

# Treatise on Theology and Politics

Showing that piety and civil peace are not harmed by allowing freedom of thought,  
but are destroyed by the abolition of freedom of thought.

Benedict (or Baruch) Spinoza

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis. . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between square brackets in normal-sized type. —Numerals like [5] embedded in the text refer to page-numbers in volume 3 of the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's works. That's to help you connect this version with other translations. (The likes of [..27] refer to Gebhardt page-numbers in the immediately preceding passage that has been omitted.) Cross-references include the word 'page(s)', and refer to numbers at the foot of each page.

•The work's Latin title is *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* = 'A Theological/Political Treatise'. The political part of the work starts with chapter 16.

•Spinoza worked mainly with the Hebrew Bible, known as *Tanakh*; so wherever it is plausible to do so, Old Testament quotations will be from a standard English translation of that (Jewish Publication Society, 1985). Verse-numbers don't always exactly match those in non-Jewish Bibles.

•Many of Spinoza's quotations from the Bible are given first in Hebrew and then in Latin. Throughout this version, the Hebrew is ignored and the Latin translated.

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**Chapter 8:**  
**The Pentateuch and *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel and Kings***  
**were not written by the people whose names they bear.**  
**Were there several writers or only one? Either way, who?**

In the preceding chapter I dealt with the foundations and principles of the knowledge of the Scriptures, and showed that they are simply a straightforward history of them. Necessary though such a history is, the ancients neglected it. Or perhaps they *did* attend to it, and passed it on •in writings which have perished through the assaults of time, or •through an oral tradition that has met that same fate; and in either case a large part of the foundations and principles of this knowledge is now [118] forgotten.

That loss might have been bearable if those who transmitted the texts had stayed within the proper limits, and in good faith handed down to their successors the few things they had received or found, and hadn't concocted new things out of their own brains. •But that is what they did•, so that the history of Scripture has been left not only incomplete, but also rather unreliable. . . .

I aim to correct these faults and to remove the common theological prejudices. But I'm afraid that I have come too late: things have nearly reached the point where men won't accept correction about this, and stubbornly defend what they have accepted as *religion*. And there seems to be no place left for reason, except among a very small fragment of mankind, so widely have these prejudices occupied the minds of men. Still, I shall try; Nevertheless, I shall try! I shan't shrink from putting the matter to the test, because there's no reason to despair completely.

•WHAT MOSES DIDN'T WRITE•

To keep things orderly, I'll begin with the prejudices about who wrote the sacred books, starting with the writer of the Pentateuch [= the first five books of the Old Testament]. Almost everyone has thought that Moses wrote them. The Pharisees, indeed, maintained this so stubbornly that they wrote off as a heretic anyone who seemed to think otherwise. That is why Ibn Ezra, a man with an independent mind and considerable learning, who was the first writer I know of who took note of this prejudice, didn't risk setting out his position openly, and dared only to indicate the problem in rather obscure terms. I shan't be afraid to make them clearer here, choosing words that will make the point obvious.

Here, then, are the words of Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Deuteronomy:

'Beyond the Jordan etc.'; if you understand the mystery of the twelve and of 'Moses wrote the law' and 'the Canaanite was then in the land' and 'it will be revealed on God's mountain' and 'behold, his bed is a bed of iron', then you will know the truth.

[Spinoza explains at length how he thinks these obscure remarks point to the conclusion that the Pentateuch was written not by Moses but by someone who lived long after he did. Example: 'Beyond the Jordan'—this refers to *Deuteronomy* 1:1–5—and the point is that in Moses' time the Israelites hadn't yet crossed the Jordan. Another example: 'Moses wrote the law', not 'I wrote the law'. Some of the

other explanations are much more complex than interesting. Spinoza winds up:] [**119–120**] That is my explanation of Ibn Ezra's position and of the passages in the Pentateuch that he cites to confirm it. But. . . there are many other passages to the same effect, some of them more important than the ones Ibn Ezra cites. ·I shall present four of them·.

(1) The writer of these books [**121**] doesn't just speak of Moses in the **third** person, but also makes reports about him such as:

- 'God spoke with Moses' (*Numbers* 1:1, 2:1, etc.);
- 'God spoke with Moses face to face' (*Exodus* 33:11);
- 'Moses was the most humble of all men' (*Numbers* 12:3);
- 'Moses was seized with anger against the leaders of the army' (*Numbers* 31:14);
- 'Moses the man of God' (*Deuteronomy* 33:1);
- 'Moses, the servant of God, died' (*Deuteronomy* 34:5);
- 'Never has there been a prophet in Israel like Moses' etc. (*Deuteronomy* 34:10).

On the other hand, *Deuteronomy* records the law that Moses had explained to the people—the law that he had written—and in this passage Moses speaks and relates his deeds in the **first** person, thus:

- 'God spoke to me' (*Deuteronomy* 2:1, 17, etc.),
- 'I prayed to God' etc. (9:26)

But then near the end of the book (32:44–34:12) the historian, after reporting Moses' words, reverts to the **third** person in narrating •how Moses handed down to the people in writing this law that he had expounded, •how he warned them for the last time, and finally •how his life ended. All these things—the manner of speaking, the reports, and the very continuity of the whole history—convince me that these books were composed by someone other than Moses.

(2) Not only does this history relate how Moses died, was buried, and caused the Hebrews to mourn for thirty days, but it also compares him with all the prophets who lived afterwards, saying that he excelled them all: 'Never was there a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom God knew face to face'. Obviously Moses couldn't give this testimony about himself, nor could anyone coming immediately after him; it would have to be by someone who lived many generations later, especially since the historian uses the past tense—'Never has there been a prophet' etc. Also he writes 'To this day no-one knows where Moses is buried' (*Deuteronomy* 34:6).

(3) Certain places are not called by the names they had while Moses was alive, but by others that they were given long afterwards. For example, Abraham 'pursued the enemy as far as Dan' (see *Genesis* 14:14), but that city didn't have that name until ·much later·, long after the death of Joshua (see *Judges* 18:29).

(4) The histories sometimes extend beyond the time of Moses' life. For *Exodus* 16:34 relates that the children of Israel ate manna for forty years, until they came to. . . the border of the land of [**122**] Canaan, i.e. until the time spoken of in *Joshua* 5:12. [And Spinoza adds another example.]

·WHAT MOSES DID WRITE·

All this makes it clearer than the noonday sun that the Pentateuch was written not by Moses but by someone who lived many generations after him. But now let us attend to the books that Moses *did* write, which are mentioned in the Pentateuch. For from these themselves it will be established that they were something different from the Pentateuch.

*Exodus* 17:14 establishes that Moses on God's orders wrote an account of the war against Amalek, though it doesn't tell us in what book he wrote this. But in *Numbers* 21:12 a certain book is mentioned under the name *God's Wars*; and it was in this, no doubt, that the war against

Amalek was described. . . .

Moreover, *Exodus* 24:4,7 establishes the existence of another book, called *Book of the Covenant*, which was publicly read to the Israelites when they first entered into the covenant with God. But this book (this *written communication*) doesn't contain much—only the laws, i.e. the commands, of God that are related in *Exodus* 20–23. Anyone who has read chapter 24 impartially and with sound judgment will agree about this: it says that as soon as Moses saw where the people stood with regard to a covenant with God, he immediately wrote down God's pronouncements and laws, and in the morning after performing certain ceremonies he read out to the whole assembly the terms of the covenant they were to enter into. When these conditions had been read out, and no doubt grasped by all the common people, the people gave their full assent to the contract. So this 'book' that Moses wrote won't have contained anything more than the few things that I have just mentioned; the nature of the covenant to be entered into didn't require anything more, and anyway there wasn't time to make it longer.

Finally, it is established that in the fortieth year after the departure from Egypt Moses expounded all the laws he had promulgated (see *Deuteronomy* 1:5), and bound the people to them again (29:14), and finally [123] wrote a book containing these laws that he had presented and this new covenant (31:9). This book, the 'Book of God's Law', was added to later by Joshua; he put into it an account of the third covenant with God that the people had entered into in his time (see *Joshua* 24:25-26). But as we don't now have any book containing both the covenant of Moses and the covenant of Joshua, we have to accept that this book has perished. [Spinoza now deals scornfully with the attempt of an ancient rabbinical scholar named Jonathan to avoid this conclusion by 'twisting the words of Scripture'.]

So I conclude that this book of God's law that Moses wrote was not •the Pentateuch but •a totally different book which the author of the Pentateuch inserted into his own work in the proper place. I have given conclusive evidence for this, and now here is some more.

*Deuteronomy* 31 reports not only that Moses wrote the *Book of the Law* but that he handed it over to the priests, commanding them to read it out at a certain time to the whole people. This shows that the 'book' was much shorter than the Pentateuch, since it could be read out in this way in one assembly, so that everyone would understand it. It is also relevant that of all the books Moses wrote there were only two that he ordered to be scrupulously preserved for posterity—•this one relating to the second covenant and •the Song, which he also wrote afterwards so that the whole people would learn it thoroughly [*Exodus* 15 or *Deuteronomy* 32:1–47]. For because he had bound only those who were present by the first covenant, but by the second, everyone, even their posterity (see *Deuteronomy* 29:14-15), he commanded the book of this second covenant to be preserved scrupulously by future generations, in addition, as we have said, to the Song, which concerns future generations most especially.

Therefore, since it is not established that Moses wrote other books besides these, [124] since he did not command posterity to scrupulously preserve any other book besides the small *Book of the Law* and the Song, and finally, since many things occur in the Pentateuch which Moses could not have written, it follows that there is no basis for saying that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. It is completely contrary to reason to say that that he was. You may ask:

Apart from the few laws of the first covenant that you say Moses wrote down when they were first revealed to him, didn't he also write down the laws that he promulgated at later times?

