

## The Early Modern Political Context to Spinoza's Bible Criticism

El contexto político de la modernidad temprana  
de la crítica bíblica de Spinoza

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### Abstract

The early modern political philosopher Benedict de Spinoza is often viewed as the father of the historical critical method for studying the Bible. Building upon the work of contemporaries, Spinoza constructed the methodological foundation upon which later historical criticism would build. This paper examines the political background of Spinoza's biblical criticism, thereby placing Spinoza's work in its socio-historical context. The Thirty Years' War and the political turmoil in the Dutch Republic provide the proximate backdrop for Spinoza's political theory, and upon his biblical criticism.

**Key words:** Spinoza, Historical Criticism, Politics, Bible.

### Resumen

El filósofo político de la Temprana Edad Moderna, Benedicto Spinoza, es a menudo visto como el padre del método crítico histórico para el estudio de la Biblia. A partir del trabajo de contemporáneos, Spinoza construyó el fundamento metodológico sobre el cual más tarde levantaría la crítica histórica. En este trabajo se examina el trasfondo político de la crítica bíblica de Spinoza, colocando así la obra de Spinoza en su contexto socio-histórico. La Guerra de los Treinta Años y la agitación política en la República holandesa proveen el trasfondo próximo de la teoría política de Spinoza y de su crítica bíblica.

**Palabras clave:** Spinoza, crítica histórica, política, Biblia.

Over the past several decades, it has become more commonplace to see Benedict de Spinoza listed among the pioneers of the modern historical critical method for interpreting the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Although studies of Spinoza and his background abound, I will attempt another look at Spinoza's methodological program by situating it within the social, historical, and political context of seventeenth century Europe.<sup>2</sup> I will proceed in four parts. First I will note Spinoza's rationale for his historical biblical hermeneutic, namely as an agent of peace in a turbulent society torn apart by religious strife. Then I will describe what I think are some of his personal reasons for his historical critique, partially as a form of revenge on the Jewish community that ostracized him. Next I will describe Spinoza's program, and how he hoped to cripple traditional theological interpretations. Finally, I will attempt to provide the broader social and political context of the time to show how Spinoza's method was at the service of modern centralized states over and against traditional theological communities. Ultimately, these parts illustrate that far from emerging as the result of some act of pure rationality, Spinoza's biblical criticism was from the beginning a political tool in the service of emerging European states.

The ideal of the historical critical method is an attempt to understand the real history behind the biblical texts; historical criticism is a hermeneutic whose goal is to discover "what really happened." Historical criticism

- 1 James Barr, "Interpretation, History of: Modern Biblical Criticism," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 322; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2; John H. Hayes, "The History of the Study of Israelite and Judaeon History," in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (London: SCM Press, 1977), 45; and Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 328.
- 2 An exhaustive list of major studies on Spinoza would require a book in itself, but a sample of some important studies dealing with his biblical criticism, from which I have benefitted greatly, include the following: Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity Volume I: Hermeneutics and Ontology and Volume II: Politics and Ethics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007); Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sylvain Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965); and C. Siegfried, *Spinoza: als Kritiker und Ausleger des Alten Testaments* (Naumburg: Druck von Heinrich Sieling, 1867).

uses a variety of modern methodologies, primarily literary, to serve this worthy goal. Christianity and Judaism are both historical religions and so an historical reading of Scripture would appear necessary, and even in the medieval period the idea of a *sensus literalis* was viewed as important for scriptural interpretation. In the early modern period, however, the emphasis on the *sensus literalis* shifted from an initial step to the end goal, where the exegete as historian went in search of so-called “objective history,” a quest Peter Novick likens to “nailing jelly to the wall.”<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the seventeenth century, precursors to such a method abound. Travis Frampton emphasizes, more than most, how many of the Protestant Reformers themselves, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, are in fact important figures who helped pave the way for the modern historical critical method, especially in their attempt to prune allegorical interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, Frampton has highlighted the political nature of the Reformers’ theological program, explaining that:

the Reformation was, at heart, politically engendered. What were the *protests* of Magisterial Reformers, if not political? Did Catholicism or Protestantism represent the *kingdom* of God on earth—and if the latter, which of its divergent forms would be representative? What part were churches of the Reformation to have in the numerous, religiously disparate European states? In the end, were leaders like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin satisfied with the Catholic Church, wanting only to reform church practice and dogma? Why did so many Lutheran and Reformed churches vie against Catholicism—and at times against each other—in order to become the established church of the (representative) state? Certainly the vision of Protestants did not exclude the political sphere!<sup>5</sup>

3 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7.

