtico canantur; circumstantiae, inquam, miraculorum clare ostendunt, ipsa causas naturales requirere" (TTP VI; G III,90; Curley II,162).

31 G III,94; C II,167. "Et ad hunc modum perplurima in Sacris Literis occurrunt, quae tantum modi loquendi inter Judaeos fuerunt, nec opus est omnia hic singulatim recensere; sed tantum hoc in genere notari velim, Hebraeos his phrasibus non tantum consuevisse ornate, sed etiam et quidem maxime, devote loqui" (TTP, VI; G III,94. See also TTP VII; G III,104; Curley II,178).

32 Sante Pagnini, for example, also describes the phenomenon in his *Institutionum Hebraicarum libri quattuor* (1549) in the following terms: "Quibus primum dicendum est, hanc linguam (ut & caeteras) propria habere idiomata, proprios habere tropos, & peculiares loquendi modos, quos aliena exprimere lingua ita significanter, aut impossibile, aut certe perdifficile fit". The quotation is in Kessler Mesguisch 2013, 26.

33 "Indeed, if we want to testify, without prejudice, to the divinity of Scripture, we must establish from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrines. For only from this can its divinity be demonstrated" (Curley II,171).

The critique of miracles thus confirms the general principle of Spinoza's hermeneutics: what tradition had interpreted as a sign of God's immediate intervention is instead revealed to be the product of the linguistic forms through which human beings have narrated their own experience of the divine. Style is therefore not an aesthetic category but an epistemological one. It identifies the point at which revelation becomes historically mediated and therefore historically intelligible.

6 Language, Method, and the Separation of Philosophy from Theology

The historicization of the language of Scripture produces the most radical theoretical consequence of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: the methodological separation between philosophy and theology. Once it is recognized that the language of revelation belongs to history and to human mediation, its meaning can no longer be sought through metaphysical categories, but only through the historical-philological analysis of the text.

Traditionally, the language of Scripture was considered divine; consequently, style was also attributed to God, and miracles were interpreted as demonstrations of the truth of revelation. For Spinoza, by contrast, language is a historical construction, style belongs to individual prophets, and each prophet shapes his own narrative according to his own imagination and that of his recipients. Style, understood as the sign of the human mediation of revelation, thus constitutes the methodological principle that makes it possible to distinguish the historical meaning of Scripture from the demonstrative truth of philosophy. It represents the theoretical mechanism that makes possible the historicization of the Bible, the naturalization of miracles, the distinction between philosophy and theology, and, finally, a decisive step toward modern biblical criticism.

The particular *constitutio* and *natura* of the Hebrew language[34] have, for the most part, prevented a genuine understanding of the texts collected and transmitted over the course of many centuries. Some interpreters have mistaken for profound mysteries and conceptual obscurities features that belonged instead exclusively to the linguistic structure of the texts. It is therefore as *peritus Scripturae*[35] that Spinoza addresses non-Jewish readers in order

34 TTP VII; G III,106. "In addition tot he fact that we cannot have a complete history of the Hebrew language, there is the very nature and constitution of this language. So many ambiguities arise from this…" (Curley II,180).

35 TTP, *Adnotatio* XVI; G III,257; Curley II,213.

to show that the very concept of election did not consist in the superiority of the Jews with regard to knowledge or piety, but rather in the particular constitution of the Mosaic state.[36] Nature, in fact – this is Spinoza's conclusion against ancient prejudices – does not create nations but individuals. Individuals are then distinguished into nations primarily by the diversity of language, as well as by traditional laws and customs.[37] With regard, instead, to intellect and virtue, no nation can be considered superior to another, and there is no essential difference between Jews and Gentiles. This common heritage constitutes, in fact, the only universal teaching present in Scripture and coincides with that "eternal covenant of the knowledge and love of God" repeatedly recalled in the text.[38] The other traditions transmitted together with Scripture, as well as the various chronological reconstructions, derive instead from interpretations that are not based on the literal meaning of the biblical narratives and must therefore be rejected.[39]

A new concept of truth is thus defined on the basis of the distinction between the true meaning of the language of Scripture and the truth proper to philosophy. The true meaning of a text (*verus*

36 Once the premises for the destruction of the *Respublica Hebraeorum* had been established through the institution of the monarchy, this election concerns all human beings, since all are equally destined for true life and sublime speculations: "these gifts are not peculiar to any nation, but have always been common to the whole human race" ("haec dona nulli nationi peculiaria, sed toti humano generi communia semper fuisse") (TTP III; G III,46-7; Curley II,114).

37 "Haec [la natura] sane nationes non creat, sed individua, quae quidem in nationes non distinguuntur nisi ex diversitate linguae, legum et morum receptorum, et ex his duobus, legibus scilicet et moribus, tantum oriri potest, quod unaquaeque natio singulare habeat ingenium, singularem conditionem et denique singularia praejudicia" (TTP XVII; G III,217; Curley II,317). The passage defines the relationship between language and collective identity. For Spinoza, language performs an eminently historical and hermeneutical function, whereas the political character of a people depends above all on its institutions and customs.

38 "Quia haec electio veram virtutem spectat, non putandum est, quod piis Judaeorum tantum, caeteris exclusis, promissa fuerit, sed plane credendum gentiles veros prophetas, quos omnes nationes habuisse ostendimus, eandem etiam fidelibus suarum nationum promisisse eosque eadem solatos fuisse. Quare hoc aeternum foedus Dei cognitionis et amoris universale est, ut etiam ex Tsephoniae cap. 3. v. 12. 13. evidentissime constat, adeoque hac in re nulla est admittenda differentia inter Judaeos et gentes, neque igitur etiam alia electio iis peculiaris praeter illam, quam jam ostendimus" (TTP III; G III,56; Curley II,123).