Well, it seems reasonable to suppose that Moses wrote down those laws at the time and in the place at which he communicated them to the people, but we are not entitled to assert that he did so. Why not? Because I showed earlier in the present work that we ought not to maintain anything about such matters except what is established from Scripture itself or derived from its foundations by a legitimate principle of inference. We mustn't assert things of this kind simply because they seem reasonable. . . .

·THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE NEXT SEVEN BOOKS·

That is enough about the five 'books of Moses'. Let us now examine the other books. The reasons showing that *Joshua* was not written by Joshua are like the reasons showing that Moses didn't write the Pentateuch. It is *someone else* who reports concerning Joshua that his fame was throughout all the land (*Joshua* 6:27), that he did everything that Moses had commanded (8:35, 11:15), that he grew old and called everyone into an assembly (23:1–2), and that finally he breathed his last (24:29).

Also, the book reports events that happened after Joshua's death, e.g. that after his death the Israelites worshipped God as long as the elders who had known him were still alive (24:31). And in 16:10 it is related that Ephraim and Manasseh 'did not drive out the Canaanites who were living in Gezer' and adds that 'the Canaanites have dwelt in the midst of Ephraim to this day and had to pay tribute'. The same thing is reported in 1 *Judges* 29–30. And the wording—'to this day'—shows that the writer is relating things that happened long before. . . . Also the event reported in 22:10–33 [125] concerning the two and a half tribes that built an altar beyond the Jordan seems to have happened after Joshua's death, because in that whole story no mention is made of Joshua; rather it reports that the people alone consider whether to make war, send out envoys, wait for

their reply, and in the end decides in favour of war.

Finally, it is clear from *Joshua* 10:14 that this book was written many generations after Joshua's death. For it says that 'neither before nor since has God ever obeyed anyone as he did on that day'. Therefore, if Joshua ever wrote any book, it was surely the one that is mentioned ['the Book of Jashar'] in this same story (*Joshua* 10:13).

No sane person, I think, is convinced that the book of *Judges* was written by the judges themselves; the summary of the whole story that is given in 2:6–23 shows clearly that the whole book was written by a single historian. Also, the writer of this book frequently reminds us that in those times there was no king in Israel, which makes it clear that it was written after kings had achieved rule and thus after the time of the judges.

We need not linger long over the books of Samuel, because that history is extended far past Samuel's lifetime. I'll call attention to just one. Still, I should like to note that this book was written many generations after Samuel. For in 1 *Samuel* 9:9 the historian reminds us in a parenthesis that 'long ago in Israel, when someone went to consult God, he said "Come, let us go to the seer", because back then 'seer' was the word they used for someone who today would be called a 'prophet'.

As for the books of *Kings*: it says right there in them that they are gathered from the books of 'The Acts of Solomon' (see 1 *Kings* 11:41), from the 'Chronicles of the Kings of Judah' (14:29), and from the 'Chronicles of the Kings of Israel' (14:19).

I conclude, therefore, that all the books I have enumerated so far were written by someone other than the person whose name they bear, and relate the things contained in them as having happened long before.

If now we attend to the unity of theme and structure of all these books, we shall easily infer that they were all written

by the same historian, who wanted to chronicle the history of the Jews from their origin up to the first destruction of the city [i.e. the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians]. The way each book follows on from its predecessor is enough, all on its own, to show us the books contain *one* narrative by *one* historian. Having concluded his account of the life of Moses, the writer moves on to Joshua thus:

And it came to pass, after God's servant Moses died, that God said to Joshua. . . etc. [*Joshua* 1:1]

And when he has finished this history with the death of Joshua, [126] he begins the history of the Judges with the same kind of transition:

And it came to pass, after Joshua died, that the children of Israel inquired of God. . . etc. [*Judges* 1:1]

And he attaches *Ruth* to *Judges*, as an appendix, thus:

And it came to pass in those days when the judges were in power, that there was a famine in the land. . . [*Ruth* 1:1]

He attaches 1 *Samuel* to *Ruth* in the same way; and when that is finished he proceeds by his customary transition to 2 *Samuel*. By the end of that the history of David is still not finished; so the historian moves on from 2 *Samuel* to 1 *Kings* and from that to 2 *Kings*, always using the same form of linkage.

Next, the continuity and order of the histories also indicates that there was only one historian, who set himself a certain goal. For he begins by relating the origin of the Hebrew nation, and proceeds by telling in an orderly manner on what occasion and at what times

- Moses promulgated laws and predicted many things to the Hebrews; then how

- according to the predictions of Moses, they invaded the promised land (*Deuteronomy* 7), but

- once they had occupied it, they abandoned the laws (31:16), and how

- from then on many evils overtook them (31:17). Next,

- how they decided to elect kings (17:14), and

- things went well or badly for the Hebrews depending on whether the kings heeded the laws (28:36, 68), until finally

- he relates the downfall of the state, as Moses had predicted.

As for things that have nothing to do with conforming to the law, he either says nothing about them or refers the reader to other historians for an account of them. Thus, all these books work together for one purpose, namely to teach the utterances and edicts of Moses, and to demonstrate them by showing how things worked out.

The conclusion that these books were all written by one historian, single-handed, is confirmed by

- the unity of their theme,

- the way they are linked to one another, and

- the fact each book was written, many generations after the events it describes, by someone other than the person whose name it bears.

I can't make such a good case regarding who the historian was, but I suspect that he was Ezra. I have some pretty good evidence to support this conjecture.

(1) Since the historian (whom we now know to have been only one person) produces a history up to the release of Jehoiachin [2 *Kings* 25:27] and adds that Jehoiachin took his place at the King's table 'for his whole life' . . . it follows that the historian wasn't someone who lived earlier than Ezra. [127] But Scripture doesn't tell us of anyone who flourished then, except Ezra (see *Ezra* 7:10), that he zealously researched God's law and enhanced it, and that he was a writer (see 7:6) who was well-versed in the Law of Moses.

So I can't suspect anyone but Ezra of having written these books.

**(2)** This account of Ezra tells us that he used zeal not only in seeking the law of God but also in enhancing it. And in *Nehemiah* 8:8 it is also said that they read the book of God's law that had been explained to them, and they used their intellect and understood the Scripture. But since *Deuteronomy* contains not only the book of the law of Moses (or the greatest part of it), but also many things inserted for a fuller explanation, I conjecture from this that *Deuteronomy* is the 'Book of God's Law', written, enhanced, and explained by Ezra. . . .

In presenting the opinion of Ibn Ezra, I gave two examples illustrating that many things are inserted parenthetically in the book of *Deuteronomy* to explain it more fully. There are many other examples of this feature of that work. For example:

. . . and the Horites previously lived in Seir, but the sons of Esau drove them out and destroyed them from their sight and dwelled in their place, as Israel did in the land that God gave them (*Deuteronomy* 2:12).

This explains 2:3–4, namely that the sons of Esau to whom Mt Seir had come as a possession were not the first to occupy that land, but that they invaded it and dislodged and destroyed its previous inhabitants, the Horites, as the Israelites did the Canaanites after the death of Moses.

Again, *Deuteronomy* 10:6–9 are inserted parenthetically in the words of Moses. Here is the whole passage, starting from verse 5 (it is Moses speaking):

**5.** Then I left and went down from the mountain, and I deposited the tablets in the Ark that I had made, where they still are, as the Lord had commanded me.

**6.** From Beeroth-bene-jaakan the Israelites marched to Moserath. Aaron died there and was buried there;

and his son Eleazar became priest in his stead. **7.** From there they marched to Gudgod, and from Gudgod to Jorbath, region of running brooks.

**8.** At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the Ark of the Lord's Covenant, to stand in attendance upon the Lord, and to bless in His name, as is still the case. **9.** That is why the Levites have received no hereditary portion along with their kinsmen: the Lord is their portion, as the Lord your God spoke concerning them.

**10.** I had stayed on the mountain, as I did the first time, forty days and forty nights, and the Lord heeded me once again. . .

and so on. *Anyone* can see that verse 8 must be related to verse 5, not to the death of Aaron. [Spinoza offers a complex explanation for why the historian inserted a mention of Aaron's death at this point. Then:] Next, he—the historian, who I think was Ezra—explains that at the time Moses is speaking of here God chose the tribe of Levi for himself, so that he (Ezra) might show •the reason for the choice, and •why the Levites weren't allotted any part of the possession. With that out of the way, he goes on in verse 10 to follow the thread of the history in the words of Moses.

To these examples we should add **[128]** the opening five verses of *Deuteronomy* and all the passages that speak of Moses in the third person. There are also the ones where the historian has added or reworded bits that don't seem to us to make any difference to what was first there, no doubt doing this so as to make the passages easier for his contemporaries to understand.

If we had Moses' actual 'Book of God's Law', I am sure we would find that it differed greatly from the corresponding parts of *Deuteronomy*, in its **(1)** wording, the **(2)** order of the precepts, and the **(3)** reasons for them. [In the next sentence

Spinoza says that in *Exodus* the Ten Commandments) are stated *ex professo*; literally this should mean that they are stated there *openly*, but the point seems rather to be that the *Exodus* version of the Commandments is the basic official one against which other versions must be tested.] Take the case of the Decalogue [= the Ten Commandments]: it is stated *ex professo* in *Exodus* and I see that the *Deuteronomy* version differs from that in all three respects. The fourth commandment [*Deuteronomy* 5:12–15, *Exodus* 20:8–11] is **(1)** worded differently and is much longer, **(3)** the reason for it differs entirely from the one given in *Exodus*, and **(2)** the order in which the tenth precept is explained in *Deuteronomy* 5:21 is also different from that in *Exodus* 20:17.

