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Spinoza's theory of religion : the importance of religion in Spinoza's thought and its implications for state and society
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Citation

Stein, Y. (2019, October 23). *Spinoza's theory of religion : the importance of religion in Spinoza's thought and its implications for state and society*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79825>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Issue Date: 2019-10-23

3. Spinoza's Treatment of the Bible in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

In this chapter I argue against the scholars who have seen in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* only a critique of religion. For, as will become clear, Spinoza's most important teaching in the TTP is a positive one, stating the importance of revealed religion for leading a good life.

The first section introduces the reasons why Spinoza turned to study Scripture: he wanted to defend his philosophical religion against 'the prejudices of the theologians', to refute the claim that it was atheistic, and to plead for the freedom to have a philosophical religion.

The second section addresses the teleological approach to Spinoza's study of the Bible and his treatment of Biblical faith as it comes to the fore in Samuel Preus's book: *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*.

In the third section Preus's book is criticized. It is argued that Preus's interpretation does not succeed in understanding Spinoza's TTP as a whole, but instead leads to a very incomplete picture of it.

The fourth section turns again to the context of the Dutch Republic as it is explained that Spinoza's approach to the Bible needs to be understood as a reaction to Reformed Orthodoxy, to Orthodox Cartesians, and to Lodewijk Meijer, showing that Spinoza's approach was heretical for the Reformed Orthodox as well as for Orthodox Cartesians.

The fifth and final section of this chapter as it argues that Spinoza did not criticize his friend Meijer in his attack on Maimonides, but that he did differ with Meijer in this respect: Spinoza concluded from his study of Scripture that the Bible teaches the philosophical religion in a form adapted to the level of understanding of the multitude, i.e., it teaches the people only to accept the practical results of the philosophical religion as *fides*. That is a kind of obedience to an imagined deity, and not as *religio*, which would be instead based on understanding the truth about God.

3.1. Why Did Spinoza Turn to Scripture?

What is Spinoza's judgement on the Bible and Biblical faith? In order to answer that question we need to study the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), the book in which Spinoza developed his new method for interpreting Scripture. Whereas Spinoza's philosophical religion plays a role in all his philosophical writings, his views on the Bible are almost exclusively documented in the TTP. A considerable part of the text of the TTP consists of Biblical citations and Spinoza's commentary on these Biblical passages. In his other works we find very little direct references and only a few

allusions to the Bible. But in the TTP we find, with the notable exception of chapters 16 and 20, that every chapter deals in some way with what Scripture has to tell us on a certain matter.

But why did Spinoza turn to Scripture? So far it is argued that there is one theme dominating all of Spinoza's writings, and this is the search for salvation by means of the knowledge of God. The path towards this goal that we find in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, the *Ethics*, and in the *Theological-Political Treatise* has been called Spinoza's philosophical religion. Spinoza's life project was to think through this true religion, to help as many others as possible to embrace the true religion, and to defend the true religion against accusations. It is this last motive that prompted Spinoza to write the *Theological-Political Treatise*: 'I am now writing a treatise on my views regarding Scripture. The reasons that move me to do so are these: 1) The prejudices of theologians. For I know that these are the main obstacles which prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy. So I apply myself to exposing such prejudices and removing them from the minds of sensible people. 2) The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation too, as far as I can. 3) The freedom to philosophize and to say what we think. This I want to vindicate completely, for here it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers'. (Letter 30, p. 844).

The Prejudices of the Theologians

The prejudices of the theologians, Spinoza accordingly writes in the Preface of the TTP, 'turn rational men into beasts since they completely prevent each person from using his own free judgment and distinguishing truth from falsehood. They seem purposely designed altogether to extinguish the light of the intellect. Dear God! Piety and religion are reduced to ridiculous mysteries and those who totally condemn reason and reject and revile the understanding as corrupt by nature, are believed without question to possess the divine light (...) Furthermore (...) what I see in their actual teaching [that is, the teaching of the theologians] is nothing more than the speculations of the Aristotelians or Platonists. (...) It was insufficient for them to be mouthing nonsense themselves, they also desired, together with the Greeks, to render the prophets equally nonsensical! This proves clearly that they cannot even imagine what is really divine in Scripture'. (TTP, Preface 9, p. 7).

The theologians, as this citation makes clear, do two things to which Spinoza objects: 1) they reject the use of reason if it is not supported by something which is stated in the Bible; 2) they supply the teachings of the ancient philosophy of Plato and Aristotle with Biblical authority (TTP XIII-2, p. 168). Both are threats to his philosophical religion. The first is most serious as it

denies that reason suffices for finding salvation. Spinoza wants to liberate his philosophical readers from this ‘prejudice’ (TTP Preface 15-12). The second, however, also forms an obstacle for understanding God adequately in a non-teleological, non-dualistic, and non-transcendent way.

Dogmatists and Sceptics

In chapter 15 of the TTP Spinoza accordingly turns to criticize these two prejudices more elaborately. The first position he calls the position of ‘the sceptics’ who ‘deny the certainty of reason’; the other position he calls the one of ‘the dogmatists’, who advocate that ‘Scripture should be accommodated to reason’ (TTP XV-1, p. 186). He doesn’t openly attach these positions to the theologians of his time, but instead names them as the position of two Jewish scholars: Rabbi Jehuda Al-Fakhar stands for the ‘sceptic’ position which wants to subordinate reason to theology; Maimonides stands for the ‘dogmatic’ position which wants to subordinate theology to reason.

Often it is assumed that Spinoza, by attacking these two positions, in fact attacked two different parties in the debate on Scripture that was going on in his time (because it seems unimaginable that someone could be ‘dogmatic’ and ‘sceptical’ at the same time), but I think this interpretation is wrong.¹ The ‘prejudices of the theologians’ that Spinoza wants to fight in the TTP are the prejudices of people such as the Utrecht theologian Gisbertius Voetius, who were ‘sceptical’ and ‘dogmatic’ at the very same time.

Theologians such as Voetius were ‘sceptical’ in their denial that we can freely use reason, because our reasoning capacity is corrupted by the fall. (Instead, they claim, that we have to base all our reasoning on Scripture.) But at the same time they are ‘dogmatic’ in insisting that the Bible teaches ‘reason’, understood as the scholastic way of doing philosophy.

This interpretation, namely, that Spinoza in the TTP implicitly accused theologians such as Voetius of being simultaneously ‘sceptical’ and ‘dogmatic’, although it might seem unlikely at first sight, can be made less unlikely by pointing to the historical context. Spinoza had one real enemy in the Dutch Republic whom he really feared, and these were ‘the theologians (...) [who] with their customary spleen will attack me, who utterly dread brawling’. (Letter 6, p. 776).