39 Spinoza repeatedly emphasizes the unreliability and tendentiousness of certain rabbinical interpretations ("Rabini namque plane delirant. Commentatores autem, quos legi, somniant, fingunt et linguam denique ipsam plane corrumpunt […] Et ad hunc modum plura alia fingunt, quae si vera essent, absolute dicerem antiquos Hebraeos et linguam suam et narrandi ordinem plane ignoravisse", TTP IX; G III,134; Curley II,216), and he does so as a philosopher and as an expert in the Hebrew language and in Scripture: "Quin addo me nihil hic scribere, quod dudum et diu meditatum non habuerim, et quanquam a pueritia opinionibus de Scriptura communibus imbutus fuerim, non tamen potui tandem haec non admittere" (TTP IX; G III,135; Curley II,217).

sensus), Spinoza explains, must not be confused with the *veritas rerum*, which is founded on the principles of natural knowledge. The distinction between *verus sensus* and *veritas rerum* does not simply separate two modes of interpretation, but rather two criteria of truth belonging to two different epistemic regimes: Scripture belongs to the order of history and language, whereas philosophy belongs to the order of rational demonstration. Philosophy, in fact, responds to rational paradigms and is articulated according to logical-deductive categories. By contrast, the meaning of Scripture is established on the basis of linguistic custom alone (*ex solo linguae usu*), since "it's not permissible for us to twist the meaning of Scripture according to the dictates of our reason and according to our preconceived opinions".[40] The knowledge of the Bible must therefore derive exclusively from its reading and from history, distinguishing the plane of eternity from that of temporality and moral teachings (*documenta moralia* or *aeterna*) from transient laws, established in a specific period and for a specific people.[41]

Spinoza therefore insists on the necessity of adhering to the 'letter' of the text in order to identify those universal elements that alone confer upon it its true meaning. The core of truth (*quod universalissimum*), the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture (*totius Scripturae basis et fundamentum*), are entirely distinct from philosophical concepts concerning the nature of God. Their essential principles instead consist in the fact that "a unique and omnipotent God exists, who alone is to be worshipped, who cares for all, and who loves above all those who worship him and who love their neighbor as themselves, etc."[42]

Linguistic analysis and the appeal to the literal meaning of Scripture ultimately show the necessity of distinguishing philosophy from theology. Theological interpretations are, in fact, constructions that can be traced back to *auctoritates* and are subject to different motivations. The meaning of the words of a language, by contrast, preserves its own stability and is extremely difficult to modify or corrupt (*depravare*) once it has been acquired. Language, in fact, belongs to an entire people, to the common people as well as to the learned (*vulgus linguam cum doctis servat*). For this reason, while learned individuals can intervene in the *sensus orationis* in order

40 "nobis non licet ad dictamina nostrae rationis et ad nostras praeconceptas opiniones mentem Scripturae torquere" (TTP VII; G III,101; Curley II,174-5).

41 "Deinde, ne documenta aeterna cum iis, quae ad tempus tantum vel paucis solummodo ex usu poterant esse, confundamus, refert etiam scire, qua occasione, quo tempore et cui nationi aut saeculo omnia documenta scripta fuerunt" (TTP VII; G III,102; Curley II,175).

42 TTP VII; G III,102; Curley II,176.

to direct or distort (*mutare vel corrumpere*) its interpretation, they have very limited power to modify or corrupt the meaning of words.[43]

On the basis of this conviction, Spinoza defines his own method of interpretation as the "*unica et vera methodus*", the only method capable of guaranteeing a correct knowledge of Scripture. This method requires, above all, a perfect knowledge of the language, although the Hebrew nation (*Hebraea natio*) no longer possesses either a dictionary, a grammar, or a book of rhetoric due to its particular history.[44] However, much of the *ambiguitates* and *obscuritates* present in biblical discourses[45] derive from the confusion between letters of the alphabet that are very similar to one another. As Spinoza will clarify in the *Compendium*, the Hebrews divide all the letters of the alphabet into five classes according to the five parts of the mouth responsible for pronunciation, namely the lips, the tongue, the teeth, the palate, and the throat. Consequently, the different articulations of speech are often rendered ambiguous or transformed almost into meaningless words. To this must be added the fact that, over the course of time, many uses and meanings of words have been lost,[46] and that conjunctions and adverbs have acquired different meanings. Verb conjugation also presents numerous peculiarities, since it lacks "the indicative mood, the present, imperfect, pluperfect, future perfect tenses, and other tenses widely used in other languages […] and this not without serious ambiguities in discourse".[47] A further source of ambiguity derives from the absence of vowels, punctuation marks, and indications of intonation. In turn, however,

43 "Ex his itaque et aliis rationibus facile nobis persuademus nemini in mentem venire potuisse linguam aliquam corrumpere, at quidem saepe mentem alicujus scriptoris, ejus orationes mutando vel easdem perperam interpretando" (TTP VII; G III,106; Curley II,180). This explains the meaning of Spinoza's strongest methodological remarks concerning the interpretation of Scripture: "solo sensu orationum, non autem de earum veritate laboramus" e "ad solam verborum significationem attendimus" (TTP VII; G III,100; Curley II,173).

44 TTP VII; G III,106; Curley II,180. The history of the language (*historia linguae Hebraeae*) is therefore a preliminary part of biblical exegesis and, consequently, the interpreter must reconstruct the language through the internal comparison of the surviving texts.

45 "Nobis scilicet, qui huic linguae non assuevimus, et ejusdem phraseologiam desideramus" (TTP, *Adnotatio* VII; G III,253; Curley II,180).

