

# Spinoza's Biblical Scholarship (Chapter 8–10)

## 6.1 The Issues

Historians of philosophy, analyzing Spinoza's contribution to biblical scholarship, have often focused on his denial that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. This is understandable, but unfortunate. In the 12th century Maimonides had made it a fundamental principle of Judaism that the Pentateuch came to us from God through Moses, „who acted like a secretary taking dictation.“ To deny this, he thought, was to be either an atheist or a heretic of the worst kind (Twersky 1972, 420 f.). By the 17th century, when doubt about this proposition was growing, Spinoza could still write that almost everyone believed Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch (TTP VIII, 146).<sup>1</sup> Even today conservative Christians still defend the Mosaic authorship, as part of their war against critical biblical scholarship.

Though the issue is undoubtedly important, Spinoza was not the first to deny the Mosaic authorship, and preoccupation with this issue has led historians to devote much energy to finding precursors, sometimes seeming to deny Spinoza any claim to originality as a biblical scholar. Not only did this deprive Spinoza of credit which was his due, it also distracted us from more important questions: if Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, who was? What about the other

<sup>1</sup> Page references to the TTP are given to the German edition in Wolfgang Bartuschat's translation. Translations of citations and paraphrases are my own.

books of the Bible? Does Spinoza challenge traditional views about their authorship also? On what grounds? More fundamentally: why do modern biblical scholars often regard Spinoza as a seminal figure in the history of their discipline, and credit him with setting biblical criticism on a productive, properly scientific course? And most important: what do his inquiries imply about the truth of the religions which hold these texts to be sacred?

## 6.2 The Question of Mosaic Authorship

Before taking up these questions, though, we must discuss the authorship of the Pentateuch. Spinoza did, of course, have precursors in denying that Moses wrote it. Some problems about the traditional theory were too obvious to escape notice. The last eight verses of Deuteronomy describe Moses's death. So the Talmud, a major source for the traditional view, says only that Moses wrote everything in the Pentateuch except those last few verses, which it assigns to Joshua instead (Talmud, Baba Bathra 15a). Luther adopted a variant of this view, ascribing the entire final chapter to either Joshua or Eleazar (Luther 1960, 310).

These are quite conservative solutions, which attribute only a small portion of the text to another author, and attribute that portion to an author roughly contemporary with Moses, who might have been an eyewitness to many of the events reported, and could at least have heard accounts of them directly from Moses himself. Popkin, who wrote extensively on Spinoza's biblical scholarship, had no trouble showing that in Spinoza's day many Christian commentators accepted such conservative solutions and did not think they presented any problem for believers (Popkin 1996, 388).

But conservative solutions don't work. One of Spinoza's contributions to this discipline was to show that in a way most subsequent scholars found conclusive (cf. ABD 1992, VI, 618 f.). Immediately after reporting the death of Moses, Deuteronomy describes his burial, commenting that „no one knows his burial place to this day.“ (Deut 34, 6) Four verses later it eulogizes him, saying: „Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses.“ This language clearly implies an author writing long after Moses's death. To assign it to a contemporary is anachronistic. Clues like this don't occur only in the last chapter of the Pentateuch; they're scattered throughout the text in a way which defies any simple theory

of its composition. For example, in Gen 12, 6, the author, describing Abraham's passage through Canaan, writes: „the Canaanite was then in the land.“ Whoever wrote that verse was evidently writing when the Canaanites were *not* in the land. But that could not be Moses or any contemporary, like Joshua. In their days the Canaanites *were* in the land.

Those are problems of anachronism; there are also problems of point of view. Often „Moses“ speaks of himself in the first person (Deut 2, 2, „Then the LORD said to me ...“); but he also often speaks of himself in the third person (Num 12, 3, „Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on ... earth.“) If Moses was the author, why does he go back and forth between the first person and the third? And how could a truly humble man say that he's the humblest man on earth? Yet on the theory of Mosaic authorship, that's precisely what Moses did.

### 6.3 Precursors

Popkin's favorite candidate for a precursor who anticipated Spinoza's arguments was Isaac La Peyrère, a 17th century French Millenarian best known for claiming that there were men before Adam. Though Spinoza must have read La Peyrère, and though La Peyrère did question Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch on some of the same grounds Spinoza did, it's doubtful that he had any significant influence on Spinoza. La Peyrère lacked what Spinoza thought was one essential qualification for serious Old Testament scholarship: a knowledge of the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written. And his arguments against the Mosaic authorship were much more limited than Spinoza's.