¹ The standard interpretation of what Spinoza actually meant with ‘dogmatism’ is that he objected to theologians and philosophers who detect their own philosophical theories in Scripture. See for example Preus (2001), p. 190 and James (2012), p. 155. However, as Spinoza in the TTP does write how his own philosophy is being affirmed by Scripture, this cannot be his real position. Rather, Spinoza objected to a procedure in which philosophical ideas receive their status as reasonable teachings solely from the fact that they are found in the Bible. The fact that a Biblical text states that this or that is true doesn’t make it true, because truth can only be discovered by reason. For more arguments against the standard interpretation see 3.5 which describes how Spinoza’s approach to the Bible relates to the one of Meijer as well as to the one of Maimonides.

Theological-Political-Philosophical Alliances

Spinoza feared the theologians as the ones who were keeping him, as this early correspondence with Oldenburg testifies, from publishing his ideas. He had reason to fear them because the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century was in the grip of a large conflict in which several groups aligned with each other. Spinoza was in the camp of free-thinkers, collegiants and supporters of Johan de Witt, who were being opposed by the (neo)-orthodox reformed theologians, the pastors of the Reformed Church and the supporters of the Orangists.

Spinoza in his TTP is engaged in this theological-philosophical-political struggle that was going on at the time. There was a theological conflict between Voetius, theologian at Utrecht University and his colleague Coccejus, theologian at Leiden University on the status of the Ten Commandments: did or didn't the commandments on ceremonies still have the authority of law in the Dutch Republic? Johannes Coccejus denied this was the case, Voetius insisted it was. Then there was a philosophical conflict between 'the Voetians' who desired to teach the old philosophy at the universities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Cartesians who wanted to teach the new. Finally, there was also a political debate between the regents, which was the regime of 'true freedom' of Johan de Witt at the time that Spinoza wrote his TTP, and the Stadtholder, which was William III. 'These philosophical, theological, and political conflicts coincided in the sense that the followers of the States Party [of Johan de Witt] tended to support the sympathizers of Coccejus in the public church and of Cartesianism in the university and vice versa. (...) external factors brought these groups together, that is, the common enemy, the Voetian Further Reformation'.²

This so-called 'Further Reformation' was a theological-political movement which pushed to purify society from impiety: 'Speaking out against pawnbrokers, dancing, and long hair and in favor of the strict keeping of the Sabbath, they needed the support of the magistrate in order to put their reform program into practice.'³ Part of this program to purify society was also the attempt to silence heretical ideas, including philosophical ones.⁴

Against the background of the 'Further Reformation' the theological conflict that broke out in 1648 between Voetius and Coccejus also had political relevance. This conflict was on what the Bible taught with regard to the laws that should regulate a truly Christian nation, such as the Dutch Republic. According to Coccejus' theory of reading of the Ten Commandments, the commandment to 'remember the Shabbat day and keep it holy' belonged solely to the Jewish

² Krop (2012), p. 79. See also: James. 2012, p. 8-9

³ Ibid, p. 71.

⁴ Van Bunge (2012), p. 138-140.

religion. This went straight against the idea of the Further Reformation. Spinoza in the TTP defends the Coccejan point of view as he states that the law of Moses was only meant for the period in which the Hebrews were in possession of their state.

The context of these philosophical-theological-political conflicts coming together in the Dutch republic of the 1660's makes a case for the interpretation that Spinoza attacked the theologians as being both 'sceptic' as well as 'dogmatic' at the same time, because Spinoza both wanted to argue – against these theologians – for the freedom to freely think without the Bible, as well as to freely think without the old philosophy of Plato and Aristotle.

The three main prejudices of the theologians that get attacked by Spinoza in the TTP are then the following:

The theological idea that reason is corrupted and that we need the light of Scripture in order to obtain the knowledge necessary for salvation.

The philosophical idea that the teachings of Plato and Aristotle are true, and also affirmed by Scriptural authority.

The political idea that the Bible provides us with universal laws that should be installed to rule over our societies.

All these three prejudices are direct or possible threats to Spinoza's philosophical religion. Spinoza writes to Oldenburg that he also wants to defend himself against the accusation of atheism and that he thirdly wants to plead for the freedom to have and express your own ideas about God and other things. In this way Spinoza seeks to defend his true philosophical religion against the accusation that this religion would undermine religious piety and political peace (TTP, subtitle). How does he proceed?

What Does the Bible Say About the Philosophical Religion?

The accusation stands that his philosophical religion in which man finds a path to salvation by means of comprehending the insights provided by the new philosophy, goes against the teachings of the Bible and biblically-revealed faith. In order to fight against this claim that the philosophical religion is the same as atheism, that the Bible and true faith do not allow for it, and that it should be outlawed in the name of piety and true religion, Spinoza goes back to study the Bible and Biblically-revealed faith. What he wants to show is that the Bible allows for his philosophical religion, yes, that the Bible even recommends it. Biblically-revealed faith is the true philosophical religion, but then adapted to the understanding of the majority of mankind, that is, the book is written by and for people without any kind of philosophical or scientific education.

This, however, makes the aim of biblically-revealed faith quite different from the aim of philosophical religion, even so distinct that the two should be strictly kept apart from each other. The philosophical religion aims at understanding the truth, at having adequate ideas with the third kind of knowledge that make the human mind become aware that it is united with the infinite mind of God and that everything is in God and is determined by the power of God to be and to act in the way that it exists and acts. Biblically-revealed faith does not aim at such an understanding, but at obedience to a God, imagined (with the first kind of knowledge) as an all-powerful, just and loving law-giver, prince and judge. As they aim at different things – one at truth and the other one at obedience – they still have the same psychological, moral and social effects on people. Both lead to salvation.

What is most important in his reading of the Bible is to show which teachings of the Bible are true and divine, and which are not. That is to say: he wants to make clear what parts of the biblically-revealed religion are in accordance with his philosophical religion and what parts of the biblically-revealed religion are in variance with it. He namely knows what is true and divine, because he has found these things in his philosophical religion. His epistemology, which plays – as we have seen – such a crucial role in his philosophical religion, helps him also to understand what kind of book the Bible is: a book in which God is understood by means of the first kind of knowledge in order that the majority of mankind can obtain the knowledge of God, necessary for their salvation.

