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The Heretic, the Bible, and the Birth of the Modern World

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As a boy, Spinoza was noted for his brilliance. In his fascinating new book, *The Courtier and the Heretic*, Matthew Stewart quotes a Polish observer who noted the brilliant young Jewish boys of Amsterdam, speaking of them as "small as grasshoppers" who were also "like prodigies because of their unusual familiarity with the entire Bible and the science of grammar."

No one knows exactly what happened between Spinoza's childhood and adolescence as an orthodox "grasshopper" and his emergence in early adulthood as a scandalous heretic. As a matter of fact, the actual writ of excommunication, pronounced on July 27, 1656, provides little specificity. Instead, the declaration indicates that the ruling council of the Jews in Amsterdam had "for some time known the evil opinions and work of Baruch de Espinoza" and, having "endeavored by various ways and promises to bring him back from his evil ways," nonetheless excommunicated him for his "horrible heresies" and "awful deeds." The sentence of excommunication was the most serious ever handed down by the Jewish authorities of Amsterdam: "We warn that none may contact him orally or in writing, nor do him any favor, nor stay under the same roof with him, nor read any paper he made or wrote."

Within four years of his excommunication, Spinoza would complete his most famous work, the *Ethics*, in which he would promote a theory of pantheism more extreme than anything yet encountered in Western thought. As Jewish scholar Yirmiyahu Yovel notes, "With these ideas Spinoza distances himself from both Judaism and Christianity, and even from the accepted philosophical traditions; he was a heretic not only from the point of view of the established religions, but also from the point of view of the freethinkers and from the several varieties of philosophic deism they were espousing at the time."

As Yovel explains, the deistic heresies "have at least acknowledged the existence of a transcendent deity elevated above the world." Spinoza, on the other hand, simply denied any distinction between God and the universe. "In short," Yovel explains, "Spinoza proclaimed himself a heretic not only among the faithful, but also among representatives of the accepted heresy of his period, thus separating himself from all of the major spiritual currents of his time."

In the end, Spinoza would deny any concept of a personal God, all claims to divine revelation, any claim of biblical inspiration, and the validity of miracles. In essence, he serves as the father of modern biblical criticism. As a matter of fact,

Spinoza is the first major figure credited with proposing an exclusively secular reading of the Bible. The philosopher Leo Strauss acknowledged Spinoza's legacy over three decades ago: "In our time, scholars generally study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book. As is generally admitted, Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of Biblical study."

Interestingly enough, the focus of Spinoza's early heresies was Judaism, but he soon turned his critical attention to Christianity. Spinoza saw dogmatic Christianity as the great enemy of the modern age and his project of biblical criticism was expressly intended to liberate Christianity from its dogmatic moorings.

As Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg note, "Spinoza's intent is clear, if indirect: false Christianity is dogmatic Christianity of any stripe. It is a child of unreason. For the sake of reason, dogmatic Christianity must be overcome." Harrisville and Sundberg then explain why biblical criticism came to serve as Spinoza's major proposal for removing the threat of dogmatic Christianity. "What is needed is something to direct the passion of the multitude from false religion to true religion . . . Since the Christian Bible is the authoritative source for the Christian religion, its understanding must be reshaped by rational criticism. Spinoza's political program of reform, then, is established in the exercise of biblical criticism."

Most modern persons would doubtless be surprised to know that the main ambition behind the emergence of biblical criticism was political—to transform the society by removing the obstacle of orthodox Christianity. Yet, as Spinoza's essays in his most notorious work, the *Theological-Political Treatise* make clear, this was precisely Spinoza's ambition.

In Spinoza's view, both Jews and Christians had simply mistaken the particularity of their religious texts for a claim to divine revelation. Since Spinoza believed in no personal God, it was impossible for God to have inspired the Bible in any sense. Instead, Spinoza believed that the Bible was simply a product of human authorship, reflecting all of the historical circumstances, prejudices, and faults of those authors. As a thoroughgoing rationalist, Spinoza believed that the goal of human existence should be to live by the service of reason alone. Nevertheless, he believed that the vast majority of human beings were driven by emotion and passion, and were thus unable to understand what was known by the rationalist elite. Thus, the masses are attracted to simplistic and fanciful ideas such as miracles.

Spinoza's rejection of the miraculous was absolute. In the first place, he did not believe in a God who would act in any personal manner. Beyond this, his absolute denial of any distinction between God and nature meant that it would be impossible for any action or event contrary to nature to occur.