4 On the Reformers’ varying roles here, see, e.g., Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 2-3, 6 n. 10, 12-14, and esp. 23-42; Randall C. Zachman, “Gathering Meaning from the Context: Calvin’s Exegetical Method,” *Journal of Religion* 82 (2002): 1-26; Scott Hendrix, *Tradition and Authority in the Reformation* (Brookfield, Vermont: Variorum, 1996), esp. 236-37; Hans-Joachim Kraus, “Calvins exegetische Prinzipien,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 79 (1968): 329-341; and the forthcoming chapter on Luther in Scott Hahn’s and Benjamin Wiker’s book, *The Bible Politicized* (Waco: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).

Despite the many theological, philosophical, and historical precursors to historical criticism, it is in the seventeenth century that we find the first programmatic methods intended simply to investigate the history behind the biblical texts.<sup>6</sup> For Spinoza, the ostensible purpose in such an historical method was peace. He wanted to bring peace to Europe which had been so savagely ripped apart by what he believed to be religious violence. For seventeenth century biblical exegetes like Spinoza and his friend Lodewijk Meyer, the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and other so-called religious wars demonstrated the inability of sectarian theological interpretations to serve any useful function to society.<sup>7</sup> Hence, Spinoza and thinkers like him claimed they were formulating their rational methods for biblical exegesis in order to curb the violence they attributed to religion. Assuming that a normative systematic interpretation of the Bible may actually prevent religious warfare, Spinoza's

- 5 Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 13. In addition to the Reformers, however, William of Ockham, Marsilius of Padua, and even Niccolò Machiavelli and the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, more commonly known in the West as Averroes, may be seen as precursors, as Hahn and Wiker demonstrate in their forthcoming book. See also, e.g., A.J. Minnis, "Material Swords and Literal Lights: The Status of Allegory in William of Ockham's *Breviloquium* on Papal Power," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering, 292-308 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 6 The Renaissance is a particularly important period for the turn to history which Spinoza later epitomized. See, e.g., Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 9-48; Jerry H. Bently, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); and Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969). For how this turn to history plays out in the modern period, particularly under the influence of German universities, see, e.g., Constantin Fasolt, "History and Religion in the Modern Age," *History and Theory* 45 (2006) : 10-26; Constantin Fasolt, "Red Herrings: Relativism, Objectivism, and Other False Dilemmas," *Storia della storiografia* 48 (2005) : 17-26; Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Novick, *That Noble Dream*. I am indebted to Timothy J. Furry for pointing me to Fasolt's works.
- 7 So, Frampton's comment concerning Meyer, "The religious debates, culminating in the Thirty Years' War (1618-48), proved theology to be incapable of performing sound exegesis" (*Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 21). See also, Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 95.

alleged motivation would appear to be quite admirable, even if naïve.<sup>8</sup> Spinoza's true motivations, however, were far more complex than a simple desire for peace.

Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* was not simply an attempt to bring peace to Europe, but also can be regarded as a tool for exacting revenge on the Synagogue; in other words, one of the purposes it served was attacking the Sephardic Jewish community of Amsterdam. Typically, scholars assume that Spinoza was kicked out of the Sephardic community in Amsterdam because of his heterodox views which he later published in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. On the contrary, as Jon Levenson points out, "...Spinoza turned against the Jewish tradition and even against the Jews themselves with fury....History supplied Spinoza with the coffin into which he placed the Torah."<sup>9</sup>

I suggest that the image of Spinoza as the greatest Torah student from the Amsterdam community who became dissatisfied with traditional Jewish

- 8 I should mention that the alleged "religious" violence Spinoza does not simply refer to large scale warfare, but also to the persecution of individuals, as David Dungan mentions, "In 1688, a wealthy Amsterdam physician named Adrian Koerbagh was arrested and tried by an ecclesiastical court....Koerbagh admitted to knowing Spinoza but denied that the ideas in his books were anyone's but his own. The court found Koerbagh guilty and sentenced him to have his right thumb cut off (so he could never practice medicine again), to have his tongue bored through with a red hot iron (so he could never talk again), to pay a crushing fine of 6,000 florins (so he would be ruined financially), and to serve a prison term of thirty years, followed by banishment, if he survived prison. He died after one year in prison. It is difficult to imagine what effect this punishment of one of his friends and disciples had on Spinoza, who was at this time in the midst of writing the *Theological-Political Treatise*." See, David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 205-6. We could add the case of Uriel da Costa, a member of Spinoza's Jewish community who had been banned in 1623 on account of heterodoxy. Da Costa was eventually readmitted to the community, but then banned again in 1633 over similar concerns from his previous ban. Upon his second and final return to the community he was publicly beaten. Afterwards, the male members of the community ritually trampled on da Costa. A week later, after penning his autobiography, da Costa committed suicide with a pistol. See Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 145-6 n. 58; and Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 200-201.
- 9 Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 91 and 95.