46 "Nam non dubium est, quin in lingua Hebraea, sicuti in reliquis, multa obsoleta et antiquata posterior usus fecerit" (TTP IX; G III,138; Curley II,221).

47 TTP VII; G III,107; Curley II,181. The whole of ch. VII is devoted to the foundations and doctrine of the Hebrew language, its deficiencies, the causes of ambiguities, and the loss of the most ancient manuals of the *Hebraea natio*.

the subsequent introduction of vowel points and accents introduced further difficulties in the understanding of texts.[48]

Precisely because of the many linguistic difficulties and the numerous revisions the texts have undergone over time, one must be wary of established customs and place one's trust not in the aforementioned "decrees" and "traditions", but in the practice of life (*usum vitae*), which alone possesses universal validity. The moral teachings contained in Scripture, in fact, present no ambiguity regarding their meaning, and the simple and common terms through which they are transmitted are comprehensible to everyone. They show that true salvation and true blessedness (*vera salus et beatitudo*) consist in true acquiescence of the soul (*in vera animi acquiescentia*), a condition that even the *vulgus* can understand with complete clarity and evidence, without the need for demonstration.[49] Anyone can, in fact, easily perceive what is necessary for salvation, in every age and in any language. It is precisely in this perception, and not in the testimony of interpreters, that the common people find their own certainty. The aspiration to individual and collective salvation is thus accompanied, in Spinoza, by the affirmation of freedom of thought and expression, understood as inalienable rights of nature and confirmed by the natural light.[50]

The *Tractatus theologico-politicus* therefore defines politics as the application of the principles attested in Scripture. The books that "teach and narrate elevated things", whatever the language in which they are written and the nation from which they originate,

48 "Antiqui autem sine punctis (hoc est sine vocalibus et accentibus) scripserunt (ut ex multis testimoniis constat). Posteri vero, prout iis Biblia interpretari visum est, haec duo addiderunt; quare accentus et puncta, quae jam habemus, merae hodiernorum interpretationes sunt, nec plus fidei neque authoritatis merentur quam reliquae authorum explicationes" (TTP VII; G III,108; Curley II,181).

49 "Verae enim pietatis documenta verbis usitatissimis exprimuntur, quandoquidem admodum communia, nec minus simplicia, et intellectu facilia sunt; et quia vera salus et beatitudo in vera animi acquiescentia consistit, et nos in iis tantum vere acquiescimus, quae clarissime intelligimus, hinc evidentissime sequitur nos mentem Scripturae circa res salutares et ad beatitudinem necessarias certo posse assequi; quare non est, cur de reliquis simus adeo solliciti; reliqua enim, quandoquidem ea ut plurimum ratione et intellectu complecti non possumus, plus curiositatis quam utilitatis habent" (TTP VII; G III,111-12; Curley II,185-6). And again, Spinoza states: "credo tamen eas levioris esse momenti, iis saltem, qui Scripturas liberiore judicio legunt, et hoc certo affirmare possum me nullam animadvertisse mendam nec lectionum varietatem circa moralia documenta, quae ipsa obscura aut dubia reddere possent" (TTP IX; G III,135; Curley II,217).

50 "Nam cum maxima authoritas Scripturam interpretandi apud unumquemque sit, interpretandi ergo norma nihil debet esse praeter lumen naturale omnibus commune, non ullum supra naturam lumen, neque ulla externa authoritas; non etiam debet esse adeo difficilis, ut non nisi ab acutissimis philosophis dirigi possit, sed naturali et communi hominum ingenio et capacitati accommodata, ut nostram esse ostendimus" (TTP VII; G III,117; Curley II,191).

are all "equally sacred".[51] Human reason is truly sacred because, together with the narratives of the prophets and the discourses of the apostles, it affirms that the eternal word of God, the covenant, and true religion are divinely inscribed in the hearts of human beings, that is, in their minds.[52] All human beings, "both Jews and Gentiles", have always been equal.

The theme of *style*, understood as the methodological category through which Spinoza dissolves the very idea of a divine language, thus also represents the necessary theoretical premise for his conclusions in the ethical and political fields.

7 Style as Historical Index and the Emergence of Critical Interpretation

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, the notion of the 'style of Scripture' constitutes the point of convergence of Spinoza's entire theory of language, revelation, and biblical interpretation. Style does not designate an aesthetic quality of the text nor an attribute of the divine word; rather, it represents the methodological criterion through which revelation is traced back to the historical conditions of its own linguistic mediation. It is precisely in this redefinition of style that the possibility of a historical reading of Scripture takes shape.

Biblical language is characterized, in fact, by its simplicity, determined not by an ideal of formal perfection, but by the practical

51 In ch. XII of the TTP, Spinoza clarifies what should properly be understood by *Sacra Scriptura* and *Verbum Dei* and states that works teaching elevated truths (*res sublimes*) are all equally sacred. The same applies to the passage in TTP X, where Spinoza criticizes the conception according to which the sacredness of Scripture would reside in its words and letters (*literae et verba*), rather than in its content and teachings ("et interea, dum scilicet literas et verba Scripturae adorant, nihil aliud faciunt, ut jam supra monuimus quam Bibliorum scriptores contemtui exponere, adeo ut viderentur nescivisse loqui, neque res dicendas ordinare", G III,147-8; Curley II,235). Spinoza polemicizes against scriptural literalism and argues that those who defend the absolute perfection of the Bible's verbal form paradoxically end up attributing a lack of expressive ability to the biblical authors: if every repetition, stylistic irregularity, or narrative disorder must be defended as perfect, then the writers of the Bible would appear to lack knowledge both of the language and of the art of composition.

