

Spinoza and the Materialism of the Letter

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Abstract: Chapter 7 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” is often read as a learned exercise in the desacralization of the Bible or, more precisely, that portion of it originally written in Hebrew. According to this reading, Spinoza uses his training in Hebrew and Aramaic, together with his knowledge of Hebrew language commentary, to discredit the authority of Scripture by revealing its inconsistencies and faults. In fact, by suggesting that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from that used to interpret nature, Spinoza carries out a desacralization of *Scriptura* in general, that is, of writing, stripping away the covering that masquerades as its interior or depth, and revealing the letter of the text as the irreducible site of meaning. By overturning the sovereignty of spirit, Spinoza opens the way to a materialism of the letter.

Keywords: interpretation, the Bible, Spinoza, materialism, desacralization

Certes la lettre tue, dit-on, quand l'esprit vivifie. Nous n'en disconvenons pas, ayant eu à saluer quelque part ici une noble victime de l'erreur de chercher l'esprit dans la lettre, mais nous demandons aussi comment sans la lettre l'esprit vivrait. Les prétentions de l'esprit pourtant demeureraient irréductibles, si la lettre n'avait fait la preuve qu'elle produit tous ses effets de vérité dans l'homme, sans que l'esprit ait le moins du monde à s'en mêler.

Jacques Lacan, “L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud”

It is not easy to understand the beginning of Ch. 7 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” nor is it easy to understand to degree to which we do not understand it. Commentators often overlook it, perhaps because appears to them to be little more than a denunciation of the exploitation of Scripture for purely worldly purposes by means of extravagant interpretations of Biblical passages that, upon examination, exhibit little real connection to the texts whose meaning they purport to elucidate. From this perspective, the interpretations Spinoza condemns are designed to appeal to the imaginations, hopes and fears of the faithful in order to bring them under the sway of the interpreter who claims Biblical authority, rather than to determine the meaning of the words of which Scripture is composed. Every, or nearly every, interpreter thus enters into conflict with every other in a competition for the adoration and obedience of the greatest possible number of readers. Further, the competition for followers, far from leading

to ever more accurate and informed interpretations, instead encourages each commentator to distinguish himself from all others by offering a truth inaccessible to his competitors, thus emphasizing the importance of hidden meanings and secret messages at the expense of the actual words of Scripture. Only a disenchantment of the Holy Scripture, carried out, of course, with the utmost prudence, could put an end to the exploitation of the Bible for worldly ends, and the religious conflict (within Christianity) that it inevitably entails. According to this reading, Spinoza has written the TTP to show that the Bible consistently teaches only a few basic lessons, and while it does not arrive at them by means of reason, these lessons nevertheless correspond to conclusions to which reason leads: human blessedness consists of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

While this reading of the introductory section of chapter seven of the TTP has a basis in Spinoza's text, it can pass as an adequate account of the text only by leaving some of the work's most original and powerful statements unread and unexplained. These are precisely the statements that render Spinoza's writing irreducible to his moment, that is, to the Dutch or European Enlightenment, or even the Enlightenment plus its resident aliens, whose work, while contemporaneous with the impulse toward the secularization of knowledge, neither clearly supported nor opposed it. To say that Spinoza is irreducible to the historical moment is neither to remove him from history, nor to dissociate him from the debates and discussions of his contemporaries. On the contrary, it is to say that neither he, nor we as his readers, can be confined to what is too quickly determined to be a moment, period, or context, whose thought, however conflictual, constitutes an unsurpassable limit both for Spinoza and for those who seek to understand and explain his work. Such a limit, in Spinoza's case at least, runs through his texts, not around them, meaning that alongside allusions to Hobbes or Lodewijk Meijer, we find not only indelible traces of Medieval Hebrew language commentaries and the polemics that animated them, but also traces of ideas still to come whose mark on Spinoza's texts could only become intelligible and even legible three centuries later. To insist on the non-contemporaneity of the time both around and in Spinoza's work is also to call into question (or rather to allow ourselves to see Spinoza call into question) the idea of historical progress as reaching its fulfillment in the realization of the ideal of secularism. The "operation of the *sive*," as André Tosel called it (e.g., *Deus, sive Natura*, God, or Nature),¹ never simply serves to replace a theological term with its secular equivalent, as if the latter were the true meaning of the former; as we will see, this operation unfailingly complicates both terms: nature is not the same when it is made, if only for a brief moment in the preface to part IV of the *Ethics*, the equivalent

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1 Tosel 37.

of God as conceived by Spinoza in parts I-III. Similarly, Spinoza's association of the methods used to understand nature and Scripture not only naturalizes Scripture, but provokes a questioning of the notion of nature itself and the extent to which, even as understood by natural philosophy, it remains in part obscured by assumptions foreign to it.

