

Does Spinoza think the Bible (or any inanimate thing) is sacred?

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I was of three minds,

Like a tree

In which there are three blackbirds.

Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

I

The question seems straightforward enough. Does Spinoza think the Bible (or any inanimate thing) is sacred? We philosophers, historians, readers are trained to parse: it depends on what you mean by sacred; it depends on what you mean by the Bible; or things. Or Spinoza. These exercises rightly declaim that this kind of question, elegant in its plainness, calls upon our powers of decision as much as discernment. Would it be possible to ascertain once and for all some single answer? It is hard to imagine an affirmative reply. And yet the plainness of the question focuses our scholarly labor, our creative decisions. What shall be the general direction questions take? Which number of variables will be put into play? What might be the relationship between one's reading and what one reads? It is this latter question which suggests Spinoza as subject and substance long after (if not long before) the matter of his true identity (meaning, contribution, import) has been settled—if it ever was or will be. Why continue to read any thinker? What is reading? What is thinking? In the case of Spinoza, one returns for fresh insight precisely here, because the questions of why read, what to read, what are reading and thinking are of critical concern to him. Spinoza is interested, in short, in bibles—that is, in books, minds, values, histories, traditions, authorities, reading practices, and truths. One returns; one of course returns.

My focus here will not be on what might seem a crucial issue in the light of the question the essay poses. I will not contend with Spinoza as a Jewish thinker, not directly at least. This is not because it is not an issue worth continuing to plumb, being so obviously a complex site by which to pursue any number of lively trajectories. It will not be considered here—the matter of Spinoza the Jew—first and foremost because in the case of the question under scrutiny, it has constituted something of a distraction. Spinoza's reading of the Bible so clearly does not count as a Jewish reading by any of the usual yardsticks. It contests God's authorship, seems to find indifferent much of the Bible's contents, disparages rabbinic and medieval Jewish philosophical interpretations, and locates the Bible among things inanimate. Yet our exertion over these items—just the full extent of Spinoza's perfidy or, perhaps, irrelevance to things Jewish—has so frequently stymied the pursuit of what Spinoza's reading does and can count as. It is as if once the question of Spinoza's Jewishness has been dispatched, and again by all usual measures it can be dispatched with alacrity, the question of what he is doing with the Bible seems to shrivel up to nothing. Whatever else it may be, the thinking goes, Spinoza's reading of the Bible dominates a modern narrative of critique, contestation, and secularization of all things biblical, i.e., (for the most part) of all things Jewish.

The language of critique, contestation, and secularization is exactly right to comprehend Spinoza's biblical interpretation. I have argued, however, that Spinoza *also* thinks the Bible is sacred, and that this thinking is a fascinating, animated dimension of his work. While much consideration has been given to the fascination of Spinoza's personal identity—neither Jew nor Christian, neither affiliated nor non-affiliated, neither secular nor religious—it is as if his Bible interpretation somehow short circuits on the plain appearance of his critique. But what is plain about Spinoza's critique? Does it—would it—mean to consider the Bible neither Jewish nor Christian, neither traditional nor non-traditional, neither secular nor religious? What might it mean to read (Spinoza, the Bible), or be read (by Spinoza, the Bible), with (or without) these qualifiers? Does Spinoza have the right to redefine not just the Bible but the very standard by which we measure which of our books are bibles? Of course. Yet (and one might find this itself fascinating) readers have been leery of fully parsing, laboring, discerning what these decisions might liberate, and how we might learn about the sacred, about books, even, circuitously, about the Jews, from the decisions of Spinoza.

In the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (TTP), Spinoza uses the terms Bible (*Biblia*) and Scripture (*Scriptura*) interchangeably. His purpose in writing the *Treatise*, he says in the preface, is to “examine Scripture afresh” in the context of the violent disputes to which it has given rise in “Church and Court” (5). Spinoza thus begins with the desire to separate the Bible from controversy long enough and with enough deliberation to determine whether its contents are to blame for “breeding bitter hatred and faction” or whether it is not in fact a case of mistaken textual identity. His comments in the preface presage the argument to come: that indeed the iniquity to which the Bible has given rise is rooted in its readers' superstition, which itself is rooted in both need (scarcity) and greed (immoderate appetite) (1). The Bible alone, he finds, is a document which in the main extols piety, peace, and freedom, the three desiderata to which Spinoza dedicates his disquisition on the title page of the work. In the usage his terminology seems designed, at least initially, to preempt, he finds that the Bible is “Scripture,” is authoritative, is sacred.

As readers of Spinoza know, however, this claim comes with particular difficulties. Spinoza tells us that we can establish the “divinity of Scripture” as long as it can be “made evident to us from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrine” (88). And he feels confident that he can show that it does, declaring repeatedly throughout the book: “from Scripture itself we learn that its message, unclouded by any doubt or any ambiguity, is in essence this, to love God above all, and one's neighbor as oneself” (151). But such declarations provoke rather than settle a set of key questions that are embedded in Spinoza's argument. How does he (how do we) ascertain what is Scripture's message? If its message is so unambiguous and so unclouded, how is it that it, in contrast with most other texts ambiguous and unambiguous, has given rise to so much controversy? What is the relationship between the message of Scripture and the need and greed which it seems, however illegitimately, to inflame? Does Scripture indeed have a single message—a single mind—and if so, what does one make of the very many competing and contradictory things it seems to propound?

One begins in the thick of such questions. But I want to skirt the matter of message for the moment and turn to another kind of objection to Spinoza's declaration that the Bible, in teaching true moral doctrine, is divine or sacred. The objection is not the

familiar one of whether the Bible's value is really augmented by the claim that, insofar as it is divine, it simply teaches what readers can come to "from accepted axioms" without its ancient pages (87). This objection is illuminating, but again I will skirt past it for now except to indicate that its thrust—that the Bible for Spinoza is merely a popular vehicle to deliver a moral (quasi-philosophical) kernel to the common people—is rejected, by Spinoza himself in conversation with disgruntled readers, if not quite by his disgruntled readers to this day.