Spinoza himself credits the 12th century Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra with having noted many of the problems about the supposed Mosaic authorship (TTP VIII, 146). But Ibn Ezra only hinted at the problems. Spinoza thinks that's because he realized Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch, but didn't dare say so openly. (This would not be surprising, if Maimonides correctly reported 12th century views about the essentials of Judaism.) Ibn Ezra's style is allusive; modern scholars still debate what he thought about the problems he raised. A recent translator writes that he „no doubt wanted to make his novel approach to the Pentateuch obscure to the uninformed and unintelligent,“ but that he was not „an anti-traditionalist in disguise,“ or „a forerunner of modern biblical cri-

ticism“ (Ibn Ezra 1988, I, xv, xx). But Spinoza clearly read Ibn Ezra as an „anti-traditionalist“. And the use he makes of him at the beginning of chapter 8 – spelling out the problems Ibn Ezra had raised in a veiled way, giving him credit for being the first to call attention to these problems, and adding numerous examples of his own – shows that Spinoza himself regarded Ibn Ezra as his true precursor. If we think Spinoza’s doubts about Scripture must have begun long before his excommunication in 1656, probably as early as his teens (Wolf 1927, 42), long before he could have had any contact with La Peyrère, it would be hard to find a better candidate. This was Gebhardt’s view (Gebhardt 1987, 228–235).

By mid-17th century Spinoza had precursors who were offering quite radical solutions, and who were open about this. In *Leviathan* Hobbes came as close to Spinoza as anyone, arguing that whoever wrote the account of Moses’s burial must have been writing „long after the death of Moses,“ pointing out that the anachronisms are not only in the last chapter of Deuteronomy, noting the references in the Pentateuch to earlier works, now lost, and contending that only a relatively small part of the Pentateuch can reasonably be ascribed to Moses, the „Volume of the Law“ set out in Deut 11–27 (Hobbes 1994, 252 f.). La Peyrère, by contrast, seems to have thought that Moses wrote most of the Pentateuch. He has no doubt, for example, that Moses gave an accurate account of the exodus from Egypt and of the laws delivered at Mt. Sinai.

On these matters Spinoza seems unlikely to have been influenced by Hobbes either. *Leviathan* was not published in a language he could read until 1667, by which time the excommunication was long past, and he’d been at work on the *Tractatus* for two years. Moreover, Spinoza makes a much stronger case for these conclusions than Hobbes had. One way he does this is by offering many more examples of anachronism. The numbers matter, because the more anachronisms there are, the harder it is to devise conservative hypotheses to explain them. He also raises problems Hobbes had not mentioned, like the problem of point of view. (La Peyrère did not mention this either.) But he reaches roughly the same conclusion about how much of the Pentateuch Moses actually wrote: mainly „the book of the second covenant,“ which he identifies with Deut 11–26, but also the song attributed to Moses in Deut 32 (TTP VIII, 150–53). That makes Moses’s contribution to the Pentateuch a rather small part of the whole, much less than the high percentage conservative commentators insisted on.

## 6.4 The Ezran Hypothesis

The most significant point on which Hobbes and Spinoza agree is that the Hebrew Bible, *in the form in which it has come down to us*, is largely the work of Ezra, a priest in the post-exilic period. The hypothesis that Ezra did much to shape the Hebrew Bible had been around for a long time. There's a wonderfully informative account of this history in Malcolm 2002. Both Hobbes and Spinoza embrace it, though in different forms, and on quite different grounds. La Peyrère does not mention it.

For Hobbes the Ezran hypothesis is simply the thesis that *the entire Hebrew Bible*, in its final form, was „set forth“ by Ezra (Hobbes 1994, 255 f.). He bases this on a passage in 2 Esdras in which the author, who presents himself as the post-exilic priest Ezra, petitions God to enable him to restore the scriptures, which are supposed to have been lost. This „Ezra“ claims to have said to God: „Your law has been burned, and no one knows the things which have been done or will be done by you. If I have found favor with you, send the holy spirit into me, and I will write everything that has happened in the world from the beginning, the things that were written in your law, so that people may be able to find the path ...“ (2 Esdras 14, 21 f.). 2 Esdras is an odd text, and not a very credible one. Modern scholarship holds that it was written after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, several centuries after the death of the historical Ezra (ABD 1992, VI, 612). If that's correct, the historical Ezra could not have been the author of 2 Esdras. Hence the scare quotes around „Ezra“, in referring to the author of this work.

