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Edwin Curley

Resurrecting Leo Strauss¹

In his recent book on the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) Steven Nadler comments that “Spinoza never subjects the New Testament to the kind of rigorous and extended textual and historical critique that he gives to the Hebrew Bible.”² I propose to speculate about his reasons for that omission, and ask if there isn’t more in the TTP than meets the eye. To ask this question is to suggest that the answer might be “yes”. And to do that is to raise the evidently terrifying spectre of Leo Strauss, who claimed that there’s an esoteric philosophy in the TTP, which we need to ferret out by reading between the lines.

In the past I’ve often expressed sympathy with Strauss’s approach.³ I’ll do that again here. I’ve also expressed reservations about it.⁴ I’ll do that again, too. But I do think Strauss was on to something important in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.⁵ And sometimes I feel that when I support Strauss, I’m swimming against the tide of a reaction against him which has gone too far. Recently Jacqueline Lagrée has written that the wiser course is to read the TTP *à la lettre*, to presuppose that Spinoza writes what he thinks and thinks what he writes.⁶ In *A Book Forged in Hell*, Nadler quotes this passage with qualified approval, saying cautiously that he thinks Lagrée is “closer to the truth” than Straussians like Steven Smith.⁷ Nadler concedes that

1 This is the July 2014 version of a paper I’ve presented twice now: first at a conference on the TTP in Toronto in October 2012, and subsequently at conference on Leo Strauss’s hermeneutics in Marburg in July 2013. The paper has evolved considerably over the course of these presentations, and I’m much indebted to those who gave me comments on them.

2 Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, p. 170. Susan James made a similar observation in *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: The Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 179.

3 For example in Curley, “‘I Durst Not Write So Boldly’, or How to Read Hobbes’ ‘Theological-Political Treatise’”; Id., “*Homo Audax*: Leibniz, Oldenburg and the ‘Theological-Political Treatise’”; Id., “Calvin and Hobbes, or Hobbes as an orthodox Christian”.

4 For example, in Id., “The Problem of Professor Caton’s Sincerity”; Id., “The Root of Contingency”; and Id., *Descartes Against the Sceptics*, Ch. 5. Some of these works criticize, not Strauss himself, but followers like Caton, or historians like Russell, who wrote quite independently of Strauss, but in a similar spirit.

5 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.

6 See Lagrée, *Spinoza et le débat religieux*, p. 10.

7 Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, p. 247, n. 6. He has in mind Smith’s *Spinoza, Liberalism and the Question of Jewish Identity*. Sometimes Nadler puts his rejection of Strauss in much stronger terms. Cf. Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, pp. 171–75 and the attached notes.

Spinoza doesn't say *everything* he thinks.⁸ But he insists that pulling your punches doesn't amount to insinuating an esoteric message.

Now that's certainly true. But if Spinoza 'wrote between the lines,' as Strauss would put it – that is, wrote in a way which required his readers to *read* between the lines – that does seem to be one way of trying to convey an esoteric teaching, a doctrine intended for those readers smart enough to draw the conclusions the author wanted them to draw, but not for readers of lesser intelligence. In this paper I intend to argue that that's a method Spinoza used in the TTP when he dealt with the New Testament.

1 Some Things Strauss Got Wrong

Before I try to show that, I need to make it clear that I don't endorse *everything* Strauss seems to have had in mind when he talks about an esoteric doctrine in the TTP. Some of the reaction against him is well-justified. For example, he suggests that the religious teaching evident on the surface of the TTP is conventional and orthodox, intended for the vulgar, and that only by reading between the lines can we who are not vulgar – we philosophers – bring to light the radical teaching beneath the surface. (Strauss 1988, "How to study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise" pp. 162–63, 177–78) Among many dubious things Strauss wrote about Spinoza, this may be the most clearly false. There's too much unorthodox doctrine plainly on the surface of the TTP. Here are three examples:

- (i) in Ch. IV Spinoza argues that God cannot properly be conceived as a lawgiver;
- (ii) in Ch. VI he argues that if miracles are understood as events contrary to the laws of nature, there are and can be no miracles.
- (iii) in Ch. XII he says that the text of the Bible which has come down to us is "faulty, mutilated, corrupted, and inconsistent," that "we have only fragments of God's word," and that "the original text of the covenant God made with the Jews has been lost."⁹

⁸ So does Lagrée, "Il me paraît plus sage de lire le *Traité théologico-politique à la lettre*, de pré-supposer que Spinoza écrit ce qu'il pense et pense ce qu'il écrit, même s'il n'écrit sans doute tout ce qu'il pense." (p. 10). Similarly Alexandre Matheron writes that a guiding principle of his inquiry is that "Spinoza, conformément à l'idée qu'il se fait du philosophe, s'interdit de mentir; s'il lui arrive, assez souvent, de ne pas dire tout ce qu'il pense, il ne dit jamais ce qu'il ne pense pas." (Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants*, p. 149).

⁹ References to the TTP are made by chapter and Bruder section number, followed by the Gebhardt volume and page numbers. The quotes here come from xii, 1, III/158. The translation is

These are all highly unorthodox statements. You don't have to read between the lines to find Spinoza saying these things. They're right there on the surface, argued for openly and forcefully, not hidden at all. But the fact that Spinoza is willing to be candid about some of his heterodoxies should not lull us into a false sense of security, thinking that he has no fear of what the consequences would be if he were completely candid.

In spite of what he sometimes says, Strauss doesn't ultimately deny that the supposedly 'esoteric' philosophy is explicitly stated in the *Treatise*. He claims that the work also contains orthodox statements conflicting with the heterodox, that the orthodox statements are more prominent than the heterodox, and that their prominence muddies the waters, permitting the unorthodox statements to be missed by all but the most careful readers. Strauss's Spinoza frequently (and deliberately) contradicts himself. The rule for interpreting him, for discerning which of two contradictory statements expresses his true view, is that the one contradicting the common view is his serious view. (Strauss 1988, "How to study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise" p. 177) He would say, moreover, that Spinoza expected 'vulgar' readers to miss his unorthodox statements, and wanted them to. He counts censors among the vulgar, and thinks they're too stupid to detect the subtlety he attributes to Spinoza.¹⁰

There's an unpleasant elitism about this which seems to me to grossly exaggerate the difficulty of reading the TTP. You'd have to be a very obtuse reader to miss the three claims I've mentioned. And though there may well be contradictions in the TTP, as there are apt to be in any author, I don't see that Spinoza ever contradicts *these* claims.¹¹ There are other complaints I might make about Strauss if I had un-

mine. My edition of this work will give the Bruder section numbers, which I find an extremely convenient way of making references.

10 Strauss, "How to study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise", p. 185. "A careful writer of normal intelligence is more intelligent than the most intelligent censor, as such." (Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing", p. 26) This is just silly. There certainly have been cases where the censors were, if not actually obtuse, then at least insufficiently vigilant. I discuss one example in Curley, "Skepticism and Toleration: The Case of Montaigne". But authors less adroit than Montaigne – i.e., most of us – would be unwise to rely on the stupidity of censors.

11 Strauss cites several examples of supposed contradictions in Spinoza ("How to study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise" p. 169 ff.), but the statements I've mentioned don't seem to be among them. Errol Harris's rebuttal of Strauss focuses on these allegations that Spinoza contradicts himself. See Harris, *Is there an esoteric doctrine in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Strauss is not at his best in this part of his work.

limited time and space. But since my goal is to resurrect, if not Strauss himself, then at least one Straussian idea, I'll relegate other criticisms to a note.¹²

2 What Strauss Got Right

Whatever his faults may have been, Strauss was right about one, very important thing: when an author holds unorthodox, dangerous opinions, and is writing in a time and place where he might be persecuted for openly saying what he thinks, he has to be careful what he says. He has to make nice judgments about what he can say without getting himself into more trouble than he's willing to accept. People who don't hold such unorthodox opinions seem to find it difficult to appreciate the situation of the unorthodox, who may choose to communicate some of what they want to say by indirect methods, requiring the reader to do more work than would be required in reading other texts, whose orthodoxy makes it easy for their authors to say what they think.

The indirect method I have in mind goes like this: sometimes Spinoza says things which he knows should raise questions in the minds of intelligent, critical, well-informed readers. But because raising these questions openly would add unacceptably to the grief he can expect, he only hints at those questions, and at the answers he would favor, leaving it for the reader to raise the questions herself, and to try to work out a reasonable answer to them. If Spinoza is doing that, then he is indeed 'writing between the lines' and suggesting a message he's not willing to state plainly. I don't claim that all his heterodoxies are disguised in this way. But I do think some are, and that he is particularly apt to use this strategy when he's dealing with Christianity, a delicate subject for a Jewish author.¹³

12 As one example, I reject Strauss's claim that according to Spinoza the Bible – the whole work, mind you, not just particular passages in that work – is a 'hieroglyphic' work, where that's supposed to mean that it is "essentially unintelligible." (Strauss, "How to study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise", 148, 175) What Spinoza does say is that there are *parts* of the Bible which are hieroglyphic. But all that means is that they are *not easy to understand*, and intelligible *only by those who approach them with the proper interpretive methods*. Spinoza's use of the term *hieroglyphicum* in other contexts will confirm this understanding of his language. See TTP i, 20, ii, 20, and vii, 37. Glazemaker's translations are instructive.

I also reject Strauss's claims that Spinoza wrote only for potential philosophers, not actual philosophers (Strauss, "How to study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise", pp. 162–63), only for (potential) *Christian* philosophers (pp. 163, 167, 168), and only for posterity, not his contemporaries (p. 153).

13 In spite of the excommunication, Spinoza's Christian contemporaries thought of him as a Jew. Note how frequently Leibniz and his correspondents refer to Spinoza as a Jew in Curley,

One more preliminary: I need to defend my Straussian assumption that Spinoza was writing in a situation where he might be persecuted for expressing unorthodox opinions. Some have thought this false. For example, Alan Donagan wrote that Spinoza might reasonably fear harassment, but not persecution.¹⁴ In support of this view he might have appealed to the legendary tolerance of 17th Century Dutch society, and might have cited Spinoza's own testimony to show that he was not writing under the threat of persecution. In the Preface to the TTP, Spinoza writes that

we have the rare good fortune (*rara felicitas*) of living in a Republic in which everyone is granted complete freedom of judgment, and is permitted to worship God according to his own mentality, and in which nothing is thought to be dearer or sweeter than freedom. (TTP, Preface, §12, III/7)

The Latin I've put in parentheses alludes to a well-known line from Tacitus, who boasted that he enjoyed "that rare good fortune of the times (*rara temporum felicitate*), when it is permitted to think what you like and to say what you think."¹⁵ But if you believe Spinoza would not say that his republic allowed its citizens complete freedom of judgment unless he believed this, you're missing his irony. This passage expresses Spinoza's hope for what the Dutch Republic *could be*, not his judgment of what it *was*.