responses to theological difficulties he discovered through his erudition needs to be revised. In the apologetical defense of Spinoza's thought, *La vie de Monsieur Benoit de Spinoza*, which was previously thought to be a nearly objective or factual early attempt at biography, we encounter the mythic confrontation between Spinoza and the chief rabbi of his synagogue Saul Levi Morteira.<sup>10</sup> This dramatic battle of wits has imprinted itself in the imagination of a host of modern scholars, and yet, as Frampton points out, no reliable confirmation of such an epic duel exists.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the archival evidence suggests that Spinoza stopped formal study in Judaism when he was about 13, bar mitzvah age, and hence, unlike his brother in law, he did not continue to advanced study.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this, Spinoza was clearly a gifted student who knew the Hebrew language, and was familiar with traditional rabbinic interpretation. The degree of his erudition within Judaism, however, is uncertain, and it now seems unlikely that he was as adept a scholar of Judaism as has previously been assumed. His skepticism was likely the result of a long process of study, which included a detailed immersion in Cartesian philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

After his ban, Spinoza clearly distanced himself from his Jewish heritage. He changed his name from the Hebrew "Baruch" to the Latin "Benedictus," and indeed, chose to write his works in Latin, as opposed to Dutch,

10 *La vie de Mr. Benoit de Spinoza* in *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, ed. Abraham Wolf, 41-75 (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1927). See Frampton's comments: "The image [in *La vie*] of a leisurely youth pursuing truth in the upper-level *medrassim* on the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud, discussing hermeneutical perplexities of biblical texts with friends, questioning the religious assumptions of his teachers and synagogue officials, and eventually confronting Talmud Torah's head rabbi, Morteira, in a final duel—however attractive this fictionalization may be, it distorts evidence from the Amsterdam archives" (*Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 132).

11 Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 94-120.

12 Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 131-2 and 154; and Abraham de Mordechai Vaz Dias and Willem Gerard van der Tak, "Spinoza Merchant and Autodidact: Charters and Other Authentic Documents Relating to the Philosopher's Youth and His Relations," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 16 (1982): 103-171.

13 Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 154.

Ladino, or Portuguese.<sup>14</sup> In a move even more radical for someone who never became a Christian, Spinoza viewed Jesus as superior to Moses in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. And, although he wrote a Hebrew grammar, which he never completed, the evidence indicates that he did so to assist his non-Jewish friends who desired to read the Old Testament in Hebrew, much as his first publication on Descartes was likewise for his friends. After his ban, Spinoza spent the rest of his days among Christians, primarily Dutch Christians who had theological and political problems with Calvinists and Catholics. After his ban from the synagogue in Amsterdam, Spinoza had no positive interaction with the Jewish community again.<sup>15</sup>

In the past, scholars have put forth numerous theological reasons for Spinoza's ban from the Jewish community in Amsterdam. These range from heterodox views concerning God to the denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. The truth is that we do not know the exact reasons for his ban, and contrary to so much scholarly opinion, the evidence does *not* indicate that Spinoza's views concerning God, his denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, or any of his other later so-called "heresies," were already fully-formed while he was a member in good standing in his synagogue community. Rather, the evidence seems instead to support Levenson's supposition that Spinoza's heterodox views were at least a partial retaliation to the Jewish community that ostracized him.<sup>16</sup>

14 Ladino was early modern Spanish written in Hebrew script, with loan words from Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, etc. It functioned as a lingua franca among Sephardic Jews much as Yiddish did among the Ashkenazi.

15 In fact, R. David Freedman maintains that, "Anti-Jewish sentiment is evident in every single chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a modern anti-Semite leveling a more vicious attack at everything held dear by Jews." See, R. David Freedman, "The Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 19 (1989): 37.

16 Indeed, Odette Vlesing has surmised that, "Historians have approached this subject by stereotyping the Jews. Spinoza became the ideal Jew through his philosophical works and the Jewish leaders were pictured as evil. In fact both parties acted rationally....Spinoza's philosophy was not a reaction to a bizarre collection of ideas within the Jewish community, but a sophisticated reaction to his own experiences. His first encounter with authority was not spiritual but legal." See Odette Vlesing, "The Jewish Community in Transition: From Acceptance to Emancipation," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 30 (1996): 209-210.

