

# Treatise on Theology and Politics

Showing that piety and civil peace are not harmed by allowing freedom of thought,  
but are destroyed by the abolition of freedom of thought.

Benedict (or Baruch) Spinoza

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis. . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between square brackets in normal-sized type. —Numerals like [5] embedded in the text refer to page-numbers in volume 3 of the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's works. That's to help you connect this version with other translations. (The likes of [..27] refer to Gebhardt page-numbers in the immediately preceding passage that has been omitted.) Cross-references include the word 'page(s)', and refer to numbers at the foot of each page.

•The work's Latin title is *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* = 'A Theological/Political Treatise'. The political part of the work starts with chapter 16.

•Spinoza worked mainly with the Hebrew Bible, known as *Tanakh*; so wherever it is plausible to do so, Old Testament quotations will be from a standard English translation of that (Jewish Publication Society, 1985). Verse-numbers don't always exactly match those in non-Jewish Bibles.

•Many of Spinoza's quotations from the Bible are given first in Hebrew and then in Latin. Throughout this version, the Hebrew is ignored and the Latin translated.

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## Preface

·SUPERSTITION·

[5] If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if they never ran into bad luck, they would never succumb to superstition. But often they are in such a jam that they can't put any plan into operation, and can only trust to luck, wobbling miserably between hope and fear. That makes them ready to believe anything ·that will calm them down·; when they are in doubt, a slight impulse drives them this way or that—especially when they are tormented by hope and fear, and don't know which way to turn. At other times they are over-confident, boastful and presumptuous.

Everyone knows this, I think, though I also think that most people don't know *themselves*. We have all seen what usually happens when things are going well: even men who are quite inexperienced are so brim-full of cleverness that they take offence at being given any advice. And when times are bad, men don't know where to turn; they ask advice from everyone, and they *follow* it, however stupid and clumsy it may be. They flail around, now hoping for better things and then fearing worse ones, without having any real reasons.

If someone who is knotted with fear sees an event that reminds him of some *past* good or evil, he'll take it to be a sign of a *future* good or evil; so he'll call it a 'good omen' or 'bad omen' even if it deceives him a hundred times. Again, if someone is amazed by a strange event that he sees happen, he'll think it's a sign of coming disaster, indicating that the gods are (or that God is) angry; which will lead him to think that he ought to placate them with sacrifices and prayers—an attitude that is full of superstition and contrary to ·real· religion. People are endlessly making up fictions, and interpret nature in amazing ways implying that the

whole of nature is as crazy as they are.

From all this we can see that the people who are most in thrall to every kind of superstition are the ones whose desires are obsessively fixed on things they aren't certain of. They all call for divine aid with prayers and womanish wailing, especially when they are in danger and can't help themselves out of it. Because ·reason can't show them a secure route to the hollow [Latin *vana*] things they want—things such as money, fame, or power·—they call ·it *blind*, and regard human wisdom as useless [Latin *vana*]. But they regard the delusions, dreams and childish follies that their imagination comes up with as God's answers ·to their prayers·. Indeed, they think that God snubs the wise and writes his decrees not in the mind but in the entrails of animals! and that fools, madmen and birds foretell his decrees by divine inspiration and prompting. That's how fear makes men insane.

[6] So what makes superstition arise and grow is fear. If you want a specific example, look at Alexander ·the Great·. He didn't make use of seers in a genuinely superstitious way until, at the ·mountain pass known as· the Susidan gates, he had his first experience of being anxious about whether his *luck* would hold, in a situation that he couldn't control. After he had defeated Darius ·in that battle·, he stopped consulting soothsayers and seers until the next time he was frightened. The Bactrians had gone over to the other side, and the Scythians were challenging him to battle when he himself was laid up with a wound. 'He lapsed back into superstition, that mocker of men's minds, and ordered Aristander, whom he had put in charge of his beliefs, to perform sacrifices so as to learn what was going to happen' (quoted from Curtius's *Life of Alexander*). There are

countless other examples, showing clearly •that superstition doesn't get its claws into men except when they are afraid; •that what they worship in their illusory religion is nothing but ghosts, the delusions of minds that are depressed and scared; and finally •that it's in times of great national distress that seers have had the most control over the common people, and have been the most dangerous to their kings. That's enough about that; I think everyone knows all this well enough.

Some people think that superstition arises from a confused idea of God; but my account of the cause of superstition clearly implies three things about it:

- All men are naturally prone to it.
- Like all delusions of the mind and impulses of frenzy, it is bound to be fluctuating and intermittent, and
- It is kept up only by hope, hate, anger, and deception, because it arises not from reason but only from the most powerful affects.

[In Spinoza's usage, the noun 'affect' is a very broad term that covers all the emotions but also some dispositions or character-traits such as cowardice and greed.] •Those three features of superstition pretty clearly rule out the theory that it consists in a confused idea of God.

It's easy for men to be taken in by any kind of superstition, but it's not easy for them to stay with one superstition •rather than rushing off to others•. The common people are always wretched, so they are never satisfied for long, and always welcome anything new that hasn't yet deceived them. This superstition-switching has been the cause of many outbreaks of disorder and terrible wars. What I have been saying makes it clear, and Curtius says it neatly: 'Nothing sways the masses more effectively than superstition.' That's why they are easily led, under the pretext of religion, to worship their kings as gods for a while and then switch to

cursing and loathing them as the common plague of the human race.

To avoid this evil •of switching•, tremendous efforts are made to embellish any true religion and [7] any empty cult with so much ceremony and pomp that it will be seen as weightier than every •other• influence and will be worshipped by everyone with the utmost deference. The Moslems have done this so well that they •consider it a sacrilege even to *discuss* •religion•, and •fill everyone's head with so many prejudices that there's no room left for sound reason or even the hint of a doubt.

The greatest secret and whole aim of •monarchic rule is to keep men deceived, and controlled through fear cloaked in a spurious religious covering, so that they'll fight for slavery as they would for salvation, and will think it honourable rather than shameful to give their life's blood so that one man can have something to boast about. But in a •free State that is the worst thing one could plan or attempt. To fill each man's judgment with prejudices, or to restrain it in any way, is flatly contrary to common freedom.

As for the rebellions that people stir up in the name of religion, they arise only because •laws are made about matters of theoretical belief, •opinions are condemned as wicked crimes, and •those who have the opinions are sacrificed not to the public good but to the hatred and barbarity of their opponents. If the law of the State were such that *only actions were condemned and words went unpunished*, controversies wouldn't become rebellions and rebellions would lose their appearance of high-mindedness. [Spinoza's praise of the Dutch Republic is ironical; his opinions had already put him under pressure, which would increase when this present work was published.] Well, then, since we have the rare good fortune of living in a republic where everyone has complete freedom of thought and is permitted to worship God as he sees fit, and in which

freedom is valued more than anything else, I thought it would be useful (and not unwelcome) for me to show not only •that this freedom can be allowed without harm to piety and the peace of the republic, but also •that if it is abolished the piety and peace of the republic will go down with it. [In this version, the words *pietas* and *pious* will often be translated by ‘piety’ and ‘pious’ respectively; but the thought they convey is always that of *religious duty*—a ‘pious’ person is one whose conduct is in accordance with (and motivated by) his religious duties—and occasionally the translation will reflect that fact.]

•THE OVER-ALL SCHEME OF THIS BOOK•

The main thing I aim to show in this treatise is that freedom of opinion and worship is not *harmful* to the piety and peace of the State but *essential* for them. This will require me to describe •the main prejudices about religion, i.e. the remnants of our former bondage, and then also •the prejudices concerning the right of the sovereign. [That phrase translates Spinoza’s *summorum potestatum jus*, which literally means ‘the right (or law, or duty) of the highest powers’. Similar phrases occur often in this work. The present version will use ‘authority’ to render the slippery word *jus* in such phrases; remember that something’s having ‘authority’ is always a matter of what it has a right to do, what it is entitled to do, or the like. And ‘the highest powers’ and some similar phrases will be variously translated—e.g. as ‘sovereign’ or as ‘government’ or as ‘those who have sovereignty’—depending on what sounds best in the context. The concept that is involved is the same all through.] Many people brazenly try to grab most of that authority for themselves, and to use religious excuses to turn the mob’s affections away from the sovereign, so that everything will collapse back into slavery. (They could succeed, because the masses aren’t yet completely free of pagan superstition.) Before telling you in what order I’m going to show these things, I shall first tell you what reasons have pushed me into writing.

[8] I have often wondered that men who boast of their

adherence to the Christian religion—i.e. to love, joy, peace, decency of conduct, and honesty towards all—quarrel so bitterly among themselves, and daily express their hatred for one another, so that a man’s religion is shown more clearly by where and how he picks his quarrels than by his love, gladness, and so on. •A person’s religious affiliations no longer affect how he lives•. For a long time now, things have become so bad that you can hardly know what anyone is—whether Christian, Moslem, Jew or pagan—except by •how he dresses and grooms himself, •where he goes to worship, •which opinions he is attached to, or •which teacher’s words he is given to swearing by. They all lead the same kind of life!

How did this bad situation arise? I’m sure that its root cause is the fact that the ‘religion’ of ordinary people has involved their looking up to the clergy as respectable, well-paid, honourable members of society. For as soon as this abuse began in the Church—i.e. the abuse of regarding God’s ministers as secure and affluent professionals—the worst men immediately set about qualifying to perform the sacred tasks; the •love of spreading divine religion degenerated into •sordid greed and ambition; and the house of worship became a theatre where one would hear not learned •ecclesiastics teaching the people but •orators aiming to create admiration for themselves, to censure publicly those who disagree, and to propagate only new and unfamiliar doctrines that the people would find striking. The only possible result, of course, has been dissension, envy, and hatred, whose violence doesn’t go down with the passage of time.

No wonder nothing remains of the old religion except its external ceremonies, which evidently involve fawning on God rather than worshipping him; no wonder there’s nothing left but credulity and prejudices. And what prejudices! They

turn men from rational beings into beasts, because they •won't let anyone use his free judgment to distinguish the true from the false, and •seem deliberately designed to put out the light of the intellect entirely. 'Piety' . . . and 'religion' consist in absurd mysteries; and (this is the worst thing) the people who scorn reason and reject the intellect as inherently corrupt are just the ones who are thought to have the divine light. If they actually had even a tiny spark of divine light, they wouldn't go in for such pompous ranting, and would instead get into the way of worshipping God more wisely, and would be notable for their love rather than, as now, for their hate. Their attitude towards those who disagreed with them would be *pity* for people whose salvation they thought was threatened, not •*hostility* towards people they saw as a danger to their own position.

[9] If they had *any* divine light, that would show up in their teaching, and it doesn't. They can't have been much impressed by the profoundly wonderful mysteries of Scripture! I can't see that they have taught *anything* but Aristotelian and Platonic theories, adjusted to square with the Bible so that they wouldn't seem to be dedicated pagans. Not content with joining the Greeks in craziness, they have wanted the prophets to rave along with them! This clearly shows that they don't see—don't even *dream* of seeing—the divinity of Scripture. The more they wonder at these mysteries, the more they show that they don't *believe* the Bible—they merely *say* Yes to it. It's also significant that most of them base their understanding of Scripture on the assumption that it is, sentence by sentence, true and divine. So they bring *to* Scripture as a rule for interpreting it, something that ought to be learned *from* Scripture, through a strict examination with no fiddling of the results.

When I weighed these matters in my mind—when I considered that

- the natural light is not only disregarded but *condemned* by many as a source of impiety,
- human inventions are treated as divine teachings,
- credulity is considered as faith,
- the controversies of the philosophers are debated with the utmost passion in the Church and in the State, and in consequence
- the most savage hatreds and disagreements arise, which men easily turn into rebellions

—when I considered these and ever so many other things that it would take too long to tell here, I resolved to examine Scripture afresh, with my mind clear and uncluttered, affirming nothing about it and accepting nothing as its teaching except what it clearly taught me.

•CHAPTER BY CHAPTER—THEOLOGY•

With this resolve in mind I set about constructing a method for interpreting the sacred Books. In accordance with this method, I began by asking:

- What is prophecy? [chapter 1]
- How did God reveal himself to the prophets?
- Why were the prophets accepted by God?—because of their exalted thoughts about God and nature, or because of their piety? [chapter 2]

Once I knew the answers to these questions, I was easily able to determine that the authority of the prophets carries weight only in its relevance to how we should live and be truly virtuous, while their *opinions* are of little concern to us. With that settled, I next asked

- Why were the Hebrews called 'God's chosen people'? [chapter 3]

When I saw that the answer is 'Because God chose for them a certain land where they could live securely and comfortably', [10] this taught me •that the laws God revealed to Moses were nothing but legislation for the particular State of the

Hebrews, •that no-one else was obliged to accept them, and indeed •that even the Hebrews were bound by them only so long as their State lasted.

Next, to know whether Scripture implies that the human intellect is inherently corrupt, I had to ask:

- Regarding universal religion, i.e. the divine law revealed to the whole human race through the prophets and apostles—is it anything other than what is also taught by the natural light? [chapters 4 and 5]
- Are miracles events that conflict with the order of nature?
- Are God's existence and providence taught better—more certainly and clearly—by miracles than by things we understand clearly and distinctly through their first causes? [chapter 6]

In the explicit teachings of Scripture I found nothing that contradicts the intellect, •i.e. contradicts the conclusions you could reach by thinking accurately without consulting Scripture.; and I saw that the prophets taught only very simple things that everyone could easily grasp, and that the style with which they decorated those things and the reasons they gave for them were aimed at moving peoples' minds to devotion toward God. In the light of all this, I was completely convinced that •Scripture leaves reason absolutely free, and that it has no overlap with •philosophy, so that each rests on its own foundation.

To demonstrate these things conclusively and get the whole matter *settled*, I show how to interpret Scripture, and show that for knowledge of it and of spiritual matters we should look only to Scripture itself, and not to anything we know through the natural light. [chapter 7] From this I move on to showing what prejudices have arisen from the fact that the common people. . . worship •the Books of Scripture rather than •the word of God itself. [chapters 8–11]

After this, I show that God's revealed word isn't a particular group of books, but rather a simple thought of the divine mind that was revealed to the prophets: *to obey God with our whole heart, by practising justice and loving kindness* [throughout this version 'loving kindness' will translate the Latin *charitas*]. And I show that this is what Scripture teaches, presenting it in a way that's appropriate to the beliefs and intellectual level of those who would get it from the prophets and apostles. The aim was for men to *welcome* the word of God with their whole heart. [chapters 12 and 13]

After setting out the fundamentals of the faith [chapter 14], I conclude finally

**what Spinoza wrote next, conservatively translated:** that revealed knowledge has no object but obedience, and that it is entirely distinct from natural knowledge, both in its object and in its foundation and means.

**expressed a bit less compactly:** that revealed knowledge is unlike natural knowledge in its basis, in the means for discovering it, and in its objective; the crucial point being that revealed knowledge *tells us how to behave*; so that if all goes well it is **obeyed**, whereas natural knowledge *says what is the case*; so that if all goes well it, it is **true**. Those are the different objectives: obedience in one case, truth in the other.

Revealed knowledge has no overlap with natural knowledge; each governs its own domain, without any [11] conflict with the other. Some mediaeval theologians held that philosophy should be subservient to theology, but in fact •neither ought to be the handmaid of the other. [chapter 15]

•CHAPTER BY CHAPTER—POLITICS•

Next, because •men's understandings vary greatly, because •one man likes *these* opinions while another likes *those*, because •what gives one man a religious inspiration makes



another man giggle, I conclude that each person must be allowed to make up his own mind, being enabled to interpret the foundations of the faith according to his own understanding. In judging whether a person's faith is pious or not, we should consider only his behaviour, not the theological propositions that he assents to. This approach will enable everyone to obey God with a whole and free heart, with nothing being prized except justice and loving kindness.

After showing the freedom that the revealed divine law grants to everyone, I proceed to show not merely that this freedom can be granted without harm to the peace of the State or the status of the sovereign, but further that it must be granted, and can't be taken away without great danger to peace and great harm to the whole republic.

To demonstrate these conclusions, I begin with the *natural right* [*jus*] of each person, which extends as far as that person's desire and power extend—meaning that if you want *x* and can get *x* then you have a right to *x*. No law [*jus*] of nature obliges anyone to live according to someone else's understanding; everyone is the defender of his own freedom. I show also that no-one gives up this right unless he transfers his power of defending himself to someone else; and that if there is some person or governmental entity to whom everyone hands over his power to defend himself and thus also his right to live according to his own understanding, that person or government must necessarily retain this natural right absolutely. [chapter 16. In that sentence, 'person or governmental entity' translates a Latin pronoun that could be understood either way, leaving that question open. That can't be done in English, which uses 'him' for persons and 'it' for other things.]

On this basis I show that those who have the sovereignty have the right to do anything that is in their power, that they alone are the defenders of right and freedom, and that everyone else must act always according to their decree

alone. [In that sentence, 'sovereignty' translates *summum imperium* = 'highest command' or the like.] But no-one can so completely give up his power of defending himself that he stops being a man; so no-one gives up *all* his natural right; everyone keeps for himself certain things—things to which he has a sort of natural right—that the State can't take from him without putting *itself* in peril. These things are tacitly granted to every subject unless they are explicitly recognized in an agreement between the subjects and the sovereign.

From these considerations, I pass to the Hebrew State, which I describe at some length. My aim here is to show how religion began to have the force of law, whose decree brought this about, and various other things that seem worth knowing. [chapters 17 and 18] Then I show that those who have sovereignty are the defenders and interpreters not only of (1) civil law but also of (2) sacred law, and that they're the only ones entitled to decide not only (1) what is just and what unjust but also (2) what is pious and what impious [chapter 19]. Finally, I conclude that if those who have sovereignty are to retain their right and authority really [12] securely, they must allow everyone to think what he likes and to say what he thinks [chapter 20. Those last eleven words translate a quotation from the great Latin historian Tacitus; it occurs also in the title of chapter 20, and on the title-page of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*.].

These, philosophical reader, are the things I'm offering for you to think about. You'll give the work a good reception, I'm sure, given the importance and the usefulness of my line of argument, both in the work as a whole and in each chapter. I could go on about this here, but I don't want this preface to grow into a book! Anyway, the main things that I might add here in the preface are points that philosophers already know quite well. And I'm not aiming to recommend this book to others who aren't, at least to some extent, philosophers, because there's no hope of its pleasing *them*

in any way! I've seen how stubbornly the mind is gripped by the prejudices that it has embraced under the guise of piety. I've seen also that the common people can't be rescued from •superstition any more than they can from •fear. And—winding this up—I've seen that the common people's way of being •constant is to be •obstinate, and that they aren't governed by reason, but are bundled along into praising and blaming by their •thoughtless• impulses. I'm not inviting the common people to read what I have to say. . . . I would prefer them to neglect this book entirely, rather than stirring up trouble by interpreting it perversely—which is what they usually do with everything. Reading it perversely won't do *them* any good, and will harm *others* who would philosophize more freely if they weren't blocked by the thought that reason must be the handmaid of theology. For them—the readers

who are willing and able to think philosophically—I think that this work will be extremely useful.

There's something I need to declare, both here and at the end of the work, so as to catch the eye of those who don't have time—or the desire—to read the entire work right through. It is this: I gladly submit the whole of this book to the examination and judgment of the governing authorities of my country. If they judge that anything in it conflicts with the laws of the country or threatens the general welfare, I take it back. I'm aware that I am a man and •therefore• may have erred. Still, I have taken great care not to go wrong, and taken care especially that whatever I might write would be entirely consistent with the laws of my country, with piety and with morals.

## Chapter 1: Prophecy

[15]• Prophecy—i.e. revelation—is the certain knowledge of something that God reveals to men. And a prophet is someone who interprets the things revealed by God to those who can't have certain knowledge of them and can only accept them through sheer faith. The Hebrew word for a prophet. . . . means 'spokesman and interpreter', but Scripture always uses it to mean 'interpreter of God', as can be seen in Exodus 7:1, where God says to Moses: 'See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet.' This amounts to saying: 'Since Aaron will

have the role of a prophet who interprets to Pharaoh the things you say, your role will be to play the part of Pharaoh's God.'

•NATURAL KNOWLEDGE•

I'll discuss *prophets* in Chapter 2; my present topic is *prophecy*. The definition I have just given implies that natural knowledge can be called 'prophecy'. For the things we know by the natural light depend only on the knowledge of God and of God's eternal decrees. [Why not '...and of his eternal decrees'? Because that treats God as a person, which Spinoza

doesn't do. Then why not '... and of *its* eternal decrees'? Because that has Spinoza *pushing* his view that God is not a person, and he doesn't do that either. No Latin pronouns mark the 'he'/'it' distinction, so Spinoza's text doesn't help us here. In this version 'he' and 'his' will be used to refer to God •when Spinoza is expressing the theological beliefs of *others*, and •in contexts dominated by the thought of Christ as the son of God. But in some other passages, such as this one and a paragraph on page 41, the pronouns will be avoided.] But everyone has this natural knowledge, because the basis for it is a nature that all men have; so it isn't valued much by the common people, who don't respect their own natural gifts and are always thirsting for things that rare and foreign to their nature. When *they* speak of 'prophetic knowledge', they mean this as excluding natural knowledge. But natural knowledge has as much right to be called 'divine' as any other knowledge, because it is dictated to us (so to speak) by God's nature insofar as we share in it and by God's decrees. There are only two differences between **(1)** natural knowledge and **(2)** the knowledge that everyone calls 'divine':

- (2)** extends beyond the limits of **(1)**, and
- the laws of human nature, considered in themselves, can't be the cause of **(2)** •as they are of **(1)**•.

•The two kinds of knowledge are alike in two respects:•

- (1)** can be just as certain as **(2)** can; [16]
- the source of **(1)** is as fine as the source of **(2)**—it is God in each case.

If you want to deny the point about the similarity of source, you'll have to adopt the fantasy that although the prophets had human bodies their minds were not of the human sort,

so that their sensations and awareness were of an entirely different nature from ours.

But though natural knowledge is divine—or anyway of divine origin—those who teach it can't be called 'prophets'.<sup>1</sup> For what they teach are things that other men can perceive and accept with as much certainty as they do, and in a way that is just as respectable—and not as a mere matter of faith.

Our mind contains a representation of the nature of God, and itself shares in that nature; and just because of that, it is able to form certain notions that explain the nature of things and teach us how to live our lives. So we can rightly maintain that the nature of the •human• mind, looked at in this way, is the first cause of divine revelation. For anything that we clearly and distinctly understand is (I repeat) dictated to us by the idea and nature of God—not in words, but in a much finer way that perfectly fits the nature of our mind. If you have ever tasted the certainty of the intellect, you must have experienced this for yourself.

That's enough about the natural light; my main concerns here are only with Scripture. So now I'll discuss in more detail the other causes and means by which God reveals to men things that go beyond the limits of natural knowledge. (And some that *don't* go beyond those limits; for nothing prevents God from communicating to men in other ways the same things we know by the light of nature.)

•HOW GOD REVEALS THINGS TO MEN•

Whatever can be said about these matters must be derived from Scripture alone. For what can we say about things that exceed the limits of our intellect other than what has

<sup>1</sup> That is, 'interpreters of God'. That label applies only to someone who interprets God's decrees to others who rely entirely on him for this knowledge. But if the men who listened to prophets became prophets, as those who listen to philosophers become philosophers, then the prophet wouldn't be an 'interpreter' (in my sense) of the divine decrees, because his hearers would •come to• rely not on what he said but on what God revealed to them. . . . •With 'interpreter' understood in this way•, the sovereign powers are the interpreters of the right of their State, because the laws they pass are preserved only by their authority and depend only on their testimony.

been passed down to us—either orally or in writing—from the prophets? And because these days we don't have any prophets, as far as I know, all we can do is to expound the sacred Books that the prophets have left to us. In doing so, we should heed this warning: in this context, don't assert or attribute to the prophets anything that they didn't say clearly and often.

Let's start with this: For the sake of religion and of piety. . . . [17] the Jews always explain things in terms of God, and never bring in—never even *mention*—causes that are intermediate between God and the effect. [Spinoza also calls these 'particular' causes. To explain an event E in terms of something causally closer than God, one will have to bring in facts that are relevant to E-like events in particular, rather than relying on the general all-purpose invocation of God.] For example, if they earn money by trade, they say that God has supplied it to them; if they want something to happen, they say that God has given them this wish; if they think something, they say that **God has told it to them**. So when Scripture says that God has told someone that P, that doesn't show that P is an item of prophecy or supernatural knowledge; for *that* we need either Scripture's explicitly saying that P was prophecy or revelation, or the status of P as prophecy is clearly implied by the details of the narration.

So if we run through the Books of the Bible, we'll see that all the things that God revealed to the prophets were revealed them in either words or visible forms or both. Sometimes the words or visible forms truly existed outside the imagination of the prophet who heard or saw them; sometimes they were imaginary, occurring only because of the state of the prophet's imagination, because of which he seemed to himself to be clearly hearing words or seeing things that weren't there to be heard or seen, this being something that happened while he was awake.

It was by a true voice that God revealed to Moses the laws that he wanted prescribed to the Hebrews, as is apparent from *Exodus 25:22*, where God says 'There I will meet with you, and I will speak to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim'—thus specifying an exact location within the temple. This shows that God used a true voice, since Moses used to find God there at that place, available to speak to him, whenever he wanted to. And as I shall soon show, this voice by which the law was pronounced was the only true voice.

One might think that the voice with which God called Samuel was a true one—in *1 Samuel 3:21* it is said: 'The Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh with the word of the Lord.' It's as though the writer were saying that God's appearance to Samuel was nothing but God's revealing himself to Samuel by God's word, or was nothing but Samuel's *hearing* God speaking. But because we have to distinguish the prophecy of Moses from that of the rest of the prophets [this will be explained shortly], we must say that what Samuel heard was an imaginary voice. This can also be inferred from its resembling Eli's voice, which Samuel was very accustomed to hearing, making it easy for him to imagine it. How do we know that the voice resembled Eli's? From the fact that when God called him three times, Samuel thought each time that [18] it *was* Eli calling him [reported in *1 Samuel 3:4–9*].

The voice Abimelech heard was imaginary. For it is said in *Genesis 20:6*: 'And God said to him in the dream. . . .' and so on. So he was able to imagine the will of God only in a dream, i.e. at the time when the imagination is naturally most apt to imagine things that don't exist.

Some Jews think that the words of the Decalogue—also known as 'the Ten Commandments'—were not pronounced by God. They think that the Israelites only heard a sound

that didn't articulate any words, and that while that was happening they perceived the Ten Commandments with a pure mind rather than through their senses. I too have sometimes suspected this, because I noticed that the words of the Decalogue in *Exodus* [20:2-17] are not the same as those of the Decalogue in *Deuteronomy* [5:7-21]. Since God spoke only once, this variation seems to show that the Decalogue doesn't purport to teach God's very words but only their meaning. But unless we're willing to do violence to Scripture, we absolutely must accept that the Israelites heard a true voice. For Scripture says explicitly, in *Deuteronomy* 5:4, 'Face to face the Lord spoke to you' and so on, i.e. in the ordinary way in which men usually communicate their thoughts to one another by means of their bodies. So it seems to fit the Scripture best to suppose that God truly **created** a voice through which to reveal the Decalogue. In chapter 8 I shall discuss the reason why the words of the two versions differ.

But this leaves a certain difficulty intact—a difficulty that seems to be soluble only by supposing that God himself spoke. It seems quite unreasonable to maintain that a **created** thing such as a disembodied voice, dependent on God in the same way as any other created thing, could express in words, or explain through its own character, the essence or existence of God by saying in the first person, 'I the Lord am your God' and so on. Let me explain the significance of 'dependent on God in the same way as any other'. When you say aloud 'I have understood', no-one gathers from this that your mouth has understood; we know that you mean that your mind has understood. *How* do we get this from what you said? I do it because it involves taking your mouth to relate to your state of mind in the way that my mouth, when I speak, relates to my state of mind. But these people knew nothing of God but his name, and they wanted

to speak with him to be assured of his existence; I don't see how they could achieve *that* through encountering 'I am God' being uttered by a created thing that didn't pertain to God's nature, and was no more closely related to God than any other created thing. [19] What if, instead of creating a voice, God had twisted Moses' lips to utter those same words, 'I am God'? Would they have understood from *that* that God exists? What if they were the lips, not of Moses, but of some beast?

Next, we find Scripture saying outright that God himself spoke—he came down from heaven to the top of Mount Sinai to do so—and that not only did the Jews hear him speaking but the elders even saw him. See *Exodus* 24:10-11. Consider also the content of the Law that was revealed to Moses—the Law to which nothing could be added and from which nothing could be taken away. . . . [In this passage, an 'image' of something is a *visible likeness* of it.] It doesn't command us to believe that God is incorporeal, or that he has no image or shape; it tells us only to believe that God exists, to trust in him, and to worship him alone. The Law did command the Israelites not to make up stories about God's shape, and not to make any image of him, but that was to guard against their falling away from the worship of him. How could image-making produce that result? Well,

They hadn't *seen* God's shape, so they weren't in a position to make any image that would resemble him, as distinct from remembering some created thing they had seen. So when they worshipped God through that image, they would think not about God but about the thing the image resembled, and would give to *that* thing the honour and worship that they owed to God. But Scripture clearly indicates that God *has* a visible shape, and that Moses was allowed when hearing God speak to see him, though only from behind [*Exodus* 33:20-23]. There's some

mystery concealed here, to be sure. I'll discuss it more fully later. But now let us look at the places in Scripture that indicate *how* God revealed his decrees to men.

God did sometimes reveal things through images alone; that is evident from 1 *Chronicles* 21:16, where God shows his anger to David through an angel holding a sword in his hand. And the same thing with Balaam [*Numbers* 22:22–35]. The Jewish scholar Maimonides and others claim that all the stories about the appearances of angels—e.g. to Manoaah [*Judges* 13:8–20] and to Abraham when he was going to sacrifice his son [*Genesis* 22:11–18]—happened in dreams, because a person couldn't see an angel with his eyes open. But they are babbling nonsense, trying to squeeze out of Scripture various bits of Aristotelian rubbish and inventions of their own. Ridiculous!

When God revealed to Joseph the power that he would some day have, he did this through images that were not real and depended only on the imagination of the prophet. [*Genesis* 37:5–10, where it is explicitly said that Joseph 'dreamed' these things.] **[20]** God used •images and •words in revealing to Joshua that he would fight for the Israelites—•showing him an angel holding a sword, like a commander of an army [*Joshua* 5:13], and also •telling him in words [*Joshua* 1:1–9, 3:7]. . . . [Spinoza adds a further example from the Book of Joshua, and says he would add many others 'if I didn't think that these matters are well enough known to everyone'.]

All these things are confirmed more clearly in *Numbers* 12:6–8, which reads:

When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make myself known in a vision [Spinoza interprets this as] i.e. through visible forms and obscure symbols (whereas Moses' prophecy, he says, is a vision without obscure symbols).

I speak with him in a dream [Spinoza:] When I speak with him, it is not with real words and a true voice.

Not so with my servant Moses. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. [Spinoza:] i.e. he looks at me as he would look at a friend (see *Exodus* 33:11), and isn't terrified when he speaks with me.

So it is beyond question that Moses was the only prophet who heard the true voice of God. This is confirmed still further by *Deuteronomy* 34:10, where it is said that 'Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out, face to face'—which has to mean 'by voice alone', for even Moses didn't ever see God's face (*Exodus* 33:20).

I haven't found in the sacred texts any other ways by which God has communicated himself to men. Therefore, by the policy that I announced earlier [page 9], we mustn't invent or admit any others. Of course, we clearly understand that God *can* communicate with men immediately (rather than through prophets), for God communicates God's essence to our mind without using any corporeal means. But there are severe limits on *what* can be communicated to us in this way. A man can perceive by his mind alone **[21]** things that are contained in the first foundations of our knowledge; but for him to perceive in that way anything that *isn't* contained in those first foundations and can't be deduced from them, his mind would have to be far more outstanding and excellent than the human mind is.

[In the foregoing passage, Spinoza equates **(1)** 'God communicates God's essence to me directly' with **(2)** 'I perceive by my mind alone the first foundations of my knowledge'. What's going on? Well, Spinoza thinks of absolutely conceptually necessary propositions as owing their truth to God's essence, which gives him some excuse for saying that **(1)** God communicates them to me; but his topic is *a priori* logical knowledge,

which we achieve by thinking things through, and that allows him to say that it is **(2)** ‘perceived by the mind alone’. In this context God is clearly not being thought of as a person.]

I don’t think anyone has reached such supreme perfection except Christ, to whom God immediately revealed—without words or visions—the conditions that lead men to salvation. So God revealed himself to the apostles through Christ’s mind, as formerly he had revealed himself to Moses by means of a heavenly voice. And therefore Christ’s voice, like the one Moses heard, can be called the voice of God. And in this sense we can also say that God’s wisdom, i.e. a wisdom surpassing human wisdom, took on a human nature in Christ, and that Christ was the way to salvation. [Both here and below, ‘the way’ translates Latin that could equally mean ‘a way’.]

Please understand that I’m saying *nothing* about the things that certain Churches maintain about Christ. I don’t deny them—because I freely admit that I don’t understand them! What I have been affirming is inferred from Scripture itself. I haven’t read anywhere that God appeared or spoke to Christ; but I *have* read •that God was revealed to the apostles through Christ, •that he is the way to salvation, and finally, that •the old law was imparted through an angel and not immediately by God. So whereas Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man usually does with a friend (i.e. by means of their two bodies), Christ communicated with God mind to mind.

What I’m saying is this: except for Christ no-one received God’s revelations without any help from the imagination, i.e. with no help from words or images; which implies that in order to prophesy one doesn’t need a more perfect mind but only a more vivid imagination. I shall show this more clearly in the following chapter •where the topic will be not prophecy but prophets•.

•SPIRIT. . . •

The question to be tackled now is this: ‘When the sacred texts say that the spirit of God has been instilled in the prophets, or that they spoke from the spirit of God, what do they mean by “spirit of God”?’ To investigate this we must first ask about the meaning of the Hebrew word *ruagh* that people commonly translate as ‘spirit’, •and then we’ll turn to the meaning of ‘of God’•.

The term *ruagh*, in its original sense, means ‘wind’, but it’s often used to mean other things, though they are derived from the original meaning. [Spinoza now lists seven of these ‘other things’. Here they are, including one biblical citation each, and excluding Spinoza’s discussion of some of them:]

**(1)** breath—*Psalms* 135:17.

**(2)** consciousness or breathing—1 *Samuel* 30:12. **[22]**

**(3)** courage and strength—*Joshua* 2:11.

**(4)** power and ability—*Job* 32:8.

**(5)** the intention of the heart—*Numbers* 14:24. And because *ruagh* can mean ‘heart’, it also serves to name all the passions of the heart, and even its endowments—as when ‘a lofty spirit’ means *pride*, ‘a lowly spirit’ means *humility*, and so on. . . .

**(6)** the mind itself, i.e. the **[23]** soul—*Ecclesiastes* 3:19.

**(7)** the regions of the world (on account of the winds that blow from them), and also a thing’s sides that face those regions of the world—*Ezekiel* 37:9, 42:16–19.

•. . . OF GOD•

Something may be described as ‘of God’

**(1)** because it pertains to God’s nature, and is a part of God (so to speak)—‘God’s power’, ‘God’s eyes’;

**(2)** because it is in God’s power, and acts from God’s command—in the Scriptures the heavens are called ‘the heavens of God’ because they are the chariot and the home

of God, Assyria is called ‘the whip of God’, Nebuchadnezzar ‘the servant of God’, and so on;

(3) because it is dedicated to God—‘the temple of God’, ‘Nazarite of God’, ‘bread of God’;

(4) because it is imparted through the prophets and not revealed through the natural light—that’s why the law of Moses is called ‘the Law of God’;

(5) as a way of expressing some superlative—‘mountains of God’ = very high mountains, ‘a sleep of God’ = a very deep sleep. That explains Amos 4:11, where God himself says ‘I have wrought destruction on you, as when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah’—meaning ‘as I did in that *memorable* destruction’ (that’s the only way to understand it, given that God himself is speaking). Even Solomon’s *natural* knowledge is called ‘God’s knowledge’, meaning that it is divine knowledge, above ordinary knowledge. . . . The Jews used to characterize as ‘God’s’ anything that they couldn’t understand, anything whose natural causes they didn’t at that time know. Thus, a storm was called ‘God’s rebuke’; and thunder and lightning were called ‘God’s arrows’, because the Jews thought that God kept the winds shut up in caves that they called ‘God’s treasuries’. . . . Miracles were also called ‘works of God’, meaning astonishing works. In fact, of course, *all* natural things [24] are God’s works, and exist and act only by divine power. In this sense, then, the Psalmist calls the miracles of Egypt ‘God’s powers’, because in a situation of extreme danger the miracles opened up the way to deliverance for the Hebrews, who weren’t expecting anything like them, and were therefore amazed by them.

Given that unusual works of nature are called ‘God’s works’, and trees of unusual size are called ‘God’s trees’, it’s not surprising that in *Genesis* the strongest and tallest men are called ‘sons of God’, even those who are immoral robbers and womanizers.

Hence, the ancients—Jews and even gentiles—used to associate God with absolutely everything in which one man surpassed the others. When the Pharaoh heard Joseph’s interpretation of his dream, he said that the mind of the gods was in him; and Nebuchadnezzar said to Daniel that he had the mind of the holy gods. . . .

·‘SPIRIT OF GOD’·

Now we are in a position to understand and explain the scriptural mentions of ‘the spirit of God’. In some passages ‘the spirit of God’ and ‘the spirit of Jehovah’ mean merely a wind that is very violent, dry and deadly, as in Isaiah 40:7 and *Genesis* 1:2.

Next, it means a great heart. For the sacred texts call Gideon’s heart and also Samson’s ‘the spirit of God’, i.e. a very daring heart, ready for anything. Similarly, any extraordinary virtue (i.e. force) is called *ruagh yehowah*, ‘the spirit or virtue of God’, as in *Exodus* 31:3. . . . And Saul’s melancholy is called ‘an evil spirit of God’, i.e. a very deep [25] depression. For Saul’s servants, who called his sadness a ‘melancholy of God’, suggested that he should call a musician to revive his spirits by playing the lyre, which shows that they took this ‘melancholy of God’ to be a natural melancholy.

Next, ‘the spirit of God’ means the mind of man, as in Job 27:3 where ‘the spirit of God is in my nostrils’ refers to *Genesis* 2:7 which says that God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of man. [Spinoza gives several other examples, from *Ezekiel* 37:14, *Job* 34:14, *Genesis* 6:3, and *Psalms* 51:12–13. Some of them are hard to illustrate from the standard English version of the Hebrew Bible, because in it the word ‘breath’ is already used. Then:]

Now, because the people were intellectually limited, Scripture usually depicts God as being like a man, and attributes to God a mind, a heart, emotions, even a body and breath; so that ‘the spirit of God’ is often used in the sacred texts for



the mind (i.e. heart), affect, force, and breath of the mouth of God. [Examples from *Isaiah* 40:13 and 63:10.]

That's how it comes about that the phrase *ruagh yehowah* is ordinarily used for the law of Moses, because it expresses the mind [26] of God (as it were). [Spinoza claims support for this interpretation in *Isaiah* 63:11, *Nehemiah* 9:20, *Deuteronomy* 4:6, *Psalms* 143:10.]

'The spirit of God' also means, as I have said, God's breath—for the Scripture does endow God with breath, which is as improper as its attributing to him a mind, a heart, and a body—see for example *Psalms* 33:6. [Curley in a footnote calls attention to the occurrence of 'mind' in this. Few theologians would credit God with having breath, heart, body, but most would say that God has or is a mind.]

Next, 'the spirit of God' also means God's power or force, as in *Job* 33:4, 'the spirit of God formed me', i.e. I was made by the power of God, or by God's decree, if you like. [Examples are given from *Psalms* 33:6 and 139:7.]

Finally, 'the spirit of God' is also used to express God's affects of the heart, e.g. kindness and compassion. [Examples are given from *Micah* 2:7, *Zechariah* 4:6 and 7:12.]

[.27] As for *Isaiah* 48:16, which says 'And now the Lord God has sent me, endowed with his spirit', this can be taken in either of two ways. (1) It could refer to •God's heart and compassion. *Isaiah* says 'From the beginning'—i.e. when I first came to you to preach God's anger and the judgment he pronounced against you—'I have not spoken in secret', and we can understand the mention of 'God's spirit' to mean 'But now I am a joyful messenger, sent by God's compassion,

to sing your restoration ·to his favour·'. Alternatively, (2) the phrase could refer to •God's mind as revealed in the Law, so that the passage means that he comes now to warn them, according to the command of the Law, namely *Leviticus* 19:17. So he warns them in the same conditions and in the same way as Moses used to. And finally, as Moses also did, he ends by preaching their restoration. ·This is a defensible interpretation·, but explanation (1) seems to me more harmonious.

At last I come to the point I have been wanting to make. From all these examples, certain sentences in Scripture become clear:

- 'the spirit of God was in the prophet',
- 'God poured his spirit into men,
- 'men were filled with the spirit of God, and with the Holy spirit',

and so on. What they mean is that the prophets had a unique and extraordinary virtue,<sup>2</sup> and that they cultivated piety with exceptional constancy of heart.

And that they perceived God's mind, i.e. his judgment; for I have shown that in Hebrew 'spirit' means both •the mind and •its judgment, so that the Law itself, because it expressed God's mind, was called the 'spirit' or 'mind' of God. For the same reason, a prophet's imagination could be called 'the mind of God', and the prophet could be said to *have* 'the mind of God', because God's decrees were revealed through that imagination. And although God's mind and eternal judgments are inscribed in our minds also [see note on page 12], so that we too perceive the mind of God (if I may put

<sup>2</sup> Although certain men have certain things that nature doesn't give to others, we don't say that they 'exceed human nature' unless their special gifts are ones that can't be understood from the definition of human nature. Gigantic size is rare, but it's still human. The ability to compose poems impromptu is one that very few people have, but it is human too—and some people do it easily. Similarly, some people may be able while their eyes are open to imagine certain things so vividly that it's as though they had the things in front of them, ·and that too would be a human capacity·. But if someone had another means of perceiving, and other foundations of knowledge, he would certainly go beyond the limits of human nature.

this in Biblical terms); this is natural knowledge, but all men have it, . . . so that they don't think very highly of it. This is especially true of the ·ancient· Hebrews, who used to boast of being better than any other people, and therefore didn't think much of knowledge that everyone has.

Finally, the prophets were said to have 'the spirit of God' because no-one knew where their knowledge came from, everyone was dazzled by it, and so it was called 'God's knowledge', in line with the Hebrews' practice of attributing to God anything [28] out of the ordinary.

So now we can say with no reservations that the prophets perceived the things revealed by God with the aid of their imaginations, i.e. by the mediation of words or of true or imaginary images. These are the only means ·of divine communication· that we find in Scripture, and I have already shown that we aren't entitled to *invent* any others.

By what laws of nature was this ·revelation· made? I don't know. I could of course follow the crowd in saying that it was made 'through the power of God', but that would be mere chatter; it would amount to trying to explain the facts about some particular thing by reference to some transcendental term—i.e. purporting to explain *this* in terms that would equally 'explain' *everything*. All things are made 'through the power of God'! Because the power of nature is nothing but the power of God, any ignorance we have about natural causes is a lack of understanding of God's power. When we don't know the natural cause of some thing, it's silly to fall back on 'the power of God' ·as an explanation·, given that our ignorance of the natural cause *is* ignorance regarding God's power. But we don't need here to know what causes prophetic knowledge. My aim, as I have already said, is to investigate Scripture's teachings in order to draw conclusions from them—like drawing conclusions from the data of nature.

We aren't in the least concerned with the causes of those teachings.

Since the prophets perceived God's revelations with the help of the imagination, there's no doubt that they could perceive many things beyond the intellect's limits. The principles and notions on which our whole natural knowledge is constructed don't enable us to construct such a rich array of ideas as words and images do.

So now we can see why the prophets perceived and taught almost everything in metaphors and codes, expressing all their spiritual messages in corporeal terms. It's because this way of going about things fits better with the nature of the imagination. We'll no longer wonder

- why Scripture or the prophets speak so improperly and obscurely about the spirit of God, i.e. God's mind, as in *Numbers* 11:17 and *1 Kings* 22:21–22; or wonder
- why Micaiah saw God *sitting* [*1 Kings* 22:19],
- why Daniel saw God as an old man dressed in white [*Daniel* 7:9],
- why Ezekiel saw him as a fire [*Ezekiel* 1:4],
- why those who were with Christ saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove [*John* 1:32] though the apostles saw it as fiery tongues [*Acts* 2:3], or, finally,
- why Paul at his conversion [29] saw a light [*Acts* 9:3].

For all of these ·visions· belong to the common man's ways of imagining God and spirits.

A final point: ·My account of what prophecy is enables me to explain why· very few men were prophets, and those who were prophets were so only intermittently. It is simply because the imagination is random and inconstant.

That raises a question: How could the prophets be so sure about things that they perceived only through the imagination, rather than from dependable sources in the mind? We'll have to answer this on the basis of Scripture,

because (I repeat) we have no genuine knowledge of this matter—i.e. we can't explain it through its first causes. In my next chapter I shall present what the Bible tells us about

the prophets' confidence in their prophecies.

## Chapter 2: The prophets

We have seen that the prophets didn't have more perfect minds but only unusually vivid imaginations. The Scriptural narratives abundantly confirm this. It's clear that Solomon excelled all other men in wisdom, but not in the gift of prophecy. . . . And on the other hand, uneducated peasants and even simple women such as Abraham's handmaid Hagar had the gift of prophecy (*Genesis* 16:9). This agrees also with both experience and reason. Those who have the most powerful imaginations are less good at grasping things by pure intellect; and, conversely, those who have better and more practised intellects have a more modest power of imagining and keep it more under their control. They keep it in on a short leash, so to speak, so as not to confuse it with the intellect.

So those who go to the Books of the prophets for wisdom, and for knowledge of natural and spiritual matters, have gone entirely astray. . . . I'm going to show this fully here. I'm not moved by the snarls that will come from the direction of superstition, which detests those who cultivate [30] true knowledge and true life. It's a real shame, but things have now reached a state where philosophers are unblushingly accused of atheism by people who openly admit that *they*

have no idea of God, and that they know God only through created things—the ones of whose true causes they are ignorant.

I'm going to show that prophecies varied, not only according to the •imagination and •physical constitution of each prophet but also according to their •opinions. . . . On the way to that, I must first discuss the *certainty* of the prophets, because that is relevant to my argument in this chapter, and also because it will help me to demonstrate my ultimate conclusion. [When someone makes a prediction, we may ask (1) 'How sure *is he* that his prediction is correct?' and (2) 'How sure *ought we to be* that his prediction is correct?' Our present topic is (1), not (2), •subjective, not •objective, certainty.]

*Imagining* a thing doesn't automatically give certainty, in the way that a *clear and distinct idea* does. To be certain of anything that we imagine we must add something, namely reasoning. So an unaided prophecy can't involve certainty, because we've seen that prophecy depends solely on the imagination. What made the prophets certain about God's revelation, therefore, wasn't •the revelation itself but •some sign. evident from *Genesis* 15:8, where Abraham asked for a

sign after he had heard God's promise. Given that he trusted God (of course), why did he ask for a sign? Not in order to have faith in God, but to know that it was indeed God who had made this promise to him.

[Spinoza gives three other biblical examples, involving Gideon (*Judges* 6:17), Moses (*Exodus* 3:12), and Hezekiah (*Isaiah* 38:7). Then:] This shows that the prophets always had some sign that made them certain of the things they had prophetically imagined. That's why Moses warns the Jews to seek a sign from anyone claiming to be a prophet—a sign consisting in some future event that he has predicted (*Deuteronomy* 18:22).

In this respect, therefore, natural knowledge is better off than prophecy because it doesn't need a sign and is inherently certain. And even the certainty that prophecies *could* get from signs wasn't mathematical certainty but only moral certainty. [31] ['Moral certainty' is the degree of certainty that we might express by saying 'For all practical purposes I can take this to be settled'. In this paragraph, incidentally, Spinoza has moved from subjective to objective certainty. What comes next involves the thought 'The content of this revelation might be false', not 'I am not perfectly certain that the content of this revelation is true'.] For Moses warns that any prophet who tries to teach new gods should be condemned to death, even if he confirms his teaching with signs and miracles; because signs and miracles may be sent by God just to test the people (*Deuteronomy* 13:2). And Christ also gave this same warning to his disciples, as *Matthew* 24:24 shows. Indeed Ezekiel clearly teaches that God sometimes deceives men with false revelations: 'If a prophet is seduced and does speak a word, it was I the Lord who seduced that prophet' (*Ezekiel* 14:9). Micaiah says the same thing about the prophets of Ahab (see *I Kings* 22:23).

Although this seems to show that prophecy and revelation are very doubtful, they do (I repeat) have a great deal of cer-

tainty. For God never deceives the pious and the elect; God uses the pious as instruments of his piety, but the impious as executors of his anger. This is confirmed. . . . most clearly from the case of Micaiah. It's true that God had decided to deceive Ahab through the prophets, but he used only false prophets. To the pious prophet he revealed the truth, and didn't forbid him to make true predictions. Still, I repeat, the prophet's own certainty was only moral certainty, because no-one can (as it were) look God in the eye and be sure that he has grasped his message, or boast that he is the instrument of God's piety. . . .

Thus, the whole of prophetic certainty is based on these three things:

- 1. The prophet very vividly imagined the things that were revealed to him, like the way we are usually affected by objects when we are awake.
- 2. There was a sign.
- 3. The prophet had a heart inclined only to the right and the good (this is the main thing).

And although Scripture doesn't always mention a sign, we have to think that the prophets always had one. It has often been noted that biblical narratives don't always provide all the details and circumstances, assuming that they are already known. [32] [Spinoza adds that a prophet didn't need a sign if what he was foretelling was confirmed by the Law or had been prophesied also by other prophets. Then:]

The role of any one sign was merely to convince that one prophet; so each sign was made to fit the opinions and capacity of that prophet, in such a way that a sign that made one prophet certain of his prophecy wouldn't convince a different one who had different opinions. The signs, therefore, differed from prophet to prophet. [Slightly expanding the rest of the paragraph, in ways that small dots can't easily indicate.] There couldn't have been such interpersonal (inter-prophet) dif-

ferences if the end-point had been •mathematical certainty, because that comes from a necessity that is inherent in the perception of the foretold event or state of affairs, and therefore isn't open to interpersonal differences. But in fact the end-point was just to make the prophets •morally certain of the truth of their prophecies, and the way to produce *that* can vary from prophet to prophet.

Also—to repeat a point made earlier—the content of what was revealed to the prophets varied according to three things.

•DIFFERENCES OF TEMPERAMENT•

**(1)** The content of revelations to the prophets varied with their temperaments. . . . If a given prophet was cheerful, what were revealed to him were victories, peace and things that cause joy in the listeners, because those are the sorts of things that cheerful men usually imagine. And if he was gloomy, what were revealed to him were wars, punishments, and all kinds of evils. And so a prophet's temperament—his being compassionate, calm, prone to anger, severe, or whatever—determined what kind of revelation he was the most ready to receive. [•In this paragraph Spinoza twice uses the Latin word *temperamentum* = 'balance', first in the phrase *temperamentum corporis* = 'bodily balance'. It was thought that a person's tending to be sad or cheerful, calm or angry, comes from whether and how his bodily fluids are in balance. That's how 'temperament' came to have our sense of it; and it seems to express his main point about prophets fairly well, when taken in our sense. •In the next couple of pages, some material that Spinoza scattered has been regrouped. That's why the Gebhardt page-Numbers are out of order.]

For evidence of this, consider the case of Elisha (see 2 Kings 3:15), who asked for a musical instrument to be played, so that he could prophesy to •King• Jehoshaphat. He couldn't perceive the mind of God until he had been charmed by the music of the instrument. Eventually he predicted joyful things to the king and his associates; and

he couldn't have done this earlier because he was angry with the king, and those who are angry with someone are ready to imagine evils but not goods concerning him.

'God isn't revealed to those who are angry or sad'—if you say that, you're dreaming! For •God revealed the wretched slaughter of the first-born children to Moses when he was angry at Pharaoh (see *Exodus* 11:8), and he didn't use any musical instrument to do it. •And God was revealed to Cain when he was in a rage (•*Genesis* 4:6•). •The wretchedness and stubbornness of the Jews were revealed to Ezekiel when he was impatient under the pressure of anger (see *Ezekiel* 3:14). •Jeremiah prophesied the Jews' calamities when he was very mournful and weary of life. That's why Josiah didn't want to consult him, and instead consulted a woman who was his contemporary and who, as one might expect from the female temperament, was more ready to reveal God's compassion to him (see 2 *Chronicles* 34:22).

And •Micaiah never prophesied anything good to Ahab, though other true prophets did (as is evident from 1 *Kings* 20:13). But his whole life he prophesied evils (see 22:8, and more clearly 2 *Chronicles* 18:7). So we see that the prophets were readier for one kind of revelation than for another, depending on differences in their temperaments.

•DIFFERENCES OF IMAGINATIVE STYLE•

**(2)** The content of revelations to the prophets varied with the state of their imaginations. A prophet whose imagination was refined (elegant, precise) would have refined perceptions of the mind of God. One whose imagination was confused would perceive God's mind confusedly. And when revelations were represented through images, *what* images a prophet had would depend on •what images he was used to having in his head•: a farmer prophet would have bulls and cows represented to him, a soldier prophet generals and armies, a courtier prophet the royal throne and such like.

There is plenty of biblical evidence that the styles of prophecies varied according to the eloquence of each prophet. Whereas the prophecies of Isaiah and Nahum are written in a refined style, those of Ezekiel and Amos have a style that is less sophisticated. [Spinoza invites readers ‘who are skilled in the Hebrew language’ to follow out several contrasts that he lists—e.g. comparing the prophetic style of ‘the courtier Isaiah’ with that of **[34]** ‘the countryman Amos’. Then:] If you think carefully about all this, you’ll easily see that God has no particular style of speaking of his own, and that he is refined, succinct, severe, unsophisticated, wordy, and obscure, in accordance with the prophet’s learning and his degree of intellectual ability.

The prophetic representations and symbols varied, even though they signified the same thing. Isaiah represented the glory of God. . . .in one way, Ezekiel in another (*Isaiah* 6, *Ezekiel* 1). The rabbis maintain that what each prophet actually saw was entirely the same, but that the rustic Ezekiel was overwhelmed with wonder, which led him to describe it fully with all the details. I think the rabbis were just making this up. . . . Isaiah saw the Seraphim with six wings, while Ezekiel saw the beasts with four wings. Isaiah saw God clothed and sitting on a royal throne, while Ezekiel saw him as like a fire. It’s obvious that each prophet •saw God as he was accustomed to •imagine him.

The representations varied not only in manner but also in clarity. The representations of Zechariah were so obscure that they had to be explained to him—he tells us so himself (*Zechariah* 1:9). And Daniel couldn’t understand *his* representations even after they had been explained to him (*Daniel* 8:15–27). This wasn’t because the content was intrinsically hard to grasp—it only concerned human affairs, and they don’t exceed the limits of human capacity, except when it comes to predicting them. Daniel’s difficulty

in understanding the revelation that came to him arose from the fact that he wasn’t as good at prophesying while he was awake as he was while he was dreaming. . . .