In the passage cited „Ezra“ reports that God granted his request, and that for forty days and forty nights, without stopping for food, drink, or rest, he dictated the scriptures to five amanuenses. The amanuenses got to stop for nourishment and sleep. This process yielded ninety-four books, of which twenty-four were to be published and seventy reserved for restricted circulation „among the wise.“

It's hard to believe that Hobbes actually expects us to accept this tale. It assumes that we have our present Hebrew Bible only because of a miracle. All extant manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible must derive from copies made by Ezra's amanuenses, dictated by Ezra under divine inspiration, in a superhuman feat of endurance. Elsewhere in *Leviathan* Hobbes is skeptical about miracles, cautioning us that we're too easily deceived by false stories of miracles (Hobbes 1994,

298–300). In this context he invites a more specific skepticism by reminding us that 2 Esdras does not have the sanction of „the church“, which classifies that book as apocryphal, not canonical. Hobbes explains that what this means is that though the church does not think 2 Esdras has a well-grounded claim to inspired authorship, and so does not expect members of the church to accept what it says, it does think 2 Esdras is „profitable ... for our instruction.“ As Malcolm has shown, Hobbes’s theory of Ezra’s authorship of the Hebrew Bible became a common feature of skeptical attacks on religion in the Enlightenment.

Spinoza’s version of the Ezran hypothesis (TTP VIII, 155–58) is more limited, and based on an argument modern scholars might more easily regard as a serious contribution to their discipline. First, he doesn’t claim that it holds for *every* book in the Hebrew Bible. He applies it only to the series of books beginning with the Pentateuch and extending through the next several books, to the end of 2 Kings, a sequence which purports to tell the history of the people of Israel from the creation down to the Babylonian Captivity. I follow Freedman 1994 in calling this sequence of texts „the Primary History“ of the people of Israel.

It’s unclear how many books we should include in this Primary History. Spinoza thinks of himself as having argued for Ezra’s authorship of twelve books (TTP VIII, 158; IX, 160). He gets to that number by including the five books of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. But it’s doubtful that he’s entitled to include Ruth. He never really discusses its authorship, and it doesn’t fit the pattern of the books he does discuss. Freedman doesn’t count Ruth as part of his Primary History. So I’ll count eleven books in the sequence, recognizing that Spinoza would say „twelve“.

None of these books, Spinoza argues, could have been written by the author to whom tradition ascribed it. „Tradition“ here means the account given in Tractate Baba Bathra of the Babylonian Talmud, 14b–15b. So not only did Moses not write the Pentateuch, Joshua did not write Joshua, Samuel did not write either the book of Judges or the books bearing his name, and Jeremiah did not write the books of Kings. In each case the reasons for denying these traditional ascriptions are similar to those we’ve already discussed, though Spinoza deals with them much more briefly.

All these books were „written“, he thinks, by Ezra. What’s the evidence for Ezra’s authorship? And what does „written“ mean here? Spinoza’s argument is essentially a literary one. First, if we pay careful attention to the way these books

are written, we'll see that they had a single author, trying to tell a coherent story, the history of the Jews, beginning with their origin in the creation and ending with the first destruction of Jerusalem and their captivity in Babylon (TTP VIII, 155 f.). One sign of this is the way the books are linked together. As soon as the author has stopped narrating the life of Moses, he passes to the history of Joshua, using these words: „And it came to pass, after Moses, the servant of God, died, that God said to Joshua ...“ (Jos 1, 1). Similar transitional formulas are used to tie the other books together. What's more, the author evidently wants to tell his story in chronological order. And most crucially, there's a common theme to the narrative: the history of the Jewish people is the history of God's providential dealings with them. Moses promulgated laws, and made certain predictions about what God would do for (or to) the Jews, depending on whether or not they obeyed his laws. If they obeyed, he would see that they flourished. If they disobeyed, they would be punished. The subsequent history of the Jewish people is the story of how these predictions were fulfilled. When the Jews were obedient, they prospered. When they were disobedient, they did not. The author ignores things which don't contribute to his case for that perspective, or refers us to other historians for an account of them (TTP VIII, 156). The failure of Ruth to contribute to this narrative is one reason for doubting that that book really belongs in the group Spinoza ascribes to Ezra.