In fact, the archival and historical evidence seems to suggest that the reasons for Spinoza's ban were not explicitly theological at all. Spinoza's merchant father was a well-respected member of the Jewish community in Amsterdam. After his father's death Spinoza publically defamed him, assigning responsibility to his father for withholding inheritance money, which Spinoza claimed contributed to his current debt. But Spinoza did not stop there. In an attempt to cancel his debt, Spinoza went (a second time) before the city of Amsterdam and formally requested to be adopted by a legal guardian appointed by the secular authorities; he made this request at the age of 23. His request was granted, and thereupon his debt was erased. Such events placed the Jewish community in Amsterdam in an uncomfortable position; Spinoza's turn to secular authority circumvented his Jewish community, and it was likely perceived by them as a threat to their accustomed relative autonomy as a community.<sup>17</sup>

17 Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 141-147 and 153; Odette Vlessing, "The Excommunication of Baruch Spinoza: A Conflict Between Jewish and Dutch Law," *Studia Spinozana* 13 (1997): 15-47; Vlessing, "Jewish Community," 195-211; and Yosef Kaplan, "The Social Functions of the *Herem* in the Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century," in *Dutch Jewish History Vol. 1*, ed. Jozeph Michman and Tirtsah Levie, 111-155 (Jerusalem: Tel-Aviv University 1984). Based on archival research, Odette Vlessing claims that Spinoza "had to be removed from the community because financial interests were at stake....The Portuguese Jewish community tried...to protect its international financial position by pronouncing this *herem*. It was in fact a conflict of interests between the individual and the group and between two legal systems" ("Jewish Community," 205 and 209). Frampton clarifies the situation when he explains, "the son of a former respected and prominent member of the *ma'amad*, *parnassim*, and *deputados* took matters into his own hands by openly criticizing his father before the city court and by sidestepping Jewish law, going outside the jurisdiction of the Portuguese neighborhood....The religious officials of the Talmud Torah could not afford to ignore the public image of the Jewish community. They did not want to jeopardize the religious and economic freedom they had in Holland, not experienced by Marranos, who had lived in Spain or Portugal beforehand. To maintain the relatively amicable relationship they had with the public, they had to appear as a cohesive, peaceful, and restrained subpopulation by keeping the status quo religiously, politically, and economically. Consequently, the *ma'amad* could not tolerate anyone in their midst who might endanger the welfare of the larger whole by bringing the Talmud Torah under further public scrutiny" (*Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 143-4). The Dutch Jewish community in the seventeenth century played an important role in the Dutch economy, particularly regarding international trade, and this was partly the reason for such relative autonomy. The Jewish community in Amsterdam was therefore accorded certain rights, like dealing with

What makes this case especially interesting is that when we examine many of Spinoza's later arguments in his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, we find that they are not unique to him but rather predate his writing. Freedman isolates 20 foundational arguments highlighting what Spinoza believes to be historical problems with the Bible that he expands to make his case for justifying his historical method.<sup>18</sup> All 20 can be traced to earlier sources, and, in fact, 14 of them, a full two thirds, may be traced back to sixteen pages of a single work by the Muslim Polemicist Ibn Hazm, who attacked Judaism and the Hebrew Bible after he was bypassed for a governmental office which was given instead to the Jewish Shmuel Ibn Nagrela, also

issues of financial debt from within set community structures in the synagogue, etc. On all of the above, see Odette Vlessing, "New Light on the Earliest History of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jews," in *Dutch Jewish History Vol. 3*, ed. Jozeph Michman, 43-75 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993); Richard H. Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 149-171; Jonathan I. Israel, "Dutch Sephardi Jewry, Millenarian Politics, and the Struggle for Brazil," in *Sceptics, Millenarians, and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel, 76-97 (Leiden: Brill, 1990); Yosef Kaplan, "The Portuguese Community in the Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam and the Ashkenazi World," in *Dutch Jewish History Vol. 2*, ed. Jozeph Michman, 23-45 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1989); Jozeph Michman, "Historiography of the Jews in the Netherlands," in *Dutch Jewish History Vol. 1*, ed. Michman and Levie, 7-29; Jonathan I. Israel, "The Changing Role of the Dutch Sephardim in International Trade, 1595-1715," in *Dutch Jewish History Vol. 1*, ed. Michman and Levie, 31-51; Yosef Kaplan, "On the Relation of Spinoza's Contemporaries in the Portuguese Jewish Community of Amsterdam to Spanish Culture and the Marrano Experience," in *Spinoza's Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. de Deugd, 82-94 (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1984); Jonathan I. Israel, "The Economic Contribution of Dutch Sephardim in International Trade, 1595-1713," *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 96 (1983): 505-535; Yosef Kaplan, "The Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam: From Forced Conversion to a Return to Judaism," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (1981): 37-51; Daniel M. Swetschinski, "Kinship and Commerce: The Foundations of Portuguese Jewish Life in Seventeenth-Century Holland," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 15 (1981): 52-74; Jonathan I. Israel, "Some Further Data on the Amsterdam Sephardim and Their Trade with Spain During the 1650s," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 14 (1980): 7-19; E.M. Koen, "The Earliest Sources Relating to the Portuguese Jews in the Municipal Archives of Amsterdam up to 1620," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 4 (1970): 25-42.

