Spinoza’s Concept of Biblical Interpretation

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1. Introduction: on the Bible, modernity, and the relationship between reason and faith

Spinoza is universally recognized as one of the founders of modern biblical criticism. He is also universally recognized as one of the most profound philosophers of all time. But here philosophical, theological, and scholarly opinion divides. For, from his day to ours, Spinoza has been considered not only the atheist who rejects divine revelation but also the acosmist (the term which Hegel uses instead of the more conventional epithet of pantheist) who reduces all reality (the cosmos) to divine substance. It is equally the case that Spinoza, the grand metaphysician of infinite totality who introduces the Ethics with the ontological argument for the existence of God and concludes his work with the intellectual love of God, is viewed as the master of modern thought who, at one and the same time, reflects the bankruptcy of modern metaphysics, embodies the irrelevance of metaphysics for modernity, and demonstrates the preeminence of metaphysics in the critique of modernity. Underlying these radically different judgments on the relationship of Spinoza’s thought to modernity is the issue of how we are to evaluate the relationship between philosophy and theology, between reason and faith, between secular truth and revealed truth in Spinoza and thus not only his relation to the
traditions of both Judaism and Christianity but also the place of the Bible in his thinking.

What all thinkers and scholars known to me fail to recognize, however, is that Spinoza provides a profoundly searching critique of not only biblical revelation but also human reason, of both theology and philosophy. But, because Spinoza himself appears to privilege philosophical discourse over theological discourse and because it is our own modernist tendency to associate rationality and secularism with modern thinkers and religion and revelation (if not what Spinoza calls superstition) with our premodern forebears, we thoughtlessly impose on Spinoza the very dualism between philosophy and theology which, as I intend to show in this paper, it is his express and fundamental purpose to reject root and branch. The fact that postmodern critique shows the inadequacy of viewing modernism in terms of rationalism should make us question, however, the notion that modern secularism marks a progressive advance over premodern religion. Yet it is also the case, I think, that postmodernism itself remains paralysed, no more and no less than the modernism which it criticizes for its shallow rationalism, by its inability to rethink the relationship between rational truth and revealed truth, between philosophy and theology, between the secular and the religious.

What is yet to be appreciated about Spinoza is the significance of the fact that he is not only the first but also the last major philosopher to make the Bible, the interpretation of the Bible, central to the philosophic enterprise, to thinking itself. What he shows, notwithstanding, at times, the ambiguity of his own presentation, is that, if we are to overcome the dualism of reducing not only the Bible to reason (in the dogmatic tradition of Maimonides) but also reason to the Bible (in the skeptical tradition of Malmonides' opponents), with the consequence that both reason and the Bible are falsified, we have to conceive of reason and faith such that each, in being sovereign and thus not subordinate to the other, is not contradictory of the other. A radical consequence of Spinoza's demonstration that biblical interpretation presupposes the sover-

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4 But see N.O. Brown who writes: "Spinoza's historical perspective contradicts the usual view of philosophy as a legacy of Greek rationality distinct from and opposed to the Hebraic legacy of prophecy . . . The archetypal philosopher is not Socrates but Jesus Christ." (99)