

Was Spinoza a crypto-dogmatist? The problem of miracles in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

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Abstract

Spinoza's treatment of miracles in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* has long been a puzzle for scholars. The traditional problem is that Spinoza allows himself to use reason to determine whether miracles happened in biblical times, even though elsewhere in the *TTP* he advocates for interpreting Scripture based on Scripture alone. Here, I aim to discuss a different, albeit not unrelated, problem: Spinoza's insistence that the prophets' beliefs about miracles were not contrary to reason and thus agreed with his own. In my analysis, I draw heavily on Carlos Fraenkel's research, who has argued, I believe mistakenly, that Spinoza displays a commitment to dogmatism, or Averroism, with respect to the issue of miracles. A key element of dogmatism is the belief that religion is part of a pedagogical program, which the prophets, being also philosophers, devised for the moral and political education of the masses. Since Spinoza famously argued that the prophets were not intellectually gifted, Fraenkel's analysis amounts to charging Spinoza with a major inconsistency. I hope to show that while Spinoza's discussion of miracles is indeed problematic, he does not go as far as endorsing the dogmatist conception of prophets.

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Introduction

In recent years, Carlos Fraenkel has embarked on an ambitious project to reconstruct the history of philosophical religions starting from Plato's political writings (*The Republic* and the *Laws* in particular), through medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers, such as al-Farabi, Averroes and Maimonides, and ending in Spinoza's works, which culminated in the publication of *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (2012). Even though the majority of the book is dedicated to ancient and medieval figures, early modern scholars should take note as well since Fraenkel's interpretation of Spinoza is learned, interesting, and unorthodox, to say the least. Fraenkel's main thesis is that Spinoza, far from unambiguously rejecting their approach to religion and the Bible, exhibits affinity with the so-called dogmatists of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter *TTP*) not only in his early publications (e.g. *Metaphysical Thoughts*) and early correspondence, but in his mature works as well. In fact, Fraenkel claims that even in the late correspondence with Henry Oldenburg, which concerns mostly the controversies in the wake of the *TTP*'s publication, we can find manifestations of Spinoza's dogmatism, or Averroism¹ (Fraenkel 2013:650).

Fraenkel's project is wide-ranging and I do not have neither the expertise, nor the space here to evaluate his entire genealogy of philosophical religion. Instead, I want to narrow my focus down to the issue of Spinoza's alleged Averroism in the *TTP* with respect to the treatment of miracles. Even before Fraenkel's analysis, Chapter VI ('Of Miracles') was something of a head-scratcher for Spinoza scholars. In this chapter, Spinoza seems to override his own hermeneutic principle for reading the Bible (as seen in Chapter VII), which endorses interpreting Scripture based on Scripture alone, and the questions surrounding this "anomaly"

¹ I use dogmatism and Averroism as synonyms in this thesis, the former being Spinoza's, the latter Fraenkel's preferred term for the position according to which reason and Scripture cannot contradict each other, and the right technique of interpretation can dissolve the apparent contradiction.

are manifold: Is he justified in doing so? Does this deviation amount to actual inconsistency? Is he actually taking the dogmatic position here? Fraenkel's answer to the last question is a resounding 'yes'. He believes that Spinoza, who singles out the skeptics (mostly Dutch Calvinists) and the dogmatists (e.g. Maimonides) as his adversaries in the theological parts of the *TTP*, exhibits dogmatist tendencies during the discussion of miracles, which far from being anomalous, form a strand that runs through Spinoza's entire *oeuvre* (Fraenkel 2012:35-36).

Fraenkel, of course, does not want to deny that Spinoza puts himself in opposition to the dogmatists as well as the skeptics, as it is evident from numerous passages of the *TTP*. Rather, he wants to provide a counter-point to those who enthusiastically recruit Spinoza for their histories of modernity, primarily on the grounds of his critical approach to religion² (Fraenkel 2009:70). These scholars purportedly fail to do justice to Spinoza's ties to medieval (and ancient) philosophers, thereby presenting a lopsided view of him as a *bona fide* proto-Enlightenment figure. Fraenkel is of the opinion, however, that "[t]he romantic image of Spinoza as a radical philosophical hero who in his uncompromising pursuit of the truth puts an end to medieval religious obscurantism, leading philosophy with a strong hand out of its servitude to theology" is "at least in part a cliché (Fraenkel, 2008a:48)".

The critical approach, which has earned Spinoza his modern reputation, advocates reading the Bible as a document written by human beings, whose prejudices, language use and historical circumstances all have to be taken account for the sake of correct interpretation. Since the interpreters have to approach the Scripture without bias, they cannot presume that the Scripture's content is true or that it constitutes a divine document prior to interpreting it. This strategy is at loggerheads with the dogmatist position of Maimonides and Averroes, which upholds that the Bible and the Qur'an are not only true but that any apparent conflict between

² The historian Jonathan Israel is the foremost proponent of this interpretation. Cf. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (pp. 159-174) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (pp. 155-163).

them and reason can be solved by allegorical interpretation (Nadler 2013:631). The basic tenet of dogmatism boils down to Averrores's famous dictum: "truth does not oppose truth (but accords with it and bears witness to it)" (McGinnis and Reisman 313). According to this fundamental principle (often called the Unity of Truth), if a philosophical truth has been conclusively demonstrated, any biblical passage which seems to contradict it must have an allegorical interpretation such that it illuminates its actual congruence with reason (Taylor 2000:6).

In Fraenkel's view, Spinoza tries to juggle both the critical and the dogmatist positions in the *TTP*, and this leads to intractable problems he cannot solve. The critical position is crucial for Spinoza's objective of separating religion, or theology, and philosophy into two different realms, which can co-exist peacefully if characterized correctly. Spinoza hopes to show by employing the hermeneutic method of Chapter VII that the teachings of the Scripture (as a whole) are very simple and are almost exclusively moral in nature. The Bible, while it does contain certain truths, is not aimed at truth, but obedience and piety, which translate into virtuous actions. The mark of the religious person is good moral conduct. As we will see later, Spinoza has no qualms about admitting that many parts of the Scripture conflict with reason and possibly with each other as well, and he does not advocate for explaining them away. What matters is that the moral teaching of the Bible is consistent with reason, thereby proving the text's divinity. Since the speculative parts do not constitute "the" teaching of the Scripture, owing to their inconsistencies and the prejudices of the prophets, we have no reason to make the word of Scripture conform to reason via allegorical interpretation. For Spinoza, the instances of divergence between the books of Bible and reason are not problems in search of a remedy. Once we understand that theology is not reason's handmaid, and vice versa, these cases will cease to be a cause for worry.

In Chapter I and II concerning prophecy and the prophets, Spinoza firmly rejects the opinion of Maimonides and Averroes about the prophets being intellectually gifted. In terms of intellect, the prophets were on par with the general populace, from whom they were distinguished by their extraordinary imagination and their moral authority. Given their cognitive limitations and the fact that the prophets had mostly inadequate ideas about the workings of nature and the nature of God, we may disregard the speculative parts of Scripture with no harm done to true religion (S 453). Unlike the dogmatists, we can just accept that some parts of the Bible do actually contradict reason. But what about the skeptics? The skeptics acknowledge that there are situations in which the teaching of Scripture and reason contradict each other. In fact, they maintain that the Bible's content is supra-rational and in case of such conflicts, Scripture should take precedence over reason. Not only is the Bible inscrutable to reason, but it is this quality that ensures its divinity. Many Christians believed in Spinoza's time that miracles, supernatural events whose understanding exceeds our rational capacities, were the clearest evidence for God's existence and providence³.

Both dogmatists and skeptics operate on the presumption that the Bible, taken as a whole, is true; the former believe this on the basis that its content can always be reconciled with reason, the latter on the grounds that God can perform acts that surpass reason. Spinoza's critical approach to interpreting the Scripture eliminates the assumption in favor of truth (Della Rocca 2008:241). The truth of the Bible is something that we may discover at the end of our discovery, not something that we presume at the beginning of it. In this respect, Spinoza repudiates the position of both the skeptics and the dogmatists. The elimination of the assumption of truth and the adoption of an impartial critical stance towards the Bible entails the realization that we cannot take the biblical stories of miracles at face value, since the

³ Oldenburg to Spinoza (Letter 71): "In addition, many are of the opinion that you take away the authority and validity of miracles, which almost all Christians are convinced form the sole basis on which the certainty of Divine Revelation can rest." (Shirley 940)

presentation of events is colored by the ancient Hebrews' preconceived notions. According to Spinoza, once we remove the layer of prejudice in the reporting of these events, we may see these miracles for what they really are: natural events in search of natural explanations (S 453). The critical approach, whereby we can "expose" miracles by discarding the assumption of truth, thus works very well against those Christians who take miracles to be a proof for God's existence. This approach, however, cuts both ways and Spinoza has to reject the dogmatist position as well, which also affirms the truth of the Scripture in its entirety, to remain consistent.

Fraenkel believes that Spinoza adopted the critical approach in the *TTP* because he hoped it would be particularly effective against the skeptics, more so than dogmatism. The criticism of the dogmatists was the collateral damage that his attack on skepticism entailed (Fraenkel 2009:75). In light of this, why does Fraenkel think that Spinoza had a motivation to display his allegiance to dogmatism on several occasions? To put it differently, what advantage does the dogmatist approach have that the critical one does not? Dogmatism, in Fraenkel's genealogy, grew partly out of the problem of non-philosophers, which he believed to greatly occupy Spinoza as well as his ancient and medieval predecessors. The problem of non-philosophers is fundamentally a question about how to enable non-philosophers to lead a virtuous life, whose path to virtue cannot lead through understanding. According to Maimonides and Averroes, the answer is religion and the narratives of sacred texts, which appeal to the imaginative faculty rather than the rational one.

Moreover, the dogmatists believed that the prophets themselves were aware of the problem of non-philosophers. The prophets, who had a brilliant intellect (not just a vivid imagination), realized that the masses were incapable of understanding demonstrations. Thus morality had to be inculcated in the multitude by other means, which amounted to the deployment of wondrous narratives, hyperboles, florid language, and exhortations to piety. According to Fraenkel, the problem of non-philosophers is linked to the notion of prophet-

philosophers. The implication is that whomever supports the view that Scripture is aimed at fostering virtue and piety among the ranks of the *vulgus*, also subscribe to the idea that the prophets were philosophers. Fraenkel takes Spinoza to share the concerns of Plato et al. regarding non-philosophers, and he believes that certain passages in Spinoza's work are best interpreted if we keep this concern and its attendant commitment to prophet-philosophers in mind.

What I hope to show in this thesis is that while I agree that Spinoza shares the dogmatist concern for the moral education of non-philosophers and the place for religion in it, I do not subscribe to the view that Chapter VI of the *TTP*, dedicated to the discussion of miracles, provides evidence for Spinoza's dogmatism. I believe that Spinoza remains committed to his standard characterization of prophets, according to which we have no strong reason to believe that they were philosophically gifted. From this follows that I also reject the view that the problem of non-philosophers always goes hand in hand with the concept of prophet-philosophers, for in Spinoza they appear to diverge. As I said before, Fraenkel's project is very ambitious and my aim is not to engage with every aspect of his work. In fact, I intend to concentrate on just a few points of contention.