Remember that the words Daniel heard being spoken by the angel were only imaginary (I showed this earlier). So it’s no wonder that in his upset and inner turmoil **[35]** he imagined all those words so confusedly and obscurely that he couldn’t learn anything from them. ‘Perhaps God didn’t *want* to reveal the thing clearly to Daniel’—if you think that, you can’t have read the words of the angel, who says explicitly (see 10:14) that he has come *to make Daniel understand* what was going to happen to his people in the end of days. These things remained obscure at that time because no-one had enough power of imagination to have them revealed to him more clearly. . . .

•DIFFERENCES IN ANTECEDENT BELIEF•

**(3)** The content of revelations to the prophets varied with the opinions that they already had. •To the Magi [the three ‘wise men’ who came from the east to worship the baby Jesus], who believed in the trifles of astrology, Christ’s birth was revealed through their imagining a star rising in the east (see *Matthew* 2). **[33]** •To the augurs [forescers, diviners, prophets] of Nebuchadnezzar the destruction of Jerusalem was revealed in the entrails of animals (see *Ezekiel* 21:21). That same King also learned of the coming destruction of Jerusalem from oracles, and from the direction of arrows that he shot into the air. •To prophets who believed that men act from free choice and by their own power, God was revealed as non-interfering and as unaware of future human actions.

•THE FALLIBILITY OF THE PROPHETS•

[This paragraph expands what Spinoza wrote, but it doesn’t add anything to the content of what he meant to say.] What I want to present here is a pair of theses: •That the prophecies = representations

varied according to the opinions the prophets already had; and •that prophets had various opinions—indeed *conflicting* opinions—and that they had various prejudices that weren't true. (I'm talking only about purely speculative = non-moral matters. It's a different story with their opinions on moral matters.) I now embark on a careful and detailed defence of these two theses, because I think they are very significant. The upshot of my this part of my inquiry will be that *no prophecy ever added anything to the prophet's stock of knowledge*; prophecies always left the prophets with their preconceived opinions. That's why we aren't in the least obliged to believe them concerning purely speculative matters.

Everyone has talked himself into believing that the prophets knew everything the human intellect can attain to. It's amazing how rashly people rush to this conclusion! Some biblical passages show utterly clearly that the prophets were ignorant of certain things; but people in the 'the-prophets-knew-everything' camp don't back down in face of these passages. They prefer either •to say that they don't understand the passages in question or •to twist the words of Scripture so as to make it mean something that it plainly *doesn't* mean. Of course, if either of these moves is permissible, that's the end of •paying serious attention to• Scripture. Trying to show something on the basis of Scripture will be pointless if it's permissible to declare even the clearest passages to be obscure and impenetrable, or to interpret them as one pleases.

For example, nothing in Scripture is clearer than that Joshua, and perhaps also the author of the Book of Joshua, thought

- that the sun moves around the earth, [36]
- that the earth is at rest, and
- that •on one occasion• the sun stood still for a while.

Nevertheless, many people aren't willing to concede that there can be any change in the heavens, •so they don't believe that the sun temporarily stood still•; and this leads them to interpret this passage so that it doesn't seem to say anything like that. Others, who know more about astronomy, don't believe that the earth is at rest or that the sun moves around the earth; which leads them to do their best to squeeze the astronomical truth out of Scripture, though the text screams in protest against this treatment. They amaze me!

Do we really have to believe •that the soldier Joshua was skilled in astronomy, and that the miracle couldn't be revealed to him? Or •that the light of the sun couldn't remain longer than usual above the horizon unless Joshua understood the cause of this? Both •interpretations• strike me as ridiculous. I would much rather say openly •that Joshua didn't know the true cause of the greater duration of that light, •that he and the whole crowd of them all thought that the sun moves daily around the earth except on that one day when it stood still for a while. They believed this to be the cause of the greater duration of that light, ignoring •or not knowing• other possible causes for this. It is beside my present point to explore what these alternative causes are, but I'll mention one. A greater-than-usual refraction could arise from the great amount of ice that was then in that part of the air (see *Joshua* 10:11, •which says that the hailstones were lethally big•).

[Spinoza then gives a paragraph each to •Isaiah's thinking the sun had moved backwards, and •Solomon's thinking that the circumference of a circle is three times the length of its diameter. In each of these cases, he says, the biblical text—*Isaiah* 38:7–8 and *1 Kings* 7:23—is clear and straightforward—he speaks of the latter one as 'narrated simply and purely historically'. If we regarded ourselves as free to re-interpret *this* sort of text, Spinoza says (mildly

swearing), that would put an end to all serious biblical studies. Then:]

If we are allowed the *fiction* that Scripture—for some reason that we don't know—sometimes doesn't say what it thinks, [37] this is nothing but a complete overturning of the whole of Scripture; for each of us will be equally entitled to say this about *any* passage in Scripture. Then Scripture's authority won't be an obstacle to anyone's defending and putting into practice any absurdity or wickedness that human malice can think up. In contrast with that, the position I have taken isn't lacking in proper respect for Scripture. The point is that Solomon, Isaiah, Joshua and the rest were not only *prophets* but were also *men*, so that nothing human should be thought alien to them, and that includes human error!

The revelation to Noah that God was destroying the human race (*Genesis* 11–13) was also adapted to his power of understanding, because he thought that the earth wasn't inhabited outside of Palestine. The prophets could be ignorant, not only of this sort of thing but also of more important points, without this making them any less pious. And they really *were* ignorant of these things. They had nothing notable to teach regarding the divine attributes—their opinions about God were quite ordinary ones. And their revelations reflected these opinions, as I shall now show by many bits of evidence from Scripture—passages that will show clearly that the prophets are praised not so much for the grandeur and excellence of their intellects as for their piety and constancy of heart.

Adam, the first person to whom God was revealed, didn't know that God is everywhere and knows everything. For he hid himself from God (*Genesis* 3:8) and tried to excuse his sin before God, as though God were a *man*. Thus, God was revealed to him in a manner appropriate to his power

of understanding, namely as someone who isn't everywhere and didn't know where Adam was or that he had sinned. For he heard (or seemed to hear) God walking through the garden and calling to him, asking where he was; and when Adam showed his sense of shame at his nakedness, asking him whether he had eaten fruit from the forbidden tree. In short, Adam didn't know anything about God except that he was the maker of all things.

[Spinoza says that Cain thought that God was 'unaware of human affairs', that Laban thought that 'each nation has its own special God' (see *Genesis* 4:9 and 31:2), and that Abraham didn't know that 'God is everywhere and that he foreknows all things'. Evidence for this:] When Abraham heard the judgment against the Sodomites, he prayed [38] to God not to carry it out until he knew whether they all deserved that punishment—saying that 'there may be fifty just men in that city'. . . . And in Abraham's imagination God says 'I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached me; if not, I will take note' (*Genesis* 18:21). Also, what God praises Abraham for (see 18:19) is his obedience and the good moral influence he has on his household, not for having lofty thoughts about God.

·WHAT MOSES BELIEVED·

Moses didn't have a good grasp of God's omniscience or of the fact that all human actions are directed by his decree alone. For although God had told him that the Israelites would obey him (*Exodus* 3:18), Moses wasn't convinced, and asked 'What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?' (4:1). Appropriately to this, God was revealed to him as. . . .not knowing how people would act in the future. For he gave Moses two signs and said 'If they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second. And if they are not convinced by either sign, and still do not heed



you, take some water from the Nile. . . ’ and so on (*Exodus* 4:8–9).

If you are willing to assess Moses’ judgments carefully and without prejudice, you’ll find clearly that his opinion of God was that he is a being who has always existed, exists, and always will exist. . . . But all he tells us about God’s nature is that he is compassionate, kind, and so on, and supremely jealous, as is established by many passages in the Pentateuch (especially *Exodus* 20:5 and *Deuteronomy* 5:9). [•In this context, ‘jealous’ means ‘demanding absolute faithfulness and exclusive worship’. •The Pentateuch is the set of the first five Books of the Old Testament, traditionally attributed to Moses.] Next, Moses believed and taught that this being, ‘God’, differs so greatly from all other beings that there can’t be any visual image of him and he can’t be seen—not because there’s anything self-contradictory about the idea of an image of God, but just because of human weakness. [This could mean that our imaginative powers are too weak to produce such an image; but we’ll soon see evidence that the point may be that our over-all constitution is too weak for us to *survive* experiencing such an image.] He also taught that God’s power makes him singular or unique.

Of course he allowed that there are beings who, doubtless by God’s order and command, perform the functions of God—i.e. beings to whom God has given the authority, right and power to direct nations, to provide for them and to care for them. But he taught that this being [39] whom the Jews were bound to worship, was the highest and supreme God. . . . Thus, in the song of *Exodus* (15:11) he said ‘Who is like you, O Lord, among the celestials?’. And Jethro says (in 18:11): ‘Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods’, meaning ‘Now at last I’m forced to concede to Moses that Jehovah is greater than all the gods, and uniquely powerful’. Did Moses believe that these beings that function like gods were created by God? That is an open question, because we have

no evidence of his ever saying anything about their creation and beginning.

[Spinoza adds that Moses taught that God created this ordered world out of chaos, and set it going, that he has power and right over everything. And that God *chose* the Hebrew nation and its territory for governance by him, leaving the other nations to the care of the substitute gods (see *2 Chronicles* 32:19, where it is said that the other gods were ‘made by human hands’. Attributing to ‘the Jews’—presumably including Moses—the belief that different regions of the earth required the worship of different gods (or substitute gods?), Spinoza back this up with evidence: *2 Kings* 17:25–6, *Genesis* 35:2–3, *1 Samuel* 26:19.]

Finally, Moses believed that this being, this God, had his dwelling place in the heavens (see *Deuteronomy* 33:27), which is what the gentiles also commonly believed.

•HOW MOSES’ REVELATIONS REFLECTED HIS BELIEFS•

Looking now to Moses’ revelations, [40] we find that they were tailored to fit these opinions. [A little is said about God’s compassion etc. and his jealousy, reflected in revelations reported at *Exodus* 34:6–7 and 20:4–5 respectively. Then:]

Next, we are told that Moses asked God to be allowed to *see* him ( *Exodus* 33:18–23), but God didn’t appear to him by any image. We know why: Moses hadn’t formed any image of God in his brain, and God is revealed to the prophets only according to the disposition of their imagination. (Other prophets testify that they *did* see God—namely Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.) And so it was that God replied to Moses ‘You may not see my face, for man cannot see me and live’. Both Moses’ request to see God, and God’s way of turning him down, reflect Moses’ belief that God is visible, i.e. that there’s nothing contradictory in the idea of God’s being seen. . . .

Later on, God's way of revealing to Moses that the Israelites had become like the other nations because they had worshipped a golden calf was to say that he didn't wish to be among them but would (*Exodus* 33:2–3) send an angel, i.e. a being who would take care of the Israelites in place of the supreme being. God did that with other nations too, so that this episode gave Moses no evidence that the Israelites were dearer to God than were the other nations (see *Exodus* 33:16).

Finally, because God was believed to live in the heavens, he was revealed as coming *down* from heaven to the *top* of a mountain. And Moses went up the mountain to speak with God, which he wouldn't have thought he needed to do if he could imagine God to be everywhere with equal ease.

The Israelites knew almost nothing about God, even though he was revealed to them. They showed this clearly enough when. . . they handed over to a *calf* the honour and worship that were due him, and believed that it was 'the gods' that had brought them out of Egypt. [The reference is to *Exodus* 32.] Given that these rough people had been [41] accustomed to the superstitions of the Egyptians, and were worn out by the most wretched bondage, it would have been astonishing if they *had* any real grasp of God, or if Moses *had* succeeded in teaching them anything other than a way of living.

And even this he taught as a legislator, aiming to have them eventually •constrained to live well by the command of the law; not as a philosopher, aiming to have them eventually •constrained to live well by the freedom of their minds. So the way of living well—the true life and the worship and love of God—were •presented• to them more as bondage than as true freedom and the grace and gift of God. Moses ordered them to love God and to keep his law so as to acknowledge the goods they had received from him (such as their freedom from bondage in Egypt). He terrified them with threats about

what would happen to them if they broke the •laws, and promised them many goods if they respected •them. So he taught them in the way parents customarily teach children, who are entirely lacking in reason. So it is certain that the Israelites didn't know the excellence of virtue and true blessedness. . . .

•BACK TO THE PROPHETS•

But let us return to the prophets, whose differences of opinion I was going to examine. The rabbis who left us the Books of the prophets that are now extant found the judgments of Ezekiel so inconsistent with those of Moses that (so we are told) they almost decided not to admit his Book among the canonical ones; which would have pushed it right out of sight, if one of their group hadn't undertaken to explain it. We are told that he finally did this, with great labour and zeal. [42] But it isn't clear *how* he did it. Did he write a commentary that happens to have been lost? Or did he have the nerve to change Ezekiel's very words, arranging them according to his own understanding? Whatever he did, it seems that *Ezekiel* 18:14–20, at least, doesn't agree with *Exodus* 34:7 or with *Jeremiah* 32:18. [The difference concerns the thesis that children will be punished for the sins of their fathers.]

Samuel believed that when God has decreed something, he never regrets or thinks better of his decree. When Saul wanted to repent of his sin, to worship God, and to ask for his forgiveness, Samuel told him that this wouldn't change God's decree against him (see 1 *Samuel* 15:29; see also *Numbers* 23:19–20). Yet it was revealed to Jeremiah that when God has decreed some harm (or some good) for a nation, he may change his mind about this if later on the people of that nation behave better (or worse)—(*Jeremiah* 18:8–10). . . .

Finally, *Genesis* 4:7 clearly shows that man *can* overcome the temptations of sin and act well. For this was said to Cain, yet we know from Scripture itself and from the Jewish historian Josephus that Cain *didn't* overcome them. The same thing can also be inferred from the chapter of *Jeremiah* just mentioned. It says that God may reconsider a decree issued for the harm or good of men, depending on whether men are willing to change their practices and ways of living; and this would be vacuous unless men *can* make such changes. Paul, on the other hand, explicitly teaches that men have no control over the temptations of the flesh except through the special calling and grace of God (see *Romans* 9 starting at verse 10). And note that when Paul attributes justice to God in 3:5 and 6:19, he corrects himself, explaining that in his human weakness he is speaking thus in a human way. [Verse 3:5 ends '...Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man.)' and verse 6:19 begins 'I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh...'. Spinoza likes these bits because of his own view that there is no independent moral standard against which God can be judged (and found perfect). Praising God as 'righteous' seems to invoke such a standard, and Spinoza understands Paul to have said, in effect, 'Oops! I'm sorry, I slipped into human-speak'.]

The passages I have discussed establish more than adequately what I set out to show: that God adjusted his revelations to fit the intellectual level and the opinions of the prophets, that the prophets could be ignorant in speculative matters, and that they really *were* ignorant and had conflicting opinions. So it's not at all appropriate to look to them for knowledge of natural and spiritual matters. I'm speaking only of speculative matters—not practical or moral ones that concern love and how to conduct our lives,

So I conclude that we aren't obliged to believe the prophets regarding anything except the moral matters that

are •the real stuff of revelation and •what revelation is *for* [the Latin is *finis et substantia revelationis*—literally 'the end and substance of revelation']. On every other topic each person is free to believe what he likes. For example, the revelation to Cain teaches us only that God warned him [43] to lead a true life, for that warning was the whole intent and substance of the revelation—not teaching philosophical doctrines such as the freedom of the will. The will's freedom is very clearly contained in the words and reasonings of God's warning, but we are allowed to think that the will isn't free, because those words and reasonings were the result of the warning's being made to fit Cain's level of understanding.

Similarly, the revelation to Micaiah means to teach only that God revealed to Micaiah what the outcome would be of the battle of Ahab against Aram (*I Kings* 22:19–23). [That is not a moral matter; it does not 'concern love' or tell us 'how to conduct our lives'. But it concerns one restricted time and place, having no general significance; so Spinoza has no reason to *want* to view it with suspicion.] So this—the outcome of that battle—is all we are obliged to believe. None of the details of that revelation... touch us at all. Concerning *them* each of us may believe whatever seems more reasonable.

Concerning the reasonings by which God showed Job his power over all things (*Job* chapters 38–41) we must say the same thing: they were presented to fit Job's level of understanding, and only to convince *him*; they aren't universal reasons that should convince everyone. (If indeed they *were* revealed to Job. Some scholars believe that the author of the Book of Job didn't mean to narrate a history, but only to embellish his own thoughts by giving them a concrete form.)

And we should accept the same account of the reasonings by which Christ •convicted the Pharisees of stubbornness and ignorance and •exhorted his disciples to •follow the true

life. In each case, he adjusted his reasonings to the opinions and principles of his listener. For example, when he said to the Pharisees ‘who accused him of being in league with Satan in his healing operations’, ‘If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?’ (*Matthew* 12:26), he was simply trying to convince the Pharisees on the basis of their own principles. He wasn’t trying to teach that demons exist, or that there’s a kingdom of them. Similarly, when Christ said to his disciples ‘Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my father which is in heaven’ (*Matthew* 18:10), he only wanted to teach his disciples not to be proud and not to disdain anyone. The rest of the content of what he said wasn’t being taught—it was included only so as to make his injunction more persuasive to his disciples.

Finally, we must say absolutely the same thing about the reasonings and signs of the apostles.

That’s enough about these matters. If I were to enumerate *all* the biblical passages that •were written only *ad hominem*, i.e. to fit someone’s level of understanding, and that •can’t, without great prejudice to philosophy, be [44] defended as •literally true• divine teaching, that would make this book *much* longer than I want it to be. . . .

The topics I have dealt with concerning the prophets and prophecy have been selected because of their relevance to my final aim, which is to separate philosophy from theology; but now that I have said some things about prophecy in general, a question arises that I had better deal with right away: Was the gift of prophecy possessed by all nations or only by the Hebrews? In dealing with that, we should also look into the matter of the *calling* of the Hebrews.

### **Chapter 3:** **The calling of the Hebrews** **Was the gift of prophecy exclusive to the Hebrews?**

The true happiness and blessedness of each person consists only in the enjoyment of the good, but not in a self-congratulatory sense that the good he is enjoying isn’t available to anyone else. Someone who thinks he is more blessed because things are well with him but not with others, or because he has better fortune than others, doesn’t know true happiness and blessedness. The pleasure he gets from such comparisons arises from envy and a bad heart—unless

it’s mere childishness.

For example, a man’s true happiness and blessedness consist only in wisdom and knowledge of the truth, but *not* in being wiser or having more true knowledge than others. Someone who is glad for that •invidious• reason is glad because of something bad in someone else’s life, which means that he is envious and evil. He doesn’t know true wisdom or the peace of true life.

Scripture, wanting to urge the Hebrews to obey the law, says that God

- chose them for himself before the other nations (*Deuteronomy* 10:15),
- is close to them but not to others (4:4–7),
- has prescribed just laws for them alone (4:8), and
- has become known to them only, the others being treated as inferior (4:32)

and so on. In putting things like that, Scripture is adjusting its speech to the level of understanding of those people who—as I showed in [45] chapter 2, and as Moses himself testifies (*Deuteronomy* 9:6–7)—didn't know what true blessedness is. For surely •the Hebrews would have been no less blessed if God had called all men equally to salvation; •God would have been just as favorably disposed towards them, however close he had been to others; •the laws would have been as just, and the Hebrews as wise, if the laws had been prescribed to everyone; the miracles would have shown the power of God equally well if they had been performed for the benefit of other nations also; and •the Hebrews would have been as strongly obliged to worship God even if God had bestowed all these gifts equally on all people.

When God said to Solomon that no-one after him would be as wise as he was (1 *Kings* 3:12), that seems to have been a mere manner of speaking, a way of saying how exceptionally wise Solomon was. Whether or not that is right, it is *certainly* not right to think that God promised Solomon that he wouldn't later bestow such great wisdom on anyone else, saying this in order to make Solomon happier. Even if God had said that he would make *everyone* just as wise as Solomon, that wouldn't have lowered the level of Solomon's intellect, and that wise king wouldn't have been any less grateful for what God had given him.

When I say that in the passages of the Pentateuch I've just

referred to Moses was adjusting his speech to the Hebrews' level of understanding, I'm not denying that •God prescribed those laws of the Pentateuch to them alone, or that •he spoke only to them, or that •the Hebrews saw wonders unlike any that any other nation had seen. I mean only that Moses, wanting to bind the Hebrews more to the worship of God, chose this way of doing it and these reasons because they were appropriate to the Hebrews' immature level of understanding. I also want to bring out that the Hebrews didn't surpass the other nations in knowledge or in piety, but in something altogether different. . . .—that they weren't chosen by God before all others because of their true life and sublime speculations, but for an entirely different reason. I'll show what this was in the present chapter.

But first I want to explain briefly what I shall mean by (1) 'God's guidance', by (2) 'God's aid' (both external and internal), by (3) 'God's choice', and by (4) 'fortune'.

(1) By 'God's guidance' I understand the fixed and unchangeable order of nature, or the connection of natural things. [46] For, as I said above and have already shown in another work, the universal laws of nature according to which all things are made to happen are nothing but *the eternal decrees of God*, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So the statement 'All things happen according to the laws of nature' and the statement 'All happenings are ordered according to the decree and guidance of God' are two ways of expressing a single truth.

(2) The power of all natural things is nothing but the power of God, through which everything that happens is made to happen, and ·of course· a man is just a part of nature. From those two truths we get this:

- anything that a man does for himself in the interests of his survival,
- and also

•anything that nature provides for a man, with no input from him,  
is *all* provided for him by the power of God alone, acting through •human nature in one case and through •things outside human nature in the other. In the former case we can say that the man received ‘internal aid’ from God, in the latter case ‘external aid’.

**(3)** That makes it easy to work out what ‘God’s choice’ should mean. No-one does anything except in accordance with the predetermined order of nature, i.e. according to God’s eternal guidance and decree; so no-one chooses any way of life (or performs any action) except through the special calling of God, i.e. because God has chosen him before others for this way of life (or action).

**(4)** Finally, by ‘fortune’ [or ‘luck] I mean simply God’s guidance when it directs human affairs through external and unforeseen causes.

With these preliminaries out of the way, I now return to the question I planned to discuss: Why was the Hebrew nation said to have been chosen by God before others? Here’s how I go about answering this.

The things we can honourably desire fall mostly into these three categories: •understanding things through their first causes; •getting control over one’s passions, i.e. getting the habit of virtue; and •living securely and in good physical health. The means that lead directly to the first two of these—means that can be regarded as their immediate efficient causes—are contained in human nature itself. So acquiring them depends chiefly on our power alone, or on the laws of human nature alone. So we must maintain absolutely, •with no conditions or qualifications•, that these gifts •of understanding and virtue• are not the special property of any nation, **[47]** but have always been common to the whole human race. The only way out of that is the fantasy that na-

ture used to produce different kinds of men. Now, the means that lead to •the third desirable thing•—living securely and preserving the body—are chiefly placed in external things, which is why they are called gifts of ‘fortune’—meaning merely that they mostly depend on the run of external causes of which we are ignorant. In respect of this kind of thing the wise man and the fool are pretty much on a par.

Still, vigilance and human guidance can greatly help us to live securely, avoiding harm from other men and also from beasts. And reason and experience tell us that the best way to get such guidance is to form a society with definite laws, to occupy a definite area of the world, and to put everyone’s powers into one body, so to speak, the body of society. But to form such a society, and to preserve it, requires a lot of intelligence and vigilance. So a society that is founded and directed mainly by prudent and vigilant men will be more secure, more stable, and less vulnerable to fortune; whereas a society established by men of untrained intelligence will mainly depend on fortune and will be less stable. If a society of the latter sort lasts a long time despite its dependence on luck, that will be because it has been steered from the outside, not by itself. If indeed it has come through great dangers and prospered, it will have to wonder at and worship the guidance of God. (This •of course• is God acting through hidden external causes, not God acting through human nature and the human mind!) Since the whole course of events has been completely unexpected and contrary to prediction, this can even be regarded as a real miracle.

So the only things that distinguish one nation from others are its •social order and the •laws that it lives under and is directed by. [We now come to the first of several passages about what was involved in God’s choice of the Hebrews. Some of them seem to be ambiguous as between •a thesis about what features of the Jewish State

motivated God to choose it and •a thesis about what goods came to the Jewish State as a result of God's choosing it. Spinoza may be meaning to assert both at once.] So the reason why God chose the Hebrew nation before others was not

•the intellect of the Hebrews,

because, as I showed in the preceding chapter, their views about God and nature were quite ordinary; nor was it

•their quality of soul, their virtue,

because other nations equalled them in this without being chosen •by God•. God's reason for choosing the Hebrew nation was

•its social order and •the good luck that enabled it to form a State and to keep it for so many years.

Scripture confirms this extremely clearly. From even a quick cursory reading you can easily see that the only things the Hebrews had over other nations were that •they handled security matters in ways that worked out well, and that •they overcame great dangers—in most cases purely by God's external aid. You'll see that in other respects [48] they were on a par with other nations, and that God was equally well-disposed to all. So all there was to their being 'chosen' and 'called' was the prosperity and stability of their State *at that time*. And we don't see that God promised the patriarchs<sup>3</sup> or their successors anything more than this. Indeed, all that the Law promises in return for obedience is the continual prosperity of their State and the other conveniences of this life; and all that is threatened in return for obstinacy and breaking the contract is the ruin of their State and very great inconveniences.

This isn't surprising. It's clear from what I have just said (and I'll show it more fully later on) that the purpose of every society and every State is to live securely and well. And a

State can't survive unless it has laws by which each person is bound. If all the members of one society choose to abandon its laws, they'll be dissolving the society and destroying the State. So nothing could be •promised to the society of the Hebrews, for their constant observance of the laws, except security of life and its conveniences. Conversely, no more certain punishment for obstinacy could be •predicted than the ruin of the State, and the evils that would follow from that—some would be results of the ruin of *any* State, others would be specially for them because of special features of *their* State. There's no need to say more about this here.

[The Latin supports this difference between upshots that are •'promised' and punishments that are •'predicted'. Spinoza's real, basic view—not explicitly declared in the present work—is that

(1) all acceptable talk about God is really talk about nature, so that (2) rewards and punishments are just naturally-caused upshots, and (3) promises and threats are really just predictions.

In this subtle passage he is perhaps playing a little game. What he offers is first 2-but-not-3: the good upshots aren't called 'rewards', but they are said to be promised. And then 3-but-not-2: the bad upshots are said to be predicted, but they are called 'punishments'.]

I have one more point to make: the laws of the Old Testament were revealed and prescribed *only to the Jews*. Since God chose only them to constitute a particular society and State, they *had to* have special laws of their own. Did God also prescribe special laws to other nations, revealing himself to their legislators prophetically (i.e. under the attributes by which they were accustomed to imagine God)? That's an open question; but Scripture at least makes it clear that the other nations also had a State and their own individual laws by God's external guidance.

I'll cite just two biblical passages in support of this. In *Genesis* 14:18–20 we are told that Melchizedek was king

<sup>3</sup> In *Genesis* 15:1 it is related that God told Abraham that he was his defender and would give him a very great reward. To this Abraham replied that he could expect nothing which would be of any importance, because he was childless and already in advanced old age

of Jerusalem and priest of the most high God; [49] that he blessed Abraham. . . .; and finally that Abraham, the beloved of God, gave a tenth of all his spoils to that priest of God. This narrative shows that, long before God founded the nation of Israel, he established kings and priests in Jerusalem and prescribed rites and laws for them. As I have said, it's not settled whether he did this prophetically or not; but I'm sure of at least this much: while Abraham lived there he lived scrupulously according to *those* laws—i.e. the ones that had been prescribed by God for Melchizedek and his line. For Abraham didn't receive any rites directly from God, yet *Genesis* 26:5 says that Abraham observed the worship, commands, statutes and laws of God. These *must* have been the worship etc. of King Melchizedek.

Malachi reproaches the Jews in these words (speaking on behalf of the Lord):

If only you would lock my doors, and not kindle fire on my altar to no purpose! I take no pleasure in you etc. . . . From where the sun rises to where it sets, my name is honoured among the nations, and everywhere incense and pure oblation are offered to my name—said the Lord of Hosts. (*Malachi* 1:10–11)

If we aren't to do great violence to this text, we must understand it as written in the present tense, i.e. as talking about *that* time; so the text provides abundant evidence that the Jews of that time were no more beloved by God than the other nations were, that indeed God had through miracles become better known to other nations than to the Jews, who at that time had regained a part of their State without miracles, and finally that the other nations had rites and ceremonies that were acceptable to God.

But I put these matters to one side. It is enough for my purposes to have shown that God's choice of the Jews involved nothing but

- the worldly prosperity and freedom of the State, and the way they acquired it,
- hence also
- the Laws, insofar as they were needed for the stability of that one State,
- and finally
- the way in which those laws were revealed.

I have also shown that in other respects—including the ones that constitute the true happiness of man—the Jews were on a par with the other nations.

So when the Bible says that no other nation has gods 'so close at hand' [50] as God is to the Jews (*Deuteronomy* 4:7), we have to take this as referring only to the Jewish State and only at that time when so many miracles happened to them. . . .

•The psalmist says 'The Lord is near to all who call him, to all who call him with sincerity' (*Psalms* 145:18); and the same psalm (verse 9) says that God is good to all, and has compassion for all the things he has made. •*Psalms* 33:15 says clearly that God has given the same intellect to everyone, in these words: ' . . . who forms their heart in the same way'. The point is that, as I think everyone knows, the Hebrews believed the heart to be the seat of the soul and of the intellect. •*Job*. . . although he was a gentile was the most acceptable of all to God because he surpassed everyone in piety. . . .

Since God is equally well-disposed to all, and chose the Hebrews only with respect to their social order and their State, we conclude that each Jew, considered alone and outside that social order and State, has no gift of God that would place him above other men and that there's no difference between him and a gentile.

Given that God is equally beneficent, compassionate and so on to everyone, and that the duty of the prophet was to



teach and advise men concerning virtue (rather than the particular laws of their native land), there's no doubt that all the nations had prophets and that the gift of prophecy wasn't exclusively the property of the Jews. Indeed, both sacred and secular histories testify to this. The sacred histories of the Old Testament don't say that the other nations [51] had as many prophets as the Hebrews did, or indeed that God sent any gentile prophet specifically to ·gentile· nations; but that doesn't matter, because the Hebrews ·who wrote the Old Testament· were concerned to write only of their own affairs and not those of other nations. [Spinoza goes on to say that in the Old Testament we find •plenty of prophets who were uncircumcised gentiles, and •a number of Hebrew prophets whom God sent not only to their own nation but also to many others. He supports all this with textual references.]

The future affairs of the Jews and of other nations were revealed to Balaam, ·who was not a Jew·; the Bible reports just one episode in which this occurs (*Numbers 22*), but it isn't credible that Balaam prophesied only on that one occasion. Indeed, the narrative in *Numbers* shows clearly he had long been famous for prophecy and other divine gifts. [Spinoza continues with details [52] and textual references, ending with:] Finally, after he has blessed the Hebrews according to the command of God, he begins (as was his custom) to prophesy to the other nations and to foretell their future affairs.

All these things indicate more than adequately that Balaam. . . prophesied quite often, and (note this well) that he had a heart inclined only to the right and the good, which is what mainly rendered the prophets certain of the truth of their prophecies. For he didn't make his own choices about whom to bless and whom to curse, as Balak thought he did, but went entirely by God's choices. That's why he replied to Balak—a king who had tried to get him to curse

the Israelites.—‘Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to the Lords's command. What the Lord says, that I must say' (*Numbers 24:13*).

[Spinoza deals with the dark side of Balaam: (1) God was once angry with him, (2) he accepted money for prophesying, and at least once (3) he sinned—with textual references given for all this. Spinoza replies that (1) God became angry also with Moses, (2) Samuel accepted money for prophesying, and (3) no-one is so just that he always acts well and never sins. He backs all this with biblical references, and gives more to show that 'Balaam was most acceptable to God'.] [53]

. . . .So I conclude that the gift of prophecy was common to all the nations, not exclusive to the Jews.

But the Pharisees fiercely denied this, maintaining that this divine gift was something that only *their* nation had, and that other nations foretold future affairs by some diabolical power or other (the things that superstition comes up with!). Wanting to have the authority of the Old Testament on their side, they cite the passage where Moses says to God:

How shall it be known that your people have gained your favour and I have singled you out by name unless you go with us so that we may be distinguished, your people and I, from every people on the face of the earth? (*Exodus 33:16*)

The Pharisees want to infer from this that Moses asked God to be present to the Jews, revealing himself prophetically to them, and to grant this favour to no other nation. The idea that Moses might want God not to be available to the ·other· nations, or that he would dare to ask such a thing of God, is obviously ridiculous! What is going on here is this: Moses came to know the obstinate temperament of his nation, and saw clearly that they couldn't finish what they had begun—indeed that they couldn't *survive*—without

terrific miracles and the special external aid of God. [On 'external aid' see item (2) on page 28.] So he asked God for this special external aid so as to be sure that God did want them to survive. And so in *Exodus* 34:9 he says 'If I have gained your favour, O Lord, let the lord go in our midst, because this is a stiff-necked people' and so on. So that's why he asked God for this special external aid—because *the people were stubborn*. If you want to be more sure that Moses was asking God *only* for this special *external* aid, look at God's reply: 'I hereby make a covenant [= 'contract']. Before all your people I will work such wonders [54] as have not been wrought on all the earth or in any nation' (*Exodus* 34:10). . . .

But Paul's letter to the Romans contains something that weighs more with me, namely *Romans* 3:1–2, where Paul's doctrine seems to be different from mine. He poses the question: What makes the Jews superior? What's the advantage of circumcision? And he answers that the Jews are greatly advantaged in every way, especially in having the utterances of God entrusted to him. [In the King James version, those two verses read: 'What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.'] But if we consider what Paul is mainly getting at here we'll find nothing contrary to what I have been saying; indeed we'll find that he and I teach the same thing. He says •that God is the God both of the Jews and of the nations (3:29), •that the difference between having and lacking a foreskin counts for nothing compared with the difference between obeying and disobeying the law (2:25–6), and •that all—the Jews and the ·other· nations equally—have been sinful (3:9), and that there is no sin without a commandment and a law (4:15). So all this obviously settles it: the law was revealed to absolutely everyone. . . .and everyone has lived under the law—i.e. under •the law that concerns only true virtue, and not •the law that

reflects the nature and constitution of a certain special State and is tailored to fit the temperament of one nation. Finally, Paul concludes that since God is the God of all nations, i.e. is equally well-disposed to all, and since all were equally under the law and equally sinned, God sent his Christ to *all* nations, to free them all from bondage to the law, so that they would act well not because of the law's commandment but because of a steady decision of the heart. So Paul says exactly what I want to say.

What are we to make of his saying that God's utterances were entrusted to the Jews? There are two options. (1) It was only to the Jews that the laws were entrusted *by writing*, and that they were given to other nations only by revelation—given to them as *thoughts*. (2) In saying this, Paul was meeting an objection that only the Jews could make, and adapted his reply to their level of understanding and their current beliefs. For in order to teach the things that he had partly seen and partly heard, he was a Greek among the Greeks and a Jew among the Jews.

Now all that remains is to reply [55] to certain arguments by which the Pharisees want to persuade themselves that God's choice of the Hebrews was *eternal*, not merely directed at their State at a particular historical time. In support of this, they say (1) that after the loss of their sovereignty the Jews have survived for many years, though they were scattered everywhere and separated from all the nations. This hasn't happened to any other nation. And (2) many biblical passages seem to teach that God chose the Jews for himself for ever, and that they therefore remain God's chosen people, even if they have lost their sovereignty.

There are two main passages that they think most clearly teach this 'chosen for eternity' doctrine.

1. *Jeremiah* 31:35–6, where the prophet says that the offspring of Israel will remain God's nation to eternity, pretty

clearly comparing them with the fixed order of the heavens and of nature.

2. *Ezekiel* 20:32–44, where Ezekiel seems to mean that even if the Jews choose to turn their backs on the worship of God, he will gather them from all the regions into which they have been dispersed, will lead them to an unpopulated territory as he led their ancestors to the unpopulated region of Egypt, and then finally—after weeding out the rebels and backsliders from among them—he will lead the rest to the mount of his holiness, where the whole household of Israel will worship him.

Some other passages are often brought up, especially by the Pharisees, but I think you'll be satisfied if I reply ·adequately· to the two passages I have just reported. It will be easy for me to do this, once I have shown from Scripture itself that God chose the Hebrews not for eternity but only on the same condition under which he previously chose the Canaanites; and *they* had priests who worshipped God scrupulously but were nevertheless rejected by God on account of their extravagant living, their slackness, and their bad behaviour. [Spinoza included in that the clause *ut supra ostendimus* = 'as I showed above'; but this is the first mention of the Canaanites in this work (and almost the last).] In *Leviticus* 18:27–8 Moses warns the Israelites not to pollute themselves by incest, as the Canaanites did, for fear that the earth would vomit them forth as it vomited forth the nations that had inhabited those places. And *Deuteronomy* 8:19–20 very explicitly threatens them with total ruin: 'I warn you this day that you shall certainly perish; like the nations that the Lord will cause to perish before you.' This is one of several passages in the law that indicate explicitly that God did not choose the Hebrew nation unconditionally or for eternity.

So if the prophets *did* foretell a new and eternal covenant of the knowledge, love, and grace of God, it's easy to show

that this was promised only to the pious. [56] I have just quoted Ezekiel saying explicitly that God will sift out from them the rebels and backsliders; and in *Zephaniah* 3:11–13 it is said that God will remove the arrogant from among ·the people of Israel· and will let the poor survive. This was to be a selection based on *true virtue*, so it's unthinkable that it was promised only to the *Jewish* pious people, with everyone else excluded. We have to take it that the true *gentile* prophets, whom I have shown that all nations had, promised the same thing to the faithful of their nations, and comforted them with it. So this eternal covenant of the knowledge and love of God is universal. . . .

In this matter, therefore, we shouldn't admit any difference between the Jews and the ·other· nations; they haven't been chosen in any way that is exclusive to them, apart from the ·historically limited· one I have talked about. Although this 'chosen' status concerns only true virtue, when the prophets speak about it they mix in many things about sacrifices and other ceremonies, and about rebuilding the temple and the city. But that's only because they wanted—as prophets usually do—to explain spiritual matters in figurative expressions; this enabled them to indicate to the Jews (whose prophets they were) that the State and the temple could be expected to be restored •in the time of Cyrus. So •today the Jews have absolutely nothing that they can attribute to themselves as distinct from any other nation.

What about the fact that they have survived for so many years, in spite of being scattered and without a State of their own? That's not surprising, given that they have kept themselves so thoroughly apart from all the nations, and they have drawn the hatred of all men against themselves, not only by having external rites that are contrary to the rites of the other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision, which they religiously maintain. Experience has shown that

the hatred of the nations has done much to preserve them.

The King of Spain gave the Jews **a choice**: they could either •accept the religion of Spain or •go into exile, and many Jews took the first option, accepting the religion of the priests. That immediately entitled them to all the privileges of native Spaniards, and made them eligible for all honours •that the State could bestow•. The result was that they integrated with the Spaniards so that before long there were no traces of them, not even memory-traces. The exact opposite happened when the King of Portugal gave the Jews **no choice**: he compelled them to accept the religion of Portugal. Although they converted to that religion, they always lived apart from everyone else, presumably because the king declared them unworthy [57] of all honours. [Spinoza was descended from these Portuguese Jews; he himself was born in Amsterdam.]

The sign of circumcision is so important in this matter

•of Jewish identity• that I'm convinced that this one thing will preserve the Jewish nation for ever. Indeed, if the foundations of their religion hadn't sapped their courage, I would be perfectly sure that some day, given the opportunity, they would set up their State again and God would choose them all over again. . . . Finally, if you want to maintain for some reason or other that the Jews *have* been chosen by God for eternity, I shan't fight back, as long as you maintain that insofar as this choice—whether temporary or eternal—is exclusive to the Jews, it concerns only their State and physical conditions of life (since that's all that can distinguish one nation from another), and that God has not selectively chosen any nation on the basis of its intellect and true virtue, because in respect of *those* no nation is distinguished from any other.

## Chapter 4: The divine law

·LAW·

The word ‘law’—taken on its own, not in a phrase of the form ‘law of. . .’—means ‘whatever it is that brings it about that each individual thing, or all or some members of the same species, act in one fixed and determinate way’. A law is based either on **(1)** a necessity of nature or on **(2)** a decision of men. A **(1)**-type law follows necessarily from the very nature or definition of a thing. A **(2)**-type law. . . is one that men prescribe for themselves and others in the interests of security and convenience, or for some other reasons.

For example,

(1) When any body x collides with a smaller body y, it loses as much of its motion as it communicates to y is a universal law of all bodies, and [58] follows from a necessity of nature. Similarly,

(1) When a man recalls one thing x, he immediately recalls something else y that either resembles x or that he has perceived together with x in the past is a law that necessarily follows from human nature. But any law of the type:

(2) Men should yield, or be compelled to yield, the right they have from nature and bind themselves to act in manner M

depends on a human decision.

Without in the least denying that *everything* is determined by the universal laws of nature to exist and behave in a certain and determinate way, I still say that **(2)**-type laws depend on human decisions. I have two things to say in defence of this. The first is a reason why something can have a type-**(2)** status and *also* a type-**(1)** status.

1. Because man is a part of nature, the goings-on within a man are part of nature’s exercise of its powers. So anything that follows necessarily from human nature (i.e. from *nature* in its humanity department) is an exercise of human power. So it is all right to say that type **(2)** laws come into force through human decisions, because they are upshots of the power of the human mind, this being one way of being an upshot of the laws of nature.

**what Spinoza wrote next:** *nihilominus humana mens, quatenus res sub ratione veri, et falsi percipit, sine hisce legibus clarissime concipi possit, at non sine lege necessaria, ut modo ipsam definivimus.*

**conservatively translated:** Nevertheless the human mind, insofar as it perceives things under the aspect of the true or the false, can be conceived quite clearly without the latter laws, but not without a necessary law, as we have just defined it.

**what he was getting at:** When we’re trying to understand how the human mind works, we don’t need to bring in type **(2)** laws, but we can’t do without type **(1)** laws. This holds for all the workings of the human mind, including the mental operations that involve beliefs.

2. My other reason for saying that type-**(2)** laws depend on human decisions is that we ought to define and explain things in terms of their immediate causes. If we move unrestrictedly to more and more remote causes, we’ll end up at the level of blanket thoughts about. . . the world’s being causally connected, and those can’t help us to form and order our thoughts about particular things. And

anyway, we don't know anything about *how* things are really ordered and connected; so in practice we have to consider things as possible. [That sentence, with its bewildering last clause, seems to unpack into something like this: If we knew the fundamental natural laws governing human thought and action, and could apply them in particular cases, we would be presenting individual human events as strictly caused by antecedent states of the person, and thus as •necessary = inevitable. But we don't know those laws; so if we are to explain human events, we'll have to do it in some other way, namely: regarding the person's beliefs and desires as arbitrating between different •possible thoughts or actions.] So much for the basic unvarnished meaning of the term 'law'.

But we seem to need a more limited sense of 'law', which can be defined as 'a way of living that man prescribes to himself and others for some purpose'. Why do we need this? Because 'law' seems •often• to be applied figuratively to natural things, •and we need to make explicit that we aren't using it in any such figurative sense•. And because •this restrictive definition is pretty close to• what is commonly understood by 'law', namely 'command that men can either carry out or neglect'. It's always true that they 'can carry out' the law, because law doesn't command anything that men can't do; and it's always true that they 'can neglect' to do what the law commands, because the actions that the law commands are never ones that men will inevitably do.

•The definition says '... for some purpose'; but the true purpose of laws is usually evident to only a few. [59] Most people are hardly capable of grasping it, and don't come anywhere near to living according to reason. This has led legislators, wanting to put the same restraints on everyone, to set up another end •or purpose•, very different from the one that necessarily follows from the nature of laws. Specifically, they have identified what the multitude most love (x) and what they most fear (y), and have promised

that the defenders of the laws will get x, and threatened law-breakers with getting y. By this wisely chosen device they do their best to restrain the multitude, like restraining a horse with a harness.

That's how it has come about that law is generally taken to be a manner of living that is prescribed to men according to the command of others, so that those who obey the laws are said to live 'under' the law, and seem to be slaves. In fact, someone who treats others fairly because he fears the gallows is acting according to the command of someone else, and is compelled by something bad. We can't call him 'just'. But someone who treats others fairly because he knows the true reason for the laws and knows why we must have them—*that* person acts in accordance with a durable character-trait that he has, and acts by his own decision rather than someone else's. So it's right to call him 'just'.

That's what Paul wanted to teach, I think, when he said that those who live 'under' the law can't be justified *by* the law [*Romans* 3:19–20]. For justice, in the standard sense of the word, is a constant and perpetual wish to treat everyone fairly; which is why Solomon says in *Proverbs* 21:15 that when a judgment is made the just man rejoices but the unjust are terrified.

•DIVINE LAW•

So there we have it: Law is nothing but a way of living that man prescribes to himself and others for some purpose. Given that, it seems that we need to distinguish two kinds of law, •human and •divine. By 'human law' I mean 'a way of living that serves only to protect life and protect the State'; by 'divine law' I mean •a way of living• that aims only at the greatest good, i.e. the true knowledge and love of God. I call the latter 'divine' because of the nature of the greatest good. I'll explain this as briefly and clearly as I can, •in four stages•.

If we really want to seek our own advantage, we should do our very best to perfect our intellect, because that's the better part of us. **(1)** The perfection of our intellect must be our greatest good.

•Nothing can either be or be conceived without God, and •as long as we have no clear and distinct idea of God we can doubt everything; **[60]** and from those two facts together it follows that all our knowledge, and the certainty that really removes doubt, depends only on the knowledge of God. So **(2)** our greatest good and perfection depend only on the knowledge of God etc.

Because nothing can be or be conceived without God, it's certain that all things in nature involve and express the concept of God (*how much* they involve and express it depends on what they are essentially like, what level of perfection they rise to). So the more we know about natural things, the greater and more perfect is the knowledge of God we acquire. And knowing an effect through its cause is really knowing some property of the cause; so our increased knowledge of natural things doesn't just *lead to*, it *is*, increased knowledge of God's essence, which is the cause of all things. **(3)** So all our knowledge, i.e. our greatest good, consists purely in the knowledge of God. . . . Our greatest good and our blessedness consist in the knowledge and love of God.

Consider now the *means* that have to be used to achieve this end ·or purpose· of all human actions—namely, the end of having the idea of God in us. These means can be called God's commands, because they are prescribed to us (so to speak) by God considered as existing in our minds. **(4)** So the way of life that aims at this end is aptly called 'the divine law'. ·This completes the four-part explanation that I embarked on half a page back·.

What *are* these means? *What* way of life is needed to achieve this end? How out of all this do we work out the

foundations of the best State and the best way for men to live together? These questions belong in a complete Ethics. I am going to deal here with the divine law only in a general way.

Thus, since the love of God is man's highest happiness and blessedness and the ultimate end and object of all human actions, following the divine law is undertaking to *love God*—

- not from fear of punishment, and
- not from love of anything else, such as pleasure or reputation,

but only

- from *knowing God*, i.e. realizing that knowing and loving God is the highest good.

So the sum-total of the divine law, and its highest command, is to love God as the **[61]** highest good, as I have said, not from fear of some punishment or penalty, and not from love of something else that we want for our pleasure. The idea of God dictates this: that God is our greatest good, i.e. that the and love of God is the ultimate end toward which all our actions are to be directed.

In spite of this, carnal mankind—i.e. average people who don't look further than the pains and pleasures of the senses—can't understand these things; they find them hollow, because •they have too slight a knowledge of God, and also because •they don't find in this highest good anything that they can stroke or eat or get physical pleasure from. *Of course* they don't! This highest good consists only in •contemplation and •purity of mind. But those who know that the best thing they have is their intellect and their mental health will doubtless judge •these things to be very solid.

I have explained what the divine law chiefly consists in, and which laws are human, namely all the ones that aim

at something other than the knowledge of God, which is what the divine law aims at. [Spinoza now presents a slight complication. His presentation is harder to grasp than it needs to be, its central point being this: We have **(1)** laws that are divine or ‘of God’ because their purpose is to produce knowledge of God, **(2)** laws that are divine or ‘of God’ in the sense that they were promulgated as laws by divine revelation through prophecy, and **(3)** human laws. Having said that **(3)** includes everything that isn’t in **(2)**, Spinoza then corrects himself and equates **(3)** with everything that is not in **(1)** or **(2)**. The aim or purpose of **(2)**-type laws of God is different from that of **(1)**-type laws, because **(1)** always and everywhere have the aim of producing knowledge of God, whereas **(2)** have other aims than that. Moses’ law can be called ‘the law of God’ or ‘divine law’ because it came from God (through prophecy), but it is tailored to fit the temperament of one people and to help that people to survive. Spinoza continues:] In what follows, I’ll use the label ‘natural divine law’ for the item that counts as ‘divine law’ in sense **(1)**—the basic, central sense that I have explained—excluding any laws that count as ‘divine’ only because they reached us through some prophet.

If now we attend to the nature of natural divine law, as I have just explained it, we shall see four main things.

**1.** It is universal, i.e. common to all men; for I deduced it from universal human nature.

**2.** It doesn’t require faith in historical narratives of any kind. Because this natural divine law is grasped simply by thinking about human nature, we can conceive it as much in Adam as in anyone else, as much in a man who lives in society as in one who lives a solitary life. And it’s not just that faith in historical narratives isn’t *needed*; it doesn’t even *help*. Faith in such narratives, however certain we are of their truth, can’t give us any knowledge of God. So it can’t give us

the love of God either, because the love of God comes from the knowledge of God, and that has to come from self-evident universal propositions. [That last clause is a free but essentially accurate translation of something which more strictly and literally means ‘... to come from common notions which, through themselves, are certain and known’.] So faith in historical narratives is far from being necessary for us to attain our greatest good, which is the knowledge and love of God. Still, I don’t deny that reading historical narratives is very useful for purposes of civil life. **[62]** The more we have seen and learned about the character and circumstances of men—which can best be known from their actions—the better the job we’ll make of taking care of ourselves when we live among them, and adjusting our actions—within reason—to fit with their temperament.

**3.** It doesn’t require ceremonies, i.e. actions that aren’t good or bad in themselves but are *conventionally* called ‘good’, or represent some good thing that is necessary for salvation. (Or, if you prefer, actions whose reason surpasses man’s power of understanding!) The natural light doesn’t require anything that it doesn’t itself reach; and it requires whatever can indicate to us very clearly the good, or the means to our blessedness. Things that are good only by command or convention, or because they *represent* something good, can’t perfect our intellect and are mere shadow-play. They can’t be counted among the actions that are (so to speak) offspring or fruits of the intellect and of a healthy mind. I needn’t go into this in more detail here.

**4.** The highest reward of obedience to the divine law is the law itself, i.e. knowing God and loving him from true freedom and with a whole and constant heart. The penalty for violating the divine law is the lack of those things and an inconstant and vacillating heart, which brings bondage to the flesh.



·IS GOD A LAW-GIVER?·

Four questions now arise: **(1)** Can we, by the natural light, conceive God as a lawgiver, or a monarch prescribing laws to men? **(2)** What does Scripture teach concerning this natural light and natural law? **(3)** What were ceremonies instituted *for*? **(4)** What is the importance of knowing the sacred historical narratives and believing them? I shall treat the first two questions in this chapter, the other two in the next chapter.

The right answer to **(1)** follows easily from the nature of God's will, which is distinguished from God's intellect only by our concepts, which is to say that God's will *is* God's intellect although we have two ways of thinking about it. We can approach them via two ways of thinking about triangles. Associated with the thought that •the nature of a triangle is eternally contained in the divine nature, making it an eternal truth, we have the thought that God *has the idea of* the triangle, i.e. *understands* the nature of the triangle. And when we move on [63] to the thought that •what puts the nature of the triangle into the divine nature is just the necessity of the divine nature and nothing else—e.g. *not* the essence and nature of the triangle—then we are in a frame of mind in which we label as 'God's will or decree' the very item that we have been calling 'God's intellect'. Thus, coming at things from God's end, the statements

- From eternity God *willed and decreed* that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and
- From eternity God *understood* that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles,

say exactly the same thing. From this it follows that God's affirmations and negations always involve eternal necessity or truth.

For example, if God said to Adam that God didn't want him to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,

it would imply a contradiction for Adam to be able to eat from that tree—it would be impossible that he should do so—because that divine decree must have involved eternal necessity and truth. But Scripture records that God *did* order Adam not to eat, and nevertheless that Adam ate from the tree; so we must say that God revealed to Adam only •that harm that would come to him if he ate from that tree, and not •that harm would *necessarily* come to him if etc.

That's how it came about that Adam regarded that revelation, namely that eating from the tree would bring harm to him, as

- a law laying down the penalty that some prince had chosen to assign for eating etc.,

rather than as

- an eternal and necessary truth, saying what eating etc. would lead to through the necessity and nature of that act.

So it was only in an Adam's-eye view—reflecting a gap in Adam's knowledge—that the revelation was a law and God a lawgiver or prince.

In the same way the Decalogue [the ten commandments] was a law only in a Hebrews'-eye view, because of a gap in *their* knowledge. Because they didn't know God's existence as an eternal truth, they *had to* regard as a law what was revealed to them in the Decalogue, namely that God exists and that God alone is to be worshipped. If God had spoken to them immediately, without using any bodily means, they would have regarded this not as a law but as an eternal truth. [Spinoza's reason for saying this is that he equates 'God told them that P immediately, without any bodily means' with 'They came to know that P just by thinking about it, which involves knowing it *a priori*, knowing it as absolutely necessary, knowing it as an eternal truth'.]

And what I've said about Adam and the Israelites also holds for all the prophets who prescribed laws in the name

[64] of God, namely that they also failed to perceive God's decrees adequately, as eternal truths. Even Moses! From the basics that were revealed to him he saw

- how the people of Israel could best be united in a certain region of the world so as to form a whole society or set up a State, and also
- how people could best be compelled to obedience.

But he didn't see—and it wasn't revealed to him—that that was the best way, or that the desired goal would necessarily follow from the general obedience of the people in such a region of the world. So he saw all these things not as eternal truths but as commands—the upshots of decisions—and he *prescribed* them as laws of God. That's why he imagined God as a ruler, a lawgiver, a king, as compassionate, just, etc., though these are attributes that only humans can have, and ought to be removed entirely from any account we give of the divine nature.

But I say this only about the prophets who prescribed laws in the name of God, and not about Christ. However much Christ may seem also to have prescribed laws in the name of God, we have to think that he perceived things truly and adequately, so that no revelation would needed to be *adjusted* to fit Christ's already existing opinions. And in any case, the question of such an adjustment shouldn't even *arise*, for the following reason. Christ was not so much God's prophet as God's *mouth*. As I showed in chapter 1, God revealed things to the human race through the mind of Christ as God had previously revealed them through angels, i.e. through created voices, visions, etc. To think that God adjusted the revelations to fit Christ's opinions would be like maintaining that in communicating to the prophets the things to be revealed, God had adjusted the revelations to fit the opinions of the angels, i.e. of created voices and of visions. Nothing could be more absurd than that!

[To make sure that you've understood this: Spinoza is saying that the transaction

- God → Christ → mankind

is not parallel to the transaction

- God → prophet → mankind,

in which God's revelation is adjusted to fit the prophet's already existing opinions. Rather it is parallel with

- God → voice-or-vision → prophet.