The objection with which I begin focuses instead on the locution "Scripture alone." It focuses, that is, on Spinoza's interest in dividing Scripture from its usual readers (commentators, theologians, philosophers) and its usual interpretive apparatus (philosophies, theologies, traditions). He does so, he tells us in the preface, as a "precaution," to avoid confusing "human fabrications" for "the divine nature of Scripture," and to found the study of Scripture in a more sober temperament than the "violent passions" to which it has given rise with such regularity. This is a demanding claim for readers of the TTP. Does Spinoza not show, dispassionately, that the Bible is a human fabrication from beginning to end, "faulty, mutilated, adulterated and inconsistent (145)"? Does he not show moreover that "God's eternal Word and covenant" is human (145), found in the mind, "the primary cause of divine revelation" (10), and "divinely inscribed in men's hearts" (145)? Does he not affirm, with Paul, that what is human (fabricated, faulty, inconsistent, adulterated) is divine: "For the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen through the intellect in the things that are made..." (57)? This patchwork of quotations only gives a flavor of what has always challenged readers of the TTP regarding the relationship between scriptures, words, and minds. In his discussion of the divine law, Spinoza notes that this law is "common to all mankind," and thus "does not demand belief in historical narratives of any kind whatsoever."

For since it is merely a consideration of human nature that leads us to this natural Divine Law, evidently it applies equally to Adam as to any other man, and equally to a man living in a community as to a hermit" (51).
Evidently. So evidently in fact that Scripture itself agrees:

... perusing the Holy Writ... the first thing we encounter is the narrative of the first man, where we are told that God forbade Adam to eat of the tree of knowledge... This single command given by God to Adam comprehends the natural Divine Law in its entirety, and is in absolute agreement with the dictates of natural reason (56).

What one can say at the least is that it is not at all obvious what Spinoza can mean by "Scripture alone," since what is Scripture (divine narrative) appears so thoroughly implicated in what is human (fabricated narrative) and, without wanting to underplay the complexity of a simple reversal, vice versa. What is human (natural reason) seems bound up with questions scriptural (the divine law of Adam and Eve).

This appearance constitutes the local provocation that leads this reader back into the TTP. The question of the locution "Scripture alone" is a systematic one, for the interest in separating and isolating pervades the TTP. Spinoza wants to know what Scripture alone teaches. He invokes—by contrast, in tandem—what one can come to by reason alone. He wants to separate philosophy and theology, mathematical from moral certainty, the message of Scripture from its corruptions, superstitions, and historical

narratives, the intellect from the imagination, natural law from laws which depend on human will, texts from readers, true religion from false religion, and yes, the Bible from other books. Spinoza is interested, one might say, in the labor of distinction. He is interested in difference; in relationship; in confusion; in interpretation. The question of Scripture forms the fulcrum of these interests as it claims—as readers claim—that it, Scripture, an inanimate thing, is sacred, is animate. Scripture alone is sacred.

Let us be precise in the face of the ambiguity of that word “alone” (Scripture on its own? Only Scripture?). Scripture alone is sacred, say Spinoza’s rabbinic, theological, and philosophical opponents. It is the word of God, “a message for mankind sent down by God from heaven,” neither faulty nor mutilated nor adulterated nor inconsistent. So “although God’s law is inscribed in our hearts, Scripture is nevertheless the Word of God, and it is no more permissible to say of Scripture that it is mutilated and contaminated than it is to say this of God’s word” (145-6). Scripture alone is sacred, says Spinoza. It is the word of God, that same, say “the prophets and the Apostles,” “divinely inscribed in men’s hearts,” and “insofar as it is properly thus called, is neither faulty, nor corrupted, nor mutilated” (150). The alert reader leans in closer. Decisions, questions. Scripture alone. Scripture only.

Spinoza is making on one level a perfectly anodyne claim. If Scripture purports to be the word of God, we must establish this “only from Scripture” (88). How else could it be established? But of course all of this is so fraught. In what sense does God speak, in what medium, with what props? Would not God’s speaking—if he did—be evident alone, on its own, as its own? What would need to be established? Or, what could possibly establish? Spinoza knows that his question shifts the very ground he ostensibly shares with his hermeneutic opponents. That one would need to establish from Scripture alone that it did indeed constitute God’s word is already to have decided that, in some sense, it does not. This judgment of Spinoza’s has proved momentous enough to have occluded its secondary implication, that, in some sense to be established, Scripture might very well constitute God’s word. As Spinoza admits, we cannot imagine that “God willed to confer on men a set number of books,” and thus “even if we possessed fewer books [of the Bible]... we should not be deprived of the word of God” (149). Yet would it follow that Spinoza thinks the word of God and the word of books are only indifferently related? Does the discernment that God did not will (only) this or that book decide for Spinoza that God (the divine, the word of God) is not finally (contained in) a book at all? Or that (which is the same) insofar as God is thereby contained, he is so as philosophical kernel to literary/historical husk?

