

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The influence of Spinoza in the higher criticism of the Old Testament

by P. C. Craigie

When the pre-history of Old Testament criticism is surveyed, some mention is usually made of the significance of Benedict Spinoza (1632-77), the "God-intoxicated" Jewish philosopher of the Netherlands. In this paper Professor Craigie, of the Department of Religious Studies in the University of Calgary (author of the NICOT commentary of Deuteronomy reviewed in our last issue), examines this aspect of Spinoza's influence in greater depth.

THE influence of Spinoza in the history of the higher critical (or scientific) study of the Old Testament is an ambiguous one. In this paper, an attempt will be made to assess that influence and to grasp some of the implications of the assessment for the current critical and theological study of the Old Testament. This will be done by posing a number of questions and attempting to provide answers to them. It might clarify the discussion if the questions are posed first and then examined one at a time. The questions will be stated succinctly here, but will be amplified during the course of the paper. (1) What is Spinoza's place in the history of the higher critical study of the Old Testament? (2) If Spinoza played an important role, by what means was his method to become influential in the growth of higher criticism during the 18th and 19th centuries? (3) Were there certain implicit assumptions in Spinoza's method, and subsequently in the higher critical method of the 18th and 19th centuries, which by their very nature contributed to the decline in the authority of the Old Testament? (4) How are the conclusions derived in answer to the foregoing questions to affect the current critical and theological study of the Old Testament? It is evident that the framing of questions (2) and (3) presupposes a particular answer to question (1); I hope to justify this procedure during the course of the paper.¹

I

What is Spinoza's place in the history of the higher critical study of the Old Testament? The answers which have been given to this first question differ considerably. In those Old Testament *Introductions* which offer a brief history of scholarship, Spinoza is normally

¹ References to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* follow the translation of R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1951). References to Spinoza's letters follow J. Wild (ed.), *Spinoza: Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 edition).

acknowledged to be one of several forerunners in the history of the discipline.² The real origins of critical scholarship, however, are said to be found in the early 19th century (de Wette, Ewald, Vatke and others) and this early work was given even more solid expression in the latter half of the same century (Kuenen, Graf, Wellhausen, Driver and Robertson Smith). Within the framework of this kind of answer, Spinoza, along with several others (Bonfrère, Morinus, Hobbes *et al.*), prepared the way for criticism proper and perhaps even "anticipated"³ some of its results.

In contrast to this, there is another answer which might be ventured, namely that Spinoza was perhaps the most important figure in the rise of Biblical criticism. For example, O. Biedermann, after noting the strong theological opposition which Spinoza's work attracted at the time, has claimed: "Deswegen darf man Spinoza auch nicht den Schöpfer der historischen Bibelkritik nennen, obwohl er das Recht hätte. Andere ernten, was er gesät hatte. . . Spinoza ist, wenn nicht der Vater, so doch der erste grosser Vertreter der historischen Bibelkritik".⁴ A more recent and more formidable advocate of this point of view is Leo Strauss, whose concern is philosophical rather than historical.⁵ It is quite clear to Strauss that Spinoza is the founder of Biblical criticism (or "Biblical science"), but the importance of this observation lies in his perception of the nature of the method. The real foundation of Biblical science is rooted in a critique of the major presupposition of religion, namely revelation.⁶ For that reason, Strauss himself engages in a major critique of Spinoza's critique.

The divergence between these two potential answers to the first question depends partly on the aspect of Spinoza's work which is given emphasis. From one point of view, Spinoza was indeed simply a forerunner; he was a forerunner in the sense that the results of his

² See, for example, G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), p. 26; R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), p. 46. See also B. Pick, "Spinoza and the Old Testament", *The Biblical World* 2 (1893), p. 113.

³ S. Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Penguin Books, 1951), p. 179; N. Smart, *Historical Selections in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1962), p. 126.

⁴ O. Biedermann, *Die Methode der Auslegung and Kritik der biblischen Schriften in Spinozas theologisch-politischem Traktat in Zusammenhang mit seiner Ethik* (Erlangen: Jacob, 1903), pp. 58-59. See also L. Fossati, "Spinoza e la critica moderna della Bibbia", *Rivista di Filosofia* (Milan) 17 (1927), pp. 217-234; C. Siegfried, *Spinoza als Kritiker und Ausleger des Alten Testaments* (Naumburg: Heinrich Sieling, 1867).

⁵ L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965; published originally in Berlin, 1930); *idem*, "How to Study Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*", in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), pp. 142-201.