It would be crazy babbling nonsense to say that God's revelation to a prophet was adjusted to suit the already existing opinions of the voice-or-vision; so, given the correct parallel, it would be equally absurd to say that God's revelation to mankind through Christ was adjusted to fit Christ's already existing opinions.] This leaves open the possibility that when Christ passed the revelation on to mankind, he adjusted it to fit people's already existing opinions; but if that is so, it would be an adjustment not to the opinions of the Jews only, but of the whole human race, since they are what he was sent to teach. His mind, that is, would have to be fitted to the opinions and teachings that are universal to the human race, i.e. to common and true notions. [In Spinoza's day the phrase 'common notion' was one standard label for a necessary truth that can be learned *a priori* just by thinking. Any such truth is 'universal to the human race' in the sense that everyone has access to it through his own thinking. See Spinoza's footnote on page 53.]

And of course from the fact that God revealed God to Christ or to Christ's mind •immediately, and not (as with the prophets) •through words and images, we have to take it that Christ perceived truly, i.e. *understood* the things that were revealed. For a thing is understood when it is perceived with a pure mind, without words and images. [65] So Christ perceived the things revealed truly and adequately. If he ever prescribed them as laws, he did this because of the people's ignorance and stubbornness. So in this respect he acted in God's way, accommodating himself to the mentality of the people. That is why, although he spoke a little more clearly

than the other prophets did, he still taught these revelations obscurely, and quite often through parables, especially when speaking to those to whom it wasn't given to understand the kingdom of heaven (see *Matthew* 13:10 etc).

But when he was speaking to those to whom it *was* given to know the mysteries of heaven, he taught things as eternal truths rather than prescribing them as laws. In this way Christ freed them from bondage to the law. He didn't abolish the law for them, but stopped it from being something externally prescribed to which they were in bondage. He did this by writing the law thoroughly in their hearts, making it surer and more durable there—but as something that was now *theirs*, not something prescribed from outside.

Paul also seems to teach this in certain passages—see *Romans* 7:6 and 3:28. But he also wanted not to speak openly, but to speak 'as a man' (3:5; see also 6:19), explicitly admitting then when he describes God as 'just'. No doubt it's also because of the weakness of the flesh that Paul fictitiously ascribes to God mercy, grace, anger, etc., adjusting his words to the frame of mind of the common people, whom he calls 'carnal men' (*Corinthians* 3:1–2). For *Romans* 9:18–20 declares outright that human conduct doesn't affect the targets of God's anger or mercy, which depend purely on God's choice; and 3:28 says that no-one is 'justified' by acting in accordance with the law, but only by faith. What Paul means by 'faith', of course, is simply a full consent of the heart. And in 8:9 he says that no-one is made blessed unless he has in himself the mind of Christ, which enables him to perceive God's laws as eternal truths.

From all this I draw three conclusions. •When God is described as a lawgiver or prince, and called just, merciful, etc., this is only because of the multitude's level of understanding and their ignorance. •God really acts and guides all things only from the necessity of God's own nature and perfection.

•God's decrees and volitions are eternal truths, and always involve necessity. [Regarding the wording of this passage, see note on page 9.] That completes my answer to the first of the four questions raised on page 39.

•WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE TEACH ABOUT THIS?•

Let us now turn to the second question, and to the Bible to see what it teaches [66] about the natural light and this divine law. The first thing that strikes us is the story of the first man—God's commanding Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This seems to mean that God commanded Adam to do good out of •love for the good rather than •fear of evil. This fits with something I have already shown: if you •do good from a true knowledge and love of the good, you are acting freely and with a constant heart; whereas if you •act from fear of evil you are letting evil call the tune—acting like a slave, and living under the command of something external to you.

This one thing that God ordered Adam to do contains the whole divine natural law [this phrase is explained on page 38], and agrees absolutely with the dictate of the natural light—i.e. what you can know, without resorting to the Bible, by careful metaphysical thinking. It wouldn't be hard to interpret that whole story—that whole parable—of the first man on the basis of this explanation of the command relating to the tree.

But I prefer to set this aside: for one thing, I can't be absolutely certain that my explanation agrees with what the author of Genesis had in mind; and also, most people won't accept that this story is a parable, and will maintain that it's a plain historical narrative. So it will be better if I call your attention to other biblical passages, especially the ones that were written by someone who spoke from the power of the natural light (which shone more brightly in him than in any other wise man of his time), and whose maxims the people

have embraced as being as holy as those of the prophets. I'm talking about Solomon, who is commended in the sacred writings not so much for his ·religious· prophecy and piety as for his ·secular· prudence and wisdom.

In his *Proverbs*, Solomon calls the human intellect the fountain of true life, and says that misfortune is merely a matter of stupidity. Thus he says 'The intellect is a fountain of life to him who has it, and the punishment of fools is foolishness' (*Proverbs* 16:22). [The Vulgate (Latin) Bible and the King James version describe as 'foolishness' the *instruction* of fools. Perhaps this is a difference between the Hebrew Bible and others. It's an enormous difference: 'A fool is punished just by being a fool'; 'Anything that a fool teaches will be stupid'.]

In the Hebrew language, when the word for 'life' is used without qualification, it means *true life*, as is evident from *Deuteronomy* 30:19. According to Solomon, therefore, the whole benefit of the intellect is true life, and the only punishment is lack of understanding. This agrees completely with what I said earlier [item 4 on page 39] about natural divine law. And this same wise man teaches openly that this fountain of life (i.e. the intellect alone, as I have shown) prescribes laws to the wise. [67] For he says in *Proverbs* 13:14 'The law of the wise man is the fountain of life'—meaning that it is the intellect (as is shown by the *Deuteronomy* passage last referred to).

Also, he says very explicitly that the intellect makes a man blessed and happy, and gives him true peace of mind: 'Happy is the man who finds wisdom, the man who attains understanding' (*Proverbs* 3:13). He goes on to say that this is because knowledge directly gives longevity, and indirectly brings wealth and honour; her ways (i.e. the paths of life that knowledge indicates) are pleasant, and all her paths are peace. Thus, Solomon agrees that only the wise live with a constant and peaceful heart, unlike the impious, whose

heart vacillates with conflicting drives and emotions, to such an extent that they have no peace, no rest. Isaiah says this too, at *Isaiah* 57:20.

Pay special attention to *Proverbs* 2, which confirms my view as clearly as possible. Solomon starts it thus:

If you call to understanding and cry aloud to discernment, etc. then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God . For the Lord grants wisdom; knowledge and discernment are by his decree. (*Proverbs* 2:3–6) [In quoting this passage, Spinoza interpolates, after 'knowledge of God', '(or rather, the love of God, for the word *Jadah* has both meanings)'. And before 'For the Lord grants wisdom' he inserts '(NB)' = 'nota bene' = 'pay special attention'.]

By these words Solomon indicates very clearly (a) that only wisdom or intellect teaches us to fear God wisely, i.e. to worship God with true religion; and (b) that wisdom and knowledge flow from the mouth of God, and that it is God that gives them. This is just what I have shown above, namely that our intellect and our knowledge depend only on the idea or knowledge of God, arise only from it, and are perfected only by it.

He proceeds in verses 9–11 to say explicitly that this knowledge contains the true morality and politics, which are deduced from it: 'You will then understand what is right, just, and equitable—every good course.' And he doesn't leave it at that, but continues: 'Wisdom will [68] enter your mind and knowledge will delight you. Foresight will protect you, and discernment will guard you.' All these things are perfectly consistent with natural knowledge, which teaches morality and true virtue after we have informed ourselves about things and tasted the excellence of knowledge. So Solomon holds that the happiness and peace of anyone who cultivates the natural intellect doesn't depend on

•how his luck goes, i.e. on God's external aid, but mainly on

•his internal virtue, i.e. on God's internal aid, because he preserves himself mainly by being watchful, and by acting and planning well. [Regarding 'internal'/'external', see item **(2)** on page 27.—The phrase 'how his luck goes' inadequately translates Spinoza's phrase *imperium fortunae*, meaning something like 'the rule or command or kingdom of luck or fortune'.]

Finally, I mustn't overlook the passage where Paul says: 'God's hidden things, from the foundations of the world, are visible in his creatures through the intellect; this includes his power and divinity, which are eternal; so they—his creatures—are without excuse' (*Romans* 1:20, following Tremellius's translation of the Syriac text). This tells us clearly enough that each person, by the natural light, clearly understands God's eternal power and divinity, from which he can know and deduce what he ought to seek and what he ought to avoid. Paul infers from this that no-one could

be excused ·for his sins· on the grounds that he didn't know ·that they *were* sins·; whereas they *could* have been excused for not knowing about supernatural inspiration, Christ's suffering in the flesh, the resurrection and other such things ·that are not naturally knowable by everyone·. Through the rest of that chapter he describes the vices of ignorance, presenting them as punishments for ignorance. This agrees completely with Solomon's Proverb—cited above—that the punishment of fools is foolishness. So *of course* Paul holds that evildoers are inexcusable. For as each one sows, so shall he reap (*Galatians* 6:7); ·that is·, from evil deeds evils *necessarily* follow, unless they are wisely corrected, and from good deeds goods *necessarily* follow, if they are accompanied by constancy of mind.

Scripture, therefore, absolutely commends the *natural* light and the *natural* divine law. Which brings me to the end of what I wanted to do in this chapter.

## Chapter 5: Why ceremonies were instituted and faith in historical narratives—who needs it, and why?

[69] In the preceding chapter I showed that the divine law which makes men truly blessed and teaches true life is universal to all men. Indeed, I derived it from human nature in such a way that we must think that it is innate to the human mind—written into it, as it were. But ceremonies—at least

the ones the Old Testament tells us about—were instituted only for the Hebrews; and they were so closely tailored to fit the Hebrew state that they mostly couldn't be performed by individuals but only by the society as a whole. So they certainly don't have to do with the divine law, because they

don't contribute to blessedness and virtue. Rather, they concern only what the Hebrews chose, namely (as I showed in chapter 3) only bodily comfort and social peace. So they could be of use only so long as their state lasted.

So if in the Old Testament the law of God was mentioned in connection with those ceremonies, that was only because they were instituted by revelation or from revealed foundations; it doesn't mean that the *content* of the ceremonies had anything to do with God. I have *shown* this; but even the most solid reasoning isn't generally valued highly by theologians, so I shall confirm what I have been saying by the authority of Scripture also. This will also help me to show *clearly* why and how the ceremonies served to stabilize and preserve the state of the Jews.

·SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE RE THE PLACE OF CEREMONIES·

Isaiah teaches nothing more clearly than this:

The phrase 'the divine law', when not qualified in any way, refers to the universal law which concerns the true manner of living but doesn't concern ceremonies.

For in *Isaiah* 1:10 the prophet calls his nation to hear from him the divine Law, from which he first excludes all kinds of sacrifices, and then all festivals, and only then does he teach the law itself (see 1:16–17), and sums it up briefly as consisting in

- purification of the heart,
- virtue (acting well, being disposed to act well), and
- giving aid to the poor.

No less illuminating is the testimony of *Psalms* 40:7,9, where the Psalmist [70] says to God:

'You gave me to understand that you do not desire sacrifice and meal offering; you do not ask for burnt offering and sin offering. To do what pleases you, my God, is my desire; your law is in my inmost parts.'

[\*Spinoza gives this first in Hebrew and then in Latin. •The verse num-

bers are the Hebrew Bible's; for other Bibles they are 6,8. •The above quotation uses 'law' (Latin: *lex*) where Tanakh has 'teaching'.] Thus, he restricts the law of God to what is written in the inmost parts or in the mind, and he explicitly excludes ceremonies from it. Ceremonies are not 'written in minds' because they are not naturally and intrinsically good—their value is institutional, i.e. they are valuable only because of how they fit into the life of the Hebrew nation. Other passages in Scripture testify to the same thing, but these two are enough.

Ceremonies don't contribute to blessedness and concern only the temporal prosperity of the state—Scripture establishes this by

- promising nothing in return for ceremonies except conveniences and physical pleasures, and
- promising blessedness in return for following the universal divine law.

In the five books that are commonly attributed to Moses, nothing else is promised (as I said on page 45) than this temporal prosperity, i.e. honours or reputation, victories, wealth, pleasures and health.

Those five books contain many moral precepts, but ceremonies figure in them not as moral teachings that hold for all men, but rather as commands especially adapted to the level of understanding and the temperament of the Hebrew nation. . . . For example, Moses doesn't

(1) teach the Jews as a teacher or prophet that they shouldn't kill or steal; rather he

(2) commands them, as a lawgiver and monarch, not to do those things. For he doesn't (1) prove these teachings by reason, but instead (2) adds a penalty to the commands, and we know from experience that penalties have to vary according to the temperament of each nation. So also the command not to commit adultery concerns only the welfare of the community and the state. If Moses had wanted

to teach this as a moral teaching, aiming not only at the advantage of the community but also at each person's peace of mind and true blessedness, he would have condemned not only the external action but also the mental consent to it, as Christ did (and he taught only universal teachings)—see *Matthew* 5:28). For this reason Christ promises a spiritual reward, but not a corporeal one as Moses does. For Christ (I repeat) was sent not to preserve the state and to institute laws, [71] but only to teach the universal law. (This shows clearly that Christ didn't repeal the law of Moses: he didn't aim to introduce any new laws into the state, and cared only about teaching moral lessons and *distinguishing* them from the state's laws. This mattered to him mainly because of the ignorance of the Pharisees, who thought that the way to live blessedly was to obey the legislation of the state, i.e. the law of Moses, whereas really that law (I repeat) aimed only at the public good and didn't serve to •teach the Hebrews as much as to •compel them.)

But to return to my theme: other passages in Scripture also promise nothing more than physical conveniences in return for ceremonies, and promise blessedness only in return for conforming to the universal divine law. No prophet taught this more clearly than Isaiah. For in chapter 58, after he has condemned hypocrisy, he commends freedom and loving kindness towards oneself and one's neighbor, and in return for these [verse 8] he promises that

‘. . . then shall your light burst through like the dawn, and your healing will spring up quickly; your Vindicator shall march before you, the presence of the Lord shall be your rear guard.’

After this he commends the sabbath also, and in return for diligence in observing it, he promises [verse 14] that

‘. . . then you can seek the favour of the Lord. I will set you astride the heights of the earth, and let you enjoy

the heritage of your father Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’

So we see that in return for •freedom and •loving kindness the prophet promises a healthy mind in a healthy body, and the glory of God even after death, but that in return for ceremonies he promises nothing but the security of the state, prosperity, and the happiness of the body.

Psalms 15 and 24 don't mention ceremonies, only moral teachings, because in those psalms it is only a question of blessedness, and that alone is held out as an inducement—though this is said in metaphors. For it is certain that by ‘the mount of God and his tents’ and the ‘inhabitants’ of these the Psalmist is referring to blessedness and peace of mind, not to the mount of Jerusalem or the tent of Moses, [72] which no-one ‘inhabited’ . . .

Next, all the maxims of Solomon that I mentioned in chapter 4 promise true blessedness in return for the cultivation of the intellect and of wisdom—the blessedness consisting in the fear of God and the knowledge of God that a developed intellect and wisdom will bring. After the destruction of their state the Hebrews are not bound to perform ceremonies: this is evident from Jeremiah who after seeing and saying that the ravaging of the city is coming soon says •something to the effect that•

God loves only those who know and understand that he exercises compassion, judgment and justice in the world; so hereafter only those who know these things are to be thought worthy of praise: [see *Jeremiah* 9:23] seemingly meaning that after the city was ravaged God wouldn't require anything special of the Jews—only obedience to the natural law by which all mortals are bound.

And the New Testament completely confirms this; for in it (as I have already said) only moral •lessons are taught, and the kingdom of heaven is promised in return for abiding by

•them; and as for •ceremonies, after the Gospel began to be preached to other nations who were bound by the laws of other states the apostles gave •them up altogether. ‘After the loss of their state ·at the hands of the *Romans*·, didn’t the Pharisees retain many ceremonies?’ Yes, but they did this more in a spirit of opposing the Christians, than of pleasing God. ·As evidence for this, consider the attitude they showed at an earlier stage in their history·. After the *first* destruction of the city, when the captives were led to Babylon. . . .they immediately

- gave up ceremonies,
- said farewell to the whole law of Moses,
- consigned the laws of their native land to oblivion as useless to them, and
- began to mix with the other nations.

This is established more than adequately by Ezra and Nehemiah. So there’s no doubt about it: the Jews were no more bound by the law of Moses after their state ended than they were before it began. While living among other nations before the exodus from Egypt, they had no laws of their own and weren’t bound by *any* law except natural law, and no doubt the laws of the state in which they were living, insofar as it wasn’t contrary to divine natural law.

‘Didn’t the Patriarchs sacrifice to God?’ Yes, but I think they did that in order to rouse their hearts—that had been accustomed to sacrifices from childhood—to more devotion. . . .

[.73] So why did the Patriarchs sacrifice to God? It was not because some divine law told them to, or because the universal foundations of divine law taught them to, but because it was the custom at that time.

If anyone’s *command* came into it, it was the command of the laws of the state in which they were living, by which they were also bound. . . .

Having confirmed my opinion by the authority of Scripture, I now have to show how and why ceremonies served to preserve and stabilize the Hebrews’ state. I shall show this from universal foundations, as briefly as I can.

·HOW CEREMONIES HELP THE STATE·

A social order is useful—*necessary* indeed—for •living securely from enemies and also for •getting things done in an efficient way. Men don’t have the skill or the time to support and preserve themselves really well, unless they are willing to help one another in this. Men vary in what they are good at; no one man could provide for himself the things he most needs, ·let alone things he would like but doesn’t outright need·. No man would have the ability and the time to do his own ploughing, sowing, reaping, grinding, cooking, weaving, sewing, if he alone had to plow, to sow, to reap, to grind, to cook, to weave, to sew, and to do the many other things to support life—not to mention the acquisition of practical skills and theoretical knowledge that are also entirely necessary for the perfection of human nature and its blessedness. Those who live barbarously, without an organized community, lead a wretched and almost brutal life; and their ability to provide themselves with the few wretched and crude things they do have depends on the mutual assistance, such as it is, that they give one another.

Now, if men were naturally so constituted that they wanted nothing except what true reason indicates, then of course the social order wouldn’t need •laws. All that would be required would be to teach men •true moral lessons, so that they would spontaneously, wholeheartedly, and freely do things that were really useful. But that’s not how human nature is constituted! Everyone seeks his own advantage ·and that is good in itself·, but ·it works out badly, because· people’s judgments about what would be useful are not based on sound reason but mostly come from immoderate desires



and from being swept away by affects of the mind that don't take a long view or a wide view. That is why no [74] social order can survive without authority and force, involving laws that moderate and restrain men's immoderate desires and unchecked impulses.

But human nature doesn't allow itself to be compelled absolutely; and as the poet Seneca says, 'no-one has maintained a violent rule for long, but moderate ones last'. When men are acting only from fear, they do things that they hate doing, and have no thought for whether the things they are told to do are useful or necessary. All they care about is staying out of trouble. Indeed, they can't help rejoicing when their ruler comes to grief, even though that also brings great evil to them. . . . Again, they are utterly resistant to being subject to—and governed by—their equals. And a last point: nothing is more difficult than to deprive men of freedom once they have had it.

From these basic facts three things follow. **(1)** Either the whole society should hold sovereignty as a body (if this can be done), so that everyone is bound to be subject to himself, and no-one is bound to be subject to his equal; or else, if one man has dominion alone, he should have something that ordinary human beings don't, at least he should do his best to persuade the multitude that he has (and this applies also if dominion is held by a small group of people).

**(2)** The laws in each state must restrain men not so much by fear as by the hope of some good that they strongly desire; for then everyone will eagerly do his duty.

**(3)** *Obeying* is doing something solely because of the authority of whoever commanded that it be done; so obedience has no place in a social order where sovereignty is in the hands of everyone and laws are enacted by common consent. When in such a society new laws are enacted or existing

laws are repealed, the freedom of the people is not affected either way, because the people don't act from the authority of someone else but by their own consent. Where one person alone holds unconstrained sovereignty, the opposite happens. For everyone carries out the commands of the state solely because of the authority of one person, so that it will be hard for him to bring in new laws when there is a need for them, depriving the people of a liberty they once had; unless they have been brought up from childhood to hang on the words of the ruler, in which case his job won't be so hard.

Let us now apply these general considerations to the Hebrew state. When the Hebrews first left Egypt, they were no longer bound by the legislation of any other nation, so that they were free to enact new laws [75] as they wished, i.e. to ordain new legislation, to achieve sovereignty wherever they wished, and to occupy what lands they wished. But they were quite incapable of legislating wisely and keeping the sovereignty in their own collective hands. Most of them were crude in their understanding and weakened by wretched bondage. So the sovereignty was bound to get into the hands of one person whose role was to command the others, compel them by force, and prescribe laws and then interpret them.

Moses was easily able to retain this sovereignty, because he excelled the others in divine power, and convinced them of this by many bits of evidence (see *Exodus* 14:31, 19:9). Thus, it was on the strength of the divine power in which he was pre-eminent that Moses developed laws and prescribed them to the people. But in this he took *great* care that the people should do their duty spontaneously rather than from fear. He was pushed in that direction by two things—the obstinate temperament of the people (who wouldn't allow themselves to be compelled solely by force) and the threat of war. If a war is to go well, the soldiers must be encouraged

rather than frightened by threats of penalties; each soldier will be more energized by a wish to become famous for virtue and nobility of spirit than he would be by a mere wish to avoid punishment.

*That* is why Moses. . . introduced religion into the body politic—to get the people to do their duty from devotion rather than from fear. Then he placed them under obligation with benefits, and made them many promises in God’s name. His laws weren’t very severe; you’ll agree about that if you attend to the requirements for finding someone guilty of a crime [Deuteronomy 9:15]. The people not being capable of being their own master, Moses wanted them to hang on the words of their ruler; so he didn’t allow these men—accustomed as they were to slavery—to do anything by their own choice. The only way to get them to do anything was to have them remember the law and carry out commands that depended only on the will of the ruler. What led them to plow, to sow, to reap? Not their own choice, but a strict and precise command by the law. Likewise, they weren’t allowed to eat, to dress, to shave their head or beard, to rejoice, to do *anything* except on orders from the laws. And they were legally required to have on the doorposts, on their hands and between their eyes certain signs, which always reminded them of the need [76] for obedience. [Deuteronomy 6:8–9, 22:9–12, and Leviticus 11, 19:9, and 19:27.]

So that is what ceremonies were for: to bring it about that men did nothing by their own decision, and everything according to the command of someone else, and that they should admit—by continual actions and meditations—that they were not their own master in anything. . . . From all of this it is crystal clear that ceremonies don’t contribute to blessedness, and that those of the Old Testament were—like the whole law of Moses—concerned only with the Hebrew state and therefore with nothing but material well-being.

As for the ceremonies of the Christians—baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the festivals, public prayers and whatever others there may that are and always have been common to all Christianity—if Christ or the apostles instituted these (which I am not yet convinced that they did), they were instituted only as external signs of the universal Church, not as contributing to blessedness or having any holiness in them. So although these ceremonies weren’t instituted with respect to a state, still they were instituted only for a whole society. So anyone who lives alone is not bound by them at all; and anyone who lives in a state where the Christian religion is forbidden has to abstain from these ceremonies, but can still live blessedly. [Spinoza cites an historical example, and says that this thesis of his is well confirmed by the New Testament and other sources, but that he doesn’t want to go into that here]. . . because I am anxious to get to other things. I proceed, therefore, to the second topic I planned to treat in this chapter, namely the question: For whom is faith in the historical narratives contained in Scriptures necessary? and why? To investigate this by the natural light, it seems that we should proceed as follows.

·FAITH IN SCRIPTURE’S HISTORICAL NARRATIVES·

If someone wants to persuade. . . men of something that isn’t self-evident, he must deduce it from things that have been granted, and convince them either by •experience or by •reason—i.e. from •things that they have experienced as happening in nature or from •intellectual self-evident axioms. But unless the experience is clearly and distinctly understood, even though it *convince* [77] a man, it can’t *affect his intellect* and disperse its clouds as much as when the doctrine in question is deduced in an orderly way solely from intellectual axioms. . . . This is especially true when the topic is something spiritual that lies outside the reach of the senses. But deriving something solely from intellectual

notions often requires

- a long chain of thoughts,
- extreme caution,
- perceptiveness of mind, and
- self-control;

and none of these are often found in men. So men would rather be taught by experience than travel that difficult intellectual route. Thus, someone wanting to teach a doctrine to an entire nation (let alone to the whole human race), wanting it to be fully understood by everyone, has to confirm his teaching solely by experience and adapt his arguments and definitions to the intellectual level of the majority, the common people. If instead he constructs his arguments and definitions in the *logically* best way, he will be writing only for learned people, a minority. . . .

I'll explain this more clearly. The main things Scripture aims to teach that concern only speculation [see note on page 65] are these:

There is a God, i.e. a being who made everything, who directs and supports everything with supreme wisdom, and who takes the greatest care of men—specifically of those who live piously and honourably—and inflicts many punishments on the others, separating them from the good.

Scripture establishes this solely through experience, i.e. by the histories that it narrates. It doesn't offer *definitions*, but adapts all its words and arguments to the common people's intellectual level. And although experience can't give any clear knowledge of these things, or teach what God is, how he supports and directs all things, and how he takes care of men, still it can teach and enlighten men enough to [78] imprint obedience and devotion on their hearts.

All this shows clearly enough who needs to have faith in Scripture's historical narratives, and why. What I have

shown makes it obvious that knowledge and acceptance of those narratives is absolutely needed by the multitude, who aren't intellectually up to perceiving things vividly and clearly. It also follows that **(1)** anyone who denies these narratives because he doesn't believe that there is a God who provides for things and for men is **impious**; **(2)** anyone who isn't familiar with the narratives and yet knows by the natural light of reason that God exists etc., and moreover has a true manner of living, is completely blessed—more blessed, indeed, than the multitude, because as well as true beliefs he has a vivid and clear conception; and **(3)** anyone who doesn't know these historical narratives in Scripture and doesn't know anything by the natural light either is devoid of human feeling and almost a beast. Even if he isn't impious or obstinate, he doesn't have any gift from God.

[Spinoza goes on to explain that what is necessary for the multitude is just knowledge and acceptance of the main narratives, the ones that 'are most capable of moving men's hearts'. To demand knowledge of all of them would be excessive; there are too many of them for that; and he mentions a few that he thinks are not essential to a grasp of Scripture's message. He continues:] [..79] But the multitude—the general run of common people—can't properly make judgments about these matters, because they take more pleasure in the narratives themselves. . . .than in what the narratives teach. So as well as reading the stories they need pastors. . . .who will teach them according to the weakness of their understanding.

Not to wander from our subject, let me conclude with what I mainly meant to show, namely that faith in historical narratives—*any* historical narratives—has nothing to do with the divine law and doesn't in itself make men more blessed. The only thing it is good for is teaching, and it's only as teaching aids that one story can be better than another. . . .

Some stories are better than others because the opinions that follow from them are salutary. Hence if someone reads the stories of Holy Scripture and utterly believes them, but hasn't attended to the lesson Scripture intends to teach through them or improved his life, he'd have done as well to read the Koran, or the dramas of the Poets, or even the ordinary Chronicles, with the same minimal attention as the multitude commonly give to these things. On the other hand, someone who knows nothing of these, is completely unfamiliar with these stories, yet has salutary opinions and a true manner of living, is absolutely blessed and really has the spirit of Christ in him.

But the Jews think just the opposite. They hold that true opinions and a true manner of living contribute nothing to blessedness if men accept them only through the natural light and not as teachings revealed prophetically to Moses. Maimonides is bold enough to affirm this openly:

'Everyone who has accepted the seven [80] precepts<sup>4</sup> and has followed them diligently is among the pious of the nations, and is an heir to the future world—provided that he accepts and follows them because God commanded them in the law and revealed to us through Moses that he had previously given the same precepts to the sons of Noah; but if he follows them because he has been led by reason, he is not to be numbered among the pious of the nations, or among their wise men. [(Maimonides, *Code of Law*, Book of Kings, ch.8, law 11)].

Those are the words of Maimonides, to which the Rabbi Joseph ben Shem Tov adds that even if Aristotle (who he thinks wrote the best Ethics, and whom he esteems above all other writers) had included all those precepts in his own Ethics, and had followed all of them diligently, this still wouldn't have helped him to attain salvation, because he doesn't accept the things he teaches as divine teachings prophetically revealed, but only as dictated by reason.

But I think that anyone who reads this stuff attentively will see that it is all sheer invention, with no support from Scripture or from reason. . . . And there's no need for me to spend time, either, on the opinion that the natural light can't teach anything sound that relates to true salvation. It's an opinion that can't be supported by reason! And if those who accept it lay claim to having something above reason, that is a sheer invention, and a long way below reason, as their ordinary way of living has already sufficiently indicated. . . .

I'll add only this: we can't know anyone except by his works. Therefore, if a man is rich in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. . . he has truly been taught by God—whether through reason alone or through Scripture alone—and he is completely blessed. That brings me to the end of what I had to say about the divine law. [That last sentence isn't displaced from the end of chapter 4. The phrase 'divine law' has occurred nearly a dozen times in chapter 5, whose main content is really a pair of negative theses about the divine law.]

<sup>4</sup> Footnote by Spinoza: The Jews think that God gave Noah seven precepts, which are the only ones by which all nations are bound; and that he gave many others to the Hebrew nation alone, so as to make it more blessed than the others.

## Chapter 6: Miracles

[81] Just as men usually label as ‘divine’ any •knowledge humans aren’t equipped to have, so also they label as ‘divine’ (or describe as ‘God’s work’) any •event whose cause isn’t known by the general run of people. Ordinary folk, when they are confronted by a natural event that is unusual and in conflict with the beliefs that their experience has given them about what’s natural, think that this is the best possible evidence that God’s power and providence are at work—especially if the event has been to their profit or advantage! Nothing proves the existence of God more clearly, they think, than an episode in which nature *doesn’t* maintain its order. If someone explains things—including ‘miracles’—through their natural causes, or who sets himself to *understand* such events—the general populace will accuse him of eliminating God, or at least eliminating God’s providence.

In their view, then, so long as nature is acting in its usual order, God isn’t doing anything; and as long as God is acting, nature and natural causes are inactive. So they imagine two distinct non-overlapping powers, the •power of God and the •power of natural things, though they think of the power of natural things as *somehow* determined by God or (as they say these days) created by God.

What do they take these two powers to be? and what do they take God and nature to be? *They don’t know!* Except that they imagine God’s power as •the rule of a monarch, and imagine nature’s power as •force and impulse. So the common people label as ‘miracles’ or ‘God’s work’ any unusual natural events; they don’t *want* to know things’ natural causes—partly out of devotion •to God•, and partly out of hostility to those who cultivate the natural sciences.

All they want to hear about are things that can astonish them, i.e. things about which they are completely ignorant. The only way they can worship God and relate everything to his rule is by eliminating natural causes and imagining events outside the order of nature. They are most impressed by God’s power when they imagine that it has, so to speak, conquered nature.

This •attitude• seems to have originated with the first Jews. The gentiles of their time worshipped visible gods—the sun, the moon, the earth, water, air and so on. To prove them wrong, and to show them that those gods [82] were weak, changeable, and under the rule of an invisible God, the Jews told the gentiles about their miracles. This was an attempt •not only to convert the gentiles from their gods, but• also to show that the whole of nature was directed only for the convenience of the Jews, according to the command of the God whom they worshipped. This way of thinking was so attractive [to the gentiles?] that the Jews are still continuing to invent miracles even today, wanting to convince others that they are •dearer to God than the rest, and are the •end for which God has created, and continually directs, all things.

There’s no limit to the claims that the foolishness of the mob makes for itself because it

- has no sound concept either of God or of nature,
- confuses God’s decisions with those of men, and
- has such a limited picture of nature that it believes man to be its chief part.

That’s enough about the opinions and prejudices of the multitude concerning nature and miracles.

To present my own views in an orderly fashion, I shall show **(1)** that nothing happens contrary to nature—that nature preserves a fixed and unchangeable eternal order—and at the same time I'll show what 'miracle' properly means [page 53]; **(2)** that miracles can't prove to us •that God exists, or •what God's essence is, or what •God's providence is; and that all these things are far better perceived through the unchangeable order of nature [pages 53–55]; **(3)** that Scripture itself understands by 'God's decrees and volitions', and hence 'God's providence', nothing but the order of nature, which follows necessarily from nature's eternal laws [pages 56–57]; and finally **(4)** how the miracles reported in the Bible are to be interpreted, and the main points that must be noted regarding the narrations of miracles [pages 57–59]. Those are the main themes of this chapter, and I think they will be very useful for the purpose of the work as a whole.

•NATURE'S UNCHANGEABILITY•

**(1)** From the things I have demonstrated in chapter 4 it is easy to show that whatever God wills or determines involves eternal necessity and truth. [Spinoza goes on to restate the demonstration. His way of doing it, though not fatally obscure, is hard to follow. Its gist is this: God's intellect is not distinct from God's will; so that God's *willing* something is the same as God's *understanding* it. We accept that if it follows from the divine nature and perfection that God understands proposition P, then P is absolutely necessary; and in the same way, if it follows from God's nature etc. that God wills event E to occur, then the occurrence of E is absolutely necessary. It follows from this that the universal laws of nature [83] are nothing but decrees of God, which follow from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature. Then:] Therefore, for something to happen in nature contrary to nature's universal laws, it would also have to be contrary to God's decree, God's intellect and God's nature. Or—to put

it another way—if you maintain that God does something contrary to the laws of nature you'll have to maintain that God acts in a way contrary to God's own nature; and nothing could be more absurd than that. . . .

Nothing, therefore, happens in nature that is contrary to its universal laws. Furthermore, nothing happens in nature that doesn't. . . follow from those laws. Everything that happens does so by God's will and eternal decree, i.e. as I have just shown, everything that happens does so according to laws and rules that involve eternal necessity and truth.

So nature always observes laws and rules that involve eternal necessity and truth, though we don't know them all; so it also observes an unchangeable order. And there are no good reasons for us to attribute to nature only a limited power, maintaining that its laws are suited only for some things and not for everything. (Incidentally, I'm using 'nature' to stand not only for matter and its states but also for countless other things as well.) For since nature's power is the very power of God, and its laws and rules are God's decrees themselves, we must believe without reservation that the power of nature is infinite, and that its laws are so broad that they extend to everything that is conceived by the divine intellect itself. The alternative is to say that God has created a nature that is so weak, and established laws and rules for it that are so sterile, that often God is compelled to come to its aid anew, if it is to be preserved and things are to turn out as God wished. That is clearly as foreign to reason as anything could be.

So I conclude that •nothing happens in nature that doesn't follow from its laws, that •its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine intellect itself, and finally, that •nature maintains an unchangeable order.

## ·WHAT 'MIRACLE' MEANS·

From these conclusions it clearly follows that the only meaning the term 'miracle' has is person-relative. It means [84] means 'event whose natural cause *we* ·humans· can't explain in terms of something familiar' or else 'event whose natural cause *I* ·the speaker· can't explain in terms of something familiar'.

Indeed, I could ·define 'miracle' in a way that isn't person-relative, because I could· say that a 'miracle' means an 'event whose cause can't be explained through the principles of natural things known by the natural light'. But that isn't right. It's the multitude—the general run of ordinary people—who have said that miracles have occurred; so what is relevant is *their* understanding; and they have always been completely ignorant of the principles of natural things. So we are forced to conclude that the ancients regarded as a 'miracle' anything that they couldn't explain in the way the multitude usually explain natural things, namely by trying to remember some similar event that they are accustomed to experience without wonder. For the multitude think they understand an event well enough if they don't wonder at it! Hence, the ancients, and almost everyone up to now, has had no way to judge whether an event is a miracle except the one embodied in my definition. Many things are reported as miracles in the Bible though their causes can easily be explained ·*now*· according to known principles of natural things. I hinted at this [on page 21], when I spoke about the sun's standing still in the time of Joshua. . . . But I'll discuss

this more fully later in the present chapter, when I get to my promised discussion of the interpretation of miracles.

## ·WE CAN LEARN ABOUT GOD FROM NATURE, NOT FROM MIRACLES·

(2) Now for the second point ·in the list on page 39·, namely to show that miracles don't teach us what God is, that God exists, or what God's providence is; but that on the contrary these things are far better perceived through the unchangeable order of nature. Here's my demonstration of this:

Since God's existence is not self-evident,<sup>5</sup> we have to infer it from notions whose truth is so firm and steady that their becoming false is inconceivable. At least they must appear to us to be like that at the time when we infer God's existence from them—that is needed if we are to infer it from them beyond any risk of doubt. If we could conceive that the notions could be made false by some power—never mind *what*—we would doubt their truth, and thus also doubt our conclusion that God exists, so that we could never be certain of anything.

Next point: We don't know that something agrees with nature (or is contrary to it) unless we have shown it to agree with (or be contrary to) those principles. So if we could conceive that some power [85]—never mind what—could make something happen in nature that was contrary to nature, that would contradict those first notions, ·i.e. the ones 'whose truth is so firm and steady that their becoming

<sup>5</sup> As long as our idea of God himself is confused rather than clear and distinct, we doubt God's existence, and so we doubt everything. Someone who conceives the divine nature confusedly won't see that existence belongs to God's nature, just as someone who doesn't properly grasp the nature of a triangle won't know that its three angles are equal to two right angles. How *can* we conceive God's nature clearly and distinctly? To do that we have to focus on certain very simple notions—known as 'common notions'—and connect them with the notions that pertain to the divine nature. If you do that it will become obvious to you •that God exists necessarily and is everywhere, •that everything we conceive involves and is conceived through the nature of God, and finally •that anything that we conceive adequately is true. On these matters see the preface of my book "*Descartes's Principles of Philosophy*" *Demonstrated in the Geometric Manner*.

false is inconceivable'. So we have either to •reject as absurd •the thesis that something could happen in nature that was contrary to nature• or to •doubt the first notions. The latter option would lead us to doubt God, and doubt everything—*everything*, no matter what the evidence for it had been.

So if we understand 'miracle' as meaning 'event that is contrary to the order of nature', miracles don't show us the existence of God. Quite the contrary: they would make us doubt his existence, •or at least open the door to such a doubt. Without miracles that door is shut, because without miracles• we can be absolutely certain of God's existence because we know that all things in nature follow a certain and immutable order.

What if we take 'miracle' to mean 'event that can't be explained by natural causes? Well, that is ambiguous. It may equate 'miracle' with

•'event that has natural causes, but ones that can't be found by the human intellect,

or with

•'event that has no cause except God' or '... except God's will'.

But because everything that happens through natural causes happens only according to God's power and will, in the end we must arrive at this: whether a miracle has natural causes or not, it is a work that can't be explained by its cause, i.e. a work that surpasses man's power of understanding. But we can't understand anything through an event like that—or indeed through *anything* surpassing our power of understanding! The only way we can come to understand something clearly and distinctly, if it isn't self-evident, is through something else that we understand clearly and distinctly. So from a miracle, or from any event surpassing our power of understanding, we can't understand God's

essence, or his existence, or *anything whatever* concerning God and nature.

On the other hand, when we come to know that every event is determined and done by God, that nature's operations follow from God's essence, and indeed that the laws of nature are God's eternal decrees and volitions, we must conclude without any reservation that we •have a better knowledge of God and God's will as well as of natural events, and •understand more clearly how those events depend on their first cause, and how they operate according to the eternal laws of nature.

So we have a much greater intellectual entitlement to •regard events that we clearly and distinctly understand as works of God and to •refer them to the will of God than we have to attribute to God these events of which we know nothing, although the latter occupy our imagination powerfully and sweep men along into wondering at them. . . . [..86] Those who have recourse to the will of God when they have no knowledge of a thing are just trifling. It's a ridiculous way of confessing one's ignorance.

And even if we *could* infer something from miracles, we couldn't infer God's existence from them. A miracle is a limited event, expressing only a definite and limited power; so we certainly couldn't infer from it the existence of an infinitely powerful cause. . . . •Something like that inference *can* be made from natural events•. The laws of nature extend to infinitely many things, and we conceive them as in a certain way eternal; and nature proceeds according to them in a definite and unchangeable order; so to that extent they indicate to us in some way the infinity, eternity and unchangeability of God. . . .

I don't here recognize any difference between an event that is •contrary to nature and an event that is •above nature (that's supposed to be an event that isn't actually contrary



to nature, but which couldn't be brought about by nature). A miracle doesn't happen *outside* nature; it's an event *in* nature itself; and an event that is said to be *above* nature still has to be an interruption of the order of nature. . . . Therefore, if something happened in nature that didn't follow from nature's laws, it would have to be incompatible with the order that God [87] has established to eternity in nature through the laws of nature. [The point that Spinoza has presumably wanted to make, but doesn't express very well, is that the laws of nature are *comprehensive* in the sense that the facts about any event either follow from them or conflict with them.]. . . .

I think I have now given strong enough reasons for my treatment of the second topic listed ·page 39· above. What I have said shows that ·the concept of· a 'miracle', with this understood as something either contrary to nature or above nature, it is a mere absurdity. So the only way we can understand miracles reported in the Bible is by taking a miracle to be a work of nature which either surpasses men's power of understanding or is thought to do so.

·THE BIBLE IMPLIES THAT WE CAN'T LEARN ABOUT GOD FROM MIRACLES·

Scripture nowhere teaches openly that we can't know God from miracles. but that view can easily be inferred from Scripture, especially from Moses' command that the Jews should condemn to death any prophet who leads them astray, even if he performs miracles (*Deuteronomy* 13:1–5). [He goes on to quote some of this ferocious passage. Then:] From this it clearly follows that even false prophets can perform miracles, and that unless men are well protected by the true knowledge and love of God, miracles can lead them to embrace false gods as easily as to embrace the true God. . . .

Again, we have seen that the Israelites, with all those miracles, still couldn't form any sound conception of God. When they thought Moses had left them, they applied to

Aaron for visible divinities, and the idea of God they ended up constructing on the basis of all those miracles was—*ugh!*—a calf! (*Exodus* 32:1–6) Although Asaph had heard of many miracles, he still doubted God's providence and would almost have been turned from the true way if he hadn't at last understood true blessedness. See *Psalms* 73. Even Solomon, writing at a time when the affairs of the Jews were very flourishing, suspects that everything happens by chance. See *Ecclesiastes* 3:19–21, 9:2–3, etc.

(A final point: Hardly [88] any of the prophets could see how the order of nature and human outcomes could agree with the concept they had formed concerning God's providence, whereas this has always been quite clear to the philosophers, who try to understand things not through miracles but through clear concepts. The philosophers locate true happiness only in virtue and peace of mind; they want to obey nature, rather than being set on getting nature to obey them; they know for sure that God directs nature as its •universal laws require, but not as the •special laws of human nature require, and that God takes account, not of the human race only, but of the whole of nature.)

Therefore, even Scripture itself establishes that miracles don't give true knowledge of God or any clear teaching about God's providence. Scripture often reports God as performing wonders to make himself known to men, for example when *Exodus* 10:2 says that God deceived the Egyptians and gave signs of himself, so that the Israelites would know that he was God; but it doesn't follow that miracles really *do* show this; the message is only that the Jews' framework of beliefs made it easy to convince them by miracles. For I showed clearly in chapter 2 that the prophetic arguments, i.e. ones that are based on revelation, can't be drawn from •universal and common notions, but rather from •opinions—even absurd ones—that are already possessed

by the hearers, i.e. those whom the Holy Spirit wants to convince. I have cited many examples of this, and also noted [page 32] the testimony of Paul, who was a Greek with the Greeks and a Jew with the Jews (1 *Corinthians* 9:20–22).

But although those miracles could convince the Egyptians and the Jews on the basis of things they had already accepted, they still couldn't give any true idea and knowledge of God. The most they could do was to get the Hebrews to accept that there is a Divinity more powerful than anything they know, and then that ·this Divinity· cared above all for the Hebrews (for whom at that time things were going even better than they had hoped). The miracles couldn't make these people accept that God cares equally for all, for only philosophy can teach that. So the Jews, like all those who knew God's providence only from the different conditions of human affairs and the unequal fortunes of men, persuaded themselves that they were dearer to God than other peoples, even though they still didn't surpass the others in human perfection (I showed this in chapter 3).

·HOW SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS 'GOD'S PROVIDENCE'·

**(3)** My third point [89] ·in the list on page 39· was to show from Scripture that God's decrees and commands, and thus his providence, are really nothing but the order of nature, i.e. that when Scripture says that a certain event was done by God or by God's will, all it means is that

- a certain event occurred according to the laws and order of nature,

and not, as the multitude thinks, that

- nature stopped acting for a while, its order was interrupted for a while.

But Scripture doesn't directly teach things that don't fall within its doctrine, because—as I showed concerning the divine law—it isn't Scripture's purpose to teach things through their natural causes or to teach things that are mere matters

of theory. So what I want to show here must be inferred by reasoning from certain biblical narratives that just *happen* to have been related with more detail than usual. I shall cite a number of these.

In 1 *Samuel* 9:15–16 we are told that God revealed to Samuel that he would send Saul to him. But God did not 'send' Saul to him in the way men usually 'send' one man to another. This 'sending by God' was nothing but the order of nature itself, as we see in that same chapter (·verses 3–10·), which reports that Saul had been looking for asses that he had lost, and was about ready to ·give up and· return home without them, when he went to the prophet Samuel, on the advice of his servant, to learn from him where he could find them. There is nothing in the whole narrative to indicate that Saul had any command from God other than this natural causal chain leading him to go to Samuel.

In *Psalms* 105:24–5 it is said that God changed the hearts of the Egyptians so that they would hate the Israelites; yet this was a completely natural change, as is evident from *Exodus* 1:7–11 where we learn that the Egyptians had strong ·natural· reasons to reduce the Israelites to slavery.

In *Genesis* 9:13 God tells Noah that he will give him a rainbow in the clouds. This 'action of God' is of course merely the refraction and reflection of the rays of the sun, which they undergo in the drops of water. In *Psalms* 147:18 the natural action of the wind by which frost and snow are melted is called 'a command [of God]', and in verse 15 the wind and cold are called the 'command' and 'word' of God. In *Psalms* 104:4 wind and fire are called the 'messengers' and 'servants' of God. The Bible contains many other things along these lines; they indicate quite clearly that the 'decree', 'order', 'command' and 'word' of God are nothing but the working of natural causality.

[90] So there's no room for doubt that everything related in Scripture happened naturally, yet is ascribed to God because the purpose of Scripture—as I have already shown—is not to •teach things through their natural causes, but only to •narrate things that loom large in the imagination, •doing this by the method and style that serves best to increase wonder at things, thereby producing devotion in the hearts of the common people.

So when we find in the Bible certain things whose causes we don't know how to give an account of, things that seem to have happened beyond the order of nature or even contrary to it, we shouldn't regard them as problems, and should believe without reservation that what really happened naturally. . . . And the details of the miracles clearly show that they require natural causes. [Spinoza gives five examples, one from the new testament.]

So we must believe that although the miracles and their natural causes are not always described in full detail, nevertheless the miracles did have such causes. . . .

[.91] You may want to object: 'Many things in the Bible seem not to be *capable* of being explained by natural causes—e.g. that men's sins and prayers caused rain or the fertility of the earth, that faith healed the blind, and other things of that sort.' But I think I have already replied to this. For I have shown that Scripture doesn't teach things through their immediate causes, but only relates them in the order and with the wording that will most effectively move people (especially the common people) to devotion. So it says things that are quite wrong about God and other things, because it's trying not to convince men's reason but to affect and occupy their imagination. If Scripture related the destruction of some State in the way political historians usually do, that wouldn't stir the common people at all. Whereas if it depicts everything poetically and ascribes everything to God, as

it usually does, it will move them very much. So when Scripture reports that the earth was sterile because of men's sins, or that the blind were healed by faith, those passages oughtn't to affect us any more than the passages that are *obviously* not to be understood literally, e.g. where the Bible relates •that because of men's sins God becomes angry, or sad, or has second thoughts about the good he has promised or done, or •that because God sees a sign he remembers a promise he has made, or •a great many other things that are either said poetically or are shaped by the opinions and prejudices of the author.

So I conclude here that everything that Scripture truly says happened must have happened—as *everything* does—according to the laws of nature. If we could find something that could be conclusively proved to be •contrary to the laws of nature, or to have been •unable to follow from them, we should be entirely confident that the passage in question has been added to the sacred texts by sacrilegious men. Anything that is contrary to nature is contrary to reason, and what is contrary to reason is absurd, and therefore to be rejected.

·HOW TO UNDERSTAND STORIES ABOUT MIRACLES·

(4) I have already said the main things about the interpretation of miracles; but I'll repeat some of that here and illustrate my points with a few examples. This is the fourth of the things I promised, ·on page 39·, to do in this chapter. My aim here is to prevent you from rashly imagining, because you have misinterpreted some miracle, that you have found anything in Scripture that is contrary to the light of nature.

Men very seldom relate an event just as it happened, without bringing in any of their own judgments. And when someone sees or hears something new, [92] he'll have to be *very* careful if he isn't to let his absorbing preconceived opinions affect his mind in such a way that the story he has in his head is completely different from what he actually

saw or heard, and therefore reports something different from what he has seen or heard. This is especially likely to happen if the event can't be explained by the narrator or his audience, and more especially if he has a practical interest in the event's having happened in one way rather than another. That's why •chroniclers and historians reveal more about their own opinions than about the events they are reporting, why •two men who have different opinions may relate a single event so differently that one would think they were reporting different events, and why •it is often fairly easy to discover from a work of history the opinions of the historian.

I could cite many examples to confirm this, both from philosophers [here = 'scientists'] who have written works of natural history, and from chroniclers. But there's no need for that, and I'll cite only one example from the Bible, leaving it to you to judge the others. In the time of Joshua, the Hebrews—as I mentioned earlier—shared the then common opinion that the sun moves with a daily motion while the earth is at rest. This preconceived opinion shaped their account of the 'miracle' that happened to them when they fought against the five kings. They didn't relate simply that •the day was longer than usual; rather, they said that •the sun and the moon stood still (•*Joshua* 10:12–13). This also helped them to overcome the sun-worshipping gentiles by giving them experiential evidence that the sun, •the gentiles' god, is under the control of another God whose command forced it to change its natural way of behaving. What had actually happened can't have been anything like what they reported; their report was a product partly of religion and partly of preconceived opinions.

Therefore, to interpret the miracles in Scripture and to understand from the narrations of them how they really happened, we have to know the opinions of those who

first narrated them and left them to us in writing, and to distinguish those opinions from what the senses could have presented •to the witnesses to the miracles. Otherwise we'll confuse their opinions and judgments with the miracle itself, the actual event. It's important to know what their opinions were not only for these purposes but also so that we don't confuse the •things that really happened with •imaginary things that were only prophetic representations. Many things are related in the Bible as real, and were even [93] believed to be real, which were really only representations and imaginary things. For example,

- that God descended from heaven (*Exodus* 19:18 and *Deuteronomy* 5:19),
- that Mt. Sinai was smoking because God had descended onto it, surrounded by fire,
- that Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot with horses of fire (•2 *Kings* 2:11).

Of course all these were only representations, fitted to the opinions of those who handed them down to us as actual events, which is how they had appeared to them. Anyone who knows even a little more than the common herd knows that God doesn't have a right or a left hand, doesn't move or stay still, isn't located but is absolutely infinite and therefore absolutely everywhere, and that all the perfections are contained in God. [That sentence reflects Spinoza's own views about God closely enough to make it unsuitable to use 'he' and 'his'. See note on page 9.] . . .

[Spinoza has a longish passage about Hebrew turns of phrase and figures of speech; if we don't understand them, we'll read as literal passages that weren't intended that way. He presents and discusses three examples. Then:]

[.94] Thus a great many things happen in the Bible that were only a *manner of speaking* among the Jews, and there's no need for me to go through them all separately here. But

I do want to make this general point: The Hebrews usually employed these figures of speech not so much for decorative purposes as to express their devotion. [More examples are given. Then:]

If you attend thoroughly to these things, and to the fact that many things are reported in Scripture very briefly, without details and almost chopped off short, you'll find hardly anything there that is demonstrably contrary to the light of nature; and on the other hand, with just a little reflection you will be able to interpret easily many things that previously seemed most obscure. . . .

·TWO WAYS OF APPROACHING MIRACLES·

Before I bring this chapter to an end, I want to comment on the fact that in dealing with miracles I have proceeded in a way that is completely different from my procedure regarding prophecy. [95] The whole basis for everything I said about prophecy was the revelations in Scripture; but in the present chapter I have drawn my main points from principles known through the natural light. This was deliberate. Prophecy surpasses man's power of understanding, and is a purely theological issue; so I couldn't affirm anything about it, or even know what it chiefly consisted in, except from foundations that have been revealed. So I had to put together a history of prophecy and draw conclusions from it, so as to learn the nature and properties of prophecy, as far as this can be learned.

But I didn't feel a need for anything like that in dealing with miracles, because what we have here is a completely philosophical issue (namely, the question 'Can we allow that something happens in nature that is contrary to its laws, or that couldn't follow from them?'). So I thought it would be better to unravel this question on the basis of truths known through the natural light. I say that 'it would be better to' and not 'it was necessary to', because I *could* easily have

resolved it purely on the basis of Scripture. I shall show this here briefly.

Scripture sometimes makes the general statement that •nature observes a fixed and unchangeable order—for example in *Psalms* 148:6 and *Jeremiah* 31:35–6. Moreover, the Philosopher teaches most clearly in *Ecclesiastes* 1:10 that •nothing new happens in nature. [One meaning of 'Ecclesiastes' is 'philosopher'.] And illustrating this same point in 9–11, he says that although we sometimes experience something that *seems* new, it never *is* new—but only something that also happened in ages past and had been forgotten. . . . Again, he says in 3:11 that •God has ordered all things properly in their time, and in 3:14 he says he knows that •whatever God makes will remain to eternity, and that nothing can be added to it or subtracted from it. All these passages clearly teach that •nature conforms to a fixed and immutable order, that •God has been the same in all ages, both those known to us and those unknown, that •the laws of nature are so perfect and fruitful that nothing can be added to them or taken away from them, and finally that •miracles are seen as something new only because of men's ignorance.

Scripture teaches these things *explicitly*, and it doesn't ever teach that something happens in nature that is contrary to nature's laws or [96] that doesn't follow from them. So we shouldn't embellish Scripture by tricking it out with fictitious ·contra-causal· miracles. . . .

It also follows very clearly from Scripture that miracles were natural events, which should be explained in a way that brings out their similarities to natural things, rather than making them seem to be 'new' (to use Solomon's word) or contrary to nature. And it's to help you to do this more easily that I have passed on to you certain rules derived solely from Scripture. But when I say that Scripture teaches these things, I don't mean that it teaches them as lessons

necessary for salvation, but only that the prophets have embraced the same things we do. So everyone is free to judge of these things as best suits himself for the purpose of entering wholeheartedly into the worship of God and religion.

[The chapter ends with a quotation from the Jewish historian Josephus, supposedly showing that he had the same opinion as Spinoza about the nature of miracles.]

## Chapter 7: The interpretation of Scripture

[97] Everyone says that Scripture is the word of God, teaching men true blessedness or the way to salvation. But a look at the facts reveals something very different. The mass of people seem to have no interest in living by the teachings of Scripture; we see everyone peddling his own inventions as the word of God, concerned only to compel others to think as he does, under the pretext of religion. We see that the theologians have mainly wanted to extract their own inventions and beliefs from the Bible so as to prop them up with divine authority. They aren't in the least hesitant about interpreting Scripture; they read the mind of the Holy Spirit with great confidence and recklessness. They aren't afraid of fictitiously ascribing some error to the Holy Spirit and straying from the path to salvation; if they fear anything, it is being convicted of error by others, which would extinguish their authority and expose them to scorn.