For this reason, I only give a short summary of Fraenkel's history of philosophy of religion so I can establish what Averroism means in this context, and how Spinoza is supposed to fit into this historical narrative. Furthermore, Fraenkel's discussion of Spinoza's purported Averroism touches upon basically all his works, and also his correspondence. Here, however, I focus on only a few chapters in the *TTP*, first and foremost Chapter VI and VII, so that I can present Spinoza's general strategy of biblical interpretation and assess the merits and demerits of Fraenkel's Averroistic reading of Spinoza's interpretation of the Bible on miracles. Ultimately, I want to demonstrate that while Fraenkel is right to point out that Spinoza shares significant common ground with Maimonides et al., he is wrong to argue that the shadow of

Averroism is cast over Chapter VI of the *TTP*⁴, as Spinoza does not repudiate his official view about prophets therein.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I provide a succinct summary of Fraenkel's genealogy of philosophical religion, in which I concentrate on Plato, from whom the tradition originates, and al-Farabi, who adopted the Platonic tradition to a Muslim context and passed it down to Averroes and Maimonides. In the second chapter, I commence the close reading of the *TTP* starting with Chapter VII, in which Spinoza gives detailed guidelines about how to read the Scripture properly. Spinoza explicitly advocates the method of Chapter VII for interpreting revelations (or prophecies), *vis-à-vis* miracles. Accordingly, the second chapter incorporates Spinoza's views regarding prophecies and the prophets (Chapter I and II). Finally in the third chapter, I discuss the treatment of miracles in the *TTP*, elaborate on the extent of my disagreement with Fraenkel with respect to Spinoza's alleged Averroism, and I present a hypothesis about a possible link between Spinoza's struggle against the accusation of atheism and his interpretation of the Scripture on miracles.

⁴ Since Chapter VI is but one piece of evidence that Fraenkel puts forward to support his hypothesis about Spinoza's Averroism, I leave the option open that other chapters of the *TTP* and other mature works of Spinoza are indeed Averroistic. My disagreement with Fraenkel is restricted to the discussion of miracles.

Chapter 1: The problem of non-philosophers in Plato and al-Farabi

If we want to get a clear picture of why Carlos Fraenkel thinks that Spinoza fits into a long-standing tradition which can be traced back to Plato's political philosophy, we must take a look at the defining characteristics of said tradition. However, as the main topic of my thesis is the interpretation of some early chapters of Spinoza's *TTP*, my summary of Fraenkel's research is kept short on purpose. My concern is Spinoza's place in the tradition of philosophical religion, not the validity of Fraenkel's entire narrative.

In order to shine light on the philosophical linkage between Averroes and Spinoza, and the possible motivation Spinoza could have for holding Averroistic views, Fraenkel begins his narrative with recounting the development of Plato's political philosophy and philosophical anthropology from the *Apology* to *The Republic* and the *Laws* (Fraenkel 2009:56). Plato's later political thought figures prominently in Fraenkel's interpretation since the late-Platonic framework was adapted by al-Farabi, who was a primary influence on both Averroes and Maimonides. While Averroes and Maimonides modified al-Farabi's philosophical system and came to somewhat different conclusions both with regard to al-Farabi and each other, they kept the core of Plato's and al-Farabi's political philosophy: the inequality of human beings as a brute fact, which divides mankind into philosophers and non-philosophers (and possibly not-quite-philosophers in the case of al-Farabi and Maimonides)⁵. In this chapter, I restrict the discussion to the points about which al-Farabi, Averroes and Maimonides were in agreement.

⁵ Whether the intellectual inequality of people is actually a brute fact in this tradition is up for debate. However, even if the line between philosophers and non-philosophers is not wholly impermeable, the ancient and medieval members of the tradition display a strong commitment to the opinion that most people are doomed to be non-philosophers (Fraenkel 2009:67).

1.1. Plato's late political philosophy

In the *Apology*, Socrates holds the view that knowledge of the good is a necessary and sufficient condition for the performance of good deeds and the achievement of a happy or virtuous life. Socrates's assumption is that all citizens are capable of coming to an understanding of the good life and the famous Socratic *elenchos* serves the purpose of helping people attain this knowledge (Fraenkel 2008b:113-14). Fraenkel, however, identifies a strong shift away from this position in *The Republic*. In *The Republic*, Plato introduces the tripartite analysis of the soul, according to which the human soul consists of reason, spirit, and appetite, and their corresponding personality types (Fraenkel 2009:59). Even though all human beings possess all three parts of the soul, the strength of each part varies from person to person. This tripartite theory of the soul is crucial to understanding the co-called 'problem of the non-philosophers', and Plato's proposed solution to it. According to Plato, most people are not ruled by the rational part of their soul, but governed by the two non-rational parts. The consequence of this inequality is that the majority of people do not possess the disposition to ever become philosophers, and as a consequence of this deficiency they would not be able to benefit from Socratic *elenchoi*.

It is the responsibility of the philosopher-king to guide these people to a virtuous life. For Plato, the mark of the good ruler is that he possesses knowledge of the good, *qua* philosopher, and he is also able to lead all citizens to it, *qua* ruler (Fraenkel 2009:57). In this framework, the Socratic *elenchos* is not completely banished from moral education, but its role is restricted to the teaching of philosophers. In the case of ordinary citizens, the *elenchos* is not only inefficient but downright dangerous. The philosopher is able to benefit from the Socrates's refutation of his original views because he has the rational powers to grasp Socrates's arguments, with which he can replace his old faulty opinions. The non-philosopher, however,

would plunge into a state of nihilism because he does not have the ability to supplant his initial views with new ones, as Socrates's demonstrations are lost on him.

To avoid such a sorry state of affairs and to lead the multitude to the best life that they can hope to live, the good ruler has to inculcate virtue in the majority of citizens by means of dialectics, rhetoric and poetics instead of philosophical argumentation. Unlike the *elenchos*, these methods have a strong effect on the non-rational parts of the soul, which govern the multitude. In the *Laws*, which develops further the framework presented in *The Republic*, Plato emphasizes the vital role that various myths and religious stories have in educating the citizenry (Fraenkel 2009:59). Plato's increasing emphasis on religion in the moral education of the multitude in his later political thought already foreshadows the way in which it will be adopted by medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers.

1.2. The prophet-kings

Al-Farabi's ambition was to steer clear of two extreme positions in this matter and Plato's political thought enabled him to do so. On the one hand, he wanted to repudiate the conservative position of al-Ghazali, who advocated for the restriction of philosophizing on account of philosophy's ability to undermine the truth of the Qur'an. On the other, al-Farabi disagreed with al-Razi, who took prophecy and revelations to be redundant as he believed that all humans were endowed with the intellectual capacity to understand truths and were not dependent on prophets to describe these truths to them in a captivating language. By adopting key ideas from Plato's later political works, al-Farabi was able to occupy the middle ground between these two stances (Fraenkel 2008b:108-111). Furthermore, the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king was also easily convertible into the ideal of the prophet-king, which was more appropriate in the context of Islam. Under Article 144 in *The Book of Letters*, al-Farabi describes the pedagogical usefulness of religion:

“After all this, there will be a need for lawgiving to teach the multitude those theoretical matters that have been inferred, concluded, and verified using demonstration, and those practical matters that have been inferred using the capacity for practical wisdom. (...) Through religion, the multitude are taught, educated, and given all that is needed to attain happiness.” (Khalidi 19)

According to al-Farabi, Mohammed was not only a prophet but also a philosopher. Since in the Muslim world, the caliphs were treated as the successors of the Prophet, in al-Farabi’s interpretation they were supremely wise political leaders (Walzer 1962:244). Similarly to Plato’s philosopher-king, the prophet-king was able to choose the most appropriate means to guide both philosophers and non-philosophers to happiness. In both medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, the hallmarks of prophets were their exceptional ability to communicate effectively with the masses and their vivid sense of imagination, whereby they could conjure up persuasive stories, parables and metaphors, which appealed to the simpler intellect of the multitude. These prophets, however, were also in possession of philosophical truths, which they could impart in a demonstrative manner to the minority of philosophers, who did not need the aforementioned rhetorical and poetic devices to see the path toward happiness.

Just by reading Qur’an we could not come to the conclusion that the Prophet was a philosopher as well. The language of the Qur’an is tailored to the limited understanding of the majority and conceals the Prophet’s abilities to perform philosophical demonstrations. Philosophy cannot be taught from religious texts, but religion is embedded in a larger philosophical framework (Fraenkel 2009:67-8). While philosophy cannot be read out of the Qur’an, it can be read into it with the help of allegorical interpretation. This asymmetry provides an explanation as to why philosophy does not pose a threat to religion, even though their harmony is not straightforward at all. The apparent disharmony is due to the fact that the literal meaning of religious texts is actually intended to be non-philosophical. It follows from al-Farabi’s scheme that if one is not a philosopher and is not privy to the means of allegorical interpretation, whereby the word of God and the truths of philosophy can be reconciled,

philosophy will appear to be subversive to piety. This is the reason why the caliph has to be both a prophet and a philosopher. His prophetic abilities enable him to be the moral educator of the multitude, whereas his wisdom makes him the teacher of philosophers.

Since he knows that philosophy and religion are in harmony, he can also vouchsafe the activity of philosophers. A non-philosopher ruler is likely to be antagonistic to philosophers as a result of misunderstanding the relationship between religion and philosophy. The prophet-king, however, recognizes that philosophy can be in certain cases subversive with regard to religiousness and public morality, and there have to be safety measures installed against the misappropriation of philosophy (Fraenkel 2009:61). As the discussion on Plato and the Socratic *elenchos* revealed, exposure to philosophy can have a detrimental effect on those whose intellect is unable to comprehend philosophical discourse. The prophet-king has the double responsibility of protecting the philosophers from the masses and protecting the masses from philosophy.

The central idea in the tradition of philosophical religions is that religion is the handmaid of philosophy and it is part of a larger pedagogical-political program invented by philosophers for the purpose of guiding non-philosophers with the help of fables, parables, rites, communal forms of worship, etc. (Fraenkel 2009:76-7) As long as the ruler is able to keep the spheres of religion and philosophy separate from each other, both spheres can thrive and communal peace is not threatened. Since religion is the invention of philosophers, the assumption is that religious texts have an interpretation which makes their harmony with reason explicit. If the literal meaning of a passage appears to conflict with reason, the philosopher recognizes that it is only an appearance. With the proper means (i.e. allegorical interpretation), the contradiction can be dissolved⁶. Moreover, the lack of conflict between philosophy and religion was also supposed

⁶ An oft-used example of allegorical interpretation is reading God's depiction as a king in the Bible in the sense that God is at the top of the hierarchy of existents (Fraenkel 2008b:116).

to be guaranteed by the political organization of the community, namely by the ruler who knew how to keep philosophy within the group of a selected few. The appropriate methods of allegorical interpretation were only entrusted upon the philosophically trained.