3.2. The Depiction of Spinoza as a Modern Bible Critic

Traditionally the Bible is understood as the holy and definitive Word of God, and therefore as the absolute and final truth about the world and man. Now, there are at least two ways in which this authoritative status of the Bible can be attacked: by means of reason and by means of historical criticism. As we study the Bible as something we believe to be reasonable, we ask questions such as: How can this or that passage be understood in order to make sense? For example, as reason dictates to us that God does not have a body, God cannot have a hand, and therefore we have to understand the 122 Bible verses which mention ‘the hand of God’ as merely ways of speaking. This way of criticizing the Bible has always been a little controversial as the reactions to Maimonides’s *Guide to the Perplexed* prove.⁵ The criticism by means of reason, however, is also limited, since it leaves from the presupposition that the truth cannot contradict the truth, meaning that the revealed word of God in the Bible cannot contradict the clearest teachings of reason. It can therefore never say that the Bible is teaching anything untrue, only it

⁵ Bosmajian (2006), p. 45

can reinterpret the teachings of the Bible in such a way that they become compatible with what reason teaches.

Historical criticism of the Bible, on the other hand, can be more radical, because the ‘eternal truth’ of the text is then no longer necessarily presupposed. Instead, the text is studied as a historical document that raises questions such as: When was this written? Who was the author? Were there multiple authors? How does the historical context influence the writing? Can we detect how the personal experiences of the author have influenced the writing? What was the contemporaneous meaning of the words and expressions used? Historical criticism of the Bible is also partly based on linguistics, as it investigates how words and expressions were used at the time, making sure that we do not attribute anachronistic meanings to words.⁶

Did Spinoza Engage in Historical Criticism?

It is true that – when we look back from our times into the past – we can find in Spinoza’s TTP one of the first expressions of this historical criticism of the Bible.⁷ This comes most clearly to the fore in Spinoza’s criticism of the teachings of the Prophets. Instead of searching for ways in which these teachings can be reconciled with those of reason, Spinoza simply states that it is obvious that the prophets were ignorant about many things.

The prophet Joshua for example did not understand astronomy, as he imagined that the sun was moving around the earth, instead of the other way around (TTP II-13, p. 33-35). Another example of it is the way in which Spinoza argues that Moses could not possibly have been the author of the Pentateuch, as Deuteronomy not ‘only tells how Moses died and was buried, and was mourned by the Hebrews for thirty days (...) but also compares him with all the prophets who lived later, claiming he excelled them all’. (TTP VIII-4-2, p. 122).

Spinoza did not try to explain this as a mystery which is in need of a rational solution. He simply claimed that it is evident that Moses could not have been the author of the Pentateuch. Spinoza was not the first to mention this, but his historical criticism of the Bible was unrivaled in its ‘willingness to go wherever the textual and historical evidence led, regardless of religious ramifications, ushered in modern biblical source scholarship’.⁸

⁶ This debate between the ones advocating a rationalist and the ones advocating a historical interpretation of texts just as well takes place with regard to philosophical texts. Spinoza can be read in a way, presupposing that he found a timeless truth or he can be read as a historical text, expressing the truth as he perceived it in his time. Leo Strauss has advocated the first approach with regard to the interpretation of historical texts, and Quentin Skinner the second one. In this dissertation a combination between the two is tried.

⁷ See Toubert (2018) and Van Rooden (1984) for a critique of this approach.

⁸ Nadler (2011), p. 106.

Spinoza's Criteria For Evaluating Scripture

The *Theological-Political Treatise* is a scandalous book that breaks away from the tradition, because Spinoza, in the Preface, denies that Scripture should be considered 'true and divine throughout', before this has emerged 'from a critical examination and understanding of Scripture' (TTP Preface-9). This presupposes that Spinoza already has a standard at his disposal in order to judge to what degree the Bible is 'true and divine'. This standard is supplied to him by reason and his philosophical religion, not by the Bible itself. Scripture can be called divine, Spinoza writes, because 'we see from Scripture itself, and without any difficulty or ambiguity, that the essence of the Law is to love God above all things, and one's neighbor as oneself'. (12-10, p. 170). Spinoza's Biblical criticism in other words is not an internal criticism: he is not judging the Bible by its own standard. He uses a standard that is external to the Bible, because he uses the standard of reason in order to judge the Bible.⁹

This is why the title of Leo Strauss' first book on the *Theological-Political Treatise* is *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* ¹⁰(...): underlying Spinoza's criticism of the Bible is the conviction that the truth is found in the use of natural reason and that true religion consists in acting out of the intellectual love of God. Before Strauss, most scholars believed that Spinoza used his method for interpreting Scripture as a tool to criticize religion. But Strauss made clear that he did not use his method in order to criticize religion. Rather, his distance from the Bible made his criticism of the Bible possible.¹¹ A traditionally religious person would not presuppose from the outset that everything found in the Bible can be judged by reason, as Spinoza did. The fact that parts of the Bible seem inconsistent or even incomprehensible, according to these true believers, only shows that God's ways are unsearchable and are above our understanding. Strauss interprets the fact that Spinoza, from the outset, denies the possibility of something being beyond human comprehension, as a proof of his irreligiosity, and this irreligiosity is then the basis for his critique of the Bible.

Spinoza, the First Modern Bible-Critic?

Samuel Preus's book on Spinoza's treatment of the Bible likewise argues that Spinoza, in treating the Bible as just an ancient text that can be investigated with the same tools as one would investigate a text from any other ancient past, has paved the way for the historical-critical study of

⁹ See Levene (2011), p. 545-573.

¹⁰ Strauss (1930).

¹¹ Janssens (2005), p. 8-11

the Bible.¹² Preus approaches Spinoza as a critic of religion, rather than as someone who thought that religion was important for individuals as well as for society at large: ‘No doubt Spinoza used pious language in part to tranquilize unwary readers and camouflage his own subversive purposes – and he does so with “snakish cunning”’.¹³

Preus’s main point in his book is, as the title already indicates, that Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise* was written with the intention to make the ‘authority’ of the Bible ‘irrelevant’ in the sense that there are no ‘eternal truths’ in the Bible that we, in our societies, must worry about. Preus therefore begins his book in the following way: ‘The fact that we are not governed by interpreters of divine law, not intellectually answerable to alleged divine revelations, is a major aspect of modern liberty. For this we are hugely indebted to writers of the seventeenth century, above all to the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza’.¹⁴

According to Preus Spinoza tried to liberate us by stripping ‘the Bible of its usefulness to such theocratic interpreters – not, as is commonly supposed, merely by submitting it to a critique from the perspective of pure (i.e., seventeenth-century) reason, but by reconceiving and exhaustively explaining the Bible itself *and* its religion in a radically new way: historically. Under Spinoza’s relentless critique the Bible would become one ancient book among and comparable to others, irrelevant as an authority’.¹⁵

Preus goes further than Strauss. He not only wants to claim Spinoza as the one who made the historical-critical study of the Bible possible by approaching the Bible as just an(other) ancient text, he also wants to present Spinoza as someone for whom the historical critical approach is the most important approach for understanding the Bible.

Maimonides: Stand-in For Meijer?