So far we have an argument for a single author. But why Ezra? First, since the author carries the story into the period of the Babylonian Captivity – the last event the Primary History mentions is Jehoiachin's release from prison in the thirty-seventh year of the exile – if there was only one author, it can't be anyone earlier than that period (TTP VIII, 156). Spinoza is apparently mistaken about Ezra's dates, taking him to have flourished in the time right after the return from Babylon, in the second half of the 6th century BCE (TTP X, 175). Modern scholarship makes Ezra a contemporary of Artaxerxes I, who reigned in the mid-5th century (ABD 1992, II, 726 f.). But whatever Ezra's dates were, the single-author theory, combined with the scope of the history recorded in these books, limits the candidates for its author to people who lived in the time of the captivity or later.

Second, Scripture describes Ezra as someone who zealously studied God's law, became skilled in it, honored it, and tried to teach it to the people of his time, amplifying it with explanations, to make it more intelligible to them. (Esr 7, 1–10;

Neh 8, 1–8.) Spinoza can cite canonical scripture in favor of these propositions. He does not need to appeal to the Apocrypha. Given his caustic dismissal of 2 Esdras (also known as 4 Ezra) as containing „legends added by some trifler“ (TTP X, 182), it seems unlikely that he would have wanted to. Furthermore, scripture does not mention anyone else in the post-exilic period who possessed all these qualifications: a zealous student of the law, who tried to explain it to the people, amplifying it as necessary. Spinoza does not advance his claim about Ezra’s authorship of these books as something we can be certain of. He says he will assume that Ezra was their author „until someone establishes another writer with greater certainty“ (TTP IX, 159). But if Ezra was not the author, Spinoza’s arguments seem at least to make it probable that the author was someone like Ezra, particularly as regards the relatively late date at which he was writing. Perhaps that’s enough for us to know.

## 6.5 What Ezra is Supposed to Have Done

What does Spinoza mean when he says that Ezra was the writer of these books? So far I’ve used the words „author“ and „writer“ as if they were synonyms. But Spinoza makes a distinction between the Latin terms I translate this way. When he’s discussing Moses, he frames the question the way the literature typically does, as when he writes that „no one has any basis for saying that Moses was the author [*autor*] of the Pentateuch“ and that it’s completely contrary to reason to say that (TTP VIII, 152). But when he’s advancing his hypothesis about Ezra, he uses the term *scriptor*: Ezra was the *writer* of those books (e. g. at TTP IX, 159). I take it that Spinoza uses *autor* to refer to someone who is the originator of a work, whereas *scriptor* is a more general term, which *might* refer to a work’s originator, but might also refer to its editor. Spinoza really thinks of Ezra’s role as more akin to that of an editor than to that of an author in the strict sense. He did not just make up the stories he told, as some polemicists against Judaism and Christianity inferred from 2 Esdras (Malcolm 2002, 400–402). He had at his disposal manuscripts of the works of earlier historians, works now lost, which he collected and organized as best he could, sometimes adding material of his own to explain things which needed explanation and to make the overall story more coherent (TTP VIII, 158; IX, 159).



It was not news that the writers of our present scriptures knew, and used, the works of earlier historians now lost. Our present scriptures sometimes mention these works, as when 1 Kings refers us to the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah for information about the life of Rehoboam, which the author of Kings chooses not to get into (1 Kings 14, 29). In *Leviathan* Hobbes had noted this (Hobbes 1994, 254). So does La Peyrère. But neither Hobbes nor La Peyrère used this datum the way Spinoza does, to give us insight into the way Ezra worked when he constructed the Primary History. Given Hobbes's at least nominal acceptance of 2 Esdras, he could hardly have presented Ezra as having edited previously existing materials. La Peyrère never says anything about the Ezran hypothesis.