18 Freedman, "Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship," 31-32.

known as Shmuel Ha Naggid.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps most crucial of Spinoza's arguments are his claims against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

What is a commonplace today in much of biblical scholarship, that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, received much resistance because of the perceived implications of such a claim at that time. It was feared that saying that Moses never wrote the Pentateuch called into question the very idea of revelation at Sinai. This threw into doubt the relevance of the entire Torah. Was it still applicable in the contemporary setting? This, in fact, often was the progression of such arguments used in the early modern period. And the answer for Spinoza was no, the Torah was no longer applicable.<sup>20</sup>

Medieval Muslim biblical criticism, such as Ibn Hazm's, was extremely sophisticated and was transmitted all the way into the nineteenth century, as Hava Lazarus-Yafeh's work has demonstrated.<sup>21</sup> Such a borrow-

- 19 Freedman, "Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship," 32-33. See Freedman's entire article (31-38) for his complete arguments. On Ibn Hazm, his biblical criticism, and particularly his critique of the Torah, see, e.g., Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Camilla Adang, *Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Camilla Adang, *Islam frente a Judaísmo: La polémica de Ibn Hazm de Córdoba* (Madrid: Aben Ezra Ediciones, 1994); Gabriel Martínez-Gros, "Ibn Hazm contre les Juifs: Un bouc émissaire jusqu'au jugement dernier," *Atalaya* 5 (1994): 123-134; Maribel Fierro, "Ibn Hazm et le zindiq juif," *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 63-64 (1992): 81-89; Nurshif Rif'at, "Ibn Hazm on Jews and Judaism," (Diss., Exeter University, 1988); Camilla Adang, "Schriftvervalsing als thema in de islamitische polemiek tegen het jodendom," *Ter Herkenning* 16, no. 3 (September 1988): 190-202; Norman Roth, "Forgery and Abrogation of the Torah: A Theme in Muslim and Christian Polemic in Spain," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987): 203-236; David S. Powers, "Reading/Misreading One Another's Scriptures: Ibn Hazm's Refutation of Ibn Nagrella al-Yahū d ī," in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions: Papers Presented at the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies*, ed. William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks, 109-121 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Ghulam Haider Aasi, "Muslim understanding of other religions: an analytical study of Ibn Hazm's *Kitab al-Fasl*," (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1986); and Camilla Adang, "Ibn Hazm on Jews and Judaism," (Diss., University of Nijmegen, 1985).
- 20 James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 29.
- 21 Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Lamin Sanneh's comments about the impact of medieval Muslim thought on the European Enlightenment in Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 75-78.

ing of argumentation from a Muslim polemicist indicates that, like Ibn Hazm, Spinoza probably developed his biblical criticism, at least in part, as a weapon of revenge on the Jewish community rather than out of disinterested scholarship.<sup>22</sup> Not only do Spinoza and Ibn Hazm employ many of the same arguments, but they shared anti-Jewish sentiments, although, arguably Ibn Hazm's were harsher and more explicit, as Freedman makes clear: "...Ibn Hazm wrote with such fierce invective that he can scarcely say the word 'Jew' without a prefixed epithet like 'stinking,' 'foul,' 'vile,' 'villainous,' and that good old stand-by 'dirty.'"<sup>23</sup>

Spinoza's new historical method for interpreting the Bible functioned as a weapon for him, a weapon whereby he attempted to demolish the very foundations of Scripture as revelation. Spinoza's method involved several steps, which may be enumerated as follows: (1) discover the original meaning of the words in the Bible, or as Spinoza puts it, "investigate...all possible meanings of any passage";<sup>24</sup> (2) assemble biblical statements together by topic;<sup>25</sup> (3) come up with a near complete historical biography of each biblical author;<sup>26</sup> (4) arrive at a complete history of the transmission of each biblical book;<sup>27</sup> (5) discover all the relevant historical details concerning the canonization process for each specific biblical book;<sup>28</sup> and (6) come to know the complete history of the textual transmission of each biblical book.<sup>29</sup> This method has much to recommend itself, and the modern historical critical method continues to be indebted to these admirable pursuits. The limitation of Spinoza's method, however, was that nothing more could be done with the text. Only after such an impossibly thorough historical inves-

22 Spinoza relied upon numerous figures in his work on religion, and biblical exegesis in particular. These figures include Nicollò Machiavelli, Isaac La Peyrère, Thomas Hobbes, Lodewijk Meyer, and perhaps Samuel Fisher and others.