I'll say it again: things like this, here and elsewhere, were done by Ezra because he was explaining the law of God to his contemporaries; so this—what we have in *Deuteronomy*—is the 'Book of God's Law', embellished and explained by Ezra. I think that this book was the one he wrote first; and I have

two reasons for this. **(i)** It contains the laws of the country, which the people needed very much, and **(ii)** it isn't linked to the preceding Book as all the others are, but begins abruptly: 'These are the words of Moses. . . ' etc. But after he had finished this and given the people a thorough knowledge of the law, I believe he then set to work to write a complete history of the Hebrew nation, from the origin of the world to the final destruction of the city; and he fitted the Book of Deuteronomy into its proper place in this history. Why did he call its first five books 'the books of Moses'? Perhaps he named them after the person who figures most prominently in them. And that may have been his reason for calling the sixth book *Joshua*, the seventh *Judges*, the eighth *Ruth*, the ninth and perhaps also the tenth *Samuel*, and finally the eleventh and twelfth *Kings*. Did Ezra himself put the finishing touches on this work, bringing it to completion as he wanted to? Read on.

## Chapter 9:

### Questions about the historical books

#### Did Ezra put them into their final form?

#### Are the marginal notes found in Hebrew manuscripts variant readings?

[129] Just from the passages I have cited as evidence for my view about who wrote those books—passages that would be found obscure by anyone who didn't have my perspective on them—it's easy to see how greatly my investigation of the authorship issue helps us to understand these books. But as well as that issue there are other things to be noted in

the books themselves—things that the common superstition won't let the multitude recognize. [Presumably meaning the common belief that Moses wrote the Pentateuch etc.]

The most important of these is that Ezra didn't put the finishing touches on the narratives in these books; all he did was to collect the histories from different writers, sometimes

simply copying them and leaving them to posterity without having examined them or put them in order. (I say 'Ezra' because I am taking him to be the author of these books until someone makes a better case for someone else.)

I have no guesses about what causes him from carrying out this work in every detail (except that it have been an early death). But although we don't now have the works of the ancient historians of the Hebrews, the few fragments of them that we *do* have establish clearly enough the fact that Ezra did collect different histories in this way.

·EVIDENCE OF FRAGMENTATION·

The story of Hezekiah (from 2 *Kings* 18:17) is copied from the account of Isaiah. . . . Indeed, this whole story in *Isaiah* 36–39 closely parallels 2 *Kings* 18:13–20:19. The two passages use the same words, with only a very few exceptions. [Spinoza adds an end-note listing some of those exceptions.] From these exceptions we can only infer that there were variant readings of this narrative of Isaiah. . . .

Again, the last chapter of 2 *Kings* is also contained in the last chapter and in chapters 39–40 and 52 of *Jeremiah*. We also find 2 *Samuel* 7 copied in 1 *Chronicles* 17. But we discover that the words in the different passages are so remarkably changed that we can easily see that these two chapters were taken from two different copies of [130] the story of Nathan. [Another end-note spelling out some of the differences, and concluding: 'No-one who has eyes to see and a mind to think can read these chapters without noting many discrepancies, some of them more important the ones I have presented here.']

Finally, the genealogy of the Kings of Edom that is given in *Genesis* 36:31–43 is also described in the same words in 1 *Chronicles* 1:43–53, though it is obvious that the author of *Chronicles* has taken his narrative from other historians and not from *Genesis* or any other of the twelve books I have

attributed to Ezra.

If we had these other histories, the position I am defending would no doubt be established directly. But we don't have them; so (I repeat) our only resource is to examine the histories that we *do* have—their order and the linkages between them, the variant wordings in repeated passages, and differences of chronology—so that we can form our opinions about the rest.

So let us carefully examine at least the principal histories, taking first that of Judah and Tamar, which the historian starts as follows: 'At about that time Judah left his brothers. . . ' (*Genesis* 38:1). The phrase 'that time' must be related to some other time that the historian he has just spoken of, but this other time can't be the time of its immediate context in *Genesis*. Why not? Because we can't count more than 22 years from the time when Joseph was taken to Egypt to the time when Jacob also went there with his whole family. For when Joseph was sold by his brothers, he was 17, and he was 30 when Pharaoh ordered him to be released from prison. If we add to these 13 years to the seven years of fertility and two years of famine, that makes 22 years. It's inconceivable that so much happened in just 22 years:

- Judah had three sons, one after another, by the one wife to whom he was then married;
- the eldest of these sons married Tamar when he was old enough to do so;
- that first son died, and then the second son took Tamar as his wife;
- the second son also died, and some time after all this Judah himself unknowingly had intercourse with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, by whom he had twin sons;
- and one of those twins also became a father

—still within the supposed over-all period of 22 years! These events can't all be related to the time that is in question in

*Genesis*, so they must relate to another time that had been treated just before that in another book. Ezra, then, has simply copied this story and inserted it among the others, without having examined it.

But we have to accept that not only this chapter but the whole story of Joseph and Jacob is so full of inconsistencies that it must have been taken from different historians [131] and ·thoughtlessly· copied out. [Spinoza gives evidence for this, largely consisting in points about people's ages. If we reject Spinoza's thesis about how Ezra assembled his narrative, and instead take the latter just as it stands, we get the result that when Jacob married Leah [this being part of what is intensely and essentially a young man's story] he was 84 years old. The other point about ages is based on figures whose basis isn't known. At this point Spinoza also refers us to an end-note, in which he says that Ibn Ezra, wanting to take the narratives just as they stand but encountering a certain difficulty, speculated that when Jacob went from Mesopotamia to Bethel—to see his aged parents and to fulfill a vow he had made years earlier—he dawdled along, taking 8 or 10 years to make the journey! [Ibn Ezra is the mediaeval scholar first mentioned on page 73, not the ancient scribe Ezra who according to Spinoza wrote the first twelve books of the Old Testament.] Then Spinoza pours in many more chronological arguments, mostly involving people's ages.]

There's no need for me to go through the Pentateuch in detail. If you just attend to the fact that all the precepts and stories in those five books are related indiscriminately, without order and with no respect to the dates, with individual stories being told more than once, sometimes with different wording, and you'll easily see that all these things were been collected and indiscriminately stored away for subsequent sorting out and examination.

Not only the Pentateuch, but also next seven books' narratives down to the destruction of the city were collected in that same way. Anyone can see that in *Judges* 2:6 and thereafter a new historian is cited (one who had also written about Joshua's doings), and that his words are simply copied out. For after our historian ·Ezra· •related in the last chapter of *Joshua* that Joshua died and was buried, •and set out at the start of *Judges* to relate what happened after Joshua's death, he now writes 'When Joshua had dismissed the people, the Israelites went to their allotted territories. . . .' etc., which completely breaks the thread of what he had been saying. . . .

Similarly, chapters 17, 18 etc. of 1 *Samuel* are selected from another historian, who thought that David's reason for attending the court of Saul was something quite different from the reason related in chapter 16. He didn't think that David went to Saul because Saul had called him on the advice of his servants, as is related in 16:17–19; rather, he thought that David's father happened to send him to his brothers in Saul's camp, and he became known to Saul when he conquered the Philistine Goliath, and only then was he kept in the court [17:55–18:2]. I suspect the same thing regarding 1 *Samuel* 26; [132] the historian seems to be telling there the same story as was told in 24, but following the version of some other chronicler.

·CHRONOLOGICAL EVIDENCE·

But I'll pass over this, and proceed to look into chronology. In 1 *Kings* 6:1 it is said that Solomon built the temple 480 years after the departure from Egypt. But from the histories themselves we infer a much greater number. Here are the details on which that inference is based:

Moses governed the people in the wilderness	40 years
Joshua is credited with a reign of not more than	26 years
Cushan-rishathaim governed for	8 years
Othniel, the son of Kenaz, judged for	40 years
Eglon, king of Moab, ruled the people for	18 years
Ehud and Shamgar were judges for	80 years
Jabin, king of Canaan, dominated the people for	20 years
then the people had peace for	40 years
then the people were ruled by the Midianites for	7 years
in the time of Gideon the people were free for	40 years
then they were ruled by Abimelech for	3 years
Tola, the son of Puah was a judge for	23 years
and Jair judged for another	22 years
domination by Philistines and Ammonites for	18 years
Jephthah was a judge for	6 years
Ibzan of Bethlehem judged for	7 years
Elon the Zebulunite judged for	10 years
Abdon the Pirathonite judged for	8 years
domination by the Philistines for	40 years
Samson judged for	20 years
and Eli judged for	40 years
more domination by the philistines	20 years
David reigned for	40 years
before building the temple Solomon reigned for	4 years
<b>Total of all this:</b>	<b>580 years.</b>

·END-NOTE TO LINE 5 (OTHNIEL'S 40-YEAR REIGN)·

The learned Rabbi Levi ben Gerson and others believe •that these 40 years, which Scripture says passed in freedom (*Judges* 3:11), nevertheless begin with the death of Joshua, and so include the preceding 8 years in which the people were subject to Cushan-rishathaim; and •that the following 18 years (*Judges* 3:14) are also to be included in the 80 years that Ehud and Shamgar judged. So they think that the

remaining years of bondage are always included in those that Scripture says passed in freedom. But because Scripture states explicitly how many years [257] the Hebrews spent in bondage and how many in freedom, and in *Judges* 2:18 says that the Hebrews always flourished under the judges, it is quite evident that this Rabbi's 'solution' of the difficulties involves correcting Scripture, not explaining it.

[Spinoza continues this long end-note with some in-fighting against scholars who have, in his view, accepted absurdities rather than accept that the Scriptural texts are defective. His final thrust is the remark that one attempt to deal with the chronological difficulties has the result that] . . . David was born in the 366th year after the crossing of the Jordan and consequently, that his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather must each have fathered a child when he was 90 years old.