If men were sincere in what they say about Scripture, their conduct would be very different. They wouldn't care so much about these frequent disagreements with other theologians, and wouldn't display such hatred in their disputes; and they wouldn't be gripped by such a blind and reckless

desire to interpret Scripture and to think up new doctrines in religion. Quite the contrary: they wouldn't dare to accept anything as a teaching of Scripture unless Scripture taught it with the greatest clarity. And the sacrilegious people who haven't shrunk from corrupting Scripture in so many passages would be careful to avoid such a crime, keeping their sacrilegious hands away from those texts.

But ambition and wickedness have been so powerful that religion is identified not so much with obeying the Holy Spirit as with defending human inventions, so that religion consists not in loving kindness but in spreading disagreement among men and propagating the most bitter hatred. . . . To these evils we may add superstition, which teaches men to ignore reason and nature, and to wonder at and venerate only what is contrary to both.

[98] So it's not surprising that to make Scripture more wonderful and venerated, men have wanted to explain it in such a way that it seems to be as unreasonable and unnatural as possible. This leads them to dream that deep mysteries lie hidden in the Bible, and they exhaust themselves in investigating these absurdities, neglecting

what is useful. They attribute to the Holy Spirit every crazy thing that they come up with, trying to defend it with the utmost force and violence of the affects [here = 'emotions']. That's what men do: when they conceive something by the pure intellect, they defend it only with the intellect and reason; but if they are led to an opinion by some affects, they also defend it with those affects.

[We are about to encounter 'history of nature' and 'history of Scripture', phrases that occur often in the following pages. A 'history of nature' is what we would call 'natural history': an assemblage of empirical facts about what kinds of things and events there are in the world, classified in an orderly manner. What Spinoza seems *mainly* to mean by 'history of Scripture' is analogous to that: an account of what those texts contain, visibly on the pages, intelligently sorted out and classified; and the same applies to 'history of the Hebrew language'. Sometimes he may be using 'history of Scripture' to cover *also* facts about the historical circumstances in which the biblical texts were written; but the 'natural history' analogy is always dominant.]

#### •INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE AND INTERPRETING NATURE•

To extricate ourselves from this mess, to free our minds from theological prejudices and stop recklessly accepting human inventions as divine teachings, we must concern ourselves with the true method of interpreting Scripture, getting into it *in detail*; for so long as we are ignorant of this, we can't know for sure anything about what either Scripture or the Holy Spirit wishes to teach. Here it is in brief: The right way to interpret Scripture is **exactly** the same as the right way to interpret nature. The main thing in interpreting nature is to

- put together a history of nature, taking this as the data from which we infer the definitions of natural things.

And what is needed to interpret Scripture is to

- prepare a straightforward history of Scripture, taking this as the data and premises from which we validly

infer what the biblical authors meant.

When we are interpreting Scripture and sorting out its contents, if our *only* premises or data are drawn from Scripture itself and its history, we can go forward with no risk of error, and we'll be able to discuss the things that surpass our grasp as safely as those we know by the natural light.

•It's obvious that this is *a sure way* to proceed, but I need to say more to establish clearly that it is *the only way*—that it matches the *right* method of interpreting nature. •If there were another way, it would have to be inferring interpretations from premises supplied by the natural light. But many of the things recorded in Scripture *can't* be deduced from principles known through the natural light, because most of Scripture consists in historical narratives and revelations. And the historical narratives give a prominent place to miracles, i.e. [99] narratives of unusual events in nature, tailored to fit the opinions and judgments of the historians who wrote them. (I showed in chapter 6 that that's what miracles are.) And the revelations were also *right out* of reach of the natural light, because they were *adjusted* to fit the opinions of the prophets (as I showed in chapter 2), and they really do surpass man's power of understanding. So our knowledge of all these things—i.e. of almost everything in Scripture—must be sought only from Scripture itself, just as the knowledge of nature must be sought from nature itself.

The moral teachings contained in the Bible *can* be demonstrated from common notions [see note on page 40], but it can't be demonstrated from common notions that Scripture teaches them! The only way to establish *that* is to examine Scripture itself. Indeed, if we want to show in an unbiased manner the divinity of the Bible, we must establish from it alone that it teaches true moral doctrines. That's the only way to demonstrate its divinity. I have shown that the prophets' own confidence *in their prophecies* came mainly

from their having a heart inclined toward the right and the good.

**what Spinoza wrote next:** *Quare hoc idem etiam nobis constare debet, ut fidem ipsis possimus habere.*

**conservatively translated:** So to be able to have faith in them, we too must establish the same thing.

**perhaps meaning:** So we need to establish that *our* hearts are thus inclined, if we are to have faith in *them*.

I have also shown that God's divinity can't be proved by miracles. . . . So the divinity of Scripture can only be established by the fact that it teaches true virtue, and this can only be established by Scripture itself. If we couldn't do that, our acceptance of Scripture as something divine would have to come from a great prejudice. Therefore, the only place to look for knowledge of Scripture is in Scripture.

Last point ·in this comparison of Scripture with nature·: Scripture doesn't give definitions of the things of which it speaks, any more than nature does. Just as the definitions of natural things are to be inferred from various natural events, so also ·the definitions of the things spoken of in Scripture· are to be drawn from the various biblical narratives about them.

So the universal rule in interpreting Scripture is this: *attribute nothing to Scripture as its teaching unless we have understood it as clearly as possible from the history of Scripture.* Now I shall describe the kind of history I have in mind.

·THE HISTORY OF SCRIPTURE·

**(1)** It must lay out the nature and properties of the language in which the Books of Scripture were written—the language the authors were accustomed to speak. **[100]** We need that if we are to find out all the meanings that each utterance could have in ordinary conversational usage. The authors of both Testaments were Hebrews, so we especially need a history

of the Hebrew language, not just for understanding the Old Testament, whose Books were written in that language, but also for understanding the Books of the New Testament. For although they were propagated in other languages, they have many Hebrew turns of phrase.

**(2)** The history must collect the sayings of each Book and organize them under main headings so that we can readily find all those concern any given topic. Then it must tag any that are ambiguous or obscure or that seem inconsistent with one another. In this context, when I call a proposition 'clear' (or 'obscure'), I mean that it is easy (or hard) to derive its •meaning from its context of the utterance, *not* that it is easy (or hard) to perceive its •truth by reason. Our present concern is with meaning, not truth. . . . A proposition's meaning must be learned solely from the usage of language, or from reasoning whose premises come solely from Scripture. Bearing that in mind should help us to avoid confusing meaning with truth.

Here's an example. When Moses says ·in *Deuteronomy* 4:24· that God is a fire and that God is jealous, those statements are perfectly clear, taking clarity as a matter of the meaning of the words. So I classify them as 'clear', though they are very *obscure* in relation to truth and reason. Their literal meaning conflicts with the natural light, but we are stuck with it as *the* meaning unless it is also clearly in conflict with principles and premises derived from the history of Scripture. And conversely, if these sayings in their literal sense *were* in conflict with premises derived from Scripture, they would still have to be interpreted non-literally (i.e. metaphorically) even if they agreed completely with reason.

Well, did Moses believe that God is a fire? To answer this we don't consider what reason has to say about this proposition; rather, we must rely on **[101]** other things that



Moses said. Since he often teaches clearly that God has no likeness to any visible thing that exists anywhere—earth, sea or sky—we are forced to interpret *something* metaphorically—either •the ‘God is a fire’ passage or •all those other passages.

[How do we decide which? Departures from literal meaning should be kept to a minimum, Spinoza says, so we should look first for a plausible metaphorical reading of the single ‘fire’ passage; and in fact we find one, through the idea that ‘God is a fire’ and ‘God is jealous’ mean the same thing. If we hadn’t found that, we’d have had to look for metaphorical readings for all the other passages under discussion. And if we couldn’t find acceptable metaphorical readings for those either, we would have to let the conflicting sentences stand, and suspend judgment about them. Then:]

Next, Moses clearly teaches that God is jealous, and nowhere teaches that God lacks passions or passive states of mind; so we have to conclude that Moses believed this, or at least wanted to teach it, however sure we may be that this opinion is contrary to reason. I repeat: it is *not* all right for us to twist the intent of Scripture to fit our preconceived opinions and the dictates of our reason. The only source for knowledge of the Bible is the Bible.

**(3)** Finally, this history ·of Scripture· must set out in full all the details that we have concerning each of the Books of the prophets:

- the life, character, and concerns of the author,
- who he was,
- the context in which he wrote,
- when he wrote,
- for whom he wrote, and
- in what language he wrote.

The history must record the fate of each Book:

- how it was first received,
- into whose hands it fell,

- how many different readings of it there were,
- who decided that it should be included in the canon of sacred Books, and
- how all the Books that everyone now accepts as sacred came to be unified into one body.

The history of Scripture, I repeat, must contain all these things. We can’t know whether a given saying is put forward as a law **[102]** or as a moral teaching unless we know the life, character, and concerns of its author. Also, the better we know someone’s spirit and temperament, the more easily we can explain his words. Again, if we want to avoid confusing eternal teachings with ones that could be useful only for a time or only for a few people, we need to know in what context, at what time, and for which nation or age all these teachings were written. And it is also important to know the other things I have listed, so that we can know—apart from questions about the authorship of each Book—whether it could have been corrupted by illicit hands, and whether errors have crept in and (·if they have·) whether they have been corrected by men sufficiently expert and worthy of trust. We need to know all these things if we are to accept only what is certain and indubitable, and not be carried away by a blind impulse to accept whatever is shoved under our eyes.

Once we have •this history of Scripture, and have firmly resolved to restrict our confident conclusions about what the prophets taught to things that follow very clearly from •it, *then* it will be time for us to embark on our investigation of the intentions of the prophets and of the Holy Spirit. To carry this out, though, we also need an orderly method like the method we follow when interpreting *nature* according to *its* history.

·INTERPRETING UNIVERSAL DOCTRINES·

In studying natural things we try to start by investigating the things that are most universal and common to the whole

of nature—namely, motion and rest and their laws and rules, which nature always observes and through which it continuously acts—and from these we proceed gradually to other less universal things. [Spinoza is evidently echoing Descartes's distinction between the 'laws' of motion in general and the 'rules' of impact mechanics in particular; but its details needn't concern us here.] Similarly, the first thing to be sought from the history of Scripture is what is

- most universal,
- the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture, and
- commended by all the prophets as an eternal teaching, most useful for all mortals.

For example, that a unique and omnipotent God exists, who alone is to be worshipped, who cares for all, and who loves above all those who worship God and love their neighbour as themselves, and so on.

Scripture teaches these and similar things all over the place, so clearly and so explicitly that there has never been any dispute about the meanings of those biblical passages. (But answers to questions such as 'What is God?' and 'How does God see and [103] provide for everything?' and so on are not taught by Scripture as eternal doctrine.) Once this universal teaching of Scripture is rightly known, we must proceed next to doctrines that are less universal but which

- flow from this universal teaching like streams and which
- concern how we should ordinarily conduct our lives. For example, teachings about particular ways of behaving that are required for true virtue—teachings that come into play only on particular occasions to which they are relevant. When something of this sort is found to be obscure or ambiguous in the biblical texts, we should clear it up on the basis of the universal teaching of Scripture.

And if we find things of this less universal sort that are

contrary to one another, we have to find out some further details: in what context were they written? and when? and for whom? Here is an example: when Christ says 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted' [*Matthew* 5:4], we don't know from this text what kind of mourner he means. But because he teaches later that we shouldn't be anxious about anything except the kingdom of God and God's justice, which he commends as the greatest good (see *Matthew* 6:33), it follows that by 'those who mourn' he is referring only to those who mourn over the neglect by men of the kingdom of God and God's justice. That's the only thing that can be mourned by someone who loves nothing but the divine kingdom. . . .and doesn't care in the least about what fortune may bring.

Another example is what Christ says about 'turning the other cheek' when someone strikes you [*Matthew* 5:39]. If he had said this in the manner of a lawgiver instructing judges, he would have been destroying the law of Moses with this command [see *Exodus* 21:23–5, *Leviticus* 24:19–20]. But he declares openly that this is *not* his intention. See *Matthew* 5:17. So we must apply the method I have described, by asking: **(1)** Who spoke? **(2)** To whom? **(3)** When?

**(1)** It was Christ who spoke. And he wasn't speaking as a legislator laying down laws; rather, he was presenting doctrines as a teacher, because (as I have shown) he didn't want to correct external actions so much as to correct the heart. **(2)** He said these things to oppressed men living in a corrupt State, where justice was completely neglected, **(3)** at a time when he saw that this State was close to ruin. And we see the prophet Jeremiah teaching the very same thing at a similarly ruinous time (see *Lamentations* 3:25–30).

So the prophets taught this only at times of oppression, [104] and they never put it forward as a law. Contrast this with Moses, who wasn't writing at a time of oppression,

but—*note this!*—was working to establish a good State. He did condemn vengeance and hatred of one's neighbour, but he also commanded that an eye be paid for an eye. From this it follows very clearly, just from the fundamental principles of Scripture, that this teaching of Christ and Jeremiah—that we should submit to injuries and yield to the impious in everything—is appropriate only in •places where justice is neglected and at •times of oppression, but not in a good State. In a good State where justice is defended, anyone who wants to be thought just is obliged to exact a penalty for injuries, in the presence of a judge (see *Leviticus* 5:1). This isn't to be done for the sake of vengeance (see 19:17–18), but with the intention of defending justice and the laws of one's native land, and ensuring that bad people don't profit from being bad. All this, incidentally, agrees completely with natural reason.

I could cite many other such examples, but I think these are enough to show what I am getting at and how this method is useful—which is all I care about just now.

·INTERPRETING SPECULATIVE PASSAGES·

All I have presented so far is the method for investigating biblical sayings about how we should conduct our lives. They aren't very hard to deal with, because the authors of the Bible didn't really disagree about them. Things don't go so easily, however, when we come to other things that occur in the biblical texts—things that are matters of pure speculation—because the path to these is narrower. [The main meaning of 'speculative' is 'not practical' in the sense of 'not having to do with morality'. In the present context, the 'speculation' that's in question is philosophical and theological theory.] I have shown that the prophets disagreed among themselves in speculative matters, and their narratives were closely tailored to fit the prejudices of their times. So we mustn't infer or explain the meaning of •one prophet on the basis of clearer passages by

•another, unless it has been *very* solidly established that the two favoured the same opinion ·on the matter in question·. Then how, when a prophet writes on such ·speculative· matters, can we use our history of Scripture as a means to discovering what he means? I'll answer this briefly.

Here again we must begin with the most universal things, inquiring first from the clearest sayings of Scripture, to find out •what prophecy or revelation is, and •what kinds of things are most commonly prophesied or revealed. Then we must ask •what a miracle is, and •what kinds of events most commonly occur in miracles. From there we must come down to the level of the opinions of each prophet. And from all of this we must finally proceed to the meaning of each revelation or prophecy, of each narrative and each miracle.

[105] We must be very careful in these matters not to confuse •the mind of the prophets and historians with •the mind of the Holy Spirit and the truth of things. I have already explained this in the appropriate places, with many examples, and I don't need to expand on it now. But I want to issue a warning about interpreting revelations, namely: my method teaches us only how to find out •what the prophets really saw or heard, not •what they wanted to signify or represent by their words. For we can *guess at* this, but we can't deduce it with certainty from the foundations of Scripture.

·TRADITIONS—SUSPECT AND TRUSTWORTHY·

There we are, then: I've shown how to interpret Scripture, and at the same time have demonstrated that this is the *only* way to find its true meaning with great certainty. If the Pharisees were right, there is a certainly true tradition about the true meaning of Scripture, i.e. a true explanation received from the prophets themselves; if the Roman Catholics are right, there is a Pope whose judgments on the interpretation of Scripture are infallible; and if either of these were right,

there would be a more secure way than mine of interpreting Scripture. There *would be* but there *isn't*, because we can't be certain of the Pharisees' tradition or of the Pope's authority, so we can't base *certain* results on either of those bases. Early Christians rejected Papal infallibility, and early Jews rejected the Pharisaic tradition. The Pharisees have an historical account of the years through which their tradition was handed on, taking it right back to Moses; but I'll show later that the account is false. [This refers to a passage in chapter 10, omitted from this version.]

So a tradition *like that* must be very suspect to us. My method of interpretation requires me to accept a certain Jewish tradition as uncorrupted, namely the meanings of the words of the Hebrew language, which we have accepted from them. It is all right for us to doubt one tradition while accepting the other—doubting the one about the meanings of prophetic utterances while accepting the one about meanings of words—because it could never be useful to anyone to change the meaning of a •word, whereas it could often be useful to change the meaning of a •speech! [Spinoza adds remarks about how hard it would be to change the meaning of a word and get the change generally accepted. Changing the meaning of a speech would be easier, partly because that would have to be accepted only by small number learned people (the guardians of books and speeches), not by the vast common mass (the guardians of language). Then:] [..106] For these and other reasons, it's easy to believe that no-one would try to corrupt a language, whereas many people might try to corrupt the intention of a writer by changing or misinterpreting what he wrote.

My method—based on the principle that knowledge of Scripture should be sought only from Scripture—is the only true method •of interpreting Scripture•, so anything that *it* can't provide us with should be absolutely given up as

hopeless. Now I must talk about what is needed, what difficulties must be overcome, for my method to lead us to a complete and certain knowledge of the sacred texts.

•THE NEED FOR A KNOWLEDGE OF HEBREW•

A great difficulty arises from the fact that my method requires a complete knowledge of the Hebrew language. Where are we to go for that? The ancient developers of the Hebrew language left nothing to posterity regarding its foundations and rules. Or at any rate *we* have absolutely nothing from them: no dictionary, no grammar, no rhetoric. Moreover, the Hebrew nation has lost all its fine literature—not surprisingly, given the disasters and persecutions it has undergone—and has retained only a few fragments of its language and of a few books. Most of its names for fruits, birds, fish and many other things have perished in the persecution of the Jews through the centuries. And the meanings of many nouns and verbs that occur in the Bible are either completely unknown or are disputed.

Above all, we have no account of the idioms of this language. Time, the devourer, has obliterated from the memory of men almost all the idioms and turns of phrase that were special to the Hebrew nation; which means that we can't always satisfy our desire to know all the meanings that a given utterance can legitimately have. Many utterances will occur whose meaning will be very obscure—indeed, completely incomprehensible—even though they are expressed in well-known terms. [An analogous case for English: someone might have a good grasp of the meanings of 'nose', 'the', 'through' and 'pay' without having the faintest idea of what it means to say that someone 'paid through the nose' for something.]

[Spinoza next writes about features of the Hebrew language which create ambiguities and difficulties of translation that aren't mirrored in all languages: •a feature of the classification of items in the Hebrew alphabet; •many meanings

for conjunctions and adverbs; •no tenses; and then:]

[.107] Along with those three causes of ambiguity in the Hebrew language, there are two others that are far more important. The language has •no letters for vowels; and [108] •no punctuation marks. At some later time these two gaps were filled by a system of ‘points’ and accents; but we can’t rely on these, because they were invented by men of a later age, . . . and shouldn’t be relied on any more than any other ·later· explanations of the ·ancient· authors.

[Spinoza discusses a seeming conflict between what *Genesis* 47:31 reports Jacob as doing and what is reported in *Hebrews* 11:21. He offers to clear up this difficulty: the earlier passage has been distorted by more recent suppliers of ‘points’, and Spinoza explains how this could come about. He concludes:] The *main* purpose of that example is not to reconcile those two passages but to show how little faith we should have in the modern points and accents. . . .

Let us return now to our subject. [109] It is easy to see that the structure and nature of the Hebrew language is bound to create many ambiguities that can’t be resolved by any method ·that is open to us to use·. I have shown that the only way to clear up ambiguities is by comparing utterances with one another, but we mustn’t expect to resolve them all in this way. For one thing, when we are faced with an ambiguity, it’s a matter of chance whether there is any comparable utterance elsewhere in the Bible that could throw light on it; no prophet was writing so as to explain the words of another prophet, or even his own! Also, as I have shown earlier, even when we *do* have a comparable pair of passages, it may not be valid for us to use our grasp of one of them to throw light on what is meant—i.e. on what the prophet intended—in the other. It is all right to do that if the passages concern the conduct of life, but not if they •are about speculative matters or •are historical narratives

of miracles and so on.

·OTHER DIFFICULTIES·

I could give plenty of examples of inexplicable utterances in Scripture, but at this point I want to set them aside and move on to other difficulties that arise when one is interpreting Scripture by the true method. One difficulty arises from the method’s demand for a history of the circumstances of all the Books of the Bible—a demand that we can’t meet, because for many of the Books we know nothing for sure, or even nothing at all, about who the authors were (or, if you like, who the *scribes* were). [That last phrase may show Spinoza allowing, tongue in cheek, for the possibility that the Books of the Bible were written down at God’s dictation.] So we don’t know, for those Books, when or on what occasion they were written. Nor do we know into whose hands all the Books fell, or who made the copies in which so many different readings were found, or (finally) whether the variants that we know about are all or most of the ones that were in general circulation among the people.

Our need to know all these things was something I touched on earlier [item (3) on page 39], but back there I deliberately omitted certain things that now have to be looked at. If we read a book that contains incredible or incomprehensible things, or is very obscurely written, and we don’t know who wrote it or when or in what context, it’s no use our trying to become more certain of its true meaning. For if we don’t know who and when etc., we *can’t* know anything about what the author did or might have intended. [110] When on the other hand we *do* have a thorough knowledge of who and when etc., we ·are in a position to· approach the given author in a frame of mind that’s clear of our own prejudices: we won’t attribute to him (or to whoever he was writing on behalf of) too much, or not enough, and won’t bring into our considerations anything that he couldn’t have had in mind,

given when and in what context he wrote.

Everyone knows this. I think. It often happens that we read similar stories in different books and judge the stories differently because of our different opinions about their writers. I once read in a certain book about **(1)** a man named Orlando Furioso who was given to riding a certain winged monster in the air, flying wherever he wanted, single-handedly slaughtering many men and giants, and other such fantasies that one can't possibly make sense of. I had also read **(2)** a story like this in Ovid, about Perseus. There is a similar story **(3)** in *Judges* 15:15 about Samson who single-handedly (and unarmed) slaughtered thousands of men, and another in *2 Kings* 2:11 about Elijah's flying through the air and at last ascending into heaven in a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire. These stories are *very* alike; but we judge them differently: **(1)** concerns trifles, **(2)** poetic matters, and **(3)** sacred matters; this way of characterising them being possible for us only because of the opinions we already have of these writers.

So it is established that for writings that are obscure or incomprehensible to the intellect, we need some knowledge of the authors if we are to interpret their writings. And for the same reasons, when we have different versions of an obscure story, if we are to select the right one we have to know who made the copies containing the different versions, and whether still other versions have ever been found in the writings of other men of greater authority.

Another difficulty in this method of interpreting certain

Books of Scripture arises from the fact that we don't have those Books in the language in which they were first written. It is generally thought that the Gospel according to *Matthew* and no doubt also the Letter to the Hebrews were written in Hebrew; but we don't have those original Hebrew texts. And there are doubts about what language the Book of Job was written in. . . .

·WHY THE DIFFICULTIES DON'T MATTER MUCH·

Those are all the difficulties I had undertaken to recount arising from my method of interpreting Scripture according to the history we can have of it. They are so great that I don't hesitate to affirm that in many places we either have •no idea as to the meaning of the passage or have only •an uncertain guess about its meaning. But bear in mind these difficulties don't block us from understanding the intention of the prophets except in passages that are incomprehensible—ones that we can get hold of only with our imaginations and not through the intellect by the use of clear concepts.<sup>6</sup> As for things that are by their nature easily grasped, they *can't* be expressed so obscurely that they are hard to understand. . . .

Euclid, who wrote only about things that are simple and intelligible, is easily explained by anyone in any language. To follow his thought and be certain of his true meaning, we don't need a •complete knowledge of the language in which he wrote—a very •ordinary knowledge, almost a beginner's knowledge, is enough. Nor do we need to know about

•his life, his concerns, his customs,

<sup>6</sup> I am counting as 'comprehensible' not only •things that are legitimately demonstrated, but also •things we are accustomed to accept with moral certainty and to hear without wonder, although they can't be demonstrated in any way. The propositions of Euclid are grasped by anyone before they are demonstrated. In this spirit, I am also regarding as comprehensible and clear any stories of future and past things that don't surpass human belief, laws, institutions and customs, even if they can't be demonstrated mathematically. What I am counting as incomprehensible are obscure symbols and stories that seem to surpass all belief. Still, many of these can be investigated according to my method, so that we can grasp the author's thought.

- what language he originally wrote in,
- for whom and when he wrote,
- what became of his book afterwards,
- its different versions, or
- how and by whose deliberation it was accepted.

And all that applies equally to anyone else who has written about things that are by their nature comprehensible.

I conclude from this that the history of Scripture that we have is a good enough basis for us to grasp its intention and be certain of its true meaning *so far as its moral teachings are concerned*. The teachings of true piety are expressed in the most familiar words—ones that are ordinary and simple and easy to understand. And because true salvation and blessedness consists in true peace of mind, which is to be found only in things that we understand very clearly, it is evident that we *can* grasp with certainty what Scripture means when it talks about salvation and blessedness. What about the other topics—speculative matters, historical narratives, miracles? We needn't worry about being somewhat shut out from those things. They are in any case not the sorts of things that we could ever come to accept through reason and the intellect, so if we want to know about them that's because of curiosity rather than [112] a concern for our welfare.

I think I have now shown the true method of interpreting Scripture and said enough about my views concerning it. Surely you can now see that this method requires only the *natural light*. The nature and power of this light consists mainly in this: by legitimate principles of inference it infers things that were obscure from things that are known or stipulated as known. That is all that my method requires. . . .

·RIVAL VIEWS: RELIANCE ON NATURAL LIGHT·

Now I have to examine the opinions of those who disagree with me. I start with the view that *the natural light has no*

*power to interpret Scripture, and for this a supernatural light is required*. I leave it to the upholders of this to explain what this other-than-natural light is. The best I can make of what they say is that it's an obscurely worded confession that they aren't sure of anything concerning the true meaning of Scripture. Their explanations contain nothing other-than-natural, indeed nothing but mere conjectures. Compare what these people say with the explanations given by those who admit openly that the natural light is all the light they have. You'll find them to be completely similar: human, long pondered, laboriously constructed.

And two things show that their contention that the natural light isn't enough for the interpretation of Scripture is *false*. (1) Difficulties in interpreting Scripture have never arisen from any power-shortage in the natural light, but only from the slackness (not to say wickedness) of men who neglected the history of Scripture at a time when it was still possible to put it together. I demonstrated this earlier. (2) Everyone who talks about this 'supernatural light' seems to regard it as something that God gives only to the faithful. But the prophets and apostles didn't usually preach only to the faithful, but also—most of the time—to the impious and those lacking in faith. (Moses would have prescribed laws in vain if they could be understood only by the faithful, who require no law.) Those to whom the prophets and apostles were mainly preaching must have been capable of understanding what they meant. [113] . . . . So those who demand a supernatural light to understand the intentions of the prophets and apostles seem to be short of natural light themselves. I'm not going to infer from this that they have a divine supernatural gift!

·The mediaeval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides had a quite different view about this. He held that each passage of Scripture admits various meanings, indeed con-

trary ones, and that we aren't *sure* of the true meaning of any passage unless we know that the passage on our interpretation of it contains nothing that •conflicts with reason or anyway •doesn't agree with reason. If a given passage has a very clear literal meaning in which it conflicts with reason, then Maimonides would say that the passage should be interpreted non-literally. [Spinoza quotes in Hebrew and in Latin a longish passage from Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, discussing the theses:

(1) God is not corporeal.

(2) The world has existed from eternity.

Each of these is contradicted by a good many biblical passages, taken literally. Maimonides retains (1), and reinterprets the passages that conflict with it when construed literally; so why not take the same line with (2)? Spinoza reports him as giving this answer:]

Two reasons move me not to do this, and not to believe that the world is eternal. **A.** It is established by a clear demonstration that (1) God is not corporeal; so the biblical passages whose literal meaning conflicts with this *must* have something other than their literal meaning. On the other hand, (2) the eternity [114] of the world is not shown by any demonstration, so we are spared from having to do violence to the Scriptures and to smooth them out for the sake of a merely probable opinion. . . . **B.** The thesis that (1) God is incorporeal is not contrary to the fundamentals of the law, etc.; but the thesis that (2) the world is eternal—a thesis that Aristotle accepted—destroys the foundation of the law etc. (*Guide for the Perplexed* II, 25)

These words of Maimonides clearly express the position I have attributed to him. •Consider what they commit him to!• If it he thought it was established by reason that (2) the world

is eternal, he would go right ahead with twisting Scripture so as to get an interpretation in which it would seem to teach (2) this very same thing. Indeed, he would immediately be certain that Scripture wanted to teach (2) this eternity of the world, even though it everywhere explicitly protests against it. This means that he can't be certain of the true •meaning of any biblical passage, however clear it may be, as long as he has any room for doubt as to whether it is •true •when taken in its clear literal sense•. For as long as the truth of the matter is not established, we don't know whether the thing (•taken in its literal sense•) agrees with reason or conflicts with it, so we don't know whether it would be right to accept the literal meaning as the right one.

If Maimonides were right about this, I would concede without qualification that we need some other-than-natural light to interpret Scripture. For hardly anything in the biblical texts can be deduced from principles known through the natural light (as I showed earlier); so the power of the natural light can't establish anything for us about their truth; so it can't establish anything for us about the true meaning and intention of Scripture. For this we would need another light.

Also, if he were right, it would follow that the general mass of people—few of whom know anything about demonstrations or can spare any time for them—won't be able to accept anything about Scripture except purely on the authority of those who philosophize. So they'll have to suppose that the philosophers cannot err regarding the interpretation of Scripture. This would introduce a new authority into the Church, and a new kind of minister or priest, whom people in general would mock rather than venerate.

•A ONE-PARAGRAPH ASIDE•

You might want to object: 'But *your* method of biblical interpretation requires knowledge of the Hebrew language,



and the general mass of the people don't have time to acquire *that*; so why isn't your method as objectionable as that of Maimonides?' Here is why: The multitude of Jews and gentiles, to whom the prophets and apostles preached and for whom they wrote in ancient times, understood the language of the prophets and apostles. [115] This knowledge of the language enabled them to grasp what the prophets meant, but not the reasons for the doctrines that were being preached. (On Maimonides' view, they couldn't grasp the meaning unless they also knew the reasons, i.e. unless they knew *by reason* that the doctrines were true.) My method of interpretation doesn't imply that the mass of people had to trust in the testimony of interpreters, for I point to •a multitude that had experience of the language of the prophets and apostles, whereas Maimonides doesn't point to •any multitude that could do the reasoning that was needed (according to him) for a grasp of the intention of the prophets and apostles. What about the general mass of people *today*? I showed earlier that all the things needed for salvation can easily be grasped in any language, even if the reasons for them aren't known, because they are so ordinary and familiar. This grasp is what the multitude trusts, not the testimony of interpreters. And in respect of the other things—the ones that are not needed for salvation—the general mass of people are in the same boat as the learned.

Now back to Maimonides for a more careful look at his position—specifically, three things in it that are wrong. (1) He supposed that the prophets agreed among themselves in everything, and that they were top-drawer philosophers and theologians. That *must* have been his view, given that he maintained that they drew conclusions according to the truth of the matter. I have shown in chapter 2 that this is false.

(2) He supposed that the •meaning of Scripture can't

be established from Scripture itself, because •the truth of things is not established by Scripture itself (since it doesn't demonstrate anything or teach about its subject-matter through definitions and first causes), and we have seen that Maimonides held that where the Bible is concerned you learn about •meaning through learning about •truth. On his view, then, the true meaning of Scripture can't be settled by Scripture and so we oughtn't to look to Scripture for knowledge of it. That is false too, as I have established in the present chapter. For I have shown, both by reason and by examples, that the *meaning* of Scripture is established from Scripture itself and nothing else, even when it speaks of things known by the natural light.

(3) He supposes that it is all right for us to explain and twist the words of Scripture according to our preconceived opinions, and to deny their literal meaning—even when it is most clearly understood or most explicit—and change it into any other meaning that we like. This licence—to-twist—is diametrically opposed to the things I have demonstrated in this and other chapters; but *anyone* can see that it is excessive and rash. And anyway, even if we grant him this great freedom, it won't do him any good. Why not? Because his very free method gives us no help with things that can't be demonstrated—and they make up the greatest part of Scripture. [116] In contrast with that, my method of interpretation enables us to explain a great many things of this kind, and to open them up with confidence; I have shown this by reasoning and by example. . . . So this method of Maimonides is utterly useless. It makes it impossible for people in general to be sure of what Scripture means on the basis of a straightforward reading of it, whereas they *can* do that if they follow my method. So I reject this opinion of Maimonides as harmful, useless and absurd.

•RIVAL VIEWS: RELIANCE ON PRIESTLY AUTHORITY•

As for the Pharisees' view that there is a *tradition* about what Scripture means, I have already said that this isn't self-consistent [presumably a reference to page 31, though that passage doesn't allege inconsistency]. And the 'authority' of the Roman Popes needs much stronger support than has been produced for it. That's the only reason I reject Papal authority; I don't base my case against it on personal facts about individual Popes. For if the Popes could establish their authority from Scripture itself as certainly as the Jewish High Priests did in ancient times, it wouldn't trouble me that some of the Popes turned out to be heretics and impious men. Some of the Hebrews' High Priests were heretics and impious men who attained the priesthood by immoral means; yet Scripture assigned to them the supreme power of interpreting the law. (See *Deuteronomy* 17:11–12, 33:10 and *Malachi* 2:8.) But since the Popes don't produce any such support for us to see, their 'authority' remains highly suspect.

You might think: 'The Hebrews had a High Priest; so the Catholic religion needs one too.' The two cases are not at all parallel. •The laws of Moses were the *public legislation* of the country, and they couldn't survive unless there was some public authority that was responsible for interpreting and enforcing them. If each citizen were free to interpret the public legislation in the way he chose, no State could survive; the existence of such freedom would immediately dissolve the State, converting its public law into private law. •The nature of religion is not like that. The core of it has to do not with external actions but rather with simplicity and sincerity of heart; so it doesn't come under any public legislation or public authority. Simplicity and sincerity of heart aren't instilled in men by the command of laws or by public authority, and *no-one* can be compelled by force or

by laws to become blessed! To make men blessed, what is required is pious and brotherly advice, good upbringing, and above all one's own free judgment. [117]

Therefore, since each person has a supreme right to think freely, even about religion, and since it is inconceivable that anyone should abandon his claim to this right, each person will also have the supreme right and authority to judge freely in religion, and hence to explain and interpret it for himself.

- The supreme authority to interpret the laws and make judgments concerning public affairs is possessed by the legal system. Why? Because these are matters of *public* right.
- The supreme authority to explain religion and to judge regarding is possessed by each individual person. Why? Because this is a matter of *individual* right.

Does it follow from the authority of the Hebrews' High Priest to interpret the laws of the country that the Roman Pope has authority to interpret religion? Far from it! is nearer the mark to say that what follows is that each and every one of us has that authority.

And I can also show from this that my method of interpreting Scripture is the best. For since the utmost authority to interpret Scripture is in the power of each person, the standard of interpretation must be nothing but the natural light that shines for everyone, not any supernatural light or external authority. The standard of interpretation mustn't be so difficult that only the sharpest philosophers can measure up to it; it must be adapted to the natural and common intelligence and capacity of men, as I have shown mine to be. For I have shown that the difficulties that my method now presents have arisen from men's slackness, and not from the nature of the method.

**Chapter 8:**  
**The Pentateuch and *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel and Kings***  
**were not written by the people whose names they bear.**  
**Were there several writers or only one? Either way, who?**

In the preceding chapter I dealt with the foundations and principles of the knowledge of the Scriptures, and showed that they are simply a straightforward history of them. Necessary though such a history is, the ancients neglected it. Or perhaps they *did* attend to it, and passed it on •in writings which have perished through the assaults of time, or •through an oral tradition that has met that same fate; and in either case a large part of the foundations and principles of this knowledge is now [118] forgotten.

That loss might have been bearable if those who transmitted the texts had stayed within the proper limits, and in good faith handed down to their successors the few things they had received or found, and hadn't concocted new things out of their own brains. •But that is what they did•, so that the history of Scripture has been left not only incomplete, but also rather unreliable. . . .

I aim to correct these faults and to remove the common theological prejudices. But I'm afraid that I have come too late: things have nearly reached the point where men won't accept correction about this, and stubbornly defend what they have accepted as *religion*. And there seems to be no place left for reason, except among a very small fragment of mankind, so widely have these prejudices occupied the minds of men. Still, I shall try; Nevertheless, I shall try! I shan't shrink from putting the matter to the test, because there's no reason to despair completely.

•WHAT MOSES DIDN'T WRITE•

To keep things orderly, I'll begin with the prejudices about who wrote the sacred books, starting with the writer of the Pentateuch [= the first five books of the Old Testament]. Almost everyone has thought that Moses wrote them. The Pharisees, indeed, maintained this so stubbornly that they wrote off as a heretic anyone who seemed to think otherwise. That is why Ibn Ezra, a man with an independent mind and considerable learning, who was the first writer I know of who took note of this prejudice, didn't risk setting out his position openly, and dared only to indicate the problem in rather obscure terms. I shan't be afraid to make them clearer here, choosing words that will make the point obvious.

Here, then, are the words of Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Deuteronomy:

'Beyond the Jordan etc.'; if you understand the mystery of the twelve and of 'Moses wrote the law' and 'the Canaanite was then in the land' and 'it will be revealed on God's mountain' and 'behold, his bed is a bed of iron', then you will know the truth.

[Spinoza explains at length how he thinks these obscure remarks point to the conclusion that the Pentateuch was written not by Moses but by someone who lived long after he did. Example: 'Beyond the Jordan'—this refers to *Deuteronomy* 1:1–5—and the point is that in Moses' time the Israelites hadn't yet crossed the Jordan. Another example: 'Moses wrote the law', not 'I wrote the law'. Some of the

other explanations are much more complex than interesting. Spinoza winds up:] [..119–120] That is my explanation of Ibn Ezra’s position and of the passages in the Pentateuch that he cites to confirm it. But. . . there are many other passages to the same effect, some of them more important than the ones Ibn Ezra cites. ·I shall present four of them·.

(1) The writer of these books [121] doesn’t just speak of Moses in the **third** person, but also makes reports about him such as:

- ‘God spoke with Moses’ (*Numbers* 1:1, 2:1, etc.);
- ‘God spoke with Moses face to face’ (*Exodus* 33:11);
- ‘Moses was the most humble of all men’ (*Numbers* 12:3);
- ‘Moses was seized with anger against the leaders of the army’ (*Numbers* 31:14);
- ‘Moses the man of God’ (*Deuteronomy* 33:1);
- ‘Moses, the servant of God, died’ (*Deuteronomy* 34:5);
- ‘Never has there been a prophet in Israel like Moses’ etc. (*Deuteronomy* 34:10).

On the other hand, *Deuteronomy* records the law that Moses had explained to the people—the law that he had written—and in this passage Moses speaks and relates his deeds in the **first** person, thus:

- ‘God spoke to me’ (*Deuteronomy* 2:1, 17, etc.),
- ‘I prayed to God’ etc. (9:26)

But then near the end of the book (32:44–34:12) the historian, after reporting Moses’ words, reverts to the **third** person in narrating •how Moses handed down to the people in writing this law that he had expounded, •how he warned them for the last time, and finally •how his life ended. All these things—the manner of speaking, the reports, and the very continuity of the whole history—convince me that these books were composed by someone other than Moses.

(2) Not only does this history relate how Moses died, was buried, and caused the Hebrews to mourn for thirty days, but it also compares him with all the prophets who lived afterwards, saying that he excelled them all: ‘Never was there a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face’. Obviously Moses couldn’t give this testimony about himself, nor could anyone coming immediately after him; it would have to be by someone who lived many generations later, especially since the historian uses the past tense—‘Never has there been a prophet’ etc. Also he writes ‘To this day no-one knows where Moses is buried’ (*Deuteronomy* 34:6).

(3) Certain places are not called by the names they had while Moses was alive, but by others that they were given long afterwards. For example, Abraham ‘pursued the enemy as far as Dan’ (see *Genesis* 14:14), but that city didn’t have that name until ·much later·, long after the death of Joshua (see *Judges* 18:29).

(4) The histories sometimes extend beyond the time of Moses’ life. For *Exodus* 16:34 relates that the children of Israel ate manna for forty years, until they came to. . . the border of the land of [122] Canaan, i.e. until the time spoken of in *Joshua* 5:12. [And Spinoza adds another example.]

·WHAT MOSES DID WRITE·

All this makes it clearer than the noonday sun that the Pentateuch was written not by Moses but by someone who lived many generations after him. But now let us attend to the books that Moses *did* write, which are mentioned in the Pentateuch. For from these themselves it will be established that they were something different from the Pentateuch.

*Exodus* 17:14 establishes that Moses on God’s orders wrote an account of the war against Amalek, though it doesn’t tell us in what book he wrote this. But in *Numbers* 21:12 a certain book is mentioned under the name *God’s Wars*; and it was in this, no doubt, that the war against

Amalek was described. . . .

Moreover, *Exodus* 24:4,7 establishes the existence of another book, called *Book of the Covenant*, which was publicly read to the Israelites when they first entered into the covenant with God. But this book (this *written communication*) doesn't contain much—only the laws, i.e. the commands, of God that are related in *Exodus* 20–23. Anyone who has read chapter 24 impartially and with sound judgment will agree about this: it says that as soon as Moses saw where the people stood with regard to a covenant with God, he immediately wrote down God's pronouncements and laws, and in the morning after performing certain ceremonies he read out to the whole assembly the terms of the covenant they were to enter into. When these conditions had been read out, and no doubt grasped by all the common people, the people gave their full assent to the contract. So this 'book' that Moses wrote won't have contained anything more than the few things that I have just mentioned; the nature of the covenant to be entered into didn't require anything more, and anyway there wasn't time to make it longer.

Finally, it is established that in the fortieth year after the departure from Egypt Moses expounded all the laws he had promulgated (see *Deuteronomy* 1:5), and bound the people to them again (29:14), and finally [123] wrote a book containing these laws that he had presented and this new covenant (31:9). This book, the 'Book of God's Law', was added to later by Joshua; he put into it an account of the third covenant with God that the people had entered into in his time (see *Joshua* 24:25-26). But as we don't now have any book containing both the covenant of Moses and the covenant of Joshua, we have to accept that this book has perished. [Spinoza now deals scornfully with the attempt of an ancient rabbinical scholar named Jonathan to avoid this conclusion by 'twisting the words of Scripture'.]

So I conclude that this book of God's law that Moses wrote was not •the Pentateuch but •a totally different book which the author of the Pentateuch inserted into his own work in the proper place. I have given conclusive evidence for this, and now here is some more.

*Deuteronomy* 31 reports not only that Moses wrote the *Book of the Law* but that he handed it over to the priests, commanding them to read it out at a certain time to the whole people. This shows that the 'book' was much shorter than the Pentateuch, since it could be read out in this way in one assembly, so that everyone would understand it. It is also relevant that of all the books Moses wrote there were only two that he ordered to be scrupulously preserved for posterity—•this one relating to the second covenant and •the Song, which he also wrote afterwards so that the whole people would learn it thoroughly [*Exodus* 15 or *Deuteronomy* 32:1–47]. For because he had bound only those who were present by the first covenant, but by the second, everyone, even their posterity (see *Deuteronomy* 29:14-15), he commanded the book of this second covenant to be preserved scrupulously by future generations, in addition, as we have said, to the Song, which concerns future generations most especially.

Therefore, since it is not established that Moses wrote other books besides these, [124] since he did not command posterity to scrupulously preserve any other book besides the small *Book of the Law* and the Song, and finally, since many things occur in the Pentateuch which Moses could not have written, it follows that there is no basis for saying that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. It is completely contrary to reason to say that that he was. You may ask:

Apart from the few laws of the first covenant that you say Moses wrote down when they were first revealed to him, didn't he also write down the laws that he promulgated at later times?

Well, it seems reasonable to suppose that Moses wrote down those laws at the time and in the place at which he communicated them to the people, but we are not entitled to assert that he did so. Why not? Because I showed earlier in the present work that we ought not to maintain anything about such matters except what is established from Scripture itself or derived from its foundations by a legitimate principle of inference. We mustn't assert things of this kind simply because they seem reasonable. . . .

·THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE NEXT SEVEN BOOKS·

That is enough about the five 'books of Moses'. Let us now examine the other books. The reasons showing that *Joshua* was not written by Joshua are like the reasons showing that Moses didn't write the Pentateuch. It is *someone else* who reports concerning Joshua that his fame was throughout all the land (*Joshua* 6:27), that he did everything that Moses had commanded (8:35, 11:15), that he grew old and called everyone into an assembly (23:1–2), and that finally he breathed his last (24:29).

Also, the book reports events that happened after Joshua's death, e.g. that after his death the Israelites worshipped God as long as the elders who had known him were still alive (24:31). And in 16:10 it is related that Ephraim and Manasseh 'did not drive out the Canaanites who were living in Gezer' and adds that 'the Canaanites have dwelt in the midst of Ephraim to this day and had to pay tribute'. The same thing is reported in 1 *Judges* 29–30. And the wording—'to this day'—shows that the writer is relating things that happened long before. . . . Also the event reported in 22:10–33 [125] concerning the two and a half tribes that built an altar beyond the Jordan seems to have happened after Joshua's death, because in that whole story no mention is made of Joshua; rather it reports that the people alone consider whether to make war, send out envoys, wait for

their reply, and in the end decides in favour of war.

Finally, it is clear from *Joshua* 10:14 that this book was written many generations after Joshua's death. For it says that 'neither before nor since has God ever obeyed anyone as he did on that day'. Therefore, if Joshua ever wrote any book, it was surely the one that is mentioned ['the Book of Jashar'] in this same story (*Joshua* 10:13).

No sane person, I think, is convinced that the book of *Judges* was written by the judges themselves; the summary of the whole story that is given in 2:6–23 shows clearly that the whole book was written by a single historian. Also, the writer of this book frequently reminds us that in those times there was no king in Israel, which makes it clear that it was written after kings had achieved rule and thus after the time of the judges.

We need not linger long over the books of Samuel, because that history is extended far past Samuel's lifetime. I'll call attention to just one. Still, I should like to note that this book was written many generations after Samuel. For in 1 *Samuel* 9:9 the historian reminds us in a parenthesis that 'long ago in Israel, when someone went to consult God, he said "Come, let us go to the seer", because back then 'seer' was the word they used for someone who today would be called a 'prophet'.

As for the books of *Kings*: it says right there in them that they are gathered from the books of 'The Acts of Solomon' (see 1 *Kings* 11:41), from the 'Chronicles of the Kings of Judah' (14:29), and from the 'Chronicles of the Kings of Israel' (14:19).

I conclude, therefore, that all the books I have enumerated so far were written by someone other than the person whose name they bear, and relate the things contained in them as having happened long before.

If now we attend to the unity of theme and structure of all these books, we shall easily infer that they were all written

by the same historian, who wanted to chronicle the history of the Jews from their origin up to the first destruction of the city [i.e. the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians]. The way each book follows on from its predecessor is enough, all on its own, to show us the books contain *one* narrative by *one* historian. Having concluded his account of the life of Moses, the writer moves on to Joshua thus:

And it came to pass, after God's servant Moses died, that God said to Joshua. . . etc. [*Joshua* 1:1]

And when he has finished this history with the death of Joshua, [126] he begins the history of the Judges with the same kind of transition:

And it came to pass, after Joshua died, that the children of Israel inquired of God. . . etc. [*Judges* 1:1]

And he attaches *Ruth* to *Judges*, as an appendix, thus:

And it came to pass in those days when the judges were in power, that there was a famine in the land. . . [*Ruth* 1:1]

He attaches 1 *Samuel* to *Ruth* in the same way; and when that is finished he proceeds by his customary transition to 2 *Samuel*. By the end of that the history of David is still not finished; so the historian moves on from 2 *Samuel* to 1 *Kings* and from that to 2 *Kings*, always using the same form of linkage.

Next, the continuity and order of the histories also indicates that there was only one historian, who set himself a certain goal. For he begins by relating the origin of the Hebrew nation, and proceeds by telling in an orderly manner on what occasion and at what times

- Moses promulgated laws and predicted many things to the Hebrews; then how

- according to the predictions of Moses, they invaded the promised land (*Deuteronomy* 7), but

- once they had occupied it, they abandoned the laws (31:16), and how

- from then on many evils overtook them (31:17). Next,

- how they decided to elect kings (17:14), and

- things went well or badly for the Hebrews depending on whether the kings heeded the laws (28:36, 68), until finally

- he relates the downfall of the state, as Moses had predicted.

As for things that have nothing to do with conforming to the law, he either says nothing about them or refers the reader to other historians for an account of them. Thus, all these books work together for one purpose, namely to teach the utterances and edicts of Moses, and to demonstrate them by showing how things worked out.

The conclusion that these books were all written by one historian, single-handed, is confirmed by

- the unity of their theme,

- the way they are linked to one another, and

- the fact each book was written, many generations after the events it describes, by someone other than the person whose name it bears.

I can't make such a good case regarding who the historian was, but I suspect that he was Ezra. I have some pretty good evidence to support this conjecture.

(1) Since the historian (whom we now know to have been only one person) produces a history up to the release of Jehoiachin [2 *Kings* 25:27] and adds that Jehoiachin took his place at the King's table 'for his whole life' . . . it follows that the historian wasn't someone who lived earlier than Ezra. [127] But Scripture doesn't tell us of anyone who flourished then, except Ezra (see *Ezra* 7:10), that he zealously researched God's law and enhanced it, and that he was a writer (see 7:6) who was well-versed in the Law of Moses.

So I can't suspect anyone but Ezra of having written these books.

**(2)** This account of Ezra tells us that he used zeal not only in seeking the law of God but also in enhancing it. And in *Nehemiah* 8:8 it is also said that they read the book of God's law that had been explained to them, and they used their intellect and understood the Scripture. But since *Deuteronomy* contains not only the book of the law of Moses (or the greatest part of it), but also many things inserted for a fuller explanation, I conjecture from this that *Deuteronomy* is the 'Book of God's Law', written, enhanced, and explained by Ezra. . . .

In presenting the opinion of Ibn Ezra, I gave two examples illustrating that many things are inserted parenthetically in the book of *Deuteronomy* to explain it more fully. There are many other examples of this feature of that work. For example:

. . . and the Horites previously lived in Seir, but the sons of Esau drove them out and destroyed them from their sight and dwelled in their place, as Israel did in the land that God gave them (*Deuteronomy* 2:12).

This explains 2:3–4, namely that the sons of Esau to whom Mt Seir had come as a possession were not the first to occupy that land, but that they invaded it and dislodged and destroyed its previous inhabitants, the Horites, as the Israelites did the Canaanites after the death of Moses.

Again, *Deuteronomy* 10:6–9 are inserted parenthetically in the words of Moses. Here is the whole passage, starting from verse 5 (it is Moses speaking):

**5.** Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the Ark that I had made, where they still are, as the Lord had commanded me.

**6.** From Beeroth-bene-jaakan the Israelites marched to Moserath. Aaron died there and was buried there;

and his son Eleazar became priest in his stead. **7.** From there they marched to Gudgod, and from Gudgod to Jorbath, region of running brooks.

**8.** At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the Ark of the Lord's Covenant, to stand in attendance upon the Lord, and to bless in His name, as is still the case. **9.** That is why the Levites have received no hereditary portion along with their kinsmen: the Lord is their portion, as the Lord your God spoke concerning them.

**10.** I had stayed on the mountain, as I did the first time, forty days and forty nights, and the Lord heeded me once again. . .

and so on. *Anyone* can see that verse 8 must be related to verse 5, not to the death of Aaron. [Spinoza offers a complex explanation for why the historian inserted a mention of Aaron's death at this point. Then:] Next, he—the historian, who I think was Ezra—explains that at the time Moses is speaking of here God chose the tribe of Levi for himself, so that he (Ezra) might show •the reason for the choice, and •why the Levites weren't allotted any part of the possession. With that out of the way, he goes on in verse 10 to follow the thread of the history in the words of Moses.

To these examples we should add **[128]** the opening five verses of *Deuteronomy* and all the passages that speak of Moses in the third person. There are also the ones where the historian has added or reworded bits that don't seem to us to make any difference to what was first there, no doubt doing this so as to make the passages easier for his contemporaries to understand.

If we had Moses' actual 'Book of God's Law', I am sure we would find that it differed greatly from the corresponding parts of *Deuteronomy*, in its **(1)** wording, the **(2)** order of the precepts, and the **(3)** reasons for them. [In the next sentence



Spinoza says that in *Exodus* the Ten Commandments) are stated *ex professo*; literally this should mean that they are stated there *openly*, but the point seems rather to be that the *Exodus* version of the Commandments is the basic official one against which other versions must be tested.] Take the case of the Decalogue [= the Ten Commandments]: it is stated *ex professo* in *Exodus* and I see that the *Deuteronomy* version differs from that in all three respects. The fourth commandment [*Deuteronomy* 5:12–15, *Exodus* 20:8–11] is **(1)** worded differently and is much longer, **(3)** the reason for it differs entirely from the one given in *Exodus*, and **(2)** the order in which the tenth precept is explained in *Deuteronomy* 5:21 is also different from that in *Exodus* 20:17.

I'll say it again: things like this, here and elsewhere, were done by Ezra because he was explaining the law of God to his contemporaries; so this—what we have in *Deuteronomy*—is the 'Book of God's Law', embellished and explained by Ezra. I think that this book was the one he wrote first; and I have

two reasons for this. **(i)** It contains the laws of the country, which the people needed very much, and **(ii)** it isn't linked to the preceding Book as all the others are, but begins abruptly: 'These are the words of Moses. . . ' etc. But after he had finished this and given the people a thorough knowledge of the law, I believe he then set to work to write a complete history of the Hebrew nation, from the origin of the world to the final destruction of the city; and he fitted the Book of Deuteronomy into its proper place in this history. Why did he call its first five books 'the books of Moses'? Perhaps he named them after the person who figures most prominently in them. And that may have been his reason for calling the sixth book *Joshua*, the seventh *Judges*, the eighth *Ruth*, the ninth and perhaps also the tenth *Samuel*, and finally the eleventh and twelfth *Kings*. Did Ezra himself put the finishing touches on this work, bringing it to completion as he wanted to? Read on.

## Chapter 9:

### Questions about the historical books

#### Did Ezra put them into their final form?

#### Are the marginal notes found in Hebrew manuscripts variant readings?

[129] Just from the passages I have cited as evidence for my view about who wrote those books—passages that would be found obscure by anyone who didn't have my perspective on them—it's easy to see how greatly my investigation of the authorship issue helps us to understand these books. But as well as that issue there are other things to be noted in

the books themselves—things that the common superstition won't let the multitude recognize. [Presumably meaning the common belief that Moses wrote the Pentateuch etc.]

The most important of these is that Ezra didn't put the finishing touches on the narratives in these books; all he did was to collect the histories from different writers, sometimes

simply copying them and leaving them to posterity without having examined them or put them in order. (I say 'Ezra' because I am taking him to be the author of these books until someone makes a better case for someone else.)

I have no guesses about what causes him from carrying out this work in every detail (except that it have been an early death). But although we don't now have the works of the ancient historians of the Hebrews, the few fragments of them that we *do* have establish clearly enough the fact that Ezra did collect different histories in this way.