⁶ L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 35.

scientific criticism were relatively simple in contrast to the grand syntheses produced during the nineteenth century. For example, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is thoroughly undermined in Spinoza's work;⁷ the results of his analysis are an advance on the rather vague allusion of Ibn Ezra, but they by no means anticipate the kind of synthesis found in the work of Wellhausen. On the other hand, in the question of method *per se*, it is probably true to say that Spinoza was the founder of higher criticism or scientific method; he had his predecessors,⁸ of course, but the rigour with which he propounded the method of criticism does not seem to have any close parallel.⁹ The importance of this argument will be expanded in the following paragraphs, but it may be anticipated briefly. The rigorous method which Spinoza advocated found its context in an explicit critique of revealed religion. However, the context within which the method was subsequently employed was that of religious (principally Protestant) scholarship. The problem which emerges may be stated as follows: does the method necessarily imply or involve the critique of religion? Or is the method itself neutral, a tool which may be used regardless of one's view of revelation? The latter alternative seems to be implicit in much of nineteenth century scholarship (and also in that of the twentieth century), but whether or not it is correct must be examined at greater length. But first it is necessary to turn to another question.

II

If Spinoza did indeed play an important role, by what means was his method to become influential during the subsequent growth of the discipline during the late 18th and the 19th centuries? At this point in the discussion, it is relevant to turn to some modern interpretations of the rise and dominance of higher criticism during the 19th century. For some time, it has been popular to consider that the major scholars of the 19th century were influenced primarily by the intellectual currents of their own age.¹⁰ Darwin, in the natural sciences, and Hegel, in history and philosophy, are thought to have been the intellectual progenitors of the modern viewpoint reflected in nineteenth century Biblical Scholarship.

⁷ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* VIII, pp. 120-132.

⁸ See H.-J. Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969), pp. 6-60.

⁹ The obvious parallel might seem to be Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which Spinoza may have read. Hobbes, in part III, "Of a Christian Commonwealth", examines many topics in common with Spinoza's *Tractatus* and his results are quite similar at a number of points; the method, however, is neither so explicitly scientific nor so rigorous. See also Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 86-104.

¹⁰ See, for example, H. F. Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 1-18.

Recently, however, a number of scholars have been discerning that the roots of 19th century criticism are to be found in an earlier period.¹¹ Several writers are now emphasizing the great importance of Herder and German Romanticism (in the broader sense) as the most significant antecedent to 19th century criticism.¹² H. J. Kraus has suggested that 19th century criticism was in some ways a "Romantic Renaissance", and that behind Herder and Romanticism stands the figure of Spinoza.¹³ This analysis appears to convey an accurate statement of the course of events, and perhaps the key figure linking Herder with 19th century scholarship was J. G. Eichhorn; the acquaintanceship between the two men provides a basis for that link¹⁴.

This newer understanding of the problem does not mean, of course, that Spinoza, Herder and the scholars of the 19th century all held the same (or even a similar) point of view; the path of influence was more subtle than that. Herder was by no means in agreement with the thorough-going rationalism of Spinoza, but he seems nevertheless to have held Spinoza in high esteem as a person. What is more important, however, is that in one respect Herder's study of the Old Testament was profoundly affected by Spinoza. Herder's two volume work, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, has as its working principle the view that the Bible is essentially the product of human imagination, and in this he concurs with Spinoza.¹⁵ His study of Hebrew poetry was simply one part of his larger quest for *Urpoesie* and in form, though not explicitly scientific, it is thoroughly objective and "unprejudiced". Another distinctive feature of Herder's study of Hebrew poetry becomes apparent when his work is compared with the slightly earlier work of the English Bishop, Robert Lowth. Lowth's lectures, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum Praelectiones Academicae* (first published in 1753), are scientific in terms of literary analysis;¹⁶ the analysis, however, is largely descriptive¹⁷ and does

- 11 This does not mean that the influence of Darwin and Hegel was insignificant but simply that it must be set within a larger context.
- 12 For a summary statement, see R. J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism since Graf* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 45-49.
- 13 H.-J. Kraus, *op. cit.*, pp. 335-336.
- 14 See R. T. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), p. 295.
- 15 See Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (translated by J. Marsh; Burlington: Smith, 1833), Vol. 1, p. 27; L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 263-264. During the same period in which Herder wrote *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, he also wrote an essay on Spinoza; see F. McEachran, *The Life and Philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 52.
- 16 For an assessment of Lowth's contribution to Old Testament scholarship see R. S. Cripps, "Two British Interpreters of the Old Testament", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35 (1952/53), pp. 385-404.

not evince clearly a philosophical stance in the approach to the Old Testament. In contrast, Herder (who had read Lowth's lectures) employs a distinct philosophy of history in his analysis of the stages of development in Hebrew poetry. The three periods which he traces in that development reflect his organic view of history, namely that within history, cultural cycles develop like organisms from birth, through maturity and into decay.

