Treatise on Theology and Politics

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

Benedict (or Baruch) Spinoza

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 4: The divine law

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

For example,

> (1) When any body x collides with a smaller body y, it loses as much of its motion as it communicates to y

is a universal law of all bodies, and **[58]** follows from a necessity of nature. Similarly,

> **(1)** When a man recalls one thing x, he immediately recalls something else y that either resembles x or that he has perceived together with x in the past

is a law that necessarily follows from human nature. But any law of the type:

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

depends on a human decision.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

·The definition says '. . . for some purpose'·; but the true purpose of laws is usually evident to only a few. **[59]** Most people are hardly capable of grasping it, and don't come anywhere near to living according to reason. This has led legislators, wanting to put the same restraints on everyone, to set up another end ·or purpose·, very different from the one that necessarily follows from the nature of laws. Specifically, they have identified what the multitude most love (x) and what they most fear (y), and have promised that the defenders of the laws will get x, and threatened law-breakers with getting y. By this wisely chosen device they do their best to restrain the multitude, like restraining a horse with a harness.

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

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

·Divine law·

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

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

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

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

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

What *are* these means? *What* way of life is needed to achieve this end? How out of all this do we work out the foundations of the best State and the best way for men to live together? These questions belong in a complete Ethics. I am going to deal here with the divine law only in a general way.

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

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

but only

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. It doesn't require faith in historical narratives of any kind. Because this natural divine law is grasped simply by thinking about human nature, we can conceive it as much in Adam as in anyone else, as much in a man who lives in society as in one who lives a solitary life. And it's not just that faith in historical narratives isn't *needed*; it doesn't even *help*. Faith in such narratives, however certain we are of their truth, can't give us any knowledge of God. So it can't give us the love of God either, because the love of God comes from the knowledge of God, and that has to come from self-evident universal propositions. [That last clause is a free but essentially accurate translation of something which more strictly and literally means '. . . to come from common notions which, through themselves, are certain and known'.] So faith in historical narratives is far from being necessary for us to attain our greatest good, which is the knowledge and love of God. Still, I don't deny that reading historical narratives is very useful for purposes of civil life. **[62]** The more we have seen and learned about the character and circumstances of men—which can best be known from their actions—the better the job we'll make of taking care of ourselves when we live among them, and adjusting our actions—within reason—to fit with their temperament.

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

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

·Is God a law-giver?·

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

rather than as

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

•God → Christ → mankind

is not parallel to the transaction

•God → prophet → mankind,

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

•God → voice-or-vision → prophet.

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

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

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

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

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

From all this I draw three conclusions. •When God is described as a lawgiver or prince, and called just, merciful, etc., this is only because of the multitude's level of understanding and their ignorance. •God really acts and guides all things only from the necessity of God's own nature and perfection. •God's decrees and volitions are eternal truths, and always involve necessity. [Regarding the wording of this passage, see note on page 9.] That completes my answer to the first of the four questions ·raised on page 39·.

·WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE TEACH ABOUT THIS?·

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

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

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

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

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

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

Also, he says very explicitly that the intellect makes a man blessed and happy, and gives him true peace of mind: 'Happy is the man who finds wisdom, the man who attains understanding' (*Proverbs* 3:13). He goes on to say that this is because knowledge directly gives longevity, and indirectly brings wealth and honour; her ways (i.e. the paths of life that knowledge indicates) are pleasant, and all her paths are peace. Thus, Solomon agrees that only the wise live with a constant and peaceful heart, unlike the impious, whose heart vacillates with conflicting drives and emotions, to such an extent that they have no peace, no rest. Isaiah says this too, at *Isaiah* 57:20.

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, I mustn't overlook the passage where Paul says: 'God's hidden things, from the foundations of the world, are visible in his creatures through the intellect; this includes his power and divinity, which are eternal; so they—·his creatures·—are without excuse' (*Romans* 1:20, following Tremellius's translation of the Syriac text). This tells us clearly enough that each person, by the natural light, clearly understands God's eternal power and divinity, from which he can know and deduce what he ought to seek and what he ought to avoid. Paul infers from this that no-one could be excused ·for his sins· on the grounds that he didn't know ·that they *were* sins·; whereas they *could* have been excused for not knowing about supernatural inspiration, Christ's suffering in the flesh, the resurrection and other such things ·that are not naturally knowable by everyone·. Through the rest of that chapter he describes the vices of ignorance, presenting them as punishments for ignorance. This agrees completely with Solomon's Proverb—cited above—that the punishment of fools is foolishness. So *of course* Paul holds that evildoers are inexcusable. For as each one sows, so shall he reap (*Galatians* 6:7); ·that is·, from evil deeds evils *necessarily* follow, unless they are wisely corrected, and from good deeds goods *necessarily* follow, if they are accompanied by constancy of mind.