One will need to get to the bottom of this notion of Scripture alone, or more generally, the notion of singularity that Spinoza seems to be prescribing. What is so intriguing is precisely the play between the singular and the plural: Scripture alone, God’s word, the reader. It would be right to ask whether Scripture is *ever* alone with Spinoza (is he alone with it, are we alone with him). Is the Bible, in Spinoza’s framework, ever without its readers, audience, traditions, critics? If not, or more strongly if indeed Spinoza’s Bible *requires* readers to become the text that it is, extolling piety, peace, and freedom, then how could it still count as the word of God? How indeed could this avoid acknowledging the simultaneous production of an iniquitous, superstitious text, a text, in the words of the TTP and *Ethics* alike, that counts as a form of human bondage and not as an expression of human freedom? Does Spinoza really think the Bible is sacred in a way

different from other texts as he asks “in what sense the terms ‘sacred’ and ‘divine’ should be applied to Scripture and to any inanimate thing” (146)? If Scripture is truly inanimate (if anything inanimate could become Scripture, if anything scriptural could be rendered inanimate), then what (where, how) is the source of its divinity? Readers? Minds? Gods? Books? What is animation? And to what end?

In earlier forays into the terrain these questions stake out, I have focused on Spinoza’s contention that “nothing is sacred or profane or impure in an absolute sense apart from the mind, but only in relation to the mind” (147). I have followed out the logic of Spinoza’s relation of (equally distinction between) minds and books, arguing that this relation is consistent with his conception of God and truth as immanent to the human project of interpretation. On rereading, I have had cause to wonder about the structure of Spinoza’s bicameral view of the sacred, and to ask whether there is not more to say about its plurality. “I am of three minds.” I have occasional recourse here to the twentieth century poet Wallace Stevens to navigate with I hope some degree more subtlety the map of Spinoza’s seventeenth century Scripture. Stevens expresses two key spinozistic notions which my earlier readings slighted. The first is the motif of the inanimate and its relationship to knowing. While it might seem inapt to designate Stevens’ blackbirds icons of the inanimate, his language—blackbirds marking “the edge,” flying “out of sight,” being “involved” in what we know—resonates with Spinoza’s complex conviction that Scripture is at once merely “paper and ink,” the Word of God, and nothing without us (146). The second thing Stevens empowers is an appreciation of the “three” in Spinoza. That is to say, Spinoza’s thinking about distinction, separation, and relationship—about “twos”—is also structured, less perceptibly, by multiplicity. Minds and books, yes; Bibles and readers, indeed: alone, and thus, we will see, together. But it is too easy to miss here what one might identify as a third dimension, though one could also call it the mark of the multiple as such. For what roots minds and books in a shared language, a shared logic? What enables Bibles to find readers who can animate them? What are the limits, the edges, to the sacred, to reading, to animating? There is not one name for the third: time, one might warrant; history; the animate as the standard of both itself and the inanimate, to borrow the construction of truth from the *Ethics*. The point, or the wager, is that Stevens’ “mind,” richly three, encounters Spinoza’s Scripture, richly one, with insights and edges not yet discerned. This is an essay, an attempt, to discern some of them.

II

“...nothing can be so accurately stated as to be incapable of distortion or misrepresentation” (TTP, 146).

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

Spinoza’s critique of the Bible begins with his critique of its readers. Although he is just as interested in authors and meanings, Spinoza’s stake in readers looms into view early and orients his other arguments. Whether evidencing “boundless wonder at Scripture’s profound mysteries” (5), appealing to ostensibly infallible traditions of one

kind or another (93), “extort[ing] from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas” and “wild fancies” (86-87), feigning incomprehension of passages “straightforwardly set forth” (27), or wringing meanings from those we cannot make out, the readers Spinoza selects for opprobrium run the gamut from ordinary people, who prefer miracles and mysteries (“arrogant ravings” [4]) to simple senses, to theologians “parad[ing] their own ideas as God’s Word” (86), ancient rabbis, who “indiscriminately accept everything in Scripture as being the universal and absolute teaching about God” (158), and medieval philosophers who assume that “the meaning of Scripture cannot be established from Scripture” (102). In fact Spinoza reserves a few words of approval for only one other reader of Scripture, Ibn Ezra, “who was the first,” he notes, “to call attention” to misconceptions about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (105).

Scripture’s readers thus share a notable readiness to forgo their natural gifts of reason and judgment in order to endow an inanimate object of “paper and ink” with extraordinary, supernatural powers (146). Spinoza identifies the crux of the matter in the preface. Speaking of readers who are given to finding esoteric teachings buried in the Bible’s plain sense, he writes

This surely shows quite clearly that they do not even glimpse the divine nature of Scripture, and the more enthusiastic their admiration of these mysteries, the more clearly they reveal that their attitude to Scripture is one of abject servility rather than belief. And this is further evident from the fact that most of them assume as a basic principle for the understanding of Scripture and for extracting its true meaning that it is throughout truthful and divine—a conclusion which ought to be the end result of study and strict examination; and they lay down at the outset as a principle of interpretation that which would be far more properly derived from Scripture itself, which stands in no need of human fabrications (5).

This passage encapsulates the two principal views of the Bible that Spinoza means to contest: that it is divine throughout and that its divinity precedes any examination of it we might undertake. These are, to be sure, versions of the same view, for the judgment that the Bible is divine in every word on every page can be guaranteed only if it is a book sealed from its readers’ discriminations. Whether this makes it a book at all (and not simply paper and ink) is of course part of what Spinoza means to ask, and why, in asking in what sense it is sacred, he associates the Bible with inanimate things (146).