Spinoza's objectives in the TTP, however, are not always easy to discern, perhaps because they take shape as objectives only retroactively, in the course of the exposition before which they could not be thought or even imagined. His denunciation of the interpreters of Scripture quickly becomes an analysis of both the theory and practice of interpretation and of the concept of Scripture that necessitates something like interpretation, that is, something more than mere reading, perhaps a reading that itself requires a second reading, or a translation (one of the meanings of the Latin verb *interpretor*). To transform the Hebrew Scriptures into a movement from a beginning, the Creation, to an end (of Days), from Sin to Redemption, that is, both teleology and eschatology, required a reconceptualization of both writing and reading, as well as of language itself. Spinoza located the weak point of the immense apparatus of interpretation, the place from which he could, given the prevailing conditions of his time, sabotage its workings and in doing so make its operation intelligible: Paul's declaration (2 Corinthians 3:6) of a New Covenant, "not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life [οὐ γράμματος ἀλλὰ πνεύματος· τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ]."

We should not mistake Paul's meaning. "Letter" here refers not simply to the letter of the law, the commandments in their literal sense, dead words, applied without mercy by dead souls, but also to the letters and words of Scripture, its narratives and histories, as well as its 613 commandments. Slavery to the letter will give way to reading according to the spirit, a reading that denies the meaning of the written words it reads in order to render them signs of prefiguration and anticipation, that is, of the coming liberation from servitude to the flesh and from the life that ends in death. Spinoza, in opposition, seeks to overturn the subjection of letter to spirit in the TTP, just as in the *Ethics* he lays the groundwork for an insurrection of the body against the soul, not the soul that is one and the same thing as the body, but the soul that it is imputed to it by law and moral doctrine. By referring to Scripture (or Scriptures in the plural as he does at the beginning of chapter 7) as the Sacred letters (*Sacris Litteris*), he sets them apart from both profane use and abuse and renders them irreducible, beyond the reach of the disfiguring operations of allegory and typology, now defined as impious acts. In declaring the letters sacred Spinoza has paradoxically restored them, and the texts of which they are the basic elements, to their material existence on the basis of which alone an adequate knowledge of Scripture can be developed.

"On the Interpretation of Scripture" begins with a rather complex set of assertions concerning the status of Scripture in which Spinoza separates what is generally said about Scripture from the practice that corresponds to it. In words, "everyone" (*omnibus*--the first of the terms he uses to designate the subject of these common pronouncements) says "the Holy Scripture is the word of God" and the road to blessedness.² In practice, however, they proceed from a very different understanding of the Holy Scripture. The actions and words of the *vulgus* (crowd), whose relation to *omnibus* (everyone) is not yet clear, suggest that they live without regard to the teachings of Scripture. Of course, "*vulgus*" can designate nothing more than a great number, the vast majority of a given population, although it may also attach to this neutral sense an additional pejorative coloring. And while the absence of any desire on the part of the vast majority of the people to live according to Scripture is condemnable, what is next attributed to "nearly everyone" (*omnes fere*) may deserve even greater condemnation. "Nearly everyone, as we can see, attempts to pass off (*venditare*) their inventions (or fabrications, their *commenta*), as the word of God, and seek nothing more than to constrain others using the pretext of religion, to think as they do."³

While Spinoza initially allows his readers to imagine themselves among the exceptions to "the mass of people" who disregard the teachings of Scripture, the third and final assertion, whose implications are far more serious, denies all but an insignificant number of people the possibility of being exempted from the charge of substituting their own commentary for the Scripture itself and thereby using religion as a cover for the effort to force others to think as they do. Does this mean that Spinoza has accused "nearly all" of his readers of fraudulently representing their own words as the word of God for the purpose of deceiving others into obeying the commentator in the belief that they are obeying God? In fact, the ubiquity of the practice suggests that individuals are both its agents and its patients, the simultaneous purveyors and victims of the fraud. But, more fundamentally, how is it possible, given that the commentary must refer to the written text of the Bible that is either read by or to the people, for a human invention to be taken as the word of God?

The next sentence, so often overlooked by modern readers, addresses exactly this problem: "We see, I would argue, that the primary concern of theologians is to be able to deform the sacred letters (*ex sacris literis extorquere possent*) so as to be able to derive from them their own fabrications and opinions."⁴ In early modern Latin scholarship, the

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2 Spinoza 2002, 456. Here and elsewhere I have modified the translation.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

phrase "Sacred Letters," (*sacris literis*) functioned as a synecdoche of "Holy Scripture" (nearly always in the singular), but appeared far less frequently, most often in ecclesiastical controversies concerning matters of ritual that in theory had a basis in Scripture and thus demanded a careful reading of "what scripture literally says." Spinoza's reading of the phrase "sacred letters" in the passage cited above, however, disrupts the synecdoche according to which the letters in their literal and graphic existence are the means of conveyance of the meaning of the Holy Scripture (in the singular), itself a synecdoche representing the spirit behind the letter, and the voice behind the writing.