·EVIDENCE OF FRAGMENTATION·

The story of Hezekiah (from 2 *Kings* 18:17) is copied from the account of Isaiah. . . . Indeed, this whole story in *Isaiah* 36–39 closely parallels 2 *Kings* 18:13–20:19. The two passages use the same words, with only a very few exceptions. [Spinoza adds an end-note listing some of those exceptions.] From these exceptions we can only infer that there were variant readings of this narrative of Isaiah. . . .

Again, the last chapter of 2 *Kings* is also contained in the last chapter and in chapters 39–40 and 52 of *Jeremiah*. We also find 2 *Samuel* 7 copied in 1 *Chronicles* 17. But we discover that the words in the different passages are so remarkably changed that we can easily see that these two chapters were taken from two different copies of [130] the story of Nathan. [Another end-note spelling out some of the differences, and concluding: 'No-one who has eyes to see and a mind to think can read these chapters without noting many discrepancies, some of them more important the ones I have presented here.']

Finally, the genealogy of the Kings of Edom that is given in *Genesis* 36:31–43 is also described in the same words in 1 *Chronicles* 1:43–53, though it is obvious that the author of *Chronicles* has taken his narrative from other historians and not from *Genesis* or any other of the twelve books I have

attributed to Ezra.

If we had these other histories, the position I am defending would no doubt be established directly. But we don't have them; so (I repeat) our only resource is to examine the histories that we *do* have—their order and the linkages between them, the variant wordings in repeated passages, and differences of chronology—so that we can form our opinions about the rest.

So let us carefully examine at least the principal histories, taking first that of Judah and Tamar, which the historian starts as follows: 'At about that time Judah left his brothers. . . ' (*Genesis* 38:1). The phrase 'that time' must be related to some other time that the historian he has just spoken of, but this other time can't be the time of its immediate context in *Genesis*. Why not? Because we can't count more than 22 years from the time when Joseph was taken to Egypt to the time when Jacob also went there with his whole family. For when Joseph was sold by his brothers, he was 17, and he was 30 when Pharaoh ordered him to be released from prison. If we add to these 13 years to the seven years of fertility and two years of famine, that makes 22 years. It's inconceivable that so much happened in just 22 years:

- Judah had three sons, one after another, by the one wife to whom he was then married;
- the eldest of these sons married Tamar when he was old enough to do so;
- that first son died, and then the second son took Tamar as his wife;
- the second son also died, and some time after all this Judah himself unknowingly had intercourse with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, by whom he had twin sons;
- and one of those twins also became a father

—still within the supposed over-all period of 22 years! These events can't all be related to the time that is in question in

*Genesis*, so they must relate to another time that had been treated just before that in another book. Ezra, then, has simply copied this story and inserted it among the others, without having examined it.

But we have to accept that not only this chapter but the whole story of Joseph and Jacob is so full of inconsistencies that it must have been taken from different historians [131] and ·thoughtlessly· copied out. [Spinoza gives evidence for this, largely consisting in points about people's ages. If we reject Spinoza's thesis about how Ezra assembled his narrative, and instead take the latter just as it stands, we get the result that when Jacob married Leah [this being part of what is intensely and essentially a young man's story] he was 84 years old. The other point about ages is based on figures whose basis isn't known. At this point Spinoza also refers us to an end-note, in which he says that Ibn Ezra, wanting to take the narratives just as they stand but encountering a certain difficulty, speculated that when Jacob went from Mesopotamia to Bethel—to see his aged parents and to fulfill a vow he had made years earlier—he dawdled along, taking 8 or 10 years to make the journey! [Ibn Ezra is the mediaeval scholar first mentioned on page 73, not the ancient scribe Ezra who according to Spinoza wrote the first twelve books of the Old Testament.] Then Spinoza pours in many more chronological arguments, mostly involving people's ages.]

There's no need for me to go through the Pentateuch in detail. If you just attend to the fact that all the precepts and stories in those five books are related indiscriminately, without order and with no respect to the dates, with individual stories being told more than once, sometimes with different wording, and you'll easily see that all these things were been collected and indiscriminately stored away for subsequent sorting out and examination.

Not only the Pentateuch, but also next seven books' narratives down to the destruction of the city were collected in that same way. Anyone can see that in *Judges* 2:6 and thereafter a new historian is cited (one who had also written about Joshua's doings), and that his words are simply copied out. For after our historian ·Ezra· •related in the last chapter of *Joshua* that Joshua died and was buried, •and set out at the start of *Judges* to relate what happened after Joshua's death, he now writes 'When Joshua had dismissed the people, the Israelites went to their allotted territories. . . .' etc., which completely breaks the thread of what he had been saying. . . .

Similarly, chapters 17, 18 etc. of 1 *Samuel* are selected from another historian, who thought that David's reason for attending the court of Saul was something quite different from the reason related in chapter 16. He didn't think that David went to Saul because Saul had called him on the advice of his servants, as is related in 16:17–19; rather, he thought that David's father happened to send him to his brothers in Saul's camp, and he became known to Saul when he conquered the Philistine Goliath, and only then was he kept in the court [17:55–18:2]. I suspect the same thing regarding 1 *Samuel* 26; [132] the historian seems to be telling there the same story as was told in 24, but following the version of some other chronicler.

·CHRONOLOGICAL EVIDENCE·

But I'll pass over this, and proceed to look into chronology. In 1 *Kings* 6:1 it is said that Solomon built the temple 480 years after the departure from Egypt. But from the histories themselves we infer a much greater number. Here are the details on which that inference is based:

Moses governed the people in the wilderness	40 years
Joshua is credited with a reign of not more than	26 years
Cushan-rishathaim governed for	8 years
Othniel, the son of Kenaz, judged for	40 years
Eglon, king of Moab, ruled the people for	18 years
Ehud and Shamgar were judges for	80 years
Jabin, king of Canaan, dominated the people for	20 years
then the people had peace for	40 years
then the people were ruled by the Midianites for	7 years
in the time of Gideon the people were free for	40 years
then they were ruled by Abimelech for	3 years
Tola, the son of Puah was a judge for	23 years
and Jair judged for another	22 years
domination by Philistines and Ammonites for	18 years
Jephthah was a judge for	6 years
Ibzan of Bethlehem judged for	7 years
Elon the Zebulunite judged for	10 years
Abdon the Pirathonite judged for	8 years
domination by the Philistines for	40 years
Samson judged for	20 years
and Eli judged for	40 years
more domination by the philistines	20 years
David reigned for	40 years
before building the temple Solomon reigned for	4 years
<b>Total of all this:</b>	<b>580 years.</b>

·END-NOTE TO LINE 5 (OTHNIEL'S 40-YEAR REIGN)·

The learned Rabbi Levi ben Gerson and others believe •that these 40 years, which Scripture says passed in freedom (*Judges* 3:11), nevertheless begin with the death of Joshua, and so include the preceding 8 years in which the people were subject to Cushan-rishathaim; and •that the following 18 years (*Judges* 3:14) are also to be included in the 80 years that Ehud and Shamgar judged. So they think that the

remaining years of bondage are always included in those that Scripture says passed in freedom. But because Scripture states explicitly how many years [257] the Hebrews spent in bondage and how many in freedom, and in *Judges* 2:18 says that the Hebrews always flourished under the judges, it is quite evident that this Rabbi's 'solution' of the difficulties involves correcting Scripture, not explaining it.

[Spinoza continues this long end-note with some in-fighting against scholars who have, in his view, accepted absurdities rather than accept that the Scriptural texts are defective. His final thrust is the remark that one attempt to deal with the chronological difficulties has the result that] . . . David was born in the 366th year after the crossing of the Jordan and consequently, that his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather must each have fathered a child when he was 90 years old.

·END OF END-NOTE·

[133] To these time-spans we must add the years during which, after Joshua's death, the Hebrew state flourished until Cushan-rishathaim subjugated it. This period lasted for many years, I think, because I can't believe that **immediately** after Joshua's death everyone who had seen his wonders dropped dead, or that the next generation **instantly** abandoned the laws and fell from the pinnacle of virtue to the depths of profligacy and negligence, or that Cushan-rishathaim subjugated them **at a single stroke**.

[That last phrase translates *dictum factum*, a phrase from the Latin playwright Terence, meaning 'said, done', i.e. 'no sooner said than done'.] Actually, each of these developments requires almost a generation, so there's no room for doubt that in *Judges* 2:7–10 Scripture is compressing the stories of many years which it has passed over without detailed comment. And we must also add ·to the figure of 580· •the years when Samuel was a judge (Scripture doesn't say how long that

was) and •the years of the reign of Saul, which I left out of my calculation because it's not clear from Scripture how long he reigned. [Spinoza discusses the length of Saul's reign, with a focus on some confusing things in 1 *Samuel* 13:1. He concludes:] [..134] I would certainly have to sweat to try to reconcile all the accounts contained in 1 *Samuel* so that they looked like something recorded and ordered by one historian. . . .

•In arriving at my figure of 580• I didn't count the years of anarchy of the Hebrews, because Scripture doesn't say what that number was, i.e. doesn't show me how long it took for the things narrated in *Judges* 17–21 to happen.

All these considerations show clearly that we can't establish a correct calculation of the years •between the exodus and the building of the temple• from the accounts themselves, and that the accounts rely on conflicting chronologies. So we have to face it: these accounts were gathered from different writers, and haven't yet been put in order or examined.

. . . .Accounts •of certain events• that are given in *Chronicles* conflict in many ways with the accounts given •of the same events• in 1 and 2 *Kings*. I needn't go into this here, and I certainly don't need to discuss the crazy devices by which authors have tried to reconcile these accounts. The commentators I have read •fantasize, •invent hypotheses, and •corrupt the language. For example, when 2 *Chronicles* 22:2 says 'Ahaziah was forty-two years old when he became king', some commentators have invented the story that what the writer meant was that when Ahaziah became king forty-two years had passed not since he was born but since Omri was on the throne. If they could show that this is what the author of *Chronicles* meant, I wouldn't hesitate to say that he didn't know how to express himself. The commentators have invented many things of that sort; if they were true, I would say outright that the ancient Hebrews

were completely ignorant of their own language and of how to tell a story; and I would be left with no principle or standard for interpreting Scripture, and would be free to invent [135] anything I liked.

Do you think that I'm offering sweeping generalisations without adequate foundation? If so, I ask you:

Please show us some definite order in these accounts— an order that historians could imitate without getting into chronological tangles. And when you are interpreting these accounts and trying to reconcile them, please be careful about language-use and the discipline of organizing and inter-linking statements, presenting them in such a way that we too could imitate them in our writing, according to your explanation.

If you do this, I shall immediately surrender to you and regard you as a great oracle for me. I have long sought such an explanation but have never managed to find one. In fact, I have given long and intense thought to everything that I write here. Although from childhood I was awash in the common beliefs about Scripture, I ended up finding myself forced to admit these things •that I am presenting here•. [‘awash in’ translates *imbutus*; the Latin—like the translation— is vague about far young Spinoza *believed* this doctrinal downpour.] But there's no reason to detain the reader long regarding these matters, or to challenge him to such a hopeless task. . . . I proceed, now, to my other points about the fate of these books.

•MUTILATED PASSAGES•

In addition to the things I have been pointing out, there is the fact that these books weren't, in later times, preserved with enough care to prevent errors from creeping in. The ancient scribes noticed many doubtful readings, as well as some (though not all) mutilated passages. I'm not discussing the question of whether these errors make difficulties for the

reader; I think in fact that they don't matter much, at least for those who read the Scriptures with a comparatively open mind. I can say this much: I haven't noticed in Scripture's moral teachings any error or variant reading that could make them obscure or doubtful.

But most people don't admit that any defect has cropped up even in the other parts of Scripture. Their view is that by a certain special providence God has kept the whole Bible uncorrupted. Moreover, they say that the variant readings are signs of the most profound mysteries, and they allege the same about the asterisks which occur 28 times in the middle of a paragraph, indicating that something is missing. [*Genesis* 4:8 has an example of this, which Spinoza will discuss on page 87.] Indeed, they claim that great secrets are contained in the very accent marks of the letters! [Spinoza offers some insulting conjectures about why someone might say such things, and contemptuously gives this whole endeavour—especially the Cabbalists—the back of his hand.] [..136]

But no-one, I think, could doubt that errors have crept in—or anyway no-one with sound judgment who has read the text about Saul (the one we have already appealed to [mentioned on page 83], 1 *Samuel* 13:1), and also 2 *Samuel* 6:2: 'Then David and all the troops that were with him set out from Baalim of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God'. Again, no-one can fail to see that the place to which they went to get the ark, has been omitted—we are only told 'to bring up from there'. [Spinoza refers here to an end-note in which he argues, with dense grammatical detail, against the view that the passage *does* give the missing name.] And it can't be denied that 2 *Samuel* 13:37 is confused and mutilated:

'Absalom fled, and he came to Talmai son of Ammihud, king of Geshur, and he mourned his son every day. And Absalom fled and went to Geshur and stayed there three years.'

[Spinoza refers here to an end-note, saying: 'Those who have been involved in commenting on this text have "corrected" it so that it reads:

Absalom fled, and he came to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur, where he stayed for three years, and David mourned his son all the time he was at Geshur.

But if that's what they call interpretation—if were allowed to take such liberties in explaining Scripture, transposing whole phrases either by joining them or by cutting something out—then we must be allowed to corrupt Scripture, giving it as many different forms as we like, as if it were a piece of wax.' The main text continues:] I know that I have noted other things of this kind, but at the moment I can't remember what they were.

·THE STATUS OF THE MARGINAL NOTES·

The marginal notes that occur throughout the Hebrew manuscripts were doubtful readings; this can't be doubted by anyone who takes in the fact that most of them arise from similarities between some Hebrew letters and others: kaph is very similar to beth, yodh to waw, dalet to resh, and so on. [It's the Hebrew letters that are said to be similar; what you have in that sentence are not the letters but their names. Compare: 'Among English letters, upper-case zed (or zee) is very like upper-case en.'] [Spinoza gives a couple of examples that aren't easy to follow for those of who don't know Hebrew. Then:] Many variant readings have arisen from the use of so-called 'silent letters', i.e. ones whose pronunciation is often inaudible, so that it's easy to confuse one with another. E.g. in *Leviticus* 25:30 something about 'a city which has no wall' has a marginal note with the alternative reading 'which has a wall'. [Spinoza gives the Hebrew for each reading.]

These things are clear enough in themselves, but I have discussed them because I want to reply to certain pharisees

who have argued that the biblical writers themselves put in the marginal notes, or gave indications for them, in order to signify some mystery. **(1)** Their first argument, which I don't find persuasive, is based on the practice of reading the Scriptures aloud. They ask:

If these notes were attached because of variant readings which later generations couldn't decide between, why has the practice prevailed of always retaining the meaning of the marginal note? Why did they put the meaning that they wanted to retain [137] in the margin? They ought to have written the main texts as they wanted them to be read, instead of relegating to the margin the reading they preferred.

[Spinoza's own text seems to have been 'mutilated' in that passage. For the pharisees' argument to make sense, it should say '... variant readings for later generations to decide between, then why in the many cases where that decision *was* made has the practice prevailed. . . ' etc.]

**(2)** Their second argument seems to have some plausibility because it is based on the nature of the thing itself, -i.e. on what actually happens in many of the marginal notes:-

Suppose that the errors are not intentional, but have crept into the manuscripts by chance. In that case -there wouldn't be any order in them-: what happens by chance happens now in one way, now in another. But in the Pentateuch the word for 'girl' is *almost always* (there's only one exception) written defectively, with one letter missing, whereas in the margin it is written correctly. Has this happened because of a slip of the pen in copying? By what fate could it have happened that the pen always went too fast whenever

*this* word occurred? Also, if this was a mere copying error they—the scribes of later generations—could easily have fixed it without any misgivings. . . .

Therefore, since these readings didn't happen by chance, and weren't fixed as obvious errors, the pharisees conclude that the first writers made these -errors- deliberately, meaning to signify something by them.

It's easy to reply to these arguments. **(1)** I see little merit in the argument based on the practice that has prevailed among -the later generations-. I don't know what superstition could have persuaded them to do. Perhaps they did these things because they found each reading equally good *or* acceptable, and therefore, in order that neither of them should be neglected, wanted one to be written and the other to be read. In so great a matter, they were afraid to determine their judgment, lest in their uncertainty they choose the false -reading- in place of the true one. So they did not want to prefer either one to the other, as they would have done, without qualification, if they had commanded only one reading to be both written and read, especially since the marginal notes are not written in the Sacred books.<sup>7</sup> Or perhaps it happened because, although certain things were copied correctly, they still wanted them to be read differently and indicated this in the margin; and therefore made it the general practice to read the Bible aloud according to the marginal notes.

The marginal notes aren't all doubtful readings; and there's a reason why some of the ones that aren't doubtful were placed in the margins by the scribes, who wanted them to be followed in public readings of Scripture. They involve

<sup>7</sup> The following note is gratefully taken from Edwin Curley's forthcoming edition of this work: J. Weinstein, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford 1959) writes: 'In printed Hebrew Bibles corrections of recognized errors are made in the margin or footnote, while the uncorrected words are retained in the text. . . . In the unpointed scrolls read in the Synagogues, the uncorrected form is similarly retained in the text but no corrected form is given in the margin or footnotes. The reader is expected to be familiar with the text and to know when a word is to be corrected.'

readings where the main text had an expression that was obsolete or ones that were not appropriate to read in a public assembly. The ancient writers used to refer to things—with a clear conscience about this—by their correct names, without resorting to polite euphemisms. But after wicked conduct and extravagant living became prevalent, [138] things that the ancients said without obscenity began to be considered obscene. This didn't create a need to alter Scripture; but the stupid readiness of the common people to take offence did provide a reason for establishing the custom of using polite terms for sexual intercourse and excrement, the polite terms being indicated in the marginal notes.

[This paragraph mentions 'the Masorettes', who were a group of Jewish scholars in the 9th century CE who constructed a vast edifice of marginal notes implying corrections to Scripture. Their version is now generally accepted as the officially correct one, though that question seems to be controversial.]

Anyway, whatever the reason for the custom of following the margins in public readings of the Scriptures, it's *not* that the true interpretation is found only there. For one thing, the Rabbis themselves often part company with the Masorettes and favour other readings (more about this in a moment). Also, in some cases the marginal note seems to be less grammatically correct than the corresponding expression in the main text. [Spinoza gives two examples from *2 Samuel*, and concludes:] In this way we find many notes that simply *aren't* preferable to the corresponding bit of the main text.

(2) As for the pharisees' second argument, I can easily respond to it by bringing in what I have just said, namely that in addition to doubtful readings the Scribes also noted obsolete words. There's no doubt that

- the Hebrew language, like every other, changed in ways that made many things obsolete and antiquated, that

- the most recent scribes found such things in the Bible, and that
- they noted them all, so that in a public reading they would be read in conformity with the accepted usage of that time.

[Spinoza gives several examples, one of which replies to an argument that he reported on page 85:] That's why the word for 'girl' is found everywhere with a marginal note, because in antiquity that word was gender-neutral, i.e. it meant 'young person' of either sex. . . .

[.139] You may want to ask 'How do you know these things about what became obsolete in the Hebrew language?' to which I reply: I know that a given word became obsolete by finding it frequently used by the most ancient writers, i.e. in the Bible, and seeing that later generations didn't follow them in this. . . .

An opponent may offer this challenge:

Since you have maintained that most of these notes are doubtful readings, why do we never find more than two readings of the same passage? why not sometimes three, or more?

It is easy to reply to this. . . . It is true that not more than two readings of one passage have ever been found, for two reasons. (i) [Spinoza's first reason is that in most cases where a note gives a variant reading, it is a choice between two letters, or the presence or absence of a silent syllable; so it's in the nature of these for there to be only two possibilities. He gives examples. Then:] [.140] (ii) The second reason why we don't find more than two readings for any one passage, I believe, is that the scribes found very few copies of the text, perhaps only two or three. The *Treatise of the Scribes* chapter 6 mentions only three, which they suppose came from Ezra's time because they parade the notes they contain as having been inserted by Ezra himself. Be that as it may,



if they had three copies of the text, it's easy to believe that every individual passage was the same in at least two of them. It would have been downright astonishing if, with only three copies, they found three readings of a single passage.

By what accident did it happen that after Ezra there were so few copies? You'll find the answer to that if you read 1 *Maccabees* 1:59–60 or Josephus' *Antiquities* 12:5. Indeed, you'll be amazed that after such extensive and enduring persecution they were able to preserve those few. [The named works describe the attempt by Antiochus in the second century BCE to destroy Judaism. He had copies of the Bible burned and those found possessing them killed.] No-one who has read that account with even moderate attention will have any doubt about this.

So we can see why there aren't more than two doubtful readings anywhere. The fact that there are never more than two readings is no reason to infer that in the annotated passages the Bible was deliberately written incorrectly in order to signify some mystery!

Another objection that an opponent may bring is this:

Certain things in the written texts (things that are indicated correctly in the margin) are so clearly ungrammatical that it isn't credible that the scribes could have been in difficulty about them and wondered which was the true reading. They ought to have corrected them, with no note in the margin.

This is of little concern to me, because I'm not obliged to know what religious scruple inclined them to handle mistakes in the texts in this way. Perhaps they honestly wanted to pass the Bible on to later generations in whatever condition they had found it in, in a few originals, and to note the discrepancies between the originals—not as doubtful readings but merely as variants. I call them 'doubtful' only because in fact I find that with most of them I don't know which alternative is preferable.

A final point. In addition to these doubtful readings, the scribes also indicated [141] a number of mutilated passages by inserting an empty space in the middle of a paragraph. (The Masoretes put on record how many places there are (28) where an empty space is inserted in the middle of a paragraph. I don't know whether they thought that some mystery lies hidden in that number!) The pharisees carefully made all these spaces exactly the same size. To take just one example: in *Genesis* 4:8 it is written:

Cain said to Abel his brother \_\_\_\_\_, and when they were in the field Cain set upon his brother. . . . etc

An empty space is left at the place where we were expecting to learn *what* Cain said to his brother. Many of the 28 such passages wouldn't look mutilated if no space had been left in them. But I have gone on long enough about these matters.

## Chapter 10: The remaining books of the Old Testament examined in the same way

I move on now to the remaining books of the Old Testament. But about the two books of **Chronicles** I have nothing certain and worthwhile to say except that—contrary to a tradition that makes Ezra their author—they were written long after Ezra, and perhaps after Judas Maccabee restored the temple. [Spinoza here refers us to a long end-note in which he gives reasons for ‘this suspicion—if what is certain can be called a suspicion’. The reasons involve historical and biographical intricacies which it wouldn’t be profitable to include here. It is, however, interesting to note Spinoza saying that he won’t go into certain details ‘for reasons which the oppressiveness of our times does not permit me to explain’. [He evidently thinks that the best interpretation of *Chronicles* poses a threat to the Old Testament basis for the New Testament account of something that Christians have thought important, namely the genealogy of Joseph, the step-father of Jesus of Nazareth.] Spinoza’s challenge to 1 and 2 *Chronicles* continues in the main text, where he winds up the question thus:] Nothing is apparent to me about the true writer of these books, or about their authority, their utility or their doctrine. In fact I’m amazed at their being accepted as sacred by the people who removed *The Book of Wisdom*, *Tobias*, and the rest of the so-called apocrypha from the canon of sacred books. But I’m not trying to lessen their authority; everyone accepts them, so I leave it at that.

The **Psalms** were collected and divided up into five books in the time of the second temple [i.e. between 520 and 40 BCE, several centuries after the rule of David]. For according to the testimony of Philo Judaeus, Psalm 88 was published while King Jehoiakin was still a captive in Babylon, and [142] and Psalm 89 was published when the same King regained his

freedom. I don’t think Philo would have said this unless either it was the received opinion in his time or he had accepted it from others worthy of trust.

I believe that Solomon’s **Proverbs** were also collected at that time, or during the reign of King Josiah at the earliest, because chapter 25 starts thus: ‘These too are the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of King Hezekiah of Judah copied.’ This sounds as though a good deal of time—probably at least 100 years—had passed from the time of Hezekiah; and that puts the text as we have it at the time of Josiah or later. But I can’t pass over in silence the audacity of the rabbis who wanted this book (and **Ecclesiastes**) to be excluded from the canon of sacred books and set aside along with other books that we now don’t have. They would have gone ahead and done it if they hadn’t found certain passages where the law of Moses is commended. It’s a lamentable thing that sacred and noble matters depended on the choice of those men. Still, I thank them for consenting to pass on to us even these books, though I can’t help wondering whether they did this in good faith. But I don’t want to explore this question here.

·THE BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS·

This brings me to the books of the prophets. [Spinoza has already had a good deal to say about six of the books of major prophets—**Joshua**, **Judges**, 1 and 2 **Samuel**, and 1 and 2 **Kings**. He will now discuss the remaining three, followed by a paragraph mentioning by name only two of the twelve minor prophets.] When I study these books I see that the prophecies they contain have been collected from other books, and aren’t always written down in the order in which the prophets themselves spoke or wrote

them; and I also see that the books don't even contain all the prophecies but only the ones that they—the collectors and transcribers—were able to find here and there. So these books are only the fragments of the prophets.

For **Isaiah** began to prophesy in the reign of Uzziah, as the transcriber himself tells us in the first verse. But he didn't just prophesy at that time; he also recorded all King Uzziah's deeds in a book now lost (see *2 Chronicles* 26:22). What we do have was copied out from two books that we don't now have, the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah and the Chronicles of Israel—as I have shown. . . .

Second, the prophecies of **Jeremiah**, which are presented in the manner of an historical narrative, have been gathered from various chroniclers. Evidence for this? Well, the items are piled up confusedly, with no account taken of when the recorded events happened; and the same story is repeated in different versions. Chapter 21 explains why Jeremiah was imprisoned, namely that when King Zedekiah consulted him, he predicted the destruction of the city. At the end of that chapter there is a break: chapter 22 tells of Jeremiah's denunciation of King Jehoiakin [22:24–30] and his [143] prediction that that king would be made captive; and the fact that he predicted the King's captivity. This is certainly a 'break' in the narrative, because Jehoiakin reigned before Zedekiah,

And then chapter 25 describes things revealed to the prophet even earlier, namely in the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakin's father Jehoiakim. And then [in chapter 26] we find things that happened in the first year of King Jehoiakim's reign. And so without any chronological order the compiler goes on piling up prophecies until finally chapter 38 returns to the narrative that was interrupted in chapter 21, as though the intervening 15 chapters were in parentheses. The beginning of chapter 38 connects nicely with

21:8-10. Also, it goes on to give an account of Jeremiah's final imprisonment and the reason for his long detention in the court of the guard, doing this quite differently from how it was done in chapter 37. You can see clearly that all these passages are collected from different historians, and can't be explained in any other way. [Spinoza adds some further thoughts about the disjointed nature of this book, and about what one of the sources for it probably was.]

The first verses of the book of **Ezekiel** clearly show that it is only a fragment. . . . Look at the start of the book: 'In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal. . . '. It is clear that the prophet is here continuing a narrative, not starting one. The writer himself also notes this when he adds parenthetically in verse 3 that 'the word of God often came to the priest Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans' etc., as if to say that the words of Ezekiel that he had recorded up to that point had to do with other things that had been revealed to him before this thirtieth year. . . .

As for Hosea, the first of the twelve 'minor prophets', we can't be sure that he wrote anything that isn't in the book that bears his name. Nevertheless, I am amazed that we do not have more writings by this man who, according to the writer of **Hosea**, prophesied for [144] more than 84 years. Anyway, we do know two general facts about the books of the minor prophets, namely that (1) their writers didn't collect all the prophecies of all the prophets, because some were mentioned in general in *2 Chronicles* 33:10, 18–19 as having prophesied during Manasseh's reign, though we have none of their prophecies made during that reign. (2) They didn't even include all the prophecies of the prophets we do have, because of **Jonah's** prophecies they recorded only the ones about the Ninevites are recorded, whereas we know from *2 Kings* 14:25 that he also prophesied to the Israelites.

## ·OTHER BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT·

Concerning the book of **Job**, and concerning Job himself, there has been much controversy among the commentators. Some people think that Moses wrote this book, and that the whole story is only a parable. Certain rabbis in the Talmud hand down this view, and Maimonides also leans towards it in his *Guide to the Perplexed*. Others believed the story to be true, with some of them holding that this Job lived in the time of Jacob and married Jacob's daughter Dinah. But Ibn Ezra. . . . says in his commentary on this book that it was translated into Hebrew from another language. I wish he had made a stronger case for this, for then we could have inferred that the gentiles also had sacred books. So I leave that question open. But I do conjecture that Job was a gentile whose heart was very constant, and whose affairs at first prospered, then went very badly, and finally went well again; for Ezekiel 14:14 names him among others ·as a righteous man·. And I believe that the changes in Job's fortunes, and the constancy of his heart, gave many people an opportunity to argue about God's providence—or at least gave such an opportunity to the author of the dialogue ·between Job and his 'friends'· that this book contains. The content and the style of that dialogue read like the work not of a man suffering among the ashes but rather of a man reflecting at leisure in his study. I'm inclined to agree with Ibn Ezra that this book really was translated from another language, because it seems to be aiming at the poetic art of the gentiles. For twice the Father of the Gods calls a council, and Momus (here called 'Satan') criticises God's words with the greatest freedom, etc. But this is only a conjecture—not solid.

I pass to the book of **Daniel**. No doubt from chapter 8 on this book contains Daniel's own writings. But I don't know where the first seven chapters were copied from. From

the fact that chapters 2–7 [145] were written in Chaldean, we may suspect that they were taken from the Chaldean historians. If this were clearly established, it would be brilliantly strong evidence that •what is sacred about Scripture is its content and not its words, not the language it uses to express that content; and that •books that teach and relate excellent things are equally sacred, whoever wrote them and in whatever language. ·Without being in a position to assert this positively and generally·, we can at least note that these chapters were written in Chaldean and are nevertheless as sacred as the rest of the Bible. The book of **Ezra** is so connected to this book of Daniel that it's easy to see that they are written by the same person, who is continuing his orderly account of the affairs of the Jews from the time of the first captivity.

And I don't doubt that the book of **Esther** is connected with the book of Ezra, because the way *Esther* begins can't be related to any other book. It has been held, on the basis of *Esther* 9:20 that this is the book that Mordecai wrote, but that is not credible. In 9:20–22 some other person tells of Mordecai's writing letters, and of what they contained; and again, in 9:31–2 the historian relates an edict that Queen Esther made. . . .and says that this was written in 'the book'—which sounds in Hebrew as though it referred to a book that everyone knew about at Esther's time. And we have to accept, as Ibn Ezra did, that 'the book' in question perished with the others. Finally, ·in *Esther* 10:2· the historian reports that the rest of Mordecai's story is to be found in the chronicles of the Persian kings. So there's no doubt that ·Mordecai had no hand in the writing of *Esther*, and that· *Esther* was written by the same historian who related the affairs of Daniel and Ezra, as well as the book of **Nehemiah**. . . . I say that these four books were written by just one historian; but I can't even guess who he was.

Whoever he was, how did he come to know these histories? Well, the governors or princes of the Jews in the time of the second temple, like the kings in the time of the first temple, had scribes or chroniclers who wrote chronologically orderly accounts of their doings; these chronologies or annals of the kings are cited throughout 1 and 2 *Kings*. But the annals of the princes and priests of the second temple are first cited in *Nehemiah* 12:23 and [146] next in 1 *Maccabees* 16:24. There's no doubt that these annals constitute 'the book' I have just referred to, in which Esther's edict and Mordecai's deeds were written, and which (with Ibn Ezra) I have said perished. So it seems that everything in these 'four books' was extracted from—copied out from—the annals of the second temple. For no other book is cited by their writer, and we don't know of any other possible source whose authority is generally recognized.

It is certain that these books were not written by Ezra or by Nehemiah [and Spinoza proceeds with some dauntingly dense and technical arguments for that conclusion—about a dozen lines containing eighteen proper names. Then:] So I have no doubt that these books were written long after '164 BCE, which is when' Judas Maccabee restored worship in the temple. Why were they written? 'There are two possible answers'. (1) Because at that time some *false* books of Daniel, Ezra and Esther were published by certain malevolent people who no doubt belonged to the sect of the Sadducees. As far as I know, the Pharisees never accepted those books. It's true that in the 'false' book known as 4 *Ezra* there are certain legends that turn up again in the Talmud; but that does not show that the Pharisees endorsed them. 'And they didn't'. Except for the really stupid ones, they—i.e. the Pharisees whose debates, discussions and decisions down through the centuries are recorded in the Talmud—all regarded those legends as trivial nothings. Why

would the Sadducees do such a thing? I think it was to make the traditions of the Pharisees look absurd to everyone. (2) Or perhaps the false books were written and published at that time to show the people that Daniel's prophecies were fulfilled, and to strengthen them in religion in this way, [147] so that amid their great calamities they wouldn't despair of having better times and of their future salvation.

·THE PROBLEM OF ERRORS·

But though these book—i.e. the canonical Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther; not the false ones—are so recent and new, still many errors have crept into them, I think because of the haste with which they were copied out. In these books as in the others we find marginal notes of the kind I discussed in chapter 9, and more of them than in the others. And some passages can't be explained in any way except as copyists' errors. I'll show this in a moment.

Before that, though, I want to point out regarding the marginal readings in those books that if we grant to the Pharisees that these readings go as far back as the writers of the books themselves, then we must say that the writers themselves (if there happened to be more than one) put these readings on record because •they found that the chronologies from which they were copying were not written carefully enough, and •they didn't dare to correct the writings of their ancient predecessors, even though in some cases the errors were clearly errors. I needn't get back into the details of this topic, and will now proceed to deal with the things that aren't noted in the margin.

There are countless errors in *Ezra* 2, known as 'the letter on genealogy'. In 2:64 the total of all those who have been counted in the various families is given as 42,360; but if you add the subtotals for each family you'll find only 29,818. Something is wrong here—either the total or some of the subtotals—and it seems that we ought to blame the subtotals.

Surely everyone had an accurate recall of something as memorable as that total number, whereas the subtotals are not so memorable. If an error had slipped into the overall total, it would have immediately been evident to everyone, and would have easily been corrected. [Spinoza goes on to cite *Nehemiah 7* in confirmation of this.]

As for the commentators who try to reconcile these obvious contradictions, each one makes up some story—the best his intelligence level is capable of. But in their worship of the letters and words of Scripture they act in ways. . . .that can only [148] expose the writers of the holy books to contempt by making them seem not to know how to express or organize what they have to say. Their net effect is to obscure things that are clear in Scripture. If it were legitimate to interpret all of Scripture in their way, the upshot would surely be that we couldn't be sure of the true meaning of any statement. But there's no need for me to go on at length about these matters. For I am convinced that if some ·secular· historian did all the things that the commentators piously allow the writers of the holy books to do, he would be held up to ridicule, even by the Biblical commentators themselves. And if they think it is blasphemous to say that Scripture is sometimes faulty, tell me what I should call those who do whatever they want with Scripture? who dishonour the sacred historians by implying that they babble and confuse everything? who deny the clear and most evident meanings of Scripture? [Spinoza then repeats his thesis that somewhere in the two versions of the 'letter on genealogy'—the one in *Ezra* and the one in *Nehemiah*—someone got something *wrong*. He continues:]

So those who explain these passages differently are only denying the true meaning of Scripture and therefore denying Scripture itself. As for their thinking that piety requires them to accommodate some passages of Scripture to others, that's a ridiculous piety because it leads to their accommodating

clear passages to obscure ones, and correct passages to faulty ones. . . . But I shan't call them blasphemers: they mean no harm, and to err is indeed human.

Returning now to my main theme: in addition to the errors that must be conceded to exist in the totals in the letter on genealogy, both in *Ezra* and in *Nehemiah*, many are also noted in the very names of the families, still more in the genealogies themselves, in the histories and, I'm afraid, even in the prophecies themselves. For certainly the prophecy in *Jeremiah 22* concerning Jehoiachin doesn't seem to fit with his actual history. [In this next bit, Spinoza gives the references but doesn't quote the passages. If you check them out against whatever Bible you are using, you need to know that Jehoiachin was also known as 'Jeconiah' and as 'Coniah'.] Compare particularly *Jeremiah 22:30*:

Thus saith the Lord: Record this man [Jehoiachin] as without succession, one who shall never be found acceptable; for no man of his offspring shall be accepted to sit on the throne of David and to rule again in Judah

with *2 Kings 25:27–30*:

The king of Babylon took note of King Jehoiachin of Judah and released him from prison. He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a throne above those of other kings who were with him in Babylon.

. . . .And I don't see how this from *Jeremiah 34:2–5*:

Go speak to King Zedekiah of Judah, and say to him: 'Thus said the Lord : I am going to deliver this city into the hand of the king of Babylon. . . etc. You will not die by the sword. You will die a peaceful death

can be true of Zedekiah, [149] whose eyes were gouged out as soon as he had seen his sons killed (*2 Kings 25:7*). If we wanted to interpret prophecies on the basis of the outcome, we would have to replace 'Zedekiah' by 'Jechoiachin' and

conversely. But that would be too paradoxical; and I prefer to leave the matter as something we can't explain, especially because if there is some error here it must be attributed to the editing work of the historian, not to a defect in the originals.

As for the other errors I have mentioned, I'm not going to list them here because that would be tedious for you, and anyway others have already called attention to them. Rabbi Shlomo observed such obvious contradictions in the genealogies that he came right out with it:

The reason why Ezra (who he thinks wrote 1 and 2 *Chronicles*) •calls the sons of Benjamin by different names, •treats his genealogy differently from how we have it in *Genesis*, and •indicates most of the cities of the Levites differently from how Joshua did, is that he found the originals inconsistent. . . (from his commentary on 1 *Chronicles* 8);

and a bit further on:

The reason why the genealogy of Gibeon and others is given twice, and in different versions, is that he found several different 'letters of genealogy' for each man, and in copying them out he followed the reading of the greatest number of copies; but when the number of inconsistent copies was equal, he recorded copies of each of them.

So he grants without reservation that these books were copied from originals that weren't correct or certain. Indeed, when commentators set themselves the task of reconciling passages so as to avoid attributing error to the Bible, all they actually succeed in doing is to indicate the causes of the errors! I should perhaps add that no sensible person thinks that the sacred historians *wanted* to write in such a way that they would seem to keep contradicting one another.

You may want to say: 'Your procedure ruins Scripture completely, because it will lead people to suspect it of being faulty everywhere.' Not so! I have shown that my procedure serves the interests of Scripture, preventing passages that are clear and uncontaminated from being corrupted by being made to fit passages that are faulty. Some passages are corrupt, but that's not a licence to suspect them all. Every book has errors in it; but no-one has been led by this to suspect error everywhere—especially when a statement is clear, and we see plainly what the author's thought is.

That brings me to the end of what I wanted to say about the history of the books of the Old Testament. [150] The conclusion is clear: •before the time of the Maccabees there was no canon of sacred books; •the books we now have were selected from many others by the Pharisees of the second temple, who also instituted the formulas for prayers, and •these books were accepted only because they decided to accept them.

·END-NOTE THAT BELONGS HERE·

[(i) The opening sentence of this note dates the Great Synagogue later than about 320 BCE, implying that it came much too late for any of the major prophets to have been present at it. (ii) The Persian rule over the Jews lasted for more than 200 years; when Spinoza says that the rabbinical tradition makes it 34 or fewer years, his point is just that this tradition can't be trusted on any historical question.]

The so-called Great Synagogue didn't begin until after Asia was conquered by the Macedonians. And the opinion of Maimonides and others that this council was presided over by Ezra, Daniel, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zecariah, etc. is a ridiculous invention. Its only basis is a rabbinical tradition which says that the reign of the Persians lasted for 34 years at most. That tradition is their only basis for holding that

the decisions of that great all-Pharisee Synagogue or Synod were received from the prophets, who had

received them from other prophets. . . and so on back to Moses, who received them from God himself and handed them down to posterity orally, not in writing.

But while the Pharisees may believe these things with their usual stubbornness, sensible people who know what causes Councils and Synods to exist, and know about the controversies of the Pharisees and Sadducees, won't have any trouble coming up with an explanation for the calling together of that great Synagogue or Council. This is certain: [261] •no prophets participated in that council, and the •decisions of the Pharisees, which they call traditions, received their authority from the same Council.

•END OF THE END-NOTE•

So those who want to demonstrate the authority of Holy Scripture have to show the authority of each book; proving the divinity of one doesn't establish the divinity of them all. To hold that it does, we would have to maintain that the council of Pharisees *could not* have erred in its choice of books, and no-one will ever demonstrate that!

One reason that compels me to maintain that the Pharisees alone constructed the canon of sacred books of the Old Testament is that *Daniel* 12:2 preaches the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees denied. And there is another, namely that the Pharisees themselves in the Talmud indicate clearly •that the decisions on what is canonical were theirs•. For in the *Treatise on the Sabbath* the Rabbi Jehuda—known as 'Rabi'—said that

The experts raised the question of whether to hide *Ecclesiastes* because its words were contrary to the words of the law (of Moses). And why did they decide not to hide it? Because it begins according to the law and ends according to the law.

And a little further on:

They also considered hiding *Proverbs*. . . and so on.

And in the preceding chapter of the *Treatise on the Sabbath* he praised the generosity of spirit of Neghunja, son of Hezekiah, and said that

if it hadn't been for him, *Ezekiel* would have been discarded, because its words are contrary to the words of the law.

These passages clearly show that those who were learned in the law **called a council** to settle which books were to be received as sacred and which were to be excluded. So if you want to be certain of the authority of all the books—**call a council** to discuss each of them separately!

Now the time has come to examine the books of the New Testament in the same way. But I choose not to undertake this difficult business—because •I'm told that it has already been done by men who are highly learned in the sciences and especially in the •relevant• languages, because •my knowledge of the Greek language isn't detailed enough for me to risk tackling such a task, and finally because •we don't have copies of the books that were originally written in the Hebrew language. [151] Still, I shall devote my next chapter to indicating the things that are most relevant to my plan •in this book•.



## Chapter 11:

### Did the apostles write their letters as apostles and prophets or rather as teachers? What the role of the apostles was.

No-one who has read the New Testament can doubt that the apostles were prophets. But the prophets didn't always speak from a revelation; on the contrary, they did that very rarely, as I showed late in chapter 1. So the question can be raised: when the apostles wrote their letters, were they writing as prophets, from a revelation and by an express command—as did Moses, Jeremiah and the other prophets—or were they writing as private persons, or teachers? This question arises particularly because in 1 *Corinthians* 14:6 Paul distinguishes two kinds of preaching, one from revelation, the other from knowledge. So we *should* raise the question of whether in their letters the apostles are prophesying or teaching.

If we take the trouble to attend to the *style* of the letters, we'll find it very unlike to that of prophecy. For the most common practice of the prophets was to keep declaring that they were speaking at God's command:

'thus says God'  
'the God of hosts says'  
'God's edict'

and so on. And this seems to have been their style not only when speaking to crowds but also in letters containing revelations. See for example Elijah's letter to Jehoram (2 *Chronicles* 21:12), which also begins 'Thus says God. . . '.

We find nothing like this in the letters of the apostles. On the contrary, in 1 *Corinthians* 7:40 Paul 'says that he speaks according to his own opinion ('after my judgment'). Indeed, many passages contain turns of phrase that are characteristic of a mind undecided and unsure:

'We reckon, therefore. . . ' (*Romans* 3:28)

'For I reckon. . . ' (*Romans* 8:18)

and many others of the same sort. [Spinoza has a footnote here directing us to an End-note consisting of a ferociously learned discussion of whether the word translated here as 'reckon' really means 'conclude'. The King James bible, incidentally, has 'conclude' in the first example and 'reckon' in the second.] We also find other ways of speaking that are strikingly distant from any suggestion of prophetic authority, such as

—'But I say this as one lacking in authority, not as a command' (1 *Corinthians* 7:6)  
—'I give advice as a man who, by God's grace, is trustworthy' (25)

[152] and many other passages to the same effect. And it should be noted that when Paul speaks in that chapter of having or not having God's precept or command, he doesn't mean •a precept or command revealed to him by God but only •the teachings Christ imparted to his disciples •in the sermon• on the mount.

Moreover, if we attend also to how the apostles pass on the Gospel teaching in these letters, we'll see that it differs greatly from how the prophets do this. The apostles are always *reasoning*, so that they seem to be debating rather than prophesying. Prophecies contain only bare assertions and decisions. There are three reasons why that is so. (1) In a prophecy God is presented as the speaker, and he doesn't *discuss* things; he *decides* in accordance with the absolute authority of his nature. (2) There's no question of discussing

the prophet's authority, because anyone who tries to confirm his assertions by reasoning thereby submits them to the discretionary judgment of anyone. Even Paul, because he reasons, seems to have done this, saying 'I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say' (1 *Corinthians* 10:15). **(3)** The prophets didn't receive their revelations through the power of the natural light, i.e. through reasoning (I showed this in chapter 1).

Some conclusions in the Pentateuch seem to be reached through inference, but if you look at these passages carefully you'll see that they can't in any way be taken as decisive arguments. For example, when Moses said to the Israelites 'if you have been rebels against God while I have lived with you, much more will you be rebels after I am dead' (*Deuteronomy* 31:27), he wasn't trying to convince them by reasoning that after his death they would necessarily turn aside from the true worship of God. *That* argument would be mistaken, as can be shown from Scripture itself: the Israelites persevered steadfastly during the lives of Joshua and the Elders, and afterwards also during the lives of Samuel, David, Solomon, etc.

So those words of Moses are only a moral exhortation, in which he predicts the future defection of the people rhetorically, making it as vivid as his imagination would enable him to. I'm not saying that Moses said these things on his own authority so as to make his prediction probable to the people, rather than as a prophet on the basis of a revelation. Why am I not saying this? Because *Deuteronomy* 31:21 relates that God revealed this very thing to Moses in other words. Of course there was no question of Moses' having to be fully convinced of the prediction and decree of God's by probable reasons, **[153]** but it did have to be vividly represented in his imagination, as I showed in chapter 1. There was no better way of doing this than by imagining

the people's present disobedience, which he had often experienced, as continuing into the future. [Notice that Spinoza has here emphasized imagination at the expense of reasoning *both* in Moses' reception of this revelation from God *and* in his passing it on to the people.]

This is how we are to understand all the arguments Moses uses in the Pentateuch. They aren't selected from reason's armoury, but are only ways of speaking by which God's decrees could be more effectively expressed and more vividly imagined. I don't want to deny outright that the prophets could argue from revelation. I say only this: •the more properly the prophets *argue*, the closer their knowledge of the revelation's content comes to being natural knowledge; and •the best evidence of their having supernatural knowledge is their coming out with simple dogmas or decrees or sayings; and therefore •the chief prophet, Moses, didn't conduct any proper argument; whereas •Paul's long deductions and arguments in *Romans* were in no way based on a supernatural revelation.

So the apostles' ways of stating and discussing things in their letters show clearly that they writing on the basis not of revelation and a divine command but rather of their natural judgment; all they are offering is brotherly advice, mixed with a courtesy that is far removed from prophetic authority—as when Paul politely explains why 'I have written a little more boldly to you, brothers' (*Romans* 15:15). [In that sentence 'advice' translates the Latin *monitio*, which can also mean 'warning', 'scolding' and the like. The same is true of the verb *moneo*, which will be translated by 'advise' throughout (with one exception); but its stronger meanings shouldn't be forgotten, as the apostles' letters contain a great deal of nagging.]

We can also infer this from the fact that we don't read anywhere that the apostles were commanded to write, but only to preach wherever they went and to confirm their preaching

with signs. Their presence and signs were absolutely needed for converting the nations to the ·Christian· religion and strengthening them in it, as Paul himself explicitly indicates—‘because I long to see you, so that I may impart to you the gift of the Spirit, that you may strengthened’ (*Romans* 1:11).

·DID THEY PREACH AS PROPHETS? THE CASE FOR ‘NO’·.

·I have been saying that the apostles in their letters didn’t *write* as prophets; but· it might be objected that ·my argument takes me further than I want to go, because· we could in the same way argue that the apostles didn’t *preach* as prophets either. For when they went here or there to preach, they didn’t do this by an express command, as the prophets used to. •We read in the Old Testament that Jonah went to Nineveh to preach and that he was expressly sent there and [154] that it was revealed to him what he had to preach there. •We’re told in some detail about Moses’ setting out for Egypt as God’s representative, and about what he had been instructed to say to the people of Israel and to Pharaoh, and what signs he was told to perform in their presence so as to win their trust. •Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were expressly ordered to preach to the Israelites. •And the prophets preached nothing that Scripture doesn’t testify that they received from God.

But we seldom if ever read anything like this in the New Testament about the apostles’ preaching journeys. On the contrary, we find (1) passages that explicitly present the apostles as making their own choices about where to preach, as witness the well-known dispute between Paul and Barnabas, which ended in their going their separate ways (see *Acts* 15:37–40); and (2) that often they tried to go somewhere and were thwarted, as Paul witnesses:

—‘I have wanted to come to you these many times and I was prevented’ (*Romans* 1:13);

—‘. . . because of this I have been hindered many times from coming to you’ (15:22);

—‘as for my brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers, and it was not his will at all; but when he has the opportunity. . . etc. (1 *Corinthians* 16:12

There is also (3) the fact that when the apostles went somewhere to preach, Scripture does not say (as it does with the prophets of old) that they went at God’s command. For those reasons it may seem that I ought to have concluded that the apostles preached as teachers, but not also as prophets.

·THE CASE FOR ‘YES’·

But we’ll easily get the right answer to this question if we attend to the difference between the *calling* of the apostles and the *calling* of the Old Testament prophets. The latter weren’t called upon to preach and prophesy to all the nations, but only to certain particular ones, so they had to have an explicit and special command for each one. But the apostles were called to preach to absolutely everyone and to convert everyone to ·the Christian· religion; so wherever they went, they were following Christ’s command. And there was no need for them to have the things they were to preach revealed to them at the start of each journey; for these were Christ’s disciples, who had been told by him: ‘When they deliver you up, don’t be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. . . etc. (*Matthew* 10:19–20)

[155] I conclude therefore that the apostles had from a special revelation only the things that they preached orally and at the same time confirmed with signs (see my remarks about signs early in chapter 2 [page 17]). Moreover, when they taught without the support of signs they were speaking or writing from knowledge (i.e. natural knowledge). On this see 1 *Corinthians* 14:6.

All the apostles' letters begin with a confirmation of the writer's status as an apostle; doesn't that make a difficulty for me? No. There are two possible explanations for that practice. (1) Along with the power to prophesy, the apostles were given the authority to teach.

**what Spinoza wrote next:** *Et hac ratione concedimus eos tanquam Apostolos suas Epistolas scripsisse, & hac de causa exordium a sui Apostolatus approbatione unumquemque summisse.*

**conservatively translated:** And for this reason we grant that they wrote their letters as apostles, and that this was the reason why each one began with an affirmation of his being an apostle.

**what Spinoza may have meant:** And that's why they began their letters in that way—simply as a way of declaring that they had authority to teach.

(2) Or perhaps, to improve his chances of winning the readers' confidence and holding their attention, each apostle began each letter with a declaration that his preaching had made him known to all the faithful and that he had shown by clear testimony that he taught the true religion and the way to salvation. Everything I see said in these letters concerning the apostles' calling and the divine Holy Spirit that they had is related to their preaching; with the sole exception of the passages where 'Spirit of God' and 'Holy Spirit' are used to refer to a sound mind, blessed and devoted to God (I discuss this in chapter 1 [page 15]). For example, Paul writes that in his opinion a widow is happier if she doesn't marry again, and adds 'I think that the Spirit of God is in me also' (1 Corinthians 7:40), which clearly equates having God's spirit in one with being happy or blessed. There are many other examples of this, but I don't think I need to list them here.

·PREACHING ON THE BASIS OF REASON·

So we have to conclude that the apostles' letters were composed only according to the natural light of reason; and now we must look into the question of how the apostles could teach, solely on the basis of natural knowledge, things that aren't known through natural knowledge. I have three points to make about this. (1) To see that there is no problem about this, look back at what I said in chapter 7 about the interpretation of Scripture. Although most of the Bible's contents surpass our grasp, [156] we can still safely argue with one another about them, provided we do this using only principles that can be found in Scripture itself. Well, in this same way—i.e. using only principles like those—the apostles could infer and derive many things from what they had seen, what they had heard, and finally what had been revealed to them. And they could if they wished teach these things to others. (2) Religion doesn't come within the province of reason—I mean religion as the apostles preached it by relating the simple story of Christ—and yet the natural light of reason is enough to enable everyone to appreciate its main thrust, which consists chiefly of moral lessons—as does the whole of Christ's teaching, i.e. what Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount (*Matthew* 5–7). (3) The apostles didn't need any supernatural light to help them to bring it about that the religion they had previously confirmed by signs was fitted to men's common power of understanding so that everyone could easily accept it from the heart; or to advise [see note on page 96] and teach men about that religion. And that's what the letters were for—to give men lessons and advice about the route to assured religion that each apostle judged to be best. And let me repeat here that the apostles received not only the power to preach the story of Christ as prophets, confirming it with signs, but also the authority to teach and advise in the way each one judged best. Paul

points clearly to each of these gifts:

‘... for which ·gospel· I have been appointed preacher and apostle and teacher of the nations’. (2 *Timothy* 1:11)

And again:

‘... of which I have been appointed preacher and apostle (I speak the truth through Christ, I do not lie), a teacher of the nations with faith and truth. (2:7).

With these words he clearly confirms both his roles—as apostle and as teacher. And he indicates his authority to advise anyone anywhere, as he wishes:

‘I have much freedom in Christ to *command* you to do what is suitable, but for love’s sake I rather *entreat* you to . . . etc. (*Philemon* 8–9

If God had told Paul as a prophet what commands he was to give to Philemon. . . . then surely it wouldn’t have been up to him to change God’s command into an entreaty. So he must be understood to speak of freedom to command as a teacher, not as a prophet.

But it still [157] doesn’t clearly follow that the apostles were free to make their own choices about *how* to teach. Well, we know that in virtue of their office as apostles they were not only prophets, but also teachers, and we *could* argue having the authority to teach carries with it the authority to choose how to teach. But it would be better to demonstrate the whole matter from Scripture alone. Words of Paul’s clearly establish that each apostle chose his individual way:

‘... anxiously trying not to preach in places where the name of Christ had been invoked, lest I build on another man’s foundation’ (*Romans* 15:20)

If they all taught the same way, and all built the Christian religion on the same foundation, Paul could have no reason to call the foundations on which another apostle had

built ‘another man’s foundation’, because they be the same as his. . . . So we must conclude that each apostle built religion on a different foundation, and that they were like other teachers, who have their own individual methods of teaching, so that they would always rather have pupils who are completely uneducated and haven’t begun to learn from anyone else. . . .

Again, if we read these letters carefully we’ll see that in religion itself the apostles do indeed agree, while differing greatly over the foundations. For to strengthen men in religion, and to show them that salvation depends only on God’s grace, Paul taught them that no-one can boast of his works, but only of his faith, and that no-one is justified by works (see *Romans* 3:27-28); and on top of that he taught the whole doctrine of predestination. James, on the other hand, taught in his letter that man is justified by works and not by faith alone (see *James* 2:24) and, having set aside all those arguments of Paul, he expressed the whole doctrine of religion in a very few words.