Before I turn to the close reading of the *TTP*, let me summarize the key elements of the tradition of philosophical religion in the medieval Islamic context. Muslim and Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages, who had great respect for ancient Greek philosophers (especially Aristotle), had to come to the realization that the philosophy of the *falasifa*⁷ was often in apparent conflict with the word of the Bible and the Qur'an. This conflict was to be solved in a way which would leave the authority and importance of both religion and philosophy intact. Plato's late political philosophy provided the model for reconciliation: religion was conceptualized within a pedagogical framework devised by prophets, who realized that morality could only be inculcated in the multitude by commands and fabulous narratives. These stories constituted the surface meaning of religious texts, which were meant to be taken literally by the masses. When the surface meaning of the text contradicted reason, philosophers could avail themselves of allegorical interpretation to expose the contradiction as false. In this framework, theology was a handmaid to philosophy inasmuch as religion was seen as the means to inculcate the virtues of philosophers in the multitude. In light of these considerations, the idea of philosophical religion comes down to a fundamental tenet: the idea that the prophets were cognizant of the truths of reason⁸ (Fraenkel 2012:29).

⁷ Arabic for 'philosopher' designating ancient Greek philosophers.

⁸ In this thesis, I choose to concentrate on this point because my disagreement with Fraenkel concerns his interpretation of Chapter VI of the *TTP*, in which, he thinks, Spinoza displays a thinly veiled commitment to the view that the prophets were philosophers.

Chapter 2: Spinoza's method of biblical interpretation

In the *TTP*, the chapter on miracles (Chapter VI) precedes the chapter in which Spinoza expounds on the general principles of his method of biblical exegesis (Chapter VII). Here, I will reverse the order of discussion because the central problem relating Chapter VI is why and to what extent Spinoza deviates from his “official” doctrine of interpretation, which he actually lays out in detail only later in Chapter VII. While Spinoza makes mention of this method earlier in the *TTP*, it is still a curious fact why the methodological discussion figures not at the very beginning of the book but after the topical treatment of the prophecies, the prophets, the election of the Hebrew people, the divine Law, religious rituals and miracles. The fact that Spinoza uses the method of interpretation described in Chapter VII first and foremost to show his readers how to properly understand prophecies in the Bible makes this all the more puzzling.

Regardless of Spinoza's possible reasons for the choice of chapter ordering, I proceed here with the close reading and analysis of Chapter VII ('Of the Interpretation of Scripture') to elucidate the precise nature of Spinoza's hermeneutic method and the limitations we will inevitably encounter when we set out to discover the true meaning of the Bible. The detailed examination of Spinoza's method and how he contrasts it with the dogmatist approach will prove very useful when I turn to Spinoza's discussion of miracles, during which he admittedly deviates from the method of Chapter VI and makes assertions that are very reminiscent of the very dogmatist position he criticizes in this chapter. This chapter also contains discussions of the first two chapters of the *TTP*, which concern prophecy and the prophets. I find it important to include a section, albeit a short one, on Spinoza's views on prophecies and prophets as well, because the method of Chapter VII is dedicated mostly to the study of revelations, and Spinoza may or may not contradict these views in Chapter VI.

2.1. Interpreting Scripture on its own terms

The chief objective of Spinoza in Chapter VII is to offer an exegetical method to interpret the Bible so that people will not “accept as Scriptural doctrine what was not most clearly taught by Scripture itself (S 456).” Religious authorities tend to present the contents of the Bible in such a way that many of its doctrines will be seen as contrary to reason to awaken greater wonder in the multitude. This engenders the mistaken belief that the Scripture is a deeply mysterious document, which can only be reliably interpreted by theologians and other individuals who are guided by the Holy Spirit. Since the teachings of philosophy and the teachings of Scripture often conflict with each other, and theologians have a vested interest in preserving the mystery of the Bible, they believe that the words of Scripture trump the words of philosophers (S 457).

Furthermore, because the aim is to instill awe in the multitude, the fact that the alleged doctrines of the Bible do not accord with reason will be presented as a strong reason to believe and not to dismiss what the Bible says. In this case, there is a stable connection between what one finds mysterious, irrational and inexplicable, and the feeling of awe it provokes. According to Spinoza, the veneration of the Bible for its conflict with reason opens up the possibility of wanton speculation about mysterious religious truths and strife between religious groups who take different stances on these issues (S 456). Since reason is banned from adjudicating in these matters, these conflicts turn out to be particularly pernicious and long-lasting⁹. He describes the strategy of the theologians as such:

“They ascribe to the Holy Spirit whatever their wild fancies have invented, and devote their utmost strength and enthusiasm to defending it. For human nature is so constituted that what men conceive by pure intellect, they defend only by intellect and reason, whereas the beliefs that spring from the emotions are emotionally defended.” (S 457)

⁹ Spinoza resigns himself to the fact that theologians and the people will hold false and superstitious opinions. What he criticizes is the practice of persecuting people for mere differences in opinion.

To bring clarity to the confusion that the continued appeal to emotions engenders, Spinoza suggests that there has to be a method with which we can decipher the true meaning of the Bible so we know its content with certainty:

“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.” (S 457)

The way Spinoza in which goes on to elaborate on the logic of his method shows that even in his political works he is committed to full-blown naturalism. In the specific context of the *TTP*, this means that the interpretation of the Bible should unfold along naturalistic principles: there is nothing in nature that escapes its immutable laws, not even the Scripture, which is the product of human beings. Thus the true method of interpreting the Bible is very similar to the true method of “interpreting” Nature:

“For the method of interpreting Nature consists essentially in composing a detailed study of Nature from which, as being the source of our assured data, we can deduce the definitions of the things of Nature. Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture. In this way- that is, by allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture- steady progress can be made without any danger of error, and one can deal with matters that surpass our understanding with no less confidence than those matters which are known to us by the natural light of reason.” (S 457)

A couple of pages later, Spinoza elaborates more on the similarities between the natural historical and his own exegetical method:

“Now in examining natural phenomena we first of all try to discover those features that are most universal and common to the whole of Nature, to wit, motion-and-rest and the rules and laws governing them which Nature always observes and through which she constantly acts; and then we advance gradually from these to other less universal features. In just the same way we must first seek from our study of Scripture that which is most universal and forms the basis and foundation of all Scripture; in short, that which is commended in Scripture by all the prophets as doctrine eternal and most profitable for all mankind.” (S 460)

The analogy with the natural historical method, which has strong connotations of impartiality and objectivity, enables Spinoza to score a rhetorical point about his hermeneutic

principle, which is supposedly as objective as the scientific inquiry into natural events. Similarly to the scientist, the interpreter should first engage in observation and collection of data in an unbiased fashion, and then identify regularities, patterns, and principles (Della Rocca 2008:238-39). When it comes to Scripture, the regularity one needs to pay attention to is the common ground among all prophets. The underlying assumption is that by using Spinoza's method we will discover that there are cases of disagreement among the prophets. These disagreements may disappear if we are expected to take certain statements to be metaphorical, but the point remains: Spinoza thinks that these can be genuine disagreements, and they should not be explained away at all costs. Spinoza often talks about what the Scripture teaches, instead of referring to the individual teachings of the prophets. The expression 'what the Scripture teaches' may be rephrased as 'what all prophets teach'. Therefore when Spinoza talks about *the* teaching of the Bible, we should not take this to mean all the things the prophets said. Rather, he refers to a set of doctrines which are affirmed by all the prophets in the Scripture¹⁰.

According to Spinoza, the teaching of the Scripture, or the Word of God, is mostly moral in nature and quite simple (S 460). The Bible teaches the same ethics as the one that Spinoza comes to endorse in Part IV and V of the *Ethics*. This means that the moral doctrines found in the Bible can be demonstrated philosophically, even though prophets of the Scripture do not actually do the work of demonstration, and the very existence of these independent demonstration is irrelevant as long as our aim is to uncover the true meaning of the Bible:

"As for the moral doctrines that are also contained in the Bible, although these themselves can be demonstrated from accepted axioms, it cannot be proved from such axioms that Scripture teaches these doctrines: this can be established only from Scripture itself." (S 457)

At this point of our inquiry, we just want to find out the true meaning of the Bible and so we should refrain from rational judgment about the truth of what we discover. However, the

¹⁰"Now up to this point we have confined our investigation to those Scriptural pronouncements which are concerned with moral conduct, and which can be the more easily elucidated because on such subjects there has never been any real difference of opinion among the writers of the Bible." (S 461)

fact the moral doctrines we find in the Bible are amenable to derivations from axioms has an important consequence. Once we establish what the Bible's teaching consists in by utilizing Spinoza's method, we are free to assess the truth of these claims from a philosophical point of view. Spinoza believes that since the moral teaching of Scripture and philosophy coincide (i.e. the moral core of the Bible is true), we can conclude that Scripture is a divine document. Bearing in mind that Spinoza does not believe God to be a transcendent entity who can reveal mysterious truths to human beings in a supernatural fashion, his confirmation of the divinity of Scripture should not be taken as a sign of agreement with the traditional understanding of revealed religions. Revelations in Spinoza are episodes in the prophets' life when they come to know certain moral truths. Once again, the divinity of Scripture rests on the teaching of true things:

"Indeed, if we want to testify, without any prejudgment, to the divinity of Scripture, it must be made evident to us from Scripture alone that it teaches true moral doctrine; for it is on this basis alone that its divinity can be proved." (S 457-58)

When Spinoza talks about the divinity of Scripture in the affirmative, I do not think he just wants to placate his audience to gain a fair hearing. Surely, the employment of 'divinity' here could be understood as merely a gesture of accommodation towards those who hold traditional religious beliefs. I admit that Spinoza often uses language in the *TTP* which he probably would not use, were he to address philosophers like himself. Yet the talk of divinity is not complacent. In my opinion, the above excerpt is consistent with Spinoza's philosophy in the *Ethics*. If we take 'divinity' to simply mean 'relating to the divine', we may infer from this passage that what Spinoza wants to point out here is the idea the moral core of the Bible is consistent with a true understanding of Nature, i.e. God. Thus the moral teaching relates to God, not because a transcendent God intervened in the regular course of events to impart moral wisdom to mankind through the prophets, but owing to the fact that these are the same moral conclusions we reach after our inquiry into the nature of all things.

2.2. *The specifics of exegesis*

The assessment of Scripture's truth, however, should only be undertaken after we have managed to determine its true meaning. Whether reason comes to the correct conclusion about the divinity and authority of the Bible is contingent upon what meaning we attribute to biblical passages. Before he delves into the presentation of the specific nature of biblical exegesis, Spinoza emphasizes once more the importance of taking Scripture on its own terms:

“Finally, Scripture does not provide us with definitions of the thing of which it speaks, any more than Nature does. Therefore, just as definitions of the thing of Nature must be inferred from the various operations of Nature, in the same way definitions must be elicited from the various Biblical narratives as they touch on a particular subject. This, then, is the universal rule for the interpretation of Scripture, to ascribe no teaching to Scripture that is not clearly established from studying it closely.” (S 458)

Spinoza allows and even requires the interpreter to go outside of the text, because various historical and philological examinations are needed so that we can establish the true meaning of the Bible. What his exegetical method strictly prohibits is not ancillary inquiries *per se*, but the prejudiced mindset that makes one looking for specific tenets in the Bible. These may be truths that we come to know by the natural light of reason, or any other opinion we hold with more or less justification. Because of the important role Bible plays in society, for many there is a strong desire to align one's independently held beliefs with the words of Scripture. Since these beliefs can be and are different from each other, the real danger in this kind of exercise is that the text of Bible is manipulated to suit the interpreters' interests. As a result, we end up with multiple interpretations of the Bible, with all interpreters claiming their own interpretation to be true and the most faithful to the text. There is no way to arbitrate among these groups because the standard arbitration should presumably be the text of Scripture, and its meaning is precisely the thing that is variously construed, or misconstrued as Spinoza would say.