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

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

[69] In the preceding chapter I showed that the divine law which makes men truly blessed and teaches true life is universal to all men. Indeed, I derived it from human nature in such a way that we must think that it is innate to the human mind—written into it, as it were. But ceremonies—at least the ones the Old Testament tells us about—were instituted only for the Hebrews; and they were so closely tailored to fit the Hebrew state that they mostly couldn't be performed by individuals but only by the society as a whole. So they certainly don't have to do with the divine law, because they

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

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

·Scriptural evidence re the place of ceremonies·
Isaiah teaches nothing more clearly than this:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> **(1)** teach the Jews as a teacher or prophet

that they shouldn't kill or steal; rather he

> **(2)** commands them, as a lawgiver and monarch,

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

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

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

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

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

> '. . . then you can seek the favour of the Lord. I will set you astride the heights of the earth, and let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

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

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

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

> God loves only those who know and understand that he exercises compassion, judgment and justice in the world; so hereafter only those who know these things are to be thought worthy of praise: [see *Jeremiah* 9:23]

seemingly meaning that after the city was ravaged God wouldn't require anything special of the Jews—only obedience to the natural law by which all mortals are bound.

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

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

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

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

'Didn't the Patriarchs sacrifice to God?' Yes, but I think they did that in order to rouse their hearts—that had been accustomed to sacrifices from childhood—to more devotion. . . . **[..73]** So why did the Patriarchs sacrifice to God? It was not

because some divine law told them to, or
because the universal foundations of divine law taught them to, but
because it was the custom at that time.

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

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

·How ceremonies help the state·

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

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

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

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

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

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

(3) *Obeying* is doing something solely because of the authority of whoever commanded that it be done; so obedience has no place in a social order where sovereignty is in the hands of everyone and laws are enacted by common consent. When in such a society new laws are enacted or existing laws are repealed, the freedom of the people is not affected either way, because the people don't act from the authority of someone else but by their own consent. Where one person alone holds unconstrained sovereignty, the opposite happens. For everyone carries out the commands of the state solely because of the authority of one person, so that it will be hard for him to bring in new laws when there is a need for them, depriving the people of a liberty they once had; unless they have been brought up from childhood to hang on the words of the ruler, ·in which case his job won't be so hard·.

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

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

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

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

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

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

·Faith in Scripture's historical narratives·

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

notions often requires

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 6: Miracles

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

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

What do they take these two powers to be? and what do they take God and nature to be? *They don't know*! Except that they imagine God's power as •the rule of a monarch, and imagine nature's power as •force and impulse. So the common people label as 'miracles' or 'God's work' any unusual natural events; they don't *want* to know things' natural causes—partly out of devotion ·to God·, and partly out of hostility to those who cultivate the natural sciences. All they want to hear about are things that can astonish them, i.e. things about which they are completely ignorant. The only way they can worship God and relate everything to his rule is by eliminating natural causes and imagining events outside the order of nature. They are most impressed by God's power when they imagine that it has, so to speak, conquered nature.

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

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

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

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

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

·NATURE'S UNCHANGEABILITY·

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

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

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

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

·WHAT 'MIRACLE' MEANS·

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

or with

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

·How scripture interprets 'God's providence'·

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

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

and not, as the multitude thinks, that

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

But Scripture doesn't directly teach things that don't fall within its doctrine, because—as I showed concerning the divine law—it isn't Scripture's purpose to teach things through their natural causes or to teach things that are mere matters of theory. So what I want to show here must be inferred by reasoning from certain biblical narratives that just *happen* to have been related with more detail than usual. I shall cite a number of these.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[..91] You may want to object: 'Many things in the Bible seem not to be *capable* of being explained by natural causes—e.g. that men's sins and prayers caused rain or the fertility of the earth, that faith healed the blind, and other things of that sort.' But I think I have already replied to this. For I have shown that Scripture doesn't teach things through their immediate causes, but only relates them in the order and with the wording that will most effectively move people (especially the common people) to devotion. So it says things that are quite wrong about God and other things, because it's trying not to convince men's reason but to affect and occupy their imagination. If Scripture related the destruction of some State in the way political historians usually do, that wouldn't stir the common people at all. Whereas if it depicts everything poetically and ascribes everything to God, as it usually does, it will move them very much. So when Scripture reports that the earth was sterile because of men's sins, or that the blind were healed by faith, those passages oughtn't to affect us any more than the passages that are *obviously* not to be understood literally, e.g. where the Bible relates •that because of men's sins God becomes angry, or sad, or has second thoughts about the good he has promised or done, or •that because God sees a sign he remembers a promise he has made, or •a great many other things that are either said poetically or are shaped by the opinions and prejudices of the author.

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

·How to understand stories about miracles·

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

·Two ways of approaching miracles·

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 7: The interpretation of Scripture

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

If men were sincere in what they say about Scripture, their conduct would be very different. They wouldn't care so much about these frequent disagreements ·with other theologians·, and wouldn't display such hatred in their disputes; and they wouldn't be gripped by such a blind and reckless desire to interpret Scripture and to think up new doctrines in religion. Quite the contrary: they wouldn't dare to accept anything as a teaching of Scripture unless Scripture taught it with the greatest clarity. And the sacrilegious people who haven't shrunk from corrupting Scripture in so many passages would been careful to avoid such a crime, keeping their sacrilegious hands away from those texts.

