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Hermeneutics and Conflict. Spinoza and the Downfall of Exegetical Interpretation

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Hermeneutics and Conflict. Spinoza and the Downfall of Exegetical Interpretation / diego donna. -  
ELETTRONICO. - 333:(2021), pp. 91-101. [10.1163/9789004471955\_007]

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/842033> since: 2024-01-26

*Published:*

DOI: [http://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471955\\_007](http://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471955_007)

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(Article begins on next page)

This is the final peer-reviewed accepted manuscript of:

**Donna, D. (2021). "Chapter 5 Hermeneutics and Conflict: Spinoza and the Downfall of Exegetical Interpretation". In *The Philosophers and the Bible*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.**

The final published version is available online at:

[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471955\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004471955_007)

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**Hermeneutics and Conflict:**  
**Spinoza and the Downfall of Exegetical Interpretation**

ABSTRACT

In a renowned passage of chapter VII of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza declares that in order to “interpret the Scriptures it is necessary to prepare their disinterested history” and not to admit any principle or data that does not result from it. Commentators of the *Treatise* have generally taken these statements as guidelines for a new historical-rational interpretation method of the Bible. However, is the real aim of Spinoza’s treatise on political theology to invert philosophy’s subordination to theology? In other words, what is the real purpose of the method inaugurated in chapter VII? As I shall demonstrate, what Spinoza has in mind was not the elaboration of a new hermeneutic model, but rather a critical confrontation with interpretative traditions, Calvinist biblical philology and its techniques and working tools in particular. Given that the inspired character of the text has disappeared, the authority of interpretation also declines.

*Keywords:* Spinoza, Scripture, interpretation, *Theological-Political Treatise*

*1. Introduction*

According to chapter VII (*De interpretatione*) of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, dealing with the method of reading the sacred text, the task of biblical criticism is to provide a history of the narratives by which theological discourse has been informed. Spinoza’s premise lies in a “complete agreement” between the interpretation of the

Scriptures and the interpretation of nature. The method of interpreting the Scriptures, he says, is no different from the “interpretation of nature,” the latter consisting in “putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things.”<sup>1</sup>

Commentators accordingly read Spinozist biblical criticism along three main lines: 1) its construction of a purely rational model of biblical hermeneutics; 2) its attribution of the imaginary and inappropriate ideas of God found in the prophets’ books to the psychological and social circumstances that governed their writing; 3) a criticism of the various forms of superstition related to religion. In Jonathan Israel’s words, the *Theological-Political Treatise* is the first explicit modern project of reducing theology to philosophy and faith to reason.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, one aspect concerning the nature and purpose of Spinoza’s method must be questioned. Does Spinoza defend the freedom to philosophize by refusing the subordination of reason to faith? In other words, does he have in mind a rational exegesis of the Holy Scriptures detached from the authority of the Church?

Through the following pages, I shall try to establish the meaning that Spinoza gives to the term “interpretation” as a practice that remains impossible as long as the required conditions are not met. At the end of chapter VII of his treatise, Spinoza is at a

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<sup>1</sup> *Tractatus theologico-politicus* [TTP] 7, *Opera*, vol. 3, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: 1925 [henceforth G]), 98; *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: 2016 [henceforth C]), 171.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: 2001), 449; See also idem, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man (1670-1752)* (Oxford: 2006), 43-51, 155-63.

dead end, as he finds it necessary to get to the bottom of the letter, of *sola Scriptura*: while according to both Catholic and Calvinist theology, the identity of the “Word” depends on its inspired character, in Spinoza’s account such character has finally disappeared together with the truth of interpretation itself. The tools used by theologians to understand the passages of Scripture will also prove useless. In his perspective the solution is twofold: on the speculative level, Spinoza excludes interpretation from science or true knowledge (philosophy); on the political level, he defends the freedom of all interpretations that respect civil authority.