If we let pre-conceived opinions, philosophically or otherwise informed, enter into the process of interpretation, we will never be able to decipher the true meaning of the Bible. We have to put our beliefs aside for the sake of impartial and fair-minded investigation, and not let them cloud our judgment even when the evidence points to an interpretation of the Bible which contradicts them. Just as Tacitus advises the historians in his *Annals* to write their histories *sine ira et studio*, Spinoza cautions his readers against letting their emotions, beliefs and interests interfere with their reading of Scripture. For philosophers specifically, this means that they should be able to accept the possibility that the true meaning of certain biblical passages conflicts with what reason tells us. The appeal to reason is only legitimate once we established the meaning of Scripture, and only then are we allowed to evaluate its truth.

But what are these ancillary inquiries that help us find the true meaning of the Bible? These inquiries can be categorized as linguistic, philological, and historical-biographical. Spinoza believes that it is a prerequisite that we learn the original idiom of the Bible, namely Hebrew, because this was the language of the prophets, their audience and later figures who actually compiled the biblical stories into one book. Even in the case of the New Testament, which was not actually written in Hebrew, knowledge of this language can be very helpful because the linguistic style has discernibly Hebraic elements (S 463-64). While mastering Hebrew should not pose problems for anyone with sufficient diligence and intelligence, its study may not be completed to the degree that would enable us to sort out all the ambiguities and obscure assertions in the Bible in a satisfactory manner. The problems that Spinoza refers to do not have to do with his own method.

First and foremost, what makes the interpretation of certain passages so problematic is that we do not possess a comprehensive grammatical treatise written by ancient Hebrews (S 463). The lack of such document means that we have to accept that there will always be instances in which even our best knowledge of Hebrew will prove to be insufficient for

decoding the language of the Scripture. Supposedly, in such cases we may suspend our judgment altogether, or hazard more or less educated guesses about the meaning of the sentences in question. This is an especially pertinent issue because the Bible is full of idiomatic expressions and sayings, and its language is heavily metaphorical. When Spinoza laments our insufficient understanding of Hebrew, he mainly refers to the lost or debatable meaning of Hebraic figures of speech. One of the main challenges in deciphering the meaning of the Bible is answering the question about where metaphorical readings are warranted. Unfortunately, our lack of knowledge about idioms makes it much harder to identify metaphors in the text¹¹.

Together with the ancillary inquiries into the nature of the Hebrew language, we should also engage in historical investigations that center on the lives and times of the prophets. This is an especially important aspect of Spinoza's method, because his characterization of the prophets stems from historical, not just strictly Scriptural considerations. To have a correct understanding of prophets and revelations, we should gather biographical data and descriptions of character, be familiar with the characteristic concerns and beliefs of ancient Hebrews, and reconstruct the actual historical era in which biblical stories are set to the best of our abilities. Knowledge about the time and location of utterances, along with knowledge about the audience which was addressed may explain why certain passages in the Bible contradict each other¹².

While Spinoza endorses his historical-critical method full-heartedly, he acknowledges that our lack of information about the language and the history of the Scripture will inevitably leave quite a few questions unanswered about the true meaning of Bible. From this follows that the truth of the Bible will often be indeterminate (S 466). In the case of seemingly insoluble

¹¹ The best strategy to deal with difficult cases is to check whether the literal reading of a passage clashes with the meaning of other passages, whose correct interpretation we know for certain. We may never discover the exact content of the metaphor in question, but at least we can conclude that the proper reading should be metaphorical.

¹² For example, Jesus did not violate the Mosaic Law when he told the oppressed to turn the other cheek because he was not addressing them as a law-giver, and the imperative was only valid in states where justice had been forsaken (S 461).

ambiguities, the temptation is quite strong to approximate the text of the Bible to the teaching of reason. In fact, ambiguities can easily be taken advantage of and can be interpreted as truthful statements cloaked in obscure language. Given the various difficulties related to biblical interpretation, our best chance to find out whether the Scripture contains truths is to concentrate on the parts whose meaning we can be most certain about. As it turns out, the most straightforwardly written sections of the Scripture are the ones that aim to convey a moral message, such as loving one's neighbor (S 460). We already saw that Spinoza believes that the divinity of the Bible can be best inferred from the truth of its moral core. This is important to bear in mind given that Spinoza rejects the popular view according to which the divine nature of Scripture can be derived from the stories about miraculous events.

2.3. The speculative parts of Scripture

The prophets engaged in speculation as well as moral education. In Spinoza's opinion, however, we should not take this to mean that the prophets were philosophers or that their speculation took the form of philosophical demonstration. We should take note of the fact that in the early modern era philosophy encompassed topics which we today are more likely to classify as scientific. Given this broad understanding of philosophy, the prophets did indeed engage in speculation about matters that are of interest to philosophers, too. Most importantly, they speculated about the nature of things. I mentioned earlier that Spinoza allows for disagreements among the prophets. Unlike in the case of the Bible's moral core, which Spinoza finds in the stories of all prophets, the more philosophical sections of the Scripture reveal a great degree of conflict among their ideas:

“But other biblical passages which belong only to the field of philosophical speculation do not yield so easily to investigation. The approach is more difficult, for the prophets differed among themselves in matters of philosophical speculation (as we have already shown) and their narratives conform especially to the prejudices of their particular age. So we are debarred from deducing and explaining the meaning of one prophet from some clearer passages in another, unless it is most plainly established that they were of one and the same mind.” (S 461)

In Spinoza's understanding, prophetic utterances are always influenced by the prejudices, biases, and beliefs of the population¹³. The existence of such conformity is equally true for moral education and speculation about nature. What makes the interpretation of speculative passages difficult is their often unclear language and the fact that it can be cumbersome to identify the exact prejudices. Furthermore, we cannot presuppose that the prophets' speculations are synoptic. The reason why we can conclude that the moral teaching of the Scripture is actually unitary is because the relevant sections are clearly written and the apparent inconsistencies can be dealt with without manipulating the text to conform to our pre-conceived opinions. In the chapter on miracles, we learn that Spinoza thinks that the stories about wondrous events fall under the category of speculation about the nature of things. Thus it is especially important to understand what he says in Chapter VII about the proper interpretation of speculative passages, when we are prohibited from making sense of one prophet's utterances by drawing on the words of other prophets. Spinoza describes his method as follows:

"Here, again, we must begin from considerations of a most general kind, first of all seeking to establish from the clearest Scriptural pronouncements what is prophecy or revelation and what is its essential nature; then what is a miracle, and so on with other subjects of a most general nature. Thereafter we must move on to the beliefs of individual prophets, and from there finally to the meaning of each particular revelation or prophecy, narrative and miracle. We have already pointed out with many apposite examples what great caution we should exercise in these matters to avoid confusing the minds of the prophets and historians with the mind of the Holy Spirit and with factual truth, and so I do not think it necessary to say any more on this subject. *But with regard to the meaning of revelation, it should be observed that this method only teaches us how to discover what the prophets really saw or heard, and not what they intended to signify or represent by the symbols in questions. The latter we can only guess at, not infer with certainty from the basis of Scripture.*" (S 462, emphasis mine)

The last two sentences reiterate an observation that Spinoza makes in the chapter on miracles: while both prophecies and miracles pertain to the speculative aspect of Scripture, in the case of the former we can never be sure about the exact content of prophecies and the signs

¹³ See for further reference: "The revelations, too, were adapted to the beliefs of the prophets (...)" (S 457)

that often accompanied them. What we can ascertain for now is that Spinoza believes that we are unable to uncover the underlying meaning of prophecies, and the best we can do is to stay faithful to the prophets' descriptions of their fabulous experiences. Furthermore, when it comes to revelation we must keep to the exegetical method espoused in Chapter VII, while the treatment of miracles allows the employment of reason during the process of interpretation, as we will see in the next chapter.

Prophecies are by their nature symbolic declarations, whose true meaning cannot be fully captured by their literal reading, which is simply a testimony of the prophet's experiences and visions. There are at least two ways in which we can interpret Spinoza's treatment of this topic in this passage. We may infer that he refers to the fact that revelations are so unique to the prophets that our knowledge of the Hebrew language, its characteristic sayings or the prejudices of the people cannot help us out in arriving at a proper understanding of them. The other possible reading of Spinoza here is that a full understanding of prophecies actually goes beyond the limits of our cognitive capacities, irrespective of how much historical and linguistic knowledge we possess. Even though in the present chapter, the interpretation of Spinoza could legitimately go both ways, the chapter on miracles makes it clear the second hypothesis is the correct. Spinoza says:

"This procedure I have adopted deliberately because in dealing with prophecy, since it surpasses human understanding and is a purely theological question, revelation provided the only basis for making any assertion about it, or even for understanding its essential nature." (S 454)

The procedure Spinoza refers to here is the method of Chapter VII, whereby one is only entitled to reconstruct the original meaning of Bible on the basis of the Bible without the interference of reason. In my opinion, what makes the understanding of the *TTP* in general difficult is the fact that Spinoza does not shy away from using pious language, which can give rise to certain questions. Is the employment of such language, which is markedly different from the language of the *Ethics*, a ploy to make Spinoza's views more palatable? Is he using it to

avoid censorship? Is this a strategy for him to avoid the accusations of atheism? Traditionally, it is the *Ethics* which has the reputation of being a difficult book, mainly because of its geometrical style. Yet I believe that we lull ourselves into a false sense of confidence if we brand the *TTP* as easily readable. Its prose is indeed more accessible but the adherence to traditional religious vocabulary can also be obfuscating.

The reader-friendliness of the *TTP* has mainly to do with its intended audience, mostly non-philosophers or philosophers-to-be, whose primary way of understanding reality is still imagination. As we know from the *Ethics*, Spinoza acknowledges there different kinds or degrees of knowledge: imagination, reason, and intuition¹⁴. If we take into consideration that the audience of the *TTP* consists primary of people who are either at the stage of imagination or somewhere in between imagination and reason, we may better understand why Spinoza eschews the more philosophical language of the *Ethics* for one whose religious significance is very apparent. Spinoza cannot opt for a language which is suited to people who already live the life of reason. He wants to persuade those who are reluctant to engage in philosophy because they fear that philosophizing will render them impious.

Despite the fact that it would surpass the limitations of my thesis to engage with the works of Leo Strauss in depth, I would like to draw attention to one Straussian idea that might be counter-productive in clarifying the role of religious language in the *TTP*. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss puts great emphasis on the relationship between the threats of persecution and censorship on the one hand, and unclear philosophical language on the other. The employment of obfuscation, double-speak, intended self-contradiction and other means of self-defense are meant to preserve the autonomy of the philosophical enterprise. The point here is not that Strauss was wrong to argue for this connection; I believe it is almost trivially true

¹⁴ For example, see EIIP17s (imagination), EIIP43s (reason) and EVP25d (intuition).

that historical thinkers almost always had to reckon with the possible negative consequences of their philosophizing, and the fact of this reckoning had an impact on their language use.