For Spinoza, the Sacred Letters can no longer be understood as the most superficial level of meaning, the superficies of the surface. He turns the synecdoche against itself and refuses a reduction of the letter (or letters) to spirit by conferring sanctity on the letters themselves. To regard the letters as sacred in his sense is to allow them a reality apart from what they are said to represent and to render the act of changing or replacing them under the pretext of more accurately transmitting the spirit of the text, "impious."⁵ Spinoza goes to great lengths to compel his readers to confront the letter or letters of the text: he generally cites the many scriptural passages that appear in the TTP in Hebrew, and not transliterated but printed in the Hebrew alphabet, before supplying the Latin equivalent (which often departs from the rendering made familiar by the Vulgate). We should note that this gesture is often suppressed in translations of the TTP, as if against Spinoza's argument, the spirit of the text lies outside of the arrangement of letters in a particular language, the latter no more than one instrument among others by which it may be communicated. Modern versions of the TTP that omit the Hebrew or, in the case of a single word, transliterate it, subtract from the experience of reading the chapter devoted to reading and interpretation something of its unyielding complexity. Apart from the relatively small percentage of its readers able to read the cited passages in Hebrew, the vast majority of those who have read some variant of the original Latin versions experience in the most graphic way (graphic understood both literally, or graphically, and metaphorically) the stubborn alterity of the Sacred Letters and have seen that only an act of faith allows them to take translations (whether Latin or vernacular) as a faithful rendering of the Hebrew text, that is, as something more than an invention or fabrication..

As far as I have been able to determine, "Sacred Letters" has served as the object of the verbs *torquere* or *extorquere*, meaning to twist or wrench, and figuratively to extort something from someone or to torture someone to extract information or a confession, only in Spinoza's text. This is hardly surprising: while in English, for example, few readers discern a link between the terms "distort" and "torture," the physical

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5 Ibid.

and violent senses of the Latin *torquere* and *extorquere* overshadow its figurative uses.⁶ What passes for interpretation is an act of violence directed at the letter of the text, as if, because “the letter killeth, while the spirit giveth life,” one must kill the letter that kills so that the spirit may live. In response, Spinoza restores sanctity to the letters, just as he does to the body and to nature as a whole: no part of existence is “unworthy of the divine nature” (*Ethics* I P2, sch). And the very letter that Spinoza repeatedly places before the reader, not in spite of its foreignness but because of it, the letter in its irreducible materiality, reminds us that there is no meaning hidden behind or beneath it from which it must be removed to reveal. There is nothing hidden: meaning emerges from the infinite concatenation of letters, a horizontal movement of conjunction and assemblage. Both interpretation and the translations that the Jews, even in the case of the Aramaic translations or *targumim* typically included in the so-called Rabbinical or Commentators Bible), regarded as interpretations rather than reproductions of the text, have been extracted through the torture of the Sacred Letters, that is, the act of interpretation whose violent coercion serves as a fictitious guarantee of the truth of what Scripture has been made to say, just as the testimony of slaves in Roman legal proceedings was credible only if it was obtained through torture. This is Spinoza’s response to Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*: the Hebrew Scriptures have been seized in the course of violent conquest by those who, without understanding or wanting to understand what they have taken, use them as a decorative covering for their own doctrines. Spinoza has no interest in asserting their truth or their superiority over other texts that claim a similar status; his objective is to make visible how they are used, distorted and deformed, in short, converted into something they are not and forbidden, like the conversos of Spain and Portugal, ever to refer to their previous life. Thus, it was not the recovery of the Holy Tongue (Hebrew: *שִׁדְרָה וְנוֹשֵׁל*), the language of the utterances (תורמא) with which God created the world, with all its admitted peculiarities, that allowed Spinoza to think about Scripture, writing, and letters in a way so new that it sometimes seems to have arrived from an unknown future rather than derived from the past. It was precisely his confrontation with the violence of interpretation, the experience of the discrepancy, the gap, the fault, conceptual as well as linguistic, between the original Hebrew and the Greek and Latin that allowed Spinoza the freedom to take what he needed from both the traditions of Jewish thought and from the great scientific advances of his time to carry out his exploration of Scripture.

Spinoza’s use of *torquere* and *extorquere*, with the inescapable connotations of “graphic,” corporeal violence, to describe the operation

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6 Moreau 1994, 337. “Torturer le texte (expression qu’emploie souvent Spinoza) ce ‘est rien d’autre que de le faire de l’*usus*.” Moreau argues that Spinoza rejects the opposition between the literal and the figurative and declares the possible meanings of Hebrew words in Scripture limited to those actually found there.

of interpretation, however, does not simply convey information about the means and motives at work in the interpretation of Scripture. It also calls attention to the resistance of Scripture to interpretation that necessitates the violence inflicted on the Sacred Letters. The critique of the letter codified and established by Augustine was founded on the notion of its emptiness and insubstantiality; it was reduced to nothing more than a temporary, superficial, and inessential means of conveying a meaning to which it remains purely external. The fact that letters that must be twisted and mangled to yield up the desired message to the interpreter means that their existence is not spiritual but material: they display the resistance to force that is one of the defining characteristics of matter, in this case, sonic or graphic forms of matter coextensive with and inseparable from the meaning they carry. The meaning immanent in Hebrew, in the patterned configurations of sounds and letters, and the words as they are used in the texts in which they exist, has been declared a pretext for the meaning added to it and then declared its true meaning. The true, spiritual Israel has, according to Augustine, rightfully supplanted carnal Israel, as the younger reigns over the elder, and the letter is submitted to the authority of spirit.