## 2. *Ex sola Scriptura*

Let us begin by clarifying some terms: strictly speaking, Spinoza identifies the term *theology* with *revelation*, referring to the word of God and aimed at instilling the moral feelings of justice and charity. “By theology here I understand, in brief, revelation, insofar as it indicates the goal we said Scripture aims at: the principle and manner of obedience.”<sup>3</sup> It is therefore necessary to distinguish between revelation (theology) and the exegetical science (interpretation) in which revelation has been transmitted. Two obstacles, however, hinder those who question the meaning of the written words of the Bible: the first involves the truth of its content, the second the certainty of its preservation within these texts.

As for the truth of Scripture, Spinoza begins by observing that “Scripture most often treats things which cannot be deduced from principles known to natural reason.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> TTP XV; G, 3, 184; C, 278.

<sup>4</sup> TTP VII; G III, 98; C 171.

The sacred text deals with things that cannot be deduced under natural light.<sup>5</sup> In his study of the Bible, Spinoza starts from the assumption that the content of the biblical narratives is completely separated from the ideas of the intellect.<sup>6</sup> The prophet goes in search of external signs that verify the content of what he imagines; but the signs grasped by the prophet are incapable of exhibiting an autonomous “norm” of truth – a norm that is expressed instead by the ideas of the intellect.<sup>7</sup> Only intellectual ideas can express the essence of what they represent and thus an intrinsic denomination, which is

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. TTP VII; G III, 99. On the other hand, the fact that the content of the Bible entails considerable problems is not a novelty of the 17th century. Medieval theologians, from Hugh of St. Victor to Thomas Aquinas, also had to explain how what in one place of the Scriptures is taught confusingly can be expressed more explicitly in other places. In any case, interpretation is a ‘science’ if it succeeds in tuning the meaning of the texts to the truth of what is preserved in them. Cf. Pierre-François Moreau, *L’Écriture Sainte au temps de Spinoza et dans le système spinoziste* (Paris: 1992), 127; Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La théologie comme science au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: 1957); Albert Patfoort, *Thomas d’Aquin: Les clés d’une théologie* (Paris: 1983). See also Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalion* (Chicago: 1993).

<sup>6</sup> TTP VII; G III, 114-15. See also TTP II; G III, 31-33.

<sup>7</sup> The distinction between “sign” and “norm” is discussed in depth in the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* [TIE], on which we are not currently focusing our attention. See TIE, §§ 88-90; G II, 33. See also *Ethica* [E], II, prop. 49, schol., G II, 132; II, prop. 17, schol., G II, 106; II, prop. 40 schol. 2, G II, 122; III, prop. 27, dem., G II, 160. See Jacqueline Lagrée, *Spinoza et la norme* (Besançon: 2002); Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza et le signe: La genèse de l’imagination* (Paris: 2005).

not granted by the imagination.<sup>8</sup> One cannot find, within the Scripture, any chain of axioms and definitions, it “does not contain lofty speculations or philosophical matters,” writes Spinoza, “but only the simplest doctrines, which anyone, no matter how slow, can perceive.”<sup>9</sup> Briefly, Spinoza denies any possible concordance between the ideas of intellect and the signs of imagination. A divine commandment is the imaginary translation of the order of nature, that the prophets knew through divine will:

Nature observes a fixed and immutable order, that God has been the same in all ages, both those known to us and those unknown, that the laws of nature are so perfect and fruitful that nothing can be added to them or taken away from them, and finally, that miracles are seen as something new only because of men ignorance.<sup>10</sup>

As for the status of the sacred texts, Spinoza’s criticism follows three main axes. First of all, he rejects the rule of faith that affirms the divinity of the Scriptures, that is the idea that the Old Testament is a homogeneous and coherent text. Secondly, if there is no norm that provides a basis for the coherence of the text, no document and no authority can be agreed upon. Thirdly, on a philosophical level, the divine will corresponds to a

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<sup>8</sup> TIE §§ 34-39, 43-44, 68-69, 87-89, G II, 15-16, 17, 26, 33; E, II, def. 3, G II, 84.