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

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

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

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

·Interpreting Scripture and interpreting nature·

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

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

And what is needed to interpret Scripture is to

- prepare a straightforward history of Scripture, taking this as the data and premises from which we validly infer what the biblical authors meant.

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

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

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

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

what Spinoza wrote next: *Quare hoc idem etiam nobis constare debet, ut fidem ipsis possimus habere.*
conservatively translated: So to be able to have faith in them, we too must establish the same thing.
perhaps meaning: So we need to establish that *our* hearts are thus inclined, if we are to have faith in *them*.

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

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

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

·THE HISTORY OF SCRIPTURE·

(1) It must lay out the nature and properties of the language in which the Books of Scripture were written—the language the authors were accustomed to speak. **[100]** We need that if we are to find out all the meanings that each utterance could have in ordinary conversational usage. The authors of both Testaments were Hebrews, so we especially need a history of the Hebrew language, not just for understanding the Old Testament, whose Books were written in that language, but also for understanding the Books of the New Testament. For although they were propagated in other languages, they have many Hebrew turns of phrase.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The history must record the fate of each Book:

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

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

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

·Interpreting universal doctrines·

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

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

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

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

Scripture teaches these and similar things all over the place, so clearly and so explicitly that there has never been any dispute about the meanings of those biblical passages. (But answers to questions such as 'What *is* God?' and '*How* does God see and **[103]** provide for everything?' and so on are not taught by Scripture as eternal doctrine.) Once this universal teaching of Scripture is rightly known, we must proceed next to doctrines that are less universal but which
- flow from this universal teaching like streams and which
- concern how we ·should· ordinarily conduct our lives. For example, teachings about particular ways of behaving that are required for true virtue—teachings that come into play only on particular occasions to which they are relevant. When something of this sort is found to be obscure or ambiguous in the biblical texts, we should clear it up on the basis of the universal teaching of Scripture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

·INTERPRETING SPECULATIVE PASSAGES·

All I have presented so far is the method for investigating biblical sayings about how we should conduct our lives. They aren't very hard to deal with, because the authors of the Bible didn't really disagree about them. Things don't go so easily, however, when we come to other things that occur in the biblical texts—things that are matters of pure speculation—because the path to these is narrower. [The main meaning of 'speculative' is 'not practical' in the sense of 'not having to do with morality'. In the present context, the 'speculation' that's in question is philosophical and theological theory.] I have shown that the prophets disagreed among themselves in speculative matters, and their narratives were closely tailored to fit the prejudices of their times. So we mustn't infer or explain the meaning of •one prophet on the basis of clearer passages by •another, unless it has been *very* solidly established that the two favoured the same opinion ·on the matter in question·. Then how, when a prophet writes on such ·speculative· matters, can we use our history of Scripture as a means to discovering what he means? I'll answer this briefly.

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

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

·TRADITIONS—SUSPECT AND TRUSTWORTHY·

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

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

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

My method—based on the principle that knowledge of Scripture should be sought only from Scripture—is the only true method ·of interpreting Scripture·, so anything that *it* can't provide us with should be absolutely given up as hopeless. Now I must talk about what is needed, what difficulties must be overcome, for my method to lead us to a complete and certain knowledge of the sacred texts.

·The need for a knowledge of Hebrew·

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

·Other difficulties·

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

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

given when and in what context he wrote.

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

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

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

·Why the difficulties don't matter much·

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

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

•his life, his concerns, his customs,

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

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

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

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

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

·Rival views: reliance on natural light·

Now I have to examine the opinions of those who disagree with me. I start with the view that *the natural light has no power to interpret Scripture, and for this a supernatural light is required*. I leave it to the upholders of this to explain what this other-than-natural light *is*. The best I can make of what they say is that it's an obscurely worded confession that they aren't sure of anything concerning the true meaning of Scripture. Their explanations contain nothing other-than-natural, indeed nothing but mere conjectures. Compare what these people say with the explanations given by those who admit openly that the natural light is all the light they have. You'll find them to be completely similar: human, long pondered, laboriously constructed.

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

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

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

(1) God is not corporeal.

(2) The world has existed from eternity.

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

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

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

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

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

·A ONE-PARAGRAPH ASIDE·

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

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

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

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

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

·RIVAL VIEWS: RELIANCE ON PRIESTLY AUTHORITY·

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

You might think: 'The Hebrews had a High Priest; so the Catholic religion needs one too.' ·The two cases are not at all parallel·. •The laws of Moses were the *public legislation* of the country, and they couldn't survive unless there was some public authority ·that was responsible for interpreting and enforcing them·. If each citizen were free to interpret the public legislation in the way he chose, no State could survive; the existence of such freedom would immediately dissolve the State, converting its public law into private law. •The nature of religion is not like that. The core of it has to do not with external actions but rather with simplicity and sincerity of heart; so it doesn't come under any public legislation or public authority. Simplicity and sincerity of heart aren't instilled in men by the command of laws or by public authority, and *no-one* can be compelled by force or by laws to become blessed! To make men blessed, what is required is pious and brotherly advice, good upbringing, and above all one's own free judgment. **[117]**

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

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

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

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