To summarize the argument up to this point: it is suggested that certain basic features of Spinoza's method were influential in the growth of 19th century scholarship. The principal channel of this influence was through Herder and other representatives of German Romanticism. Now attention must be turned to those features of Spinoza's method which were significant in the higher criticism of the 19th century and an attempt must be made to determine their implications for the higher critical study of the Old Testament and the relationship of that discipline to theology.

III

The third major problem can be expressed by means of two related questions. If the higher critical method of studying the Bible found its initial expression within the framework of a critique of revealed religion, does that fact bind the method inextricably to the critique, or is the method *per se* neutral? And, related to this question, were there certain implicit assumptions in the method which by their very nature contributed to the subsequent decline in the authority of the Bible? The first of these questions contains two alternatives; insofar as the method was subsequently employed within Christian scholarship, the latter alternative is implied (*viz.* that the method *per se* is neutral).¹⁷ The former alternative is possible, however, and it is this possibility which prompts the second of the two questions just posed. If scientific method is not *per se* neutral, but is nevertheless believed to be neutral, then it may be that certain implicit assumptions within the method did contribute to the decline in the authority of the Old Testament.

In order to provide an answer to these questions, it is necessary to make an attempt to distinguish the principal features of Spinoza's

¹⁷ In this sense, Lowth's *Lectures* are still an excellent introduction to the study of Hebrew poetry; they have not become "dated" in the same manner as Herder's work.

¹⁸ Note that the argument at this stage does not necessarily imply that subsequent advocates of the method were fully aware of Spinoza's role in its formulation. To take one example, Wellhausen—who should by all means be described as a scientific Biblical scholar—does not place much significance on the role of Spinoza in his brief sketch of the history of Biblical criticism; see J. Wellhausen, *Grundrisse zum Alten Testament* (R. Smend, ed.; München: Kaiser, 1965), pp. 116-117.

Biblical criticism. Within the scope of this paper, however, that task will not be undertaken by an extensive analysis of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.¹⁹ The reason for not so doing lies in the fact that it was probably not this literary work of Spinoza which directly provoked the growth of the discipline in the subsequent centuries.²⁰ Rather an attempt will be made to examine certain basic features of his method which continue to be of primary importance in the subsequent history of the discipline.

There are two or three preliminary matters to be mentioned briefly, however. First, Spinoza's conception of God is not a direct prerequisite for understanding his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: there seems to be little doubt, on the other hand, that the concept of God in Spinoza's philosophy²¹ was significant in prompting him to produce the method of Biblical criticism in the first place. Second, the aim of the *Tractatus* was not to establish Biblical criticism, but to demonstrate the nature of a free state (by which Spinoza meant a state within which the philosopher would have freedom to philosophize). The result of the *Tractatus* was achieved by a critique of revealed religion; the result, stated concisely, was to undermine the revelatory status and thereby the authority of the Bible, but to leave a minimal deposit of ethics and piety, the validity of which could be agreed upon by all rational men. This result was within the conspectus of the *Tractatus*, for it made possible a kind of diluted loyalty to the Biblical tradition which transcended the particularities of Christianity and Judaism. But what was the nature of the method?

The method can be examined from two vantage points, that of the subject (*viz.* the scholar) and that of the object (*viz.* the Scripture). From the first point of view, the scholar must approach the Biblical text in an impartial and unprejudiced way. To quote Spinoza (*Tractatus*, Preface, p. 8): "I determined to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assumptions concerning it, and attributing to it no doctrines, which I do not find clearly therein set down". So far, the statement is a model of objectivity and modern scholarly method, but the sentence which immediately follows is significant. "With these precautions, I constructed a method of Scriptural interpretation, and thus equipped, proceeded to enquire—What is prophecy?" The second sentence is indicative of the nature of the *Tractatus*, for in the first six chapters Spinoza engages in a critique of revealed religion (Prophecy, Law, Miracles)

¹⁹ This task is undertaken admirably in the writings of L. Strauss.