52 Spinoza distinguishes the eternal Word of God from Scripture understood as a material text: "Nam tam ipsa ratio, quam prophetarum et apostolorum sententiae aperte clamant Dei aeternum verbum et pactum veramque religionem hominum cordibus, hoc est, humanae menti divinitus inscriptam esse, eamque verum esse Dei syngraphum, quod ipse suo sigillo, nempe sui idea, tanquam imagine suae divinitatis consignavit" (TTP XII; G III,158; Curley II,248). Cf. anche TTP XVIII; G III,221; Curley II,322: "At Deus contra per apostolos revelavit Dei pactum non amplius atramento nec in tabulis lapideis, sed Dei spiritu in corde scribi". In ch. XII Spinoza discusses the nature of the sacred and the Word of God, whereas in ch. XVIII the same Pauline motif (2 Cor 3:3) is taken up again in relation to the transformation of the Jewish political-religious covenant.

function that it is called upon to perform. As Spinoza states in the second chapter of the *Tractatus*, the prophets conveyed their message through images, metaphors, and narrative forms accessible to all. Scripture does not aim to communicate speculative truths or to teach philosophical doctrines, but rather to arouse obedience, justice, and piety. The simplicity of its language thus reflects the ethical and political function of the text, not its supernatural origin.[53]

From this premise derives the fundamental principle of Spinoza's hermeneutics: Scripture must be interpreted through Scripture itself, reconstructing its meaning through the analysis of language, history, and the circumstances of its composition. The differences of style, vocabulary, narrative structure, and conceptual framework thus cease to be traced back to the unity of a divine author and become instead indications of the plurality of authors, the variety of historical contexts, and the complex redactional history of the various books. The Bible therefore appears not as a perfectly coherent doctrinal system, but as a collection of historically layered texts, whose unity does not precede the work of the interpreter, but must instead be critically reconstructed.

The eminently epistemological significance of the notion of style identifies the point at which revelation manifests itself as human mediation and becomes, precisely for this reason, historically knowable. If God coincides with the necessary order of Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) and does not constitute a subject endowed with communicative intentions, it is no longer possible to attribute to Him a language or a style of His own. The stylistic variety of Scripture therefore does not testify to different modes of divine speech, but rather makes visible the plurality of human mediations through which revelation has been transmitted.

In this sense, what tradition interpreted as the immediate expression of the word of God is instead revealed to be the result of a linguistic, redactional, and cultural history. On this basis, Spinoza can challenge the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, initiate a critique of sources, and establish a historical-philological method destined to profoundly transform modern biblical interpretation. The theoretical scope of this operation, however, extends beyond the field of biblical

53 To summarize: in ch. VII Spinoza argues that the teachings of true piety necessary for salvation do not require an elevated philosophical language, but are expressed through common and accessible words ("Verae enim pietatis documenta verbis usitatissimis exprimuntur, quandoquidem admodum communia, nec minus simplicia, et intellectu facilia sunt…", G III,111; Curley II,185). In ch. XIV Scripture teaches nothing other than obedience to God through the practice of justice and charity and contains no philosophical teachings ("Philosophiae enim scopus nihil est, praeter veritatem: Fidei autem, ut abunde ostendimus, nihil praeter obedientiam, et pietatem", G II,179; Curley II,271).

exegesis. The historicization of Scripture, in fact, presupposes a more radical historicization of language. Precisely because the language of revelation is recognized as a form of historical mediation, the Bible can be interpreted according to the same criteria applied to any other document of the past. Style thus ceases to be an exclusively rhetorical or literary category and becomes the methodological principle that makes possible the historical critique of revelation.

In this perspective, Spinoza's philosophy of language does not merely provide the foundation of biblical hermeneutics; it redefines the epistemic framework within which Scripture can be interpreted.

8 The Style of Scripture between Divine Accommodation and Historical Mediation: Boyle and Spinoza

The comparison with Boyle makes it possible to clarify, by contrast, the theoretical specificity of Spinoza's notion of style. The question of the style of Scripture does not, in fact, concern only the way in which the biblical text should be interpreted, but rather involves the more radical problem of the relationship between human language and divine truth.[54]

8.1 Boyle: Divine Accommodation and the Preservation of Scriptural Unity

"The Honorable Robert Boyle", as he is presented on the title page of some of his works, is best remembered today for his contribution to natural science. In addition to his interests in pneumatics and chemistry, Boyle also devoted himself to the study of colour, hydrostatics, heat, and respiration. He was an active member of the Royal Society and an enthusiastic supporter of its activities. What is less well known today is that Boyle was also a devout Christian and that his scientific research was deeply oriented and informed by

54 It seems to me that there is no study devoted exclusively to the relationship between Boyle and Spinoza concerning the "style of Scripture". More generally, broader studies on seventeenth-century biblical criticism, Dutch and English hermeneutics, and the relationship between Scripture and natural philosophy tend today to argue that Spinoza inaugurates the historical-critical turn (the Bible as a historical-linguistic text), whereas Boyle represents an alternative form of modernity founded on the principles of *accommodation* and the harmony between reason and revelation. The issue would therefore not be one of direct influence, but rather of two competing models of biblical interpretation within the context of the Scientific Revolution.

religious faith.[55] Within the framework of his conception of natural science as a support for natural theology,[56] the "devout and pious" Boyle published the treatise *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures*.[57] In this work, he argues that the language of Scripture is the true language of God and that God speaks through it. Boyle defends biblical language against accusations of stylistic crudeness[58] and argues that the simplicity of Scripture does not constitute a defect, but rather a positive and intentional quality.[59] In particular, Boyle argues that God chose to make use of a style

55 All these details are mentioned in Pyle 2000, I, V. In his will, Boyle provided money for a series of lectures to defend the Christian religion against those he considered "notorious infidels, namely atheists, deists, pagans, Jews and Muslims", with the provision that controversies between Christians were not to be mentioned.