Spinoza delivers the letter from the its subjection to the spirit and allows it to display the power proper to it. We might recall Lucretius's account of sound and voice in Book IV of *De Rerum Natura*: "*Corpoream quoque enim vocem constare fatendum est, Et sonitum, quoniam possunt impellere sensus.*" According Thomas Creech's seventeenth-century translation: "'Tis certain, then, the voice that thus can wound; Is all material body, every sound."⁷ As Spinoza reaches the peroration of his condemnation of the theologians, and the conclusion of the long sentence we have not yet found our way out of, he condenses into a single phrase the diverse lines of argumentation concerning the nature of speech, writing, and language in general. Speaking again of the theologians, now likened to inquisitors who extract false confessions through the torture that serves to guarantee their truth, he maintains that "there is nothing in which they act with less care (the word is "*scrupulo*" or *scrupulus*, a sharp stone, and in its figurative sense, the pain it inflicts, as in "to take pains" or "painstaking") or more rashly (but also dishonorably) than in the interpretation of the Scriptures, or the mind of the Holy Spirit (*Scripturas, sive spiritus sancti mentem*)."

The Scriptures, or the mind of the Holy Spirit: if very few of the commentators on the TTP appear even to have noticed this passage, the general avoidance it has occasioned is not difficult to explain. In fact, the prominence of the terms Scripture and Holy Spirit encourage the reader to make haste to rejoin Spinoza in his continuing harangue against theological interpretations of the Bible. If we pause, however, at

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7 Lucretius 118.

this phrase, another example of the operation of translation/substitution of incommensurable terms indicated by the conjunction *sive*, we are immediately confronted with a series of questions. First, while Spinoza nearly always speaks of Scripture in the singular, as in Holy Scripture, he here uses the plural form, Scriptures, a use many translators have chosen to ignore, as if it were an error or a matter of insignificance. It would seem, however, that Spinoza calls attention to his use of the plural by asserting that the Scriptures are the mind, or are what we mean by the mind of the Holy Spirit, in the singular, thus introducing a discrepancy between them. The words that follow, "the mind of the Holy Spirit," or the "the Holy Spirit's mind," only complicate the meaning further. How is it possible to attribute a mind to the Holy Spirit given that *Spiritus* often served as a synonym of *mens*, both of which could be translated as "mind?" Finally, while Spinoza might have said that Scripture is an expression, a reflection or a representation of the (mind of) the Holy Spirit, thus making Scripture derivative of and dependent on the Holy Spirit from which it emanates, he declined to do so. Instead, he informs us that when we speak of the Holy Spirit, of what it commands or forbids, praises or blames, that is, its judgment or intellection, its *mens* is entirely immanent in the material existence of Scripture, its letters, and the words and phrases they compose. Conspicuously absent from the presentation of the two phenomena joined by the conjunction is that which would mediate their relation: in this case, because we are speaking of writing or written language on the one hand and a mind on the other, the notion that Scripture "expresses," "signifies," or "represents" the mind of the Holy Spirit. The exteriority of Scripture to that which it represents or that of which it is a sign is, of course, critical to the very possibility of translation. The mind of the Holy Spirit must possess an existence prior to and outside of the written form of its expression not only to remain present to writing as a guarantee of its truth, but also as that which remains present to any translation, that which is repeated and re-presented in the translation itself, which becomes the transmission of an identical meaning through another language or system of signs. By rejecting the notion that Scripture "expresses" the mind of the Holy Spirit, and instead suggesting that, as in the case of God and nature, the mind of the Holy Spirit is entirely immanent in and therefore not separable from the Scripture, from the very properties of the language in which it was written, in its lacunae, inconsistencies and redundancies, is to eliminate precisely the dimension that would be susceptible to translation by virtue of its transcendence of and separability from the accidental and merely material form in which it was first realized.

It is this that allows us to understand Spinoza's use of the plural "scriptures:" as he will show in great detail in the remainder of chapter 7, there is no unified or consistent scriptural doctrine, any more than there is a uniform style of writing, or use of language. It is a composite

of multiple and diverse texts that together form a text that in no way transcends the diversity it embodies. This, to recall *Ethics* II, Def. 7, is both its irreducible reality and its perfection. The mind of the Holy Spirit does not exist either prior to or outside of the Scriptures in their very plurality but is entirely coincident with them. To understand what is at stake in the idea that the Scriptures are the mind of the Holy Spirit, we might turn to a strikingly similar passage in *Ethics* I P33 Sch2: "God was not (or did not exist) before his decrees nor could he have been without them." While the proposition concerns the necessary character of what God has produced, such that not even God has the freedom to change their configuration, Spinoza advances the extraordinary notion that God does not exist before his own the decrees, the decrees through which that which exists was produced. I want particularly to call attention to Spinoza's use of "decrees" (*decreta*) in this passage, a performative term that captures a necessary coincidence between speech and power in the sense of *potentia*: it is a command accompanied by the force to assure its realization. But Spinoza refers here to decrees and commands in which language and the reality on which it acts become inseparable, and thus to commands without a commander and therefore to a process of production without a subject or agent. Neither language nor the reality to which it not only refers, but which it also produces, can be said, according to Spinoza, to originate in God, as long as we understand God to remain prior and external to his decrees. If a notion of origin (or originating cause) survives, it is only as that which is absolutely immanent in its effects as, in the earlier passage from the TTP, the mind of the Holy Spirit neither precedes nor transcends the letters in which alone it inseparably dwells.