Spinoza is asking, then, a root question: not simply in what sense is the Bible divine, but also in what sense is the Bible a book? How can a book be or become a bible? Even more foundationally, if only implied, what can count as a book? To ask in what sense the Bible is sacred is to ask in what sense it is like other books, which is to ask about what would go into this determination—what is a book such that one might be like or unlike another? To pursue these questions Spinoza has first to rid readers of the notion that what animates a book (or, the animation that warrants the judgment that something is indeed a book) is something to which reason and reading must defer. He finds it a painful irony that what is truly animate, the mind, is made to serve what is, on its face, inanimate: “piety and religion—O everlasting God—take the form of ridiculous mysteries, and men who utterly despise reason, who reject and turn away from the intellect as naturally corrupt—these are the men (and this is of all things the most iniquitous) who are believed to possess the divine light!” (4). Reason, degraded, is made to serve a “thing,” then, not only insofar as it is inanimate, but indeed insofar as the Bible’s very inanimation—

imperviousness, inertness, perfection—constitutes the signs of extraordinary, if mysterious, animation. The problem is not the inanimate thing, the paper and ink, the scribbles on pages. Indeed the challenge of plumbing in what sense such a thing could also be animate is the task Spinoza has set himself. The problem, again, is readers and their perverse investments in a book which, by their own terms, cannot be read; to rewrite the epigraph above, a book the presumed “accuracy” of which ensures that its encounter will be distorting—if not of it then certainly of the reader and her reasoning.

This concept of a mind bent athwart an impervious text suggests that we will have cause to ponder the seeming asymmetry in Spinoza between mind (truly animate) and book (inanimate without further cause). Is not the presumption that Scripture is sacred precisely to de-animate the mind? Is reason itself any more presumptively sacred or animate than paper and ink? As Spinoza cannily asks one of his interlocutors about the submission of reason to the Bible: “must this submission be effected with reason’s concurrence, or without it, blindly? (166)” In so asking, Spinoza means to suggest that it is futile to cast reason as the Bible’s enemy; that this tack is much more fatal to the Bible than it is to reason. But to Spinoza one wants to say, if fatal to the Bible not also, then, fatal to its antagonist? Reason can either submit (blind) or dominate (concur). If the Bible does not vanquish reason, reason will vanquish the Bible, for “then it is only at reason’s behest that we accept Scripture...” (166-167). But are we not deprived of both mind and book either way? Spinoza wants to assert Scripture’s reasonability in the face of the folly of fideism. He also, however, opens the fascinating issue of the mind’s own reasonability, its own imperviousness, its own “distortion or misrepresentation” (146). Does reason not have its reasons, which, no less than the putatively inerrant Bible, it can be called upon to proffer?

If Spinoza does not quite ask the question concerning reason’s reasonableness, he acknowledges its force in his vivid portrayal of unscrupulous readers, their (submissive) minds activated by “zeal” and “burning enthusiasm” (86), rationalist (domineering) readers, which hold the Bible’s meanings hostage to the question of whether they are reasonable or not (100), and credulous readers, who hold both that “we must accept as true or reject as false everything that Scripture affirms or denies” and that “Scripture never expressly affirms or denies anything that contradicts what it elsewhere affirms or denies” (167). When Spinoza writes that “nothing can be so accurately stated as to be incapable of distortion or misrepresentation,” he is trying to defend himself from the anticipated charge that, because he thinks Scripture is at some points both contradictory (faulty, mutilated, multiple) and false (not sacred), it therefore follows “that Scripture is at all points faulty and contaminated;” that because he thinks we need to question in what sense it is authoritative it must therefore, for him, have “no authority” (146). Spinoza dismisses these concerns with the observation that people who want to twist his words will always find it easy enough to do so. Perhaps, I add, we should therefore not be surprised that these conclusions about Spinoza have indeed proved tenacious over time. But Spinoza’s notion that “nothing can be so accurately stated,” instead of being an impatient retort, might then refer more generally to the multiple risks of reading, the difficulty of it. Is not the fact that nothing can be so accurately stated precisely why Spinoza sets about to read the Bible anew? Is it not why we still need to read Spinoza? Is it so easy to avoid the route of the unscrupulous, the rationalist, or the credulous when faced with a book, a thing, another reader whose words can never be transparent, immune

from distortion or misrepresentation? Perhaps the language of distortion is just another way of speaking about what Stevens calls “the beauty of inflections/Or the beauty of innuendos...”

Spinoza allows simply that “all men, Jews and gentiles alike, have always been the same, and in every age virtue has been exceedingly rare” (146). One revises slightly. A book, a mind, a message: reading is delimited, particular, fibrous, tough. Books have edges, minds do; they fly in and out of sight, circling possibilities. Words provoke desires to which one is likely “to give rein,” sometimes to one’s own detriment or (and thus) to theirs (146). The task therefore is the reformation of readers and the tack to liberate them and their book, each from the other. Whatever the relationship of reading is, it requires some primary disentangling of the parties to the project. It is at this point that the language of “Scripture alone” and “reason alone” come into play. At the heart of Spinoza’s desire here is the abhorrence of the confusion that results from taking one for the other:

We see that nearly all men parade their own ideas as God’s Word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. We see, I say, that the chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrarily invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority (86).

Again, though, Spinoza’s concern is just as much from the other side, from the failure to employ one’s own ideas, from the “extortion” of thought by a despotic book inscribed with the “prejudices of a common people of long ago” (165). The profanation of the book; the profanation of the mind. Thus, Spinoza writes,

In order to escape from this scene of confusion, to free our minds from the prejudices of theologians and to avoid the hasty acceptance of human fabrications as divine teachings, we must discuss the true method of Scriptural interpretation and examine it in depth; for unless we understand this we cannot know with any certainty what the Bible or the Holy Spirit intends to teach (87).

Spinoza displays all the confidence of his age; all the confidence of his temperament, perhaps, or his aloneness. All men have always been the same. But virtue is possible. All men have always been confused. But escape is possible. All men have always been wrongly entangled in what they value. But free connection is possible.