56 On the relationship between scientific research and theology in Boyle, and on the subordination of the former to the latter, see: Wojcik 1997. For a general study of England in this period, which remains useful today, see: Westfall 1958; see also Brooke 1991; Ricciardo 2009-10, 317-90; Wojcik 2000 (this article focuses on Robert Boyle's views on the style and interpretation of the Bible).

57 Boyle's *Some Considerations* are commonly dated to their first publication in 1661 or 1663. The copy I consulted online is dated 1663 (`https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=rYDdt6ONsjsC&pg=GBS.PP1&hl=it`); a copy dated 1661 is also available online. In 1664 a new edition was published in Oxford with the following title-page wording: "A Second Edition [since the first Published June 1663]".

58 Boyle's "style of scripture", articulated in his *Considerations* views the Bible as a sophisticated, diverse work designed for both spiritual enlightenment and moral transformation. He argues its beauty lies not in ornate human rhetoric, but in a purposeful, divine eloquence that is sometimes intentionally obscure to challenge readers, rather than just provide easy information. He countered accusations that the Bible was disorganized (immethodical) or contradictory, arguing that its style uses vivid, often emotional language to engage the heart, not just the head. Boyle believed scripture is a harmonious blend of divine inspiration and human expression. Boyle famously bridged faith and reason, holding that both the "Book of Nature" and the "Book of Scripture" were written by the same author and therefore could not ultimately conflict.

59 This defense of linguistic simplicity fits coherently within the ideal of the *plain style*, also promoted by the Royal Society. This ideal privileges a clear, sober, and unadorned language, in sharp opposition to traditional rhetoric. However, in Boyle this modern orientation is still combined with a traditional theological perspective: the simplicity of the biblical text is interpreted as the result of a divine choice perfectly suited to the salvific purpose of revelation. Recent scholarship has emphasized that early modern biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to a linear transition from theological to historical modes of reading. Rather, it consists of multiple coexisting strategies for managing the relation between linguistic form and authority. Within this broader field, Spinoza's account of scriptural language would represent one particularly radical articulation, rather than an isolated rupture or endpoint of development. For the different interpretations, see: Force-Popkin 1994; more directly, for the history of exegesis, Grafton 1991; Israel 2001; Melamed 2021, where several essays reassess the idea of Spinoza as a "founder" of critical modernity (see also Arbib's essay, pp. 559-73). For the view that Boyle is not simply a "biblical traditionalist" opposed to Spinoza, see: Hunter 2000; Hunter 2009. For the overcoming of the "conflict" between science and religion, see Brooke 1991. These perspectives present a more nuanced understanding of Spinoza's position as part of a broader early modern reconfiguration of interpretive practices, in which questions of language, cognition, and authority are continuously renegotiated.

"accessibile, rather suited to the capacity of the vulgar than to the gust of the learned".[60] The renunciation of rhetorical ornament does not therefore imply expressive poverty, but responds to a precise communicative purpose. In this way, the Bible fulfills its universal function, which consists in instructing and guiding all of humanity. As Boyle states, the purpose of Scripture is "not to please by elegance of words", "but to instruct by the efficacy of things".[61]

On this point, there might appear to be a convergence between Spinoza and Boyle; however, the theoretical premises and the aims of their analyses are profoundly different. First of all, Boyle affirms "the Heavenly Origination of the Scripture".[62] "I study", he writes, "God's Will most in that Book",[63] and even in the less ornate parts of Scripture truth manifests itself as "a direct Emanation from the Essential and Supreme Truth".[64] The simplicity of the Bible does not constitute a limitation of the text, but rather a form of "divine condescension". Even when biblical style appears simple or "human", it preserves the signs of its own divine origin. The Bible is effective not because of any particular apparent rhetorical elegance, but because it derives directly from God and presents a divinely ordered

60 *Considerations*, nn.

61 *Considerations*, 21-2: "several Books of the Bible were written chiefly and primarily to those to whom they were first addressed, and the their contemporaries, and that yet the Bible yet the Bible not being written for one Age or People onely, but for the whole people of God, consisting of persons of all Ages; Nations, Sexes, Complexions and Conditions, it was fit it should be written in such a way as that none of all these might be quite excluded from the advantages designed them in it. Therefore were these Sacred Books so wisely as well as graciously tempered, that their Variety so comprehends the several abilities and dispositions of men".

62 *Considerations*, 29. See also, 104: "Now as it is past Question that there are no Speculative Truths of so Noble and Elevated a Nature as those that have God him self for their Object, so there is no Book from whence there is so much to be Learned, as there is from the Bible, of the Nature, and even the Thoughts of God, and of those deep Mysteries in to which, as I formerly noted from St. Peter, the Angels themselves are greedy of Prying. Nay, there is no other Book whatoever that Teaches any thing at all, concerning divers of these sublime subjects, that may be safely Releved on, save in what it is be holden to the Scripture for".

63 *Considerations*, 127.