Rather, caution is warranted against engaging in monocausal explanation about linguistic style, disregarding factors other than the specter of persecution (Yovel 1989:150-52). As I argued earlier, we need not believe that Spinoza's employment of religious language is just a propitiating gesture towards the censors and the theologians. Traditional religious language with its frequent use of metaphors, allegories and flowery expressions is well-suited for an audience, whose imagination has to be captured first and whose mind has to be led to reason gradually. This does not negate the possibility that Spinoza had also censors in his mind when he opted to make copious use of Judeo-Christian religious vocabulary. Yet we should acknowledge that his decision finds ample justification in his views about epistemology and the psychological make-up of human beings. This brief foray into the issue of language in the *TTP* is a good preparation for us to look at Spinoza's ideas about prophecies and prophets in Chapter I and II, where the concept of imagination has supreme importance.

2.4. Prophecy and the prophets

In the previous sections, I highlighted the characteristics of Spinoza's methodology for reading the Bible, which can be summarized as reading Scripture on the basis of Scripture alone. This method is well-suited to the discovery of the Bible's teaching because it requires interpreters to cast their biases and interests aside, which are often the causes of textual manipulation. As it turns out, the teaching of the Scripture can be found in its moral core, which all the prophets support. All the other speculative parts may be freely disregarded because failure to endorse the prophets' view on these matters does not constitute impiety. We are, of course, free to believe these things, but these beliefs do not pertain to what Spinoza defines as true religion. In order to see why Spinoza considers prophets to be authoritative in moral matters

more clearly, let us now turn to Spinoza's discussion of prophecies and the prophets in the *TTP*.

Spinoza defines prophecy thusly:

“Prophecy, or revelation, is the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to man¹⁵. A prophet is one who interprets God's revelations to those who cannot attain to certain knowledge of the matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith.” (S 394)

Those who cannot attain certain knowledge are quite numerous in rank: they are the majority, who lack philosophical understanding of God, nature and virtue. As I pointed out earlier, revelation is not a mysterious concept in Spinoza. It simply means an act of realization, when truth, as it were, comes to a person. Given the above definition, can we say then that philosophers are also prophets? After all, they are certain in their knowledge and it is revealed to them by God. Indeed, Spinoza admits that he takes all knowledge to be divine. Only the non-philosophers think that prophetic knowledge is uniquely divine:

“From the definition given above, it follows that natural knowledge can be called prophecy, for the knowledge that we acquire by the natural light of reason depends solely on knowledge of God and of his eternal decrees. However, since this natural knowledge is common to all men - for it rests on foundations common to all men - it is not so highly prized by the multitude who are ever eager for what is strange and foreign to their own nature, despising their natural gifts. Therefore prophetic knowledge is usually taken to exclude natural knowledge.” (S 394-95)

However, just because all knowledge is divine, it does not mean that philosophers are prophets as well:

“But although natural knowledge is divine, its professors cannot be called prophets; for the rest of mankind can apprehend and be convinced of what they teach with an assurance in no way inferior to theirs, and it is not through mere faith that they do so.” (S 395)

To put it differently, philosophers have the power to turn other people philosophers by showing them what the natural light of reason illuminates. Prophets, however, do not turn other people into prophets by convincing them of the truth of revelations. Prophecies are not understood, but accepted by the multitude on faith, whose respect have been gained by the piety

¹⁵ The certainty of prophetic knowledge has three requirements: “[T]he certainty of the prophets rested entirely on these three factors - first a distinct and vivid imagination, second, a sign, third and most important, a heart turned to what is right and good.” (S 524)

of the prophets. This is only one of the several differences between philosophers and prophets. For instance, philosophers can be certain in their knowledge because the possession of adequate ideas eliminates doubts. The prophets gain certainty by asking for signs to ascertain that the revelations come from God. Prophets, unlike philosophers who live by reason, are distinguished from the rest of humanity by their extraordinary imagination (and their moral standing)¹⁶.

Before I present Spinoza's textual evidence for the latter claim, I would like to emphasize the importance of his method in his characterization of prophets. Spinoza's imperative of taking Scripture as sole warrant for his interpretation is both a gesture towards the skeptics and weapon against them. Both skeptics and dogmatists agree that the Bible is true, but they disagree about its supra-rational quality. The dogmatists have no reservations about using reason to uncover the true meaning of Scripture, but the skeptics reject this method since they do not assume that Scripture must be rational. When Spinoza agrees to derive his interpretation from the Bible alone, he puts himself on the same footing as the skeptics. Since we should examine Scripture without bias, we also have to refrain from taking a stance on its supra-rationality prior to reading it. Spinoza asks: "For what can we say of things transcending the bounds of our intellect except what is transmitted to us by the prophets by word or writing? (S 395)" Spinoza's aim is to show that the skeptics violate their own principle and attribute dogmas to the Bible which are in reality just fabrications (S 456).

Of course, Spinoza allows himself quite a bit of latitude when he interprets Scripture on the basis of Scripture¹⁷. However, his strategy remains the same. First of all, the people he wants to persuade by the publication of the *TTP* are (primarily) not the dogmatists, but intelligent individuals whose view of religion is tainted by skepticism. Spinoza hopes to dissipate their

¹⁶ Furthermore, the means of attaining knowledge can be different: "So I pass on to treat more fully of other sources of knowledge, and other means by which God reveals to man that which transcends the bounds of natural knowledge - and also that which is within its scope, for there is nothing to prevent God from communicating by other means to man that which we can know by the natural light." (S 395)

¹⁷ See the ancillary inquires previously discussed.

worries by showing that true religion is simple and agrees with reason, and all other religious dogmas are not necessary for salvation (James 2012a:210-11). For this and other historical reasons¹⁸, the main target of the *TTP* is skepticism. What we can reliably infer from Scripture is that the prophets were imaginative individuals¹⁹ and uniquely pious. The first quality we can establish by paying attention to the language prophets use to describe their experiences:

“An examination of the Bible will show us that everything that God revealed to the prophets was revealed either by words, or by appearances, or by a combination of both²⁰. The words and appearances were either real and independent of the imagination of the prophet who heard or saw, or they were imaginary, the prophet’s imagination being so disposed, even in waking hours, as to convince him that he heard something or saw something.” (S 396)

The prophets’ knowledge had an experiential basis since they saw visions and heard voices (James 2012b:94). Furthermore, their piety was extraordinary, and this enabled them to garner the respect of their fellow men (S 402-3). Because Spinoza only accepts the word of Scripture and historical circumstances which may bear on interpretation as evidence, he would only agree to the dogmatist tenet about philosophers-prophets if it was supported by the Bible. Accordingly, he squarely rejects the dogmatist position because of lack of strong evidence. In Chapter XIII, Spinoza summarizes his views regarding the prophets:

“All commentators have displayed an extraordinary eagerness to convince themselves that the prophets knew everything attainable by human intellect; and although certain passages in Scripture make it absolutely clear that there were some things the prophets did not know, rather than admit that there was anything the prophets did not know, they prefer to declare that they do not understand those passages, or alternatively they strive to twist the words of Scripture to mean what they plainly do not mean. If either of these options is permissible, we can bid Scripture farewell.” (S 409)

The above quote demonstrates that the project Spinoza undertakes in the *TTP* is scientific in nature. Spinoza criticizes the dogmatists on the grounds that they disregard the

¹⁸ For instance, the fact that the Reformed Church allied itself with the Orangists, a conservative, royalist faction, in opposition to Johan De Witt, who represented a relatively tolerant form of republicanism (Fraenkel 2009:72).

¹⁹ With the exception of Christ, whom Spinoza credits with intuition (S 398-99). Here, I will bracket the problem of Christ, since it would raise too many questions.

²⁰ Note that Spinoza allows for the possibility that the prophets heard real voices, and does not want to explain it away. In fact, he believes this distinguished Moses from the other prophets (S 397). Possibly, he thinks that the phenomenon can have a natural explanation.

abundant textual evidence which piles up against the claim that the prophets were philosophers. Maimonides et al. could defend themselves by pointing out that they never intended to derive this claim from the Bible's text, since they also affirm that Scripture's linguistic style is not philosophical. This would shift the discussion to a priori grounds. I mentioned previously that Spinoza's exegetical principle is the hermeneutic equivalent of the natural historical method, in which the first stage of inquiry is the collection of information. This is a method that rests on empirical observation: whatever claims we make about the Scripture, we need to have evidence to back it up. The dogmatists believed the prophets were philosophers because they thought it *must have been* the case; Spinoza rejects this view because he does not think it *was* the case. In his opinion, neither the word of Scripture, nor our historical knowledge of biblical times supports the dogmatist case.

The intellectual divide that both Averroes and Maimonides supposed to exist between the prophets and their audience does not exist for Spinoza. Intellectually speaking, they are of one kind. The prophets share their prejudices and beliefs with the masses as they share the same cultural background as well. Their use of language, which regularly reveals these prejudices, is not a deliberate tactic to condescend to the intellectually inferior multitude, as Averroes and Maimonides would maintain. The picture that is much more likely to emerge based on the text of the Scripture is that the prophets were not perfectly wise, and their ignorance was the general ignorance of non-philosophers, namely the lack of adequate ideas about the true nature and causes of things.

As my last point in this chapter, I want to draw attention to the fact that when it comes to prophecies, dogmatists may have the upper hand, at least *prima facie*, in terms of the denial of their supernatural nature. In order to stay loyal to his exegetical method, Spinoza has to take the prophets' testimonies at face value unless he has good reason to suppose that they are colored by prejudices. For this reason, he is willing to accept that Moses heard a real voice on

the Mount Sinai, not an imaginary one, and in general he concedes that the prophets were truthful (S 398). However, he confesses that he does not have an explanation as to what specific mechanism lies behind revelations²¹. When Spinoza admits his ignorance, he still denies the possibility that the explanation could ever turn out to be other than natural. In other words, he is firmly against the idea that prophecies are proof for the interference of a transcendent God in the regular course of Nature in order to communicate with mankind via the prophets.