Spinoza describes his method as the study of Scripture alone, the study of Scripture from Scripture, bringing nothing to bear on it that we cannot find from reading it, making a “straightforward study” of it, and considering its histories (87). The reply to confusion, then, is separation. We will study the Bible and its history separate from what human desires have sought to foist there. Spinoza obviously does not exempt readers from this project—he himself is the reader in question; he invites his readers to become such readers as he recommends. Nor does he mention that readers must be rational. Indeed he says that “in seeking the meaning of Scripture we should take every precaution against the undue influence, not only of our own prejudices, but of our faculty of reason insofar as that is based on principles of natural cognition” (88-89). Reason, too, then, and not only passion or iniquity, represents a scene of confusion as readers are tempted to find in another (book, thing, reader) what they already (or think they already) know by reason alone.

What Spinoza urges is that we seek a historical account of Scripture, in particular “the nature and properties of the language in which the Bible was written and which its authors were accustomed to speak” (88) and the “circumstances relevant to all the extant books of the prophets, giving the life, character and pursuits of the author of every book, detailing who he was, on what occasion and at what time and for whom and in what language he wrote.” In addition, we must pursue “what happened to each book, how it was received, into whose hands it fell, how many variant versions there were, by whose decision it was received into the canon, and, finally, how all the books, now universally regarded as sacred, were united into a single whole” (90). This Spinoza is not only our contemporary; he is in fact our colleague in every Bible position in the land. Until, that is, he writes this:

Now when we possess this historical account of Scripture and are firmly resolved not to assert as the indubitable doctrine of the prophets anything that does not follow from this study or cannot be most clearly inferred from it, it will then be time to embark on the task of investigating the meaning [*mentem*] of the prophets and the Holy spirit (90).

The Bible’s meaning (mind, spirit) is the Bible’s message. What it teaches. What we learn from it. I say that with this prospectus Spinoza loses his chair in Bible at Indiana University because there the question of the message of the Bible is not—cannot—be under scrutiny. There is no (single) message of the Bible. The message of the Bible, if there is one, is not the business of the historian of the Bible. Whereas Spinoza gets kicked out of the seminary for his infractions against the immaculate text, he is kicked out of the research university for his stubborn insistence... what. That the Bible is *mutatis mutandis* not only fractious but also peaceable? That, as historians, we are not forbidden from adding talk of the words of Gods to our talk of the words of men? That perhaps such talk is even inescapable? Freeing? According to the late Samuel Preus (late, too, of Indiana University), Spinoza never got further than historicizing the Bible, than denuding it of authority of any kind. According to Yirmiyahu Yovel, of the secular seminary that is Hebrew University, Spinoza never got further than rationalizing the Bible, than casting it as an impoverished shell to the immaculate text of the mind. I say these things, dragging Spinoza into contemporary controversies, in order to underscore just how difficult a thing he is asking us to do. To consider the Bible alone, as history. And then not alone, as mind, as value. To consider (and be considered by) the Bible as readers. And then as interlocutors, friends, lovers. What do you mean *to me*, you bible, you book, you blackbird?

It is not hard to predict where this is going, in Spinoza, in this paper. Reasons and scriptures will have to be separated in order ultimately to be understood in and through one another. Spinoza wants both reason and Scripture, alone and together. There are no scriptures without reasons, or thoughts purporting to be; no reasons without scriptures, or books purporting to be. Notions of the sacred and the secular will both have to begin precisely here. Or, as Spinoza says above, once we have done our research, it will “be time to embark,” to begin again. How alone? In what sense together? What is the time of embarkation?

Let us continue to pursue the concepts at hand. Two pages after Spinoza has inveighed against the “arrogant ravings,” “credulity,” and “biased dogma” of the Bible’s latter day readers, he announces phlegmatically that his own labors have convinced him

there is “nothing expressly taught in Scripture that [i]s not in agreement with the intellect or that contradict[s] it” (6). This language of the Bible’s agreement with the intellect is everywhere in the philosophies of this period. Descartes uses it; Hobbes uses it, as does Locke. It can be found in much earlier thinkers as well—in Augustine, in Anselm. In fact one might say it is a standard recurring trope among all readers of all bibles, alternately obfuscating, deceitful, clarifying, or mystifying depending on the specifics of each case. In Spinoza’s case, it could be said to structure the whole argument in the TTP. For while Spinoza tries to parse his thought as “Scripture does not in any way inhibit reason and has nothing to do with philosophy, each standing on its own footing,” his consistent strategy to demonstrate this fact (that each has nothing to do with the other) is to deploy both, making a claim, say that miracles are metaphor, and then arguing for it on the two tracks *seriatim*: we know miracles are metaphor by reason alone and because it tells us this in Scripture (6). We know that ceremonies (rituals) are provisional and locally justifiable by reason alone and by Scripture alone. We know the election of Israel was a temporary matter based on political success by reason alone and by Scripture alone. Spinoza argues thus for all of his major claims and contentions, including the claims of reason itself. That is, when arguing, in chapter four, that the divine law is of universal application, being grounded in human nature, and that therefore there is no particular need for “belief in historical narratives” (51), he goes on, we have seen, to ground this argument in the historical narratives of “the Holy Writ,” which, from Adam and Eve to Solomon, Psalms, Proverbs, and Paul, agrees that “the happiness and peace of the man who cultivates his natural understanding” through “his own vigilance, conduct and wise counsel” are of the highest value (57). There will be more to say about this duplicity shortly. One grants to Spinoza that this is not to gainsay the concept of separation. But it is to notice that separate footing might more adequately be construed through the metaphor of a foot and its size, shape and color.