Nearly two years before the publication of the TTP a good friend of Spinoza's, Adriaan Koerbagh, was confined in a very nasty prison, for publishing a book (*Een ligt schynende in Duystere Plaatsen*) which expressed Spinozistic ideas less cautiously than Spinoza himself did.¹⁶ Conditions in that prison being what they were, Koerbagh contracted an illness there and died shortly before the TTP was published. However great the freedom of the Dutch Republic may have been – and it was considerable compared with that of most other European societies at that time – Spinoza's Amsterdam was not a place where you could say whatever you thought – not without putting yourself in danger of pay-

"Homo Audax: Leibniz, Oldenburg and the 'Theological-Political Treatise'" (above, n. 3). Even 'friends' like Huygens and Oldenburg did this, as their correspondence illustrates.

14 Cf. Donagan, *Spinoza*, p. 14.

15 *Histories* I, i, 4. I take it that Hume was also engaging in irony when he chose this line as the epigraph for his *Treatise of Human Nature*. I've discussed Spinoza's and Hume's use of this quote in Curley, "Rara temporum felicitas: Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*", forthcoming in *Censorship Moments*, ed. by Geoff Kemp, to be published by Bloomsbury Academic.

16 Not only did Koerbagh present the Bible as a work of human authorship (*A light shining in dark places*, p. 296), and deny the existence of miracles (pp. 480–88), he also denied the divinity of Jesus (p. 152). See Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell*, pp. 38–44.

ing a price high enough to discourage candor. Christian interpreters of Spinoza sometimes seem oblivious to the measures their religion has traditionally taken to shield itself from criticism.¹⁷

One reason Koerbagh got in trouble was that he published his book in Dutch, under his own name. Spinoza knew better than to do that. He published the TTP only in Latin, and discouraged friends who wanted to publish a Dutch translation.¹⁸ Not only did he publish it anonymously, the title page gave false information about the publisher and place of publication. If Spinoza had believed what he wrote about the complete religious freedom of the Dutch Republic, he would have felt no need for such precautions. So much for the comforting proposition that Spinoza need not worry about persecution.

When Spinoza wrote to Oldenburg in Letter 30, explaining his aims in writing the TTP, he said he sought to expose the prejudices of the theologians, to rebut the accusation that he was an atheist, and to defend the freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think:

I want to protect this in every way. Here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness. (IV/166/27–29)

In the Dutch Republic of Spinoza's day, the preachers did not have the power to decide what actions the state might take against unorthodox writings. But they did have an influence on the state's decisions which Spinoza clearly thought he needed to combat. These facts about the fate of Spinoza's friend, the publishing history of the TTP, and Spinoza's own explanation of his reasons for writing it should be enough to put an end to any illusions that Spinoza felt completely free to say what he thought, and that he never said things he didn't believe.¹⁹

17 This appears, I think, in the tendency Christian historians have to argue that Straussian interpretations impugn the moral character of the philosophers who are supposed to have written between the lines. Cf. Harris, *Is there an esoteric doctrine in the tractatus theologico-politicus?*, which argues that Strauss's interpretation implies a lack of integrity on Spinoza's part. In reply, it seems enough to repeat something I've said earlier, regarding Geach's attack on Straussian interpretations of Hobbes: "If there is any moral fault to be found in these situations, it lies with those who made plain-speaking dangerous." The quote is from Curley, "I Durst Not Write so Boldly..." pp. 591–92, which in turn quotes Leslie Stephen.

18 See Letter 44, to Jarig Jelles, 17 Feb. 1671.

19 If further confirmation is needed, another passage – this time in one of the annotations – provides it: "I have preferred to pass over these things in silence, for reasons which the oppressiveness of our times does not permit me to explain." (ADN. XXI, attached to TTP x, 1) "These things" apparently refers to the genealogy of King Jeconiah given in I Chronicles 3. One of our sources for this note indicates that instead of "oppressiveness" (*gravitas*) Spinoza originally

3 Why Spinoza Will Not Examine the New Testament Critically

Now to my main topic: Spinoza's decision not to examine the New Testament critically, in the same way he had the Old Testament. At the end of TTP X, concluding his account of the composition of the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza writes:

It would now be time to examine the books of the New Testament in the same way. But because [i] I'm told that this has been done by men most learned both in the sciences and especially in the languages, because [ii] I do not have such an exact knowledge of the Greek language that I might dare to undertake this task, and finally, because [iii] we lack the original texts of the books written in the Hebrew language, I prefer to refrain from this difficult business... (x, 48, III/150–51, bracketed numbers mine)

This should rouse suspicion. Spinoza says *he's been told* that men learned in the sciences and the relevant languages have already examined the New Testament in the way his method requires, by constructing a 'history' of the text. That's vague, and apparently based on hearsay, a kind of evidence even readers unfamiliar with Spinoza's epistemology will know is not generally reliable. Who are these men? In Ch. VII, where Spinoza sets out his method for interpreting Scripture, he gives the impression that he's offering a new method:

To ... free our minds from theological prejudices, and to stop recklessly embracing men's inventions as divine teachings, we must treat the true method of interpreting Scripture and discussing it. As long as we're ignorant of this, we can't know anything with certainty about what either Scripture or the Holy Spirit wishes to teach. (TTP vii, 6, III/98)

In this passage Spinoza presents himself as writing for an audience ignorant of the proper method of interpreting Scripture. Are we to believe that some people had previously discovered Spinoza's method, and been applying it to the New Testament before he ever explained it? This seems unlikely. In any event, so far I have not been

wrote "injustices and reigning superstition" (*injuriae et superstitio regnans*). On the status of the annotations, see below, pp. nn. [= pp. 11 ff.]

Nadler's *A Book Forged in Hell* gives a good account of the limitations on freedom of the press in the Dutch Republic at that time and of the measures taken against the TTP. See also Israel, "The Banning of Spinoza's Works in the Dutch Republic (1670–1678)".

able to discover any previous writer who constructed a history of the New Testament which would do for that work what Spinoza did for the Old.²⁰

4 Spinoza's Precursors

Spinoza did, of course, have precursors. *To some extent* they laid the groundwork for a properly spinozistic examination of the New Testament. For example, in the 15th Century Lorenzo Valla undertook to compare Jerome's 'Vulgate' Latin translation of the NT with the Greek mss. available to him, and to make corrections in it based on his knowledge of Greek and Latin.²¹ This was a bold thing to do. At that time, the Catholic Church held that the Vulgate was the definitive version of the New Testament, preferable to the Greek mss. on which it was based. The theory was that Jerome, who had to deal with Hebrew and Greek mss. which did not always agree (as well as with earlier Latin translations), had been divinely inspired in making his judgments about what text to translate and how to translate it.²² Valla, in taking on this task, aimed to help readers of scripture to deal with the texts in the original languages, one of the requirements of a properly Spinozistic 'history of scripture.' A history of scripture, Spinoza says, must contain "an exact knowledge of the original languages in which the books of scripture were written and which its authors were accustomed to speak." (TTP vii, 15)

Valla never published his *Annotations on the New Testament*. They circulated in ms. form and influenced later editions of the Bible, like the Complutensian

20 Here I cite a book I cannot recommend as a whole: David Dungan's *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, Anchor Bible. Dungan's virtue is that he recognizes Spinoza's originality in formulating the historical-critical method of interpreting scripture, and applying it to the New Testament. Among his faults: he is extremely unsympathetic to that method, and fails to see the power of Spinoza's case for it. Further, he seeks to discredit it as motivated by a political agenda. For another example of this reactionary criticism, see Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700*.

There's no doubt that Spinoza saw his Biblical criticism as supporting freedom of thought and expression, and in that sense had a political agenda. But his method of interpretation can be defended without appeal to that agenda, and has seemed sensible of many scholars who do not share Spinoza's religious radicalism. See, for example, Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*.

21 On Valla's contribution to New Testament scholarship, see Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ, New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance*, ch. 2.

22 The Council of Trent reaffirmed the traditional status of Jerome's translation, proclaiming that his translation, which "by the lengthened usage of so many years, has been approved of in the Church, [must] be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions, held as authentic; no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever. "*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, The Fourth Session*, 1546. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulgate>)

Polyglot edition of 1520.²³ But they didn't see print until Erasmus read the ms. and arranged for its publication in 1505. Over the next ten years Erasmus extended Valla's work, making a more thorough search for and comparison of the Greek mss. than Valla had, and using them as a basis for his own edition of the text (1515) and a new Latin translation based on that edition (1516).

The textual criticism of Valla and Erasmus was a major advance on previous studies of the NT, but it left much to be desired.²⁴ For our purposes the most significant defect of their biblical scholarship was that neither of them satisfies the second and third requirements for a proper spinozistic 'history' of the New Testament. Neither of them gives us a subject index of the text, organizing all the passages which discuss the same subject, and noting those which seem inconsistent with each other. (TTP vii, 16–17, III/100) What is more crucial, neither of them systematically asked the necessary questions about the provenance of the texts: who wrote them? when did those authors write? for what audience? for what purpose? in what language? how were the books first received? who preserved them? how faithfully did they transmit them? and finally, who decided they were sacred?²⁵

So I'm skeptical of Spinoza's claim that others had already done the work of compiling a critical history of the New Testament. I suggest that he intended to provoke his readers to ask: who did this work? what conclusions did they reach? And if his readers found no previous scholar who had done *everything* Spinoza's method of interpretation required, they might also ask: what remains to be done? In what ways is our New Testament scholarship deficient? What sciences and languages must we master to compile such a history? Perhaps Spinoza's claim

23 On the Complutensian Polyglot see Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, ch. 3.

24 Valla did not make a thorough search for Greek mss. Erasmus improved on him in this respect. But subsequent scholars have thought that his search too was not as thorough as necessary, and that his judgment of the quality of the mss. was not as sound as we might wish. That his text of the Greek New Testament came to be regarded, for a long time, as 'the received text' created problems which took a long time to correct. On this, see Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, Chapters IV and V, and Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, Chapters XIV and XV.