In Spinoza's understanding, the prophets use a certain language because it enables them to describe their experiences vividly. For the dogmatists, language choice is more like a conscious decision than simply a means of reporting. The prophets speak about vivid images and sounds because they know it will capture the imagination of the multitude. Spinoza cannot take this route because of his views on the prophets. In the end, he stays firm in his beliefs that the prophets' experiences have natural explanations, to which we may never be privy. Instead of chalking them up to supernatural causes, we can choose to be humble and acknowledge that we just do not know how powerful Nature can be. We are also not obliged to believe the explanations prophets give about their experiences. As we move forward to the analysis of miracles, what we have to bear in mind is that Spinoza finds the uniqueness of prophets mostly in their exceptional capacity of imagination, and therefore we are only required to take their statements at face value when they have to do with this faculty; when they describe their visions or the voices they hear, but not when they attempt to explain different phenomena:

“So now the point we set out to prove has been made abundantly clear, namely, that God adapted his revelations to the understanding and beliefs of the prophets, who may well have been ignorant of matters that have no bearing on charity and moral conduct but concern philosophic speculation, and were in fact ignorant of them, holding conflicting beliefs. Therefore knowledge of science and of matters spiritual should by no means be expected of them. So we conclude that we must believe the prophets only with regard to the purpose and substance of the revelation; in all else one is free to believe as one will.” (S 414)

²¹ “As to the particular laws of Nature involved in revelation, I confess my ignorance.” (S 403)

Chapter 3: Dogmatism and the problem of miracles

In the last chapter of my thesis, I examine Spinoza's discussion of miracles in Chapter VI, which has been at the forefront of recent scholarly discussions about the *TTP*²². I found it useful to first discuss Spinoza's exegetical method in Chapter VII, because it is conventionally designated as his "official" method, from which he deviates in Chapter VI. I am not convinced, however, that it is the best way to approach the problems relating to the chapters on prophecies, miracles and method. Firstly, picking out an official method invites the charge of inconsistency in Spinoza too easily. Secondly, Spinoza believes that different phenomena of the Bible can justify different methods, which underlies his decision not to treat miracles not quite the same way as prophecies. It is probably better to characterize Spinoza's methodology in the *TTP* as pluralistic inasmuch as the nature of the subject matter determines which method is the most appropriate. As I hope to show, what is particularly puzzling about Chapter VI is not that Spinoza denies that miracles happened in biblical times, but his attempts at arguing that the prophets actually did not believe in them either.

As for the non-existence of miracles, he argues this on the basis of his philosophy, but he can also provide some justification on the basis of Scripture (taken broadly to include the prejudices of the Hebrews) as well. I quoted a passage earlier that confirms that Spinoza takes stories about miracles to be speculative. The speculative parts of Scripture overlap with the interests of philosophers since they attempt to clarify the nature of things: it would be a threat for philosophy if it turned out that these parts should be taken as authoritative. Spinoza tries to defuse this threat by relentlessly arguing that the Hebrews, prophets and non-prophets alike,

²² Cf. Nadler (2013), Harvey (2013), and Fraenkel (2013).

held many inadequate ideas and were deeply prejudiced²³. As a result, their description of natural events, such as miracles (which for Spinoza are unusual but not supernatural), naturally mirrors these biases. This is the reason why it strikes readers as strange that Spinoza wants to show that the prophets were not prejudiced about miracles. According to Fraenkel, Spinoza lets his dogmatist colors show in Chapter VI because he makes certain comments indicating that he believed that the prophets knew what reason taught. I aim to reject this interpretation as I believe that Spinoza remains faithful to his official view about prophets.

3.1. The interpretation of (biblical) miracles

It is useful to look at once again what Averroism means to see what sort of evidence we need to make the case for the Averroistic reading of Spinoza on miracles. First of all, the very fact of finding textual evidence for the claim that Spinoza believes that he and the prophets agree about the non-existence of miracles does not *ipso facto* make him an Averroist. Averroism is not just the claim that philosophers and prophets agree; it is the claim that they *necessarily* agree, because they all know what reason teaches. In theory, it is possible that Spinoza arrives at this conclusion by finding enough textual evidence for it. In that case, the agreement between him and prophets on miracles exist not because of the so-called Unity of Truth but because it is the best impartial interpretation of what the prophets say²⁴. Therefore when we look for Averroism in the *TTP*, we look for passages where Spinoza claims that he and the prophets cannot but agree. To Fraenkel's credit, this is exactly what he does. But now, let us turn to the Spinoza's characterization of miracles.

In Spinoza's belief, the mind of multitude is such that irregular phenomena, which contradict their habitual beliefs, inspire more awe in them than the observance of the regular

²³ "Anyone who gives any thought to this question cannot fail to realise that, for a true comprehension of faith, it is essential to understand that Scripture is adapted to the intellectual level not only of the prophets but of the unstable and fickle Jewish multitude." (S 514)

²⁴ This is the view I support, although I believe that Spinoza's arguments are not very strong.

course of things. As a consequence of this, the masses mistakenly think that God can be best known from the occurrence of such awe-inspiring events since whatever provokes the most wonder in people has to be attributed to an almighty Being. Such an understanding of miracles cannot be further from Spinoza's own view. First of all, he does not recognize miracles as being radically different from any other natural phenomenon. He only allows for the use of 'miracles' when we refer to unusual occurrences, which we have yet to explain fully. Genuine miracles would be instances of God's direct wilful interference with the regular course of natural events to bring about something that would not have occurred without His intervention. This is predicated upon the belief that God and Nature stand apart, for singular interventions only make sense if we conceive of these two entities as separate. Thus it is no wonder that Spinoza is hostile to the idea of true miracles; they cannot be reconciled with his conviction that God is Nature (Nadler 2013:635). This is a short summary of his philosophical position:

“[T]he necessity whereby it follows from the divine nature and perfection that God understands some thing as it is, is the same necessity from which it follows that God wills that thing as it is. Now since nothing is necessarily true save by the divine decree, it quite clearly follows that the universal laws of Nature are merely God's decrees, following from the necessity and perfection of the divine nature. So if anything were to happen in Nature contrary to her universal laws, it would also be necessarily contrary to the decree, intellect and nature of God. Or if anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain that God acts contrary to his own nature - of which nothing could be more absurd.” (S 445-46)

Unfortunately for philosophers, the multitude does not have a proper understanding of God and his laws, and tends to reject explanations based on natural causes because they perceive them as depriving them of the sense of awe miracles grant them. Indeed, this sense of wonder is germane to the popular conception of miracles:

“For the common people are not satisfied that they understand a thing until they can regard it without wonder. So men of old, and in general all men up to the present day, had no other criterion of a miracle, and therefore there are undoubtedly many alleged miracles in Scripture whose causes can be easily explained from known scientific principles.” (S 446)

The biggest problem for Spinoza is that the strong affective response miracles elicit in the majority of people seems inextricably linked to the idea that God reveals His existence to

us by bringing about miraculous events. Those who believe that God can be known through miracles are doubly mistaken: they believe in miracles, and they believe that they are proofs for God's existence. However, since these beliefs are very strong, anyone who wants to expose the belief in miracles as false risks the accusation that they eliminate a very strong reason to believe in God. In light of this conundrum, Spinoza wants to convince his readers in the *TTP* that God *is* knowable, however not by miracles²⁵. What makes the prejudice of miracles particularly pernicious is that it is linked to knowledge of God. I believe this is the motivation why Spinoza is so eager to build a case against miracles on Scriptural grounds. The people, to whom the *TTP* is addressed, have not embraced the teachings of reason fully because they are still beholden to skepticism, i.e. the idea that Scripture is a supra-rational document. As I said earlier, Spinoza acknowledges the limitations of purely philosophical discourse in persuading the readers who are mostly not philosophers. This means that on top of summarizing his own philosophical views related to God, the laws of nature, and miracles, he also has to find arguments within the Scripture about the fact that God is not known from miracles in order to be more persuasive. What is exactly the view of miracles that Spinoza rejects?

“They [the mistaken] consider that God is inactive all the while that Nature pursues her normal course, and, conversely, that Nature's power and natural causes are suspended as long as God is acting. Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature, though the latter is determined in a definite way by God, or - as is the prevailing opinion nowadays - created by God. What they mean by the two powers, and what by God and Nature, they have no idea, except that they imagine God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate, and Nature's power to be a kind of force and energy.” (S 444)

Because the adoration of God originates from the admiration of God's power, the way this power is identified has ramifications for how God is worshipped. For the philosopher, the power of God is known through the ways in which this power manifest itself throughout Nature, but the multitude only perceives the power of God when it is confronted with unusual events.

²⁵ As I argued earlier, for Spinoza the proof of Scripture's divinity is the truth of its moral core.

Of course, Spinoza does not want to sway the opinion of the multitude in the *TTP*. He is tolerant about people's prejudices as long as they do not threaten the peace of the republic and do not lead to wicked actions, and the uneducated masses are probably a lost cause in this respect. As for those, who may be converted to Spinoza's position, it should be pointed out that despite the fact that the Hebrews related God's power to so-called miracles, God's power manifests itself in all natural events as well.

Even though, miracles are usually defined as events that cannot be explained with recourse to the universal laws of nature, it is highly unlikely that this is how the prophets and the Hebrews conceived of miracles. The idea of laws of nature and deviation from it are too sophisticated notions to ascribe to these ancient people. Rather, the masses, past and present, conceive of miracles as events that they cannot understand, and as a result find them awe-inspiring. It is the lack of understanding and the ability to inspire wonder that mark out miracles for the multitude, not definitions about the laws of nature. In this respect, there is not anything surprising about the fact that so many phenomena, which can be explained with natural causes, are termed miracles in the Bible. Indeed, Spinoza attempts to explain away a number of miracles in the Bible and present textual evidence for the claim that not even prophets, or at least not all prophets, believed that God can be known from miracles. Let us start with the first strategy.

In Spinoza's understanding, the belief in miracles grows out of one's lack of understanding about nature. In the case of the Bible, the lack of understanding stems from people's false beliefs and prejudices. If we want to attempt a reconstruction of what actually took place, first we must have to investigate what these prejudices were and how the stories of miracles became colored by them:

“[T]o interpret Scriptural miracles and to understand from their accounts how they really took place, one must know the beliefs of those who originally related them and left us written records of them, and one must distinguish between these beliefs and what could have been presented to their senses. Otherwise we shall confuse their beliefs and judgments with the miracle as it really happened.” (S 453)

Spinoza advises us to pay close attention to how people in the Scripture describe their experiences, so we can extract the facts from narratives by identifying the layer of prejudice under which they are buried. In the Scripture, when Joshua talks about the Sun stopping in its course and the prolongation of daylight, he describes experiences in both cases (Nadler 2013:640). Joshua was evidently ignorant of the truth of Heliocentrism, and he not only reported that the day appeared longer but also that the Sun's movement stopped. Since Spinoza is very much aware of the fact that it is the Earth that revolves around the Sun, and not vice versa, he cannot accept Joshua's claim about the Sun uncritically. What he can accept is the testimony that the day seemed longer, and look for other clues in the text that may enable him to identify the natural causes of the event. In this case, Spinoza offers a hypothesis about what might have happened:

"I prefer the simple view that Joshua did not know the cause of that extension of daylight, and that he and all the host along with him believed that the sun revolves around the earth with a diurnal motion and on that day it stood still for a while, this being the cause of the prolonged daylight. They did not take account of the fact that, as a result of the excessive coldness of the atmosphere at that time (see Joshua ch. 10 v. 11), there may have been an unusually great refraction of light, or something of the sort, which is not our present concern." (S 409)

Most of the time, it will be difficult to reconstruct events because crucial details are missing from these testimonies and intermediate causes, even when they were known at the time, are omitted from stories so as to piously attribute things directly to God (S 451). This decreases the power of Spinoza's argument: for those who are either not fully committed to the Spinozistic understanding of God or do not quite understand it, the lack of concrete explanation for miracles can be troubling. These people are still undecided about whether to believe that biblical miracles were genuine miracles, and the reason for their hesitation is that they have not embraced the idea that God is Nature. The fact that Spinoza cannot provide certain demonstrations about specific miracles in the Scripture is thus a shortcoming of the first strategy.