Spinoza does not give Ezra high marks as an editor. In chapter 9 of the *Tractatus* he writes that Ezra „did not put the narratives contained in these books in final form, and did not do anything but collect the narratives from different writers, sometimes just copying them, and that he left them to posterity without having examined or ordered them“ (TTP IX, 159). What's most interesting about this passage is that in supporting his criticism of Ezra, Spinoza is led to discuss numerous passages in which the Hebrew Bible, as it has come down to us, contains inconsistencies. He takes this as evidence that however much Ezra may have wanted to tell a coherent story, he couldn't do so. Spinoza speculates that this was because he did not live long enough to complete the daunting project he had embarked on.

## 6.6 Doublets

One important kind of evidence for this theory involves what modern scholars call „doublets“, i. e., repetitions of similar passages, which differ in ways scholars take to show that the passages in which they occur originated in different sources (Speiser 1964, xxxi–xxxiii). As an example Spinoza offers the different versions of David's entry into Saul's court in 1 Samuel (TTP IX, 162). In one version David went to Saul because Saul had called him, on the advice of his servants, when he wanted a skillful musician to play the lyre for him (1 Sam 16, 17–21). In the other the initiator of the events was David's father, Jesse, who sent David to attend his brothers, soldiers in Saul's camp; David became known to Saul only when he

asked questions which suggested a willingness to fight Goliath; he was taken into the court as a result of his victory in that battle. In the first story David is said to be a warrior, a man of valor. In the second, he's just a boy, who has no experience in battle (1 Sam 17, 17–8, 31–3, 38–9, 18, 1–2). Inconsistencies of this sort occur, Spinoza says, because the editor has collected stories from different historians, „piling them up indiscriminately, so that afterwards they might be more easily examined and reduced to order“ (TTP IX, 161 f.).

Sometimes the „doublets“ get a different treatment. Notoriously, there are two different versions of the Decalogue. This fact evidently made an early and deep impression on Spinoza. He first brings the issue up in the 1st chapter, where he writes: „In the opinion of certain Jews, God did not utter the words of the Decalogue. They think, rather, that the Israelites only heard a sound, which did not utter any words, and that while this sound lasted, they perceived the Laws of the Decalogue with a pure mind. At one time I too was inclined to think this, because I saw that the words of the Decalogue in Exodus are not the same as those of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy. Since God spoke only once, it seems to follow from this [variation] that the Decalogue does not intend to teach God's very words, but only their meaning.“ (TTP I, 17 f.) Spinoza does not say here what the differences between the two versions were, and proceeds to give reasons for rejecting his earlier opinion. But the problem had apparently bothered him long before he began to write the *Tractatus*. It's also a problem one of his rabbis, Manasseh ben Israel, had discussed in a work Spinoza must have read, his *Conciliator*. More of that later.

Spinoza returns to the Decalogue at the end of chapter 8 (TTP VIII, 158), where he enumerates three differences between the two versions. In Deut 5, 21 the tenth commandment orders the prohibitions differently, commanding the Israelites first not to covet their neighbor's wife, and only then not to covet his house and other possessions, altering the order of Ex 20, 17. This at least shows that we're not dealing in these passages with a stenographic transcript of God's words. More significant, though, are the differences concerning the commandment to keep the sabbath. In Deuteronomy, not only is this commandment stated more fully, with more emphasis on the application to slaves, but the fundamental reason for observing the sabbath is different: not because it was on the seventh day that God rested after creating the world (as in Ex 20, 8–11), but to commemo-

morate God's bringing his people out of bondage in the land of Egypt (Deut 5, 12–15).

Spinoza does not explain these differences as he had those in the story of David and Saul. He does not present them as arising simply because Ezra reproduced different sources, without reconciling the inconsistencies between them. Instead he postulates that Ezra was responsible for the variations in Deuteronomy, which he introduced as he was trying to explain the law of God to the men of his time (TTP VIII, 158). On this theory Ezra gives a reason for this commandment which is more consistent with his overall theological perspective, emphasizing God's providential relation with the people of Israel. Spinoza thinks this was probably because Deuteronomy was the first book Ezra wrote. After the return from exile, the people urgently needed to have the law explained to them. Only after that did Ezra undertake the task of writing a complete history of the Hebrew people, from the creation to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in the early sixth century.