23 Freedman, "Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship," 33.

24 Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 142.

25 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 143.

26 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 144.

27 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 144.

28 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 144.

29 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 145.

tigation is complete can the exegete begin to examine the theological significance of the biblical texts.<sup>30</sup>

The assumption undergirding his method was based on Cartesian skepticism applied to biblical interpretation.<sup>31</sup> Spinoza relied upon Carte-

30 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 145.

31 Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 195; and Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), xviii. A number of scholars have argued that Spinoza's skeptical views were cryptic, that Spinoza employed a sort of "dual language" in typical Marrano style. See, e.g., the arguments of Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997 [1965]), esp. 35-52, 107-146, and 215-268; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics Vol. 1: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), esp. 15-39 and 128-152; Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1952]), 142-201; Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Marrano Patterns in Spinoza," in *Proceedings of the First Italian International Congress on Spinoza*, ed. Emilia Giancotti, 461-485 (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1985), esp. 475-77; Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Spinoza: The Psychology of the Multitude and the Uses of Language," *Studia Spinozana* 1 (1985): 305-333; and Leo Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 27-31. This view has been heavily criticized, e.g., in Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, esp. 20 and 20 n. 49; Wiep van Bunge, "Spinoza and the Idea of Religious Imposture," in *On the Edge of Truth and Honesty: Principles and Strategies of Fraud and Deceit in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Toon van Houdt, Jan L. de Jong, Zoran Kwak, Marijke Spies, and Marc van Vaeck, 105-126 (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Nancy Levene, "Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Study Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* without Strauss," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10 (2000) : 57-110; Wiep van Bunge, "Spinoza's Jewish Identity and the Use of Context," *Studia Spinozana* 13 (1997): 100-118, esp. 102-3; Alan Donagan, "Spinoza's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett, 343-382 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 345 and 369-371; Errol Harris, *Is There an Esoteric Doctrine in the "Tractatus theologico-politicus"?* (Leiden: Brill, 1978); and Errol Harris, *Salvation from Despair: A Reappraisal of Spinoza's Philosophy* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), esp. 206-210. Frampton provides the main argument against Strauss and Yovel's modification of Strauss's argument: "If Spinoza were trying to cancel his true thoughts and intentions, using dual language, why publish the *TT-P* anonymously?" (*Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 20 n. 49). And furthermore, on the same page, Spinoza was not himself a Marrano, a Sephardic Jewish convert to Catholicism. In response to Frampton's question (and implied argument) here, I would suggest that the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* includes arguments that were too controversial at that time, like the denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, which would explain Spinoza's anonymity; dual language was insufficient to protect the author. The point of such dual language, however, was to help soften the blow so as to convince the reader that not every methodological suggestion within the book was necessarily bad. Spinoza wanted to convince his readers to actually employ his method and this was the reason for dual language, as Dungan makes clear in *His-*

sian methodic doubt in that disembodied reason became the ultimate judge of Scripture. So-called biblical truths could not rest on any other authority, not even prophetic or divine authority.<sup>32</sup> The following examples illustrate Spinoza's skeptical stance toward the biblical texts. For Spinoza, no God exists apart from nature itself. Hence Old Testament prophets were not inspired by God in any traditional understanding, but rather they simply had brilliant imaginations.<sup>33</sup> Spinoza likewise denied the existence of miracles and views the Holy Spirit simply as peace of mind from doing what one ought to do.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Spinoza reduced all the moral precepts of the Bible to loving God and loving one's neighbor, but unlike the way in which this Jesus-like idea has been traditionally understood by Christians, for Spinoza it held a threefold significance: to tolerate differences in private beliefs, to help those in need, and to obey the state. Any other moral laws from the Bible had no relevance, since they were intended only for earlier states, like the Hebrew Nation of the Old Testament.<sup>35</sup>

David Dungan points out how Spinoza believed there were certain platitudes that could be known and universally accepted—like love of neighbor—and how Spinoza used the assumption of such platitudes, combined with his historical method, to eviscerate Scripture of more complex theological meaning.<sup>36</sup> Spinoza's study of the Bible led him to conclude that we do not know enough about the original meaning of the words in their original languages, nor can we arrive at sufficiently complete historical biographies of the authors, etc. In effect, after laying out the details of his new historical method, Spinoza proceeded to show how there was no realistic way to answer the questions he multiplied; all the exegete is left with are the numerous

*tory of the Synoptic Problem*, esp. 214, where he underscores that Spinoza "realized he had to accommodate to some extent to the views of his audience." Also, although Spinoza was not himself a true Marrano, he spent over the first twenty years of his life in a prominent Marrano community, so he would be well accustomed to numerous aspects of Marrano culture.