The second argumentative strategy is to find sections in the Bible, in which the prophets either reject the existence of miracles, or at least the belief that miracles can be a way to know God. Depending on how we define miracles, we may come to different conclusions about whether the prophets rejected their existence. I pointed out earlier that Spinoza believed that in biblical times miracles were not strictly defined: they were awe-inspiring unusual events for which people did not have explanations based on their habitual beliefs, apart from the intervention of God. We may call this the epistemological conception of miracles. Spinoza presumably does not expect the prophets to reject miracles on this simple definition. What he thinks, instead, is that we cannot find textual evidence in Scripture for the claim that events happen contrary to the laws of nature. In fact, this is his conclusion at the end of Chapter VI:

“These, then, are the express teaching. of Scripture: nowhere does it say that something can happen in Nature that contravenes her laws or that cannot follow from her laws; so neither should we impute such a doctrine to Scripture. Then there is the further fact that miracles stand in need of causes and attendant circumstances (as we have already shown); they do not result from some kind of royal government which the masses attribute to God, but from the divine government and decree; that is (as we have also shown from Scripture), from Nature’s laws and order.” (S 455)

Notice that Spinoza does not just say that nothing in Scripture happens contrary to the laws of Nature. He believes that Scripture does not even *say* that things can happen contravening Nature’s law. He says that whenever something like a natural law is referred in the Bible, it is described as eternal, fixed, and immutable, and these laws are attributed to God²⁶. Furthermore, he argues that the Scripture does not recognize miracles as a means to know God. The key biblical passage, on which he bases this thesis, is the one where Moses warns the Hebrews against following false prophets who perform miracles to turn them away from God:

“If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not know, and let us serve them;

²⁶ Spinoza references Psalms 138:6, Jeremiah 31:35-36, Ecclesiastes 1:10-12, Ecclesiastes 3:11 to support this claim (S 455).

Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

Spinoza interprets this section as Moses admitting that miracles can be performed by false prophets who attribute them to false gods, meaning that miracles cannot be trusted to lead us to the one true God. The rejection of false gods thus is not based on the miracles God performs, since these are not unique, but on the “true knowledge and love of God” (S 449). In my opinion, Spinoza’s choice in examples and interpretative strategy in Chapter VI comes down to this: he wants to argue that insofar as Scripture talks about miracles, it only does so to pick out wondrous, seemingly inexplicable events, i.e. it endorses the epistemological conception of miracles. When we find numerous allusions to the order of nature, they do not occur in relation to miracles, but to claim that this order is unchangeable. If we put these two theses together, we can see why Spinoza thinks that he and the Scripture are in agreement about miracles. In his view, Scripture contains passages that appear to support the idea of an eternal natural order, while miracles appear only in their weakened epistemological sense.

3.2. Agreement between Spinoza and the prophets

I put forward my objection tentatively, since this question merits more investigation I can undertake here, but I believe that Spinoza fails to show that Scripture only supports the epistemological notion of miracles. First of all, the multitude and the prophets, who intellectually speaking share a common ground with one another, think that God and Nature are separate²⁷. If they are separate, it opens up the possibility that God as an external actor intervenes in the affairs of the world. Spinoza himself emphasizes at various places that we must take people’s prejudices into account when we interpret their claims, since they are filtered through these very prejudices. If we know that God and Nature were construed as different in

²⁷ Spinoza thinks that Moses indeed believed that God could have emotions. It would follow from this that Moses, and possibly the Hebrews, conceived of God as an entity, subject to passions, apart from Nature.

biblical times and miracles were referred to God's will and power, we cannot hold the view that prophets' and ancient Hebrews' understanding of miracles was merely epistemological. They may have not thought of them in terms of natural laws and their contravention, but the key element in genuine miracles is the act of intervention, not the specific way the intervention occurs.

Spinoza's argumentation in Chapter VI is quite reminiscent of the very textual arm-twisting he denounces in Maimonides in other places of the *TTP*, although he is not straightforward about his intention to approximate Scripture to reason. If Spinoza had stopped at arguing that the miraculous events recounted in the Scripture are natural phenomena, which we may even explain with the benefit of scientific hindsight, Chapter VI would not be so puzzling. Spinoza could have just argued that while we should accept that these events did indeed happen, we do not have to treat the prophets' explanations for them as authoritative. Two questions remain unanswered. Why does Spinoza insist on claiming that the prophets were on his side? Is this properly characterized as Averroism? As I mentioned before, Averroism is the idea that those biblical, or Qur'anic, passages which conflict with reason have to be interpreted allegorically. Furthermore, a key element of Averroism is the belief that the prophets were philosophers, who deliberately eschewed philosophical demonstration in favor of a language that captivates the imagination of the multitude. I would argue that while Spinoza endorses a view in Chapter VI, which is incompatible with his characterization of prophets in Chapter I and II, his position cannot be called fully Averroistic.

I base this claim primarily on the observation that Spinoza uses several textual examples to argue for the position that the express teaching of Scripture do not advocate the view that there can be events contrary to the laws of nature (Harvey 2013:668). It is compatible with Spinoza's critical method that there could be overlap between the views of philosophers and prophets in speculative matters, not just moral ones. Rather than arguing that he and the

prophets *must* agree about miracles, he tries to show that they *happen to* be in agreement by citing various biblical passages. The problem is that the passages Spinoza picks to support him on this question do not yield conclusive evidence, and he appears to disregard the prejudices of the prophets, too (namely the widespread view that God and Nature are different).

I believe that Fraenkel is too quick to label Spinoza's treatment of miracles Averroistic, however. Spinoza does not claim that he and the prophets have to be in agreement or that the prophets were philosophers in disguise, but his interpretative inconsistencies do reveal a strong preference for agreement in the case of miracles. Take the example of Joshua. A consistent interpretation of his story, which combines both Spinoza's understanding of God and his method of interpretation in Chapter VII, would go like this. Joshua perceives a curious phenomenon during a military battle, when daylight lasts longer than it does on other days. Joshua is struck by a sense of wonder and he believes that the miracle was produced by God, who stopped the movement of the Sun to help the Hebrews emerge victorious in the battle. His belief about the Sun is mistaken, although it is only to be expected that a simple soldier like Joshua would be just as ignorant about Heliocentrism as his contemporaries, who were not prophets. Since we are in the fortunate position to know about Heliocentrism, we know that Joshua mischaracterized the nature of this miracle but we accept his testimony about daylight as true. Given Joshua's prejudices, the most likely interpretation of his story is that he actually believed that God intervened "from outside Nature". Yet this cannot be Spinoza's opinion on this matter if he insists that Scripture does not talk about things which contravene the law of nature.

Even though I do not think that Spinoza's case is strong enough, I am not of the opinion that he repudiates his views about prophets, namely that they were intellectually on par with the rest of the Hebrews. Historical evidence (e.g. certain prophets' lowly origins, the general beliefs of the populace) strongly supports this view and the only reason we could have to believe

otherwise is to have proof of the prophets doing philosophical demonstrations; and that we do not have. Just because Spinoza finds, or at least attempts to find, agreement between his own views and the views of the prophets related to philosophical matters such as miracles, it does not mean that he automatically recognizes the prophets as philosophers as well. When it comes to the Averroistic reading of Chapter VI, Fraenkel finds evidence for it in a passage, in which Spinoza remarks that the purpose of the Bible is to instil piety in the multitude and the best way to do it is to employ language that appeals to the imagination:

“For I have shown that Scripture does not explain things through their proximate causes; in its narratives it merely employs such order and such language as is most effective in moving men - and particularly the common people - to devotion. That is why it speaks of God and events in terms far from correct, its aim being not to convince on rational grounds but to appeal to and engage men's fantasy and imagination.” (S 451)

Fraenkel infers the following:

“While the prophets understood God and nature in the same way as Spinoza, they described God's relation to nature in a way that was useful to nonphilosophers. Properly interpreted, then, the God of the prophets is the God of the philosophers.” (2013:647)

I believe that Fraenkel goes wrong when he attributes to Spinoza the abovementioned position, for it is consistent with Spinoza's official view on prophets to argue that the purpose of the Bible is not rational demonstration of truths and that its language is adapted to the mind of the multitude for its efficiency²⁸. The prophets did not have much of a choice in what language to employ, although they employed the most effective one since they were extraordinarily imaginative individuals, and the most effective language was the language of imagination. We should not interpret Spinoza's claim about the Bible's “aim being not to convince on rational grounds but to appeal to and engage men's fantasy and imagination” to mean that the prophets deliberately opted to speak in the language of imagination, even though, had they wanted to, they could have provided rational demonstrations as well. I admit that the

²⁸ “I do not think I need here remind you that Scripture, when it says that God is angry with sinners, that he is a judge who takes cognizance of the actions of men, decides, and passes sentence, is speaking in merely human terms according to the accepted beliefs of the multitude; for its aim is not to teach philosophy, nor to make men learned, but to make them obedient.” (S 953)

talk of aims and effective means can be misleading and it allows for an interpretation which posits a conscious decision behind the prophets' language use. But this is not the only interpretation which is possible here, and given Spinoza's repeated claims about the intellectual ordinariness of prophets in the *TTP*, we may want to support one that does not attribute to him such an egregious self-contradiction.

When Spinoza talks about the aim of Scripture, he does not so much address the individual objectives of the prophets, but the nature of Scripture, from which we can infer that its aim cannot be rational demonstration, because a) it is not written in the language of reason, and b) it could not have been written in other than the language of imagination. The prophets did not understand nature the same way as Spinoza did because their understanding was limited, although they may have had notions about nature that were not inconsistent with Spinoza's philosophy. When Spinoza claims not to find anything in Scripture that would constitute an endorsement for genuine miracles²⁹, he means that he only finds accounts of wondrous and unusual events and appeals to God's will and power. He also believes that lack of familiarity with Hebraicisms can also cause readers to posit miracles where none are intended (S 453).

It is possible to say that Spinoza twists the biblical text, deliberately or not, to fit his own position better. But what he engages in in Chapter VI is not allegorical interpretation of the Averroistic-Maimonidean kind, but metaphorical interpretation on thin textual grounds. He indeed deviates from the method of Chapter VII to establish that miracles could not have happened in the Bible with the aid of reason. However, he does not fully abandon the method during the discussion about miracles. He tries to base his claims on textual evidence: he puts forward Moses's claim about false prophets, tries to show how idiomatic expressions can be

²⁹ "These, then, are the express teaching. of Scripture: nowhere does it say that something can happen in Nature that contravenes her laws or that cannot follow from her laws; so neither should we impute such a doctrine to Scripture." (S 455)

misinterpreted as endorsement of miracles, and when all else fails, he blames the contradiction with reason on textual corruption by “sacrilegious men” (S 452; Fraenkel 2013:649).

3.3. *The accusation of atheism*

Even though in the previous section I expressed my disagreement with the Averroistic interpretation of Chapter VI, I think that Fraenkel raises a very salient point. The point is that Spinoza struggles to show that his God is the God of the Bible, and it is a task to which dogmatism is better suited (Fraenkel 2013:650). For each seemingly prejudiced declaration about God and nature, the dogmatist has an allegorical interpretation handy to show that underneath the surface there is a philosophically acceptable idea. Spinoza cannot avail himself of this method on pains of contradicting his exegetical principle, i.e. interpreting Scripture based on Scripture alone. He may be able to show on certain occasions that a metaphorical reading is warranted, but in the end the realization is inevitable: the Bible is full of evidence about mistaken beliefs about God.