64 *Considerations*, 153. Like Spinoza, Boyle argues for the necessity of knowledge of Hebrew also for a better understanding of the New Testament; however, Hebrew is considered "the Holy Tongue", "that which God himself made choice of, to Dignifie with his Expressions" (156). Boyle interprets every political event and every earthly occurrence as an expression of the divine: "The Revolution of Monarchies, the Fates of Princes, and Destinies of Nations, are but Illustrious Instances and Proclamation of his Providence" (216). The historical part of the Bible itself, "being endited by an Omniscient and Unerring Spirit layes cleerly open the True and Genuine Causes of the Establishment, Flourishing, and Vicissitudes of the Princes and Commonwealths it Relates the Story off" (219).

adaptation to human capacities.[65] Boyle explains indeed stylistic variation through the doctrine of accommodation, according to which God adapts revelation to human cognitive capacities through ordinary and figurative language. On this account, linguistic variability preserves rather than undermines scriptural unity, insofar as it reflects a divinely regulated asymmetry between truth and human understanding. The decisive question, however, concerns the subject of this linguistic mediation. For Boyle, mediation belongs to God himself: stylistic diversity results from God's intentional accommodation of revelation to human cognitive capacities. It is precisely this assumption that Spinoza will radically reverse.

The historical reception of *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* testifies to the strong impact exerted by Boyle not only in the scientific debate, but also in the theological debates of seventeenth-century Europe. His defense of the theory of "condescension" or divine accommodation – namely, the idea that God communicates through the simple language of appearances and of human beings – influenced subsequent debates on biblical hermeneutics. In particular, the work was favorably received by members of the nascent Royal Society and by moderate theologians, since it offered a solution to the epistemological conflict between the new experimental science and religious faith.[66]

8.2 Hobbes as the Political Background of Boyle's Intervention

The crisis of the cognitive value of language, conveyed through the analysis of the style of Scripture, was also emphasized by Hobbes. In the *Leviathan*, he shows how language constitutes a constant

65 "Certainly then, if we Consider God as Creator of our Souls, and so likeliest to Know, the Frame, and Springs, and Nature of his own Workmanship we shall make but little Difficulty to Believe that in the Book written For, and Addressed To Men, he hath Employed very Powerfull and Appropriated Means to Work upon them" (*Considerations*, 241).

66 Boyle demonstrated that a scientist could apply the same critical acumen both to the study of nature (the "Book of Nature") and to the study of sacred texts (the "Book of Scripture"). On the relationship between the Books of Nature and Scripture, see Force-Popkin 1994: the text explicitly connects Spinoza and the English tradition (Boyle, Newton), analyzes the relationship between the "Book of Nature" and the "Book of Scripture", and shows the plurality of responses to the crisis of biblical authority.

source of errors and confusion[67] and strongly criticizes the literal interpretation of the poetic images found in the Bible. According to Hobbes, a large part of superstition arises from linguistic errors, and religious conflicts themselves derive from the improper use and abuse of words. Scripture, therefore, cannot be interpreted autonomously: in the third part of the *Leviathan* ("*Of a Christian Commonwealth*"), Hobbes argues that ultimate authority over public interpretation belongs to the civil sovereign. Religious language is thus conventional, politically regulable, and semantically unstable. The fundamental problem is therefore not theological, but political: it concerns the possibility of guaranteeing civil order through the control of the public meaning of words.

The question of the 'style of God' thus assumes a strongly political turn. The decisive question is no longer simply "what does God truly say?", but rather "who possesses the right to establish the meaning of Scripture?" In this sense, the problem of the language of revelation becomes a problem of political authority.

The naturalistic or minimalist reinterpretation of miracles, prophecy, spirits, and demonology elaborated by Hobbes deeply concerned Boyle. In his *Considerations*, Boyle defends the simplicity, metaphoricity, and apparent irregularity of biblical language against the reduction of natural religion and against the subordination of the Bible's moral authority to civil power. For Boyle, the Bible employs common language because God adapts Himself to human capacities. According to the theory of 'accommodation', religious language is analogical, adapted, and limited by the cognitive conditions of human beings, but not arbitrary. The central problem is not political, but theological: how can divine revelation communicate itself to finite human beings?

67 In *Leviathan* I.4 on *Abuses of Speech* Hobbes writes: "The first abuse, is when men register their thoughts wrong, by the inconstancy of the signification of their words…"; "the second, when they use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for…". In *Leviathan*, III.34 "Of the Signification of Spirit, Angels, and Inspiration" Hobbes directly addresses the problem of the figurative language of Scripture. He argues that many biblical terms should not be understood literally, because Scripture uses images and metaphors adapted to human capacities: "When we say an Attribute is attributed to God, we are not to understand the Name of the Attribute, as it is in Creatures, but as it is in God": see Hobbes 1996, especially chs. IV, V, XII, XXXIV, and XLV. Here Hobbes does not simply deny the authority of Scripture; rather, he argues that it must be interpreted according to the rules of language and that many theological controversies arise from taking biblical metaphors and images as literal descriptions of reality. Spinoza will radicalize this position in the TTP, especially in chs. VII, IX, and XIII. For language, rhetoric, and the use of metaphors in Hobbes, see Skinner 1996. For the relationship between biblical language and Hobbes's theology, see Martinich 1992; Springborg 2007.

8.3 Boyle and Spinoza: The Subject of Linguistic Mediation

Hobbes's treatment of the language of Scripture represents, for Boyle, a threat different from that posed by Spinoza.[68] While Spinoza radicalizes the historical-philological critique of the biblical text, Hobbes instead tends to subordinate the interpretation of Scripture to civil power, reducing religious content to a political-linguistic problem and treating biblical language according to a strongly materialistic and nominalist perspective.

Boyle responds to this situation by developing a position that is philologically open, but theologically orthodox. His experimental theology is in fact based on the principle of "linguistic voluntarism": biblical language depends on the divine free choice to accommodate itself to human capacities. Metaphor assumes here a decisive role. While for Hobbes it represents a possible source of error, for Boyle it constitutes an instrument of divine pedagogy inscribed in revelation.[69] For Hobbes, the sovereign represents the only legitimate interpreter of Scripture; for Boyle, by contrast, reason and faith remain harmoniously coordinated, and the variety of biblical language confirms the adaptive action of God.