## 6.7 Can We Assume Consistency?

Even today there will be resistance in some quarters to acknowledge that there are genuine inconsistencies in the texts. This was especially true in Spinoza's day. Manasseh ben Israel's *Conciliator* was an attempt by a learned rabbi to identify *all* prima facie contradictions in the Hebrew Bible and to explain why they were not really contradictions. Manasseh operated on the assumption that because the Bible is „in the highest degree true, it cannot contain any text really contradictory of another.“ (Manasseh 1972, ix) Spinoza condemns this principle in his preface to the TTP: „Most [theologians] presuppose, as a foundation for understanding Scripture and unearthing its true meaning, that it is everywhere true and divine. So what we ought to establish by understanding Scripture, and subjecting it to a strict examination, and what we would be far better taught by Scripture itself, which needs no human inventions, they maintain at the outset as a rule for the interpretation of Scripture“ (TTP Preface, 8 f.).

Spinoza's alternative principle – that we must first seek to understand Scripture, using ordinary scholarly principles, and not assuming in advance that we are dealing with the word of God – is one of the defining principles of modern criti-

cal biblical scholarship, and one reason modern biblical scholars regard Spinoza as a seminal figure in the history of their discipline.

Popkin speaks of Spinoza's „total secularization“ of the Bible as an historical document, and says that Spinoza could do this because he had „a radically different metaphysics ... a metaphysics for a world without a supernatural dimension“ (Popkin 1996, 403). But Spinoza's hermeneutic principles have been accepted by scholars of quite varying religious perspectives – e. g. by orthodox Jews (Kugel 2007, 45) – perhaps because they depend, not on a naturalistic metaphysics, but on the common sense proposition that before we can conclude that a particular text is of divine origin, we must first try to work out what it says.

## 6.8 Chronological Questions

Since there are still many for whom the truth, and hence, consistency, of Scripture is a first principle, it may be helpful to add a further example of a *prima facie* inconsistency in the Hebrew Bible involving a different kind of issue. Much of Spinoza's discussion in chapter 9 is devoted to problems of chronology. His most detailed example is too complicated to discuss here (TTP IX, 162–65). It involves the *prima facie* inconsistency between the statement in 1 Kings 6, 1 that 480 years passed between the Exodus and Solomon's construction of the temple and the total you get if you add up the years of each individual period which Scripture reports between those two events (in excess of 580 years). But he has another, more manageable example.

The last fourteen chapters of Genesis tell the story of Joseph and his brothers. Gen 37 reports how the brothers sold Joseph to the Egyptians. Gen 38 interrupts the story of Joseph with a story about Judah and Tamar, in which Judah first marries a Canaanite woman, Shua's daughter, then arranges for his first son by Shua's daughter to marry Tamar. When that son dies without having fathered a child, he arranges for his second son to marry Tamar. After that son also dies without children, Judah promises Tamar that when his third son grows up, he will fulfill the brother-in-law's duty and marry her. But Tamar does not trust his promise. When she sees that the third son has grown up, but still has not been given to her in marriage, she disguises herself as a prostitute, and has intercourse with Judah. This produces two children, one of whom has fathered two children

by the time Judah moves to Egypt. Gen 38 does not tell that part of Judah's story. It ends with the birth of Judah's children by Tamar. Then Gen 39 goes back to the story of Joseph in Egypt.

The problem is that all these things are supposed to have happened within a definite – all too short – time period: between the time Joseph was sold into bondage and the time he was reunited with his father in Egypt. Gen 38 begins the story of Judah and Tamar by saying „It happened *at that time* that Judah went down from his brothers“. Our normal narrative expectations would dictate that the italicized phrase refers to the time at issue in the immediately preceding verse, which describes Joseph being sold into bondage. In Gen 46 Jacob moves his whole family to Egypt, to be reunited with Joseph. Judah is part of this move, as are his surviving son by Shua's daughter, the children he had by Tamar, *and* the two grandchildren he had through one of Tamar's sons. But according to calculations generally agreed on, only twenty-two years passed between the time Joseph was sold into bondage and the time of his reunion with his family. (The traditional calculation goes back to a rabbinic work on biblical chronology dating from the 2nd century C. E., *Seder Olam*, and is assumed in Ibn Ezra's commentary on Gen 38. Spinoza reproduces it in TTP IX, 160 f.)

This raises an awkward question: how could all the things related in Gen 38 have happened in twenty-two years? How could Judah have produced three sons by Shua's daughter, all of whom grew up to be of marriageable age, and then two sons by Tamar, one of whom became old enough to have children, in that time? *Seder Olam* managed to squeeze all these events into that twenty-two year period by assuming that Judah's sons all married at the age of seven (*Seder Olam* 2005, 32–36). Later commentators found this implausible.