Scripture and the intellect, then, agree—on matters “expressly taught.” Let me leave that qualifier to the side for the moment, and reflect on the reception of this maxim in Spinoza. In all important respects, one might paraphrase, the Bible agrees with reason. Put negatively, it does not propound mysteries or philosophies too esoteric for the common reader. It is not a text written for the educated elite reader or the reader in possession of a supernatural mind. Rather it is a text written in simple language teaching its readers simple truths, “for example, that God exists, one alone and omnipotent, who alone should be worshipped, who cares for all, who loves above all others those who worship him and love their neighbors as themselves.” To be sure there are dimensions of the Bible that, due to the vicissitudes of time (language, transmission) cannot be understood well or at all. Nevertheless in the main one can make out enough of its substance to ascertain that indeed its message is not contradictory, it teaches truths, its actors, authors, and scribes can for the most part be believed. As Spinoza says, “these and similar doctrines... are taught everywhere in Scripture so clearly and explicitly that no one has ever been in any doubt as to its meaning on these points” (91). Perhaps. Perhaps readers’ doubts and controversies (arrogant ravings) have focused rather on how to understand, interpret, live by, transmit these simple truths. Perhaps the truths are not that simple. Or even truths. The point is that Spinoza conceives of the Bible as reasonable, as not in contradiction to reason.

Every reader of Spinoza's, in his day as in ours, will have to confront the looming question (his, ours, the reader of the Bible as such, any reader of any bibles), which I posed as a familiar objection above. If the Bible and reason agree, if the Bible's truths are not mysterious or contrary to reason or requiring certain educations or mindsets or tools or priests, then what do we need it for? What is its distinct value? Depending on the context, to be sure, this might seem neither familiar nor looming. What is the distinct value of any thing—book, object, artifact? We are not brains in a vat. We live in a world. What exactly is being asked: Why is there something rather than nothing? Are there values other than those of thinking and reasoning? I wonder these things aloud to acknowledge that our own context is actually somewhat hostile to this objection to Spinoza, with its implication that all you need is reason. We might not sympathize with his opponents that the Bible needs no justification to command our loyalty. But neither, I think, would we sympathize with too many versions of the position in question, namely that if reason can do all the work for us, we need not crack open this or that book or engage with this or that thing or person. In this critique our age is much closer to Spinoza's thinking than were most of his own interlocutors, whether sympathetic or hostile. We all now want scriptures with our reasons, blackbirds with our minds, though we do not for all that have particularly good ways of talking about why and how. ("all men are everywhere and always...") Let us restate the objection with the requisite precision. If reason and the Bible agree, then in what sense is the Bible sacred, where "sacred" means, at the least, special, set apart, valuable in a distinct sense—hence, one wonders, distinct from, valuable as opposed to, set apart from reason itself?

Spinoza gives two different answers to the objection. One, which I have grappled with elsewhere, is that there is in fact something the Bible teaches that reason cannot come to on its own: "for the power of reason... does not extend so far as to enable us to conclude that men can achieve blessedness simply through obedience without understanding, whereas this alone is the message of theology, which commands only obedience and neither seeks nor is able to oppose reason" (169). Again we have the image of separate footing, along with the conviction that each foot "has nothing to do with" the other. I have argued that this notion of obedience without understanding (and in general this sense that theology has its own truths which reason cannot plumb), so clearly inconsistent with what Spinoza means by obedience and theology elsewhere in the TTP (e.g., Scripture and reason agree), can be understood as Spinoza's attempt to engage with the dialectic of history and reason, or practical and theoretical reason—that here he is trying to grant both that practice (obedience, works, things) is valuable (blessed) and also that it is different than reasoning in a philosophical mode. I am no longer confident either in my success at having delivered something defensible on this score or, more importantly, in Spinoza's adequacy on this point. Is this not the exquisite rub of the gesture of separation as prolegomenon to connection? For while Spinoza begins with readers who confuse and conflate—minds, books, values—it is clearly possible to separate to such a degree ("nothing to do with...") that perhaps you cannot argue your way back to the relationship you wanted to conjure or construct in the first place. Perhaps Spinoza gets a little lost in these wilds.

The second answer Spinoza gives to the suspicion that the Bible is not the beneficiary in a shared agreement with reason is quite different. If the Bible is in agreement with reason, and if therefore readers can come to the Bible's message of

virtue—its divinity—by reason alone, or at least, without the Bible, then do we really need the Bible itself? No, Spinoza seems to suggest. We do not. No reader of the TTP can miss the ways in which the book is a paean to reason. From the opening pages excoriating those who “despise[e] their natural gifts” (9) to the account of the intellectual failings of the prophets; from the deconstruction of the Hebrew concepts of election, ceremony, and narrative to the comparison of reading Scripture to reading nature; from the claim that the written law was necessary for the Jews until such time as it could be written in their hearts to the postulate that the “nature of mind... is the primary cause of divine revelation” (10): no reader can reckon with the TTP without appreciating Spinoza’s sometimes desperate speeches to defend reason from its not so cultured despisers:

What can be more calamitous than that men should be regarded as enemies and put to death, not for any crime or misdeed, but for being of independent mind. That the scaffold, the terror of evildoers, should become the glorious stage where is presented a supreme example of virtuous endurance, to the utter disgrace of the ruling power? Those who are conscious of their probity do not fear death as criminals do, nor do they beg for mercy, for they are not tormented with remorse for shameful deeds... What sort of lesson, then, is learnt from the death of such men, whose cause is beyond the understanding of those of sluggish and feeble spirit, is hated by troublemakers, but is dear to the hearts of all good men? (227)

Spinoza, we know, lived in a time and place when these were not idle images. He believed in reason as a solvent to violence and passion. But where it was itself under violent and passionate attack, he was committed, at least in word, to going down with it. This fact—that reason truly is what is at stake for Spinoza—cannot go unmarked.