It is at this point that the true significance of the comparison with Spinoza emerges. The divergence between Boyle and Spinoza does not primarily concern the value of the simplicity of Scripture nor the function of metaphor. The decisive point concerns the subject of the linguistic mediation of revelation. Both authors recognize that the divine word reaches human beings through linguistic mediation; they differ, however, radically in identifying the subject of this mediation. For Boyle, mediation belongs to God, who intentionally adapts His own language to the cognitive capacities of humanity. For Spinoza, by contrast, mediation belongs entirely to the prophets and authors of Scripture, whose historical, linguistic, and imaginative conditions determine the very form of revelation.

Paradoxically, the different interlocutors share some elements that are typically modern: attention to language, the critique of scholasticism, distrust of metaphysical systems, and the centrality of experience. Boyle and Spinoza also share a critique of the stylistic ornaments of the humanist rhetorical model and an interest in the communicative capacity of the text. However, they respond in radically different ways

68 On Hobbes and Scripture, the sections of Martinich 1992 devoted to chs. III-IV and XXXII-XLIII of the *Leviathan* are particularly relevant. See also Collins 2005. This book shows that Hobbes's position on religion does not simply consist in reducing Scripture to a political instrument: Collins emphasizes that Hobbes develops a coherent theory of religious authority subordinated to civil sovereignty, in opposition to the claims of ecclesiastical authorities.

69 On Boyle against Hobbes, see: Hunter 2009; Shapin-Schaffer 1985. The latter work shows how the scientific dispute between Boyle and Hobbes also involved epistemological and linguistic implications.

to the crisis of language. Boyle preserves divine transcendence and constructs a Christian experimental modernity that offers an alternative both to Hobbes and to Spinoza:[70] God retains ultimate control over the linguistic form of revelation. Spinoza, by contrast, responds to the same crisis by fully historicizing language. He does not simply reject the explanatory structure of accommodation; rather, he changes its subject: in Boyle, it is God who adapts Himself to human beings; in Spinoza, it is human beings, through their imagination and their historical language, who determine the concrete form of revelation.

The comparison between Boyle and Spinoza shows that the question of the "style of Scripture" does not simply oppose a theological conception to a historical conception of the Bible. The true point of divergence concerns the subject of the linguistic mediation of revelation. For Boyle, mediation is the work of God, who intentionally adapts His own language to human capacities without compromising the unity of Scripture. For Spinoza, by contrast, mediation belongs entirely to human authors: the linguistic variety of the Bible does not refer to God's accommodating action, but to the historical plurality of prophets and editors.[71] The divergence between the two authors

70 Boyle's anti-Hobbesianism and anti-Spinozism would become especially evident in the *Boyle Lectures* and in his defense of natural religion. Although less radical than Spinoza, Hobbes nevertheless raises problems concerning the historicity of the sacred text, initiating a process of the desacralization of language and the politicization of hermeneutics.

71 The TTP thus reverses Boyle's apologetic approach. Spinoza too refuses to judge Scripture according to classical rhetorical criteria, but he draws opposite conclusions from this rejection. Both defend the simplicity of biblical language and reject the aristocratic-humanist model of "eloquence"; however, Boyle defends the Bible as a divinely inspired text, adopts a religious apologetic position, and holds that simplicity is intended by God and serves the universal dissemination of the message. Spinoza, by contrast, begins from a philological-rational critique and analyzes the Bible as a historical human text: the simplicity of language is not a sign of divine perfection but a historical condition of communication. Spinoza's account of scriptural style constitutes a decisive reconfiguration of early modern hermeneutics. By treating stylistic variation as historical evidence rather than theological design, he shifts the interpretation of Scripture from a doctrinal to a historical-philological framework. From the aforementioned studies of Popkin, which interpreted the seventeenth century as an age of skeptical crisis in religious authority, to Israel's readings distinguishing between Radical and Moderate Enlightenment, the comparison between Boyle and Spinoza has progressively been incorporated into a narrative of modernity as a process of internal differentiation. More recently, studies by other scholars have emphasized the continuity between Renaissance philological practices and the innovations of seventeenth-century thought, thereby reducing the idea of a sharp break introduced by Spinoza. These studies ultimately converge toward a pluralistic understanding of modernity. Boyle and Spinoza respond to the same problem – the linguistic and interpretive nature of Scripture – through divergent solutions: theological accommodation in Boyle's case and critical historicization in Spinoza's. From this perspective, the 'style of Scripture' does not simply mark the transition from a theological to a historical paradigm, but rather the encounter between learned traditions, natural philosophy, and reflection on language. The result is a picture in which the emergence of modern biblical criticism cannot be identified with a single isolated historical turning point, although Spinoza's transformation of the concept of language constitutes one of its decisive theoretical foundations.

therefore does not consist simply in a different assessment of the simplicity of scriptural language, but in two opposing conceptions of the relationship between language, truth, and revelation. Boyle interprets style as the sign of God's pedagogical presence in history; Spinoza, by contrast, understands it as the historical index of the human mediation of Scripture.[72]

In this sense, the decisive innovation of Spinoza does not consist in rejecting linguistic mediation, but in relocating its subject from God to human historical agents.

It is this shift in the subject of mediation that makes possible the transformation of style into an epistemological category and, at the same time, the emergence of the historical method. Indeed, the transformation of style and the emergence of the historical method are themselves consequences of the principle according to which the 'style of Scripture' is the theoretical locus in which the mediation of revelation changes its subject: from God to the prophets.