In his commentary on Genesis, Ibn Ezra rejected *Seder Olam's* theory, arguing that the earliest possible age of procreation (and hence, of marriage) is twelve. His solution is that the phrase „at that time“ in Gen 38, 1 does not refer to the time in the immediately preceding verse –when Joseph was sold – but to an earlier time. He doesn't say when that earlier time was, or explain how Judah's absence in Canaan (assumed in Gen 38) would have been consistent with the role he is supposed to have played in the sale of Joseph in Gen 37 (See Ibn Ezra 1988, I, 354 f.).

To some extent Spinoza accepts this solution. Like Ibn Ezra, he doesn't think „at that time“ can refer to the time when Joseph was sold into bondage. But he

gives more weight than Ibn Ezra did to our normal narrative expectations. He hypothesizes that the narrative of Gen 38 has been taken from another book and inserted into the Joseph narrative, without having been properly integrated into its new surroundings: „Since not all these events can be related to the time in question in Genesis, they must be related to another time, *treated just previously in another book*. Ezra, then, has merely copied this story, and inserted it among the others, without having examined it“ (TTP IX, 161).

A leading 20th century commentator on Genesis substantially agrees with Spinoza, though he's less harsh in his judgment of the editor. He concludes that the inconsistency shows that „the narrators acted in the main as custodians of diverse traditions which they did not attempt to co-ordinate and harmonize when the respective data appeared to be in conflict“ (Speiser 1964, 299). Spinoza's fundamental idea – that the person who ultimately compiled these stories often put together the inconsistent narratives he found in his sources without resolving the inconsistencies – that idea remains intact.

Spinoza is critical of Ezra's editorial work, but he reserves his most caustic words for the rabbis who have tried to persuade us that the apparent inconsistencies in the text are not real inconsistencies: „If anyone wants to compare the narratives of the book of Chronicles with those of the books of Kings, he will find numerous similar discrepancies, which I don't need to recount here. Much less do I need to discuss the devices authors use to try to reconcile these accounts. For the rabbis are completely crazy. The commentators I have read indulge in idle fancies and hypotheses, and in the end, completely corrupt the language itself“ (TTP IX, 165 f.).

As an example he offers the statement in 2 Chr 22, 2, that Ahaziah was forty-two when he began to reign, which conflicts with the claim in 2 Kings 8, 26, that he was twenty-two at that point. This was one of the nearly two dozen discrepancies between the narratives of Kings and Chronicles Manasseh discussed in his *Conciliator* (Manasseh 1972, II, 94 f.). Manasseh mentions two ways commentators have tried to resolve this conflict, without expressing a preference for one over the other. Spinoza discusses only one of those solutions: Gersonides' proposal that the author of Chronicles was calculating Ahaziah's age from the reign of Omri, not from Ahaziah's birth. Spinoza comments that „[i]f they could show that this was what the author of the books of Chronicles meant, I wouldn't hesitate to say that he didn't know how to express himself. And they invent many

other things of this kind. If these things were true, I would say, without qualification, that the ancient Hebrews were completely ignorant both of their own language and of how to tell a story in an orderly way“ (TTP IX, 166).

Gersonides's hypothesis flouts the way we normally calculate someone's age. If this sort of explanation is permissible, then we are playing a game with no rules. As Spinoza puts it, „there will be no principle or standard for interpreting Scripture. We can invent anything we like“ (ibid.).

Spinoza not only denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, he also challenges the traditional view of the authorship of all the other books which make up Freedman's „Primary History“ of the people of Israel, and has a plausible theory about who did write them. He doesn't claim to be certain of that writer's identity, but he can at least tell us approximately when he lived, how he proceeded in constructing his history, and what his theological perspective on the history of Israel was. Developing this theory, based entirely on internal evidence from the text itself, and not on tradition, occupies most of chapters 8 and 9 of the *Tractatus*. Here we see Spinoza operating in ways which have no parallel in La Peyrère or Hobbes, making use of arguments from doublets and chronological problems which demonstrate his knowledge of the tradition of Jewish biblical commentary, a tradition which was closed to these predecessors by their lack of Hebrew.