32 I owe Joel Schickel thanks for helping me clarify in what way Spinoza relied upon Cartesian doubt.

33 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 70-73.

34 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 125 and 235.

35 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 112, 119, and 145.

36 Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 236-240. Frampton is very critical of Dungan here, but he does not fully engage Dungan's arguments (*Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism*, 14-17).

historical questions and the fruitless investigations to try and answer them. Spinoza did not believe anything more should be done with the biblical texts until the complete histories were discovered. Dungan makes clear, “Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground.”<sup>37</sup> In short, his method of investigating Scripture did more to paralyze the exegete than to further theological biblical understanding.

In this final portion of my paper, I want to unmask the broader political context to Spinoza’s biblical interpretation, which also serves as the context to much of the rest of seventeenth century historical critical projects. Levenson explains that:

It is no coincidence that the early pioneers of biblical criticism—Hobbes, Spinoza, Richard Simon—lived in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War. Through the famous formula *cuius regio, eius religio* (whoever’s realm, his religion), the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which ended that war, established the superiority of the state over religion in fact and provided a hospitable climate for a theory to the same effect.<sup>38</sup>

The most neglected aspect of Spinoza studies and of studies concerning the early modern origins of the historical critical method is the way in which the sixteenth and seventeenth century so-called religious wars provide the ultimate backdrop to the emergence of these early historical critical programs. Indeed, many date the birth of the Dutch Republic, in addition to modern European states in general, to the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). It is no secret that Spinoza wrote his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* in support of the politics of Jan De Witt, apparently his friend and patron. Spinoza interrupted work on his *Ethics* to write his theological political treatise at a key moment in De Witt’s career.<sup>39</sup> What remains least examined, however, is the general role of the religious wars of the previous decades in such exegetical methodologies.

37 Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 172.

38 Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 117.

39 Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 204-205. On De Witt, see H.H. Rowen, *John de Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625-1672* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

In his 1995 article, “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House’: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” William Cavanaugh demonstrates that the classic myth of western civilization is wrong.<sup>40</sup> Centralized states, like De Witt’s Dutch Republic, did not emerge in Europe as peace-makers in response to violent wars between Catholics and Protestants fighting over religious doctrines. Rather, these wars represent the final stages of state centralization that began as early as the eleventh century, well before the Reformation splintered Europe along confessional lines. Furthermore, as Cavanaugh notes, in most of these conflicts, Catholics fought Catholics, exemplified in the bloodiest years of the Thirty Years’ War, namely when the strife was between the two largest Catholic dynasties, the Habsburgs and the Bourbons.<sup>41</sup>

Cavanaugh points out that the regions in Europe which already had concordats with the pope, limiting papal authority within their realms, remained Catholic through the Reformation; the Protestant Reformation was only successful in regions which had not been able to secure any other means of limiting the pope’s authority. Both Catholic and Protestant state rulers wanted to restrict foreign (i.e., papal) authority in their realms. Confessional conflicts were incidental when they occurred:

(1) In 1547 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (a Catholic) attacked Lutheran states (Protestant), but for the purposes of consolidating authority.

(2) In 1572 the Queen Mother Catherine de Medici (Catholic) launched the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre slaughtering Huguenots (Protestants), but this had to do with the threat French

40 William T. Cavanaugh, “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House’: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 1995) : 397-420.

41 See, e.g., Cavanaugh, “Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House,” 399-403; James B. Collins, “State Building in Early-Modern Europe: The Case of France,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997) : 603-633; Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4, 15, and 26-27; all of the articles in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), especially the chapters by Tilly, Samuel Finer, Gabriel Ardant, and Rudolf Braun; and Joseph R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 15-27 and 58-68.

Calvinism posed to the ecclesiastical system in France, which, because of earlier concordats, was viewed as a threat to French royal authority.

To recognize the complexity involved, and see how in most cases these wars involved Catholics fighting Catholics and Protestants fighting Protestants, simply look at the tally Cavanaugh provides:

(1) In 1527 the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (Catholic) attacked Rome (Catholic).

(2) In 1552-1553 Lutheran princes (Protestant) teamed up with King Henry II of France (Catholic) and went up against the Holy Roman Empire (Catholic).