Preus believes this can be demonstrated as Spinoza attacks ‘dogmatists’ such as Maimonides who believe that they can make Scripture subservient to reason. As Spinoza clearly indicates that this Maimonidean approach is bad (we should not assume from the outset that Scripture is reasonable, because the people who wrote the Bible were not philosophers), Spinoza’s criticism of the Bible should not be understood as a rationalist critique, but as historical criticism.

Now, according to Preus, as well as according to a host of other commentators, the real target of Spinoza’s attack on Maimonides’s dogmatism was the book of Spinoza’s good friend Lodewijk Meijer, *Philosophia Sanctae Scripturae Interpres* (PSSI, *Philosophy as the Interpreter of Holy*

¹² Preus (2001).

¹³ Preus (2001), p. 13, n. 39.

¹⁴ Preus (2001), p. 1.

¹⁵ Preus (2001), p. 2

Scripture), published in 1666, four years before the TTP. In this book Meijer argues that philosophy should be the interpreter of Holy Scripture, meaning with ‘philosophy’ the new philosophy of Descartes and maybe even more so, the philosophy of his friend Spinoza that went further from where Descartes’s philosophy stopped.¹⁶

The publication of Meijer’s anonymous book had aroused a scandal in the Republic and many refutations were written against it. Spinoza, according to Preus, turns the arguments of Meijer’s opponents into arguments against the authority of Scripture. What was argued against Meijer’s idea that philosophy should be the interpreter of the Bible was ‘that the essential biblical discourse was *historical*, not philosophical, and that the investigation of original *meanings* must be prior to and separate from the question of truth’.¹⁷ This, Preus argues, is exactly the method that Spinoza uses in the TTP: this method, according to Preus, is not based on his philosophical system, but on a secure investigation of the meaning of words, and the historical context in which the Bible has to be understood. ‘Spinoza did not believe in “revelation” as a source of truth and knowledge independent of reason, or as a heteronomous authority over reason. But this does not allow us to infer that his *method* of scriptural interpretation was “rationalistic”. Rather his reasoning led him to propose a method that dismissed Meyerian rationalism and mapped a new route into scripture by way of history’.¹⁸

3.3. Why the Depiction of Spinoza as a Modern Bible Critic is Limited

In this section I will investigate the first three of the following claims that Samuel Preus makes:

- 1) Spinoza sought to make the Bible ‘irrelevant as an authority’.¹⁹
- 2) Spinoza ‘did not try to derive his own approach from scripture’.²⁰
- 3) Spinoza’s criticism of the Bible is not based on his philosophy, but on the historical-critical method.
- 4) Spinoza targeted his friend Meijer in criticizing the dogmatism of Maimonides.²¹

Did Spinoza consider the authority of the Bible to be irrelevant?

To a very large extent, Preus is fully justified in stating this: Spinoza had his own philosophical religion which was authoritative to him, and the exact words of the Bible did not impress him.²²

¹⁶ Descartes uses his method only for the things that we find in nature, but he did not dare to use his method to come to a clear understanding of God itself, which according to the Cartesians was a matter of ‘theology’, and not of ‘philosophy’.

¹⁷ Preus (2001), p. 17

¹⁸ Preus (2001), p. 202

¹⁹ Preus (2001), p. 2.

²⁰ Preus (2001), p.2 and p. 202

²¹ Preus (2001), p. 7, note 21 and p. 202

Spinoza's Theological Reasoning

However, the claim needs to be qualified. There are many chapters in the TTP in which Spinoza seems to turn to the authority of Scripture in order to prove one of his points. For example, Spinoza, in chapter four seeks to argue that the Bible does fully support the natural divine law, which is that our supreme good consists in the knowledge and love of God, the most important teaching of his philosophical religion.

Spinoza then points to Scriptural evidence for the truth of his philosophical religion: '[the] Bible fully endorses the natural light of reason and the natural divine law'. (TTP IV-12, p. 67). Many other examples can be given from chapters in the TTP where Spinoza seeks to prove that his own philosophy is supported by Scripture. For example, that God can only be understood from contemplation of his eternal order, and not by means of miracles, is a reasonable and timeless theory which is supported by Scripture: 'I will show from Scripture that the edicts and commands of God, and hence of providence, are nothing other than the order of nature. (...)' (TTP VI-12, p. 89).

Spinoza likewise seeks to show that the Bible approves of the standard of what is to be called true and divine, which he uses to judge Scripture (TTP XII-6, p. 165). Many more examples can be given of Spinoza using the Bible as an 'authority', such as all these paragraphs that have to do with the political lessons of Scripture. The authority of the Bible seems then not completely 'irrelevant' for Spinoza. Time and time again, he refers to the Bible in order to support his own philosophical theory.

Preus might argue that these appeals to Scriptural authority, although there are many to be found in the TTP, cannot be taken as indications that Spinoza seriously believed that the Bible contains truths that cannot be found by reason. Spinoza has already made sufficiently clear that such is not the case.

Some Things The Bible Teaches Are Beyond Reason

But is it really true that he doesn't find anything in Scripture which cannot likewise be understood by means of reason? The most important thing that the Bible teaches – faith through obedience –

²² See the exchange of letters between Spinoza and the grainbroker Van Blyenbergh: 'When I read your first letter', Spinoza writes to Van Byenbergh, 'I had the impression that our views were nearly in agreement. From your second letter, however (...) I realize that this is far from being so, and I see that we disagree not only in the conclusions to be drawn by a chain of reasoning from first principles, but in those very first principles, so that I hardly believe that our correspondence can be for our mutual instruction. For I see that no proof, however firmly established according to the rules of logic, has any validity with you unless it agrees with the explanation, which you, or other theologians of your acquaintance, assign to Holy Scripture. However, it is your conviction that God speaks more clearly and effectually through Holy Scripture than through the light of the natural understanding which he has also granted us (...)' (Letter 21, p. 822)

is not something that we could have found out by means of reason alone. '[W]e are unable to prove by means of reason whether the fundamental principle of theology – that men are saved by obedience alone – is true or false'. (TTP 15-7, p. 191). Prophecy, Spinoza writes, 'exceeds the limits of the intellect' (TTP I-6, p. 15). He does not understand by what 'natural laws prophetic insights occurred' (TTP I-27, p. 25), nor does he understand how it is possible that we can be saved by obedience alone. But, still, he can accept these Biblical teachings with moral certainty (TTP XV-7, p. 192-193). It is then untrue that Spinoza thought there is nothing in Scripture that cannot be found by reason alone.

That Scripture remains an authority in Spinoza's hands is furthermore shown by his treatment of the fundamental dogmas of the faith. Scripture teaches the dogmas of faith, dogmas that everybody needs to know. These dogmas can only be known from Scripture, and not from reason. So, in a certain sense Scripture is an authority, which teaches things that cannot be understood by reason alone. Of course, Preus might reply that everybody is free to interpret these dogmas as he likes, making them not really an authority. That is also true. Nevertheless, we only know these dogmas from Scripture, and they need to be taught to everyone. Therefore, it is not entirely true to state that the 'authority of Scripture' has become totally 'irrelevant'.