Finally, there is no doubt but what the fact that the apostles built religion on different foundations gave rise to many disputes and schisms; these have tormented the church incessantly from the time of the apostles to the present day, and will surely continue to torment it forever, until at last someday [158] religion is separated from philosophic speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple tenets Christ taught his followers.

This was impossible for the apostles, because the Gospel was unknown to men; so lest the novelty of its doctrine greatly offend their ears, they accommodated it as much as they could to the mentality of their contemporaries (see 1 *Corinthians* 9:19-20) and constructed it on the foundations which were best known and accepted at that time. [24] That is why none of the apostles philosophized more than Paul,

who was called to preach to the nations. But the others, preaching to the Jews who had no respect for philosophy, also adapted what they said to the mentality of their audience

(on this see *Galatians* 2:11-14) and taught a religion devoid of philosophic speculations. How happy our age would surely be now, if we saw religion again free of all superstition!

**Chapter 12:**  
**The true original text of the divine law.**  
**Why Scripture can be called 'sacred' and 'the word of God'.**  
**Scripture as containing the word of God has reached us uncorrupted**

·GOD'S ORIGINAL TEXT·

[..158] Those who think that the Bible just as it stands is a letter written to men on earth by God in heaven are sure to cry out that I have sinned against the Holy Ghost by maintaining that

- the word of God is faulty, mutilated, corrupted, and inconsistent, that
- we have only fragments of it, and that
- the original text of the contract God made with the Jews has been lost.

But I'm sure that their protests would stop immediately if they would only weigh the matter carefully. Reason itself *and* the sayings of the prophets and apostles openly proclaim that God's eternal word, his contract, and true religion, are inscribed by divine agency in the hearts of men, i.e. in the human mind, and that *this* is God's true original text that he has stamped with his seal, i.e. with the idea of himself as an image of his divinity.

To the first Jews. religion [159] was imparted in writing, as a law, because at that time they were regarded as infants. But later Moses (*Deuteronomy* 30:6) and *Jeremiah* 31:33) proclaimed that a time was coming when God would inscribe his law in their hearts. So back then it was appropriate for the Jews, especially the Sadducees, to stand up for a law written in tablets; but it's entirely *inappropriate* for those who have the law written in their minds.

So if you'll just *attend* to these things you'll find nothing

in what I have said that contradicts or could •weaken the word of God, or true religion and faith. On the contrary, you'll find that I •strengthen it. . . . If that were not so I would have decided to say nothing at all about these matters, and to escape all the difficulties by cheerfully conceding that the most profound mysteries are hidden in Scripture! It's a good thing I wasn't led to make that concession so as to keep out of trouble, because the belief in deep mysteries in Scripture has led to intolerable superstition and to other ruinously bad consequences that I spoke about at the start of Chapter 7 [page 60]. And in any case religion doesn't *need* any superstitious embellishments ·such as the pretence that it is full of mystery·. On the contrary, tricking it out with such inventions *diminishes* its splendour.

But they'll say: 'Although the divine law is inscribed in our hearts, Scripture *is* nonetheless the word of God; so you are as wrong to say that •Scripture is mutilated and distorted as it would be to say that •the word of God is mutilated etc.' Against that, I am afraid that in their excessive zeal to be holy they may turn religion into superstition, and start to worship substitutes and images—ink and paper—in place of the word of God. I do know this: I haven't said anything unworthy of Scripture or of the word of God, for I haven't maintained anything that I haven't demonstrated to be true by the most compelling arguments. So I can confidently assert that nothing I have said comes anywhere near to being impious.

No doubt some profane men to whom religion is a burden will be manage to treat my work as a license to sin. They'll infer from what I have written that Scripture is faulty and falsified everywhere, and therefore has no authority, having no *reason* for this but merely wanting to surrender to their sensual pleasure. There is no defence against such people. As the saying goes: you can't say anything so correctly that no-one can distort it through misinterpretation! Anyone who wants to wallow in sensual pleasures can easily find a reason for doing so wherever he likes. The •men long ago who had the original texts and the ark of the covenant were no better or more obedient; nor indeed were •the prophets and [160] apostles themselves. Everyone, Jew and gentile alike, has always been the same; virtue has *always* been extremely rare.

•WHAT IT MEANS TO CALL SCRIPTURE 'SACRED'.

Still, to remove any lingering doubts I should show here •what it can mean to label as 'sacred' and 'divine' a silent thing such as Scripture; •what 'the word of God' really is, and that it isn't contained in a certain number of books; and lastly •that Scripture in its role as teaching the things needed for obedience and salvation *couldn't* have been corrupted. That will make it easy for everyone to see that I haven't said anything against the word of God and haven't given any opening for impiety.

We label as 'sacred' and 'divine' anything that is meant for the practice of piety and religion, and it will stop being sacred when men stop using it in a religious manner: at the moment when •they stop being •pious, •it stops being •sacred. And if they •go even further, and• dedicate the same thing to impious purposes, then something that was initially sacred become unclean and profane. [Spinoza gives an example of a 'house of God' where God was worshipped which became a 'house of iniquity' because idols were worshipped in it.]

Here's another example, which illustrates the point very clearly. Words have a definite meaning only from their use. If some words are set out in such a way that, according to their usage (•i.e. to their customary meaning•), they move the readers to devotion, then those words will be sacred; and a *book* can be sacred in that way. But if, later on, usage changes so that the words have no meaning, or if the book comes to be completely neglected (whether from malice or because men no longer need it), then the words and the book will •no longer count as 'sacred' because they are• no longer put to any holy use. Finally, if. . . meanings were to change in such a way that the formerly sacred text came to have an opposite meaning, then the words and the book would become unclean and profane.

From this it follows that nothing is *intrinsically* sacred or profane; a thing's status as sacred or profane is purely a matter of how the thing relates to the mind. Many passages in Scripture clearly confirm this. To take just one example: Jeremiah says (7:14) that the Jews of his time *wrongly* called the temple of Solomon 'the temple of God'. The name 'God' (he explains later in that chapter), [161] could be associated with that temple only so long as it was used by men who worship God and preserve justice. But if it was often used by murderers, thieves, idolaters, and other wicked men, then it was rather a den of criminals.

I have often been puzzled that Scripture never tells us what happened to the ark of the covenant. But we know this much: it perished, or was burned with the temple, even though the Hebrews had nothing more sacred, nothing they revered more highly. Well, it's the same with Scripture: it is sacred and its utterances are divine just as long as it moves men to devotion toward God. But if they come to neglect it, as the Jews once did, it is nothing but paper and ink, deprived of its religious status and liable to be corrupted. So



if it then is corrupted, or if it perishes, it's not true that the word of God is corrupted or perishes, just as it wouldn't have been true to say in the time of Jeremiah that the temple, which until then had been the temple of God, perished in flames.

Jeremiah says the same thing about the law itself. For he reproaches the impious people of his time as follows:

How can you say 'We are wise, and we possess the instruction of the Lord'? Assuredly, for naught has the pen laboured, for naught the scribes! [*Jeremiah* 8:8]

That is: you are wrong to say that you have the law of God in your hands, after you have made it null and void! Similarly, when Moses broke the first tablets [*Exodus* 32:19], what he angrily hurled from his hands and broke was not •the word of God—who could even *think* this of Moses and of the word of God?—but only •stones. These stone tablets had been sacred, because they were inscribed with the contract by which the Jews had obliged themselves to obey God; but after the Jews had rendered that contract null and void by worshipping a •golden• calf, the tablets no longer had any holiness. . . .

So it's not surprising that •Moses' first originals don't exist any longer, and that •the Books that we do still possess have undergone the things I described above, given that •the true original of the divine contract, the holiest thing of all, could totally perish. My critics should stop accusing me of impiety. I have said nothing that opposes or debases the word of God. If my critics are legitimately angry about anything, it should be about those ancient Jews whose wicked conduct took away the religious status of God's ark, temple, law, and every other [162] sacred thing, making them liable to corruption. And if the situation is as Paul said it was—

Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink but with the

Spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone but in the fleshy tables of the heart (2 Corinthians 3:3)

—they should stop worshipping the ink-written word and being so anxious about it.—I think that explains well enough in what way Scripture is to be considered sacred and divine.

•WHAT THE 'WORD OF GOD' IS•

Now we must see how to understand properly the phrase 'the word of God'. The relevant Hebrew noun means 'word', 'utterance', 'edict', and 'thing'. And I explained in chapter 1 what it means when a thing is said in Hebrew to be 'of God'. Putting all this together we can easily understand what Scripture means by 'God's word' (utterance, edict, thing). So I needn't repeat it all here, or repeat what I showed regarding miracles in the third segment of chapter 6. All I need to do here is to call attention to the main points, so that what I want to say about these matters here may be better understood. **(1)** When the phrase 'the word of God' is applied to something other than God, it refers to the divine law that I discussed in chapter 4, i.e. universal religion, the religion common to the whole human race. On this see *Isaiah* 1:10, where Isaiah teaches the true way of living, which consists not in ceremonies but in loving kindness and a true heart, and which he interchangeably labels as 'God's law' and 'God's word'. **(2)** The phrase 'the word of God' can also be meant metaphorically, as referring to •the order of nature itself (and of •so-called• 'fate', because that really depends on and follows from the eternal decree of the divine nature), and especially to •what the prophets had foreseen of this •natural• order (in this context the label 'word of God' label reflects the fact that the prophets didn't perceive future things through natural causes, but as decisions or decrees of God). **(3)** The phrase 'the word of God' is also used as a label for every proclamation of a prophet, if he had perceived it by his own special power or prophetic gift, and

not by the natural light that is open to everyone (·and the label 'word of God' kicks in· especially ·strongly· because the prophets usually regarded God as a lawgiver, as I showed in chapter 4).

For these three reasons, then, Scripture is called 'the word of God': **(1)** because it teaches the true religion whose eternal author is God, **(2)** because it reports predictions of future things as God's decrees, and **(3)** because those who were really its authors mostly taught not by the common natural light, but by a certain special light [163] and introduced God as saying these things. Scripture contains many other things that are merely historical, and are perceived by the natural light, but the whole thing gets called 'the word of God' on the strength of the most valuable part of its content.

So we can easily see why God should be understood to be the author of the Bible. It's because of the true religion that is taught in it, not because he had ·written· a certain number of Books for men to read!

And this also lets us know why the Bible is divided into the Old and New Testaments. It is because before the coming of Christ

- the prophets usually preached religion as the law of their own country, on the strength of the contract ·between God and the Jews· entered into in the time of Moses;

but after the coming of Christ

- the apostles preached that same religion to everyone as a universal law, solely on the strength of Christ's suffering.

[The next sentence expands what Spinoza wrote, in ways that ·dots· can't easily indicate.] What makes the Books of the New Testament *new* is not •their offering new doctrine, or •their constituting a record of a new contract, or •the universal religion's being new (because it *wasn't*, except in the trivial sense of being

new to those who hadn't known it; it wasn't new in relation to the world—'He was in the world and yet the world did not know him' (*John* 1:10)).

So even if we had fewer Old and New Testament Books than we do, that wouldn't deprive us of the word of God (i.e. of true religion); just as we don't think we are *now* deprived of it by our not having the Book of the Law, which was guarded scrupulously in the temple as the original text of the contract, and the Book of the Wars, the Book of the Chronologies, and many other very important writings out of which the Old Testament was constructed by selection and re-arrangement.

There are five further arguments for this conclusion.

**(1)** The Books of each Testament were written not

- all at the same time, •for all ages, •by an explicit command ·from God·,

but rather

- at different times, •for readers in particular situations, •by historical accident.

This is clearly shown by the callings of the ·Old Testament· prophets (who were called to warn the impious people among their contemporaries), and also by the letters of the ·New Testament· apostles ·each of which is addressed to a particular audience which the writer names·.

**(2)** It is one thing to understand Scripture and the mind of the prophets, and a different thing to understand the mind of God, i.e. the truth of the matter itself. This follows from what I showed in chapter 2 about the prophets and in chapter 6, where I reapplied all that to histories and miracles, reaching conclusions about •them that one couldn't possibly apply to •the biblical passages that treat true religion and true virtue. [164]

**(3)** The Books of the Old Testament were chosen from many ·candidates·, and were eventually assembled and

approved by a council of Pharisees, as I showed in chapter 10. And the Books of the New Testament were also added to the canon—the approved list—by the decisions of certain councils, which also rejected as inauthentic a number of other books that many people considered sacred. The members of these councils—both of the Pharisees and of the Christians—were not prophets but only teachers and experts; but *of course* in making their choices they had the word of God as a standard. So they must have been acquainted with the word of God from the outset.

(4) As I said in chapter 11, the apostles wrote not as prophets but as teachers, and chose the teaching style that they judged would be easier for the pupils they wanted to teach at that time; from which it follows (as I also concluded at the end of that chapter) that their letters contain many things that we now don't *need* for religious purposes.

(5) [Curley remarks that this next paragraph contains Spinoza's most explicit discussion of the Gospels from the standpoint of biblical criticism. Why is it buried in the middle of a chapter whose title doesn't indicate that it contains any such thing? Curley suggests: because Spinoza wanted not to offend unnecessarily.] There are four evangelists in the New Testament. Who could believe that God aimed to tell Christ's story to men by having it written four times over? It's true that some things are contained in one gospel that aren't in another, so that one often helps us to understand another; but we shouldn't infer from *that* that everything reported in *any of* these four works was necessary for men to know, and that God chose the evangelists to write their works so that the story of Christ would be better understood. For each of them, in his choice of how and where and what he preached, was simply trying *to tell the story of Christ clearly—not to explain the others!* If we now sometimes understand them better by comparing them with one another, that happens by chance and only

in a few passages. Even if we knew nothing about those passages, the story would still be equally clear, and men no less blessed.

·SCRIPTURE QUA WORD OF GOD COULD NOT HAVE BEEN CORRUPTED·

Through these arguments I have shown that Scripture is properly called 'the word of God' only in relation to religion, i.e. in relation to the universal divine law. I have one more thing to show, namely that Scripture in its role as the word of God (properly so-called) is not faulty, distorted, or mutilated. When I call something 'faulty', 'distorted' and 'mutilated' I mean that it is written and constructed so badly that its meaning can't be *worked out from linguistic usage or gathered solely from Scripture.* [165] I'm not saying that the parts of Scripture that express the divine law have *been free from merely linguistic mishaps*, always using the same accents, the same letters and the same words. The question of whether that is true. . . can be left to those who superstitiously worship the ink on paper. My claim is just this: the only thing in any *biblical* statement that we have any reason to call 'divine' has reached us without corruption, even if the words that first expressed it have been changed. Such verbal changes don't take anything at all away from the Scripture's divinity. Scripture would be equally divine if it were written in other words or another language.

So no-one can doubt that we have received the divine law pure and uncorrupted. Scripture itself has made clear to us what its *top teaching* [Latin *summa*] is, and there's nothing difficult or ambiguous about it. It is

**•TT: To love God above all else, and to love your neighbour as yourself.**

This can't be an interpolation *in a document that shouldn't have contained it*, or something written by a hasty or erring pen. For if Scripture didn't teach *this* it would have to teach

everything else differently, because TT is the foundation of the whole religion; remove it, and the structure immediately collapses; which means that a Scripture without TT wouldn't be the book we are speaking about. So this is a secure result: Scripture has always taught TT, and if anything had happened to corrupt its meaning this would have been immediately noticed by everyone. If someone did that maliciously, his wicked conduct would be evident. [The doctrine in question is here called 'TT' for convenience. Spinoza has no name for it.]

Since the foundational teaching TT is uncorrupted, the same must be true for the other teachings that uncontroversially follow from it, and are also foundational, such as that

- God exists;
- God provides for all;
- God is omnipotent;
- By God's decree things go well with those who observe their religious duties and badly with the unprincipled; and
- Our salvation depends only on God's grace.

Scripture clearly teaches all these things everywhere, and must always have taught them, because otherwise all its other teachings would be hollow and baseless. The remaining moral commands—

- Defend justice,
- Aid the poor,
- Kill no-one,
- Covet nothing belonging to someone else,

and so on—must be regarded as equally uncorrupted, because they follow quite evidently from the universal foundation TT. None of these things could be corrupted by malicious interference with texts, or destroyed by age; for if any of these teachings were to be destroyed, its universal

foundation TT would immediately have taught it again! [166] This especially holds for the teaching of loving kindness, which is commended all through both Testaments in the strongest terms. As for the possibility of someone's having *deliberately* corrupted this teaching: There's no limit to the badness of the crimes that have been committed, and yet no-one ever tries to •destroy the laws to excuse his own crimes, or to •parade something impious as an eternal and salutary teaching. That's because man's nature is so constituted that anyone—prince or pauper—who does something shameful is eager to decorate his action with details that will get people to think he hasn't done anything contrary to justice or propriety. So I conclude that the whole universal divine law that Scripture teaches—the *whole* of it, without exception—has come to us uncorrupted.

There are other things that we also can't doubt were handed down to us in good faith, namely the gist of the historical narratives in Scripture, because they were very well known to everyone. The ordinary people among the Jews were long ago accustomed to sing the past history of their nation in psalms. Also, the gist of the deeds of Christ and his suffering were immediately spread throughout the whole Roman Empire. It's not remotely credible that later generations altered important parts of these narratives before handing them on to their posterity—not unless this deception was known and accepted by almost everyone, and that is incredible too.

So if anything has been interpolated in Scripture, or is faulty in it, that must concern matters other than TT and the doctrines that follow from it. For example, •some detail in of a narrative or a prophecy, •inserted or modified• so as to move the people to greater devotion; •some miracle, •interpolated• so as to torment the philosophers, or—after schismatics had introduced theological theories into religion—•some

bit of theory, ·inserted· by someone who was willing to misuse divine authority to prop up one of his own inventions. But it doesn't matter much for our salvation whether such

distortions have occurred. I shall show this in detail in the next chapter, though I think it is already established by things I have already said, especially in chapter 2.

**Chapter 13:**  
**Scripture teaches only the simplest matters.**  
**It aims only at obedience, and teaches nothing about God's nature**  
**except what men can imitate by how they live**

I showed in chapter 2 that the prophets had only a special power to •imagine things and not a special power to •understand them, that God revealed to them only the simplest things and not any secrets of philosophy, adjusting his revelations to their preconceived opinions. And I showed in chapter 5 that Scripture hands things down and teaches them as each person can most easily take them in: rather than

deducing things from axioms and definitions, and connecting them with one another in that way,  
 what it does is

to speak simply, and (aiming to induce trust) to back up what it says by experience, i.e. by miracles and historical narratives, relating these matters in a style and vocabulary that are most apt to move people's hearts.

On this see chapter 6, regarding the things demonstrated under heading 3 [pages 56–57]. Finally, in chapter 7 I showed that the difficulty of understanding Scripture lies only in its language, and not in the loftiness of its theme. To these

points we can add one more: the prophets preached not to the learned few but to *all Jews*, and they usually taught the doctrine of the Gospel in the churches—the places where everyone met.

From all this it follows that what Scripture has to teach doesn't involve philosophical topics or high-level theorizing; it offers only the simplest material that can be taken in by anyone, however slow. And yet some people (I spoke about them earlier) •see Scripture as containing mysteries so profound that no human language can explain them, and •have introduced into religion so many issues in theoretical philosophy that they make the Church look like a university, and make religion look like a learned society—or a debate within one. What sort of minds can these people have? But really I suppose it's not surprising that men who boast of having a supernatural light don't defer to the knowledge possessed by philosophers, who have nothing but the natural light! What *would* be surprising is their having any *new* items of theory to offer. ·I stress 'new' because they *do* present plenty of *old* stuff·, things that had been commonplaces among the [168]

pagan philosophers (although the theologians I am criticising here say that the pagan philosophers were blind!). Look at the writings of these theologians to see what mysteries they have found hidden in Scripture, and you'll find *nothing* but the inventions of Aristotle or Plato or their like—things that could be dreamed up by a layman as easily as they could be found by a theologian in Scripture.

I don't of course maintain that absolutely nothing in the way of ·theological· theory is linked to the teaching of Scripture: I cited in chapter 12 some things of this kind as fundamentals of Scripture. All I'm saying is that there aren't many such things, and what ones there are are very simple. I'm now going to show which ones these are, and how they are determined. [Having 'cited some', Spinoza now aims to 'show which ones these are'. This looks odd at first, but isn't really. He gave some *samples* in chapter 12—'God exists' and 'God is omnipotent' and so on (page 106)—and now he's going to characterize *in general terms* the class of theoretical items that have an important role in Scripture.] This will be easy to do now that it's established that the purpose of Scripture is not to teach any matters of high-level intellectual theory ·but rather to present what I have called its *summa* or 'top teaching', namely the injunction to love God above all else and to love one's neighbour as oneself. Given that this is its purpose, we can easily judge that all Scripture requires from men is *obedience*, and that what it condemns is not ignorance but *stubborn resistance*.

Now, obedience to God consists only in •love towards one's neighbour. *Only* that? Yes—Paul says in *Romans* 13:8 that if as a matter of obedience to God you love your neighbour, then you have fulfilled the law. It follows from this that the only *knowledge* that Scripture endorses [Latin *commendari*] is whatever men need if they are to obey God according to •this prescription, and without which men would fall short in the discipline of obedience. It also

follows that Scripture doesn't touch on other theoretical matters—whether in theology or natural science—that don't directly *tend* toward this end; so all such items are to be separated from revealed religion.

I repeat: everyone can easily see these things. Still, because the settlement of the whole of religion depends on this, I want to go through it all in greater detail and to explain it more clearly. For this purpose I need to show first that

(1) although the faithful all have obedience, they *don't* all have a detailed knowledge of God as a topic of theological theory.

I must show also that

(2) what God (through the prophets) has required *everyone* to know—what *everyone* is obliged to know—is nothing but the knowledge of his divine justice and loving kindness.

Both of these things are easily demonstrated from Scripture itself.

(1) The first point follows most evidently from *Exodus* 6:3, where God indicates the special grace he has given to Moses by saying to him: 'I appeared [169] to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as "El Shaddai", but I did not make myself known to them by my name "Jehova".' [Spinoza starts his explanation of this passage with a point about the Hebrew language. The phrase translated here as 'God almighty' means something like 'God who is •sufficient'; so it is a general noun phrase, which refers to God through just one of his attributes, namely his giving to each person what is •sufficient for that person. Similarly with other Hebrew nouns and adjectives applying to God; the only exception—the only one that the Hebrews understood as expressing God's intrinsic nature rather than his relation to created things—is the represented here by 'Jehovah'. [In the English translation of the Hebrew Bible it is left

untranslated, and a footnote says that it is traditionally not spoken aloud, being replaced in speech by *Adonai* = ‘the Lord’.] The explanation continues:]

God tells Moses that he (God) wasn’t known to Moses’ forefathers by the name ‘Jehovah’, from which it follows that they didn’t know any attribute of God that reveals his intrinsic nature, but only attributes that express his power as is manifested through visible things—his effects and his promises. In telling Moses this, God is *not* accusing those patriarchs of lacking faith; on the contrary, he is praising their trustfulness and faith, which led them to believe God’s promises to be valid and lasting even when they didn’t have the special knowledge of God that Moses had. . . . So there we have it:

The patriarchs didn’t know the special name of God, and God tells Moses this fact to praise their simplicity of heart and faith, and at the same time to put on record the special grace he was granting to Moses.

This very obviously implies my first conclusion, namely that •men are not obliged by a •divine• command [170] to know God’s attributes, and that •this knowledge is a special gift granted only to certain of the faithful.

There’s no point in piling up biblical evidence for this. *Anyone* can see that knowledge of God wasn’t evenly distributed throughout the faithful. And *anyone* can see that no-one can •be knowledgeable on command, any more than he •can live on command. It’s possible for all people—men, women and children—to be equally obedient, but not for all people to be equally knowledgeable.

Possible objection: ‘Indeed it isn’t necessary to •understand God’s attributes, but it’s necessary to •believe in them, this being a simple belief not backed up by any demonstration.’ Rubbish! Invisible things are the objects only of the mind, •not of the senses•; so the only ‘eyes’ they

can be seen by are, precisely, demonstrations. So someone who doesn’t have demonstrations doesn’t see anything at all in these matters. If they repeat something they have heard about such things, that doesn’t come from their minds or reveal anything about their minds, any more than do the words of a parrot or an automaton, which speaks without any mind or meaning.

Before I go on, I have to explain why it is often said in *Genesis* that the Patriarchs called God by the name ‘Jehovah’, which looks like a flat contradiction of what I have just said •in the indented passage three paragraphs back•. Well, if we attend to the things I showed in chapter 8, we’ll find it easy to reconcile these statements. In that chapter I showed that the writer of the Pentateuch refers to things and places by the names they were well known to have •at the time of writing, not the names they had had •at the earlier times he is writing *about*. When *Genesis* reports the Patriarchs as referring to God as ‘Jehovah’, that’s not because that was *their* name for him, but because this name was accorded the greatest reverence by the Jews. We’re forced to this conclusion by the fact that our passage from *Exodus* says explicitly that God wasn’t known to the Patriarchs by this name, and also because in *Exodus* 3:13 Moses asks what God’s name is. If anyone else had previously known it, then Moses too would have known it. So we are forced to the conclusions that I have argued for: •the faithful Patriarchs did not know this name of God, and •the knowledge of God is something God *gives* us, not something he commands us to have.

It is time now to pass to **(2)** [introduced a page back], namely the thesis that the only knowledge that God through the prophets asks men to have of him is the knowledge of his divine justice and loving kindness, i.e. attributes of God that men can imitate by how they live their lives. [171] Jeremiah

teaches this most explicitly. For in *Jeremiah 22:15*...he speaks of someone as having done justice and judged the right of the poor and the needy, and adds that Jehovah says: *Doing these things is knowing me*. Another equally clear passage is this: 'Only in this should one glory: in his earnest devotion to me. For I Jehovah act with kindness, justice and equity in the world, for in these I delight—says Jehovah' (*Jeremiah 9:23*). I draw the same conclusion from *Exodus 34:6–7*, where Moses wants to see God and to come to know him, and God reveals only those of his attributes that display divine justice and loving kindness. And there is a passage that I'll discuss later [page 113], but want also to highlight here, in which John, because no-one has seen God, explains God only through loving kindness, and concludes that whoever has loving kindness really *has* God and comes to *know* God (·1 *John 4:7–8, 12–16*·).

So we see that Jeremiah, Moses and John sum up the knowledge of God each person is obliged to have by locating it only in this: that God is supremely just and supremely merciful, i.e. that he is the unique model of the true life. Which is just what I have been maintaining. And then there's the fact that Scripture doesn't •explicitly define God, •tell us to accept any attributes of God except the two I have just mentioned, or •explicitly commend any other attributes as it does those. From all this I conclude that

faith and revealed religion have nothing to do with intellectual knowledge of God, knowledge of his nature as it is in itself—a nature that men can't imitate by living in a certain way and can't take as a model in working out how to live.

So men can be completely mistaken about this without being wicked.

So it's not in the least surprising that God adjusted his revelations to fit the prophets' imaginations and preconceived

opinions, and that the faithful have favoured different opinions about God, as I showed in chapter 2 that they do, with many examples. Nor is it surprising that the Sacred Books everywhere speak so improperly about God,

attributing to him hands, feet, eyes, [172] ears, a mind, and movement, as well as emotions such as jealousy, compassion, and so on; depicting him as a judge, and as sitting in the heavens on a royal throne with Christ at his right hand.

The biblical Books speak according to the level of understanding of the general mass of people, whom Scripture is trying to make obedient, not to make learned.

Nevertheless, the general run of theologians have contended that if they could see by the natural light that any of •these things—e.g. God's having hands, feeling compassion, being a judge—are inconsistent with the divine nature, •they would have to be interpreted metaphorically, whereas what escaped their grasp must be accepted literally. [That last clause seems odd and implausible; but it might arise from the theologian's saying that any biblical passage is to be interpreted metaphorically if, *and only if*, the natural light shows that it is inconsistent with God's nature.] But if everything like that in Scripture *had to* be understood metaphorically, that would mean that Scripture was written not for the uneducated multitude of common people, but only for the most learned, and especially for philosophers. Indeed, if it were impious to believe about God the things I have just mentioned, believing them piously and with simplicity of heart, then surely the prophets would have been especially careful *not* to use such expressions, if only out of consideration for the ·intellectual· weakness of the general mass of people. They would have put a premium on clearly and explicitly teaching the indispensable truths about God's attributes. And they haven't in fact done this anywhere.



[This paragraph amplifies what Spinoza wrote, in ways that the ·small dots· convention can't easily indicate. His version of the paragraph is not notably difficult; but it contains an elegant bit of analysis just under its surface, and the present version brings it to the surface.] So when we have the thought that there is something pious (or impious) about a particular person's faith, we shouldn't have it in the form:

•x believes that P, and P is pious (or impious).

It should rather have the form:

•x piously (or impiously) believes that P,

where there's no question of P's containing piety or impiety, and the piety or impiety of x's belief that P consists in *the use*

*he makes of* P. If this belief of his moves him to obedience it is a pious belief; if he gets from it a license to sin or rebel, it is an impious belief. Either way, what counts is the behaviour, not the content of P. It is perfectly possible for someone to believe piously something that is false. For I have shown that the true knowledge of God is not something we are commanded to have; for those who have it, it is a divine *gift*; and the only knowledge of God that God asks men to have is knowledge of his divine justice and loving kindness. And what this knowledge is needed for is not •theory-building endeavours but only •obedience.

## Chapter 14:

### What is faith? Who are the faithful?

#### Settling the foundations of faith, and separating it from philosophy

You don't have to look very hard to be aware that a proper knowledge of faith must involve knowing that

Scripture is adjusted to fit the grasp not only of the prophets but also of the fluctuating and inconstant multitude of the Jews.

Anyone who indiscriminately accepts everything contained in Scripture as universal and unconditional teaching about God, and doesn't understand in detail what comes from adjustment to the grasp of the multitude, will be bound to •confuse the multitude's opinions with divine doctrine, to •peddle human inventions and beliefs as divine teachings, and to •abuse the authority of Scripture.

It's just *obvious* that this—the failure to grasp that not everything in Scripture is meant universally—is the main reason why the followers of the sects teach as doctrines of the faith so many and such contrary opinions, and confirm them by many examples from Scripture—so that it has long been a proverb among the Dutch, *geen ketter sonder letter*, ·meaning 'no heretic without a text'·. The sacred Books were written not by one person only, nor for the people of one age, but by many people of different mentalities, and for men of different ages, over a period of at least two thousand years.

When the followers of the sects make the words of Scripture fit their own opinions, they aren't behaving impiously.

Just as Scripture was once adjusted to fit the grasp of the general mass of people, so also everyone is permitted to adjust it to fit his own opinions, if he sees that this will help him to obey God more wholeheartedly in matters of justice and loving kindness. But I *do* accuse them of impiety when they refuse to allow this same freedom to others, and persecute as God's enemies everyone who does not think as they do, however honest and obediently virtuous they may be. And the impiety of such people goes even further: They love as God's elect those who share their opinions, however poorly those people behave. You can't imagine anything more wicked than that—or more fatal to the State.

We need to get a good grasp of two things concerning faith-related matters:

- How far is each person free [174] to think what he likes?
- Whom should we regard as faithful, even if they think different things?

To answer these questions, we have to get clear about what faith and its fundamentals *are*. That's what I plan to do in this chapter, along with separating faith from philosophy, which is the main purpose of this whole work.

To show these things in an orderly way, let's start by reviewing the chief purpose of the whole of Scripture, because *that* is what will show us the true standard for determining what faith is. As I said in chapter 13, the only purpose of Scripture is to teach obedience. Really, no-one can deny this, for it is *obvious* that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament is anything but an education in obedience, and that each Testament has only one axiom, namely that men should obey in all sincerity. I showed this in chapter 13, to which I now add another point: Moses didn't try to convince the Israelites by reason; all he wanted was to bind them by a contract, oaths and benefits: he tried to get them to obey

by threatening them with punishment if they didn't obey the laws and promising them rewards if they did. This is all about obedience, not knowledge. And **(1)** what the Gospel teaches is nothing but simple faith—i.e. to believe in God and to revere him—which is just to say: to obey him. In support of something as obvious as this, there's no need for me to heap up Scriptural texts commending obedience—there are plenty of them in each Testament.

**(2)** Next, Scripture itself also lays down—clearly and often—what each person must do if he is to obey God: namely, to love his neighbour, this being the whole law. So there's no denying that someone who loves his neighbour as himself, according to God's command, is really obedient. . . .whereas one who hates his neighbour or fails to help him when he is in need is a stiff-necked rebel.

**(3)** Finally, everyone agrees that Scripture was written and published not only for •learned people but for •all people of every age and kind.

From these •three• considerations alone it clearly follows that the only beliefs that Scriptural command obliges us to have are whatever beliefs are absolutely needed for us to carry out this command •to love our neighbour•. So *this command itself* is the unique standard of the whole universal faith. Only through it are we to settle what the articles of that faith are—to settle what the beliefs are that everyone is obliged to have.

[175] Since this is very obvious, and since everything •that is needed for the faith• can be soundly inferred from this foundation alone, by reason alone, you be the judge of •how so many disagreements could have arisen in the Church, and of •whether they could have had causes other than those I mentioned at the start of chapter 7 [page 60]. Just because these disagreements occur, I have to show here how to determine what the required articles of faith

are, working from the basis that I have discovered. If I don't do this, determining the matter by definite rules, people will rightly think I haven't done much to advance the discussion, and the door will left open to everyone to produce his own favourite candidates for 'necessary as a means to obedience'—especially ones concerning the attributes of God.

To show all of this in an orderly way, I'll start by defining *faith*. According to the foundation that I have laid down, the definition must be this:

*faith* is thinking things about God such that •if you don't believe them your obedience to God is destroyed, and—saying essentially the same thing in a different way—•if you are obedient you do believe them.

This definition is so clear, and follows so plainly from the things I have just demonstrated, that it doesn't need explanation. I'll show ·five· things that follow from it.

**(1)** Faith doesn't bring salvation •all by itself but only •through its bearing on obedience; in other words. 'Faith if it hath not works is dead' (*James* 2:17). On this, see the whole of *James* 2.

**(2)** It follows that anyone who is truly obedient must have a true and saving faith. James says this too: '... I will show you my faith *by* my works' (*James* 2:18). And John says that whoever loves—i.e. loves his neighbour—is born of God and knows God; and that he who doesn't love doesn't know God, for God is loving kindness. (1 *John* 4:7–8)

**(3)** It also follows that we can judge people faithful or unfaithful only on the basis of their works. If the works are good, the people are faithful, however much they may disagree with other faithful people in their beliefs; and if the works are bad, they are unfaithful, however much they may agree in words with other faithful people. Because where there is obedience there must also be faith, and 'faith without works is dead'. [Spinoza adds a somewhat

convoluted account of 1 *John* 4:13, which he says 'explicitly' teaches the doctrine that Spinoza is offering here; **[176]** and also of 1 *John* 2:3–4, which ends with:] 'He who saith, "I know him", and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.'

**(4)** The next thing we can infer from all this is that people who persecute honest men who love justice, on the grounds that they don't share their views about the articles of the faith, are really *Antichrists*. If someone loves justice and loving kindness, that settles it: he is faithful; and anyone who persecutes the faithful is an Antichrist.

**(5)** Finally, it follows that faith doesn't require articles that are •true as much as it does articles that are •pious, i.e. ones that move the heart to obedience. It doesn't matter if many of them are utterly false, so long as the person who accepts them doesn't know they are false. If he does, then he must be a rebel. Why? Because he worships as divine something he knows to be foreign to the divine nature, so he can't possibly be eager to love justice and to obey God. But people can be mistaken from simplicity of heart, and Scripture doesn't condemn ignorance ·or honest doctrinal error·, as I have shown, but only wilful disobedience.

[Spinoza now repeats the core of what he has been saying in this chapter, decorating it with further details. Something that he hasn't said before is this:] The common mentality of men **[177]** is extremely variable, so that a single opinion may move different men in different ways: a doctrine that moves *this* person to pray may move *that* one to laughter and contempt. So there *are* no articles of *universal* faith that honest people could disagree about. Articles of faith can be pious in relation to one person and impious in relation to another, because they have to be judged only by the works ·they lead to·. The only doctrines that belong to the universal faith are the ones that obedience to God absolutely

posits, and the lack of which makes obedience absolutely impossible.

[This says something of the form:

$Bel \rightarrow Ob$  and  $not-Bel \rightarrow not-Ob$ ,

meaning that the belief in question is *sufficient and necessary* for obedience. Spinoza may have thought he had said the same thing in his definition ('*faith* is thinking. . . etc.'. a page back), but he didn't, because his definition has the form:

$not-Bel \rightarrow not-Ob$  and  $Ob \rightarrow Bel$ .

These two are equivalent to one another, and they don't entail  $Bel \rightarrow Ob$ .] As for beliefs that lie outside this essential core of faith: each person knows himself better than anyone else does, so it must be left to him to judge which beliefs will best serve *him* in reinforcing his love of justice. This approach, I think, will leave no room for controversies in the Church.

And I don't shrink from listing the articles of the universal faith, or the basic principles of Scripture as a whole. The things I have shown in chapters 12 and 13 all point to this:

•There is a supreme being, who loves justice and loving kindness; and we shan't be saved unless we obey this being and worship him by practising justice and loving kindness toward our neighbour.

This makes it easy for us to determine what doctrines are essential to the faith. They are just precisely these:

**1.** God exists, i.e. there is a supreme being who is supremely just and merciful, i.e. is a model of true life. Anyone who doesn't know or doesn't believe that God exists can't obey him or acknowledge him as a judge.

**2.** God is unique; for it's undeniable that this too is absolutely required for supreme devotion, admiration and love towards God. Devotion, admiration and love arise only from something's being excellent by comparison with everything else.

**3.** God is present everywhere, or everything is open to his view; for •if people believed that some things were hidden

from him, they would have doubts about the fairness of his justice in governing the universe, and •if they merely weren't aware that he sees everything, they wouldn't be aware of the fairness of his justice.

**4.** God has the supreme authority [see note concerning *jus* on page 4] and dominion over all things. He doesn't do anything because he is compelled to by a law, acting only from his absolute good pleasure and special grace; for everyone is absolutely obliged to obey him, but he isn't obliged to obey anyone.

**5.** The worship of God and obedience to him consist only in •justice and in •loving kindness, i.e. loving one's neighbour.

**6.** Everyone who obeys God by living in this way [178] is saved, and everyone else—living under the control of the pleasures—is lost. If men didn't firmly believe this, they would have no reason to prefer to obey God rather than their pleasures.

**7.** God pardons the sins of those who repent. Everyone sins; so if we didn't accept this •doctrine about repentance bringing pardon, everyone would despair of his salvation, and would have no reason to expect God to be merciful. And another point: if someone loves God more intensely because he is sure that God (out of mercy and the grace by which he directs everything) pardons men's sins, then he really knows Christ according to the spirit, and Christ is in him.

It must be obvious to everyone that if men—all men—are to be capable of loving God according to the command of the law explained above, they must know these •seven• things; if even one of them is taken away, obedience is also destroyed.

Other questions about God simply don't matter. I mean such questions as:

•What is God (that model of true life)? Is he fire? spirit? light? thought?

•What makes God a model of true life? His having a just and merciful heart? Its being the case that all things exist and act through him, so that we also understand through him and see through him what is true, right, and good?

The answers to questions like these don't matter as far as faith is concerned. Think what you like about them—it doesn't make any difference. Here are some other questions that don't matter as far as faith is concerned:

- (1) Is God's being everywhere a fact about what he *is* or rather about what he *does*?
- (2) In God's directing everything that happens, is he exercising freedom or rather acting from a necessity of ·his· nature?
- (3) Does God •prescribe laws as a prince or rather •teach them as eternal truths?
- (4) When we obey God, are we •exercising freedom of the will or rather •acting from the necessity of the divine decree?
- (5) Is the reward of the good and punishment of the evil •natural or •supernatural?

As far as faith is concerned, *it doesn't matter* how you answer these questions and others like them, provided that none of your answers makes you less obedient to God or encourages you to think you have a license to sin. Repeating what I have already said: each person is bound to get these tenets of faith into a form that fits *his* level of understanding, and to interpret them *for himself* in whatever way makes it easiest to accept them unhesitatingly and with an undivided mind, so that he'll obey God whole-heartedly. We've seen that the faith was •initially written and revealed in a form that would fit the intellectual level and the opinions of the prophets and [179] of the common people of that time. Well, everyone •now is bound to fit the faith to his own opinions, so that

he accepts it without any mental conflict and without any hesitation. I have shown that faith requires •piety more than it does •truth. . . . The person who displays the best faith is the one whose behaviour best displays justice and loving kindness; he may not be the one who displays the best arguments! How salutary is this doctrine of mine? How greatly is it needed in the State, if people are to live peacefully and harmoniously? How many of the causes of disturbance and wickedness does it prevent? Everyone can answer these questions for himself.

Before leaving this topic, I should revert to a problem that I left dangling in chapter 1 [pages 10–12], regarding God's speaking to the Israelites from Mt. Sinai. The voice that the Israelites heard couldn't give them any philosophical or mathematical certainty about God's existence; but it was enough to make them *wonder* at God. . . .and to *motivate* them to obedience—which is what that manifestation was *for*. God didn't want to •teach the Israelites about his own intrinsic nature (about which he revealed nothing at that time); what he wanted was to •break their stubbornness and win them over to obedience. That's why he addressed them not with arguments but with the sound of trumpets, and with thunder and lightning (see *Exodus* 20:18).

The last thing I have to show in this chapter is that there is no interplay between •faith (or theology) and •philosophy; indeed, the two aren't interrelated in any way. This will be evident to anyone who knows what faith and philosophy aim at and are based on, and how different they are in these respects. What philosophy aims at is *truth* and nothing else; what faith aims at is *obedience and piety* and nothing else. And philosophy is based on common notions [see note on page 40], and must be sought only from nature; faith is based on histories expressed in language, which must be sought only from Scripture and revelation. . . .

Thus, faith grants everyone the greatest freedom to philosophize. [180] There's nothing wicked about your thinking anything you like about anything; faith condemns as heretics and schismatics only those who teach opinions that are likely to encourage obstinacy, hatred, quarrels and anger. . . .

Finally, since the things I have shown here are the main points I want to make in this book, I don't want to go further without first begging you to think it worth your while to re-read chapters 13 and 14 rather attentively, to weigh them

again and again, and to believe me when I say that I didn't write them with the intention of introducing any novelties, but only to correct distortions that I hope will finally be corrected, some day. [Curley remarks that this paragraph seems to indicate that the end of the book is near, and conjectures that when Spinoza was writing chapters 1–15 he regarded them as the complete work (arguing for philosophical freedom on the basis of premises about religion and philosophy) and only later came to want to add chapters 16–20 (arguing for the same conclusion from premises about the State).]

## Chapter 15: Theology and reason: neither should be the handmaid of the other Why we are convinced of Scripture's authority

Those who don't know how to separate philosophy from theology debate the question of which of these is true:

- (1) Scripture should be the handmaid of reason.
- (2) Reason should be the handmaid of Scripture.

That amounts to asking which of these is true:

- (1) The meaning of Scripture should be adjusted to fit reason.
- (2) Reason should be adjusted to fit Scripture.

The sceptics, who deny the certainty of reason, accept option (2), whereas dogmatists accept (1). But I have already said enough to show that both parties are entirely wrong. . . . I have shown that Scripture doesn't teach philosophical matters, but only piety, and that everything contained in it has been adjusted to fit the intellectual level and preconceived opinions of the common people. So those who want to adjust

Scripture so that it squares with philosophy will have to •ascribe to the prophets many things they didn't think of even in their dreams, and •interpret their meaning wrongly. And on the other side, those who make reason and philosophy the handmaid of theology have to •admit as 'divine teachings' the prejudices of the common people of long ago, to •fill their minds with that stuff, and to •blind themselves. Both lots are behaving crazily, one with reason and the other without it.

The first person among the pharisees who frankly maintained that Scripture [181] should be adjusted to fit reason was Maimonides (whose opinion I examined in chapter 7 [page 69–71], refuting it by many arguments). And though this author had great authority among them, nevertheless most of them part from him in this matter, and follow the opinion of a certain Rabbi Jehuda al-Fakhar, who, in his desire to

avoid Maimonides' error, fell into another error that is its opposite.

Al-Fakhar maintained that reason should be the handmaid of Scripture and should be made completely subordinate to it. One might think that if a biblical passage in its literal meaning is •contrary to reason, it should be understood metaphorically, but al-Fakhar didn't hold with that. He thought that the only legitimate reason for understanding any passage metaphorically is that it is •contrary to Scripture itself, i.e. to its clear doctrines. That led him to this general thesis:

Anything that Scripture teaches dogmatically and asserts in explicit terms must be accepted unconditionally as true, simply because of the authority of Scripture. You won't find any other biblical doctrine that clearly and •explicitly conflicts with it. You may find some passages that •implicitly conflict with it, because Scripture's ways of speaking often seem to *presuppose* something contrary to what it has explicitly taught; and when that happens, the latter passages are to be explained metaphorically.

For example, Scripture teaches clearly that God is *one* (see *Deuteronomy* 6:4), and you don't find any other biblical passage saying outright that there is more than one God, though there are indeed passages where God uses 'we' in speaking of himself [see *Genesis* 1:26] and others where the prophets speak of God in the plural number [no clear examples of this], a way of speaking that *presupposes* that there is more than one God but doesn't show that this is what the writer actually meant. So all these passages are to be explained as metaphorical—not because it is contrary to reason that there should be more than one God, but because Scripture itself says outright that God is one. . . .

That's what al-Fakhar thinks. I praise his desire to explain Scripture through Scripture; but I find it astonishing that a man endowed with reason should be eager to destroy reason. It is true [182] that Scripture ought to be explained through Scripture when we are concerned with what the statements mean and what the prophets wanted to convey; but *after* we have unearthed the true meaning •in that way•, *then* we have to use judgment and reason in giving our assent to it. [The rest of this paragraph amplifies Spinoza's text in ways that the small-dots convention can't easily indicate.] If you think that reason, however much it may protest against Scripture, must still be made completely subordinate to it, then tell me this:

When we make this move of questioning a proposition P that reason endorses, because it conflicts with Scripture, how do we arrive at the judgment that P *does* indeed conflict with Scripture?

If we aren't guided by reason in judging that there is such a conflict, we must be blundering along like blind men, acting foolishly and without judgment. If we are guided by reason, i.e. if it is *reason* that tells us that P conflicts with Scripture, then we are allowing reason to control our acceptance of a bit of Scripture; and in that case we are in a frame of mind in which we wouldn't accept any proposition such as 'It is not the case that P' if it were contrary to reason.

And another point: *Can* anyone accept something in his mind in defiance of the protests of reason? What *is* denying something in one's mind except •being aware of• reason's protest against it? I have no words to express my amazement at •people's wanting to make reason—the divine light, •God's• greatest gift—subordinate to dead words on a page, words that could have been distorted by wicked men, and at •their thinking it's all right for them to

denigrate the mind, describing this *true original text* of God's word as corrupt, blind and lost,

while regarding it as a very great crime to

think such things about the written text, *a mere copy of God's word*.

They think it pious to trust nothing to reason and to their own judgment, but impious to doubt the reliability of those who handed down the sacred Books to us. This attitude isn't pious—it's stupid! What are they worried about? What are they afraid of? Can religion and faith not be defended unless men stay ignorant of everyone and say farewell to reason completely? Someone who believes this must fear Scripture rather than trusting in it. The fact is that religion and piety have their domain, and reason has its domain; the two can coexist in perfect harmony, with neither wanting to make the other its handmaid. I'll return to this shortly, but first I want to examine the position of the rabbi ·al-Fakhar·.

As I have said, he maintains that **(1)** we are bound to accept as true (or reject as false) anything that Scripture affirms (or denies); and **(2)** that Scripture never explicitly affirms or denies anything conflicting with something it explicitly says or denies in another passage. Surely anyone can see what bold blundering this is! Objections come crowding in. •The rabbi overlooks the fact that Scripture is made up of different Books, written at different times for different audiences by different authors. •He maintains this doctrine of his on his own authority (because neither reason nor Scripture says anything like it). [183] •He ought to have shown that every biblical passage that implies something contrary to others *can* satisfactorily be explained metaphorically, given the nature of the language and the purpose of the passage. •And he ought also to have shown that Scripture has reached our hands uncorrupted.

·DEMOLISHING AL-FAKHAR'S THESIS·

But let's examine the matter in an orderly way. About his first claim I ask: what if reason protests? Are we, even then, obliged to accept as true (or reject as false) what Scripture affirms (or denies)? He may say that there isn't anything in Scripture contrary to reason; but I reply that Scripture explicitly affirms and teaches that *God is jealous* (e.g. in the ten commandments, in *Exodus* 34:14, *Deuteronomy* 4:24, and several of other places), and that is contrary to reason; yet it is something that (·according to the rabbi·) we should accept as true. And if we find biblical passages implying that God is not jealous, they must be cleared of that implication by being interpreted metaphorically.

Another example: Scripture says explicitly that God *came down* onto Mt. Sinai (see *Exodus* 19:20), and it attributes other movements to him as well, ·e.g. in *Genesis* 3:8·, and it doesn't ever say explicitly that God doesn't move. And so (according to al-Fakhar) everyone must accept *God moves* as true. What about Solomon's saying (1 *Kings* 8:27) that God is not contained in any place? This •implies that God doesn't move (·because moving is going from place to place·), but it doesn't explicitly •say that God doesn't move; so we'll have to interpret it metaphorically, giving it a meaning in which it doesn't seem to deprive God of motion. . . .

In this way a great many things said in accordance with the opinions of the prophets and the common people—things that are declared to be false by reason and philosophy, but not by Scripture—must be accepted as true, according to the opinion of this author, because he doesn't allow reason to be consulted in these matters.

One of his claims that a certain passage is contrary to another only by inference, and not explicitly, is false. For Moses explicitly



(1) asserts that God is a fire (see *Deuteronomy* 4:24), and explicitly

(2) denies that God has any likeness to visible things (see 4:12).

The rabbi might reply that (2) doesn't deny •outright that God is a fire, but only denies it •by inference, so that the 4:12 passage must be interpreted so that it fits the 4:24 one. So he would have us accept that *God is a fire!* This is lunacy; but let us set these examples aside and bring forward another. [184] [The next example concerns the thesis that God sometimes thinks better of ('repents of') things he has done. Spinoza says that 1 *Samuel* 15:29 explicitly says that God never does this, whereas *Jeremiah* 18:8–10 explicitly asserts that he sometimes does.]

And another point: if one passage conflicts with another not directly but only by inference, what does *that* matter if the principle of inference is clear and neither passage allows of metaphorical explanations? There are a great many such passages in the Bible. . . .

So I have demolished both al-Fakhar's position and that of Maimonides, and have firmly established that •reason remains in charge of its own domain of truth and wisdom, while •theology is in charge of its domain of piety and obedience, neither of them being a handmaid to the other. As I have shown: it isn't in reason's power to prove that

•men can be made happy through obedience alone, without understanding things,

whereas •that's the only thing that theology does teach. All it commands is obedience, and it can't and doesn't want to do anything against reason. I showed this in chapter 14: theology tells us what the tenets of faith are, considered as sufficient for obedience; but as for what we are to make of those tenets from the point of view of truth or falsity—it

leaves that to be settled by reason, which is really the light of the mind, without which it sees only dreams and inventions.

What I mean by 'theology' here is just this:

•Revelation, insofar as it indicates the goal that I have said Scripture aims at (namely the ways and means of *obedience*, i.e. the tenets of true piety and faith).

This is what is properly called [185] 'the word of God'—a phrase that doesn't refer to a particular set of Books (see chapter 12 on this). If you consider the teachings of 'theology' taken in *this* sense, and bear in mind what its purpose is, you'll find that it agrees with reason and doesn't conflict with it anywhere, which is why it is common to everyone.

As far as the whole of Scripture in general is concerned, I showed back in chapter 7 that its meaning is to be determined only from *its* history, and not from the universal natural history that is the only foundation for philosophy [or the Latin could mean: 'which is the foundation only for philosophy'].

If after we have tracked down its true meaning in this way, we find that in odd places Scripture is contrary to reason, we shouldn't be thrown off by this. When we find something of this sort in the Bible, or something that men can fail to know without detriment to their loving kindness, we can be sure that it doesn't touch theology or the word of God, so that we can think what we like about it without running any moral risk. I conclude, therefore, with no ifs or buts, that Scripture is not to be adjusted to fit reason, and reason is not to be adjusted to fit Scripture.

You may want to object:

'You can't give a reasoned knock-down proof that the basic principle of theology—that men are saved only by obedience—is true, so *why do you believe it?* If you accept it without reason, like a blind man, then you too are acting foolishly and without judgment. And if you maintain that we *can* after all logically prove this

basic principle, then you'll have to allow that theology is after all a part of philosophy, and needn't be kept separate from it.'

In reply to this, I maintain that this fundamental tenet of theology can't be tracked down by the natural light of reason—or at least that no-one ever has logically demonstrated it—so that we have needed revelation to know it. But so far from 'acting foolishly and without judgment', we *can* use our judgment in arriving at moral certainty [i.e. the attitude that we might express by saying 'For all practical purposes I can take this to be settled'] with regard to it. Note 'moral certainty': we shouldn't expect to be able to be more certain of it than were the prophets to whom it was first revealed, and what *they* had was only moral certainty, as I showed in chapter 2.

So those who try to show the authority of Scripture by mathematical demonstrations are totally mistaken. The Bible's authority depends on the authority of the prophets; so it can't be demonstrated by any arguments stronger than the ones the prophets [186] used long ago to persuade their own people. Furthermore, our confidence about this can't be based on anything other than what *their* confidence was based on. And I have shown what that was: the whole certainty of the prophets was based on (1) a distinct and vivid imagination, (2) a sign, and—this being the main thing—(3) a heart inclined toward the right and the good. That is all they had to go by; so it is all they could offer to their listeners, and to readers such as us, as bases for their authority.

But (1) their ability to imagine things vividly is not something the prophets could share with the rest of us; so *our* whole certainty about revelation can only be founded on the other two considerations—(2) the sign and (3) the teaching about the right and the good. That is what Moses says too—explicitly. He commands the people to obey any prophet who has given a (2) true sign (3) in the name of God; and

says that they should condemn to death •any prophet who (not-2) predicts something falsely, even if he (3) does it in the name of God; and also •any prophet who tries (not-3) to seduce the people away from true religion, even if (2) he has confirmed his authority by signs and wonders (*Deuteronomy* 18:15–22 and 13:1–5). So a true prophet is marked off from a false one by (3) doctrine and (2) miracles taken together. . . .

So that's what obliges us also to believe Scripture—i.e. believe the prophets—namely (3) their teaching, (2) confirmed by signs. We see that the prophets commended loving kindness and justice above all, and weren't 'up to' anything else; which shows us that when they taught that men become blessed by obedience and trust they were (3) honestly speaking from a true heart. And because they reinforced this (2) with signs, we're convinced that in their prophecies they weren't just flailing around. We are further confirmed in this when we notice that every moral doctrine they taught fully agrees with reason. It's no coincidence that the word of God in the prophets agrees completely with the word of God speaking in us through reason. We infer these things from the Bible with as much confidence as the Jews once inferred the same things from the living voice of the prophets. [187] For I showed near the end of chapter 12 that as regards its moral teaching and its main historical narratives the Bible has come down to us uncorrupted.