In the last section of my thesis, I would like to present a hypothesis about how Spinoza’s puzzling remarks about the prophets’ understanding of miracles can be tied to his fight against the accusation of atheism. In my view, Spinoza had at least two strategies against these charges: one that tried to equate atheism with immorality, and another which attempted to demonstrate the identity of the God of the *Ethics* and the God of Scripture. In Letter 30 to Oldenburg, Spinoza mentions three reasons that move him towards the composition of the *TTP*:

“1. The prejudices of theologians. For I know that these are the main obstacles which prevent men from giving their minds to philosophy. So I apply myself to exposing such prejudices and removing them from the minds of sensible people.

2. The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation, too, as far as I can.

3. The freedom to philosophise and to say what we think. This I want to vindicate completely, for here it is in every way suppressed by the excessive authority and egotism of preachers.” (S 844)

Picking out someone as an atheist in historical times was not as straightforward an affair as it is today. While definitions of atheism can still vary to a certain extent, we usually define atheism as lack of belief in God, gods and other supernatural entities. As opposed to this practice, in the seventeenth century one could easily be branded as an atheist for deviating from the orthodoxy of certain religious denominations. To put it differently, atheism was not just used to designate lack of religious beliefs, but also to indicate the absence of “proper” beliefs, where propriety meant adherence to specific religious dogmas. Taking this into consideration, we can easily see why Spinoza was not very successful in refuting the charges of atheism with the publication of the *TTP*, wherein he repeatedly gives voice to his opinion about the non-transcendence of God and the impossibility of divine intervention. Another connotation of atheism apart from heresy was immorality.

In my opinion, there were two main reasons why Spinoza could have believed that the *TTP* might rid him of the notorious label of atheism. Firstly, he affirms the truth of the moral code of the Bible, and he probably believes that this will clear him of the charges of subverting traditional morality with his philosophizing. Secondly, he wants to maintain that the God of the *Ethics* and the God of the Bible are not different. Of course, Spinoza is of the opinion that the Hebrews, by and large, had inadequate ideas about God (e.g. Moses was wont to describe God as having passions and emotions), but he does not go as far as saying that his God had nothing to do with the God of the Scripture. The first strategy rests on an assumption about how philosophy can be possibly dangerous. Spinoza hopes that if he shows that he advocates the same morality as the Bible, his work would not be branded as subversive. It also follows from Spinoza’s conceptualization of religion in the *TTP* as revolving around a moral code and obedience to it that he probably did not think of himself as an atheist. In Letter 43 to Jacob Ostens, Spinoza also appeals to his modest lifestyle, and *a fortiori*, his moral stature to argue against the charge of atheism:

“Firs he says ‘it is of no importance to know of what nationality I am, or what manner of life I pursue’. But surely if he had known this, he would not have been so readily convinced that I teach atheism. For atheists are usually inordinately fond of honours and riches, which I have always despised, as is known to all who are acquainted with me.” (S 878)

Later in the same letter, Spinoza goes on to point out the absurdity of accusing him of renouncing all religion, given what he writes in the *TTP* as well as in the *Ethics*:

“Does that man, pray, renounce all religion, who declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved as such in a free spirit? And that in this alone does our supreme happiness and our highest freedom consist? And further, that the reward of virtue is virtue itself, while the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself! And lastly, that everyone is in duty bound to love his neighbour and obey the commands of the sovereign power? I not only said this explicitly, but also proved it with the strongest arguments.” (S 879)

As we can see from these excerpts, Spinoza is hopeful that his own moral conduct and the endorsement of religious morality will grant him a fair hearing, and may even rehabilitate his good reputation. Ultimately, this was a predominantly unsuccessful endeavor as doctrinal truth proved to be just as important as moral truth for believers, who perceived Spinoza undermining the former and understandably so. The reaction to the *TTP* demonstrates that the notion of God as a transcendent Being, who is able to stake out punishment or reward both here and the afterlife was tightly linked to the religious moral code. Spinoza was thus accused of undermining the motivation to obey this code by deviating from doctrinal orthodoxy³⁰. Once again, he is faced with the problem that he cannot presume too much agreement with his philosophical views among his readers. If someone already shares Spinoza’s opinion, they could fairly easily why the true moral core of the Bible is the proof for its divinity, and why true religion is something very simple, adherence to which can be inferred from one’s virtuous actions. However, Spinoza’s readers, by and large, are still held hostage by the superstitious view that the divinity of the Bible can be ascertained on the basis of God’s miracles.

For this reason, Spinoza needs to make more effort in showing that his God is not alien to the God of Scripture. Since the equivalence of God and Nature stands at the core of

³⁰ Cf. Letter 74 (Oldenburg to Spinoza).

Spinozism, one possible way to sway the *TTP*'s readership is to show that the Bible does not give support to the view that miracles exist, or that they are proofs for God's existence and providence. In other words, beneath all the superstition, prejudice and false belief, the prophets did have some sort of knowledge about God, which creates common ground between them and Spinoza. In theory, Spinoza could just grant that this knowledge is exclusively moral. The common ground would be there and Scripture would be credited with truth and divinity. Yet this would probably leave him too open to attacks and he needs to establish a stronger connection between his view of God and the God of the Scripture.

Spinoza's famous *Deus sive Natura* is incompatible with the idea of a transcendent God. Genuine miracles, unlike epistemological ones, are predicated on the transcendence of God, i.e. the ontological distance between God and Nature. If it turns out to be the case that the prophets strongly supported the view that God was separate from Nature and performed genuine miracles, the thesis that the God of the *Ethics* and the God of the Bible are the same, I believe, becomes untenable. Therefore, Spinoza has a strong motivation not just to show that the miracles of the Bible were natural phenomena but to argue that Scripture does not support the claim that there are genuine miracles. However, as Chapter VI shows, Spinoza can only accomplish this by engaging in the frowned-upon practice of reading things into rather than out of the Bible. Spinoza, of course, does not own up to this practice, but the biblical passages on which he bases his opinion are scant and open to multiple interpretations.

Concluding remarks

In the past decade or so, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* has attracted increasing amounts of scholarly attention, challenging the view that our appreciation for Spinoza is primarily due to him as a metaphysician, and only secondarily as a political thinker. Spinoza, despite his reputation of being a recluse, was very much interested in the politics of his age, and by publishing the *TTP*, he hoped to intervene in Dutch political affairs to support the republican cause, to encourage intellectually gifted citizens to take up philosophy, and to absolve himself of the charges of atheism, which followed him for almost all his life. Spinoza's general strategy for achieving the second aim is to show how the wheat of religion can be separated from the chaff of superstition, so to speak. He realizes that the members of his intended audience are still under the influence of the prejudices of the theologians, so he attempts to demonstrate how these prejudices can be exposed as such by employing the proper method of reading the Bible.

Spinoza's main opposition in the *TTP* are the so-called skeptics, who believe that the content of Scripture surpasses reason. The dogmatists, whom Spinoza also opposes, espouse the idea that Scripture and reason can only be in apparent conflict. These conflicts, however, can be solved by allegorical interpretation. Spinoza agrees with the skeptics about using Scripture to interpret Scripture, and he believes that reason cannot be used for interpretation, only to judge the truth of what has been interpreted. Ultimately, Spinoza wants to present a reading strategy which prohibits the interpreters from letting their biases and interests interfere with the process of interpretation. In this respect, the commitment to the idea that the Bible must agree with reason is also a prejudice that needs to be put aside for the sake of impartiality. Only by eliminating these subjective considerations can we ever hope to uncover the true meaning of the Bible. According to Spinoza, the skeptics violate their purported commitment to making religious claims on Scriptural warrant alone, and instead read their pre-conceived

notions into the text. In this respect, they are similar to the dogmatists. The dogmatists read reason into the Bible, the skeptics read things into it which are beyond reason.

Spinoza does, however, allow for the use of ancillary inquiries, which are also vital for the Bible's correct interpretation. These include, for example, the study of Hebrew grammar and Hebraicisms, historical investigation about popular beliefs in biblical times and gathering biographical data about biblical figures. These inquiries help us decide which parts of Scripture should be interpreted metaphorically, and whether contradictions between different passages can be reconciled by pointing out relevant differences in the context of utterances. Most importantly, the method of interpreting Scripture on its own terms enables us to adjust our expectations about the Bible. Once we realize that the prophets had an extraordinary imagination and the fact that they were morally but not intellectually superior to their peers, we come to see that in speculative matters the Scripture does not have authority. Furthermore, we should only accept those teachings as the teachings of the whole Scripture on which all prophets agree. Thus what the Bible teaches is simple and moral in nature: fundamentally, it teaches one to love one's neighbor.

Since the prophets' speculative declarations, which often contradict reason, are not authoritative, those who hesitate to dedicate themselves to philosophical inquiry for fear of becoming impious can rest assured that the study of nature will not turn the away from true religion (Nadler 2013:624). But a significant hurdle remains, which Spinoza has to clear from the way of these would-be philosophers. This is the widely accepted view that our clearest evidence for God's existence and providence is the occurrence of miracles in the Bible, that is, events which God brings about contradicting the laws of nature. Spinoza tries to refute this opinion on both philosophical and Scriptural grounds. He realizes that while his philosophical arguments are strong, they may not be sufficiently effective against those who have yet to fully embrace the life of reason and whose beliefs about religion have been conditioned by

theologians. Accordingly, Spinoza raises a number of textual points to convince his readers that the Bible does not give credence to the aforementioned view.

He is only willing to accept the notion of miracle as long as it is used to designate unusual, possibly awe-inducing events, for which people do not have explanations. Spinoza argues that the ancient Hebrews were mistaken in their belief that God was only active when miracles happened, and this is the reason why they only referenced God's power when they were confronted with wondrous events. However, this is more like a misunderstanding about the scope of divine power, than endorsement for genuine miracles which contravene natural laws. Moreover, whenever natural laws, or some sort of cosmic order, is mentioned in the Bible, it is described as fixed, eternal, and universal. Also, we can infer from Moses's words in Deuteronomy about false prophets that our knowledge of God does not come from miracles. In the end, it is up for debate whether Spinoza builds a strong case out of the textual evidence he claims to have. As I have shown, I am skeptical about the success of his endeavor.

Nevertheless, my primary objective was not to assess how convincing these arguments are, but to examine whether Fraenkel is right in attributing Averroism to Spinoza's discussion of miracles. Specifically, I wanted to answer the question whether Spinoza contradicts his standard view of prophets and actually acknowledges their intellectual giftedness. I have come to the conclusion that Fraenkel may have misinterpreted certain passages, which refer to the Bible's aim being the teaching of obedience to the multitude, and not their education on theoretical matters. I believe that these problematic passages can be interpreted in a way which keeps Spinoza's consistency in argumentation intact. Insofar as Spinoza engages in a questionable practice in Chapter VI, it is not a dogmatist slip-up, but stretching the concept of textual evidence so he can present a more persuasive case to the philosophically undecided, who are afraid that the lack of belief in miracles will implicate them in a form of atheism.

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