·END OF END-NOTE·

[133] To these time-spans we must add the years during which, after Joshua's death, the Hebrew state flourished until Cushan-rishathaim subjugated it. This period lasted for many years, I think, because I can't believe that **immediately** after Joshua's death everyone who had seen his wonders dropped dead, or that the next generation **instantly** abandoned the laws and fell from the pinnacle of virtue to the depths of profligacy and negligence, or that Cushan-rishathaim subjugated them **at a single stroke**.

[That last phrase translates *dictum factum*, a phrase from the Latin playwright Terence, meaning 'said, done', i.e. 'no sooner said than done'.] Actually, each of these developments requires almost a generation, so there's no room for doubt that in *Judges* 2:7–10 Scripture is compressing the stories of many years which it has passed over without detailed comment. And we must also add ·to the figure of 580· •the years when Samuel was a judge (Scripture doesn't say how long that

was) and •the years of the reign of Saul, which I left out of my calculation because it's not clear from Scripture how long he reigned. [Spinoza discusses the length of Saul's reign, with a focus on some confusing things in 1 *Samuel* 13:1. He concludes:] [..134] I would certainly have to sweat to try to reconcile all the accounts contained in 1 *Samuel* so that they looked like something recorded and ordered by one historian. . . .

•In arriving at my figure of 580• I didn't count the years of anarchy of the Hebrews, because Scripture doesn't say what that number was, i.e. doesn't show me how long it took for the things narrated in *Judges* 17–21 to happen.

All these considerations show clearly that we can't establish a correct calculation of the years •between the exodus and the building of the temple• from the accounts themselves, and that the accounts rely on conflicting chronologies. So we have to face it: these accounts were gathered from different writers, and haven't yet been put in order or examined.

. . . .Accounts •of certain events• that are given in *Chronicles* conflict in many ways with the accounts given •of the same events• in 1 and 2 *Kings*. I needn't go into this here, and I certainly don't need to discuss the crazy devices by which authors have tried to reconcile these accounts. The commentators I have read •fantasize, •invent hypotheses, and •corrupt the language. For example, when 2 *Chronicles* 22:2 says 'Ahaziah was forty-two years old when he became king', some commentators have invented the story that what the writer meant was that when Ahaziah became king forty-two years had passed not since he was born but since Omri was on the throne. If they could show that this is what the author of *Chronicles* meant, I wouldn't hesitate to say that he didn't know how to express himself. The commentators have invented many things of that sort; if they were true, I would say outright that the ancient Hebrews

were completely ignorant of their own language and of how to tell a story; and I would be left with no principle or standard for interpreting Scripture, and would be free to invent [135] anything I liked.

Do you think that I'm offering sweeping generalisations without adequate foundation? If so, I ask you:

Please show us some definite order in these accounts— an order that historians could imitate without getting into chronological tangles. And when you are interpreting these accounts and trying to reconcile them, please be careful about language-use and the discipline of organizing and inter-linking statements, presenting them in such a way that we too could imitate them in our writing, according to your explanation.

If you do this, I shall immediately surrender to you and regard you as a great oracle for me. I have long sought such an explanation but have never managed to find one. In fact, I have given long and intense thought to everything that I write here. Although from childhood I was awash in the common beliefs about Scripture, I ended up finding myself forced to admit these things •that I am presenting here•. [‘awash in’ translates *imbutus*; the Latin—like the translation— is vague about far young Spinoza *believed* this doctrinal downpour.] But there's no reason to detain the reader long regarding these matters, or to challenge him to such a hopeless task. . . . I proceed, now, to my other points about the fate of these books.

•MUTILATED PASSAGES•

In addition to the things I have been pointing out, there is the fact that these books weren't, in later times, preserved with enough care to prevent errors from creeping in. The ancient scribes noticed many doubtful readings, as well as some (though not all) mutilated passages. I'm not discussing the question of whether these errors make difficulties for the

reader; I think in fact that they don't matter much, at least for those who read the Scriptures with a comparatively open mind. I can say this much: I haven't noticed in Scripture's moral teachings any error or variant reading that could make them obscure or doubtful.

But most people don't admit that any defect has cropped up even in the other parts of Scripture. Their view is that by a certain special providence God has kept the whole Bible uncorrupted. Moreover, they say that the variant readings are signs of the most profound mysteries, and they allege the same about the asterisks which occur 28 times in the middle of a paragraph, indicating that something is missing. [*Genesis* 4:8 has an example of this, which Spinoza will discuss on page 87.] Indeed, they claim that great secrets are contained in the very accent marks of the letters! [Spinoza offers some insulting conjectures about why someone might say such things, and contemptuously gives this whole endeavour—especially the Cabbalists—the back of his hand.] [..136]

But no-one, I think, could doubt that errors have crept in—or anyway no-one with sound judgment who has read the text about Saul (the one we have already appealed to [mentioned on page 83], 1 *Samuel* 13:1), and also 2 *Samuel* 6:2: 'Then David and all the troops that were with him set out from Baalim of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God'. Again, no-one can fail to see that the place to which they went to get the ark, has been omitted—we are only told 'to bring up from there'. [Spinoza refers here to an end-note in which he argues, with dense grammatical detail, against the view that the passage *does* give the missing name.] And it can't be denied that 2 *Samuel* 13:37 is confused and mutilated:

'Absalom fled, and he came to Talmai son of Ammihud, king of Geshur, and he mourned his son every day. And Absalom fled and went to Geshur and stayed there three years.'

[Spinoza refers here to an end-note, saying: 'Those who have been involved in commenting on this text have "corrected" it so that it reads:

Absalom fled, and he came to Talmai the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur, where he stayed for three years, and David mourned his son all the time he was at Geshur.

But if that's what they call interpretation—if were allowed to take such liberties in explaining Scripture, transposing whole phrases either by joining them or by cutting something out—then we must be allowed to corrupt Scripture, giving it as many different forms as we like, as if it were a piece of wax.' The main text continues:] I know that I have noted other things of this kind, but at the moment I can't remember what they were.

·THE STATUS OF THE MARGINAL NOTES·

The marginal notes that occur throughout the Hebrew manuscripts were doubtful readings; this can't be doubted by anyone who takes in the fact that most of them arise from similarities between some Hebrew letters and others: kaph is very similar to beth, yodh to waw, dalet to resh, and so on. [It's the Hebrew letters that are said to be similar; what you have in that sentence are not the letters but their names. Compare: 'Among English letters, upper-case zed (or zee) is very like upper-case en.'] [Spinoza gives a couple of examples that aren't easy to follow for those of who don't know Hebrew. Then:] Many variant readings have arisen from the use of so-called 'silent letters', i.e. ones whose pronunciation is often inaudible, so that it's easy to confuse one with another. E.g. in *Leviticus* 25:30 something about 'a city which has no wall' has a marginal note with the alternative reading 'which has a wall'. [Spinoza gives the Hebrew for each reading.]

These things are clear enough in themselves, but I have discussed them because I want to reply to certain pharisees

who have argued that the biblical writers themselves put in the marginal notes, or gave indications for them, in order to signify some mystery. **(1)** Their first argument, which I don't find persuasive, is based on the practice of reading the Scriptures aloud. They ask:

If these notes were attached because of variant readings which later generations couldn't decide between, why has the practice prevailed of always retaining the meaning of the marginal note? Why did they put the meaning that they wanted to retain [137] in the margin? They ought to have written the main texts as they wanted them to be read, instead of relegating to the margin the reading they preferred.

[Spinoza's own text seems to have been 'mutilated' in that passage. For the pharisees' argument to make sense, it should say '... variant readings for later generations to decide between, then why in the many cases where that decision *was* made has the practice prevailed. . . ' etc.]

**(2)** Their second argument seems to have some plausibility because it is based on the nature of the thing itself, -i.e. on what actually happens in many of the marginal notes:-

Suppose that the errors are not intentional, but have crept into the manuscripts by chance. In that case -there wouldn't be any order in them-: what happens by chance happens now in one way, now in another. But in the Pentateuch the word for 'girl' is *almost always* (there's only one exception) written defectively, with one letter missing, whereas in the margin it is written correctly. Has this happened because of a slip of the pen in copying? By what fate could it have happened that the pen always went too fast whenever

*this* word occurred? Also, if this was a mere copying error they—the scribes of later generations—could easily have fixed it without any misgivings. . . .

Therefore, since these readings didn't happen by chance, and weren't fixed as obvious errors, the pharisees conclude that the first writers made these -errors- deliberately, meaning to signify something by them.

It's easy to reply to these arguments. **(1)** I see little merit in the argument based on the practice that has prevailed among -the later generations-. I don't know what superstition could have persuaded them to do. Perhaps they did these things because they found each reading equally good *or* acceptable, and therefore, in order that neither of them should be neglected, wanted one to be written and the other to be read. In so great a matter, they were afraid to determine their judgment, lest in their uncertainty they choose the false -reading- in place of the true one. So they did not want to prefer either one to the other, as they would have done, without qualification, if they had commanded only one reading to be both written and read, especially since the marginal notes are not written in the Sacred books.<sup>7</sup> Or perhaps it happened because, although certain things were copied correctly, they still wanted them to be read differently and indicated this in the margin; and therefore made it the general practice to read the Bible aloud according to the marginal notes.