9 Language, Authority, and Revelation. Two Early Modern Theories of Scriptural Style

The controversy surrounding the 'style of Scripture' reveals two competing early modern strategies for determining the epistemic status of religious language. Robert Boyle's reflections on biblical style belong to a broader project aimed at reconciling scientific inquiry and Christian theology. His defense of scriptural simplicity is therefore inseparable from his conviction that the study of nature ultimately

72 The comparison with Boyle shows that this transformation does not yield a single trajectory of modernity. Instead, it reveals the coexistence of divergent interpretive models: one grounded in accommodation and theological continuity, the other in historical reconstruction and textual plurality. Boyle and Spinoza represent two different responses to the same crisis: the former preserves the transcendence of the divine word through accommodation, while the latter makes Scripture intelligible through history. The reflection on style constitutes, in particular, the point of convergence of Spinoza's entire exegetical project. It shows that the language of Scripture does not belong to a separate and purely divine order, but rather to the history of the languages, institutions, and human communities that produced and transmitted it. The transformation of the idea of a divine language makes possible a new conception of biblical interpretation, founded on historical-philological analysis rather than on the authority of tradition. From this perspective, the distinction between philosophy and theology represents not merely a disciplinary separation, but the result of a deeper redefinition of the epistemological status of language. The 'style of Scripture' thus becomes the methodological category through which Spinoza brings revelation back within the historical conditions of its production and, at the same time, opens the theoretical space for the freedom of philosophical inquiry and for a new conception of civil and political life. 'Style of Scripture' thus emerges as a central site for understanding competing genealogies of early modern biblical interpretation, its secularization, and the emergence of a modern conception of history as a decisive moment in the formation of modernity.

confirms divine wisdom and providential order. In *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* and later in *The Christian Virtuoso*, Boyle presents linguistic accommodation as the principle that explains how an infinite God communicates with finite human beings.

Spinoza's position is fundamentally different. Where Boyle interprets stylistic variation as the expression of divine pedagogy, Spinoza transforms the question of style into a problem of historical interpretation and understands it as the historical trace of human mediation. Boyle preserves the unity of Scripture by grounding linguistic diversity in divine intention; Spinoza reconstructs the plurality of biblical forms by analyzing the historical conditions of their production.

The decisive disagreement between Boyle and Spinoza concerns the subject of linguistic mediation. Both acknowledge that revelation reaches human beings only through linguistic mediation; they differ radically, however, in identifying the agent of that mediation. For Boyle, mediation remains an intentional act of God, who accommodates revelation to finite human capacities. For Spinoza, mediation belongs entirely to the historical activity of prophetic authors, whose language, imagination, and circumstances determine the textual form of revelation.

The comparison between Boyle and Spinoza therefore illuminates two competing early modern conceptions of scriptural language rather than simply two different methods of biblical interpretation. Both acknowledge that revelation reaches human beings through language, yet they assign radically different epistemic functions to that mediation. Boyle explains linguistic diversity by appealing to the unity of divine intention, whereas Spinoza treats diversity itself as historical evidence requiring critical reconstruction.

From this perspective, the debate over the 'style of Scripture' becomes a revealing episode in the emergence of modern philosophy of language. What is ultimately at stake is not merely the interpretation of biblical texts but the conditions under which language can function as a vehicle of truth and authority. In Boyle these conditions remain grounded in theology; in Spinoza they become objects of historical and philological inquiry. The transition from one model to the other therefore consists not simply in the replacement of a theological by a historical interpretation of Scripture, but in a relocation of the subject of linguistic mediation from God to history.

10 Conclusion

This article has argued that the problem of the 'style of Scripture' deserves to occupy a more central place in the intellectual history of the seventeenth century than it has usually received. Far from being a merely rhetorical question, scriptural style became a point at which

broader debates concerning language, authority, and revelation converged.

By reconstructing Boyle's doctrine of accommodation alongside Spinoza's historical theory of biblical language, this study has shown that the two authors offer competing accounts of linguistic mediation. Their disagreement concerns not only how Scripture should be interpreted but also what kind of relation language can establish between human understanding and religious truth.

Spinoza's originality lies not simply in relocating the mediation of revelation from theology to history, but in relocating the subject of linguistic mediation itself. Once mediation is no longer attributed to divine accommodation but to the historical activity of prophetic authors, stylistic diversity becomes historical evidence rather than a sign of divine accommodation.

Seen in this light, the debate over the 'style of God' marks one of the decisive moments in the early modern transformation of the philosophy of language. What changes is not merely the interpretation of Scripture but the very location of linguistic authority. The 'style of God' thus becomes, paradoxically, the point at which God ceases to function as the subject of scriptural style and the subject of linguistic mediation shifts from God to the prophetic authors as historical mediators of revelation, making revelation historically intelligible and opening the way to modern historical criticism.

Abbreviations

AT = Descartes, R. (1902). *Œuvres de Descartes*. Ch. Adam et P. Tannery (eds), 11 vols., Paris: Léopold Cerf (reprint J. Vrin/CNRS 1985).
CSM = Descartes, R. (1985). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Curley = Spinoza (1985). *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. E. Curley (ed.), 2 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press.
G = Spinoza (1925). *Opera*. Im Auftrag der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften herausgegeben von C. Gebhardt, 4 vols., Heidelberg: Carl Winter, reprint 1972.
Considerations = Boyle, R. (1663). *Some considerations touching the style of the holy scriptures,* London, Printed for H. Herringman (per l'edizione moderna si veda R. Boyle, *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Scriptures*, in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, M. Hunter and E.B. Davis (eds.), vol. II, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1999-2000, 379-490).
E = *Ethica*.
TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:
app = *Appendix.*
d = *Demonstratio*.
p = *Propositio*.
s = *Scholium*.

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