(3) By 1576 French nobles (both Protestant and Catholic) rebelled against King Henry III of France (Catholic).

(4) Beginning in 1576 the Catholic League (Catholic) opposed the Politiques (Catholic) who teamed up with Protestants.

(5) In 1588 the Guises family (Catholic) financed by King Phillip II of Spain (Catholic) attacked King Henry III of France in Paris (Catholic) who teamed up with Henry of Navarre (Protestant, who, after succeeding Henry III to the French throne, converted to Catholicism and took the name Henry IV).

(6) In 1618 the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II (Catholic) launched the Thirty Years' War and allied himself with the Lutheran elector of Saxony (Protestant) and Albrecht von Wallenstein (Protestant) against petty princes (Catholic) and Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden (Protestant) who were backed by Cardinal Richelieu in France (Catholic).

(7) Nearly the last half of the Thirty Years' War was primarily fought between the Habsburgs (Catholic) and the Bourbons (Catholic).<sup>42</sup>

42 See Cavanaugh, "Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House," 399-403; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 15, 59-60, and 254-59; J.H.M. Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 189-190; Richard S. Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars: 1559-1689* (New York: Norton, 1970), 6,

Meanwhile, the idea of religion, which had previously been understood as pertaining to monastic life and discipline, or with specific religious orders, was only then being redefined as private systems of belief.<sup>43</sup> In what sense, then, can these conflicts be called religious wars?

Historical biblical methodologies like Spinoza's became tools of state used to flatten out perceived religious threats to citizens' physical safety stemming from rival biblical interpretations. It is no coincidence that Spinoza saw the state as the necessary controller of religion in the public square. Nor should it seem a coincidence that state-run universities would replace religious magisteria as the loci of biblical interpretation, much as Spinoza's contemporary Thomas Hobbes envisioned the state sovereign, or the officials she appointed, as *the* authority on all matters of biblical interpretation. In short, Spinoza's program, which survived into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through German and English translations, removed Scripture from its home in the synagogue and church, in Jewish and Christian liturgical life, and placed it instead as a political tool in the hands of emerging modern states.<sup>44</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, states would use such academic programs to domesticate further both Judaism and Christianity, which was Spinoza's true motivation in the first place. Indeed, this became the initial *raison d'être* of the historical critical method, which was, as Al-

23-31, 48-49, and 69-78; John Neville Figgis, *From Gerson to Grotius, 1414-1625* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960), 6; and Franklin C. Palm, *Calvinism and the Religious Wars* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1932), 51-55.

43 See, e.g., Cavanaugh, "Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House," 403-8; and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. 37-43 and 200-208.

44 Spinoza's work was particularly preserved through Richard Simon's appropriation of his methods. Johann Salomo Semler brought Simon's works into the German speaking world. Semler represented cutting edge philological analysis severed from any theological moorings. See, e.g., Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 95 and 114-15; and Gottfried Hornig, *Johann Salomo Semler: Studien zu Leben und Werk des Hallenser Aufklärungstheologen* (Tübingen: Walter de Gruyter, 1996). Johann Lorenz Schmidt translated Spinoza's *Ethics* into German in 1744, bringing Spinoza into German scholarly circles in the eighteenth century. Sheehan explains that, "...Schmidt wanted to tear the Bible out of the hands of traditional Christian theology" (*Enlightenment Bible*, 126).

bert Schweitzer conceded, “an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma.”<sup>45</sup>

Rather than the general assumption that Spinoza’s construction of a historical method of biblical interpretation arose out of his desire to end violent religious conflict, I argue that the evidence from his socio-political background indicates that the method emerged from more personal and political desires. Spinoza had personal motivations in creating a method that would attack the biblical and Talmudic foundation of the Jewish society which ostracized him. More importantly, such a method served the political goal of furthering the secularization of nascent European states. The end result of the program, as it advanced through the centuries, was the removal of the Bible from tradition-specific religious contexts into its exile in modern universities, often at the service of modern states.<sup>46</sup>

45 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 4.

46 I need to thank Travis Frampton, whose insightful questions helped me clarify a number of points in this paper. I am deeply indebted to the works of Frampton, Richard Popkin, and David Dungan, not only for their own works and arguments (even when I depart from each of them), but also for the numerous sources their texts pointed me to. I owe Maria Morrow and Biff Rocha tremendous thanks for critiquing drafts of this paper. I also owe Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker thanks for providing me with drafts of their forthcoming book dealing with the political, philosophical, and historical origins of modern biblical criticism. This paper especially benefitted from their extensive chapter on Spinoza. All infelicities remain my own.