So although we can't give a mathematical demonstration of this foundation of the whole of theology and Scripture—i.e. the principle that men are saved only by obedience—we can still accept it with sound judgment. When you are confronted by something that

- has been confirmed by so many testimonies of the prophets,
- is a great source of comfort to people whose reasoning powers aren't great,

- brings considerable advantage to the State, and
- can be believed with absolutely no risk or harm,

if you are unwilling to accept it merely because it can't be mathematically demonstrated, that's just *ignorance* on your part. As though in prudence we should never accept as true anything that can be called in question by some procedure of doubt; or as though most of our actions weren't uncertain and full of risk.

Those who think that philosophy and theology contradict one another, so that one or the other must be toppled from its throne and banished, do of course have some reason to be eager to lay firm foundations for theology by trying to demonstrate it mathematically. For only someone who was desperate and mad would be so rash as to push reason aside, denying the certainty of reasons and giving the arts and sciences the back of his hand! But although they have a reason for wanting to reach this conclusion, they are open to criticism: they are trying to call reason to their aid in order to repudiate it, looking for a certain reason why reason should be uncertain! In fact, in their eagerness to demonstrate mathematically the truth and authority of theology, so as to topple the authority of reason and the natural light, all they succeed in doing is to drag theology under the control of reason. It's as though they thought that theology has no brilliance unless it is illuminated by the natural light of reason!

If someone in that camp says 'I completely trust the internal •testimony of the Holy Spirit, and don't look to reason for help except in convincing unbelievers', *don't believe him!* It is easy to show that someone who says this is driven by vanity or by some emotion. From chapter 14 it obviously follows that the Holy Spirit gives •testimony only concerning good works, which Paul for that reason [188] calls 'the fruit of the Holy Spirit' (*Galatians* 5:22). (Really, the Holy Spirit is just the peace of mind that comes from knowing that one has

behaved well.) As for issues of truth and falsity and certainty of items of theory—e.g. in philosophical theology—the only 'Spirit' that gives •testimony about those is *reason*, which claims the domain of truth for itself, as I have shown. If someone claims to be certain of truths on the basis of any 'Spirit' other than reason, his boast is false: he is either •speaking under the influence of prejudices that reflect bad character or •ducking behind sacred things so as to protect himself from philosophical defeat and public ridicule. But it won't do him any good, for where can a man hide himself if he commits treason against the majesty of reason?

... Summing up: I have shown •how philosophy is to be separated from theology, •what each principally consists in, •that neither should be the handmaid of the other because each rules in its own domain without any conflict with the other, and •what absurdities, disadvantages, and harms have followed from men's astonishing way of confusing these two faculties with one another. . . .

Before moving on I want to repeat that I regard Scripture, or revelation, as very useful and indeed necessary. We can't perceive by the natural light of reason that simple obedience is the way to salvation. (I showed this in chapter 4: reason *can't* but revelation *can* teach that all we need for salvation or blessedness is to accept the divine decrees as laws or commands, and that they don't have to be conceived as eternal truths.) It's only revelation that tells us this, teaching that salvation comes by God's special grace, which we can't achieve by reason. It follows from this that Scripture has been a very great source of comfort to mortals. Everyone—yes, *everyone*—can be obedient; whereas only a small minority of human beings acquire a virtuous disposition from the guidance of reason alone. If we didn't have this testimony of Scripture, therefore, we would doubt nearly everyone's salvation.

## Chapter 16: The foundations of the State, the natural and civil right of each person, and the right of the supreme powers

Up to here I have been separating philosophy from theology, and showing how theology leaves everyone free to philosophize as he wishes without interference from theology. Now a fresh question arises: How far does this freedom of thinking—and of saying what one thinks—extend in the best kind of State? To tackle this in an orderly way, I must start with a discussion of everyone's natural rights—rights that don't involve the State or religion. Then I can get into the foundations of the State, from which I shall deal with the question. [Throughout all this, 'right' translates *jus*. See note on page 4.]

By the right and established practice of nature I mean the *rules of the nature of each individual*—rules that we think of as governing the existence and the behaviour of each thing. For example, it's because of their nature that fish swim, and that big fish eat small fish; so fish have a supreme natural right to swim, and big fish have a supreme natural right to eat little ones.

Here is my argument for that conclusion. **(1)** God has the supreme right to do all things. **(2)** The power of nature is just the power of God. Therefore **(3)** nature, considered just in itself, has the supreme right to do everything in its power, which is to say that the right of nature extends as far as its power does. But now **(4)** the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the assemblage of powers of all individuals together. So **(5)** each individual has a supreme right to do everything in its power, i.e. the right of each thing extends as far as its naturally settled power

does. And because the supreme law of nature is that each thing does its best to stay in existence, doing this for its own sake and without regard to anything else, it follows that each individual has the supreme right to do this, i.e. to exist and act as it is naturally made to do.

In this matter of rights and powers, there's no difference  
—between •men and •other individuals in nature,  
—between •men endowed with reason and •others who are ignorant of true reason, or  
—between •fools and madmen and •those who are in their right mind.

Whatever *any* thing [190] does according to the laws of its own nature, it does with supreme right, because it acts as it has been made to act by nature, and can't do otherwise.

Consider two men who both live only under the rule of nature: **(1)** one of them doesn't yet know reason, or hasn't yet acquired a virtuous disposition, and is governed solely by the laws of appetite; while **(2)** the other directs his life according to the laws of reason. *Each man has the supreme right to act as he does*—**(1)** the ignorant and weak-minded man has the supreme right to do whatever his appetites urge, and **(2)** the wise man has the supreme right to do everything that reason dictates. This is what Paul teaches, when he says that there was no sin until there was the law, i.e. no sin so long as men are considered as living only according to the rule of nature [see *Romans* 4:15 and 5:13].

So if we want to know what natural right a given man has, we don't consult reason but merely ask 'What does he

want?’ and ‘Is he able to get it?’ ·You may like the thought that· all people are naturally led to act according to the rules and laws of reason; but that is just wrong. In fact, all people are born ignorant of everything, and even those have been well brought up reach a relatively advanced age before they •come to know the true principle of living and •acquire a virtuous disposition. Until that happens—if indeed it *does* happen—they have to live and take care of themselves as best they can by their own power, i.e. by the prompting of appetite alone. Why? Because nature has given them no alternative, having denied them the power to live according to sound reason. They aren’t obliged to live according to the laws of a sound mind, any more than a cat is bound to live according to the laws of a lion’s nature!

Now, take some person x whom we are to consider as being only under the rule of nature, and some item y that x thinks will be useful to him—whether he is led to this by sound reason or prodded into it by his appetites and emotions. What I have been saying implies that x is permitted, by supreme natural right, to want y and to take it in any way that he finds convenient—by force, deception, entreaties, or whatever. So he is also permitted to regard as an enemy anyone who wants to prevent him from getting y.

From this it follows that the right and established order of nature, under which we are all are born and under which most people live, does not prohibit

disputes,  
hatreds,  
anger,  
deception, or  
anything at all that appetite urges.

In fact it prohibits nothing except

things that no-one wants and things that no-one can get.

This isn’t surprising, because nature isn’t constrained by the laws of human reason, which aim only at •two things—man’s true advantage and preservation. [191] What governs a man’s nature is an •infinity of other factors—ones that make sense in relation to the eternal order of the whole of nature, of which a man is only a small part. What makes individual things exist and act as they do is the necessity of this •order. So when anything in nature strikes us as ridiculous, absurd, or very bad, that’s because we •don’t know the whole picture, •know very little about the order and coherence of the whole of nature, and •want everything to be directed according to the usage of our reason, even though what •our reason says is bad isn’t bad in relation to the order and laws of *nature as a whole* but only in relation to the laws of *our nature*.

Still, it’s unquestionably much more advantageous for men to live according to the laws and secure dictates of our reason, which (I repeat) aim only at men’s true advantage. Moreover, everyone wants to live securely and as free from fear as possible. But this state of affairs can’t occur while •everyone is permitted to do whatever he likes, and •reason has no more authority [*jus*] than hatred and anger do. That’s because everyone who lives in an environment of hostility, hatred, anger and deception lives *anxiously*, and does his best to avoid these things. Also, as I showed in chapter 5, if we consider that without *mutual aid* men must live most wretchedly and without any cultivation of reason, we’ll see very clearly that •to live securely and prosperously men *had* to join forces, and that •this led them to bring it about that each *individual’s* natural right to everything was turned into a right that they all had *collectively*, so that upshots would no longer depend on the •force and •appetite of each one but rather on the •power and •will of everyone together.

But this arrangement wouldn’t have done them any good if they tried to follow only what appetite urges, because the

laws of appetite draw different people in different directions. So they had to devise a system—firmly deciding on it and promising one another to maintain it—in which everything was to be done according to the dictate of reason (which no-one ventures to oppose openly, for fear of seeming mindless). This involved each of them in deciding •to rein in his appetites when they urged him to harm someone else, •to avoid doing anything to anyone that he wouldn't want done to himself, and •to defend the rights of other people as though they were his own.

How *could* they enter into such a contract, making it valid and lasting? The answer to this will have to square with this universal law of human nature:

Everyone pursues anything that he judges to be good, unless he •hopes for something better [192] •from not pursuing it• or •fears a greater harm •from pursuing it•. Each person chooses what he judges to be the greater or two goods, or what seems to be the lesser of two evils. Between any two goods, each person chooses the one he judges to be greater, and between two evils, the one that seems to him lesser.

(Note that I refer explicitly to the option that the person *judges* to be better or that *seems* to him to be worse; I am not speaking of what really *is* better or worse.) The above law is so firmly inscribed in human nature that we should count it among the eternal truths that no-one can be ignorant of.

But from this it follows necessarily •that anyone who promises to give up the right he has to all things is trying to deceive, and that no-one—absolutely *no-one*—will stand by his promises unless he fears a greater evil or hopes for a greater good.

To understand this better, suppose a robber forces me to promise him that I will give him my goods when he demands them. Since . . . I have a natural right to anything that I *can*

get, I have a natural right to make this promise without intending to keep it. Another example: suppose that I have sincerely promised someone that I won't eat or drink anything for twenty days, and that I then come to see that this was foolish and that I'll do myself great harm by keeping my promise. Since the natural law [*jus*] obliges me to choose the lesser of two evils, I can with supreme right [*jus*] break faith with such a contract, and take back my promise. My natural right permits this, I'm saying, whether the stupidity of my promise is something that I •clearly see for sure or merely •believe because it seems right. Either way, I'll fear a great evil and will be led to do my best avoid it.

From all this I infer that a contract can have force only if it is useful to us. If the usefulness goes, so does the contract, which becomes null and void. That's why it is foolish to demand of someone that he keep faith with you *for ever*, unless at the same time you work to bring it about that violating the contract will bring more harm than good to the violator. This is especially relevant to •the contract involved in• the instituting of a State.

If everyone could easily be led by the guidance of reason alone, and *saw* how supremely useful—indeed: necessary—the State is, then everyone would utterly detest deceptions and would perfectly keep his promises out of a desire for this supreme good, the survival of the State. . . . [193] But it is *far* from true that everyone can easily be led by the guidance of reason alone! In fact, everyone is drawn by his own pleasure, and most of the time the mind is so filled with greed, pride, envy, anger, etc. that there's no place •in their motivational set-up• for reason. Thus, when someone makes a promise or enters into a contract with evident signs of sincerity, we can't be certain that he will keep the promise unless something is added to it. For by natural right he can act deceptively, and the only thing that binds him to keeping the contract is

hope of getting something good by keeping it or his fear of suffering harm by breaking it.

Now, I have shown that each person's natural right is determined only by his power—i.e. that he has a *right* to do anything that he *can* do—and from this it follows that when one person *x* transfers some of his power to someone else *y*, he thereby gives to *y* a corresponding amount of his right. And it also follows that someone who has the supreme power over everyone else—compelling them by force and restraining them by their fear of the supreme punishment that *everyone* fears—has the supreme right or supreme authority over everyone else. But he'll keep this right only as long as he keeps this power of doing anything he wants to do. Without that power, his command will be precarious, and any stronger person can please himself whether to obey him.

This puts us into a position to answer the question:

- How can a society be formed without coming into conflict with any natural right?

The answer to that raises a further question:

- How can there be a contract that is really secure against being breached?

Here's the procedure that answers both questions: Each person transfers all his power to the society, which alone will retain the supreme natural right over everything, i.e. the *sovereignty* that each person will be bound to obey, either freely or from fear of the supreme punishment.

The right of such a society is called 'democracy', which is defined as *a general assembly of men that has, as a body, the supreme right to do anything that it has the power to do*. It follows that the supreme power is not constrained by any law; everyone is obliged to obey it in everything. For everyone had to contract to this, either tacitly or explicitly, when they transferred to the sovereign power all their power

of defending themselves, i.e. all their right. 'Transferred all their power?' Well, if they had wanted to keep anything for themselves, they ought at the same time to have made preparations for defending it safely; but they didn't do that, and indeed couldn't do it without dividing and consequently destroying sovereignty; so, yes, they submitted themselves absolutely to the will of the supreme power, handing over to it all their power. Since they did this unconditionally, being compelled to it by necessity [194] and urged to it by reason, we are obliged to carry out all the supreme power's commands, even the stupid ones; because the only alternative is to be enemies of the State, and to act contrary to reason, which urges us to defend the State with all our powers. [The switch from 'they' to 'we' in that sentence is Spinoza's.] Reason orders us to obey even the stupid commands, this being the lesser of two evils.

[Spinoza says next that there's usually little risk of absurd or stupid orders from the supreme power, because giving such orders will weaken the supreme power, thus moving it towards losing its power and thus its right over everyone else; so it is in the rational interest of those who constitute the supreme power to govern sensibly. And in a democratic State, he adds, there is even less reason to fear absurdities, because in a large legislative assembly it is almost impossible for the majority to agree on one absurd action. Then:]

Someone may want to object:

You are making subjects *slaves*—i.e. people who act as they are ordered to act, unlike a free man who acts as he pleases.

But this view of the difference between slavery and freedom is completely wrong. A person who is led by his own pleasure and can't see or do anything advantageous to himself—*he* is the real slave! The only free person is the one whose life is completely guided by reason and nothing else. It's true that

when you act on a command—i.e. when you *obey*—there is a certain lack of freedom; but what makes someone a slave is not *that* but rather the reason for the action. If the action aims at the advantage not of the person who acts but of the person who tells him how to act, then the agent is indeed a slave, and is useless to himself. But in a Republic, a State where the supreme law is the well-being of the whole people and not that of the ruler, [195] someone who obeys the supreme power in everything shouldn't be called a 'slave', useless to himself, but rather a 'subject'. So the freest State is the one whose laws are founded on sound reason. Why? Because that is a State in which each person can be free whenever he wants to,<sup>8</sup> i.e. can wholeheartedly submit himself to the guidance of reason. Similarly, children are obliged to do whatever their parents command, but that doesn't make them slaves, because parents' commands are primarily concerned with the welfare of the children.

So we recognize a great difference between a slave, a son, and a subject. I define these as follows:

**slave:** someone who is bound to obey the commands of a master whose commands are aimed at his own advantage rather than that of the slave.

**son:** someone who does things that are to his own advantage, in obedience to the commands of a parent.

**subject:** someone who does what is for the advantage of the collective body, and thus also for his own advantage, in obedience to the commands of the supreme power.

I think I have shown clearly enough what the basis is for the democratic State. I chose to treat democracy in

preference to any other form of government because it seemed the most natural one, and the one that comes nearest to giving to each person the freedom that nature gives him. That's because in a democracy no-one transfers his natural right to someone else in such a way that that's the end of it, and there will never be any further consultation between them. Rather, the subject transfers his natural right to the majority of the whole society of which he is a part. In this way, the subjects all remain equal, just as they were previously in the state of nature. Another reason for singling out democracy for explicit treatment is its being the form of government that fits in best with my plan to discuss the utility of freedom in the State.

I shan't go into the bases for other forms of political power. [Spinoza explains that his fundamental account of political power, according to which subjects serve their own interest by transferring their powers to a central power or authority, applies equally whatever form the central power has. Then:]

Now that I have shown what the foundations and right of the State are, it will be easy to settle [196] how various concepts work within the civil State. Specifically, to explain what these are: (1) individual civil right, (2) somebody's *wronging* someone, (3) justice and injustice, (4) an ally, (5) an enemy, (6) the crime of treason.

(1) All we can mean by '**individual civil right**' is each person's freedom to preserve himself in his condition, which is fixed by the edicts of the supreme power and is defended only by its authority. For after someone has transferred to some person or group x his right to live as he pleases, a right that used to be settled only by his power, i.e. after he has

<sup>8</sup> A man can be free in *any* kind of civil State. He is free to the extent that he is led by reason; what reason urges (Hobbes notwithstanding) is peace in all circumstances; and peace can't be had unless the common rights of the State are maintained without infringement. Thus, the more a man is led by reason—i.e. the more free he is—the more steadfastly he will maintain the rights of the State and obey the commands of the supreme power of which he is a subject.



transferred his freedom and his power to defend himself, he is obliged to be guided in his life solely by x's judgment and defended solely by x's protection.

(2) Someone is **wronged** when a citizen or subject is compelled to suffer some harm from someone else, contrary to the civil law, i.e. contrary to the edict of the supreme power. There's no place for the concept of *wronging* outside the civil State; and within the State a subject can't be wronged by the supreme power, which has a right to do anything; so *wronging* can occur only among individual persons who are obliged by civil law not to harm one another.

(3) **Justice** ·considered as a virtue· is a firm resolve to assign to each person what belongs to him according to civil law. And **injustice** ·considered as a kind of action· is depriving someone (under some legal pretext) of what belongs to him according to the laws as properly interpreted. Justice and injustice are also called 'equity' and 'inequity' respectively, because those whose job it is to settle disputes are obliged to . . . treat everyone as equals, and to defend the right of each person equally, without coming down unfairly hard on the rich or disregarding the poor.

(4) **Allies** are citizens of two different States which, to avoid the danger of war or to gain some other advantage, agree not to harm one another, and indeed to help one another in cases of need, though each retains its own sovereignty. This contract will be valid for as long as its basis persists, i.e. as long as common dangers make the contract useful to both sides. At a time when there is no reason to hope for some good from it, no-one will *make* a contract and if one already exists no-one is obliged to *keep* it. A contract automatically lapses when this good-for-both-sides basis for it disappears. That's what we clearly find from our own experience. When two States enter into such an agreement not to harm one another, each of them still does its best

to prevent the other from becoming too powerful, and they don't trust one another's word unless they can see clearly the advantages for both in keeping the agreement. Failing that, they fear deception, and not without reason; for nobody will trust the words and promises of someone else who [197] has the supreme power and retains the right to do whatever he likes. Well, nobody but a fool who doesn't know what rights come with supreme power! For someone who has the supreme power, the supreme law must be: 'Do whatever favours· the well-being and advantage of *your* State.'

·Don't see this as a cold-blooded rejection of real morality·. If we bring piety and religion into the story, we find that it is downright *wicked* for someone who has sovereignty to keep his promises at the expense of his own State's welfare. When a sovereign sees that some promise he has made is detrimental to his State, he can't keep it without betraying the promise he has given to his subjects—and his strongest obligation is to keep *that* promise. . . .

(5) An **enemy** is whoever lives outside the State in such a way that he doesn't recognize its sovereignty as its ally or as its subject. What makes someone an enemy of the State is not *hatred* but *right*. A State has the same right against

- anyone who doesn't recognize its authority by any kind of contract

as it has against

- anyone who has done it harm.

Either way, it is entitled to compel him, in any way it can, either to surrender or to become an ally.

(6) The **crime of treason** can be committed only by subjects or citizens, people who have—either tacitly or through an explicit contract—transferred all their right to the State. A subject is said to have committed treason if he has in any way tried to seize the right of the supreme power for himself or to transfer it to someone else.

Why do I say ‘has *tried*’? Because if the traitor *succeeds*, it’s then too late for the State to charge him with treason because by then it has lost its power to do anything about it. That’s why nearly all active prosecutions for treason concern attempts, not successes.

Why do I say so strongly ‘has tried *in any way*’ to seize the right of the supreme power? I want the definition of *treason* to cover both attempted power-grabs that •harm the State and ones that perfectly clearly •work to the advantage of the State. Even in a case of the latter kind, the person has committed treason and is rightly condemned. Consider the situation of the military in time of war. If a soldier leaves his post and attacks the enemy, without his commander’s knowing anything about it, he is rightly condemned to death for violating his oath and the commander’s authority; and this is the case even if his attack was well planned and successful. There’s nothing controversial about *that*. But not everyone sees equally clearly that every single citizen is always bound by this same right, although the reason for this is exactly the same. The State must be preserved and directed by the policy of the supreme power alone, and the citizens have agreed unconditionally that this right belongs only to the supreme power; so if any citizen has tried to act on behalf of the State without the knowledge of the sovereign power, [198] he has violated the sovereign power’s authority, has committed treason, and is rightly condemned—however much advantage to the State would certainly have followed from his intervention if he had carried it through, as I have said.

You may want to challenge the position I have been defending, by asking:

Isn’t it obviously contrary to the revealed divine law to maintain, as you have, that in the state of nature anyone who doesn’t have the use of reason has

the supreme right of nature to live according to the laws of appetite? The divine command binds all of us equally—those who have the use of reason and those who don’t—to love our neighbour as ourselves. Doesn’t it follow that we will be acting wrongly if we live by the laws of appetite alone, and harm other people?

It’s easy to reply to this objection if we focus on what the state of nature is, and especially on its being prior in nature and in time to religion. No-one knows *through nature* that he owes any obedience to God; indeed, no-one can get this knowledge through reason at all, but only from revelation, confirmed by signs. [At this point Spinoza has a footnote referring the reader to one of his end-notes. Its size and importance are a reason for incorporating it into the main text at this point.]

•SPINOZA’S END-NOTE•

[264] When Paul says [Romans 1:20] that men are ‘without excuse’, speaking of men who do not glorify God and aren’t thankful to him, this may seem to mean that they can’t escape punishment for their disobedience. But that is just Paul speaking to humans in terms they understand; his *real* topic isn’t ‘excuses’ in the ordinary sense of that term. We see this in *Romans* 9, where he explicitly teaches that God has mercy on those he wants to have mercy on, and hardens those he wants to harden; and that men are ‘inexcusable’ not because

•they have been forewarned yet went ahead and sinned anyway,

but only because

•they are in God’s power, like clay in the power of the potter

—the potter who from a single lump of clay makes one beautiful object and one humdrum one. So the notion of punishment for disobedience has no place in what Paul

was really saying.

As for natural divine law, whose chief precept (as I said [on page 37]) is to love God: This notion of *law* might seem to be a peg on which to hang the notion of obedience, but that is wrong too. When I call it a 'law', I am using that word in the sense philosophers give it when they label as 'laws' the common rules of nature according to which all things happen, and there's obviously no question of (dis)obedience to *this* kind of 'law'! Loving God isn't a matter of obedience to a command; love for God is a virtue that anyone who rightly knows God necessarily possesses. Obedience has to do with the will of the commander, not with the necessity and truth of the matter.

Furthermore, we can't possibly be subject to a naturally knowable command by God, because we have through nature no knowledge about God's will; it's only by revelation that we can know whether God wills that men should revere him in the way they might revere a human prince. Contrast that with our certain knowledge, not from revelation, that whatever happens happens only by God's power.

[At this point in the end-note, Spinoza switched from *lex* to *jus*—each translated here by 'law'.] I have shown that so long as we don't know the cause of the divine laws, they seem to us to be laws of the sort that are laid down or enacted; but as soon as we learn their cause they stop being 'laws' in that sense and are accepted as eternal truths. Thus, obedience turns into love—the love that comes from true knowledge as necessarily as light comes from the sun.

So we can, indeed, love God according to the guidance of reason; but we can't obey God according to the guidance of reason, because by reason we can't . . . conceive of God as establishing laws like a prince.

·END OF SPINOZA'S END-NOTE·

So before revelation no-one is bound by divine law, because no-one can possibly know of this law. We mustn't run the state of nature together with the state of religion; we should think of it as having no religion or law, and hence no sin or violation of right. That's how I have been taking it, with support from the authority of Paul.

Why is the state of nature to be thought of as predating and not involving divine law? I have given one reason: men in the state of nature *don't know* the divine law. But there is also another, namely the fact that everyone is born into freedom. If you are dubious about *that*, consider: if all men were naturally bound by divine law, or if the divine law were itself a law of nature, there'd have been no need for God to enter into a contract with men and to bind them by an agreement and an oath. So we have to agree, with no ifs or buts, that divine law began when men explicitly promised God to obey him in everything. By doing this they in effect surrendered their natural freedom, and transferred their right to God, which is what I have said happens in the civil State. More about this later.

[In the next few paragraphs, *summa potestas* will be translated as 'sovereign', as though the holder of the highest power = authority in the State were always one man. This is just for ease of exposition; it doesn't reflect any thesis held by Spinoza, who—as we have seen—allows that the *summa potestas* may be a group of people, or indeed the collective of all the members of the State.] Another possible objection to what I have been saying:

'According to you the sovereign retains his natural right, and that by right everything is permitted to him. But actually he is bound by this divine law just as much as subjects are.'

This difficulty arises from a misunderstanding not of the state of nature but of the right of nature. Each person in the state of nature is bound by revealed law in the same way as

he is bound to live according to the dictates of sound reason: [199] because it is more advantageous to him and necessary for his well-being. If he prefers not to do this, he may go his own way—at his own risk. So the only *decision* that binds him to live in a certain way is *his*, not anyone else's. He doesn't have to recognize the authority of any human judge, or of any rightful defender of religion. I contend that the sovereign has retained this right. He can of course consult men, but he isn't bound to recognize anyone as a judge, or to recognize any human being other than himself as a defender of any right. What if there are indubitable signs that a certain person is a prophet whom God has expressly sent? In that case the sovereign is compelled to recognize the authority of a judge, but the judge is God himself, not the prophet.

If the sovereign chooses to disobey God as revealed in his law, he'll be doing this at his own risk, and will be the loser by it; but he won't be in conflict with either civil or natural law. Why? Well, the civil law depends only on *his* decree; and the natural law depends on the laws of nature, which are adapted not to religion, which is concerned only with human good, but to the order nature as a whole, i.e. to the eternal decree of God, which we don't know. . . .

Another question that may arise:

What if the sovereign commands something contrary to religion and to the obedience that we have promised to God in an explicit contract? Which command should we obey—the divine or the human?

I'll discuss this in more detail later, so here I'll be brief: we must obey God above all others, when we have from him a certain and indubitable revelation. You might think that this sometimes puts religion above the State, but it doesn't, because the sovereign has the supreme right to make and enforce his own judgments concerning religion—e.g.

concerning whether there has been a revelation, and if there has, what it means—and everyone [200] is bound to go along with his judgments about this. What binds them? The pledge of obedience that they have given to the sovereign, which God commands them to honour in every case. If you don't see why this is so, remember that the both natural law and divine law give to the sovereign the sole responsibility for preserving and protecting the rights of the State, and obviously he can't do this unless he can lay down the law about religion. The point is that, as we know from experience, men are very apt to go wrong about religion, and to *invent* religious doctrines—different inventions for different casts of mind—which then draw them into quarrels and competition. If it weren't for the fact that each person is obliged to accept what the sovereign authorities say about things that *they* think pertain to religion, then no-one would be bound by any civil statute that *he* thought was contrary to his faith and superstition; so the right of the State would depend on the beliefs and feelings of individual subjects, and its authority would be shattered.

But if those who have the sovereign authority are pagans, not Christians or Jews, there are two possibilities. (1) We shouldn't enter into any contracts with them, and should resolve to endure extreme suffering rather than transfer our right to them. For example, Eleazar wanted while his country was still somewhat independent to give his people an example of constancy to follow, so that they would be prepared to bear anything rather than allow their right and authority to be transferred to the Greeks, and undergo anything so as not to be forced to swear loyalty to the pagans. [This is found in 2 *Maccabees* 6:18–31, this being a book that is recognised as part of the Old Testament by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox versions of Christianity but not by the Jews or Protestants.] (2) But if we already have entered into a contract and transferred our

right to them, that means that we have given up the right to defend ourselves and our religion, so we are bound to obey the supreme civil power and to honour our assurance to it—and if we don't do this voluntarily we should be forced to do it. The only exceptions occur when God has either by a very clear revelation promised his special aid against a ·pagan· tyrant or specifically willed an exception ·in this particular case·. ·Here's an example of the general point and of the special exceptions·. Out of all the Jews in Babylon only

three young men were willing to disobey Nebuchadnezzar because they were sure that God would come to their aid (·*Daniel* 3:12·). Daniel, whom the King himself revered, was a fourth special case (·6:15·). But all the rest unhesitatingly obeyed when the law compelled them to; perhaps reflecting that it was by God's decree that they were subject to the King, and that the King held his sovereignty and preserved it by God's guidance. . . .

## Chapter 17:

**No-one can, or needs to, transfer everything to the supreme power.**

**The Hebrew State before they elected Kings; its superiority.**

**Why the divine State could perish, and could hardly survive without rebellions.**

[201] In Chapter 16 I presented a view of the supreme powers' right to do everything, and the natural right that each person has transferred to them. That account fits pretty well with what actually happens, and ·relevant· human behaviour could change so as to bring it ever closer to my account. But the account will never fit reality in every detail; it must always be in some respects merely theoretical. Why? Because ·the account speaks of (1) the supreme power as having unlimited power to do what it wants to do, and of (2) the individual man's transferring to the supreme power *all* his rights. And (2) no-one will ever be able to transfer his power (and thus his right) to someone else so completely that he stops being a man, and (1) there won't ever be any supreme power that can do everything it would like to do. It might want you

- to hate someone who had been good to you, or
- to love someone who had harmed you, or
- not to be offended by insults, or
- not to want freedom from fear;

but commanding you to do those things would be pointless, because obedience would involve going against the laws of human nature.

Experience teaches this very clearly. Men have *never* surrendered all their right and transferred *all* their power to someone else; indeed, they have retained enough power and right •to keep the supreme powers afraid of them, •and to put the State in greater danger from *them* (despite their having been deprived of ·most of· their right) than from *enemies*.

If men *could* be so thoroughly deprived of their natural right that they were left powerless, unable to do anything except by the will of those who held the supreme right, then the latter—the rulers—*could* reign over their subjects in the most oppressive manner and have nothing to fear from them. [Here and elsewhere, including the five occurrences in chapter 20, 'oppressive' translates *violentum*. The thought is of a government that has to *force* the subjects to obey because what it wants of them goes against their grain, so to speak.] But I don't think anyone would regard that as really possible. So we have to adopt the picture in which each person keeps many things for himself, so that *those* aspects of his behaviour depend on no-one's decision but his own.

To understand of how far the right and power of the State extend, one needs to know this: the State's power is not limited to what [202] it can compel men to do *from fear*; it extends to everything that it can *somehow* bring men to do in compliance with its commands. What makes a man a *subject* is his obedience, whatever the reasons for it. [In the rest of this paragraph, in the interests of clarity, Spinoza's text is amplified in ways that the ·small dots· convention can't signify.] Someone might obey a governmental command because

- (1) he is afraid of punishment, or
- (2) he hopes for a reward, or
- (3) he loves his country, or
- (4) he has been prompted by some other feeling or attitude.

If he acts for any of these reasons, he is still acting in accordance with the command of the supreme power, and his doing so falls under the general heading of ‘things that the subject does in accordance with the government’s commands’. You might think:

‘That’s not right. A line must be drawn between **(1)** and the other three. It’s only in connection with **(1)** fear of punishment that State control is exercised; in the other cases, the person is acting by his own decision and in accordance with his own judgment.’

On the contrary, in **(1)** and indeed in *everything* that a person does he acts by his own decision and in accordance with his own judgment. If someone’s acting by his own judgment entailed that he acts by his own right and not the right of the State, it would follow that the State has *no* right over him. The only way to avoid that conclusion is to allow that the State’s right and power can be at work when the subject acts by his own decision and on his own judgment. And then there is no way to draw the line: we have to conclude that the State’s authority is involved in *everything* that a subject can be brought to do in accordance with the commands of the supreme power—whether he is motivated by love, by fear or (the more usual case) by hope and fear together, by reverence (an emotional mix of fear and wonder), or whatever. In any of these cases, he acts in virtue of the right of the State, not his own right.

This is also very clearly established by the fact that obedience is less a matter of physical action than of internal mental action, so that the person who is *most* under the control of someone else is the one who is *wholeheartedly* set on obeying all the other’s commands. Thus, the ruler with the greatest authority is the one who *reigns in the hearts* of his subjects. Don’t think that it’s the person who is most feared who has the greatest authority—for if that were right,

the greatest authority would be possessed by the subjects of tyrants, because the tyrants are really scared of them!

A further point: although hearts can’t be commanded in the way that tongues can, they can to *some* extent come under the control of the sovereign, who has various ways of bringing it about that most of men believe, love, and hate whatever he wants them to. This doesn’t happen through direct command—the sovereign ‘doesn’t say ‘Love x!’ and ‘Hate y!’—but we can see from experience that when it happens it is often guided into happening by the sovereign and is an exercise of his power, i.e. happens according to his right. There is no conceptual incoherence in the thought of men who, when they

believe,

love,

hate,

despise, or

are gripped by any kind of affect—*any* kind—

do so through the right of the State.

[203] This lets us conceive the right and authority of the State to be pretty broad, but it will never be broad enough to give the government power to do absolutely anything that it wants to do. I have already shown this clearly enough, I think. And I’ve said that it’s not part of my plan to show how, despite this limit on State power, a State could be formed that would be securely preserved for ever. Still, my plan *does* require me to discuss a part of that large topic, namely, what the main things are that supreme powers ought to grant to subjects, in the interests of the greater security and advantage of the State. I’ll lead us to knowledge of that by noting what divine revelation taught Moses about this matter of security of the State, and then weighing the history of the Hebrews and their successes.

Both by thinking about it and from experience we see very clearly that the State's survival depends chiefly on the loyalty of its subjects, on their virtue, and on their reliability in carrying out commands. But it's harder to see what kind of government is needed for them to maintain their loyalty and virtue. The rulers and the ruled are all human, and so are inclined to prefer pleasure to work. And those who have experienced the fast-change mentality of the masses are almost in despair about it, because the masses aren't governed by reason but only by affects. They rush headlong in all directions, and are very easily corrupted by greed or by extravagant living. Each person thinks that he alone knows everything, and wants everything to go according to his way of looking at things; he regards a thing as fair or unfair, right or wrong, to the extent that he thinks that it brings *him* profit or loss; in his vanity he disdains people who are his equal, and won't put up with being directed by them; out of envy for the greater reputations or fortunes of others (for these are never equal), he wants misfortune to come to them and is delighted when it does. There's no need for me to go into details. Everyone knows how it goes: the wicked man can't stand the present state of affairs and is determined change it, his heart being full of the impetuous anger that comes from his hatred for his own poverty.

So here is our task: To get in ahead of all these ·destructive· events, setting up the State in such a way that there's no room left for subversive activity—in such a way, indeed, that everyone, no matter what his cast of mind, prefers the public right to private advantage. People have come up with various solutions (because the problem *needs* to be solved), but we haven't yet reached the point where a State is in more danger from its enemies than from its own citizens, [204] and governments don't fear their enemies more than they fear their subjects. Consider the example of

the Roman State: its enemies couldn't defeat it, but it was often conquered and horribly oppressed by its own citizens, particularly in the civil war between Vespasian and Vitellius. [Spinoza refers to Tacitus for details, and then gives the example of what Alexander the Great is reported to have said to friends, about a ruler's having more to fear from internal treachery than from foreign wars. Then:]

That's why in past times anyone who seized control of a throne tried to make himself secure by persuading the people that he was descended from the immortal gods. It's pretty clear that usurpers thought that as long as their subjects and everyone else believed them to be gods rather than fellow-humans, they would willingly accept their rule and easily surrender themselves to them. [Spinoza gives the examples of the Roman Emperor Augustus and Alexander the Great, quoting from Alexander the remark that 'often a false belief has been just as effective as a true one'. He reports that Alexander's supporter Cleon tried to convince his people, the Macedonians, that Alexander should be treated as though he were a God. 'When the King enters the banquet hall,' Cleon said, 'I will prostrate myself on the ground, and so should everyone else.' Then:]

The Macedonians had too much good sense to behave like that; only men who are complete barbarians allow themselves to be deceived so openly and become slaves who are of no use to themselves. But others have had better success in persuading men •that Kingship is sacred and acts on God's behalf on earth, •that it has been established not by human consent but by God, and •that it is preserved and defended by God's special providence and aid. In this way monarchs have devised other means to secure their rule. I shan't go into all that. To get to where I want to go, I shall (I repeat) note and weigh only the things that divine revelation once taught Moses about this.



I have already said in chapter 5, that the Hebrews, after their escape from Egypt, were no longer bound by the laws of any other nation, and were permitted to institute new laws for themselves as they pleased, and to occupy whatever lands they wanted. Freed from the intolerable oppression of the Egyptians, and not contractually bound to any mortal, they regained their natural right to do anything that it was in their power to do, and each of them could again decide whether he wanted to keep his natural right or to surrender it by transferring it to someone else.

Placed in this natural condition, they decided to transfer their right only to God and not to any mortal. (This was on the advice of Moses, in whom they had the utmost trust.) Without hesitation they all made the same promise—with one shout—to obey absolutely all God’s commands and not to recognize any law except what he laid down as law by prophetic revelation. And this promise—this transfer of right—to God was made in the same way as I have depicted it in an ordinary society where men decide to surrender their natural right. . . . See *Exodus 24:7*.

To make the contract valid and lasting and free from any suspicion of fraud, God delayed making it until after they had experienced his amazing power, which was all that had enabled the Hebrews to survive [206] and would be all that enabled them to survive in the future (see *Exodus 19:4–5*). It was their belief that only the power of God could preserve them that led them to transfer to God all their natural power to preserve themselves (which they may have thought they had on their own account), thus transferring all their right. [The point of that parenthetical bit is that in Spinoza’s view anything that a man naturally has is something that is given to him by God = Nature.]

So God alone ruled over the Hebrews, this contractually based authority was rightly called ‘the Kingdom of God’, and God was rightly called ‘the King of the Hebrews’. So •enemies

of this State were God’s enemies, •citizens who tried to usurp his authority were guilty of treason against God, and •the laws of this State were laws and commands of God.

In this State, therefore, •civil law and •religion (which I have shown consists only in obedience to God) were one and the same thing. The tenets of religion weren’t •doctrines that were taught; they were •laws and commands that were issued; piety was regarded as justice, and impiety as a crime and an injustice. Anyone who failed in his religious duties lost his citizenship and was therefore regarded as an enemy; anyone who died for religion was considered to have died for his country; and no distinction at all was made between civil law and religion. That State could be called a ‘theocracy’, because its citizens were not bound by any law except the law revealed by God.

But this whole account is really about what they Hebrews believed, rather than what was actually going on; for in fact the Hebrews didn’t transfer *any* of their right of government! You’ll see that this is so when I have explained how this State was administered—that being my next task.

The Hebrews didn’t transfer their right to anyone else; •i.e. to any human being; rather, everyone surrendered his right equally, as happens in a democracy, and they cried out in one voice ‘whatever God says we will do’, with no mention of a mediator. So they all remained completely equal in this contract—•equally entitled to consult God and receive and interpret his laws, and •equally in possession of the whole administration of the State. That’s why they all equally went to God the first time to hear his commands. But at this first greeting they were so terrified, so stunned by thunder and lightning when they heard God speaking, that they thought their end was near. Full of fear, then, they went back to Moses and said:

What mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire, as we did, and lived? You go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then *you* tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will willingly do it. [*Deuteronomy* 5:24–7.]

It's clear that by saying this they annulled the first contract and transferred to Moses, unconditionally, their right to consult God and to interpret his edicts. For now they were promising to obey not whatever God said •to them but whatever God said •to Moses (see *Deuteronomy* 5, after the ten commandments, and 18:15–16). This made Moses the sole formulator and interpreter of the divine laws, and thus also the supreme judge, who couldn't be judged in his turn by anyone. He was the sole agent of God among the Hebrews, i.e. had the supreme authority, since he alone had the right to consult God, to give God's replies to the people, and to compel the people to act on them. He *alone*, I say, because if anyone else tried to preach anything in God's name while Moses was alive, he was liable to punishment as a usurper of the supreme right, even if he was a true prophet (see *Numbers* 11:28).<sup>9</sup>

Notice that although the people chose Moses, they had no legal right to choose his successor. As soon as they •transferred to Moses the right to consult God, and •promised unconditionally to regard him as a divine oracle, they lost absolutely all their rights, and had to accept anyone Moses chose as his successor as though God had chosen

him. If he had chosen someone who would undertake the whole administration of the State, as he had done, having the right to consult God alone in his tent, and hence having the authority •to establish and repeal laws, •to decide about war and peace, •to send ambassadors, •establish judges, •choose a successor, and •administer absolutely all the duties of the supreme power, the State would have been simply a *monarchy*. And it would differ from other monarchies in only one respect: *they* are generally governed on the basis of a decree of God that is hidden even from the monarch himself, whereas the State of the Hebrews would, or should, have been governed by a decree of God revealed only to the monarch. [Spinoza goes on to say that this difference implies that the imagined Hebrew monarch would have more, not less, authority over his people than ordinary monarchs do. Then:]

But Moses didn't choose such a successor. [208] Instead he left the State to be administered by his successors in such a way that it couldn't be called democratic or aristocratic or monarchic, but *theocratic*. One person had the right of interpreting the laws and of passing along God's replies, and a different person had the right and authority to administer the State—according to laws already explained and replies already passed along. On this see *Numbers* 27:21. [Spinoza has a footnote here, commenting on the badness of every translation he has seen of *Numbers* 27:19,23.] So that these matters may be better understood, I shall explain the entire administration of the State in an orderly way.

<sup>9</sup> In this passage two men are accused of prophesying in the camp, and Joshua says that they should be arrested. He wouldn't have done this if everyone had been permitted to give the people divine answers without Moses' permission. Moses chooses to acquit them, and he scolds Joshua for urging him to insist on his royal right at a time when he is finding his right of ruling so burdensome that—as we see in *Numbers* 11:14–15—he would rather die than rule alone. This is what he says to Joshua: 'Are you wrought up on my account? Would that *all* the Lord's people were prophets!' He was expressing the wish that the right of consulting God would return to the people, so that *they* would rule. Joshua had a correct view about what was right •or legal•, but not of what was suitable at that time. That is why Moses chastised him. . . .

First, the people were ordered to put up a building which was to be God's palace, so to speak, i.e. the palace of the supreme authority of that State. It was to be built not at the expense of one person but from the resources of the whole people, so that the house where God was to be consulted would be common property.

The Levites were chosen as the officials and administrators of this divine palace. Aaron, Moses' brother, was chosen as •the chief of these and •second in command to King God (if I may so put it). The law laid down that he would be succeeded by his sons. So he, as the person nearest to God, was the supreme interpreter of the divine laws, the one who gave the people the replies of the divine oracle, and finally, the one who petitioned God on behalf of the people. If along with these powers of interpretation he had also had the right to command that the laws be obeyed, that would have made him an absolute monarch. But Aaron was given no such powers. Indeed, not only he but his entire tribe, the Levites, were so far from having the civil command that they were deprived of the rights that the other tribes had—to the point where they weren't even entitled to a portion of land that could give them a living. Moses ordained that the tribe of Levi would be fed by the rest of the people, so that it would always be held in greatest honour by the common people, as the only tribe dedicated to God.

Next, an army was formed from the other tribes and was commanded •to invade the territory of the Canaanites, •to divide it into twelve parts, and to •distribute those among the tribes through a lottery. The right to make this division and distribution was given to twelve chosen leaders, one from each tribe, along with Joshua and the high priest Eleazar. Joshua was chosen as supreme commander of this army. He alone had the right to consult God regarding any new business that might come up, . . . but he was to

do this through the high priest, who alone received God's replies. He also had the right

- to uphold the commands of God communicated to him by the high priest,
- to compel the people to obey those commands,
- to devise and use means of carrying them out,
- to choose from the army anyone he wanted for special duty, and
- to send [209] ambassadors in his own name.

All decisions relating to war were to be made by him alone. The law didn't lay down any procedure for selecting a successor to Joshua in this post. There wouldn't be any successor until there was a national *need* for one, and then the selection would be made directly by God. At other times all matters of war and peace were to be administered by the tribal leaders, as I shall soon show.

Finally, Moses commanded everyone from age twenty to age sixty to take up arms to serve as a soldier and to form hosts [here = 'battle groups'] only from the people, hosts that swore loyalty not to the commander or the high priest but to religion, i.e. to God. So these hosts were called 'God's hosts' and he was called 'the Lord of hosts' . . .

From these commands that Moses gave to his successors we can easily gather that he was choosing the State's administrators, not its rulers. He didn't give anyone the right to consult God alone and whenever he wanted to; so he gave no-one the authority *he* had of establishing and repealing laws, making decisions about war and peace, and choosing administrators of the temple and of the cities. These are all functions of whoever has sovereignty. The high priest had the right to interpret the laws and give God's replies, but only •when asked to do so by the commander or the supreme council—not •whenever he wanted to (like Moses). The supreme commander of the hosts, and also the councils,

could consult God whenever they wanted to, but could receive God's replies only through the high priest. In Moses' mouth, God's words were *commands*; but in the mouth of the high priest they were only *replies*. They eventually came to have the force of commands through being accepted by Joshua and the councils.

And this high priest, who received God's replies directly from God, didn't have an army and weren't legally entitled to govern; while those who owned land had no legal right to make laws. The high priest—this was as true of Aaron as it was of his son Eleazar—was indeed chosen by Moses; but after Moses' death no-one had the right to *choose* the priest—the role of priest passed by law from father to son.

The commander of the host was also chosen by Moses. His right to the role of commander came not from the high priest but from Moses, who gave it to him. [210] When Joshua died, therefore, the priest didn't choose anyone to replace him; nor did the tribal leaders ask God whom they should make commander. Rather, each leader retained over his own tribe's armed forces the right that Joshua had had over all the armed forces of the Hebrews; and the command of the Hebrew army as a whole was exercised by all those leaders collectively.

There seems to have been no need for a supreme commander except when they had to fight a common enemy with their combined forces. The main case of this sort was in the time of Joshua, when no tribe had its own legally defined territory, and everything was held in common. Once the tribes had divided up among themselves the lands they held by right of war and the lands they had been commanded still to acquire, it was no longer the case that everything belonged to everyone, and so there was no longer any need for a common commander. Because of the division of the land, the members of any tribe had to view the members of

the other tribes not as fellow citizens but rather as allies. (In connection with their inter-relations of powers and rights, that is. In relation to God and religion they had, of course, still to be thought of as fellow citizens.) [For Spinoza's definition of 'ally', see item (4) on page 127.]

[Spinoza adds details of this matter, including biblical examples (two tribes forming a temporary alliance to defeat a common enemy, eleven tribes ganging up on a single tribe, the Benjaminites). He likens that Hebrew political entity to the Dutch Republic in which he lived—called the 'Federated States of the Netherlands'. And he offers a conjecture about something that the Bible doesn't clearly settle, namely what the rules of succession were for tribal leaders. Then:]

[.211] For my present purposes I don't need to know for sure whether that conjecture is right. What *does* matter is that I have shown that after Moses' death no-one had all the functions of the supreme commander. These things didn't all depend on the decision of one man or of one council or of the people as a whole. Some administrative matters were dealt with by one tribe, others by the other tribes in an equal partnership. This very clearly implies that after Moses died the State wasn't monarchical or aristocratic or democratic; it was (I repeat) *theocratic*. Its three theocratic features were these: (1) the temple was the royal palace of the State, and (as I have shown) the Hebrews of different tribes were all fellow citizens only because of their relation to the temple. (2) All the citizens had to swear allegiance to God as their supreme judge, the only one they had promised to obey in absolutely everything. (3) When a supreme commander of everyone was needed, God chose him. . . .

[.212] The next task is to see how far this political structure could guide people's minds, discouraging the rulers from becoming tyrants and the ruled from becoming rebels.

·WHY THE HEBREW LEADERS DIDN'T BECOME TYRANTS·

People who have or administer sovereignty always try to cover any crimes they commit under a pretext of legality and to persuade the people that they have acted honestly. It's easy for them to get away with this when they have sole charge of the interpretation of the law. That obviously gives them the greatest freedom to do whatever they want, a freedom that they lose if someone else has the right to interpret the laws or if the true interpretation is so obvious to everyone that no-one can doubt it.

This makes it clear that the leaders of the Hebrews were deprived of great opportunities for crime by the assignment to the Levites—and to them alone—the job of interpreting the laws (see *Deuteronomy* 21:5). These Levites had no administrative duties and no land of their own. Their whole fortune and honour depended on their interpreting the laws truly.

Also, the people as a whole were ordered to gather once every seven years in a certain place where the high priest instructed them in the laws. And each one was ordered to read and reread the book of the law alone, continuously, and with attention (see *Deuteronomy* 31:9–13 and 6:7).

So if a leader wanted the people to cherish him with the greatest honour, he had to take great care to govern entirely according to the prescribed laws, which everyone knew well enough. If he •did this, the people would venerate him as a servant of God's government and as acting on behalf of God. If he •didn't, he couldn't escape his subjects' intense hatred, for usually there is no greater hate than theological hate.

·FIVE MORE THINGS KEEPING HEBREW LEADERS HONEST·

**1.** Another means of restraining the unbridled lust of princes—a very important one—is **(a)** having an army formed from all the citizens (*all*—from age 20 to age 60), and **(b)** not being allowed to hire foreign soldiers by offering pay. This,

I repeat, was a matter of very great importance. **[213]** For it is certain that **(b)** princes can suppress their subjects merely by employing an army of mercenaries, and that **(a)** princes fear nothing more than the freedom of citizen soldiers, who bring freedom and glory to the state by their virtue, work, and sacrifice. [Spinoza cites an episode involving Alexander the Great as an example of a leader who was kept in check by fear of his own citizen army, and remarks that this inhibiting effect must have been much stronger with leaders of the ancient Hebrews, whose soldiers 'fought not for the glory of their leaders but for the glory of God'. Then:]

**2.** The only thing connecting all the leaders of the Hebrews was the bond of religion. If any one of them had defected from their religion and begun to violate the divine right of each individual, the rest could have considered him an enemy and rightly put him down.

**3.** There was always the fear of a new prophet. If someone whose life had been blameless showed by certain accepted signs that he was a prophet, that alone would have given him (as it gave Moses) the supreme right of command

- in the name of God revealed to him alone, and not (like the leaders)

- in the name of a God only consulted through the priest.

Such a man could easily draw an oppressed people to him, and convince them of anything he liked. But if the government had been going well and the people were *not* oppressed, the leader could—in advance of the appearance of any such prophet—adopt a stated policy that such a prophet would first have to submit himself to the leader's judgment about

- whether his life passed official scrutiny,

- whether he had certain and indubitable signs of his mission, and

•whether what he planned to say in the name of God agreed with accepted doctrine and with the civil laws of the country.

If the signs were insufficient or the doctrine was new, the leader could rightly condemn the ‘prophet’ [214] to death. Otherwise—i.e. if he *did* pass muster—he wouldn’t constitute a challenge to the leader, because everyone would know that he preached only because the leader authorized him to.

4. The leader wouldn’t be likely to govern corruptly because he had been put in charge of the state only because of his age and virtue, and not for any reason having to do with hereditary rights or nobility.

5. The leader and the whole army couldn’t be carried away by a desire for war. . . . As I have pointed out, the army was made up entirely of citizens; so the management of war was in the hands of the same men as the management of peace. Thus,

- a soldier in the camp was a citizen in civilian life,
- an officer in the camp was a judge in the civil court, and
- the commander in the camp was a leader in the State.

So no-one could want war for its own sake, but only for the sake of peace and to protect freedom. . . .

·WHAT KEPT THE HEBREW PEOPLE IN LINE·

So much for the reasons that held *the leaders* within their limits. Now we must see how *the people* were checked. It’s really very clear that they were kept in line by the basic way the State was constituted. You don’t have to look very hard to see that this constitution was sure to fill the hearts of the citizens with a love so special that it would be really difficult for them even to *think of* betraying their country or defecting from it. They must all have been in a frame of mind where they’d have suffered death rather than be under foreign rule. Why? Well, after they transferred their

right to God they believed that •their kingdom was God’s kingdom, that •they alone were the children of God, and that •other nations were God’s enemies. This led them into the most fierce hatred of other nations (a hatred they also believed to be pious—see Psalm 139:21–22). Nothing could be more loathsome to them than swearing loyalty to a foreign power and promising obedience to it. They couldn’t imagine anything more disgraceful or detestable than to betray their country, i.e. the very kingdom of the God whom they worshipped.

They even considered it a disgrace for anyone merely to go to live outside their country, because (they held) their country was the only place where they were allowed to worship God as they were obliged to do. That’s because it was the only land they thought to be sacred, all the rest being (in their view) unclean and profane. . . .

[.215] So the Hebrews’ love for their own country wasn’t simple *love*. It was *piety*, which (together with hatred for other nations) was so inflamed and fed by their daily worship that it must have become a part of their nature. [This is a good place to remember that ‘piety’ is mostly a matter of obedience to religious duties; see note on page 4.] How did their worship have these effects? Well,

(1) their daily worship was completely different from that of other nations, making the Hebrews altogether individual and completely separated from the others; and •there is also the stronger fact that

(2) their daily worship was absolutely contrary to that of other nations, so that they had a daily dose of ‘Down with foreigners!’, which was bound to lead to a continual hatred’s being lodged durably in their hearts.

It’s only natural that the most intense and stubborn hatred is the one that comes from great devotion, i.e. piety, and that

is believed to *be* pious. And course their hatred for foreign nations was also nourished in a more ordinary way, namely by the savage hatred that those other nations had for *them*.

Reason very clearly teaches, and experience confirms, that all these things—

- freedom from human rule,
- devotion to their country,
- an absolute right over all others,
- a hatred that was not only permitted but regarded as pious,
- regarding everyone else as hostile,
- the individuality of customs and rites

—could strengthen the Hebrews' hearts to bear everything, with special constancy and virtue, for the sake of their country. [Because of this cluster of feelings and attitudes, Spinoza goes on to say, the Jews couldn't bear to be under foreign rule, which is why Jerusalem was known as 'the rebellious city'. He quotes Tacitus saying that 'the mentality of the people' made Jerusalem an especially difficult target for the Romans. Then:]

·THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR, AND SOME OTHERS·

Hebrew citizens were prevented from thinking of defection or wanting to desert their country not only by •the factors I have been listing but also by •something else whose workings are utterly dependable and which is the mainstay and life of all human actions—I'm talking about self-interest. [Spinoza says that the evaluation of the previously listed factors 'depends only on opinion'. His point seems to be that there is some room for argument about the effectiveness of each of those factors, in contrast to self-interest, whose power to affect action is beyond question.] ·Although self-interest is a sure-fire cause in human behaviour generally·, [216] it had a special role in the Hebrew State. In no other State did the citizens possess their things with a stronger right than did the subjects of this State. Each

of them was the everlasting lord of his share of land, which was of same size as the leader's share. If someone was forced by poverty to sell his farm or field, it had to be restored to him when the jubilee year came around. Because of this procedure, and some others, no-one could be alienated from his firmly established goods. Nowhere could poverty be more bearable than in the Hebrew State, where loving kindness towards one's neighbour, i.e. your fellow citizen, had to be practised with the utmost piety, so that God their King would look with favour on them. So things could go well with the Hebrew citizens in their own country, and *only* there: outside it ·they could expect· only loss and shame.