A Paradoxical Truth

There remains a puzzle, however. For how can Spinoza simultaneously use his philosophy to evaluate Scripture while he uses Scripture to support his philosophy? The paradoxical truth here is that Spinoza denies Scripture its authority *by the authority of Scripture*. A response to Preus's book about the TTP should therefore bear the title: *The Relevance of Biblical Authority For Understanding the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*. In order to see this we only have to read what Spinoza writes carefully: 'Those who consider the Bible in its current state a letter from God, sent from heaven to men, will undoubtedly protest that I have sinned 'against the Holy Ghost' by claiming the word of God is erroneous, mutilated, corrupt and inconsistent, that we have only fragments of it, and that the original covenant which God made with the Jews has perished. However, if they reflect upon the facts I have no doubt that they will soon cease to protest. For both reason and the beliefs of the prophets and the Apostles evidently proclaim that God's eternal word and covenant and true religion are divinely inscribed upon the hearts of men, that is, upon the human mind'. (TTP XII-1, p. 163).

Spinoza uses the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, that the new covenant is not 'written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of the human heart', as the authority to undermine the authority of the Bible. He can do this because the Bible

is a book consisting out of letters. To revere a book or to think of a certain combination of letters as holy is to revere an external thing. This rises to a form of superstition, comparable to thinking that some kind of statue or mountain or any object is God. True religion is the idea of God within us. This is testified to not only by reason but also by the Bible itself. That is to say: the Bible can lead the ‘philosophical reader’ (TTP, Preface 15, p. 12) to discover that Christ and Paul actually taught true salvation by means of adequate knowledge of God. But for the majority of men the Bible teaches salvation through obedience by means of the first kind of knowledge of God. In the case of the philosophical religion as well as in the case of universal faith, true religion is not about venerating a book or a bunch of words, but about ‘worshipping God’ with the ‘mind’ (TTP, Preface 8, p. 6).

Spinoza: ‘I Don’t Think That The Authority of the Bible is Irrelevant’

Spinoza himself flatly denies that he tries to undermine the authority of Scripture. Again, it might be interesting to read his argumentation here, before stating that it is a pious cover-up. Spinoza addresses the issue of whether he has contributed to the idea of ‘some impious persons who find religion a burden (...) [who may] discern an excuse for wrongdoing here and may infer, without any justification, but merely to indulge their pleasures that Scripture is thoroughly flawed and corrupted and consequently *lacks authority*. One can do nothing to help such people. It is a commonplace that nothing can be so well formulated that it cannot be perverted by *wrong interpretations*’. (TTP XV-3, p. 164, Italics not in the original).

Scripture still has authority, because of the parts in it that are uncorrupted and that teach the natural divine law, which states that our highest good consists in the knowledge and the love of God.

Spinoza Did Seek His Own Philosophy in Scripture

On Preus’s second claim – that Spinoza did not seek to find his own philosophy in Scripture – we can be brief. This is not correct as we have already made clear. Christ and probably also Paul embraced Spinoza’s philosophical religion and Spinoza’s idea of God. However, they chose to remain silent about it (TTP IV-10, p. 64-65). Spinoza did not consider it problematic at all to detect his own philosophical teachings in Scripture. This might strike one as a little hypocritical. It seems to be exactly the kind of thing that Spinoza reproaches Maimonides for, and the theologians that have followed Maimonides in his ‘dogmatism’ (TTP VII-21, p. 115). However, as I will show in my discussion of Preus’s fourth claim, Spinoza does not object *per se* to pointing

to true philosophical teachings in Scripture. He only objects to the theological tradition, because of the scholastic philosophical ‘nonsense’ it projects onto the prophets (TTP, Preface 9, p. 8).²³

Didn't Spinoza Criticize the Bible By Means of Reason?

Let's move then to Preus's third claim: that Spinoza criticizes the Bible not by means of his philosophy of reason, but by means of historical criticism. I will first indicate to what extent Preus is right before I will start my criticism of this view.

Spinoza in His Biblical Hermeneutical Makes Use of Historical Criticism

Preus is right that history, according to Spinoza, is extremely important for understanding Scripture. This is clearly stated by Spinoza in chapter 7 of the TTP: ‘The universal rule for interpreting Scripture is to claim nothing as a biblical doctrine that we have not derived, by the closest possible scrutiny from its own [i.e. the Bible's] history’ (TTP VII-5, p. 99-100). Spinoza makes clear that we, if we want to interpret Scripture, have to make a taxonomy, containing:

- 1) an overview of the way in which the Bible uses certain words and expressions like Spinoza has done with regard to the different uses in the Bible of the Hebrew word *ruagh* (TTP I-22, P. 20-21).
- 2) An overview of the different opinions that are being expressed on each topic in the way that Spinoza has done with the different views of the prophets on the subject whether God repents of his decrees (TTP II-18, p. 40). When we find internal contradictions in the Bible on a particular subject, these can often be solved by linguistic studies. An example of an inconsistency in the Bible that is solved by means of the study of expressions is that Moses both states that God does not bear any resemblance to physical objects, while he, on the other hand states that God is fire. This is solved when we know that fire in Hebrew also means ‘emotional’. Since Moses testifies on many occasions that God has emotions, the internal contradiction disappears. As we see from this example, Spinoza does not use reason to interpret the Bible. Doing so would have made clear that God does not have any emotions.
- 3) An overview of the tradition that handed the books down to us, telling us also about the different biblical authors and the different historical circumstances they faced while writing. Spinoza will demonstrate in chapters 8 till 10 that we don't possess clear knowledge of how the books were handed down to us, and this is one of the reasons that there will be parts of the Bible

²³ His criticism of Maimonides in chapter 7 is actually that he took refuge in the Bible's teachings the moment he failed to understand clearly the proof for the eternal order of nature. His criticism also in this case is therefore not a criticism of a theological practice, but of the philosophical tradition.

that we cannot adequately understand, because we lack this crucial information (TTP VII-5, p. 100-101).

Spinoza urges his readers that everything that we say about the Bible needs to be based on facts, meaning, the literal statements made in the Bible. 'I demonstrate how Scripture must be interpreted, proving that we must derive all our knowledge of it and of spiritual matters from Scripture alone and not from what we discover by the natural light of reason' (TTP, Preface 10, p. 10).