Those who would correct or improve Scripture by translating the Hebrew into another, "more philosophical," language, such as Greek or Latin (to follow Augustine's argument) or by covering the original text, the mind of the Holy Spirit, with invented meanings, have "falsified" it, and thus committed "sacrilege." And while their worldly interests are served by the falsifications they pass off as Scripture, their interpretations are governed by a set of "theological prejudices" that prevent us from apprehending Scripture in its reality and that represent an extension of superstition as Spinoza defines it in EI appendix to the realm of written texts. The theologians transform Scripture into the mere surface or pretext of the meaning they claim to have found hidden in the depths of the Sacred Letters, but which they have in fact added to it. For them, the surface or external appearance of the text exists precisely to conceal what lies hidden within it, whether to humble those readers given to inordinate pride (as suggested by Augustine) or to protect the truths it conceals by restricting access to those willing and able to undertake the arduous journey into its interior regions. Only those who understand the carnal nature of the letter, its impermanence and worldliness, know enough to seek the immutable spirit beyond, beneath or behind

it, and hence not immediately available to the interpreter. If Scripture presents the appearance of disorder and diversity, a true reading, one in accordance with spirit, will discover the providential order that extends from God's creation even into his Word. Just as what appears to be a sequence of events governed by chance alone, as a series of Spinoza's contemporaries showed, further study reveals the laws and principles determining the movements of bodies, both simple and complex, and the place of these movements in the service of the ends assigned to them by the divine intellect, so Scripture becomes intelligible only on the basis of the purposes that every element of its composition exists to fulfill. The letter of the text by virtue of its bodily character is the site of diversity, ambiguity and confusion: the coherence of the work cannot be found there, but only by a reading that leaves it behind to find Scripture's hidden coherence.

The practice of allegorical interpretation proposed by Augustine in *La Doctrina Christiana* represents one of the most important contributions to the "theological interpretation" Spinoza opposes. His critique of the devaluation of the letter of Scripture, that is, the Sacred Letters, begins with an assertion that the Scriptures, in their plurality, are the word of God and not signs of the word of God that could legitimately be replaced by other signs. The Scriptures as they are, in Hebrew, with its many sources of confusion and undecidability, replete with contradictory statements, discrepancies and lacunae, are the mind of the Holy Spirit, meaning that this mind has no existence apart from the Scriptures, existing neither before nor outside of them, but as their immanent cause, the cause immanent in their multiplicity and present nowhere outside of it to confer unity upon their diversity. To define the letter of Scripture as a degraded expression of the Holy Spirit in order to set it aside or to add through imposition a meaning not found in the Hebrew letters and words is, Spinoza tells us, impious disobedience to the direct command spoken in the first person by God in Deuteronomy (4:2): "Do not add to the word with which I command you nor take away from it," echoed subsequently in Proverbs (30:6): "Do not add to his words." Every attempt to supply the order and design regarded as missing or to add what is necessary to reconcile its discordant and conflicting parts of Scripture or cover over its gaps represents a rejection of the actual text on the basis of imaginary norms external both to it and to nature.

The entire opening section of Chapter 7 consists of a series of theoretical experiments often with only slight variation in the instruments, here words and concepts, in the development of a theory of language (in the sense of *langage*, rather than *langue*, or of the immanence of *langue* in *langage*, to cite Althusser)⁸ adequate to his discussion of Scripture, even as he is compelled to take Scripture, both as it is as

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8 Althusser 82

an artifact, and as the site of a philosophical mobilization supported by a number of apparatuses and institutions, each with the practices, rituals and liturgies by which they persist, as his immediate object. At first, he operates, as a matter of necessity, within the field of Scriptural interpretation as it has been defined historically, occupying the points of contradiction and conflict to shift the relations between their terms in a way favorable to thinking in a new way about both Scripture and language (as did Augustine more than a millennium earlier): his use of “Sacred Letters” (drawing on the ever increasing emphasis in Jewish thought up to his time on the holiness and power of Hebrew letters (תּוֹרָה) in their graphic as well as phonic existence; his use of Scriptures in the plural in place of Scripture, and finally his definition of Scriptures as the mind of the Holy Spirit, which simultaneously made God the author of Scripture and declared that his mind (or thought) had no existence outside of the letter of the text.