25 TTP vii, 23–25, III/101–02. Hobbes asked *some* of the questions Spinoza's method calls for. He rightly gets credit for being one of the founders of modern biblical criticism because he questioned the traditional assumption that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, along with the traditional theories of the authorship of the other Old Testament books. See *Leviathan* xxxiii, 1–19. But when he comes to the New Testament, he becomes quite conventional: "The writers of the New Testament lived all in less than an age after Christ's ascension, and had all of them seen our Saviour or been his disciples, except St. Paul and St. Luke. Consequently, whatsoever was written by them is as ancient as the time of the apostles." *Leviathan* xxxiii, 20. For the consensus of modern scholarship on these issues, see Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*.

was also intended to invite those readers who couldn't find that the work *has* been done, and think they're competent to do it, to take up the challenge.²⁶

5 What is the Original Language Anyway?

The other reasons Spinoza offers for not pursuing a critical history of the New Testament seem no more satisfactory. He says he doesn't know Greek well enough to undertake the task, and then adds that he refrains from it because "we lack the original texts of the books written in the Hebrew language." (TTP x, 48, III/150–51) But he evidently knows enough Greek to make intelligent use of the Septuagint translation when he thinks it can shed light on the Hebrew of the OT, and to challenge existing translations of the Greek NT into Latin.²⁷ And how many of the NT books does he think were actually written in Hebrew anyway?

In Chapter X he doesn't say. Earlier he'd cited the gospel of Matthew and the epistle to the Hebrews as examples. (TTP vii, 64, III/110) But if those are the only works problematic for this reason – and those were the only books traditionally thought to have been written in Hebrew²⁸ – then this justification for not undertaking a critical examination of the New Testament is pretty weak. The canonical version of the NT contains twenty-seven books. If only two of them are translations of a (lost) Hebrew original, that still leaves twenty-five books whose history might be examined without worrying about the lack of the original text.

But in fact it seems that Spinoza thinks most – if not all – of the books of the NT were written, not in Hebrew exactly, but in a closely related language nowadays usually called Aramaic. We see this in one of the notes Spinoza added to the TTP in the last months of his life. There are thirty-nine such notes, known from

26 Perhaps this is the way Richard Simon saw his work in his *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament*. If so, I think it's fair to say that he didn't fully appreciate what the task required. From a spinozistic point of view he relies far too heavily on tradition in his arguments. Questions of authorship are largely resolved by appeal to the consensus of the church fathers, the churches founded by the apostles, and the churches derived from them. This ignores the import of Spinoza's dictum that "our knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone." (TTP Preface, p. 25) Neither Spinoza nor any other Biblical scholar can avoid using data from outside Scripture. Spinoza does this, for example, when he makes claims about what the native language of the apostles was. But his experience with the Hebrew Bible had taught him that tradition is an unreliable guide to answering questions about authorship. His own Old Testament scholarship relies primarily on internal indications. For his application of this method to the Hebrew Bible, see Curley, "Spinoza's Contribution to Biblical Scholarship".

27 Cf. Adnotation XXI, attached to TTP x, 1, and Adnotation XXVI, attached to TTP xi, 3.

28 The traditions stem from Eusebius, *Church History*, III, xxiv, 6; III, xxxix, 16; and VI, xiv, 2–3.

several different sources – in some cases from a copy of the TTP in which five notes were written in the margin in Spinoza’s own hand; in other cases from copies of his work which apparently circulated privately among his friends. These notes did not appear in any edition of the TTP published in Spinoza’s lifetime. But most of them were published shortly after his death, in a French translation of the TTP by St. Glain.²⁹

The note which concerns us deals with the translation of a passage in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Spinoza considers two possible translations into Latin, and prefers one to the other because, he says,

it agrees best with the Syriac text. For the Syriac translation – *if indeed it is a translation, which is doubtful*, since we don’t know the translator, or when [the supposed translation] was circulated [*vulgata*], and the native language of the Apostles was Syriac – renders this text of Paul thus etc.³⁰

I’m not interested now in the question of how to translate Paul’s letter. What I’m interested in is Spinoza’s justification for giving heavy weight to the Syriac translation in evaluating the translation he rejects.

6 A Confusion of Tongues

Before we can see why this note is important, we need to clear up some mistakes Spinoza makes here.³¹ First, what is now normally called Syriac, and is the lan-

29 For a discussion of the sources of the notes and the textual problems they present, see the recent French edition of the TTP: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Traité théologico-politique*, texte établi par Fokke Akkerman, traduction et notes par Jacqueline Lagrée et Pierre-François Moreau, PUF, 1999, pp. 28–35. That Spinoza wrote the notes in the last months of his life is indicated by these facts: the one source for the notes which is firmly dated – the copy of the TTP which Spinoza gave to Jacob Klefmann, with the notes added in his own handwriting – bears a dedication to Klefmann dated 25 July 1676. That source contains only five notes, the last of which bears on a passage in Ch. IX. So it appears that when Spinoza gave Klefmann this copy of the TTP, he had only begun the process of adding notes to it. The remaining thirty-four notes, most of which are attached to later passages, must have been written in the last seven months of his life. These later notes include the one discussed in the text.

30 Note 26, attached to TTP xi, 3, III/262/8–13, my emphasis.

31 On the claims made in this paragraph and those immediately following it, see the *Cambridge History of the Bible, The West From the Reformation*, p. 73; Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament, Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, pp. 96–100; Meyer, *Jesu Muttersprache: Das Galiläische Aramäisch in seiner Bedeutung für die Erklärung der Reden Jesu und der Evangelien überhaupt*, Ch. 1; and Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark’s Gospel*, Ch. 1.

guage of the translation Spinoza is referring to, is a dialect of Aramaic. The native language of the apostles (and of most Jews in 1st Century Palestine) was also a dialect of Aramaic. So far so good. But the Aramaic commonly spoken in Palestine in the 1st Century was a different dialect of Aramaic than the one used in the Syriac translation. If Spinoza thinks, as he seems to, that the Syriac translation may give us what the apostles actually wrote, he's wrong.

This would not be an unintelligible mistake to make. When Widmanstadt published the first printed edition of the Syriac New Testament in 1555, it seems that he and many scholars thought the Syriac text might give us the original of Matthew and Hebrews. Some also argued that Syriac (i.e., the dialect of Aramaic used in the 'Syriac' translation) was the language spoken by Jesus. This seems to have been one motivation for Tremellius' translation of the Syriac NT into Latin in 1569.³² We now know that the text Widmanstadt published, known as the Peshitta version of the New Testament, was an early 5th Century translation from the Greek into Syriac, *not* the original text of the NT.

For a long time there was confusion about what to call (or how to classify) the various Near Eastern languages involved in the transmission of the NT. When the 2nd Century bishop Papias – the source of the tradition reported in Eusebius³³ – said that Matthew had originally written his gospel in Hebrew, the language he was attributing to Matthew was pretty certainly the Palestinian dialect of Aramaic, not what we would now call Hebrew. What Papias seems to have meant was that Matthew had originally written his gospel in the language spoken by the Hebrew people in 1st Century Palestine.³⁴ By the first century that language was no longer Hebrew, but Palestinian Aramaic. Biblical Hebrew was so little understood in 1st Century Palestine that observant Jews needed a translation of the Torah into Aramaic if they were to understand the requirements of the law. This led to the creation of the Targums, Aramaic paraphrases of the an-

32 Tremellius was a 16th Century Jewish convert to Christianity, who translated the Bible into Latin. When he translated the OT, he translated from Hebrew; when he translated the NT, he translated from Syriac. See Kenneth Austin's biography, *From Judaism to Calvinism: the life and writings of Immanuel Tremellius*.

33 See Eusebius' *Church History* III, xxxix, 16.

34 Richard Simon understood this. See his *Histoire critique*: "On ne peut pas nier, à moins que de s'opposer à toute l'antiquité, que Saint Matthieu n'ait écrit son Evangile en Ebreu, *c'est-à-dire, dans la langue que parloient alors les Juifs de Jerusalem, qui étoit Caldaïque ou Syriaque.*", p. 47, my emphasis; ("Chaldaic", like "Syriac", refers to a dialect of Aramaic.) It seems that in the late 16th Century Joseph Scaliger began the process of sorting out the different dialects of Aramaic, and that Grotius continued this work in the 17th Century. (On this, see Meyer, *Jesu Muttersprache*, Ch. 1) But it seems from Simon's account of the debate over the existence of a Hebrew original for Matthew that even late in the 17th Century the distinctions were not widely understood.

cient Hebrew text, which came to play an important role in medieval Jewish liturgy and Biblical studies, and were commonly printed in the polyglot editions of the Bible which began to appear in the 16th Century.³⁵ Spinoza's knowledge of these Targums and the reasons why they were created no doubt helped him to see that the language of the Apostles must have been a dialect of Aramaic.

In any event, though Paul would have known Palestinian Aramaic, no competent scholar would now think that he wrote his epistle to the Romans in that language (or Syriac). He was a Jew of the diaspora, not Palestine, born and raised in the Jewish community in Tarsus, a city in the south central region of modern Turkey. He wrote good Greek, quoted the Hebrew Scriptures from the Septuagint translation, and on his visit to Athens addressed the Athenians in Greek. If Greek was not his native language, it was at least a language in which he felt perfectly at home, and certainly the language he would have used in writing to the Christian community in Rome.³⁶ Greek was the lingua franca of the Roman Empire, and surely the language in which all his epistles were written.

So Spinoza was mistaken if he thought that the Syriac version gave us the original text of the NT, mistaken (though not far off) in thinking that the apostles spoke Syriac, and very much mistaken in thinking that Paul might have written his letter to the Romans in Syriac. But he is close to grasping some important truths: *the native language of the (Palestinian) apostles – those apostles who had personally experienced the ministry of Jesus – was not Greek, but a dialect of Aramaic*, which had replaced Hebrew as the common language of Jews in 1st Century Palestine. What's more, *Palestinian Aramaic was almost certainly the native language of Jesus*. Since this was also the native language of most of his audience, *Palestinian Aramaic was almost certainly the language he would have used in his preaching*.³⁷

³⁵ On the Targums, see the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI, 320–21. (ABD) The Buxtorf Bible, which Spinoza owned, reproduced these paraphrases, along with selections from the most prominent medieval commentaries.

³⁶ On this see Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 423–26.