Just as we, when we study nature, should take care not to project the laws of human reason, 'which aim only at the true interest and conservation of humans' onto nature as a whole (TTP XVI-4, p. 197), we should also be careful in presupposing that the biblical authors understood things in a reasonable way. We should first understand the 'true meaning' of their words, that is, the things that they intended to say, before investigating whether we have to judge these words as true or not.

Spinoza's Aim is to Find What is True and Divine in Scripture

However, after we have discovered what the true meaning is, 'we must necessarily use our judgment and reason before giving assent to it'. (TTP XV- 3, p. 188). It is, in other words, not true that Spinoza only wants to establish a historical overview of the different things that we find in the Bible. He does this, because he wants to know to what extent the Bible can be called 'true and divine' (TTP I-9, p. 8). This clearly separates him from the modern Bible scholar who approaches the Bible in a historical-critical fashion. Such a detached scientific observer would not be interested at all in finding out what is true and divine in the Bible, as he would assume from the outset that there is not such a thing as an ahistorical truth, to remain silent on the subject of there really being anything that can be rightfully called 'divine'. The presupposition of such a modern Bible scholar is in other words clearly different from the presupposition of Spinoza, who did believe that there was something which was true and divine. This was of course his philosophical religion, on which he had been working for seven or eight years, before he interrupted his writing of the *Ethics* in order to write the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Preus cannot say that Spinoza only made use of the historical-critical method and that his rationalism played not an important role in his Bible-interpretation, for the ultimate goal of his pursuit is to find out what is true and divine in Scripture. Chapters 8 through 10 (where Spinoza investigates who has written the Bible, what parts are written by one author, what by other authors, what parts are missing, what parts are inconsistent or incorrect, etcetera) are not

considered by Spinoza to be the most important part of the book. The ‘cardinal points’ he makes in the *Treatise* are, according to Spinoza himself, those that show what the Bible positively and universally teaches, which are the dogmas of the universal faith that everyone needs to have in order to be obedient (TTP XIV-14, p. 185).

Spinoza’s Epistemology

But not only does Spinoza use reason to evaluate the degree of truth and divinity of the Bible, his reasonable philosophy is also the most important instrument for interpreting Scripture. The first six chapters of the TTP investigate ‘the philosophical matters’ that Scripture teaches (chapters 12 through 14 deal with what the Bible teaches ‘about questions of daily life’). Most important for understanding ‘the philosophical matters’, is first to inquire ‘(...) what prophecy and revelation is, and what it chiefly consists in. Then we must ask what a miracle is, and continue thus with the most general questions’ (TTP VII-8, p. 104). In other words, what is needed first and foremost for an adequate understanding of Scripture is to know what kind of book it is. Since the Bible is a book that is based on prophecy, Spinoza asks what the nature is of Biblical revelation. Spinoza answers that the Bible has to be understood as a book which was written by people to which only the first kind of knowledge of God was revealed. There are a few Biblical figures who did receive more adequate knowledge of God (Christ and Paul), but they decided to only teach the first kind of knowledge of God to the common people. This epistemological insight also underlies the choice for a historical-critical method. For, if the Bible was not written in the language of the imagination, the whole historical-critical method would not be justified, as Spinoza makes clear by naming the books of Euclid as an example of books that are not in need of the historical critical method (TTP VII-17, p. 111). We conclude, then, regarding the third claim of Preus, that it is not true that the historical-critical method for studying Scripture was more important for Spinoza than his own reasonable philosophical system.

Preus’s fourth and final claim – Spinoza criticized the rationalism of Meijer by attacking Maimonides – is more complex, and brings us to a whole new subject.²⁴ This fourth claim will therefore be treated separately in the last section of this chapter. But before arriving there we have to do one other thing: describe the context of the Dutch Republic in order to find out how Spinoza’s approach to the Bible related to the three other main approaches of the Bible in the Republic of his time.

²⁴ In order to fully grasp how Spinoza relates to both Maimonides as well as Meijer one has to know Maimonides’s way of interpreting Scripture, Meijer’s method for interpreting Scripture, and Spinoza’s method for doing so. Besides that one also needs to take the historical context of the Dutch Republic of the 1660’s into account, or, more specifically, one needs to know the debates that were going on at that time about how one should interpret the Bible.

3.4. Context of the Dutch Republic

Theo Verbeek has conveniently distinguished between the three different approaches to the interpretation of the Bible which existed in the Republic of the 1660s, and to which Spinoza in one way or the other had to relate.²⁵ The first was that of Orthodox Reformed theology. That found an assertive spokesperson in Gysbertius Voetius (1589-1679). Crucial in the Orthodox Reformed approach was the slogan *sola Scriptura*.

Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura meant in the first place that biblical knowledge was the most certain knowledge that one can obtain. Martin Luther and John Calvin had taught that because the Fall of man had corrupted the natural light, philosophy or natural theology had to be deeply distrusted. As reason is corrupted, people have to turn to the Bible for guidance. In theory, therefore, the Reformation stood hostile towards philosophy. But in practice reformed theologians soon went back to the scholastic way of using the philosophies of especially Aristotle. For example, Voetius and some other Reformed theologians had developed what they called ‘Mosaic physics’, which was based on the Bible as well as the teachings of Aristotle.²⁶ The Voetian approach is therefore characterized by Verbeek as ‘an uneasy compromise between scholastic rationalism and the rule of *sola Scriptura*’.²⁷

In the second sense *sola Scriptura* meant that, for understanding the teachings of the Bible itself one had no need for a pope and bishops, like the Roman Catholic Church has, nor for a rabbinical tradition such as Judaism has. Scripture could be understood from Scripture alone, without traditions and offices of interpretation. Orthodox Reformed theologians posit that the less clear passages in the Bible can be explained by means of the more clear ones.²⁸

One of the major threats to true faith in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, in the eyes of Voetius, came from the enormous success that the philosophy of René Descartes had in the universities. Voetius believed – rightly, it turns out – that the methodological doubt of common-sense experiences would not stop at the theoretical truths of physics, but would also affect the theological teachings.

²⁵ Verbeek (2003), p. 94-99.

²⁶ Douglas (2013), p. 569-570.

²⁷ Verbeek (2003), p. 95.

²⁸ Verbeek (2003), p. 94.

Orthodox Cartesians and their Defense of the Freedom to Philosophize

The orthodox Cartesians, the second group of people that Verbeek distinguishes in their approach towards Scripture, defended themselves from the accusation that they were a threat to piety by stating that there was something called ‘the freedom to philosophize’, by which they meant that philosophy needed to be separated from theology.²⁹ Philosophy, according to the orthodox Cartesians, was the way to the truth with regard to knowledge of natural sciences such as physics; whereas theology knew the truth with regard to all supernatural and practical matters.³⁰

Separating philosophy from theology, in other words, meant that each – philosophy as well as theology – possessed the truth on its own terrain. In this way philosophy could be free from theology, just as theology could be free from philosophy. Cartesians such as Johannes de Raey (1622-1707) insisted that his mathematical method should not be used with regard to things such as God, the soul, or the way to salvation.³¹ These things still had to be derived from theology. The freedom to philosophize therefore meant that just as philosophy was no threat to theology, theology was no threat to philosophy, because each ruled over its own terrain.