The effects of Spinoza’s procedure becomes clear when the passage in question is read in the light of his discussion of prophecy in chapter 1 of the TTP, in the course of which Spinoza asks “what is meant in the Bible by the prophets’ being filled with the Spirit of God, or the prophets speaking with the Spirit of God [*quidnam sacrae literae intelligant per spiritum Dei prophetis infusum, vel quodi prophetae ex Dei spiritu loquebantur*], ” and more particularly the meaning of the Hebrew word רוּחַ or *ruach*, commonly translated as spirit [*quid significat vox Hebraea רוּחַ ruagh, quam vulgus spiritum interpretatur*].⁹ From the Sacred Letters, Spinoza deduces seven distinct meanings, none of which correspond to the sense of the Greek and Latin terms, πνεῦμα and *spiritus*, assigned to *ruach* by the various translations of the Bible. Instead, he argues that the “genuine” or basic meaning of *ruach* is “wind,” necessitating a revision of the translation of Genesis 1:2 of which the King James version is typical (“And the spirit of God [רוּחַ מִיְהוָה] hovered over the face of the waters) ” to “God’s wind (a “wind” that, like all things, comes from God) blew across the surface of the waters.” *Ruach*, like πνεῦμα and *spiritus*, can also mean “breath,” and by extension life, a meaning from which a number of subsidiary uses are derived: persistence, fortitude, courage. In addition, the term may signify an individual’s disposition or tendency, often involuntary or unconscious, that moves him as a wind would. We should note, however, that in none of these senses can *ruach* be understood as a substance external and opposed to bodies, human or otherwise. It is only through translation and interpretation that such a meaning is added to the text. And what Spinoza says later in the TTP is perfectly applicable here: “Now if this is to be called interpretation, and if one can assume such licence in expounding Scripture, transposing entire phrases, adding to them and subtracting

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9 Spinoza 399.

from them, then I declare that it is permissible to corrupt Scripture and to treat it as a piece of wax on which one can impose whatever forms one chooses.”¹⁰

We have now sufficiently complicated the notion of interpretation both in and around Spinoza to be able to return to chapter 7, to the precise point at which he changes terrain and abandons, for the moment, the language of theologians, arguing that “in order to extricate ourselves from this confusion” and “to liberate our thought from theological prejudices,” it is time to move towards “the true method of the interpretation of Scripture [*vera method Scripturam interpretandi*] and examine it carefully.”¹¹ To express it as succinctly as possible, he will say that “the method of the interpretation of Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting nature, but is consistent (*convenire*) with it.”¹² The exact wording of the statement is important, above all, Spinoza’s use of the negative. He does not say that the method of the interpretation of Scripture is the same as the method of interpreting nature, but that the first does not differ from the second. Moreover, he both calls attention to and complicates this non-difference by using the verb *convenire* to designate the relation between the two methods of interpretation. This verb appears in Spinoza work frequently, perhaps too frequently, in the sense that it encompasses such range of meanings that it is left to the reader to choose from among them, and serves to mark a relation of agreement, compatibility or consistency between two things that unites them and allows them to form a greater thing. It does not, however, negate their difference. The use of *convenire* suggests that the relation between these methods is something closer to compatibility, that is, non-antagonism or non-opposition, than non-difference. Is the relation between the interpretation of nature and the interpretation of Scripture one of identity or sameness, or of harmony or unity? Spinoza leaves these questions unanswered for the simple reason that, just as the discourse on the interpretation of Scripture does not appear at the beginning of his analysis but in the middle of it, the seventh of fifteen chapters, so the precise relation of the true method of interpreting scripture to that of interpreting nature cannot be specified until it has been put into practice and tested. He takes the reader with him to observe the experiment as it is conducted and to note the modifications of method its results demand. In this sense, it is possible to say that the TTP represents an experiment in progress, not simply its results, but both the conceptualization and the carrying out of the experiment or experiments, all of them, whatever their result, a journey of discovery that repeatedly encounters dead ends and

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10 Ibid,

11 Spinoza 457.

12 Ibid.

detours. It could not be otherwise: Spinoza is not the first to explore and chart the unknown world of the letter as letter, understood as irreducible to anything prior to or outside of itself, but he is perhaps the first to propose to do so systematically.

As if this were not enough to unsettle the reader at the beginning of the journey, the sentence cited above contains yet another question or problem that while not explicitly posed as such nevertheless remains unavoidable: the meaning and usage of the term “interpretation.” The phrase “interpretation of Scripture” was very common in English, French and Latin in the second half of the seventeenth century. It appears frequently in in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. More broadly, both Hobbes and Locke employ the verb “interpret” and the noun “interpretation” in their discussions of law and how settled law is construed (Hobbes approximately 30 times in *Leviathan* and Locke half that in the *Essay*). Both use the verb ‘interpret,’ although rarely, in other senses, primarily as a synonym for understanding or to designate translation from a foreign language. The term “interpretation” does not appear in any of Descartes’ major works: *The Discourse on Method*, *The Meditations*, the *Principles of Philosophy* or the *Passions of the Soul* (where questions of Scripture or law are seldom treated). Newton’s reference to a faulty interpretation of Scripture is his only use of the term in the *Principia*, while it appears once in Galileo’s *Discorsi*, in the account of the way the human ear “interprets” or experiences sound vibrations. From these examples, not simply those immediately relevant to Spinoza as his predecessors, but also the contemporaries whose concerns overlapped with his, we can offer the hypothesis that “interpretation,” with a handful of exceptions, designates the activity by means of which the knowledge of texts and written documents, Scriptural or legal, is produced, or the results of such activity. If it is possible to formulate a rule that establishes the need for interpretation, it would be that artifacts made of words and letters require a procedure distinct from that employed in the natural sciences. Further, for Hobbes and to a lesser extent Locke, “interpretation” as a mode of knowledge is not only different from, but inferior to, the knowledge of nature, as if the act of interpretation, haunted by the indeterminacy of its object, could never arrive at the certainty that defines true knowledge and thus remains forever open to dispute.