<sup>9</sup> TTP XIII; G III, 167; C 257. *Ivi*, 169-70. See also TTP I, § 5; G III, 16, 77; Spinoza to De Vries, *Epistolae* [Ep.], 9, G IV, 42-46; E, II, prop. 1-2, G II, 86.

<sup>10</sup> TTP VI; G III, 91; C 168.

necessary and universal law of nature. And this idea does not need to be interpreted, it can be the object of a definition, but not an interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

Spinoza therefore rejects the rule of faith, which affirms the divinity of Scripture. Closely linked to this is the question regarding the identity of the authors and the subsequent issue of the unity of Scripture. The task of biblical criticism is to provide the history of the narratives on which the collective religious imagination was built. From the history of nature, we define the natural things, as from certain data. Accordingly, in order to interpret the Scriptures it is necessary to derive from them, by means of legitimate deductions taken from certain principles and data, the “mind” (*mens*) of the author.<sup>12</sup> As the central aspect of the scholarly work is the comparison between the texts and the knowledge of the Hebrew sources<sup>13</sup>, Spinoza starts from the

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<sup>11</sup> TTP IV, G III, 57-63; 6, G III, 81-88; E, I, app., G II, 78-83; II, prop. 2, dem., schol., G II, 141-44.

<sup>12</sup> TTP VII, G III, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Each theologian of the Reformed Church is called upon to adhere scrupulously to the texts of the Bible, which is its own judge. Only in this way can the theologian in turn be considered a judge of the texts and a guide for the faithful in the deepening of the contents of the faith. For Calvinist theology, the authority of the Scriptures alone is based on the divine character of the Scriptures themselves. Thanks to it, as Henk van den Belt has pointed out in his study of *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology. Truth and Trust* (Leiden: 2008), 66, the believer has access to the testimony of the Spirit. See also Peter T. van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship, and Rabbinical Studies in the Seventeenth Century: Costantijn L'Empereur (1591-1648) Professor of Hebrew and Theology at Leiden* (Leiden: 1989); Susan James, *Spinoza on*



same method, that is Scripture must be interpreted through itself. He prepares an approach to the texts which is based on the study of language and the enumeration and analysis of the scriptural passages. What sort of history must that be?

First, it must contain the nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written [...]. Second, it must collect the sentences of each book [...]. Finally, this history must describe fully, with respect to all the books of the Prophets, the circumstances of which a record has been preserved, viz. the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book.<sup>14</sup>

However, interpreting the Bible proves to be highly difficult: “for the most part we do not know this history. Either we are completely ignorant of the authors of many of the books, or else we have doubts about them.”<sup>15</sup> The comparison between the passages of the Scriptures can only accidentally clarify the meaning of the darker passages; the Bible contains “incredible or incomprehensible things,” written in “very obscure terms;” it is difficult to acquire certainties about the “true meaning” of the books.<sup>16</sup> Has God

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*Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: 2012), 37-49. For a reconstruction of the relationship between philosophy and Scripture in Dutch theology and Cartesianism, see the study by Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625-1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: 2006).

<sup>14</sup> TTP VII; G III, 100-01; C 173-75.

<sup>15</sup> TTP VII; G III, 109; C 183.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

really left the Bible uncorrupted? Spinoza's answer, based on these assumptions, is fairly clear:

If we read a book which contains incredible or incomprehensible things, or is written in very obscure terms, and we do not know its author, or when or on what occasion it was written, it will be pointless for us to try to become more certain of its true meaning. [...] Euclid wrote only about the most simple and intelligible things. Anyone can easily explain his work in any language. To grasp his intention and be certain of his true meaning we do not need a complete knowledge of the language he wrote in, but only a fairly ordinary – almost childish – knowledge. Nor do we need to know about his life, concerns and customs.<sup>17</sup>

Even from a grammatical point of view, Spinoza maintains that in the Hebrew language “many utterances will occur whose meaning will be very obscure, indeed completely incomprehensible, even though they are expressed in well-known terms.”<sup>18</sup> The problem arises within the principles of language: “for time, the devourer (*tempus edax*), has obliterated from the memory of men almost all the idioms and manners of speaking peculiar to the Hebrew nation. In fact, the use of this language is now largely abolished, its meanings have become obscure.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> TTP VII; G III, 100-11; C 183-85.