Yet it is simply too easy to assume, as readers assume with boldface texts, that we know what reason is, what reason is for Spinoza, before reading it through. What reason is, what counts as reason, must be, like ascribing value to a book, “the end result of study and strict examination.” Spinoza is often depicted as a rationalist whose interest in the Bible is limited to its deployment as a sop to the masses. He does say that the masses benefit enormously from the simplicity of the Bible’s method and message; he does think that most people do not have time (energy, wherewithal) to engage in philosophy proper, and thus we can be grateful that the one thing all human beings really need to know—to love God and neighbor—is available in multiple media. He clearly thinks the masses are swayed by need and greed, though no less than the intellectual elites are by appetites for absurd speculations. But more care is required in adducing what Spinoza means by reason when he says Scripture and reason agree, when he insists on reading one in the light of the other. While Spinoza embraces reason from the first pages of the TTP (as elsewhere in his works), must one not ask in what sense—how, in what manner, under what conditions—he finds *it* sacred, or divine; in what sense the Bible is not necessary in its light; in what sense reason is the queen of the sciences, the single sacred script. Just as he does with the Bible alone, Spinoza wants us to consider the substance of reason alone from the standpoint of reading—books, things.

To this end, there can be no savvier instrument than the slightly comic opposition between the medieval Jewish thinkers Maimonides and Alfakhar. Grossly unequal in their powers and influence, they yet abide forever in the pages of the TTP, locked in a perfect symmetrical agon. Alfakhar, anxious to secure the Bible’s truth, submits his mind

uncritically to its every word (166). Maimonides, anxious to secure the Bible's truth, submits the Bible uncritically to his mind's every word (100-101). Maimonides, the dogmatist, cannot let the Bible say what it says; Alfakar, the sceptic, cannot let his mind have a say (165). Domination, submission. Both would assert that Scripture and reason are in agreement. But neither gives a sense of how this could be such one is not subordinated to the other. If in Alfakar the Bible alone conjures a commanding text with no commanded audience, in Maimonides reason alone conjures a commanding mind with no commanded text. Each renders inanimate *both* text and mind: frozen, solitary, singular, alone. Neither can give an account of their relationship, their connection. It may be unfair of Spinoza to depict these thinkers with such a broad brush. But fair or not, it is an ingenious comparison. For it enables readers to appreciate the way in which Spinoza's own invocation of Scripture alone, reason alone, is not an end of any kind. In Maimonides in particular, we see reason as a bully, a relentless force to suppress the welter of textual diversity—opinions, histories, sources, authors, flavors. The TTP may be a paean to reason, but reason itself is neither the overweening engine of Maimonides nor the timid, credulous cipher of Alfakar. It is not that to which the inanimate submits nor that to which we ourselves, we readers, submit.

This is again the issue of establishment or demonstration. We must establish from Scripture alone whether it indeed is sacred. But if we have to ask...? Maimonides and Alfakar each assume that one cannot ask, that the stakes are too high, that one must find it established, come what may. Spinoza shows that, yes, the stakes are high, but this very pressure has served the opposite end, rendering the text merely paper and ink, the dead letter of someone's wild fancy. It is also fair to say the each thinker represents something of Spinoza, something, too, of us contemporary readers. Alfakar is clearly driven by a desire to preserve the integrity of the text; Maimonides by a desire to safeguard the mind from literalism. Maimonides sensed that philosophy and law did not have to contradict one another; Alfakar that hermeneutics was a form of life and practice. They each have their bibles, their readings, with which they are alone. Spinoza's wager is that they cannot, also, figure relation. They are each "twos" (minds and their books) without also being "threes": minds, books, and the words and times that connect and thus constitute each.

What is the difference? Let me restate the passage about the proximity of Spinoza and his opponents. Scripture alone is sacred, says Spinoza's rabbinic, theological, and philosophical targets. It is the word of God, "a message for mankind sent down by God from heaven," neither faulty nor mutilated nor adulterated nor inconsistent. So "although God's law is inscribed in our hearts, Scripture is nevertheless the Word of God, and it is no more permissible to say of Scripture that it is mutilated and contaminated than it is to say this of God's word" (145-6). Scripture alone is sacred, says Spinoza. It is the word of God, that same, say "the prophets and the Apostles," "divinely inscribed in men's hearts," and "insofar as it is properly thus called, is neither faulty, nor corrupted, nor mutilated" (150). What, again, is the difference between these two positions? What Maimonides and Alfakar reveal for Spinoza is the consequence of the desire to keep both reason and Scripture separate from the corrupt readers who also enliven them. For all that Spinoza himself insists that we consider Scripture on its own, he never suggests that its identity, its message, is separate from what we make of it. Nor that its mutilations, such as they are, are separate from our own. The conception of Scripture as containing no

error is preposterous to Spinoza, and for this he is justly famous as one of its first secular readers. Every text can be profaned (“nothing can be so accurately stated...”), including especially the one deemed most sacred. He is less famous for his conviction that the conception of the mind as containing no error is just as preposterous—again “all men are everywhere and always the same;” “born in a state of complete ignorance,” he later adds, just in case one’s confidence was beginning to rival his own (174). The point for Spinoza is not to celebrate (or bemoan) corruption, whether in book or mind. It is to investigate how it is the corruption and incorruption in fact subsist together—that the Bible’s corruptions do not render it fully profane; that the mind’s corruptions (frenzies, fancies, ignorance) do not render it utterly unsound. That mind and book are also sacred, divine. Again and again one asks, then: What is the relationship between these relationships? Between corruption and incorruption in the mind? Between corruption and incorruption in the text? The Bible and the intellect are in agreement. About *what*?

III

“...things which of their own nature are readily apprehended can never be so obscurely worded that they are not easily understood; as the proverb says ‘a word to the wise is enough’” (TTP, 98).