The marginal notes aren't all doubtful readings; and there's a reason why some of the ones that aren't doubtful were placed in the margins by the scribes, who wanted them to be followed in public readings of Scripture. They involve

<sup>7</sup> The following note is gratefully taken from Edwin Curley's forthcoming edition of this work: J. Weinstein, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford 1959) writes: 'In printed Hebrew Bibles corrections of recognized errors are made in the margin or footnote, while the uncorrected words are retained in the text. . . . In the unpointed scrolls read in the Synagogues, the uncorrected form is similarly retained in the text but no corrected form is given in the margin or footnotes. The reader is expected to be familiar with the text and to know when a word is to be corrected.'

readings where the main text had an expression that was obsolete or ones that were not appropriate to read in a public assembly. The ancient writers used to refer to things—with a clear conscience about this—by their correct names, without resorting to polite euphemisms. But after wicked conduct and extravagant living became prevalent, [138] things that the ancients said without obscenity began to be considered obscene. This didn't create a need to alter Scripture; but the stupid readiness of the common people to take offence did provide a reason for establishing the custom of using polite terms for sexual intercourse and excrement, the polite terms being indicated in the marginal notes.

[This paragraph mentions 'the Masorettes', who were a group of Jewish scholars in the 9th century CE who constructed a vast edifice of marginal notes implying corrections to Scripture. Their version is now generally accepted as the officially correct one, though that question seems to be controversial.]

Anyway, whatever the reason for the custom of following the margins in public readings of the Scriptures, it's *not* that the true interpretation is found only there. For one thing, the Rabbis themselves often part company with the Masorettes and favour other readings (more about this in a moment). Also, in some cases the marginal note seems to be less grammatically correct than the corresponding expression in the main text. [Spinoza gives two examples from *2 Samuel*, and concludes:] In this way we find many notes that simply *aren't* preferable to the corresponding bit of the main text.

(2) As for the pharisees' second argument, I can easily respond to it by bringing in what I have just said, namely that in addition to doubtful readings the Scribes also noted obsolete words. There's no doubt that

- the Hebrew language, like every other, changed in ways that made many things obsolete and antiquated, that

- the most recent scribes found such things in the Bible, and that
- they noted them all, so that in a public reading they would be read in conformity with the accepted usage of that time.

[Spinoza gives several examples, one of which replies to an argument that he reported on page 85:] That's why the word for 'girl' is found everywhere with a marginal note, because in antiquity that word was gender-neutral, i.e. it meant 'young person' of either sex. . . .

[.139] You may want to ask 'How do you know these things about what became obsolete in the Hebrew language?' to which I reply: I know that a given word became obsolete by finding it frequently used by the most ancient writers, i.e. in the Bible, and seeing that later generations didn't follow them in this. . . .

An opponent may offer this challenge:

Since you have maintained that most of these notes are doubtful readings, why do we never find more than two readings of the same passage? why not sometimes three, or more?

It is easy to reply to this. . . . It is true that not more than two readings of one passage have ever been found, for two reasons. (i) [Spinoza's first reason is that in most cases where a note gives a variant reading, it is a choice between two letters, or the presence or absence of a silent syllable; so it's in the nature of these for there to be only two possibilities. He gives examples. Then:] [.140] (ii) The second reason why we don't find more than two readings for any one passage, I believe, is that the scribes found very few copies of the text, perhaps only two or three. The *Treatise of the Scribes* chapter 6 mentions only three, which they suppose came from Ezra's time because they parade the notes they contain as having been inserted by Ezra himself. Be that as it may,

if they had three copies of the text, it's easy to believe that every individual passage was the same in at least two of them. It would have been downright astonishing if, with only three copies, they found three readings of a single passage.

By what accident did it happen that after Ezra there were so few copies? You'll find the answer to that if you read 1 *Maccabees* 1:59–60 or Josephus' *Antiquities* 12:5. Indeed, you'll be amazed that after such extensive and enduring persecution they were able to preserve those few. [The named works describe the attempt by Antiochus in the second century BCE to destroy Judaism. He had copies of the Bible burned and those found possessing them killed.] No-one who has read that account with even moderate attention will have any doubt about this.

So we can see why there aren't more than two doubtful readings anywhere. The fact that there are never more than two readings is no reason to infer that in the annotated passages the Bible was deliberately written incorrectly in order to signify some mystery!

Another objection that an opponent may bring is this:

Certain things in the written texts (things that are indicated correctly in the margin) are so clearly ungrammatical that it isn't credible that the scribes could have been in difficulty about them and wondered which was the true reading. They ought to have corrected them, with no note in the margin.

This is of little concern to me, because I'm not obliged to know what religious scruple inclined them to handle mistakes in the texts in this way. Perhaps they honestly wanted to pass the Bible on to later generations in whatever condition they had found it in, in a few originals, and to note the discrepancies between the originals—not as doubtful readings but merely as variants. I call them 'doubtful' only because in fact I find that with most of them I don't know which alternative is preferable.

A final point. In addition to these doubtful readings, the scribes also indicated [141] a number of mutilated passages by inserting an empty space in the middle of a paragraph. (The Masoretes put on record how many places there are (28) where an empty space is inserted in the middle of a paragraph. I don't know whether they thought that some mystery lies hidden in that number!) The pharisees carefully made all these spaces exactly the same size. To take just one example: in *Genesis* 4:8 it is written:

Cain said to Abel his brother \_\_\_\_\_, and when they were in the field Cain set upon his brother. . . . etc

An empty space is left at the place where we were expecting to learn *what* Cain said to his brother. Many of the 28 such passages wouldn't look mutilated if no space had been left in them. But I have gone on long enough about these matters.

## Chapter 10: The remaining books of the Old Testament examined in the same way

I move on now to the remaining books of the Old Testament. But about the two books of **Chronicles** I have nothing certain and worthwhile to say except that—contrary to a tradition that makes Ezra their author—they were written long after Ezra, and perhaps after Judas Maccabee restored the temple. [Spinoza here refers us to a long end-note in which he gives reasons for ‘this suspicion—if what is certain can be called a suspicion’. The reasons involve historical and biographical intricacies which it wouldn’t be profitable to include here. It is, however, interesting to note Spinoza saying that he won’t go into certain details ‘for reasons which the oppressiveness of our times does not permit me to explain’. [Evidently his challenge to the authenticity of *Chronicles* poses a threat to the Old Testament basis for the New Testament account of something that Christians have thought important, namely the genealogy of Joseph, the step-father of Jesus of Nazareth.] Spinoza’s challenge to 1 and 2 *Chronicles* continues in the main text, where he winds up the question thus:] Nothing is apparent to me about the true writer of these books, or about their authority, their utility or their doctrine. In fact I’m amazed at their being accepted as sacred by the people who removed *The Book of Wisdom*, *Tobias*, and the rest of the so-called apocrypha from the canon of sacred books. But I’m not trying to lessen their authority; everyone accepts them, so I leave it at that.

The **Psalms** were collected and divided up into five books in the time of the second temple [i.e. between 520 and 40 BCE, several centuries after the rule of David]. For according to the testimony of Philo Judaeus, Psalm 88 was published while King Jehoiakin was still a captive in Babylon, and [142] and Psalm 89 was published when the same King regained his

freedom. I don’t think Philo would have said this unless either it was the received opinion in his time or he had accepted it from others worthy of trust.

I believe that Solomon’s **Proverbs** were also collected at that time, or during the reign of King Josiah at the earliest, because chapter 25 starts thus: ‘These too are the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of King Hezekiah of Judah copied.’ This sounds as though a good deal of time—probably at least 100 years—had passed from the time of Hezekiah; and that puts the text as we have it at the time of Josiah or later. But I can’t pass over in silence the audacity of the rabbis who wanted this book (and **Ecclesiastes**) to be excluded from the canon of sacred books and set aside along with other books that we now don’t have. They would have gone ahead and done it if they hadn’t found certain passages where the law of Moses is commended. It’s a lamentable thing that sacred and noble matters depended on the choice of those men. Still, I thank them for consenting to pass on to us even these books, though I can’t help wondering whether they did this in good faith. But I don’t want to explore this question here.

·THE BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS·

This brings me to the books of the prophets. [Spinoza has already had a good deal to say about six of the books of major prophets—**Joshua**, **Judges**, 1 and 2 **Samuel**, and 1 and 2 **Kings**. He will now discuss the remaining three, followed by a paragraph mentioning by name only two of the twelve minor prophets.] When I study these books I see that the prophecies they contain have been collected from other books, and aren’t always written down in the order in which the prophets themselves spoke or wrote

them; and I also see that the books don't even contain all the prophecies but only the ones that they—the collectors and transcribers—were able to find here and there. So these books are only the fragments of the prophets.

For **Isaiah** began to prophesy in the reign of Uzziah, as the transcriber himself tells us in the first verse. But he didn't just prophesy at that time; he also recorded all King Uzziah's deeds in a book now lost (see *2 Chronicles* 26:22). What we do have was copied out from two books that we don't now have, the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah and the Chronicles of Israel—as I have shown. . . .

Second, the prophecies of **Jeremiah**, which are presented in the manner of an historical narrative, have been gathered from various chroniclers. Evidence for this? Well, the items are piled up confusedly, with no account taken of when the recorded events happened; and the same story is repeated in different versions. Chapter 21 explains why Jeremiah was imprisoned, namely that when King Zedekiah consulted him, he predicted the destruction of the city. At the end of that chapter there is a break: chapter 22 tells of Jeremiah's denunciation of King Jehoiakin [22:24–30] and his [143] prediction that that king would be made captive; and the fact that he predicted the King's captivity. This is certainly a 'break' in the narrative, because Jehoiakin reigned before Zedekiah,

And then chapter 25 describes things revealed to the prophet even earlier, namely in the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakin's father Jehoiakim. And then [in chapter 26] we find things that happened in the first year of King Jehoiakim's reign. And so without any chronological order the compiler goes on piling up prophecies until finally chapter 38 returns to the narrative that was interrupted in chapter 21, as though the intervening 15 chapters were in parentheses. The beginning of chapter 38 connects nicely with

21:8-10. Also, it goes on to give an account of Jeremiah's final imprisonment and the reason for his long detention in the court of the guard, doing this quite differently from how it was done in chapter 37. You can see clearly that all these passages are collected from different historians, and can't be explained in any other way. [Spinoza adds some further thoughts about the disjointed nature of this book, and about what one of the sources for it probably was.]