³⁷ I say “almost certainly” because there is still some dispute about the languages Jesus can be presumed to have known and used. I suppose this is likely to remain the case as long as the possibility that he preached in Aramaic seems to threaten our confidence that we can know exactly what he said. But I take it that Meier's statement of the situation is not only well-argued, but also represents the consensus of objective scholars qualified to address the issue: that Jesus “regularly and perhaps exclusively taught in Aramaic, his Greek being of a practical, business type, and perhaps rudimentary to boot.” (Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, pp. 255–68) Meier contends that Jesus would have known enough Hebrew to debate Scripture with the scribes and Pharisees, but that he would not have used it in preaching to Palestinian Jews, because most of his audience would not have understood Biblical Hebrew. Though

7 Why This Matters

These facts have significant implications. At a minimum they imply that whenever the English text of the gospels reports what are supposed to be the words of Jesus – those words which these Bibles often emphasize by printing them in red – what they give us is not the very words of Jesus, but *an English translation of a Greek translation of a lost Aramaic original*. Not necessarily an Aramaic original text, because the authors of the gospels may have been relying on oral sources when they reported what Jesus is supposed to have said. But if they were reporting an oral tradition, at the origin of that tradition were utterances in Aramaic. So even if the gospel authors could rely on the testimony of eyewitnesses for their knowledge of what Jesus said – even if they themselves *were* eyewitnesses³⁸ – at some point in the composition of the NT text there is a translation from Aramaic into Greek, a translation whose accuracy we cannot now verify in the way we might ordinarily verify the accuracy of a translation, since we have no copy of the original text being translated.³⁹

Latin was used by the Roman officials ruling Palestine, it was apparently not widely used among ordinary Palestinians. See also Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching*, pp. 108 – 120.

38 The traditional view was that the gospels of Matthew and John were written by eyewitnesses (two of the original twelve disciples), Mark by an author who got his information from an eyewitness (Peter), and Luke by an associate of Paul's who made a conscientious search for reliable sources. Modern critical scholarship has cast doubt on most of these assumptions, particularly on the assumptions that the authors of Matthew and John were eyewitnesses, and that Mark essentially reported what Peter told him. For a sober summary, see Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 158 – 61, 208 – 12, 267 – 69, 368 – 71.

39 In two provocative works – *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, cited above, and *An Aramaic Approach to Q, Sources for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* – Maurice Casey has argued that it is possible, at least in favorable cases, to *reconstruct* the Aramaic texts which must have underlain the Greek of the NT. He distinguishes reconstructing the lost Aramaic from simply translating the Greek back into Aramaic. What principally distinguishes these processes is that reconstruction requires recognizing when the differences between the two languages might make it extremely difficult to translate from one to the other, and when the normal habits of bilingual translators might make them prone to certain characteristic mistakes. I'm doubtful that this can be done with complete certainty. But even if it can, I think it's clear from what Casey has written that reconstructing a lost original requires a high level of competence in both languages. Prior to the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which added greatly to what we know about that dialect, that level of competence was unattainable for 1st Century Palestinian Aramaic. If this is correct, then (a) (in spite of the observations made above on p. 11) Spinoza may well have been right to say that his knowledge of Greek was not up to the task of examining the NT,

This fact would seem to warrant a certain caution in drawing conclusions about what Jesus said from what the gospels report him as having said. Of course we also have the normal uncertainties which arise whenever we take one person's word for what another person said: is he giving us, in good faith, the most accurate account he can of what the person said? did he understand what was said when it was said? how good is his memory of this utterance? did he make a contemporary record of what he heard? is his account influenced by what others who were also present told him about what they remember having heard? or by his beliefs about what the person is likely to have said in those circumstances? But in addition to these normal uncertainties, we have an uncertainty arising from the need at some point for a translation by an unknown person whose competence in the relevant languages we cannot evaluate.

8 Hints of These Problems

Now so far I've been commenting on a brief note which did not appear in any version of the TTP published in Spinoza's lifetime, but was added to the text not long before his death, and was first published shortly after his death. Spinoza may not have intended it for publication in his lifetime. Nevertheless, there are, in versions of the TTP published in his lifetime, passages which at least hint at the conclusions I've drawn from this note. For example, in explaining the first element in the history of scripture he calls for, Spinoza writes that

it must contain the nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which their authors were accustomed to speak. For in this way we'll be able to find out all the meanings each utterance can admit in ordinary conversational usage. And because all the writers, both of the Old Testament and the New, were Hebrews, it's certain that the history of the Hebrew language is necessary above all others, not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament, which were written in this language, but also for understanding those of the New. For though they've been made available in other languages, nevertheless they're expressed in a Hebrew manner.⁴⁰

and (b) at the time he wrote, it would have been quite reasonable for him to regard reconstructing the Aramaic text as impossible.

40 TTP vii, 15, III/99–100. The Latin for that last sentence reads: *quamvis aliis linguis vulgati fuerint, Hebraizant tamen*. I note that Spinoza says here that the books of the NT were *vulgati* in other languages. I've translated that as "made available." We might also translate: "circulated" or "published." What Spinoza does *not* say is that they were *written* in other languages. I take it that this reflects his belief that they may well have been written in 'Syriac' (i.e., Aramaic).

I take it that Spinoza's insistence on regarding the NT as a document which gives evidence of Jewish ways of thinking comes from his awareness that the Greek of that work contains many Hebraisms or Aramaisms, ways of speaking natural in one of these semitic languages, but not natural in Greek. He mentions no specific examples, but readers familiar with Tremellius' translation of the Syriac text would have found its annotation a source of many examples.⁴¹

Spinoza's quotational practices also suggest his attitude toward the Greek text. When he quotes the Hebrew Bible, he typically gives the Hebrew text first, and then makes his own translation into Latin. When he quotes the New Testament, he doesn't give the Greek at all, and the text he quotes is Tremellius's Latin translation of the Syriac text. He calls our attention to his use of Tremellius' translation at the end of Chapter IV, when he quotes a passage from Romans in which Tremellius' version differs from the Vulgate. He doesn't say there why he prefers that translation, or explain anywhere why that is the translation he routinely uses. But his quotational practices, in conjunction with his emphasis on the importance of knowing the original language of the text, naturally invite the question: why this difference in his practices regarding the two testaments?

Perhaps Spinoza did not have had a firm opinion about the original language of the NT. In Annotation 26 he doesn't actually say that the Syriac version gives us the original language; he just says it's doubtful that it's a translation from the Greek. And he gives us a reason for thinking that the Greek text was probably not the original: that wasn't the native language of the apostles. Doubt about what the original language of the NT actually was – inability to say, with confidence, whether it was Greek or Syriac/Aramaic – might be reason enough for Spinoza not to want to get into an extended discussion of the history of the NT, particularly if he was inclined to the view that its original language wasn't Greek. But he might also have wished to avoid the criticism he was apt to receive if he came out strongly for a non-Greek original text.

⁴¹ See Austin, *From Judaism to Calvinism*, Ch. 7. An interesting example would be the phrase *huios tou anthrōpou*, commonly translated “the son of man,” which Jesus frequently uses to refer to himself, and which, because of the theological weight attached to it, has been the subject of much discussion. This is apparently a very unnatural expression in Greek. But the Aramaic it probably translates, *bar* (°)*nash(ā)*, is evidently a quite ordinary Aramaic term for ‘man.’ See Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth, An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching*, pp. 358–61. Meier (*A Marginal Jew*, I, pp. 265–6) gives other examples of Aramaisms.

9 Debates About the Original Language

Though Spinoza represents the claim that Matthew originally wrote his gospel in ‘Hebrew’ as “the common opinion,” this view was actually quite controversial.⁴² Some argued that if the original had been in Hebrew, the church would have been careful to preserve it. But none of the church fathers claims to have even seen it. They also argued that Matthew must have written in Greek, because an audience of Palestinian Jews would not have understood a work written in Hebrew (as if knowledge of Greek was so widespread in 1st Century Palestine that a work in Greek would have had a wider audience). Though this view had prominent Catholic defenders, like Erasmus and Cajetan, most of its advocates were Protestant (most notably, Calvin).

Richard Simon, a Catholic priest, replied that Papius’ testimony was not contradicted by any of the church fathers, that when Papias said the gospel was written in ‘Hebrew,’ he didn’t mean Biblical Hebrew, but Palestinian Aramaic, and that when Jerome reports having consulted “the Gospel of the Nazarenes” in preparing his Vulgate translation, what he’s referring to is the lost ‘Hebrew’ original of Matthew. The arguments for a Greek original of Matthew are so weak, Simon thinks, that they should embarrass the defenders of that view. The real reason for their position is their fear that acknowledging that the original version of Matthew has been lost would lead people to conclude that we don’t have ‘the true gospel’ of Matthew. In the case of Protestants, committed to regarding Scripture as the ultimate authority in deciding matters of religious dispute, it would be embarrassing to admit that our record of the teachings of Jesus is based even in part on a translation of a lost original. Imagine the fuss Spinoza would have stirred up if he had said, publicly, that we don’t have the originals of *any* of the gospels, at least insofar as they claim to report what Jesus *said*.⁴³

⁴² I discuss here only a few of the arguments pro and con. For a fuller summary see Simon, *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament*, Ch. 5.

⁴³ The issue of a lost Aramaic original does not affect only the gospel reports of what Jesus *said*. There will also be a question about those portions of the gospel which report what he *did*. If the gospel authors depended on eye-witnesses for their narratives of what happened in the life of Jesus, and if the eye-witnesses were Aramaic speakers who knew little or no Greek (as most of the original apostles presumably were), there will have to have been translation at some point in the process of getting from the eye-witness reports to the Greek gospel narrative.

10 Skeptical Implications of the Method

Earlier I inferred from Annotation 26 that if the Greek text of the NT was a translation of a lost Aramaic original, that might properly encourage skepticism about our ability to know exactly what the teachings of Jesus were. In versions of the TTP published in his lifetime Spinoza does not go quite so far as that. But he does hint at such a result. Toward the end of Ch. VII, he considers various objections which he thinks people might make to his method of interpreting scripture:

There's one final difficulty in interpreting certain books of Scripture according to this method: we don't possess them in the same language in which they were first written. For according to the common opinion, the Gospel of Matthew, and no doubt also the Letter to the Hebrews, were written in Hebrew. Nevertheless, the [original texts] are not extant. Moreover, regarding the book of Job there is doubt about what language it was written in. In his commentaries Ibn Ezra affirms that it has been translated from another language into Hebrew, and that this is the reason for its obscurity. (TTP vii, 64, III/110–11)

Now if Spinoza thinks the Syriac version of the NT gives us the original text of the books it includes, he has an easy solution to this objection, at least as regards the NT. He could say that we *do* possess the texts of the NT in the language in which they were first written. That language is just not the Greek it has generally been thought to be. So his method does not really face this difficulty.