‘Heretical Cartesians’

It is exactly this attempt to find a *modus vivendi* between Orthodoxy and Cartesianism, by means of strictly separating philosophy from theology, that was threatened by the third group that stood for yet another approach to Scripture. The ‘heretical’ Cartesians, such as Lodewijk Meijer (or Spinoza and his other friends), believed that the Cartesian mathematical method could be used in order to arrive at adequate knowledge of God, the soul, and the way to salvation; or, as Meijer’s argued in his anonymously published scandalous book *Philosophy as the Interpreter of H. Scripture*, this method could also be used in order to interpret Scripture.

Meyers approach was heretical for three reasons, according to Verbeek: ‘first and mainly, because he explicitly rejects the Reformed principle of absolute clarity of Scripture (...) Meyer’s book is also a provocation because he gives the same weight to the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Cartesian method. (...) Finally, Meyer’s proposal is a provocation because he does not restrict his argument to natural philosophy but extends it to all those subjects the Cartesians had so far avoided’.³²

²⁹ Verbeek (2011), p. 252.

³⁰ Verbeek (1994), p. 5-8.

³¹ Verbeek (2003), p. 95-96.

³² Verbeek (2003), p. 99.

The Relation Between Spinoza and Reformed Orthodoxy

How did Spinoza's method of studying Scripture, described in the *Treatise*, relate to these three different approaches? With regard to the relationship between Spinoza and Reformed orthodoxy, it seems that Spinoza might have stayed close to its principle of *sola Scriptura* by stating that 'we must derive all our knowledge of it [Scripture] and of spiritual matters from Scripture alone and not from what we discover by the natural light of reason' (TTP, Preface 10, p. 10. See also: TTP VII-5, p. 99-100; TTP XV-6, p. 191). But what Spinoza means is far removed from what Reformed orthodoxy meant. For, Spinoza denies that Scripture is either wholly true or wholly divine.

Because the Bible is not a consistent book, written by one author, but a book full of contradictions, written by many different authors, it would be a big mistake to explain the less clear parts of the Bible by means of using the clearer ones. Instead we have to investigate the different meanings of the different parts of the Bible. In this search we have to accept that many things that the Bible states cannot be understood, because the Bible is a selection of texts, which is handed down to us incompletely. Many of the Biblical authors write things that are not understandable, as they write about the products of their own imagination, and because the Bible is also written in a language (namely Hebrew) in which words always can be interpreted in many different ways.

Spinoza spends so much time on this criticism of the Bible, because the idea that the Bible is true and divine throughout gives rise to 'the prejudices of the theologians', which were already mentioned in 4.1. Spinoza's TTP is written against the orthodox theologians. Since reason 'claims the realm of truth for itself' (TTP XV-8, p. 194), Scripture in itself, *sola Scriptura*, cannot teach us the truth. This doesn't mean that there are no truths to be found in Scripture, only that these truths have to be discovered by reason and cannot be trusted to be truth on the mere ground that they are part of Holy Scripture. Only reason can tell us what is true and what is untrue in Scripture, and only reason can tell us what is divine and what is not divine in Scripture.

Spinoza and the Orthodox Cartesians

The second question we should ask is: how does Spinoza's approach towards the Bible relate to the one of the orthodox Cartesians? Here again it seems as if he shared their principles, because he – just like them – defended the 'freedom to philosophize' and the 'separation of philosophy from theology'. Also in this case, he was using these slogans to designate very different things. He says: 'It remains only to show that there is no interaction and no affinity between faith or theology, on the one side, and philosophy, on the other. (...) For the aim of philosophy is

nothing but truth, but the aim of faith, as we have abundantly demonstrated, is simply obedience and piety. The foundations of philosophy are universal concepts, and philosophy should be drawn from nature alone. But the foundations of faith are histories and language and are to be drawn only from Scripture and revelation'. (TTP XIV-13, p. 184).

In other words, Spinoza wanted to give philosophy much more space than the Cartesians did, since he held that it is his philosophy which can teach us to find a lasting happiness, and how we can be saved. Theology or the teachings of Scripture was not meant to teach theoretical truth, but only practical, moral lessons. Theology on the grounds of Scripture is meant to teach 'obedience' to the people by helping them to imagine God as a perfect exemplar of how one should live, who rules over them as a prince and a lawgiver and who must be obeyed by performing acts of justice and charity. Theology is then good for helping simple and uneducated people to behave in a moral fashion, but in itself theology does not contain the truth of what exactly God is or how he relates to the world and to man. This is of course very different from what the Cartesians meant by the separation of philosophy from theology, in which theology does know the truth about practical and supernatural things, whereas philosophy knows the truth about natural things.

3.5. The TTP and Meijer

This brings us then to the third and most complicated question (and to the fourth of Preus's claims): How does Spinoza's account of Scripture relate to Lodewijk Meijer's in his book *Philosophy as the Interpreter of Holy Scripture*? A large group of commentators believe that when Spinoza in chapter 15 attacks the position of those who think that 'Scripture should be accommodated to reason' – people whom Spinoza calls 'dogmatists' and whom he associates with Maimonides – Spinoza is actually targeting his friend Meijer.³³

Maimonides Is *Not* a Stand-In For Meijer

However, as Klever has pointed out, Spinoza himself clearly denied this was the case when the orthodox Cartesian Velthuysen made exactly the same claim. Velthuysen believed that the anonymous author of the *Treatise* considered 'all those who deny that reason and philosophy are the interpreters of Scripture will be on his side'. Spinoza would then have rejected 'the view of those who agree with the paradoxical theologian [that is, Meijer]' (Letter 42, p. 871). Spinoza's

³³ See for this view that Spinoza in fact is targeting Meijer with his attack on Maimonides: Zac (1965), p. 27-28; Lagrée (1988); Walther (1995); James (2012), p. 156-160; Preus (2001), p. 37; Hunter (2005), p. 106; Huenemann (2008), p. 115. Two people who have come to the opposite view and think that Spinoza and Meijer agree that philosophy should be the interpreter of Scripture are Klever (1997), p. 81, and Verbeek (2003), p. 108.

reply: 'I do not see why he says that I think that all those will agree with me who deny that reason and philosophy are the interpreters of Scripture. For I have refuted the views of these and of Maimonides'. (Letter 43, p. 881). Spinoza writes that *he has refuted* the views of those people who believe that reason or philosophy is *not* the interpreter of Scripture, in other words, Spinoza affirms, just like Meijer, that reason or philosophy *is* the interpreter of Scripture, and he somehow differentiates between this view and the faulty view of Maimonides which he rejects.