<sup>18</sup> TTP VII; G III, 106; C 180.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. See *Compendium*, 49. In the words of Martine Pécharman, “Les dégâts causés dans le temps à l’hébreu ne sont pas surmontables par la méthode historique, il y a

In Spinoza's hands, the study of Hebrew, which he deepened in the *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*, also becomes an instrument for criticism of the holy language: if in theory the language in which the biblical texts were written should help its understanding, on a practical level the use (*usus*) of the same language is now largely abolished and its meanings have become obscure and impenetrable. In the *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, which remained unfinished and was published posthumously in 1677, Spinoza's study of the Hebrew language extends to the consideration of the common use of the Hebrew language (*communis loquendi usus*). This use, as Pina Totaro points out, is understood as the "code proper to a particular community" which arises out of the awareness of the historicity of the language, applied to the texts of the Scriptures and modified over time in relation to society, habits, private and political life<sup>20</sup>. The *Compendium* represents an important complement to Spinoza's reflection on the Scriptures: it tests what the *Treatise* legitimizes on a philosophical and political level, namely the passage from a grammar of the sacred Scriptures, subordinate to biblical exegesis, to a grammar of the Hebrew language,

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impossibilité pour nous d'une histoire accomplie de la langue hébraïque *linguae Hebraeae perfectam historiam non possumus habere.*" Pécharman, "Loin de Port-Royal: Le statut linguistique de l'hébreu dans le *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* de Spinoza", in *Spinoza philosophe grammairien*, ed. Jean Baumgarten, Irène Rosier-Catach, and Pina Totaro (Paris: 2019), 228.

<sup>20</sup> See Pina Totaro, "Introduzione," in Baruch Spinoza, *Compendio di grammatica della lingua ebraica*, ed. Pina Totaro, trans. Massimo Gargiulo (Florence: 2013), 5. See also Philippe Cassuto, *Spinoza hébraïsant: L'hébreu dans le Tractatus theologico-politicus et le Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* (Paris: 1999).

based on the historical tradition of a population. The study of language is detached from the exegesis of revelation. Hebrew is the vehicle of an original historical heritage, it is the language of the Scriptures, but above all the language of a people and of a living tradition. Language, both vernacular and learned, belongs to all people: the point is to reveal the historical origin of the sacred texts, separating the living language from its fixation on “paper.” This is how Spinoza puts it in the *Theological-Political Treatise*: “Scripture is sacred and its statements divine just as long as it moves men to devotion toward God. But if they completely neglect it, as the Jews once did, it is nothing but paper and ink. They completely profane it and leave it subject to corruption.”<sup>21</sup>

Spinoza’s conclusion is that what is stated in the Bible will remain largely incomprehensible: “in addition to the fact that we cannot have a complete history of the Hebrew language, there is the very nature and constitution of this language.”<sup>22</sup> What time has eroded cannot be recovered by the historical-critical method: “so many ambiguities arise from this that it is impossible to devise a method.”<sup>23</sup> Understanding the meaning of discourses depends on the use of the language (*usus linguae*): the language in which the biblical texts were written should therefore help their interpretation. Nevertheless, if there is no divine norm on which to base the homogeneity of the text, no unity can be found between documents and authorities that are uncertain and often in conflict.

Clearly, a biblical hermeneutics involving the Scriptures alone leads to rather problematic results. The more one remains on the level of the Scriptures alone, the more

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<sup>21</sup> TTP XII; G III, 161; C 251.