But Spinoza does not take that way out. Perhaps he regards it as too uncertain just what the original language of the NT was. Or perhaps he doesn't mind conceding the objection. At any rate, he accepts the common opinion, at least for the sake of the argument – that only Matthew and Hebrews were written originally in Hebrew, the rest having been written in Greek – *and* he accepts the skeptical implications his methodology leads to on that theory. So in response to the objection quoted above he writes:

I consider [the objections which might be raised against this method] so great that I don't hesitate to say this: in a great many places either we don't know what Scripture really means or we're just guessing about its meaning without any certainty. (TTP vii, 65, III/111)

And though this concession might be very provocative, it might not be quite as troubling to a Christian who thought the lack of an original text raised problems only for two books in the NT (one of the four gospels and one of the twenty-one epistles) as it would to a Christian who thought it raised problems for all four gospels (*and* any epistles written by Palestinian apostles).

11 Did the Apostles Speak as Prophets?

I turn now to two passages in the TTP which come as close to a critical history of the New Testament as anything you will find in that work. The first is Chapter XI, where Spinoza takes up the question whether the apostles wrote their letters as prophets or as teachers? Spinoza begins by saying that no one familiar with the NT can doubt that the apostles *were* prophets. (TTP xi, 1, III/151) The only question is whether they were *acting as* prophets when they wrote their letters, or whether they wrote their letters merely as teachers. The argument is fairly straight-forward: if we compare the characteristic style of the prophets with that of the apostles in their letters, we find them to be quite different. The prophets don't typically reason with their audience; they make authoritative judgments. They claim to speak on behalf of God. "Thus says the Lord" is the typical way a prophet begins his prophecy. The apostles, on the other hand, don't speak that way. They reason with the people they're writing to. Sometimes they express uncertainty about what they're saying. They may apologize for their boldness. They don't claim to speak with authority.⁴⁴

I say this argument is "fairly straightforward". It does raise certain questions: if the apostles never spoke with the authority of a prophet, how do we know they *were* prophets? Granted, prophets don't *always* speak from revelation. But if they don't *sometimes* speak from revelation, why should we believe that they are prophets?⁴⁵ I see nothing in Spinoza's text which would give us a reason to think this. It seems possible that his intent was just to raise the question, and let us decide for ourselves whether there is a good answer to it.

Again, all of Spinoza's examples of apostolic style come from letters attributed to Paul. He gives no examples from other New Testament letter writers. So what he says is the characteristic style of the apostles may just be the characteristic style of Paul. I make no attempt to decide that now. Even if the style Spinoza attributes to all the apostles is just the style of Paul, that's a significant point. The main purpose of Chapter XI seems to be to weaken the authority of the apostles by arguing that they were just trying to work out the truth using their own

⁴⁴ Among the examples Spinoza cites are Romans 3:28, 15:15, 1 Cor. 7:6, 7:25, 7:40, 10:15.

⁴⁵ In fact, it seems not to be true that the apostles never spoke with prophetic authority. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul writes: "For this we declare to you *by the word of the Lord*, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died." (my emphasis) Unless otherwise stated, I quote Biblical texts from the New Revised Standard Version, as given in the *HarperCollins Study Bible*. The HCSB annotation comments that the italicized phrase probably refers to "a special revelation from the risen Christ; no such saying of Jesus survives in the Gospels."

human capacities, not acting as spokesmen for God. If it succeeds only in weakening the authority of Paul, that would not be a trivial result. Paul, or someone claiming to be Paul, wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. Many of those letters are now generally thought to have been written by someone else.⁴⁶ But the ‘Pauline’ letters – that is, the letters written either by Paul or by someone claiming to be Paul – are undoubtedly the ones which exercised the greatest influence on the subsequent development of Christianity and the churches which gave it institutional form.

12 Disagreements Among the Apostles

The most interesting point of this chapter, though, comes at the end, where Spinoza discusses the conflict between Paul and James over the path to salvation. The text is important enough to quote rather fully:

If we survey these letters attentively, we'll see that in religion itself the Apostles indeed agree. But they differ greatly in the foundations. For to strengthen men in religion, and show them that salvation depends only on God's grace, Paul taught that no one can boast of his works, but only of his faith, and that no one is justified by works (see Romans 3:27–28)... James, on the other hand, taught... that man is justified by works and not by faith alone (see James 2:24). Setting aside all Paul's arguments, he expressed succinctly the whole doctrine of religion.⁴⁷

This disagreement about the foundations of religion, Spinoza says, is the source of

the many disputes and schisms which have tormented the church incessantly from the time of the Apostles to the present day, and will surely continue to torment it forever, until at last someday religion is separated from philosophic speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple doctrines Christ taught his followers.⁴⁸

46 According to Brown, of the thirteen letters traditionally ascribed to Paul only seven – 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans – are now generally accepted as actually having been written by Paul. The other six – 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, Titus, and 1 and 2 Timothy – are thought not to be by Paul, though presumably they were written by authors who took themselves to be expressing Pauline ideas. Spinoza's examples come almost exclusively from the seven letters scholars regard as genuinely Pauline.

47 TTP xi, 21, III/157.

48 TTP xi, 22, III/157–58.

Though Spinoza often seems to be sympathetic to Paul,⁴⁹ here he identifies himself with James, who “expressed succinctly the whole doctrine of religion” when he rejected Paul’s position, and taught that man is justified by works. Spinoza criticizes Paul for having introduced philosophical speculations into religion, as part of his effort to accommodate the unfamiliar gospel message to his Gentile audience (citing 1 Corinthians 9:19–20). The other apostles, who were preaching only to a Jewish audience, unreceptive to philosophizing, did not engage in such speculations. “How happy our age would surely be now”, he concludes, “if we saw religion again free of all superstition!” Here Spinoza moves from suggesting that Paul’s teaching is ‘philosophical speculation’ to calling it a form of superstition. But he doesn’t say explicitly what particular teachings he objects to. He leaves that for us to figure out.

13 What Paul Taught

Let’s try to do that, focusing on passages where Paul seems to provide reasons for thinking that our salvation depends on faith, not works, the point at issue between him and James. Essentially what Paul argues in his epistle to the Romans is that we are all woefully sinful; so if we had to depend for our salvation on our works – on our compliance with God’s law – a just God would condemn us to damnation; fortunately for us, God is merciful; so he’s provided another way, the way of faith. If we have the right faith, we will be saved. Let’s examine this reasoning a little more closely.

First, the doctrine that *sin is universal*: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23) This might mean no more than that everyone fails to achieve perfection, not that everyone is profoundly wicked. It’s easy enough to

⁴⁹ Nadler remarks (*A Book Forged in Hell*, p. 170) that “Spinoza holds Paul in especially high esteem.” He’s not alone in that judgment. Yitzhak Melamed has gone so far as to describe Paul as “Spinoza’s true Biblical hero”, in Melamed, “*Christus secundum spiritum*: Spinoza, Jesus, and the Infinite Intellect”, p. 147. Similarly Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza’s Thought*, pp. 54–5.

I suggest that we need some nuance here. Spinoza is certainly sympathetic to some of the things Paul says. E. g., he frequently comments favorably on Rom. 9:10–18, a key text for the doctrine of predestination. (Cf. TTP ii, 51, iv, 36, xvi, 53, ADN. XXXIV, and Letters 75 and 78.) He also likes very much Paul’s doctrine that there is no sin before the law, which he interprets to mean that there is no sin in the state of nature. (Cf. TTP xvi, 6, with Romans 4:15) But as TTP xi, 21–24, demonstrates, he’s not sympathetic to the doctrine of justification by faith. Nor can he be if he wishes to defend religious liberty. As I’ll argue below, that doctrine is central to the traditional Christian argument against religious liberty.

believe that much. Our common experience of the world suggests that everyone who reaches adulthood is guilty, at some point, of some transgression against the commandments. I presume most people don't commit murder. I will not speculate about how many commit adultery. Reliable information seems hard to come by in that area. But many steal. And many children fail to respect their parents. And how many of us, children or adults, consistently refrain from coveting our neighbors' possessions?

Still, some people's transgressions seem to be few and relatively minor, compared with the horrendous crimes others commit. It would be consistent with holding that we are all sinful, in the sense of failing to achieve perfection, to add that there are still some people, perhaps many, who do the right thing most of the time, and who, when they do the wrong thing, don't do anything truly awful. Call that the cheerful interpretation of the doctrine that sin is universal. Paul's version of the doctrine is not cheerful:

3:9... we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,⁵⁰ 10 as it is written, "there is no one who is righteous, not even one, 11... there is no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."

Paul goes on in this vein for several more verses (3:13–18), which I won't quote here. Suffice it to say that this passage seems to express a deep pessimism about our moral nature. Paul would deny, it seems, that there is *anyone* who does the right thing most of the time, and even that there is *anyone* who genuinely seeks God, or demonstrates his love for his fellow men by sometimes showing them kindness. We are all *worthless*.

It's not so easy to believe that everyone is *that* wicked. So scholars are divided about how Paul could have come to accept such an extreme view of human sinfulness. Brown writes that "Paul's view of the universality of sin and death stems from observing the existing world." (p. 580) Sanders, on the other hand, argues that "both the Gentile and the Jewish worlds contained 'saints,' people whose lives were *largely beyond reproach*. It is unlikely that Paul's view

50 There are translation issues here. The King James version is more literal: "we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all *under sin*." (my italics) More recent translations introduce the notion of being *under the power of sin*. (Cf. the RSV and NRSV, or Joseph Fitzmyer in the Anchor Bible edition of Romans, Doubleday, 1992) Sanders defends these translations (*Anchor Bible Dictionary* VI, 44) pointing to a number of passages in Romans 5–7 in which Paul treats sin as an active power which has 'dominion' over us, enslaves us, and alienates us from God.

of universal heinous transgression rested on empirical observation.”⁵¹ That seems plausible. But if empirical observation won’t support such pessimism, how did Paul come to embrace it?