This helps explain why the phrases “interpretation of nature” and the “method of interpreting nature” (*methodo naturam interpretandi*), that is, the use of “interpretation” to designate the means of arriving at a knowledge of nature, is quite unusual in this period, and largely limited to Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* (1620), the subtitle of which is “True Suggestions for the Interpretation of Nature.” Should we thereby assume that Spinoza’s use of the phrase indicates Bacon’s influence on the method of interpreting Scripture as well as nature? The evidence provided

by Spinoza's correspondence would seem to point in the opposite direction. In his initial exchange of letters with Oldenburg, he responds to a question concerning his view of Descartes and Bacon.

“Of Bacon I shall say little; he speaks very confusedly on this subject, and simply makes assertions while proving hardly anything. In the first place he takes for granted that the human intellect, besides the fallibility of the senses, is by its very nature liable to error, and fashions everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe, so that it is like a mirror presenting an irregular surface to the rays it receives, mingling its own nature with the nature of reality, and so forth. Secondly, he holds that the human intellect by reason of its peculiar nature, is prone to abstractions," and imagines as stable things that are in flux, and so on. Thirdly, he holds that the human intellect is in constant activity, and cannot come to a halt or rest, Whatever other causes he assigns can all be readily reduced to the one Cartesian principle, that the human will is free and more extensive than the intellect, or, as Verulam more confusedly puts it, the intellect is not characterised as a dry light, but receives infusion from the will. We

should here observe that Verulam often takes intellect for mind, therein differing from Descartes.) This cause, then, disregarding the others as being of little importance, I shall show to be false. Indeed, they would easily have seen this for themselves, had they but given consideration to the fact that the will differs from this or that volition in the same way as whiteness differs from this or that white object, or as humanity differs from this or that human being. So to conceive the will to be the cause of this or that volition is as impossible as to conceive humanity to be the cause of Peter and Paul.”¹³

Although Spinoza’s critique of Bacon (referred to here as “Verulam”) does not bear directly on Scripture, it touches on the reasons for Bacon’s use of “interpretation” to represent a knowledge of nature in ways that illuminate the practice of scriptural interpretation. The fact that Bacon was a proponent of observation and experiment as the basis of scientific inquiry, did not prevent him from understanding this inquiry as a decryption of nature’s secret forms and the hidden order they together composed, guided by a cryptography. The idea of a unity that precedes and makes possible the diversity of the world as it appears to us, renders our world the code that, when decrypted, will lead to the discovery of what has remained unknown. Spinoza’s critique in the letter to Oldenburgh of the notion of a unified will concealed under the innumerable particular volitions that emanate from it, even at this early stage in his intellectual development, represents a rejection of the emanative or expressive conception of causality implied in Bacon’s idea of decryption as an obstacle that bars the way to a philosophy of immanence.

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13 Spinoza 762-763.

It would appear then that Spinoza has chosen to use a phrase, the interpretation of nature," associated with Bacon's *Novum Organum*, published fifty years earlier which, despite Bacon's continuing repute as a defender of scientific knowledge, may well have had a dated air about it. The strangeness of his choice of phrase is underscored by the near absence of any variant of "interpret" or "interpretation" in Spinoza's other works. This absence is total in the case of the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, the *Tractatus Politicus* and his correspondence, while in the *Ethics* we find a total of three variants of the verb or noun forms. Particularly noteworthy is the first of these, found in the long appendix to Part I, where the positive valence with which Spinoza has endowed "the method of the interpretation of nature" in the TTP, is replaced by its contrary. Midway through the appendix, whose focus is the origin and function of teleological thought, Spinoza describes the proponents of a providential worldview that renders their rule over others the fulfillment of a divine purpose, as those "the mass reveres as interpreters of nature and the gods (*quos vulgus tamquam naturae deorumque interpretes adorat*)."¹⁴ The problem Spinoza identifies is not or not simply the fact that the mass mistakenly regards these individuals as diviners of providence; the act of interpretation itself is impugned as the passing off of an invented world added to the actual world as its hidden truth, of which the interpreter then claims to have unique knowledge. Here, knowledge derived from an interpretation of nature is treated as the pseudo-knowledge of a realm of final purposes deemed supernatural, but whose reality lies entirely in this world, in the ideas and bodily dispositions of subjection and servitude, themselves justified as means necessary to the end of God's will. It flourishes where causes are not yet known, in unexpected and unusual events, whether an earthquake or a plague, mobilizing fear and stupefaction to the benefit of the powers that be.

The verb "interpret" appears at only two points in the *Ethics*. In Part II, P47, Spinoza writes "From this come most disputes, namely that people do not explain their own thinking correctly or interpret badly the thought of others [*atque hinc pleraeque oriuntur controversiae, nempe quia homines mentem suam non recte explicant, vel quia alterius mentem male interpretantur*]."¹⁵ It is used in a similar way in Part III, P55 sch, where he argues that people "interpret the actions of their equals incorrectly, while embellishing their own as much as possible [*suorum aequalium actiones perperam interpretando, vel suas quantum potest adornando*]."¹⁶ In neither case can interpretation be understood as a means to knowledge; in fact, it appears as the operation by which error imposes itself as truth through

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14 Spinoza 241.