²⁰ By this, I mean simply that 19th century scholars may not have read the *Tractatus*: insofar as Spinoza exerted influence, it was in positing certain basic directions of approach to Scripture, which became increasingly the norm in Biblical scholarship after his time.

²¹ For a description, see Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I ("Of God").

and only in the seventh chapter does he present his method for the interpretation of Scripture.

Leaving this criticism aside, let us return to the "careful" and "impartial" approach. The implications of this approach are in fact philosophical and the significance of the point emerges clearly in Spinoza's correspondence with William van Blyenbergh. In that correspondence, certain "first principles" emerge and in them the distinction between Blyenbergh and Spinoza is made clear. For Blyenbergh, there are two basic principles for philosophizing: (a) his own clear and distinct ideas; (b) the revealed word of God. But, as Spinoza objects, Blyenbergh is more willing to admit that his own "clear and distinct ideas" might be wrong, than he is to say that Scripture might be erroneous.²² For Spinoza, on the other hand, full trust in the discoveries of his own intelligence provided the basic principle and precondition for philosophizing: "I acquiesce wholly in that which my understanding shows me, without any suspicion that I may be deceived, or that Holy Scripture, although I do not search it, can contradict it: for truth does not conflict with truth. . ."²³

Blyenbergh was clearly in a predicament insofar as he wished to be both a radical philosopher and a Christian. For Calvin, on the other hand, there would have been no predicament, for his understanding of "fallen" man—and therefore his assessment of the ability of human reason—was such that "clear and distinct ideas" (*in Spinoza's sense*) would not have arisen in the first place.²⁴ To summarize the approach of the scholar to Scripture, two points must be stressed: (a) a very high view of human reason is assumed; (b) it is further assumed that the truth of Scripture may be accessible to impartial reason. The second point becomes clear in Spinoza's objection that the theologians prejudged the case "by their laying down beforehand, as a foundation for the study and true interpretation of Scripture, the principle that it is in every passage true and divine. Such a doctrine should be reached only after a strict scrutiny and thorough comprehension of the Sacred Books. . ." (*Tractatus*, Preface, p. 8). Although the objection may seem a reasonable one, in a sense it misses the mark, for the truth of Scripture (within Christianity) is affirmed on a broad basis through its canonization and on an individual basis by the "Spirit which beareth witness in my heart that these things are true". The latter point, namely the role of the Holy Spirit in the revelation of the truth of Scripture, is clearly an affirmation based on something other than reason (namely faith, or religious experience). If, then, a Christian scholar has a

²² See the correspondence in *Spinoza Selections*, p. 424.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

²⁴ See further L. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 193-214.

cautious view of the nature and role of reason, and/or a spiritual awareness of the living truth of Scripture, it follows that his precondition for Biblical study will not be exactly the same as that of Spinoza.

Turning from the subject to the object (*viz.* the Scripture as the object of examination), some further aspects of Spinoza's method may be seen. There are two statements which summarize the conception of character of the book which was to be the object of study: (1) the Bible should be studied in the same way that nature is studied; (2) the Bible should be studied in the same way that any other book is studied.²⁵ Both statements involve a radical assumption of the greatest significance; the Bible is essentially a human book, a product of the human imagination. As such, it becomes liable to the most thorough investigation along the lines of natural science. The subsequent significance of this approach will be examined in the next section, but first one further point must be made. For Spinoza, the conception of the Bible as a product of human imagination had derogatory implications, for his view of imagination was extremely negative in contrast to his view of human reason. In subsequent application of the method (e.g. that of Herder), imagination *per se* very often was given a different and more positive significance, but the conception of the Bible as essentially a human document remained a primary dictum of higher criticism.²⁶

IV

The final question may now be posed: How does the analysis of the influence of Spinoza in the growth of higher criticism affect the current critical and theological study of the Old Testament?

It is fair to say that the majority of current scientific or higher-critical Old Testament scholarship employs a method which, by definition, does not have a "God-hypothesis" as a precondition.

²⁵ See Spinoza, *Tractatus*, VII (pp. 99, 113). See also Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 258-262. Biedermann (*op. cit.*, pp. 18-21) summarized the significance of Spinoza's method as follows: "Der einzige Weg, der zu einem wirklichen, unbefangenen Verständnis der Schrift führt, ist die historisch-kritische Methode der Bibelauslegung. . . Die historisch-kritische Methode führt allein zur Wahrheit, sie ist die vorteilhafteste, die beste, die allein richtige". Spinoza's analogy between natural science and Biblical science was subsequently objected to by Jacobi, but his objection did not materially change the course of the discipline. See F. H. Jacobi, *Werke*, Vol. IV/1 (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1819: "Ueber die Lehre des Spinoza").