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

In briefest terms, the answer is as simple as the question with which I began. The Bible and reason agree that neither Bible nor reason are alone, incorrupt, separate. The Bible and reason agree that both the Bible and reason are singular, complex, various. The Bible and reason agree that neither the Bible nor reason is necessary except insofar as each encounters some version of the other. They agree, thus, that there are no bibles, no sacred objects, no words of God separate from the risk and the stakes of interpretation. Spinoza’s strategy throughout the TTP, as I’ve noted, is to engage the separate “feet” of Scripture and reason serially. Reason shows us something that Scripture also agrees with, even the value of reason itself. Even, to come near the conclusion, the value of itself, the value of the Bible (to) itself. To put this differently, when Spinoza makes the astonishing claim in chapter twelve of the TTP that Scripture’s message “has reached us uncorrupted” despite all the corruptions and mutilations of the text, despite its checkered history and uncertain grammars, despite every blind or opaque thing about it Spinoza ferrets out, readers seem to be faced with two choices. Either Spinoza is saying that the Bible has a rational core, which, as above, leaves us with discarded text as husk or shell, or the Bible’s very corruptions are themselves incorrupt. The profane is sacred. The false is true. The Bible is a contradiction. What we are in a position to see now, though, is that these are not the only ways to interpret the notion that there is something in obscurity that is unobscure, something in a world of profanation that is sacred; something animate amidst the drives to de-animate. If the Bible agrees with reason that reason is valuable,

must it not also agree with reason as to its own value? If so, what is this value? What is the Bible's message?

We know Spinoza's standard answer. The Bible's message, the one unclouded by doubt or ambiguity, is to love God and one's neighbor as oneself. As long as a book teaches this, it is the Bible; as long as a reader strives to make these real, she is a bible. But does this still leave us with the vaguely dissatisfying notion of fishing for an ethical injunction? When I lift this imperative out of the Bible's very many other messages, in what sense am I lifting out words and things in addition to minds and hearts? I ask this question not because I have an insufficiently spinozistic appreciation for the rich textuality and burning animation of the golden rule. I ask it because Spinoza does. It is Spinoza who contrasts mind and book, heart and word, message and narrative. Does he help us with our contemporary intuitions about his early modern book, that at the end of the day there are no scriptures without reasons, or thoughts purporting to be; no reasons without scriptures, or books purporting to be? Is Spinoza really like us (are we really like him)?

I submit that Spinoza is more than us; that we are not yet like him; that he has something non-standard to teach us about standards of reading and reasoning both. For what Spinoza shows the Bible teaches above all is that there are no Bibles. And this commitment, we come to see, is the Bible. "I find it strange," writes Spinoza, that Scripture tells us nothing of what became of the Ark of the Covenant; but there can be no doubt that it perished or was burnt along with the temple, in spite of the fact that the Hebrews regarded nothing as more sacred or more worthy of reverence. So Scripture likewise is sacred, and its words divine, only as long as it moves men to devotion towards God; but if it is utterly disregarded by them, as it once was by the Jews, it is nothing more than paper and ink, and their neglect renders it completely profane, leaving it exposed to corruption (147).

Or not so strange. That the Bible can *always* be corrupted is the one incorruptible thing about it, the one thing that has reached us uncorrupted, the one thing without which it would not be what it is, namely nothing. Nothing without us (as we are nothing without it). Anything can be or become a bible. The Bible can be or become anything.

This is not to say that the Bible is like everything else and everything else like the Bible; that there is no standard by which to differentiate bibles from other kinds of books and things. It is not to say that every book is unlike every other book or that there are no unlike books. In fact Spinoza is making an absolute distinction between the sacred and the profane, without which his concept of the Bible as nothing but what we make of it would be a simple domination. What Spinoza gives us is a double-mindedness and a triple-mindedness both. Bibles and readers constitute a world of absolute value only if their value is cast in history, where the bounds of its privilege will encounter constant critique. Readers as historians encounter bibles through making absolute distinction relative to the commitment to leave nothing out of bounds. Bibles in history count as readers of the risks and imperatives of embarking on the bounds of what cannot be relative. These conceptions of reading and reasoning, absolute and relative, are not entirely foreign to the rabbis Spinoza disparaged. Or Stevens. "I know, too,/That the blackbird is involved/In what I know." As we have seen, Spinoza has much to say about the pathologies such relationships often embody. But he never looks up from connection, and thus interpretation, as the practice of identifying what one is reading and how well.

These are ethical matters, yes; they can be cast, as Spinoza often does, as prescriptions of justice and charity, or the oneness of God. They are also principles of interpretation, principles of relationships as such. The one thing that cannot be profaned is the very principle (process, practice, pretext) of profanation; the one thing that cannot be rendered inanimate (indifferent) is the difference between animation and inanimation. The one thing that could not “have been corrupted by human malice or destroyed by time’s decay,” that, if flown out of sight, would “at once” be restored, is the “underlying universal principle” of the relativity of principles: of relation as a principle (147).

Thus Spinoza’s non-standard answer to the question of the Bible’s message involves an erasure of a kind. But to read the Bible as narrating its own demise is not yet to see precisely enough what Stevens calls the edges of the blackbird’s flight. That the Bible can be reduced to nothing because the Bible is nothing more than the readings we give it is to miss the fact that there are edges to our interpretations, as Spinoza so vividly shows. That the Bible is what we make of it does not mean we can make just anything. That all books may be or become bibles does not mean all of them are. This is the paradox: interpretation is absolutely open, and absolutely principled. The principle—absolute openness; the openness—subject to principle. Infinite in practice, lawful in theory. And vice versa. This is the delicacy of the three: that the struggle to determine (establish) whether some thing, mind, book is animate or inanimate, sacred or profane, is not a contradictory one, not about losing one in the fight for the other. It is a struggle rather on the grounds that they are unstable, open to being changed one into the other. Who discerns? Who decides? “I” do.

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.