14 How Paul Became a Pessimist

I’ll sketch here the answer which seems to me to emerge most naturally from Paul’s letters. It’s a pretty traditional answer, I think, though not one which seems popular among NT scholars nowadays. The first point is that in Romans 3: 9–18 Paul supports his doctrine that sin is universal by appealing to various Biblical passages. Both in the verses I quoted, and in the continuation I omitted, Paul is citing scripture, mostly the Psalms, though Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Isaiah all provide some of his quotes. So the dark view of human nature expressed in Romans 3:9–18 is not peculiarly Paul’s. It’s a view he finds expressed frequently in the Hebrew Bible.⁵² It may not be the *consistent* view of the Bible. Sanders contends that

In the Jewish view, God had created the world and declared it good, a teaching which is not easily reconcilable with the view that Sin is a power strong enough to wrest the law from God’s control or to render humans powerless to do what is good. (*Paul*, p. 43)

Let’s suppose this is broadly true. Still, the argument Paul uses in the immediate context of Romans 3:9 shows him responding to a different, darker side of the Jewish religion. So why is Paul drawn toward the dark side of scripture?

The best answer I can find is that at some point Paul came to believe in his own sinfulness, as measured by what he had come to think was the appropriate standard. Later in Romans he will write:

7:14... I am of flesh, sold in bondage to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For I do not do what I want to do, and what I detest, that I do. 16 Yet if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But as it is, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18 I know that no good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. I can desire what is good, but I cannot carry

⁵¹ The quote comes from Sanders, *Paul*, p. 44. The emphasis is mine. He expressed a similar view in his article on “Sin, Sinners (NT)” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. In both these works Sanders offers suggestions about how Paul could have come to his pessimism about our moral nature. I hope to say something about these suggestions later.

⁵² Specifically, Eccles. 7:20, Ps. 14:2–3, 5:10, 140:4, 10:7, Isa. 59:7–8, Prov. 1:16, Ps. 36:2b. See the *Anchor Bible Romans*, pp. 334–6. The article on “Sin, Sinners (OT)” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* demonstrates that there are many other passages he might have cited.

it out. 19 For I do not do the good I desire, but instead the evil that I do not desire. 20 Yet if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 21 So I discover this principle at work: when I want to do right, evil is ready at hand. 22 For in my inmost self I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law in my members battling against the law that my mind acknowledges, and making me captive to the law of sin that is in my members. 24 Wretch that I am, who will rescue me from this doomed body?⁵³

This passage is well-known, and central to the interpretations of Paul which dominated Christian theology for a long time.

Recent discussions of Paul have argued that the traditional interpretation profoundly misunderstood him. I am rather old-fashioned in reading it as expressing what Krister Stendahl called “the anguish of a plagued conscience.”⁵⁴ Stendahl himself doesn't think Paul actually suffered this anguish, pointing out that in Philippians he had written:

3:4 ... If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel... as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; *as to righteousness under the law, blameless.* (my emphasis)

Stendahl observes that the statements in Romans “about the impossibility of fulfilling the Law stand side by side with the one just [quoted].” (p. 81) On this reading Paul did not think the law impossible to fulfill, because he believed he himself had fulfilled it. But if Paul did not think the law impossible to fulfill, and did not feel that he personally had great difficulty obeying it, why did he think sin – serious sin – was universal?

Here's a possible answer: it's not true that these statements literally “stand side by side”. They occur in different letters, and there seems to be no consensus about their relative dates. Romans is generally thought to be one of Paul's last letters, if not the last. Philippians is apparently hard to date.⁵⁵ Maybe it's later

53 Here I use Fitzmyer's translation from the Anchor Bible edition of Romans, but mainly for stylistic reasons. I don't see any substantive difference between it and the RSV/NRSV.

54 Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West”, p. 81. Brown (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 568n) describes this article as “an essential corrective” to interpretations which see Paul as “reflecting on his preChristian struggles observing the Law.” Among the recent works influenced by Stendahl's interpretation are Sanders' *Paul* and Garry Wills' *What Paul Meant*. Wills writes that Paul “says repeatedly that he has done nothing for which his conscience could reproach him,” citing a number of passages to that effect, the most pertinent of which (apart from Phil. 3:6) is 1 Cor. 4:4.

55 Brown's suggested dates for Philippians range from 56 to 63 CE, depending on where Paul is thought to have written that letter. (p. 484) His suggested dates for Romans cover a narrower range, from 55 to 58. (p. 560) Without attempting to be specific about dates, Wills suggests a

than Romans. Maybe it's earlier. But if it is earlier than Romans, it could represent a different stage of Paul's thought about sin, where he is optimistic, not only about his own ability to fulfill the law, but about the ability of the Philippians as well:

2:14 Do all things without murmuring and arguing, 15 so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world.

Here blamelessness appears to be a condition the Philippians can attain by *doing the right thing in the right spirit*: without murmuring and arguing. Paul does not think this is easy. If the Philippians behave as he recommends, they will be rare specimens of virtue. Still, it's possible for them to be blameless and innocent. Does Paul, then, at this stage of his career, think sin is universal? On the hypothesis I propose he started out as a comparative optimist, and ended as a deep pessimist.

15 Interiorizing the Law

But why the change of heart? Earlier I suggested that in Romans Paul was conscious of his own sinfulness *as measured by what he had come to think was the appropriate standard*. What I had in mind was that Paul may have come to think that when he declared himself blameless, he wasn't setting the bar high enough. By this I don't mean that he came to recognize that the moral requirements of the law were more crucial than its ceremonial requirements, that everyone is obliged not to kill, say, but that not everyone (or not every male) needs to be circumcised. What I'm postulating is a more significant change: Paul may have come to think that fulfilling the moral requirements of the law would take more than just correct external behavior.

In the passage leading up to that description of his inner conflict, he focuses attention on one commandment in particular: the commandment not to covet.

7:7 ... If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'

chronology for Paul's letters which makes Romans the last of the genuine Pauline letters (pp. 15–16). The HCSB proposes an essentially similar chronology (p. 1908). Sanders says that Romans "may be" Paul's last surviving letter – "may be" because Philippians and Philemon... cannot be dated." (Sanders, *Paul*, pp. 39–40).

Now some of the commandments seem to require nothing more than a certain external behavior: “you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal.” The commandment not to covet looks like it requires more than that. What is it to covet? It is to desire, especially, to desire strongly, to long for. This aspect of the tenth commandment is particularly clear in the version given in Deuteronomy:

5:21 Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor’s house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

You can’t fulfill this commandment merely by not sleeping with your neighbor’s wife and not stealing his possessions. You have to not *want* to do those things. And this looks like much more of a challenge than avoiding the external acts would be.

The Sermon on the Mount, for many Christians, is the epitome of Jesus’ teaching. There Matthew reports him as saying:

5:27 You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

In his life of Jesus Sanders comments that these verses – and others in that context – illustrate an “idealistic perfectionism” which “marks substantial portions of the Sermon on the Mount.”⁵⁶ And he questions whether Jesus ever said such things:

The reader of Mark and Luke would not know that Jesus prohibited anger and lustful thoughts. Admonition to eliminate feelings that are common to humanity is not a characteristic of Jesus’ teaching generally, but occurs only in this section of Matthew... the overall tenor of Jesus’ teaching is compassion towards human frailty. (*ibid.*, p. 202)

I don’t wish, at this point, to get into the difficult business of sorting out which of the teachings attributed to Jesus in the gospels actually go back to Jesus. I’ll limit myself to three points.

First, whatever Jesus himself may have taught, and whatever Paul may have believed that Jesus taught,⁵⁷ the interiorization of the moral law we find in the

⁵⁶ See Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 201.

⁵⁷ It’s an interesting question what Paul’s sources for knowledge of Jesus’ teachings were. The picture I derive from Brown is that Paul died sometime between 64 and 67, and that the most likely date of the earliest gospel, Mark, would be between 68 and 73. Brown thinks the next ear-

Sermon on the Mount is not entirely foreign to the Jewish tradition. As we've seen, it's present in the Torah itself, even if not strongly emphasized. Second, if Paul did come to think of the law as requiring the absence of certain desires, then it becomes much easier to understand why he might also have come to think that he was in bondage to sin. By that standard, it's so hard to be good that one might easily think it impossible. Third, if Paul did think of the law as making these demands on our desires, it's easier to understand why empirical observation of people would not settle the matter for him. Let's stipulate that our everyday experience of others would probably lead us to believe that most of them are not horrendously wicked, and that some even leads lives which are "largely beyond reproach."⁵⁸ But what we see is only what is external. By introspection we learn that blameless external behavior can co-exist with desires a strict moralist would condemn. We may be able to conceal these desires from human judges. But in the end we will have to answer to God for our secret thoughts. (Rom. 2:14–16) Paul's recognition of this point would explain why he might not regard everyday observation of others as dispositive.

16 Philosophical Speculation

So far I don't think we find anything in Paul which deserves to be called 'philosophical speculation.' He believes that sin is universal, that everybody sins frequently and seriously, and (if my interpretation of this is correct) that part of the explanation for the ubiquity of serious sin is that the law makes demands on us which ordinary human beings will frequently fail to fulfill, demands even saints will often find challenging. To the extent that this view is not based on empirical observation, it seems to be based at least partly on introspection, and partly on scripture. Perhaps it is also based partly on literary and philosophical accounts of human experience. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid gives Medea the following lines:

A new force drags me against my will; desire urges one thing, my mind another; I see the better and approve it; but I choose the worse. (*Metamorphoses* VII, 19–21)

The act she contemplates in this version of the story is betraying her father by helping Jason steal the golden fleece. Euripedes attributed a similar sentiment

liest gospel, Matthew, was probably written between 80 and 90. So it seems unlikely that Paul knew any of the gospels, though he must have been familiar with some of their sources.

58 Even the story of Noah, which on the whole favors a rather dark view of man's moral nature, does present Noah, initially, at least, as "a righteous man, blameless in his generation." (Gen 6:9).

to his Medea, though in a different, and more troubling context, where what she was on the point of doing was unambiguously appalling.⁵⁹ Ironically, if we interiorize the moral law, it does not matter what Medea chooses. She is condemned merely by having the desires she does.