Meijer seems to agree with the dogmatist position of Maimonides, as he writes that the Bible is 'the true and infallible word of God'. However, in order to understand what he meant we must turn to Meijer's theory of language, as explained in the Epilogue of his *Interpres*. There he writes: words in themselves can never possess truth. Truth is not something that pertains to words. Words are two things: they are material things as well as signs that denote other things. Words are material things because they are either spoken, and then they are soundwaves in the air; or they are written, and in that case, they are, say, ink on paper. Words are signs, because the sound or ink points to something else. For example, the word 'tree' can make us think about a tree, and then we have an idea of the tree. Notice that we can only understand the word 'tree' as a sign that pertains to the idea 'tree', if we first are in possession of the idea 'tree'. We first learn to know the ideas of the things, and then only later attach words to these ideas. Words themselves, therefore, do not possess truth. It is rather the ideas that the mind understands as the things to which words points us.

The Theory Of Language of Meijer and Spinoza

Does this mean that the Bible, a book consisting out of words, does not contain any truth? No, according to Meijer, it contains truth in the sense that the words of the Bible give us little impulses that trigger the mind to think about certain things. Truth is not to be found in the words of the Bible itself, but in the way in which these words make the mind contemplate the nature of God and our supreme happiness. The 'greatest and most useful assistance' that books can give to us is that 'they inspire the reader to think and they urge him towards ideas which he already possesses in his mind in clear and distinct form. (...) In no way can they lead the intellect either of itself or through itself to a true knowledge of things; far less can they implant in the mind clear and distinct ideas if they were not already infused and implanted in it, nor can they infuse, impress, or in other way generate such ideas'.³⁴

In other words, the Bible according to Meijer is nothing but an instrument to lead us to the knowledge of God. That is the religion dictated to us by God. He is in us as the light of reason.

³⁴ Meyer (2005), p. 238.

Only when we have arrived at this true religion, will we be able to interpret the Bible. We then understand that it is the true and infallible word of God, since it has led us to this true religion. This is all very similar to Spinoza's ideas, and also very far removed from what Maimonides taught.

Spinoza, just as Meijer, criticizes the idea that words and books in themselves can be holy. 'They [his adversaries, the orthodox theologians] are converting religion into superstition, indeed verge, unfortunately, on adoring images and pictures, i.e., paper and ink, as the word of God'. (TTP XV-3, p. 164). Spinoza also thinks that philosophy is the true interpreter of Holy Scripture in the sense that only those who understand Spinoza's philosophical religion will grasp the true and infallible word of God. 'Scripture is properly termed the word of God only with respect to religion, i.e. the universal divine law'. (TTP XII-10, p. 169) In other words, Spinoza understands Scripture, just as Meijer, to be true and divine, because it teaches the same things as the natural light of reason does: the natural divine law, which is 'the law which looks only to the supreme good, that is, to the true knowledge and love of God' (TTP IV-3, p. 59).

Spinoza's Critique of Maimonides

Maimonides, however, is criticized, not, because he interprets passages in Scripture as corresponding to what he considers to be the teachings of reason (as the whole series of scholars that I have earlier mentioned believe). This cannot be Spinoza's criticism, because Spinoza himself namely also interprets the Bible in ways that make it correspond to reason. An example of this practice is that Spinoza explains the story of Adam who was forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil as a 'parable', teaching that we should 'seek good for the love of good rather than for the fear of harm'. (TTP IV-11, p.65).

Rather, the problem with Maimonides' way of interpreting the Bible is that he believes that revelation provides us with a light above reason, which helps us to detect what reason really teaches, while not understanding it ourselves. For, Maimonides chooses to believe the account of creation in the Bible, because he himself is still in doubt about the question of whether the earth is eternal as Aristotle thought or that the earth is created as the Torah states.³⁵ That is to say: because the things shown to him by the natural light of reason are not clear enough for him, he decides to believe in something on the basis of revelation, rather than on the basis of reason.

³⁵ Spinoza cites: Maimonides. *Guide of the Perplexed* II. 25 (TTP V-20, p. 113).

Spinoza's criticism of Maimonides is then not that he is too rationalist, but rather that he is not rationalistic enough.³⁶ This lack of rationalism makes it impossible for Maimonides to see what truth the Bible really teaches. 'For while the truth of a thing is not fully evident we will not know whether it agrees with reason or contradicts it and, consequently, will also not know whether the literal sense is true or false' (TTP VII-20, p. 113-114).

There is only one real way to understand the Bible, and this is that one already knows the truth which is shown by the natural light and not by the revealed light. 'Indeed, just as light makes manifest both itself and darkness, so truth is the standard both of itself and falsity' (E-IIp43s, p. 269).

Spinoza's Critique of Scepticism and Dogmatism

When Spinoza criticizes Maimonides's 'dogmatism' or the idea that the Bible 'contains nothing that is contrary to or that does not accord with reason' (TTP VII-20, p. 113), or the idea that the Bible 'should be accommodated to reason' (TTP XV-1, p. 186), he is not criticizing Meijer's idea that philosophy is the true interpreter of Scripture. No, he is criticizing the entire tradition up to that point which holds that there are two lights: a natural light provided by reason and a supernatural light provided by revelation. Whereas 'scepticism' claims that we should not trust reason, but that we should trust only revealed faith, 'dogmatism' claims that we can trust the supernatural light always to be in accordance with reason, without having fully to understand it ourselves. This is dogmatic, because it orders us to believe something to be rational on the mere grounds that the Bible states that this is the case. Meijer's *Interpres*, as well as Spinoza's *Treatise*, are scandalous, because they both equally defy the tradition. This they do because the two close friends both were convinced of the philosophical religion in which salvation is reached by means of the reasonable understanding of God alone.

The only truly important difference between Spinoza and Meijer is that Spinoza remained in a certain sense a Maimonidean in distinguishing between the philosophical religion which will always remain the preserve of a few, and revealed faith which brings salvation to the masses by means of obedience alone. This faith, or the knowledge provided by theology, should be clearly separated from the knowledge provided by philosophy. The first only aims at obedience, the second one only at truth. That is to say: Spinoza criticizes Maimonides as well as Meijer for

³⁶ Spinoza also criticizes Maimonides for his lack of rationalism as Maimonides believes that reason in itself is not sufficient for piety and salvation, but that only 'the teachings prophetically revealed to Moses' make someone 'belong to the pious or learned of the nations' (TTP V-19, p. 79)

believing that the Bible was meant to teach theoretical truth; whereas it was meant to have a purely practical function in making people obey the divine law.