The first verses of the book of **Ezekiel** clearly show that it is only a fragment. . . . Look at the start of the book: 'In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal. . . '. It is clear that the prophet is here continuing a narrative, not starting one. The writer himself also notes this when he adds parenthetically in verse 3 that 'the word of God often came to the priest Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans' etc., as if to say that the words of Ezekiel that he had recorded up to that point had to do with other things that had been revealed to him before this thirtieth year. . . .

As for Hosea, the first of the twelve 'minor prophets', we can't be sure that he wrote anything that isn't in the book that bears his name. Nevertheless, I am amazed that we do not have more writings by this man who, according to the writer of **Hosea**, prophesied for [144] more than 84 years. Anyway, we do know two general facts about the books of the minor prophets, namely that (1) their writers didn't collect all the prophecies of all the prophets, because some were mentioned in general in *2 Chronicles* 33:10, 18–19 as having prophesied during Manasseh's reign, though we have none of their prophecies made during that reign. (2) They didn't even include all the prophecies of the prophets we do have, because of **Jonah**'s prophecies they recorded only the ones about the Ninevites are recorded, whereas we know from *2 Kings* 14:25 that he also prophesied to the Israelites.

## ·OTHER BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT·

Concerning the book of **Job**, and concerning Job himself, there has been much controversy among the commentators. Some people think that Moses wrote this book, and that the whole story is only a parable. Certain rabbis in the Talmud hand down this view, and Maimonides also leans towards it in his *Guide to the Perplexed*. Others believed the story to be true, with some of them holding that this Job lived in the time of Jacob and married Jacob's daughter Dinah. But Ibn Ezra. . . . says in his commentary on this book that it was translated into Hebrew from another language. I wish he had made a stronger case for this, for then we could have inferred that the gentiles also had sacred books. So I leave that question open. But I do conjecture that Job was a gentile whose heart was very constant, and whose affairs at first prospered, then went very badly, and finally went well again; for Ezekiel 14:14 names him among others ·as a righteous man·. And I believe that the changes in Job's fortunes, and the constancy of his heart, gave many people an opportunity to argue about God's providence—or at least gave such an opportunity to the author of the dialogue ·between Job and his 'friends'· that this book contains. The content and the style of that dialogue read like the work not of a man suffering among the ashes but rather of a man reflecting at leisure in his study. I'm inclined to agree with Ibn Ezra that this book really was translated from another language, because it seems to be aiming at the poetic art of the gentiles. For twice the Father of the Gods calls a council, and Momus (here called 'Satan') criticises God's words with the greatest freedom, etc. But this is only a conjecture—not solid.

I pass to the book of **Daniel**. No doubt from chapter 8 on this book contains Daniel's own writings. But I don't know where the first seven chapters were copied from. From

the fact that chapters 2–7 [145] were written in Chaldean, we may suspect that they were taken from the Chaldean historians. If this were clearly established, it would be brilliantly strong evidence that ·what is sacred about Scripture is its content and not its words, not the language it uses to express that content; and that ·books that teach and relate excellent things are equally sacred, whoever wrote them and in whatever language. ·Without being in a position to assert this positively and generally·, we can at least note that these chapters were written in Chaldean and are nevertheless as sacred as the rest of the Bible. The book of **Ezra** is so connected to this book of Daniel that it's easy to see that they are written by the same person, who is continuing his orderly account of the affairs of the Jews from the time of the first captivity.

And I don't doubt that the book of **Esther** is connected with the book of Ezra, because the way *Esther* begins can't be related to any other book. It has been held, on the basis of *Esther* 9:20 that this is the book that Mordecai wrote, but that is not credible. In 9:20–22 some other person tells of Mordecai's writing letters, and of what they contained; and again, in 9:31–2 the historian relates an edict that Queen Esther made. . . . and says that this was written in 'the book'—which sounds in Hebrew as though it referred to a book that everyone knew about at Esther's time. And we have to accept, as Ibn Ezra did, that 'the book' in question perished with the others. Finally, ·in *Esther* 10:2· the historian reports that the rest of Mordecai's story is to be found in the chronicles of the Persian kings. So there's no doubt that ·Mordecai had no hand in the writing of *Esther*, and that· *Esther* was written by the same historian who related the affairs of Daniel and Ezra, as well as the book of **Nehemiah**. . . . I say that these four books were written by just one historian; but I can't even guess who he was.

Whoever he was, how did he come to know these histories? Well, the governors or princes of the Jews in the time of the second temple, like the kings in the time of the first temple, had scribes or chroniclers who wrote chronologically orderly accounts of their doings; these chronologies or annals of the kings are cited throughout 1 and 2 *Kings*. But the annals of the princes and priests of the second temple are first cited in *Nehemiah* 12:23 and [146] next in 1 *Maccabees* 16:24. There's no doubt that these annals constitute 'the book' I have just referred to, in which Esther's edict and Mordecai's deeds were written, and which (with Ibn Ezra) I have said perished. So it seems that everything in these four books was extracted from—copied out from—the annals of the second temple. For no other book is cited by their writer, and we don't know of any other possible source whose authority is generally recognized.

It is certain that these books were not written by Ezra or by Nehemiah [and Spinoza proceeds with some dauntingly dense and technical arguments for that conclusion—about a dozen lines containing eighteen proper names. Then:] So I have no doubt that these books were written long after 164 BCE, which is when Judas Maccabee restored worship in the temple. Why were they written? There are two possible answers. (1) Because at that time some false books of Daniel, Ezra and Esther were published by certain malevolent people who no doubt belonged to the sect of the Sadducees. As far as I know, the Pharisees never accepted those books. It's true that in the false book known as 4 *Ezra* there are certain legends that turn up again in the Talmud; but that does not show that the Pharisees endorsed them. And they didn't. Except for the really stupid ones, they—i.e. the Pharisees whose debates, discussions and decisions down through the centuries are recorded in the Talmud—all regarded those legends as trivial nothings. Why

would the Sadducees do such a thing? I think it was to make the traditions of the Pharisees look absurd to everyone. (2) Or perhaps the false books were written and published at that time to show the people that Daniel's prophecies were fulfilled, and to strengthen them in religion in this way, [147] so that amid their great calamities they wouldn't despair of having better times and of their future salvation.

·THE PROBLEM OF ERRORS·

But though these books—i.e. the canonical Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther; not the false ones—are so recent and new, still many errors have crept into them, I think because of the haste with which they were copied out. In these books as in the others we find marginal notes of the kind I discussed in chapter 9, and more of them than in the others. And some passages can't be explained in any way except as copyists' errors. I'll show this in a moment.

Before that, though, I want to point out regarding the marginal readings in those books that if we grant to the Pharisees that these readings go as far back as the writers of the books themselves, then we must say that the writers themselves (if there happened to be more than one) put these readings on record because they found that the chronologies from which they were copying were not written carefully enough, and they didn't dare to correct the writings of their ancient predecessors, even though in some cases the errors were clearly errors. I needn't get back into the details of this topic, and will now proceed to deal with the things that aren't noted in the margin.

There are countless errors in *Ezra* 2, known as 'the letter on genealogy'. In 2:64 the total of all those who have been counted in the various families is given as 42,360; but if you add the subtotals for each family you'll find only 29,818. Something is wrong here—either the total or some of the subtotals—and it seems that we ought to blame the subtotals.

Surely everyone had an accurate recall of something as memorable as that total number, whereas the subtotals are not so memorable. If an error had slipped into the overall total, it would have immediately been evident to everyone, and would have easily been corrected. [Spinoza goes on to cite *Nehemiah 7* in confirmation of this.]

As for the commentators who try to reconcile these obvious contradictions, each one makes up some story—the best his intelligence level is capable of. But in their worship of the letters and words of Scripture they act in ways. . . .that can only [148] expose the writers of the holy books to contempt by making them seem not to know how to express or organize what they have to say. Their net effect is to obscure things that are clear in Scripture. If it were legitimate to interpret all of Scripture in their way, the upshot would surely be that we couldn't be sure of the true meaning of any statement. But there's no need for me to go on at length about these matters. For I am convinced that if some ·secular· historian did all the things that the commentators piously allow the writers of the holy books to do, he would be held up to ridicule, even by the Biblical commentators themselves. And if they think it is blasphemous to say that Scripture is sometimes faulty, tell me what I should call those who do whatever they want with Scripture? who dishonour the sacred historians by implying that they babble and confuse everything? who deny the clear and most evident meanings of Scripture? [Spinoza then repeats his thesis that somewhere in the two versions of the 'letter on genealogy'—the one in *Ezra* and the one in *Nehemiah*—someone got something *wrong*. He continues:]

So those who explain these passages differently are only denying the true meaning of Scripture and therefore denying Scripture itself. As for their thinking that piety requires them to accommodate some passages of Scripture to others, that's a ridiculous piety because it leads to their accommodating

clear passages to obscure ones, and correct passages to faulty ones. . . . But I shan't call them blasphemers: they mean no harm, and to err is indeed human.

Returning now to my main theme: in addition to the errors that must be conceded to exist in the totals in the letter on genealogy, both in *Ezra* and in *Nehemiah*, many are also noted in the very names of the families, still more in the genealogies themselves, in the histories and, I'm afraid, even in the prophecies themselves. For certainly the prophecy in *Jeremiah 22* concerning Jehoiachin doesn't seem to fit with his actual history. [In this next bit, Spinoza gives the references but doesn't quote the passages. If you check them out against whatever Bible you are using, you need to know that Jehoiachin was also known as 'Jeconiah' and as 'Coniah'.] Compare particularly *Jeremiah 22:30*:

Thus saith the Lord: Record this man [Jehoiachin] as without succession, one who shall never be found acceptable; for no man of his offspring shall be accepted to sit on the throne of David and to rule again in Judah

with *2 Kings 25:27–30*:

The king of Babylon took note of King Jehoiachin of Judah and released him from prison. He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a throne above those of other kings who were with him in Babylon.

