

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.

First launched: August 2007

Chapters 5 and 8–11 added: June 2010

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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'.¹ 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

¹ 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 Manoah [*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,² 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

² 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 patriarchs³ 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

³ 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.