<sup>22</sup> TTP VII; G III, 106-07; C 180.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

the difficulties increase; we can only ignore, or at most conjecture without certainty, the true meaning of the Scriptures, concludes Spinoza: “we are just guessing about its meaning without any certainty.”<sup>24</sup> On a philosophical level, the divine will correspond with a necessary and universal law of nature. And just as an idea does not need to be interpreted, so philosophy cannot be based on the idea of a legislating God.

### *3. The conflict of interpretations*

Politically, the issue is even more serious. The idiosyncratic character of the prophets’ visions – “a sign, which would render one Prophet certain of his Prophecy could not at all convince another”<sup>25</sup> – will most probably feed conflict between interpretations.

Theologians in fact introduce themselves as intermediaries between the strictly individual message of the prophet and the rest of society. But is there a doctrine, or an “invention,” as Spinoza calls it, that represents God’s “authority” better than others?<sup>26</sup>

The certain fact is that the more interpretations proliferate, the more theological conflict increases: if men were sincere in their reading of the Scriptures, “they wouldn’t be in the grip of such a blind and reckless desire to interpret Scripture.”<sup>27</sup> Interpretations only multiply conflicts by leading one to “venerate Scripture” in such a way that it seems absolutely contrary to reason.<sup>28</sup> Exegesis has nothing to do with the search for truth, but

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<sup>24</sup> TTP VII; G III, 111; C 185.

<sup>25</sup> TTP II; G III, 32; C 97.

<sup>26</sup> TTP VII; G III, 98; C 186.

<sup>27</sup> TTP VII; G III, 97; C 170.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

with the problem of adapting the contents of the Scriptures to the beliefs of the reader in order to strengthen obedience and charity.<sup>29</sup>

Now, if one assumes that there is no rule that guarantees the truth of the content of the Bible and that the search for signs has nothing to do with the autonomous norm of ideas, one must admit that exegesis transforms all ministers (interpreters) into potential political agitators. The God of revelation has not asked for anything other than justice and charity – nothing to do with science, Spinoza specifies, but only obedience:

If, in accordance with what the Apostle says in 2 Corinthians 3: 3, they have in themselves the Letter of God, written not in ink, but with the Spirit of God, and not on tables of stones, but on the flesh of the hearth, let them stop worshipping the letter and being so anxious about it.<sup>30</sup>

The moral value attributed to the Scriptures thus overturns the argument in defense of interpretation: the usefulness of the texts is meant not for the learned, but precisely for those who are not able to acquire the habit of virtue thanks to reason alone. “It is sheer stupidity to be unwilling to embrace what has been confirmed by so many testimonies of the Prophets and what, moreover, is a great comfort to those whose power of reason is not strong.”<sup>31</sup> If what in the Bible refers to interpretation remains shrouded in deep darkness, on the contrary, it is not necessary to know Hebrew or Greek or to prepare a

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<sup>29</sup> TTP XIV; G III, 174-76.

<sup>30</sup> TTP XII; G III, 162; C 252.

<sup>31</sup> TTP XV; G III, 187; C 280.

historical-philological study in order to understand a simple and easy meaning. The content of this message states that obedience is the way of salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Cartesian philosophers such as Lodewijk Meyer, one of Spinoza's closest correspondents, who in 1666 wrote a text entitled *Philosophy as Interpreter of Scripture* (*Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres*)<sup>33</sup>, claim that the rule of interpretation must be the natural light of reason (i.e. philosophical reason). But then it would mean that the Scripture was written for philosophers rather than for ordinary people, Spinoza replies. On the contrary, if one assumes that the Scriptures are an expression of truth, and only an expression of truth, this would mean understanding philosophy as the "servant" of theology and shackling philosophy to the prejudices of the vernacular. In both cases, as Spinoza concludes in chapter XV by comparing the positions of Maimonides and the Jewish theologian Alfakar: "each is insane, the former with reason, the latter without it."<sup>34</sup> The "dogmatic" position, which defends the possibility of a philosophical reading

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<sup>32</sup> Obedience can be used in two ways: by letting it adhere to the political order, or by reinvesting it in an interior and universal morality. Spinoza's position on "universal morality," inspired in TTP by the figure of Christ, is highly problematic. Cf. Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (Burlington: 2002), 82: "Christian Law is universal, not in the sense that it should be obeyed by all under all circumstances – indeed, it neither should nor could be obeyed in the state of nature – but in the sense that is not a law at all."