. . . .And I don't see how this from *Jeremiah 34:2–5*:

Go speak to King Zedekiah of Judah, and say to him: 'Thus said the Lord : I am going to deliver this city into the hand of the king of Babylon. . . etc. You will not die by the sword. You will die a peaceful death

can be true of Zedekiah, [149] whose eyes were gouged out as soon as he had seen his sons killed (*2 Kings 25:7*). If we wanted to interpret prophecies on the basis of the outcome, we would have to replace 'Zedekiah' by 'Jechoiachin' and

conversely. But that would be too paradoxical; and I prefer to leave the matter as something we can't explain, especially because if there is some error here it must be attributed to the editing work of the historian, not to a defect in the originals.

As for the other errors I have mentioned, I'm not going to list them here because that would be tedious for you, and anyway others have already called attention to them. Rabbi Shlomo observed such obvious contradictions in the genealogies that he came right out with it:

The reason why Ezra (who he thinks wrote 1 and 2 *Chronicles*) •calls the sons of Benjamin by different names, •treats his genealogy differently from how we have it in *Genesis*, and •indicates most of the cities of the Levites differently from how Joshua did, is that he found the originals inconsistent. . . (from his commentary on 1 *Chronicles* 8);

and a bit further on:

The reason why the genealogy of Gibeon and others is given twice, and in different versions, is that he found several different 'letters of genealogy' for each man, and in copying them out he followed the reading of the greatest number of copies; but when the number of inconsistent copies was equal, he recorded copies of each of them.

So he grants without reservation that these books were copied from originals that weren't correct or certain. Indeed, when commentators set themselves the task of reconciling passages so as to avoid attributing error to the Bible, all they actually succeed in doing is to indicate the causes of the errors! I should perhaps add that no sensible person thinks that the sacred historians *wanted* to write in such a way that they would seem to keep contradicting one another.

You may want to say: 'Your procedure ruins Scripture completely, because it will lead people to suspect it of being faulty everywhere.' Not so! I have shown that my procedure serves the interests of Scripture, preventing passages that are clear and uncontaminated from being corrupted by being made to fit passages that are faulty. Some passages are corrupt, but that's not a licence to suspect them all. Every book has errors in it; but no-one has been led by this to suspect error everywhere—especially when a statement is clear, and we see plainly what the author's thought is.

That brings me to the end of what I wanted to say about the history of the books of the Old Testament. [150] The conclusion is clear: •before the time of the Maccabees there was no canon of sacred books; •the books we now have were selected from many others by the Pharisees of the second temple, who also instituted the formulas for prayers, and •these books were accepted only because they decided to accept them.

·END-NOTE THAT BELONGS HERE·

[(i) The opening sentence of this note dates the Great Synagogue later than about 320 BCE, implying that it came much too late for any of the major prophets to have been present at it. (ii) The Persian rule over the Jews lasted for more than 200 years; when Spinoza says that the rabbinical tradition makes it 34 or fewer years, his point is just that this tradition can't be trusted on any historical question.]

The so-called Great Synagogue didn't begin until after Asia was conquered by the Macedonians. And the opinion of Maimonides and others that this council was presided over by Ezra, Daniel, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zecariah, etc. is a ridiculous invention. Its only basis is a rabbinical tradition which says that the reign of the Persians lasted for 34 years at most. That tradition is their only basis for holding that

the decisions of that great all-Pharisee Synagogue or Synod were received from the prophets, who had

received them from other prophets. . . and so on back to Moses, who received them from God himself and handed them down to posterity orally, not in writing.

But while the Pharisees may believe these things with their usual stubbornness, sensible people who know what causes Councils and Synods to exist, and know about the controversies of the Pharisees and Sadducees, won't have any trouble coming up with an explanation for the calling together of that great Synagogue or Council. This is certain: [261] •no prophets participated in that council, and the •decisions of the Pharisees, which they call traditions, received their authority from the same Council.

•END OF THE END-NOTE•

So those who want to demonstrate the authority of Holy Scripture have to show the authority of each book; proving the divinity of one doesn't establish the divinity of them all. To hold that it does, we would have to maintain that the council of Pharisees *could not* have erred in its choice of books, and no-one will ever demonstrate that!

One reason that compels me to maintain that the Pharisees alone constructed the canon of sacred books of the Old Testament is that *Daniel 12:2* preaches the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees denied. And there is another, namely that the Pharisees themselves in the Talmud indicate clearly that the decisions on what is canonical were theirs. For in the *Treatise on the Sabbath* the Rabbi Jehuda—known as 'Rabi'—said that

The experts raised the question of whether to hide *Ecclesiastes* because its words were contrary to the words of the law (of Moses). And why did they decide not to hide it? Because it begins according to the law and ends according to the law.

And a little further on:

They also considered hiding *Proverbs*. . . and so on.

And in the preceding chapter of the *Treatise on the Sabbath* he praised the generosity of spirit of Neghunja, son of Hezekiah, and said that

if it hadn't been for him, *Ezekiel* would have been discarded, because its words are contrary to the words of the law.

These passages clearly show that those who were learned in the law **called a council** to settle which books were to be received as sacred and which were to be excluded. So if you want to be certain of the authority of all the books—**call a council** to discuss each of them separately!

Now the time has come to examine the books of the New Testament in the same way. But I choose not to undertake this difficult business—because •I'm told that it has already been done by men who are highly learned in the sciences and especially in the •relevant• languages, because •my knowledge of the Greek language isn't detailed enough for me to risk tackling such a task, and finally because •we don't have copies of the books that were originally written in the Hebrew language. [151] Still, I shall devote my next chapter to indicating the things that are most relevant to my plan •in this book•.

## Chapter 11:

### Did the apostles write their letters as apostles and prophets or rather as teachers? What the role of the apostles was.

No-one who has read the New Testament can doubt that the apostles were prophets. But the prophets didn't always speak from a revelation; on the contrary, they did that very rarely, as I showed late in chapter 1. So the question can be raised: when the apostles wrote their letters, were they writing as prophets, from a revelation and by an express command—as did Moses, Jeremiah and the other prophets—or were they writing as private persons, or teachers? This question arises particularly because in 1 *Corinthians* 14:6 Paul distinguishes two kinds of preaching, one from revelation, the other from knowledge. So we *should* raise the question of whether in their letters the apostles are prophesying or teaching.

If we take the trouble to attend to the *style* of the letters, we'll find it very unlike to that of prophecy. For the most common practice of the prophets was to keep declaring that they were speaking at God's command:

'thus says God'  
'the God of hosts says'  
'God's edict'

and so on. And this seems to have been their style not only when speaking to crowds but also in letters containing revelations. See for example Elijah's letter to Jehoram (2 *Chronicles* 21:12), which also begins 'Thus says God. . . '.

We find nothing like this in the letters of the apostles. On the contrary, in 1 *Corinthians* 7:40 Paul 'says that he speaks according to his own opinion ('after my judgment'). Indeed, many passages contain turns of phrase that are characteristic of a mind undecided and unsure:

'We reckon, therefore. . . ' (*Romans* 3:28)

'For I reckon. . . ' (*Romans* 8:18)

and many others of the same sort. [Spinoza has a footnote here directing us to an End-note consisting of a ferociously learned discussion of whether the word translated here as 'reckon' really means 'conclude'. The King James bible, incidentally, has 'conclude' in the first example and 'reckon' in the second.] We also find other ways of speaking that are strikingly distant from any suggestion of prophetic authority, such as

—'But I say this as one lacking in authority, not as a command' (1 *Corinthians* 7:6)  
—'I give advice as a man who, by God's grace, is trustworthy' (25)

[152] and many other passages to the same effect. And it should be noted that when Paul speaks in that chapter of having or not having God's precept or command, he doesn't mean •a precept or command revealed to him by God but only •the teachings Christ imparted to his disciples •in the sermon• on the mount.

Moreover, if we attend also to how the apostles pass on the Gospel teaching in these letters, we'll see that it differs greatly from how the prophets do this. The apostles are always *reasoning*, so that they seem to be debating rather than prophesying. Prophecies contain only bare assertions and decisions. 'There are three reasons why that is so. (1) In a prophecy God is presented as the speaker, and he doesn't *discuss* things; he *decides* in accordance with the absolute authority of his nature. (2) There's no question of discussing

the prophet's authority, because anyone who tries to confirm his assertions by reasoning thereby submits them to the discretionary judgment of anyone. Even Paul, because he reasons, seems to have done this, saying 'I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say' (1 *Corinthians* 10:15). **(3)** The prophets didn't receive their revelations through the power of the natural light, i.e. through reasoning (I showed this in chapter 1).

Some conclusions in the Pentateuch seem to be reached through inference, but if you look at these passages carefully you'll see that they can't in any way be taken as decisive arguments. For example, when Moses said to the Israelites 'if you have been rebels against God while I have lived with you, much more will you be rebels after I am dead' (*Deuteronomy* 31:27), he wasn't trying to convince them by reasoning that after his death they would necessarily turn aside from the true worship of God. *That* argument would be mistaken, as can be shown from Scripture itself: the Israelites persevered steadfastly during the lives of Joshua and the Elders, and afterwards also during the lives of Samuel, David, Solomon, etc.