As Spinoza wrote: "The universal laws of nature are merely God's decrees, following from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature. So if anything were to happen in nature contrary to her universal laws, it would also be necessarily contrary to the decree, intellect and nature of God. Or if anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain that God acts contrary to his own nature—than which nothing could be more absurd."

The idea of a supernatural deity who revealed himself in the Bible is nothing more than superstition, Spinoza insisted. And superstition is "the bitter enemy of all true knowledge and true morality."

Spinoza denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the inspiration of the Scriptures as a whole. The prophets were simply men of elevated moral insight, whose actual worldviews and understanding of reality were often woefully deficient.

In one central paragraph, Spinoza offers his approach to understanding the Bible: "Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture. In this way, by allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture—steady progress can be made without any danger of error, and one can deal with matters that surpass our understanding with no less confidence than those matters that are known to us by the natural light of reason."

As Spinoza scholar Steven Nadler suggests, Spinoza denies that the Bible provides "privileged knowledge of natural or spiritual phenomena." In Spinoza's view, the enduring message of the Bible is merely obedience to God, altruism, and

submission to the divine predetermination of all things.

With specific reference to Israel, Spinoza denies that the Jews were in any way “elected” by God. Instead, they were simply the product of historical circumstance, benefiting from historical, geographical, political, and economic realities. The Torah was simply a fortuitous development that offered rules and precepts that aided the Jews in their endurance, survival, and national development. The Bible is simply the work of human writers who were often ill informed, prejudiced, and superstitious.

As Matthew Stewart argues, “In short, Spinoza presents a thoroughly secular and historicist reading of the scriptures—entirely unexceptional by modern standards—according to which the Bible is clearly the work of human hands, and the truths it relays are, in the main, not *factual* but *moral*.”

Armed with his new philosophy, Spinoza saw himself, as Stewart acknowledges, as “the spiritual leader of a global revolution.”

The foundations of modern biblical criticism, and the secular worldview from which these foundations emerge, are all present and visible in Spinoza’s writings. Indeed, one of the most fundamental distinctions common to the critical reading of the Bible—the distinction between *meaning* and *truth*—is well established in Spinoza’s thought. In Spinoza’s own words, “the point at issue is merely the meaning of the texts, not their truth.” Or, as Harrisville and Sundberg explain, “The distinction between truth and meaning is crucial to Spinoza’s argument. Truth refers to matters of universal significance that reason is able to discern regardless of time and place. Meaning refers to the cultural expressions and artifacts of specific peoples bound to time and place.”

Thus, the miracle accounts found in the Bible are described as meaningful, even if untrue. The “truth” of the Bible is found only in its call to “true virtue.”

Harrisville and Sundberg understand the revolutionary character of Spinoza’s thought: “In retrospect, Spinoza appears to be the trailblazer of a revolutionary position. In his work the Bible has become the object of historical science. This science is unalterably opposed to the proposition that the foundation of biblical study is revealed religion. The only proper foundation of religion is human reason.”

Further: “The motivation for historical criticism of the Bible is clear. It is a primary means to free society from the destructive force of religious passion. That is to say, the purpose of this new exegesis is not proclamatory or dogmatic, but political. The content of the Bible is investigated with an eye firmly fixed on its social effect. By undercutting religious passion, Spinoza encourages doubt. From doubt, Spinoza believes there will spring the social good of tolerance.”

Thus, the anniversary of Baruch Spinoza’s excommunication in Amsterdam 350 years ago serves as a reminder of the radical roots of modern biblical criticism—and of what little remains when divine revelation is denied. The Bible is left as nothing more than a “meaningful” witness to the religious passions of the ancients, marked by all of their own prejudices, faults, and misconceptions.

Once again, we face the basic fault line in modern thought—the line between the belief that the Bible is indeed the written Word of God and the belief that the Bible is nothing more than a fallible moral witness. Matthew Stewart is absolutely correct in noting that Benedict Spinoza’s concept of biblical criticism is now seen as “unexceptional” in the modern secular academy. Beyond this, Spinoza’s distinction between meaning and truth has found its way into all too many pulpits, churches, seminaries, and denominations. We can only hope that a reminder of what took place in Amsterdam 350 summers ago might serve to remind the believing church of what is at stake today.