<sup>33</sup> Lodewijk Meyer, *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* (Amsterdam: 1666). See Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza: État et religion* (Lyon: 2005), 93-106; Roberto Bordoli, *Ragione e Scrittura tra Descartes e Spinoza* (Milan: 2001).

<sup>34</sup> TTP XV; G III, 180; C 272.

of Scripture, culminates in the same blind alley as the “skeptical” one, which relies solely on the authority of the text. None of them is finally capable of tracing an authentic separation between philosophy and theology:

We cannot demonstrate by reason whether the foundation of Theology – that men are saved only by obedience – is true or false. [...] If we embrace it without reason, like blinded men, then we too act foolishly and without judgment. On the other hand, if we want to maintain that we can demonstrate this foundation rationally, then Theology will be part of Philosophy, and ought not be separated from it.<sup>35</sup>

In short, if we accept rational arguments, we must recognize that they reject the Scriptures; if we believe in the authority of the Scriptures alone, we will basically cease to be human, having betrayed the natural light. It is not possible to reconcile or contrast two incompatible regimes of meaning: interpretation, which works with signs and images; philosophy, which works with concepts. But in essence, all that we cannot understand by natural light is more a source of “vain” knowledge than of useful benefit. The norms themselves concerning practical life and supported by worship are no longer valid once they are placed outside political order.<sup>36</sup> Their exclusive purpose is the exercise of justice and charity.

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<sup>35</sup> TTP XV; G III, 185; C 278.

<sup>36</sup> See Spinoza’s considerations on ceremonies, which we cannot discuss in further detail in this chapter: TTP V, § 12; G III, 69, 160.



#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis carried out so far leads to three conclusions. First, the programmatic thesis at the beginning of chapter VII of the *Treatise*, namely to provide a new nature- based method of reading the sacred texts, takes the form of a process of deconstruction.

Spinoza invalidates the claim made by the Reformed Church of being the true holder of the meaning of the Scriptures by showing the limits and contradictions of its working tools: philology and historical analysis of authors and texts. Secondly, obedience and charity are taken as the only two sources of a rational understanding of the texts, an understanding that in Moses's lexicon was instead a command, communicated through words or images. For this reason, Spinoza specifies, it only had to be executed, without having to be understood. Thirdly, the impossibility of any mediation between the equivocal language of the theological authorities and the univocal concepts of philosophy is confirmed. In any case, either the meaning of the letter of the Scriptures can be understood and there is nothing else to interpret, or this meaning is not accessible, and hence there is nothing to interpret. The distinction between philosophy (truth) and faith (obedience) remains firm.

The outcome of Spinoza's engagement in hermeneutics is then decisive for the development of modern rationality: beneath the letter there is no hidden meaning, nor is it possible to construct meaning from the letter. Once the norm that legitimized the comparison of the clearest passages with the most obscure ones has disappeared, the scheme of exegesis is dismantled. The new method saves the (obvious) moral sense of the texts by dragging interpretation into conjecture devoid of certainty. Not only is Scripture a mystery, but it is an unsolvable mystery since it can no longer count on the sacredness of the letter.

One thing is certain: every interpretation is legitimate, but this freedom refers to the absence of any foundation for what is interpreted. Interpretation is free precisely because of its groundlessness, that is, because the “spirit” of the letter, which was the starting and ending point of the exegetical circle, has been refused.

The novelty introduced by the biblical criticism of Spinoza can rightly be considered the point of origin of this crisis. His warning is that no interpretation is given without freedom, but such a freedom results in losing the “truth” of the text.

Diego Donna

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