## 6.9 Implications of Spinoza's Theory

Why do these questions of authorship matter? Conservative Christians may argue that there are a number of texts in the New Testament which suggest that Jesus thought Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. Commonly cited are Mark 7, 10, Mark 10, 3–8, and Matthew 8, 4, in all of which Jesus reportedly refers to passages in the Pentateuch as coming from Moses. For those who believe Jesus was the son of God, whose beliefs about Scripture have special standing, these passages are strong evidence for Moses's authorship. For readers who lack that theological commitment, these passages will just be indications that Jesus held a view common among the Jews of his time, but a view which may nevertheless be false.

Let's set aside these theological issues, and ask what the implications of Spinoza's view are, independently of anything in the New Testament. One implication seems obvious: if Spinoza is right in his theory of the composition of the books making up the Primary History, we can't assume that those books are a reliable account of that history. If, in their present form, they are essentially the work of Ezra (or of an editor writing in the post-exilic period), working with the kinds of materials Spinoza takes Ezra to have had at his disposal – chronicles written by earlier historians, which were not consistent, have not survived to be examined, and, for all we know, may themselves have been second- or third-hand accounts, dealing mainly with events in the remote past (that is, dealing with events the most important of which took place many centuries before our Bible took final form) – that will tend to diminish the authority of the Hebrew Bible as an historical work. It may be correct in what it says happened; but its saying that is not much reason to believe what it says.

Spinoza does not make these skeptical implications of his work explicit. He leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions. But he doesn't conclude, and wouldn't want us to think, that the Bible is without value. It may be unreliable as a work of history, but it does contain important moral teachings. Spinoza would insist particularly on its teaching that we must pursue justice and seek to love our neighbors (see, e. g., TTP XIV, 221). I don't think Spinoza wanted to endorse *all* the moral teachings of Scripture. In chapter 17 he quotes Ezekiel's claim that God said „I gave them statutes which were not good, and laws they could not live by“ (TTP XVII, 276). In context (20, 25–26) Ezekiel seems to be referring to laws requiring the sacrifice of the first-born (e. g. Ex 22, 28–29). Perhaps Spinoza would extend his use of this passage to other Scriptural commands, such as those which require the killing of witches (Ex 22, 18), or the extermination of the Canaanites (Deut 7, 1–2). But however that comes out, this much is clear: Spinoza doesn't wish to endorse every command God is represented in Scripture as having given. If we are generally skeptical about the accuracy of Scripture as an historical record of God's dealings with his people – as Spinoza's biblical criticism surely encourages us to be – then we are not bound to accept as a genuine divine command everything Scripture represents as a divine command. Spinoza's hermeneutics permits us to pick and choose, perhaps relying on our own independent moral judgment. The cost of this is that in obeying biblical commands,



we may not be able to justify our actions by saying that we are merely obeying God's will. That might be a price worth paying.

But I think he would add that philosophers should not think of these imperatives as justified simply because they are divine commands. God cannot properly be conceived as a lawgiver (TTP IV, 72–77). If the commands are justified, it must be because obedience to them contributes to the optimal functioning of human society, something which is in all our interests.

## 6.10 Summing Up

Toward the end of his 1996 article on Spinoza's biblical scholarship, Popkin wrote that Spinoza was not really much of an historical scholar, compared to some of his contemporaries (Popkin 1996, 403). This would be a perfectly reasonable thing to say, if you think Spinoza's contribution to biblical scholarship was limited to adding a few examples of anachronism in support of a theory, already well-developed by others, that Moses did not write absolutely all of the Pentateuch. In this article I've tried to show that his contributions were more significant than that: that he supported his denial of the Mosaic authorship by lines of argument you won't find in Hobbes or La Peyrère, that he extended his skepticism about the authorship of the Hebrew Bible to many of its other books, and that he developed a positive theory about the writing of the core historical books which he defended by using arguments of a kind which figure crucially in modern scholarship, but don't seem to appear in his predecessors.

In his remarks on the history of critical biblical scholarship, E. A. Speiser begins by giving credit to Ibn Ezra for having been the first to suggest the problems in the assumption of Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch. But, he says, „it required ... the penetrating probing of Spinoza ... to launch ‚higher‘ biblical criticism – that is, internal analysis as opposed to textual or ‚lower‘ criticism – on a truly productive course“ (Speiser 1964, xx).

This seems a more just assessment of Spinoza's contribution than what you find in Popkin.

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