Ovid did not invent the problem of weakness of will. He merely gave crisp epigrammatic expression to a common human weakness which philosophers had puzzled about since Plato's *Protagoras*, a weakness explored most influentially in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. So far I think Spinoza might have had some sympathy with Paul's view. He himself holds a moderate, secularized form of the view. He can't accept the traditional notion of sin. He thinks it's unintelligible to conceive God as a lawgiver (TTP iv, 23–37). If sin is defined as a transgression of the laws of God, he will deny that there is such a thing as sin. (Cf. E IV P37S2 with TP ii, 18) But he proposes to redefine "sin" as disobedience to the laws of the state. In that sense there is no doubt that sin is possible and all too common, if not universal. And because he thinks the state is an institution whose function is to enable people to pursue their rational self-interest – giving them additional incentives to engage in cooperative behavior and avoid anti-social behavior⁶⁰ – he will sometimes equate sin with irrational behavior. (Cf. TP ii, 20–21 with E IV P54S)

Suppose we think of sin as irrational action, action in which reason succumbs to the passions, yielding anti-social action contrary to the agent's interests, broadly understood. On that conception, I think Spinoza would grant that sin is universal, frequent in the life of most, though not all, human beings. In the *Political Treatise* he writes that "it's not in anyone's power to always use reason and be at the highest peak of human freedom." (TP ii, 8) We are all subject to affects like anger, envy, or some other form of hatred. These pull us in different directions, and make us naturally enemies to one another. (TP ii, 14) This is not to say that no one is virtuous. But Spinoza does think that the truly virtuous – that is, those who are guided by reason *most* of the time – are very few:

Everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, has always been the same. In every age virtue has been extremely rare. (TTP xii, 7, III/160)

⁵⁹ Euripedes, *Medea*, 1076–1080: "The evil done to me has won the day. / I understand too well the dreadful act / I'm going to commit, but my judgment / can't check my anger, and that incites / the greatest evils human beings do." There the act is avenging Jason's betrayal of her by killing their children.

⁶⁰ Incentives and disincentives which go beyond those nature provides, and should make it clearer what it is in our interest to do.

We may have an allusion here to Romans 3:9. But if so, Spinoza has moderated Paul's pessimism. He does *not* join Paul in saying with the Psalmist that no one is righteous, not even one.

17 Where Paul Went Astray

If Spinoza accepts a more moderate version of Paul's teaching, what is the philosophical speculation he thinks so unfortunate? I think it lies in Paul's account of the ultimate cause of sin. Paul may not have fully articulated the doctrine of original sin which the Church subsequently adopted, but he did a great deal to get it started. The traditional doctrine maintains that God created us with free will, with an ability either to sin or not to sin, but that the first man, Adam, chose to sin, and that as a result of his choice, sin passed to all his descendants, who were henceforth unable not to sin.⁶¹ Though those descendants might *now* be under the power of sin, unable to order their lives as they should, or as they would wish, the fact that they lack this power is a consequence of an act of Adam's which he could have avoided.

When the church fathers offered scriptural support for this view, they emphasized a passage in Romans which the Vulgate translation rendered:

...as through one man sin entered the world (and through sin death), and so [death] passed into all men, *in whom* all have sinned.⁶²

61 Unless cleansed by baptism. See, for example, Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, entries in the Systematic Index for "Original Man", "Original Sin" and "Fallen Man". For an Augustinian statement of the doctrine, see Id., *City of God*, XII, xxii; XIII, i-iii, xiv; and XIV, i-iii, xi-xvi.

62 Romans 5:12, as translated by Deferrari in Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, my emphasis. This is a pretty literal translation of the Vulgate, which still has some currency, though it is problematic on both linguistic and philosophical grounds, and most subsequent translations read differently. The Vulgate puts all the responsibility on Adam, not only for his own sin, but also for those of his descendants, in a way many moderns find uncomfortable. The RSV, which we can take as representative of most recent translations, assigns responsibility for the descendants' sins, and consequent death, to the descendants themselves: "As sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men have sinned."

Fitzmyer has argued forcefully that both these translations face linguistic difficulties and that the context does not permit us to evade the philosophical issue by amending the Vulgate translation of Romans 5:12: "No matter how one understands 5.12d, the universal causality of Adam's sin is presupposed in 5.15a, 16a, 17a, 18a, 19. Hence it would be false to the thrust of the whole Pauline paragraph to interpret 5.12 as though it implied that the sinful human condition before Christ's coming were due solely to individual personal conduct, as Pelagius advocated, in imi-

It's not clear what this verse means, but Augustine offered a way of reading it which became official church doctrine for a long time. He took the italicized phrase as a reference to Adam, the 'one man' mentioned in the first clause, who brought sin into the world. His idea was that the *first* sin, Adam's sin, involved all of his descendants, who somehow sinned in his act of sin. Hence the lines in the *New England Primer*: "In Adam's fall we sinnèd all." Augustine put the matter as follows:

God, who is the author of natures, and certainly not of vices, created man morally upright. But man, corrupted willingly, and justly condemned, produced corrupted and condemned descendants. For we were all *in* that one man, since we all *were* that one man, who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him before they sinned.⁶³

Here we have what can only be described as philosophical speculation. To say things like "we were all *in* that one man... we all *were* that one man" is to make metaphysical claims which it's very hard to know how you would establish. And these seem to be philosophical speculations foreign to the Old Testament tradition, which does not need to engage in them, because however much the Hebrew Bible may believe in the universality of sin, it does not try to explain its universality by a doctrine of inheritance from Adam.⁶⁴

The problem of explaining human sinfulness – in the secular sense in which Spinoza can accept the idea of sin – is central to the latter parts of his *Ethics*. Part IV is called "Of Human Bondage", a phrase Spinoza glosses as "man's lack of power to moderate and restrain [his] affects", manifested in the fact that often, though he sees the better, he cannot help but follow the worse. That allusion to the words of Ovid's *Medea* occurs in the Preface to Part IV, and the passage is quoted in E IV P17S. Spinoza's project is to account for our irrationality through natural causes, through the laws of nature, "according to which all things happen." (E III Pref) In the *Ethics* he avoids polemic against the traditional religious explanation. In the *Political Treatise* he is more confrontational:

The theologians don't remove this difficulty [that people don't organize their lives wisely, but are carried away by blind desire] when they claim that the cause of this weakness is a vice of human nature, *or* a sin, originating in the fall of our first ancestor. If the first man had it in his power to either stand firm or fall, and if he was in possession of his fac-

tation of Adam." See Fitzmyer, "The Consecutive Meaning of ΕΦ' Ω in Romans 5:12". This much seems right, whatever one may think of Fitzmyer's own alternative translation.

⁶³ Augustine, *City of God*, XIII, xiv, my emphasis, my translation.

⁶⁴ See the article cited above, "Sin, Sinners (OT)" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

ulties and unimpaired in his nature, how could he have fallen, knowingly, and with eyes open?... They say he was deceived by the Devil. But who deceived the Devil?... And how could that first man, who was of sound mind and the master of his will, be seduced and undergo the loss of his mental faculties? If he had the power to use reason correctly, he couldn't be deceived. He necessarily strove, as far as he could, to preserve his being and keep his mind sound. It's supposed that he had this in his power. So he must have kept his mind sound and could not have been deceived. The story of the first man shows that this is false. So it must be granted that it wasn't in the first man's power to use reason correctly. Like us, he was subject to affects. (TP ii, 6)

In the end, Paul, Augustine, and the long line of theologians who follow them have no explanation for Adam's sin.

18 What Christ Taught

Spinoza contrasts the philosophical speculations Paul engaged in with “the very few and very simple doctrines Christ taught his followers.” (TTP xi, 22) By this I take it he's referring to a quite short list of ethical teachings hardly anyone would object to. Sometimes he identifies the true religion with the commandments to practice justice and love your fellow human beings. (TTP xix, 9, III/230) I can understand a Christian objecting that this list is *too* short, that these are mere platitudes, which everyone might agree with, but which are not meaningful without more specifics about what constitutes being just and loving your fellow human beings.⁶⁵

Spinoza might concede that. But toward the end of Chapter XII, he responds to this objection in advance. He has just claimed that the most important requirements of scripture are the commandments “to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” (TTP xii, 34)

This recalls the saying attributed to Jesus in Matthew:

22:35 One of [the Pharisees], a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is greatest?” 37 He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ I take it that Dungan makes a version of this objection in Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, pp. 216, 240, 242.

⁶⁶ There are alternative versions of this story in the other synoptic gospels (Mark 12:28–34 and Luke 10:25–28), with interesting variations. These gospel passages, of course, go back to various passages in the Hebrew Bible: Deut. 6:4–9, 10:12–22; Lev. 19:18.

This last verse suggests that the rest of the law can be derived from these two commandments. So does Spinoza:

The remaining moral precepts must be held to be no less uncorrupted,⁶⁷ since they follow with utmost clarity from this universal foundation: to defend justice, to aid the poor, to kill no one, to covet nothing belonging to another, and so on. (xii, 37, III/165)

Spinoza will certainly allow that the short list can be expanded. But not indefinitely. The principle governing the expansion – that things which follow clearly from the universal foundation are part of the moral law – also limits it. Things which don't follow clearly from that foundation are without justification and not required.

19 The True Religion

Spinoza thinks that a short list is crucial to the claim of Christianity to be the universal religion. Before Jesus the prophets preached the true religion, relying on the covenant Moses entered into at Mt. Sinai, but they preached it only to the people of Israel, as the law of their country. After Jesus the Apostles also preached the true religion, but preached it to everyone, as a universal law. (xii, 24, III/163) If the religion Jesus and the apostles preached was the true religion, and the religion Moses and the prophets preached was also the true religion, then both the prophets and the apostles preached the same religion. So no doctrine peculiar to either Testament can be part of the true religion.

Even if we had fewer books than we do, either of the Old Testament or of the New, we would still not be deprived of the word of God, by which we ought to understand the true religion. (xii, 25, III/163)

One crucial implication of this is that insofar as the books of the New Testament teach doctrines not present in the Hebrew Bible, they don't teach anything essential for salvation.

Spinoza's principle – that even if we had fewer books of the Bible than we do, we wouldn't be deprived of God's word – entails that if we lacked one of the present four gospels, we wouldn't lack anything essential for our salvation:

⁶⁷ That is, we need not worry that the text of Scripture which has come down to us has been corrupted in the places where these doctrines are taught.

It's true that some things are contained in one gospel which are not there in another, so that one often aids in understanding the other. Still, we should not conclude from that that everything related in these four works was necessary for men to know... (xii, 30, III/164)

To see why this is important, let's compare the gospels to see how they bear on the issue between Paul and James: is salvation by faith or by works? This will be an application of Spinoza's historical-critical method, which requires us to "collect the sayings of each book and organize them under main headings, so that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject... noting all those which are ambiguous or obscure or seem inconsistent with one another." (TTP vii, 16, III/100)

20 Salvation in the Synoptics

Suppose a thorough examination of the gospels yields the following result: three gospels agree, roughly, in telling the same story: the path to salvation is by works, obeying the commandments; one gospel rejects that answer, arguing that faith in Jesus is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. On that gospel's view, obedience to the commandments would be a very good thing, if it were possible; but it's not possible, and so not necessary for salvation. On Spinoza's principle that no one gospel is essential to our determining the word of God, we should reject the outlier and follow the three gospels which agree in recommending salvation by works. So our hypothetical examination would wind up supporting Spinoza's preference for James over Paul.