²⁶ Implicit in the dictum is the view that the Bible records man's aspirations for God, rather than God's self-revelation to man; that this is an implicit assumption in 19th century Biblical criticism seems clear, but explicitly many scholars made no such assumption. See T. W. Manson, "The Failure of Liberalism to interpret the Bible as the Word of God", in C. W. Dugmore (ed.), *The Interpretation of the Bible* (London: S.P.C.K., 1944), pp. 101-102.

The Bible is studied primarily as a human document and Spinoza's objectives have been achieved to a limited extent; that is to say, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, agnostic and atheistic scholars may approach the Old Testament on common ground (even though they may never agree on detailed matters of interpretation). This is in itself a good thing, but it leads to a kind of schizophrenic tension when for example, a Protestant Old Testament scholar moves from the critical study of the literature and attempts to formulate a Biblical Theology. Theology, by definition, does not operate on the same axioms as does a Spinozistic method of Biblical criticism.

The dilemma produced by higher critical method becomes most obvious in the realm of Old Testament Theology, for it becomes necessary for some Biblical scholars to operate on a double set of axioms; *knowledge* (critical Biblical method) and *faith* (the Bible as revelation) may often be put in separate "compartments" and the relationship between the two becomes extremely ambivalent.²⁷ This ambivalence is no doubt a principal contributing factor in the continuing problems of method and procedure in the area of Old Testament Theology. It leads, for example, to distinctions between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, for higher criticism has undermined in many cases the possibility of "real history" and revelation or truth has to be found in "sacred history", which may not in fact be grounded in the former kind of history.

Though the dilemma is most obvious in Old Testament Theology, it is also present in the literary study of the Old Testament. In theology, it is impossible to avoid the dilemma, but in a purely textual study, it is easier to brush it aside and work on the Old Testament text just as if it were any other book. But it is important to stress that there is a good reason for the dilemma. It is not simply the case that nineteenth-century (Christian) Biblical scholars were "duped" by Spinoza and his method. The very nature of the Biblical revelation, as being divine in its source but human in its mediation, meant that the dilemma was always potential. In this sense, the study of the Bible as revelation is open to the same variations in emphasis as have been seen in the history of Christological doctrine. Biblical criticism, it is suggested, is a form of "Dynamic Monarchianism" in relation to the Bible as revelation. The Bible itself is seen as a human product and must be examined as such with the rigour of scientific method; only then can an attempt be made to discern its nature as revelation and its source in God.

²⁷ See, for example, O. Eissfeldt, "Israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche Theologie", *ZAW* 44 (1926), pp. 1-12. For a recent discussion of the problem, see G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

By describing Biblical criticism in the metaphor of Dynamic Monarchianism, it is clearly implied that the discipline lacks a proper balance, or fails to hold in a proper tension the two elements of the apparent paradox. The potential for the imbalance lies in the nature of revelation, but the appearance of the imbalance, as it is expressed in the contemporary state of Biblical scholarship, finds its roots in the method of Spinoza. It finds further strength during the current century in the apparent compatibility of the method with the science, technology and conception of history which constitute the component parts of our contemporary world-view. Thus, in any attempt to redress the imbalance, and to restore the authority of the Bible, there will inevitably be critics; method may become "non-scientific" (at least in the most rigorous and modern sense) and the stance of the interpreter may be said to be "theologically prejudiced" (as distinct from an implicit "scientific prejudice").

To return to the question: the analysis of the relationship between Spinoza's work and modern Biblical scholarship points to a deep-seated dilemma in the nature of current method. The dilemma has been expressed in the preceding paragraphs from a religious point of view (as is implied, for example, by reference to the "authority" of the Bible). However, the dilemma is not only present for the religious scholar, whether he be Christian or Jewish. It is also present for the general scholarship of religion, such as that which is emerging in many Universities with the growth of Departments of Religious Studies. Whether the object of study be the Old Testament or the Qur'an, a method which by definition excludes a "God-hypothesis" is failing to account in some fashion for a central belief in the religion under examination. The nature of the dilemma may differ somewhat for the religious scholar and the scholar of religion, but it is present for both of them. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that in the current re-thinking of the problems and nature of method in Old Testament study, a better awareness of the work of Spinoza will set those problems in a clearer perspective.

University of Calgary