CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BOOK OF NATURE: FROM AXIOM TO METAPHOR

The atheist convinced

‘I have read your lectures with very great pleasure’, wrote Constantijn Huygens to the Leiden professor of theology Friederich Spanheim on 5 May 1676, ‘and I approve of your plan to have them translated into Dutch’.¹ The texts to which Huygens was referring had been published shortly before under the title L’Athée convaincu, en quatre sermons, and they were indeed also made available to Dutch who were unable to read French.² Den atheïst, of God-verloochenaar, overtuycht in vier predikatien (The atheist convinced, in four sermons) was the title, above the words of Psalm 14:1: ‘The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God’.³

Spanheim is an interesting figure in connection with the present study. The orthodox theologian was a bitter opponent of Cartesians and other enlightened thinkers, but, unlike many followers of Voetius, he was not a dogmatist but a historian of the church and an exegete of international standing who had a great affinity with the emergent historico-critical interpretation of the Bible.⁴ In other words, he was one of those scholars who oscillated between the two extremes of biblicism and radical rationalism. It is characteristic of Spanheim’s interests that he wrote a commentary on Job, a book filled with natural wonders; this commentary exerted a very strong fascination on Huygens and was to be reprinted down to late in the eighteenth century.⁵ Like so many, Spanheim considered that the contemplation and study of God’s creation provided decisive arguments against the Epicureans, materialists and atheists. He expressed his convictions not only in books but also in sermons. Between the end of 1675 and the beginning

¹ BCH VI, 377.
² Spanheim, L’Athée convaincu.
³ Spanheim, Den atheïst of God-verloochenaar overtuycht.
⁴ Thijssen-Schoute, Nederlands cartesianisme, 48–52; De Jonge, De bestudering van het Nieuwe Testament, 57.
⁵ Spanheim, Historia Jobi, sive de obscuris historiae commentario; Idem, Geschiedenis van Job. Cf. BCH VI, 313.
of 1676 he preached four times on godlessness from the pulpit of the Waalse Kerk in Leiden.

The timing was certainly not chosen at random, but should be seen partly against the background of the work of Spinoza, the publication of whose *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* in 1670 had caused an exceptional commotion in the Dutch Republic. The Leiden council of churches decided on 8 December 1673 to strongly urge the Grand Pensionary Fagel to have the book banned ‘as vigorously as possible’. Four years after publication, the *Tractatus* was one of several books, including Meijer’s *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres*, to be banned by the Court of Holland. The motivation of the sentence adduced the argument that these blasphemous works were an assault on the ‘authority of the Holy Scripture’. However, this did not eliminate the danger. On the contrary, while in 1675 the Leiden council of churches repeated its great concern at the ‘undermining of the true Christian Reformed Religion’, news spread that Spinoza had a second book in print. ‘Which rumour’, the philosopher wrote to Oldenburg in September 1675, ‘was accepted by many…When I understood this from certain trustworthy men, I decided to postpone the edition I was preparing’ (the *Ethica*). In short, the ever present danger of heresy and atheism seemed to be very acute at this moment.

Although Spanheim’s sermons against ‘godlessness’ were triggered by the present circumstances, he displayed a remarkable awareness of the historical context of this menace. Indeed, the need had never been so acute, now that various writers were changing religion ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, were presenting Moses as a wily politician, and were regarding the biblical wonders ‘as entertaining stories, or simple works of nature’. Spanheim did not name his opponents, but it must have been clear enough to most of his audience whom he had in mind. He turned his wrath not only on these ‘fools’, but also on their Dutch publishers. They lent themselves only too readily

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7 Freudenthal, *Die Lebengeschichte Spinoza’s*, 136–137.
8 *Groot Placaet-Boeck* III, 523.