I can't attempt here a thorough examination of the gospels on this issue. But I can discuss, briefly, a few relevant texts. Consider the following story, told in Matthew, Mark and Luke. To make comparison easier, I'll put the different versions of the story side by side:

Mark 10:17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; you shall not commit

Matthew 19:16 Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder;

Luke 18:18 A certain ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 20 You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false wit-

adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22 When he heard this he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; 19 Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 20 The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” 21 Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22 When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

ness; Honor your father and mother.” 21 He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” 22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” But when he heard this he became sad; for he was very rich. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

One reason the three gospels here excerpted are called the Synoptics is that they lend themselves to this kind of side-by-side comparison. They often tell different versions of the same story. Sometimes the differences seem slight and insignificant. Sometimes they clearly aren't. In this case we have differences of both kinds, which I'll leave it as an exercise for the reader to decide about. What's most pertinent to my argument is a similarity: each version of the story presents a path to eternal life which achieves that goal through obedience to the commandments – plus (for some, at least) extraordinary generosity to the poor. The contention at the end of each version, that it's very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, seems intended to reassure us that extreme generosity is not required of those who are not rich. From those to whom more is given, more is expected. For most of us what's required for salvation is simply

obedience to the commandments. (Hard enough, you might think, if obedience to the commandments requires not coveting.) Jesus seems to regard this obedience as a realistic possibility. When his interlocutor claims to have kept all the commandments since his youth, Jesus accepts what he says, and tells him he needs to do just one thing more: give all he has to the poor. In these passages at least the synoptics favor James.

21 Salvation in John

The gospel of John, on the other hand, clearly sides with Paul. It provides the principal, perhaps the only, support in the gospels for the view that what's required for salvation is faith *and only faith*. The text which states this most clearly and concisely is John 3:

16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life... 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the only Son of God.

Belief in Jesus – presumably that means belief in Jesus as God's son, whose sacrificial death on the cross redeemed mankind from sin, not just belief in Jesus as a wise and charismatic preacher in 1st Century Palestine, who taught a message of love – is both necessary and sufficient for salvation. There are a number of other passages in John which endorse a similar view.⁶⁸ These passages epitomize John's gospel. So far as I can see, there are no similar passages in the synoptic gospels.⁶⁹

Now it might be objected that we don't need Spinoza's principle – if it's in only one gospel, it's not essential – to exclude John from consideration when we're trying to determine what Jesus taught about salvation. There are many reasons, well-known to biblical scholars, for regarding John as unreliable. Evaluating the primary sources for our knowledge of Jesus, Sanders concludes that John's picture of Jesus is so different from that offered in the synoptics that

⁶⁸ See, for example, John 6:44–51, 14:6.

⁶⁹ A prima facie counter-example occurs in what is known as 'the longer ending of Mark': "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned." But the longer ending of Mark is "missing from the earliest, most reliable Greek manuscripts." (HCSB, p. 1758n.) Textually conscientious Bibles bracket it as dubious. Alas, not all Bibles are conscientious about the texts they give us.

... for the last 150 or so years scholars have had to choose. They have almost unanimously, and I think entirely correctly, concluded that the teaching of the historical Jesus is to be sought in the synoptic gospels and that John represents an advanced theological development, in which meditations on the person and work of Christ are presented in the first person, as if Jesus had said them. (Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 71)

Sanders goes on to say that John is aiming at a different kind of truth, which is not synonymous with historical accuracy. This seems to be a diplomatic way of saying: if you want a serious attempt to tell the historical truth about the life and teachings of Jesus, the place to go is to the synoptic gospels; if you don't care that much about the historical accuracy of the narrative, but enjoy theological speculation, you will find that in John. By and large I'm happy to concede this objection, but would add that the force of tradition, and the investment so many have in defending the existing canon, make it desirable to have as many arguments at our disposal as possible.⁷⁰

22 Why Spinoza Matters

I began this paper by suggesting that there might be more than meets the eye in Spinoza's discussion of the New Testament. I'll conclude by explaining why I think it's important to try to go beneath the surface of Spinoza's text. Spinoza's argument – putting together things both explicit and implicit – goes like this:

1) In understanding any substantial text, it's important to understand its provenance: who wrote it? when? for what audience? for what purpose(s)? in what language? in what historical context? and so on.

2) It's also important to read the text, if possible, in its original language, with a good understanding of how that language works.

3) For the most important books in the New Testament, the gospels, the original language was Aramaic; the original texts of the gospels have not come down to us; what we have are Greek translations of lost Aramaic originals, done by persons unknown, whose qualifications as translators are also unknown.

⁷⁰ Extremely interesting in this connection is Casey's analysis of the reasons why the scholarly community, which has largely accepted the arguments against the historicity of John, has been unwilling to make those arguments accessible to the general public. See discussion of John, in the appendix to *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of his Life and Teaching*, pp. 511–525, also helpful because it summarizes the principal arguments of Id., *Is John's Gospel True?* and responds to critics of that book.

4) As a result, we can't hope to understand the gospels as well as we might a text for which we had better textual information; in many cases we can't understand the text at all.

5) But the following consideration saves us from total skepticism: where two or more of the gospels substantially agree in what they report about the teachings of Jesus, then it's likely that what they report is (at least roughly) what he taught.

6) One important teaching which is substantially the same in the three synoptic gospels is that if we obey God's commandments, we will be saved, and that if we don't, we won't. The gospel of John teaches that faith in Jesus is both necessary and sufficient for salvation, but this message is difficult to find in the synoptics, and probably not taught by Jesus.

This result is interesting enough in itself. But it's also important because of its consequences for the problem of religious liberty.

Historically the belief that having a certain faith is essential to salvation has been central to arguments for using coercion against nonbelievers. Sometimes the argument was that coercion, suitably employed, could be instrumental in saving the soul of the nonbeliever by bringing him to the true faith. Sometimes the thought was that even if coercion didn't work on the people immediately coerced, it still might have indirect benefits. Hypocrisy has its uses. Among them is the fact that a heretic or apostate who must pretend to be orthodox doesn't have the same opportunities to corrupt others. This idea underlay Thomas Aquinas' argument justifying the use of coercion in religious matters.⁷¹ Since the benefits of correct belief and the costs of incorrect belief were thought to be infinite, it was easy to justify using harsh measures to get agreement.⁷²

Spinoza develops a theological argument for religious liberty in Chapters XIII-XV of the TTP, arguing that Scripture aims only at obedience, and that obedience is enough to meet the requirements of scripture. This opens up the possibility of salvation to members of *any* organized religion – or for that matter, to

⁷¹ Cf. Augustine, Letter 185, with Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, Qu. 10, Art. 8; Qu. 11, Art. 3. In a book I hope to write, on the rise of religious liberty in early modern philosophy, I intend to discuss not only Augustine and Aquinas on this topic, but also Luther and Calvin. In general I think discussions of religious liberty too often fail to discuss seriously the arguments of those who opposed religious liberty. Some of the articles which I think of as draft chapters for that book are available on my website: http://www.sitemaker.umich.edu/emcurley/files/emor-y_religious_liberty_march_2011_revision.pdf

See particularly the article Curley, "From Augustine to Spinoza and Locke".

⁷² The reasoning here is, of course, analogous to the reasoning in Pascal's wager, which Augustine anticipates. See Curley, "From Augustine to Spinoza and Locke".

adherents of *no* organized religion – so long as they obey the basic moral requirements Spinoza identifies at the end of Ch. XII: they must love God above all else, love their neighbors as themselves, defend justice, help the poor, kill no one, and so on.⁷³ It's a crucial part of this argument that in xiv, 13, Spinoza *defines* faith in terms of obedience to God. Faith, on this account, is

thinking such things about God that if you had no knowledge of them, obedience to God would be destroyed, whereas if you are obedient to God, you necessarily have these thoughts. (xiv, 13, III/175)

To anyone who comes to Spinoza with a knowledge of the Reformation debates about the relative importance of faith and works, this may seem a breathtakingly simple way of resolving the conflict between Paul and James in favor of James. Spinoza does go on to support his definition by appealing to passages in the epistles, including epistles traditionally ascribed to John.⁷⁴ But his way of understanding “faith” must entail a rejection of the fourth gospel, and of the theological tradition deriving from Paul. For a long time I felt Spinoza did not show adequately that obedience to certain basic moral requirements is (according to the NT) sufficient for salvation, and in particular, that he did not deal sufficiently with those passages in the NT which seem to require orthodox belief for salvation. I think I now see how he could make that argument, how he perhaps would have made that argument, if the oppressiveness of his times had not prevented him from being fully candid.

Adequately understanding Spinoza's argument for freedom of thought and expression requires understanding his treatment of the New Testament. And understanding his treatment of the New Testament, I think, requires reading between the lines in the TTP, seeing at least the fundamental points Spinoza

73 In Curley, “Spinoza's Exchange with Albert Burgh” I've argued, on the basis of the exchange with Burgh, that Spinoza was a religious pluralist in this sense: that he thought salvation was possible in many religions. I think my interpretation entails that he thought it would also be possible in an individual religion, outside all organized religions. As is true of most of my articles on Spinoza, this one is also available on the website mentioned above.

74 In xiv, 14, he quotes James' statement that faith without works is dead (James 2:17), probably the most frequently cited of the NT passages favoring justification by works. In subsequent sections he follows that up with a number of quotations from 'John': 1 John 4:7–8, 1 John 4:13, and 1 John 2:3–4. The traditional view about this letter was that it was written by the author of the fourth gospel. You might think that if Spinoza had been willing to subject the New Testament to the kind of critical discussion he gave the Hebrew Bible, the *prima facie* conflict between the teaching of this letter and the teaching of the fourth gospel might have been used to raise questions about that traditional view. But Spinoza abstains from that inquiry.

would have made if he had provided us with a critical history of the NT. Reading between the lines is thus really essential to understanding Spinoza's defense of religious liberty. In that regard, Strauss's hermeneutics are vindicated.

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