15 Spinoza

16 Spinoza

the attribution of one individual's thoughts and feelings, not clearly known even to that individual, to another individual. The projection of what one imagines about oneself on to another is similar to the action by which individuals project ends or purposes on nature because they imagine that they are the causes of their own actions, which arise from a desire to bring about a certain end. In Parts II and III, however, Spinoza identifies the unconscious mechanisms at work in the fabrication of realities that require, or are simply susceptible to, interpretation and their place in the production of a world of human servitude.

Chapter I of the TTP, "On Prophecy," begins by linking prophecy and interpretation: the prophet is the *interpretes*, or go-between, the means of communication between God and his people: "prophecy, or revelation, is the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to humankind. A prophet is one who interprets God's revelations to those who cannot attain to certain knowledge of the matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith. The Hebrew word for prophet is 'nabi' (איבנ)* that is, speaker and interpreter; but it is always used in Scripture in the sense of interpreter of God, as we gather from Exodus chapter 7 v. 1, where God says to Moses, "See, I have made thee a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." This implies that because Aaron was acting the part of prophet in interpreting Moses' words to Pharaoh, Moses would be to Pharaoh as God, or one acting in God's place."¹⁷

The first supplementary note of the first chapter of the TTP thus confronts the reader with Hebrew words in bold, and a discussion of *Nabi* in relation to Hebrew phonology and orthography, as if Spinoza were more interested in the correct attribution of the root of the words and the rules governing combinations of letters than in the meaning of this fundamentally important word. Although overshadowed by the history of and rules determining the word, Spinoza's brief definition of *nabi* as "interpreter," translator, or orator, reduces the prophet to the role of messenger whose message itself must be diminished to be made acceptable to those unable to arrive at a certain understanding of "the matters revealed."

In chapter 9, Spinoza notes that what he calls "dubious passages," in the Hebrew Scriptures, statements whose meaning he admits he finds undecidable, were marked with a marginal notation by the scribes responsible for the reproduction of the text. They did this both for future scribes, so they would not take these passages as errors and try to correct them, and for future readers, to indicate that the fault is neither in their understanding, nor in the scribes' copy. The fact that these ambiguities were not explained away or made the pretext for the addition of mysteries to the text to fill in its gaps led Spinoza to come

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17 Spinoza 394.

very close to giving praise to those reviled in the Gospels as worshippers of the letter and reveal quite ostentatiously his familiarity with the most “Pharasaical” of texts (in the sense Spinoza uses the term in the TTP), the *Tractate Soferim* [מִירְפוּס תַּכְסֵּמָה], a set of rules for scribes. It might well be useful to for readers of the TTP to follow their example and mark those particularly difficult passages whose very difficulty has so often been overlooked.

The statement that “the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact completely consistent with it” is undoubtedly one of these passages, especially when read in the light of his treatment of “interpretation” elsewhere in the TTP and in the *Ethics*. His statement of the non-difference between the method of interpreting nature and that of interpreting scripture inscribes the difference elsewhere, not between the methods of interpreting nature and scripture but within them, as if the contradiction within the approaches to the interpretation of nature simply continues on or extends into the interpretation of Scripture. Here two alternative readings of this passage appear. On the one hand, it may be that the single method for the interpretation of nature and scripture represents the application of the model of scriptural interpretation to nature, dividing it into appearance and essence, surface and depth, exterior and interior, and adding the second term to the first as its truth and reality. The end result of such an operation is or ought to be the discovery of an initially invisible order, whether the formal order of a written text or the providential order of the world, within which apparently discordant moments are resolved into harmony. From this perspective, nature and scripture can be said to be known to the extent that the disorder they seem to present is reduced to an order whose origins lie beyond them, beyond letters, bodies and movements, in the spirit that confers order on matter.

The second, true, method does not exist in symmetrical opposition to the first, for which the knowledge of both nature and scripture requires a hermeneutic procedure. Natural philosophy, as Spinoza conceives it, must begin with the act of renouncing any recourse to the supernatural, to mysteries, to hidden realms; the causal processes it establishes are those internal to nature. If God is, as Spinoza argues, the cause of all things, it is not as an external or transcendental cause, but a cause so absolutely immanent in its effects that it might be taken as absent, having no existence outside of them. This notion of God, or nature, hardly seems to offer a model for the understanding of scripture (both as a written text and as the word of God that it contains) which requires the dissipation of the letter to gain access to the spirit it conceals. If Spinoza rejects the notion of interpretation as it is commonly practiced and understood, however, he does not offer an alternative notion to replace it. On the contrary, chapter 7 begins with the gesture by which Spinoza divides himself from the existing concept of the interpretation of scripture,

a gesture made possible by the work evidenced in the preceding six chapters and reaffirmed in the next eight. Spinoza does not begin with a method, but is compelled to theorize his own practice of reading as he reads, lingering in its wake for the few moments it takes to summarize its lessons and record its successes and failures, all the while engaged in a labor that perpetually exceeds its theory.

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