Something else that helped greatly in •keeping the people in their native country and also in •avoiding civil war and removing the causes of disputes, was this: No-one was subject to his equal, but only to God; and loving kindness and love [*charitas & amor*] towards one's fellow citizen were thought to be the height of piety. This was considerably encouraged by the way they hated other nations, and the way the other nations hated them back.

Especially conducive ·to avoiding domestic disputes· was the strong discipline of obedience with which the Hebrews were brought up: they had to do everything according to definite laws. They weren't allowed to plough whenever they pleased, but only at certain times and in certain years, with the plough being pulled by only one kind of beast at a time. They could sow and reap only in a certain way and at a certain time. *Every* aspect of their life involved continual obedience (see chapter 5 on the use of ceremonies). This régime, to those who had become used to it, must have come to seem like freedom rather than bondage. A result must have been that no-one wanted anything that was forbidden, only what was commanded.

It must have been a great help also that at certain times of each year they were obliged to devote themselves to leisure and joy, not to satisfy their wishes but wishing to obey God. . . . There couldn't be a better device than this for steering people's hearts in a certain direction. The best way to win hearts is through the joy that arises from devotion, i.e. from love and wonder together. [217] And they wouldn't be likely to get bored with these recurring festivals, because they didn't occur often and their content varied. . . .

I think I have now explained, clearly though briefly, the principal design features of the Hebrew State.

·WHY DID THE HEBREWS FAIL?·

The questions that we still have to tackle are these:

- Why did the Hebrews so often fail to obey the law?
- Why were they so often subjugated?
- What made it possible for their State to be, eventually, completely destroyed?

Someone might answer that this ·triplet of failures· happened because *the people were wilfully disobedient*. But this is childish. ·It is always a puerile exercise to 'explain' a fact about a nation simply by postulating a feature of the national character·. *Why* was this nation more disobedient than other nations? Was it by nature? Of course not! Nature creates individuals, not nations, and individuals are sorted out into nationalities only by differences of •language, •laws and •accepted customs. It is only from •laws and •customs that a given nationality can get its particular mentality, its particular flavour, its particular prejudices. [Notice that Spinoza doesn't here give •language any role in the formation of national character.] So if we have to accept that the Hebrews were more disobedient than other mortals, we must attribute this to there being something wrong with either their laws or their accepted customs.

It's true: if God had wanted their State to be more stable, he would have set up its rights and laws differently, and provided a different way of administering it. So what can we say except that ·God treated them as he did because· *they made their God angry?* [Spinoza quotes Ezekiel 20:25–6, a strange passage in which God announces that he gave the Jews bad laws so as to 'render them desolate'. There are significant differences between the •King James and •Revised Standard versions of this, and between each of those and the •Latin and •Jewish Bibles and also •Spinoza's own translation. Let's by-pass this mare's nest.]

For a better understanding of these words, and of what caused the destruction [218] of the Hebrew State, we must note that ·God· intended at first to hand over the whole of the sacred ministry to the first-born, not to the Levites (see *Numbers* 8:17); but after everyone except the Levites worshipped the calf, the first-born were rejected and declared unclean, and the Levites were chosen in their place ( *Deuteronomy* 10:8).

The more I think about this switch, the more it compels me to burst out in the words of Tacitus: what God wanted then 'was not their security but his revenge'. And I'm just amazed that there was so much anger in the divine mind that he established the laws—the *laws!*—aiming at vengeance for himself and punishment for the people. Real *laws* aim only at the honour, well-being and security of the whole people; so these things that God established weren't really laws. What they did was to create plenty of bases for accusing the Hebrews of being unclean: •the gifts they were bound to give the Levites and priests, •the need to redeem the first-born, •the compulsory per capita payments to the Levites, and •the fact that only the Levites were permitted to approach the sacred things.



There were always openings for the Levites to subject the others to moral criticism, and criticism flowed in the other direction as well, as I now explain. Among so many thousands of Levites there must have been many who were pushy and stupid ‘men of God’; so the people kept track of the Levites’ conduct (they were only men, after all); and when one Levite misbehaved, the people did what people *do*—blamed them all! So there was a continual rumble of discontent, and—especially when food-prices were high—unwillingness to feed these resented idle men who weren’t even related to them by blood.

So it’s not surprising that in times of peace, when there were no more obvious miracles and there were no men of outstanding authority, the people became angry and mean and therefore *slack*; to the point where they didn’t properly observe their old form of worship (discredited and viewed with suspicion by them, although it had been given by God), and hungered for something new. Nor is it surprising if the leaders—always trying to find a way to get the supreme right of command exclusively for themselves—gave in to the people and introduced new forms of worship, so as to bind the people to themselves and turn them away from the high priest.

If the State had been set up in accordance with God’s original plan for it, the tribes would always have been equal in right and honour, and security would have been achieved. Who would want to violate the sacred right of his own blood-relatives? What would a man have put ahead of

- feeding his own blood-relatives, his brothers and parents, in accordance with religious duty?
- learning from his kin the interpretation of the laws?
- looking to them for God’s answers? [219]

Also, the tribes would have remained much more closely united if the management of religious affairs had been evenly

distributed amongst them.

But although the bare facts about the structure of religious authority seem to threaten trouble, there wouldn’t have been anything to fear if God’s choice of the Levites had arisen from something other than anger and vengeance. . . .

The historical narratives confirm the account I am giving. As soon as things eased up for the people while they were still in the desert, many of them (not of the common folk) began to find this assignment of priestly duties intolerable, and to think that Moses hadn’t instituted *anything* by divine command, but had followed his own wishes in everything, choosing his own tribe before all the others and giving the right of priesthood to his own brother Aaron for ever. They staged a demonstration and confronted him with the claim that everyone was equally holy and that it wasn’t right that he had been raised above everyone else [Numbers 16:3]. He couldn’t quieten them; but when he used a miracle as a sign of God’s confidence in him, all the rebels were annihilated [Numbers 16:31–35]. This started up a new rebellion, this time of the whole people. The first rebels, they thought, had been annihilated not by God’s judgment but by the craftiness of Moses. According to them, he had quietened those rebels after they had been ground down by a plague or some other great calamity, so that they all preferred death to life. So all that happened was that the rebellion failed—not that harmony began.

Scripture is a witness to this, when God, after predicting to Moses that after his death the people would lapse in their loyalty to divine worship, says:

I know what plans they are devising, even now, before I bring them into the land that I promised on oath.  
(Deuteronomy 31:21)

And a little later, Moses says to the people:

Well I know how defiant and stiff-necked you are: even now, while I am alive in your midst, you have been defiant towards the Lord; how much more, then, when I am dead! (31:27)

And we all know that that's just what did in fact happen. There were great changes, and a great license to do anything, luxury and idleness, with everything going from bad to worse; until eventually, after they had suffered many defeats, they completely broke away from the divine law, and wanted an ordinary human king so that the physical centre of the State would be not the Temple but a Court. In this way (they thought), what held the Hebrews together as a single nation would be •the rule of kings and no longer •divine law and the priesthood.

This encouraged new rebellions, and eventually led to the complete ruin of the whole State. For what can a king tolerate less than •ruling insecurely [220] and •having to allow a State within a State? ·How did those two factors come into the story? In three strongly inter-connected ways, which I now explain. **(1)** The first kings, chosen from the ranks of private citizens, were content with the degree of dignity to which they had risen. But after their sons took over the kingship by right of succession, *they* gradually began to change things so that they would have the right of governing entirely to themselves. They hadn't had this completely, because the right over the laws had depended not on them but on the high Priest, who guarded the laws in the sanctuary and interpreted them to the people; with the result that the kings were bound by the laws, like subjects, and couldn't legally repeal them or make new laws that would be equally authoritative. **(2)** The kings were also like their subjects in being treated by the Levites as secular, and therefore forbidden to deal with sacred matters. **(3)** The whole security of the State depended on the will of one

person, who was seen as a prophet. They had seen examples of this dependence in the great freedom with which ·prophet· Samuel gave orders to ·King· Saul about everything, and the ease with which Samuel transferred the kingship to David because of one bit of bad behaviour by Saul. ·Putting those three things together·, the kings •had a State within a State, and •ruled insecurely.

To remedy this situation, the kings allowed other temples to be dedicated to the gods, so as to by-pass the procedure of consulting with the Levites. Then they sought out a number of men who would prophesy in the name of God, so that they—the kings—could have 'prophets' ·of their own· to counteract the genuine prophets. But nothing that the kings attempted had any success in getting them what they wanted. That's because the genuine prophets—always prudent and alert—waited for an opportune time to strike back. The opportune time was *early* in the reign of a new king, when his rule was insecure because of people's strong memories of his predecessor. At that time it was easy for them to use their divine authority to get some rival to take legal control of the State (or of ·the secular· part of it), in the name of 'defending divine right'. The rival had to be a disaffected subject of the present king, and to be known to be virtuous.

But the prophets weren't able to make any real improvements in this way. Although they removed a tyrant from their midst, the causes ·of tyranny· remained; so all they achieved was to buy a new tyrant with a great expenditure of the citizens' blood! There was no end to dissension and civil wars, and in fact the causes for violations of divine law were always the same. The only way to remove them was by getting rid of the State altogether.

So now we can see how religion was introduced into the Hebrew State, and how that State could have retained its power for ever, if only the just anger of the lawgiver had

allowed it to continue ·with the same constitution· as it had at the outset. But this couldn't happen, so eventually the State had to perish.

I've been talking here only about the •first State. The •second one was hardly a shadow of the first: [221] the Jews were subjects of the Persians, and were bound by Persian law; and after they got free, their High Priests usurped the authority of leadership through which they obtained absolute control, wanting to be supreme in both civic and in religious matters. So there's not much I need to say about the second State. [The second State existed after the Jews were released from their Babylonian captivity. Babylon, now in Iraq, was at that time controlled by Persia.]

A question arises about the first State, which I have

claimed to be •durable (·if only God hadn't closed it down by a constitutional change·)—namely the question *Can it be imitated?* And ·if it can't be imitated closely·, *do we have a religious duty to imitate it as much as possible?* I'll answer these in the remaining chapters.

As a kind of book-end to the present chapter, I add a remark that I have already hinted at. The results I have reached in this chapter establish that •divine right—i.e. the right of religion—arises from a contract or covenant; the only right there can be where there is no contract is •natural right. So the Hebrews had no religion-based obligations to nations that weren't participants in a contract with them; they had such obligations only toward their fellow citizens.

## Chapter 18: Inferring political tenets from the Hebrew State and its history

Although the Hebrew State, as I described it in Chapter 17, could have lasted for ever, no-one *now* can imitate it, and it wouldn't be wise even to try. If you wanted to transfer your right to God, you'd have to make a contract explicitly with him, as the Hebrews did; and that would require not only •your consent but also •God's. But God has told us through his apostles that his contract is no longer written with ink, or on stone tablets, but is written by the spirit of God in the human heart. Moreover, such a form of State would probably be useful only for people willing to live by themselves, without any foreign trade, shutting themselves

up within their own boundaries in isolation from the rest of the world. It couldn't be any use to those who need to have dealings with others. So it could be useful only for a very few people.

Although this ·Hebrew form of State· can't be imitated in every respect, it had many features that it's worthwhile to take note of and perhaps even to imitate. But (I repeat) I don't aim to treat of the State in detail, so I'll skip most of those things and note only points that are [222] relevant to my purpose. ·Two of them concern the division of authority·. •It isn't contrary to God's kingship to elect a supreme authority

to have the supreme right of command. After transferring their right to God, the Hebrews handed over the supreme right of command to Moses; so that he alone had the authority to make and repeal laws, to choose the ministers of sacred affairs, to judge, to teach, to chastise, and to govern all the people in every respect—all this in God's name. •Although the ministers of sacred affairs were the interpreters of the laws, it wasn't for them to judge the citizens or excommunicate anyone; for this was in the jurisdiction of the judges and the leaders chosen from the people (see *Joshua* 6:26, *Judges* 21:18, and 1 *Samuel* 14:24).

In addition to those points about the •formal structure of the Hebrew State, there are noteworthy things to be learned by attending to the •history of the Hebrews.

(1) There were no sects in their religion until after the high priests in the second Hebrew State had acquired the authority to make decrees and to handle the affairs of the State, and then—to make their authority truly permanent—seized the right of leadership for themselves and eventually wanted to be called Kings.

•How was that change in the power of the high priests relevant to the formation of sects?• It's not hard to see how or why. In the first State no decree could get its validity from the high Priest, because the priests had no right to issue decrees; their role was merely to pass along God's answers when asked to do so by the secular authorities. So they couldn't feel any drive to decree novelties, rather than merely administering and defending decrees that were familiar and accepted. Their only way of defending their own freedom against the wishes of the secular leaders was to keep the laws from being tampered with. But after they had acquired the authority to handle the affairs of the State, combining the powers of secular leadership with the powers of priesthood, each of them began to seek glory for his own

name, in religious *and* in secular matters. He did this by invoking priestly authority to settle everything, keeping up a rapid fire of new decrees governing ceremonies, the faith, and everything else, wanting these decrees to be just as sacred and authoritative as the laws of Moses. The result was that religion slumped into a pernicious superstition and that the true meaning and interpretation of the laws was corrupted.

Also: while the priests were busy trying to gain control of the leadership at the start of the restoration, they tried to get the common people on their side by •approving everything they did, even if it was impious, and [223] by •adjusting Scripture to fit the worst customs of the people. Malachi testifies to this in the most solemn terms. Having reproached the priests of his time, calling them men who 'scorn God's name' [*Malachi* 1:6], he lays into them thus:

The lips of a priest guard knowledge, and men seek rulings from his mouth; for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts. But you have turned away from that course: you have made the many stumble through your rulings; you have corrupted the covenant of the Levites—said the Lord of Hosts. [*Malachi* 2:7–8]

He goes on to accuse them of interpreting the laws as they pleased, and of acting on the basis not of what God wants but of what men want.

But there was no chance of the priests' doing this so carefully that •right-minded people didn't see what was going on. And •these people will have claimed, with growing boldness, that they weren't obliged to follow any laws except written ones, and that there was no obligation to observe the decrees that the deluded Pharisees. . . .called 'traditions of our forefathers'.

•That is a confident conjecture of mine, but it isn't a mere conjecture.—it is indeed something we can't have any doubt of—that

- the flattery of the priests,
- the corruption of religion and of the laws, and
- the incredible increase in the number of laws

provided many wide-open opportunities for arguments and disputes that couldn't ever be settled. When men start an argument in the fierce heat of superstition, and the legal system takes one side against the other, the people will never calm down, and are sure to split up into sects.

**(2)** The •prophets (who were private individuals ·and not office-holders of any sort·) were so free in warning and scolding the people that the people were more annoyed than corrected; whereas they were easily led to change course when warned or punished by their •kings. Indeed, because of their authority to judge what actions would be pious and what impious, the prophets made a serious nuisance of themselves even to pious kings, reprimanding them if they were bold enough to treat some public or private business in a way that conflicted with the judgment of the prophets. [Spinoza cites an example from *2 Chronicles* 16. Then:] There are also other examples showing that religion was more harmed than helped by such freedom ·to criticise·; not to mention the fact that **[224]** the prophets' hanging on to so much authority for themselves was a source of intense civil wars.

**(3)** As long as the people were sovereign, they had only one civil war, which finally came to a complete end (the winners had so much pity for the losers that did all they could to restore them to their former status and power). But after the people—without any previous experience of monarchy—replaced the original ·democratic· form of the State by a monarchical one, there was almost no end to civil wars, and the Hebrews engaged in battles of unprecedented ferocity. For in one battle (this is almost beyond belief) the men of Judah killed 500,000 men of Israel; in another, the

men of Israel

- slaughtered many men of Judah (Scripture doesn't say how many),
  - seized the King himself,
  - almost destroyed the wall of Jerusalem,
- and (to show there was no limit to their anger)
- stripped the Temple of everything movable.

Loaded down with enormous amounts of loot taken from their brothers, their thirst for blood satisfied, they •took hostages, •left the King with his almost destroyed kingdom, and •laid down their arms—their security coming not from the good faith of the men of Judah but from their weakness. A few years later, when the men of Judah had regained their strength, they went into battle again; and again the men of Israel were the winners, slaughtering 120,000 men of Judah, taking up to 200,000 of their women and children captive, and again seizing a great many spoils. [*2 Chronicles* 28:5–15] Exhausted by these and other battles (the histories don't say much about them), the men of Israel eventually fell a prey to their enemies.

Contrast that with the length of the interludes of absolute peace that the Hebrews enjoyed before the monarchy was started. Back then, they often had forty-year stretches of peace [*Judges* 3:11, 5:31, 8:28] and one stretch of eighty years, believe it or not [*Judges* 3:30]—periods when they lived harmoniously, without any external or internal wars. But after the Kings got control, the wars were about glory and not as previously about peace and freedom. So we read that all the kings waged wars (actually, all except Solomon, whose power showed up better in peace than in war, because his power consisted in his wisdom). ·As well as the desire for glory·, there was a pernicious lust for governing power, which meant that most of the kings reached the throne by a very bloody path.

(4) Finally, for as long as the people were the rulers, the laws remained uncorrupted and were observed more steadfastly. That is because before the kings there were very few prophets to nag the people, [225] whereas after they opted for monarchy there were always a great many at any given time. Obadiah, for example, saved a hundred prophets from slaughter, hiding them so that they wouldn't be killed along with the other prophets [1 Kings 18:4, 13]. And we don't find people being deceived by false prophets until after the power passed into the hands of kings. . . .

From this history of the Hebrew State we can learn four things:

(i) **How destructive** it is, both for religion and for the State, to allow the ministers of sacred affairs the right to make decrees or handle the business of government. Everything is *much* more stable if these people—these priests—are kept on a short leash so that they don't give any answers except when asked, and in the meantime teach and apply only doctrines that have already been accepted and are very familiar.

(ii) **How dangerous** it is to bring divine right to bear on things that are really matters of philosophical theory, and to legislate answers to questions that are or could be controversial. A person's opinions are under his control, and no-one can give that up; so there's something very oppressive about a law making it a crime to hold such-and-such an opinion. When there are such laws, what happens is mostly dictated by the anger of the mob. Pilate was yielding to the fury of the Pharisees when he ordered the crucifixion of Christ, whom he knew to be innocent. The Pharisees also created a religious stir, accusing the Sadducees of impiety (what they really wanted was just to dislodge the wealthier people from their high perch). Following the Pharisees' example, everyone has been driven by the same madness, which they call zeal

for God's law (how far each man takes this depends only on how much of a hypocrite he is). Everywhere they have persecuted men who are distinguished for their integrity and famous for their virtue, and *therefore* envied by the mob—publicly denouncing their opinions and inflaming the savage multitude in their anger against them.

It's hard to quell the people who impudently help themselves to a freedom to attack the opinions of others, because they do it all under the cloak of religion. This is especially true where the sovereign authorities have introduced a sect

**what Spinoza wrote next:** *cujus ipsae authores non sunt;*

**which could mean:** of which they are not themselves the founders;

**or it could mean:** in which they themselves have no position of authority;

because then they are seen not as interpreters of divine law but merely as adherents of a sect, i.e. as people who acknowledge the learned men of that sect as interpreters of divine law. That's why the authority of the legal system [226] about these matters is usually not worth much among the common people, whereas the authority of the learned sectarians, to whose interpretations they think even kings must submit, is very great. The safest way to avoid these evils is to tie piety and the practice of religion only to *works*, i.e. only to the exercise of loving kindness and justice, leaving everyone's judgment free in all other matters. I'll say more about this later.

(iii) **How necessary** it is, both for the State and for religion, to give the authority to distinguish right from wrong to the sovereign secular power alone. For if this authority to distinguish right actions from wrong ones couldn't be granted to the divine prophets themselves without great harm both to the State and to Religion, much less should

it be granted to those who don't know how to predict the future and cannot perform miracles. But I shall discuss this in detail later.

(iv) **How disastrous** it is for a people to opt for monarchy when •they have no experience of living under kings and •they have laws already established. They won't be able to bear the weight of so much control, •not being accustomed to it; and the monarch won't be able to endure the •already established laws and rights of the people, established by someone with less authority than a king has. Still less will he be willing to apply himself to •defending those laws—especially given that those laws won't have been set up to deal with monarchy but only with the people or the council that thought it was in charge. So if the king *did* defend the rights that the people used to have, he would seem to be the people's servant rather than their master. A new monarch will therefore work very hard to •establish new laws, to •transform the powers of the State to his own advantage, and to •reduce the people to a level where they can't deprive him of his throne as easily as they gave it to him.

But I mustn't suppress the fact that it's equally dangerous to get rid of a monarch, even if it's in every way clear that he is a tyrant. A people accustomed to royal authority and held in check only by it, will despise and deride any lesser authority. So if they depose one monarch they will need (as the prophets did long ago) to choose another *monarch* to replace him. But this new monarch will be a tyrant—he will *have to be* a tyrant. When he sees the citizens' hands, stained with blood from the slaughter of a king, and hears them glorying in their assassination, how could he regard that as a deed well done? . . . If he wants to be a king, and doesn't want to •acknowledge the people as the judge and master of kings or to •rule at their pleasure, he must first [227] avenge the death of his predecessor and set a contrary

example for his own benefit, so that the people won't •again dare to commit such a crime. But he'll find it hard to avenge the death of the tyrant by killing citizens unless at the same time he defends the conduct and political aims of the former tyrant, endorsing his actions and thus following closely in his footsteps.

That's how it comes about that the people can often change tyrants but can't ever destroy tyranny, changing a monarchic State into one of a different form. The English people have given us a deadly example of this truth, when they tried to find reasons to *justify* deposing their king [Charles I]. When they had removed him, they were utterly unable to change the form of the State. After much blood had been spilled, they reached the point where they hailed a new monarch under another name [Oliver Cromwell, whose title as a ruler was 'Lord Protector'], as if the whole issue had only been about the name! The new monarch could survive only if he •wiped out the royal family, •killed the king's friends and anyone suspected of friendship, and •launched a war •against the Dutch. He needed the war so as to •disturb the tranquillity of peace that is so conducive to murmurings of discontent, and to •confront the common people with urgent new crises that would steer their thoughts away from royal slaughter. The people didn't realize until it was too late that in trying to further the well-being of their country they had achieved nothing except to violate the right of a legitimate king and make things worse than ever. So as soon as they could, they decided to retrace their steps, and didn't rest until they saw things restored to their original condition.

You may want to object that the example of the Romans shows that a people can easily depose a tyrant; but I think that the Roman example strongly *confirms* my view. In their endeavour to depose a tyrant and change the form of the State, the Romans had two things going for them: •they

·already· had the right to choose the king and his successor, and •they weren't yet accustomed to obeying kings (because they were so rebellious; of the six kings they had had, they killed three). And yet, ·even with those two advantages·, all they achieved was to replace one tyrant by several of them—tyrants who inflicted misery on them by starting external and internal wars, until in the end the State reverted to monarchy, with only the name changed, as in England.

As for the Estates of Holland, so far as we know they never had kings, but only counts, who were never given the rights of government. . . . [..228] They always reserved for themselves the authority to advise the counts of their duty, and held onto the power to •defend this authority of theirs

and the freedom of the citizens, to •punish the counts if they degenerated into tyrants, and to •keep them under control in such a way that they couldn't get anything done without the permission and approval of the Estates [= governing committees, not elected democratically but representative of the people as a whole.] Thus, the Estates always held the right of sovereignty—a right that the last count tried to usurp. So there was nothing wrong with their ·getting rid of him and· restoring their original State, which had almost been lost.

These examples completely confirm my thesis that the form of each State must necessarily be retained, and that it can't be changed without risking ruin for the whole State.

## Chapter 19:

### **The supreme civil authority is sovereign in all sacred matters. If we want to obey God rightly, external religious practices must be adapted to the peace of the State**

When I said that those (and only those) who have sovereignty have jurisdiction over everything, and that 'all law' depends solely on their decision, I meant not only *civil* law but also *law concerning sacred matters*. For they must interpret and defend this law also. I'm saying this loudly here, and will treat it in detail in this chapter, because many people flatly deny that the sovereign ·civil· powers have authority over sacred matters, and won't recognize them as the interpreters of divine law. They claim for *themselves* a license to criticize the civil governing powers, and even to

excommunicate them from the Church (as Ambrosius once did to the emperor Theodosius). But in doing this they are dividing the sovereignty, and indeed trying to find a way to become sovereign themselves. I'll show this later in the present chapter.

But I want first to show •that religion gets to have the force of law only because the sovereign ·civil· power says that it does, •that God has no special kingdom over men except through those who have sovereignty, and •that religious worship and the exercise of piety [229] must be adapted to



the peace and well-being of the State, so that the forms of worship must be chosen purely by the sovereign powers, who must also be their interpreters.

I am speaking specifically about •the exercise of piety and about •the external practice of religion, not about •piety itself and the •internal worship of God. That is, I'm not talking about the means by which the mind is brought to the wholehearted *internal* worship of God, because the control over a given person's internal worship of God and his state of piety belongs (as I showed at the end of Chapter 7 [page 72]) to that person himself; it *can't* be handed over to anyone else. And I think that what I wrote in Chapter 14 shows clearly enough what I mean here by 'God's kingdom'. I showed back there that a person fulfils God's law if he pursues justice and loving kindness according to God's command; from which it follows that a kingdom is God's if justice and loving kindness have in it the force of law and of a command. *How* does God teach and command the true pursuit of justice and loving kindness—by the natural light or by revelation? It makes no difference. It doesn't matter *how* that goal is revealed, provided that it has sovereign authority and is the supreme law for men.

So if I show now that **(1)** justice and loving kindness can get the force of law and of a command only from the authority of the State, then, since **(2)** the State's authority is all in the hands of the sovereign ·civil· powers, I can easily draw the conclusion that **(3)** religion gets the force of law only by the decree of those who have the right to command, and that God has no special kingdom over men except through those who have governmental authority.

Well, things I have already said make it obvious that **(1)** the pursuit of justice and loving kindness acquires the force of law only from the authority of the State. I showed in Chapter 16 that *in the state of nature* •reason has no more

right than •appetite—'You have a right to do anything you can' can be said both to those who live according to the laws of appetite and to those who live according to the laws of reason. That's why in talking about the state of nature we couldn't find any work for the concept of sin to do, or the concept of God as a judge punishing men for their sins. We had to steer purely by the thought that all things happen according to laws common to the whole of nature, and that (as Solomon puts it) 'the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous and for the wicked, for the good and pure and for the impure' [*Ecclesiastes* 9:2]), and there's no place for justice or for loving kindness. How was a proper status to be accorded to the teachings of true reason (which are, as I showed in chapter 4 discussing the divine law, the divine teachings themselves)? How could they come to have the full force of law? For that to happen it was necessary for each person to surrender his natural right, [230] handing it over to •everyone, or to some •group of people, or to •one individual. Only then could we bring justice and injustice, equity and inequity, into the story.

From all this. . . it follows that God has no kingdom over men except through those who have sovereignty.

I repeat that it doesn't matter whether we think of religion as •revealed by the light of nature or •revealed by the prophetic light. The demonstration I have given is universal, because religion is the same, and has equally been revealed by God, whether men became aware of it in one way or in the other. Even prophetically revealed religion couldn't have the force of law among the Hebrews until each of them gave up his natural right and all of them agreed among themselves that

•they would obey only commands that were revealed to them prophetically by God.

This is just like the procedure in a democratic State where

the people agree among themselves

•to live only according to the dictate of reason.

Didn't the Hebrews also transfer their right to God? Well, that's what they meant to do, but in fact—as we have seen—they retained absolutely the right of sovereignty until they transferred it *to Moses*. From then onwards *he* was the King, having that position outright, with no conditions on it and it was only *through him* that God reigned over the Hebrews.

It's because religion gets the force of law only from the authority of the State that Moses couldn't punish Sabbath-breakers while people were still under their own control (see *Exodus* 16:27); but after they made the covenant [= 'contract'] through which each of them surrendered his natural right, observation of the Sabbath acquired the force of a command from the authority of the State ·which could be punished by that same authority· (see *Numbers* 15:36).

And this is also the reason why revealed religion stopped having the force of law when the Hebrew State was destroyed. It's beyond question that when the Hebrews transferred their right to the King of Babylon, God's kingdom and the authority came to an end *right then*. For by that act they completely abolished the contract by which they had promised to obey God in everything he told them to do, [231] which was the basis for God's kingdom, and they *couldn't* stand by that contract any longer, because now they weren't their own masters. . . .

Jeremiah explicitly warns them of this: 'Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper' (*Jeremiah* 29:7). They couldn't 'seek the welfare of the city' as ministers of State, but only as servants (which is what they were), by showing themselves to be obedient in all things. . . .and by observing the rights and laws of the State, different as these

were from the laws to which they had become accustomed in their own land.

From all this it clearly follows that among the Hebrews religion got the force of law only from the authority of the State. When the State was destroyed, religion could no longer be regarded as the command of a particular State, but only as a universal teaching of reason. I say 'of reason' because universal religion wasn't yet known from revelation. So I conclude, without any ifs or buts, that

*religion*, whether revealed by the natural light or by prophetic light, gets the force of a command only through the decree of those who have governing authority, and that God has no special kingdom over men except through those who have sovereignty.

You can get a firmer grasp of this, and a further reasons for it, by considering some things I said in chapter 4. I showed there [page 39] that all God's decrees involve eternal truth and necessity, and that God can't be conceived as giving laws to men in the way a prince or legislator does. Divine teachings, therefore, whether revealed by the natural light or by the prophetic light, don't get •the force of a command directly from God; they must get •that from (or through the mediation of) those who have the right to rule and make decrees. Our thought of God as reigning over men and directing human affairs according to justice and equity *essentially* involves those mediators.

This is also confirmed by experience itself, because ·we find that· there's no sign of *divine* justice except where just *people* rule. . . . Indeed, this has caused many people to question whether there is any such thing as divine providence, these being people who had thought that God reigns directly over men and steers the whole of nature for their benefit.

[232] So we know from experience and through reason that divine right depends purely on the decrees of •the supreme

·civil· powers, and it follows from this that •they must also be its interpreters. Let us now see how they go about this. It's time now to show that if we want to obey God properly our external religious worship, and all our religious activity of any kind, must be made consistent with the peace and preservation of the State. When I have demonstrated *that*, it won't be hard to explain *how* the supreme ·civil· powers are the interpreters of religion and religious duty.

It is certain that piety towards one's country is the highest kind of piety, because if sovereignty is destroyed,

- nothing good can remain,
- everything is at risk,
- only anger and immorality rule, and
- everyone lives in terror.

It follows from this that any—*any*—·seemingly· pious act that you can perform **for** a neighbour becomes impious if it does some harm to the State as a whole; and, conversely, that any ·seemingly· impious act that you perform **against** a neighbour counts as pious if it is done for the sake of preserving the State. [Spinoza gives two fairly unconvincing examples, one imaginary and the other from Rome in the 4th century BCE. Then:] So the supreme law, to which all laws—human and divine—must be accommodated, is *the well-being of the people*. Now, it's up to the sovereign ·civil· authority to decide what is necessary for the well-being of the whole people and the security of the State, and to issue commands that back up its decisions. So it is also the duty of that authority to determine what religious duties each person has with respect to his neighbour, i.e. to decide *how* each person is obliged to obey God.

This makes clear to us in what way the sovereign ·civil· authorities are the interpreters of religion. It also makes clear **(1)** that if you are to obey God rightly you must adapt your religious practices to the public interest. We are bound by

God's command to cherish absolutely everyone in accordance with our religious duty, and to harm no-one; which implies that no-one is permitted to aid one person at the expense of another, much less at the expense of the whole State; from which **(1)** follows. It also follows **(2)** that if you are to obey God rightly you must obey all the commands of the sovereign ·civil· power. Why? Because the only way a private person can know what *is* in the State's interest is from the decrees of the sovereign authorities, they being the only ones whose job it is to manage public business; from which, together with **(1)**, **(2)** obviously follows.

**[233]** This is also confirmed in practice. [He gives examples. Then:] As I showed in chapter 17, for the Hebrews to preserve the freedom they had acquired, and have absolute control over the lands they occupied, they had to adapt religion to their own State, and to keep other nations at arm's length. That's why they were told 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy' (*Matthew* 5:43). But after they were defeated and led into captivity, Jeremiah taught them to care for the peace of Babylon, to which they had been led as captives [*Jeremiah* 29:7]. And after Christ saw that they were going to be dispersed through the whole world, he taught them that they should behave piously—in accordance with religious duty—towards absolutely everyone. All these things show, as clearly as can be, that religion has always been adapted to the interests of the State.

You may ask: 'Christ's disciples were private men—what right did they have to preach religion?' I answer that they did this by right of their Christ-given power over unclean spirits (see *Matthew* 10:1). At the end of chapter 16 I dealt explicitly with this [page 131]. I said that everyone was bound to keep faith even with a tyrant, except for people to whom God has, by a single unquestionable revelation, promised special aid against the tyrant. So it's not permissible for

you to take this—i.e. the disciples’ defiance of tyrannical rulers—as an example unless you too have the power to perform miracles! This is also clear from Christ’s telling •his disciples not to fear [234] those who kill the body (see *Matthew* 10:28). If he had said this to •everyone, and everyone had accepted it, governments would be useless, and what Solomon said—*Fear the Lord, my son, and the king* (*Proverbs* 24:21)—would have been impious, which it certainly isn’t. So we have to accept that the authority Christ gave to his disciples was given to them in particular, and that the rest of us can’t follow their example.

Some of my opponents have claimed to distinguish sacred law from civil law, and argued that the •civil• sovereign controls only the latter, whereas the former is in the hands of the universal church. These arguments are too flimsy to be worth refuting. [Spinoza goes on to address one mistake that these opponents make, namely misunderstanding the fact that at certain stage in Hebrew history the high priest was in charge of religious matters. What the opponents don’t understand, Spinoza says, is that the high priests were given the authority for this *by Moses*, and they were understood as deputising for him, even after he had died. In the second Hebrew State, he adds, the priests *did* have a supreme right to manage religious affairs, but then they also had the supreme civil power, so again there was no splitting of power along the religious/secular line. Then:]

So we can’t doubt that these days sacred matters are entirely controlled by the supreme •civil• authorities. . . . [..235] Without their authority or consent no-one has the right and power to administer these things—to •choose religion’s ministers, to •decide and stabilise the foundations of the Church and its doctrine, to •settle questions about the details of religious duty, to •excommunicate someone or receive someone into the Church, or even to •provide for the poor.

I have shown that all this is *true*; it is also demonstrably necessary for the preservation of religion as well as for the survival of the State. Everyone knows how much weight the common people attach to religious authority, and how intently they listen to whoever has it; so we can rightly say that the person who has religious authority has the most powerful control over their hearts. Any attempt to take this authority away from the supreme •civil• powers, therefore, is an attempt to divide the sovereignty, which will necessarily give rise to quarrels and conflicts that can never be settled—which is what happened ago with the kings and priests of the Hebrews. . . . For what can the supreme •civil• powers decide if they don’t have authority in religion? With any decision concerning war and peace, or anything else, they’ll have to wait for someone else to tell them whether something they think it would be good to do is permissible from a religious point of view. . . .

I shall discuss one example of this; it’s typical of all the others that have occurred down through the centuries. When the Roman Pope was unconditionally granted this supreme authority in religious matters, he started a gradual process of getting all the kings under his control, until he rose to the peak of sovereignty. From then onwards, the various kings—and especially the German Emperors—who tried to lessen his authority were unable to make the slightest dent in it. On the contrary, their activities vastly *increased* it! But what the kings •couldn’t do using iron and fire ecclesiastics •such as Luther• •could do using the power of their pens. . . .

Things that I said in chapter 18 show [236] that the growth of religion and piety is considerably helped by having the supreme authority in religious matters in the hands of the supreme •civil• powers; for we saw there [item (2) on page 153] that although the •prophets themselves were endowed with a divine virtue, they were still just private men, and their

freedom in warning, scolding and reproaching the people irritated them rather than setting them right. On the other hand, when the •kings warned or chastised the people, it was easy to put them on the right path. We have also seen that quite often the kings themselves—followed by most of the people—turned away from religion, simply because they didn't have this right unconditionally. . . .

You may want to ask: 'In that case, who will have the right to defend piety when those who have sovereignty choose to be impious? Are *they* still going to be its interpreters?' I reply with a question: 'What about the ecclesiastics (who are also men, and private individuals whose only duty is to take care of their own affairs) or whoever else you want to be in charge of sacred matters—if they choose to be impious, are *they* still going to be the interpreters of piety?'

If those who have sovereignty choose to follow their own interests, things will certainly go downhill—sacred affairs and secular ones—whether or not the authorities have control over sacred matters. But they'll go down faster if private men try defend divine right by sedition. So there's *nothing* to be gained by denying this right to the •civil• supreme powers; on the contrary, it only makes matters worse. For denying them this right is sure to make them impious (as were the Hebrew kings who didn't have this right unconditionally)—thereby moving damage to the whole State from the 'might happen' category to the 'is certain to happen' one. So we have a triple-result concerning the thesis that

Divine right, i.e. the right concerning sacred matters, depends absolutely on the decree of the supreme •civil• powers, who are its interpreters and defenders.

The thesis is **(1)** true, **(2)** good for the security of the State, and **(3)** good for the increase of piety. So we can identify those who are ministers of the word of God: they are the ones who teach the people piety by the authority of the supreme •civil•

powers, and adapt their teaching to the public interest as defined by government decrees.

A question arises: Why has there always been dispute about this right •of religious command• in Christian States, whereas the Hebrews seem never to have quarrelled about it? Given how obvious and necessary the truth of this matter is, it might seem downright *weird* that it has always been disputed, [237] and that the supreme •civil• powers never had this right •of religious command• without controversy—indeed, without great danger of rebellions and of harm to religion. If I couldn't clearly explain this, I might feel that I had to back down, dismissing everything I have shown in this chapter as being merely theoretical—the kind of speculation that couldn't be applied in practice.

But if you look at the origins of the Christian religion, you'll see clearly what the explanation is. The Christian religion wasn't initially taught by kings, but by private men who—against the will of those who had sovereign power and whose subjects they were—for a long time customarily addressed meetings in private churches, set up and conducted sacred ceremonies, arranged everything by themselves, and made decrees; all without giving any thought to issues about sovereignty. And when, much later, religion began to be introduced into the State, it was the ecclesiastics who had to teach it—their version of it—to the Emperors. So it was easy for them to get recognized as its teachers and interpreters—and also as shepherds of the Christian flock and (as it were) God's deputies. And they took care of their own interests by prohibiting marriage to the supreme ministers of the Church and interpreters of religion, so that Christian kings couldn't muscle in and take this •religious• authority for themselves. They also increased the number of religious doctrines, and mixed them up so much with philosophy that the supreme interpreter of religion had to

be a supreme philosopher and theologian, and had to have abundant spare time in which to engage in a great many useless speculations.

Among the Hebrews the situation was very different. Their Church began at the same time as their State did, and Moses, who had absolute political authority, taught the people religion, ordained sacred ministries, and chose the ministers for them. That's why royal authority was valued very highly among the people, and why the kings

had great authority in sacred matters. Although after Moses' death no-one had absolute sovereignty, we've seen that the political leader had the right to make decrees about all matters, sacred and otherwise. [Spinoza continues this, for about a page, going into details of Hebrew history to illustrate his thesis that among the Hebrews 'the whole practice of religion and the whole sacred ministry depended entirely on the King's command'.]

## Chapter 20: In a free State everyone is permitted to think what he likes and to say what he thinks.

[239] If it were as easy to govern men's minds as it is their tongues, every ruler would govern in safety and no rule would be oppressive. Everyone would live as their rulers wanted them to, and would be *obedient* in all their judgments about what is true or false, good or evil, right or wrong. But as I pointed out early in chapter 17, one person's mind can't be absolutely controlled by someone else. No-one can transfer to another person his natural right or power of reasoning freely, and of forming his own opinions on any topic; so no-one can be compelled to do this. This is why rule over minds is considered oppressive, and why the supreme authority seems to wrong its subjects and to usurp their rights when it tries to prescribe to each person what he must embrace as true and what reject as false, and what reasons he must have for his devotion to God. These things are within the

individual person's control, and he *can't* give up that control even if he wants to.

Admittedly there are various ways—some of them almost incredible—in which one person *x* can influence the judgment of another person *y*, and though these don't involve *x* in directly commanding *y* to believe this or that, they can have *y*'s mind depending so much on *x* that it's not entirely wrong to say that *y*'s mind is under *x*'s control. But however ingeniously this has been done, it hasn't ever wiped out men's knowledge from their own experience that each person is well equipped with his own faculty of judgment and that men's minds differ as much as their palates do. Though Moses very thoroughly took control of his people's judgment—not deceptively but through his divine virtue, which led them to think he was divine and spoke and

acted always with divine inspiration—even he couldn't escape rumours and perverse interpretations of the doctrines he taught. Other monarchs are even less able to do this. . . .

[240] Therefore, however much the sovereign authorities are believed to have a right over everything, and to be the interpreters of right and piety, they'll never be able to stop men from forming *their* own opinions about everything on the basis of *their* state of mind, and from having whatever emotions arise from those opinions. It's true of course that they have a right to regard as enemies anyone who doesn't think absolutely as they do about everything; but my present topic is not what is *right* but what is *beneficial*. They have a *right* to rule with the utmost oppressiveness, condemning citizens to death for trivial offences; but everyone will agree that governing in that way reflects poor thinking. Indeed, because such government brings great danger to the whole State, we can deny that they have the absolute •power to do such things. So we can •after all• deny that they have an absolute •right to do them, because (as I have shown) the rights of sovereign authorities reach as far as their power but no further.

So no-one can surrender his freedom to judge and think what he likes; everyone, by the utmost right of nature, is master of his own thoughts. From this it follows that if the sovereign authorities of a State try to make men (with all their different and conflicting views) always speak according to what *they* prescribe, they will get only the most unfortunate result. •It's no use suggesting that this policy might work, through people's mainly not saying anything: not even the wisest know how to be silent, much less the common people! It's a common vice of men to share their thoughts with others, even when there is need for secrecy. So a régime that denies each person the freedom to say and teach what he thinks must be very oppressive. A régime that grants this freedom

to everyone will be a moderate one.

But it can't be denied that treason can be committed by words as well as by deeds. While it's •impossible to take this freedom of speech completely away from subjects, it would be *very* dangerous to grant it completely. Let's think about *how far* this freedom should be granted to each person, i.e. how far it can be granted without harming the peace of the State and the sovereign's authority. As I remarked at the start of chapter 16, my main purpose in these final chapters is to investigate this question.

The account I have given of the foundations of the State obviously imply that what the State is *for* is not to act as a despot, holding men down by fear and making them subject to someone else's control. Rather, it is [241] to free each person from fear so that he can live as securely as possible, retaining to the utmost his natural right to exist and act without hurting himself or anyone else. The State's purpose, according to me, is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or automata, but rather to bring it about that

- they don't risk anything by fully using their mental and physical powers,
- they use their reason freely,
- they don't contend with one another in hatred, anger or deception, and
- they don't deal unfairly with one another.

So the purpose of the State is really **freedom**.

Next point: When a State is being formed, it is essential (I noted this earlier) that *all* the decision-making power be held

- by everyone,
- by some •specified group of• people, or
- by one person.

Free men vary a lot in their judgments; and each man thinks that he alone knows everything; so there's no chance of their

all thinking alike and speaking with one voice; so people *couldn't* live together peaceably unless each one surrendered his right to act solely on the basis of *his* decisions.

That concerns *acting on* his own decisions; the person doesn't give up his right to reason and judge for himself. So you are infringing the authority of the sovereign powers if you act in a way that goes against a decision they have made; but you aren't infringing anything by •thinking and •judging as you think fit. And the same goes for •speaking as you think fit, as long as you are speaking or teaching on the basis of reason alone, and not with deception, anger, hatred, or any intention to alter the governmental set-up on your own initiative. For example, if someone thinks that a law ought to be repealed because it is contrary to sound reason, and submits his opinion to the judgment of the supreme power. . . .in the meantime doing nothing that breaks that law, he deserves well of the State, as one of its best citizens. But if he does this as a way of •accusing the government of unfairness and •making the people hate it, or if he wants seditiously to get rid of that law, against the will of the government, he's just a troublemaker and a rebel. [In that sentence, 'the government' translates *magistratus* = 'magistrate' or •'magistracy'. When the word occurs once in chapter 7 and twice in chapter 18, it is translated by •'legal system'. But its many occurrences in the present chapter are translated by 'the government', except in one place where it seems that Spinoza really does mean to narrow his spotlight from •government to merely •its law-enforcement arm.]

So we can see how each person can say and teach whatever he likes without detriment to the right and authority of the supreme powers, i.e. without harming the peace of the State: all that's needed is for him to leave to the governing authorities every decision about what is to be *done*, and to refrain from *doing* anything contrary to their decisions, even

if this often involves his doing things that are contrary to *his own* openly expressed judgments about what would be best. He doesn't offend against **(1)** justice or **(2)** piety by acting in that way; indeed, it's how he must act if he is to show himself to be just and pious. [242] As I have already shown, **(1)** justice depends only on the decree of the sovereign authorities; so no-one can be just unless he lives according to the decrees he has received from them. And I showed in chapter 19 that the height of piety is exercised in seeking the peace and tranquillity of the State, which can't be preserved if each person is allowed to live according to his own decisions. So it's impious to act according to your own decision, contrary to the decree of the sovereign authority of your State; for if everyone were allowed to do that the State would go down. And in acting in obedience to the decrees of •the sovereign authority, you *can't* be acting in a way that is contrary to the decrees of •your own reason; because when you decided to transfer to the governing authorities your right of living according to your own judgment, it was *your reason* that urged to do this! . . .

The facts about how States are formed enable us not only to •see how each person can use his freedom of judgment without infringing on the authority of the government, but also to •work out which opinions in a State are subversive, namely: any opinion which, as soon as it is accepted by someone, destroys the agreement by which that person surrendered his right to act on his own decisions. Here are some examples:

- The supreme power isn't entitled to *be* the supreme power,
- No-one is obliged to keep his promises,
- Each person ought to live according to his own decisions.

Someone who holds such an opinion is subversive not



because of what he thinks but because of what his opinion implies for people's behaviour. Just *having* such an opinion cancels the assurance the person has (tacitly or explicitly) given to the supreme power. As for opinions that don't involve any such act as breaking a contract, getting revenge, or giving vent to anger, there's nothing subversive about *them*—except perhaps in a State that has gone bad somehow, e.g. one where superstitious and ambitious men who can't bear free-minded people get such a great reputation that the common people value their authority over that of the supreme [243] powers. I don't deny that there are also some opinions that seem to be concerned only with •truth and •falsity but are stated and spread around in a spirit of hostility that makes them tantamount to calls to subversive action. I pinned these down in chapter 15, leaving reason free over the rest of the territory.

A final argument: if we attend also to the fact that the loyalty of each person to the State, like his loyalty toward God, can be known only from his works, such as loving kindness towards his neighbour, we'll have no doubt that •the best State allows everyone the same freedom to philosophize that I have shown that •faith does.

It's true of course that such freedom sometimes has drawbacks. But what was ever so cleverly devised that no disadvantages could arise from it? Trying to shape laws so that they head off in advance all the disadvantages will do more harm than good; so various kinds of bad behaviour can't be prohibited by law, which means that they must be allowed, harmful though they may be. Think of all the evils arising from extravagant living, envy, greed, drunkenness and so on! Yet we put up with these things—these •vices—because they can't be ruled out by laws. The same holds even more strongly for freedom of judgment—we can't rule it out by law, and it is a •virtue. . . . More than that, it is utterly

essential for the development of the sciences and the arts, which can't flourish except in the hands of people who have a free and uncoerced judgment.

Suppose this freedom *could* be suppressed, and that men could be so restrained that they didn't dare *whisper* anything that the supreme powers hadn't prescribed. This couldn't be done in such a way that they didn't even *think* anything that the supreme powers didn't want them to think. So this would be a State in which men were constantly thinking one thing and saying another, so that the honesty that is so very necessary in a State would be corrupted. Abominable flattery and treachery would be encouraged, along with deception and the corruption of all the good arts.

But in fact it *couldn't* happen that everyone spoke within predetermined limits. The harder the authorities try to take away this freedom of speech, the more stubbornly men will resist. Not everyone, of course; not the greedy or the flatterers or others whose characters are weak [244] and whose greatest joy comes from thinking about the money in their coffers and having bloated bellies. But there will be resistance from those whom a good upbringing, integrity of character, and virtue have made more free.

Very many men are so constituted that the thing that infuriates them most is being regarded as criminals because of their sincerely held beliefs, including the ones that move them to dutiful conduct towards God and men. This leads them to curse the laws and to do anything they can against the legal system; and they are •proud rather than •ashamed to start rebellions and do other things—*any* other things—that will further their cause.

From this fact about human nature, it follows that laws restricting people's opinions don't affect rascals but only honest men. Their target—whether or not this was the legislators' intention—isn't •to restrain scoundrels but rather

•to make life difficult for honourable men. Such laws can't be maintained without great danger to the State.

Anyway, such laws are completely useless. Those who think that the opinions condemned by the laws are sound won't be *able* to obey the laws; while those who reject those opinions will regard the relevant laws as privileges for *them*, and will glory in them so much that the government won't ever be able to repeal them even if it wants to. . . . To these considerations I would add the conclusions I drew from the history of the Hebrews in chapter 18, item (ii) on page 148.

Finally, think of the many schisms in the Church that have been occurred because governments were willing to settle controversies among scholars *by laws*! Men wouldn't have fought so unfairly, gripped by such wild fanaticism, if they hadn't hoped to get the laws and the government on their side, to triumph over their opponents to the applause of the mob, and to acquire honours.

One could know just by thinking about it that that's how things would work out, but experience confirms it all the time. Laws of this kind, •telling everyone what to believe and •forbidding everyone to speak or write against this or that opinion, have often been instituted as a concession (or rather a surrender!) to the anger of those who can't endure free minds and who can, by a kind of grim authority, stir up the turbulent mob into mad hostility towards. . . .whatever they like. But •calming the mob would be so much better than •pandering to their fury by •passing useless laws that can't be violated except by those who love the virtues and the arts, thereby •making the State so narrow-minded [245] that it's no longer a place for men whose thoughts are free. What could be more damaging to a State than that honourable men should be exiled as outlaws because they •hold and don't know how to •hide opinions that are different from those of the government and the mob? Treating men as

enemies and condemning them to death, not because of any crime but merely because they think like free men—tell me, what could be more fatal to the State than *that*? Or letting that scourge of evil men, the gallows, become •the noblest stage for displaying paradigm examples of great endurance and virtue, putting the authorities to shame? And that is what would happen, because anyone who knows that the condemned man is honest. . . .will think it honourable, not a punishment, to die for a good cause, and glorious to die for freedom.

What sort of example will be set? As to the cause for which the man is dying: **(1)** ignorant and weak-minded people won't have any idea of what it is, **(2)** rebellious people will hate it, and **(3)** honest people will love it. His death couldn't serve as an *example* except to people who would try to follow him or at least would sing his praises. [Curley suggests that in item **(2)** Spinoza is referring to the priests. He supports this by pointing to the passage starting 'A question arises. . . ' on page 155.]

So men should be governed in such a way that they can live together in harmony while holding different and even contrary opinions. They *must* be governed in that way—freedom of judgment *must* be granted—if it is to be the case that

•honesty, not insincere agreement, is valued, and •the supreme powers retain their full sovereignty rather than rather than being compelled to knuckle under to the sedition-minded.

We can't doubt that this is the best type of government, with the fewest drawbacks, because it's the one that fits best with human nature. I have shown that in a democratic State (which is the closest one to the state of nature) everyone agrees to *act*—but not to judge or reason—according to the common decision. That is: because it can't be that all men think alike, they agreed that the course of action that had the most votes would be regarded as having been decided on,

while still retaining the authority to cancel such decisions when they saw better ones. The less this freedom of judgment is allowed to men, the more we depart from the most natural condition, and hence the more oppressive is the rule.

The next points to be established are •that this freedom has no drawbacks that can't be avoided simply by the authority of the supreme power, and •that only by this authority can men who openly hold conflicting opinions be easily restrained from harming one another. I don't have to look far for examples. The city of Amsterdam [246] has experienced the fruits of this liberty ·of thought and speech·, including great growth and the admiration of all nations. In this most flourishing republic, this outstanding city, people of every nation and sect live harmoniously together. Before they extend credit to someone, all they want to know is whether he is rich or poor and whether he has a reputation for being trustworthy. They aren't in the least interested in what his religion or sect is, because that wouldn't have any relevance in any legal proceedings. No sect is so hated that its followers aren't protected by the legal system [*magistratus*] and its officers, as long as they harm no-one, give each person his due, and live honourably. Compare this with earlier times when the religious controversy between the Remonstrants and the Counter-remonstrants started to make politicians and the Dutch provincial assemblies *jumpy*. The troubles finally degenerated into a schism—a near civil war, resulting in the start of the Orange régime·. That course of events provided plenty of examples of three facts: •laws passed to settle religious controversies stir people up rather than disciplining them, •some people take unlimited license from such laws, and •schisms don't come from a great zeal for truth—which is a source of gentleness and consideration for others—but from greed for power.

All this makes it as clear as day that the real schismatics are those who condemn the writings of others, and sedulously incite the unruly mob against the writers, and that the real troublemakers are those who try in a free State to take away freedom of belief, despite the fact that it *can't* be suppressed. The writers themselves aren't schismatics: they write mostly for a learned audience, and depend only on reason ·rather than on rabble-rousing oratory·. So here is what I have shown:

(1) It is impossible to deprive people of the freedom to say what they think.

(2) This freedom can be granted to everyone, without harm to the right and authority of the supreme powers; and anyone can *keep* it, without harm to that right, provided he doesn't think it entitles him to launch a new law into the State, and doesn't do anything contrary to the existing laws.

(3) This same freedom can be granted to everyone without disturbance of the peace of the State, with no drawbacks that can't easily be controlled.

(4) Everyone can have this freedom without any loss of piety.

(5) Laws passed about speculative (doctrinal) matters are [247] completely useless.

(6) The peace and piety of the State and the authority of the supreme powers are threatened not by •permitting this freedom but by •*not* permitting it. [Spinoza now repeats points he has already made in this chapter. The main point is that 'punishing' honest people won't deter anyone whom the State needs to deter, and will upset honest citizens. Then:] Also, this kind of legislation

- corrupts cultural pursuits and honesty,
- encourages flatterers and traitors, and
- gives hostile people something to crow about, because a concession has been made to their rage—they

have turned the powers that be into *followers* of the doctrine of which they are considered to be the interpreters. That's what emboldens them to usurp the authority and right of the sovereign powers, and to boast unblushingly that they have been chosen immediately by God and that *their* decrees are divine, and should take precedence over the merely human decrees of the supreme ·civil· powers.

It's just perfectly obvious that all these things are completely antithetical to the well-being of the State.

So I conclude here, as I did in chapter 18, that the best way for the State to be secure is for piety and religion to be found only in the practice of loving kindness and justice, and for the authority of the supreme ·civil· powers concerning

both sacred and secular matters to be exercised only over *actions*, with everyone being allowed to think what he likes and to say what he thinks.

That brings me to the end of what I wanted to say in this book. I have only to add that

I gladly submit the whole thing to the examination and judgment of the governing authorities of my country. If they judge that anything in it conflicts with the laws of the country or threatens the general welfare, I take it back. I'm aware that I am a man and ·therefore· may have erred. Still, I have tried very hard not to go wrong, and taken care especially that whatever I might write would be entirely consistent with the laws of my country, with piety and with morals.