So those words of Moses are only a moral exhortation, in which he predicts the future defection of the people rhetorically, making it as vivid as his imagination would enable him to. I'm not saying that Moses said these things on his own authority so as to make his prediction probable to the people, rather than as a prophet on the basis of a revelation. Why am I not saying this? Because *Deuteronomy* 31:21 relates that God revealed this very thing to Moses in other words. Of course there was no question of Moses' having to be fully convinced of the prediction and decree of God's by probable reasons, **[153]** but it did have to be vividly represented in his imagination, as I showed in chapter 1. There was no better way of doing this than by imagining

the people's present disobedience, which he had often experienced, as continuing into the future. [Notice that Spinoza has here emphasized imagination at the expense of reasoning *both* in Moses' reception of this revelation from God *and* in his passing it on to the people.]

This is how we are to understand all the arguments Moses uses in the Pentateuch. They aren't selected from reason's armoury, but are only ways of speaking by which God's decrees could be more effectively expressed and more vividly imagined. I don't want to deny outright that the prophets could argue from revelation. I say only this: •the more properly the prophets *argue*, the closer their knowledge of the revelation's content comes to being natural knowledge; and •the best evidence of their having supernatural knowledge is their coming out with simple dogmas or decrees or sayings; and therefore •the chief prophet, Moses, didn't conduct any proper argument; whereas •Paul's long deductions and arguments in *Romans* were in no way based on a supernatural revelation.

So the apostles' ways of stating and discussing things in their letters show clearly that they writing on the basis not of revelation and a divine command but rather of their natural judgment; all they are offering is brotherly advice, mixed with a courtesy that is far removed from prophetic authority—as when Paul politely explains why 'I have written a little more boldly to you, brothers' (*Romans* 15:15). [In that sentence 'advice' translates the Latin *monitio*, which can also mean 'warning', 'scolding' and the like. The same is true of the verb *moneo*, which will be translated by 'advise' throughout (with one exception); but its stronger meanings shouldn't be forgotten, as the apostles' letters contain a great deal of nagging.]

We can also infer this from the fact that we don't read anywhere that the apostles were commanded to write, but only to preach wherever they went and to confirm their preaching

with signs. Their presence and signs were absolutely needed for converting the nations to the ·Christian· religion and strengthening them in it, as Paul himself explicitly indicates—‘because I long to see you, so that I may impart to you the gift of the Spirit, that you may strengthened’ (*Romans* 1:11).

·DID THEY PREACH AS PROPHETS? THE CASE FOR ‘NO’·.

·I have been saying that the apostles in their letters didn’t *write* as prophets; but· it might be objected that ·my argument takes me further than I want to go, because· we could in the same way argue that the apostles didn’t *preach* as prophets either. For when they went here or there to preach, they didn’t do this by an express command, as the prophets used to. •We read in the Old Testament that Jonah went to Nineveh to preach and that he was expressly sent there and [154] that it was revealed to him what he had to preach there. •We’re told in some detail about Moses’ setting out for Egypt as God’s representative, and about what he had been instructed to say to the people of Israel and to Pharaoh, and what signs he was told to perform in their presence so as to win their trust. •Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel were expressly ordered to preach to the Israelites. •And the prophets preached nothing that Scripture doesn’t testify that they received from God.

But we seldom if ever read anything like this in the New Testament about the apostles’ preaching journeys. On the contrary, we find (1) passages that explicitly present the apostles as making their own choices about where to preach, as witness the well-known dispute between Paul and Barnabas, which ended in their going their separate ways (see *Acts* 15:37–40); and (2) that often they tried to go somewhere and were thwarted, as Paul witnesses:

—‘I have wanted to come to you these many times and I was prevented’ (*Romans* 1:13);

—‘. . . because of this I have been hindered many times from coming to you’ (15:22);

—‘as for my brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers, and it was not his will at all; but when he has the opportunity. . . etc. (*1 Corinthians* 16:12

There is also (3) the fact that when the apostles went somewhere to preach, Scripture does not say (as it does with the prophets of old) that they went at God’s command. For those reasons it may seem that I ought to have concluded that the apostles preached as teachers, but not also as prophets.

·THE CASE FOR ‘YES’·

But we’ll easily get the right answer to this question if we attend to the difference between the *calling* of the apostles and the *calling* of the Old Testament prophets. The latter weren’t called upon to preach and prophesy to all the nations, but only to certain particular ones, so they had to have an explicit and special command for each one. But the apostles were called to preach to absolutely everyone and to convert everyone to ·the Christian· religion; so wherever they went, they were following Christ’s command. And there was no need for them to have the things they were to preach revealed to them at the start of each journey; for these were Christ’s disciples, who had been told by him: ‘When they deliver you up, don’t be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. . . etc. (*Matthew* 10:19–20)

[155] I conclude therefore that the apostles had from a special revelation only the things that they preached orally and at the same time confirmed with signs (see my remarks about signs early in chapter 2 [page 17]). Moreover, when they taught without the support of signs they were speaking or writing from knowledge (i.e. natural knowledge). On this see *1 Corinthians* 14:6.

All the apostles' letters begin with a confirmation of the writer's status as an apostle; doesn't that make a difficulty for me? No. There are two possible explanations for that practice. (1) Along with the power to prophesy, the apostles were given the authority to teach.

**what Spinoza wrote next:** *Et hac ratione concedimus eos tanquam Apostolos suas Epistolas scripsisse, & hac de causa exordium a sui Apostolatus approbatione unumquemque summisse.*

**conservatively translated:** And for this reason we grant that they wrote their letters as apostles, and that this was the reason why each one began with an affirmation of his being an apostle.

**what Spinoza may have meant:** And that's why they began their letters in that way—simply as a way of declaring that they had authority to teach.

(2) Or perhaps, to improve his chances of winning the readers' confidence and holding their attention, each apostle began each letter with a declaration that his preaching had made him known to all the faithful and that he had shown by clear testimony that he taught the true religion and the way to salvation. Everything I see said in these letters concerning the apostles' calling and the divine Holy Spirit that they had is related to their preaching; with the sole exception of the passages where 'Spirit of God' and 'Holy Spirit' are used to refer to a sound mind, blessed and devoted to God (I discuss this in chapter 1 [page 15]). For example, Paul writes that in his opinion a widow is happier if she doesn't marry again, and adds 'I think that the Spirit of God is in me also' (1 *Corinthians* 7:40), which clearly equates having God's spirit in one with being happy or blessed. There are many other examples of this, but I don't think I need to list them here.

·PREACHING ON THE BASIS OF REASON·

So we have to conclude that the apostles' letters were composed only according to the natural light of reason; and now we must look into the question of how the apostles could teach, solely on the basis of natural knowledge, things that aren't known through natural knowledge. I have three points to make about this. (1) To see that there is no problem about this, look back at what I said in chapter 7 about the interpretation of Scripture. Although most of the Bible's contents surpass our grasp, [156] we can still safely argue with one another about them, provided we do this using only principles that can be found in Scripture itself. Well, in this same way—i.e. using only principles like those—the apostles could infer and derive many things from what they had seen, what they had heard, and finally what had been revealed to them. And they could if they wished teach these things to others. (2) Religion doesn't come within the province of reason—I mean religion as the apostles preached it by relating the simple story of Christ—and yet the natural light of reason is enough to enable everyone to appreciate its main thrust, which consists chiefly of moral lessons—as does the whole of Christ's teaching, i.e. what Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount (*Matthew* 5–7). (3) The apostles didn't need any supernatural light to help them to bring it about that the religion they had previously confirmed by signs was fitted to men's common power of understanding so that everyone could easily accept it from the heart; or to advise [see note on page 96] and teach men about that religion. And that's what the letters were for—to give men lessons and advice about the route to assured religion that each apostle judged to be best. And let me repeat here that the apostles received not only the power to preach the story of Christ as prophets, confirming it with signs, but also the authority to teach and advise in the way each one judged best. Paul

points clearly to each of these gifts:

‘... for which ·gospel· I have been appointed preacher and apostle and teacher of the nations’. (2 *Timothy* 1:11)

And again:

‘... of which I have been appointed preacher and apostle (I speak the truth through Christ, I do not lie), a teacher of the nations with faith and truth. (2:7).

With these words he clearly confirms both his roles—as apostle and as teacher. And he indicates his authority to advise anyone anywhere, as he wishes:

‘I have much freedom in Christ to *command* you to do what is suitable, but for love’s sake I rather *entreat* you to . . . etc. (*Philemon* 8–9

If God had told Paul as a prophet what commands he was to give to Philemon. . . . then surely it wouldn’t have been up to him to change God’s command into an entreaty. So he must be understood to speak of freedom to command as a teacher, not as a prophet.

But it still [157] doesn’t clearly follow that the apostles were free to make their own choices about *how* to teach. Well, we know that in virtue of their office as apostles they were not only prophets, but also teachers, and we *could* argue having the authority to teach carries with it the authority to choose how to teach. But it would be better to demonstrate the whole matter from Scripture alone. Words of Paul’s clearly establish that each apostle chose his individual way:

‘... anxiously trying not to preach in places where the name of Christ had been invoked, lest I build on another man’s foundation’ (*Romans* 15:20)

If they all taught the same way, and all built the Christian religion on the same foundation, Paul could have no reason to call the foundations on which another apostle had

built ‘another man’s foundation’, because they be the same as his. . . . So we must conclude that each apostle built religion on a different foundation, and that they were like other teachers, who have their own individual methods of teaching, so that they would always rather have pupils who are completely uneducated and haven’t begun to learn from anyone else. . . .

Again, if we read these letters carefully we’ll see that in religion itself the apostles do indeed agree, while differing greatly over the foundations. For to strengthen men in religion, and to show them that salvation depends only on God’s grace, Paul taught them that no-one can boast of his works, but only of his faith, and that no-one is justified by works (see *Romans* 3:27-28); and on top of that he taught the whole doctrine of predestination. James, on the other hand, taught in his letter that man is justified by works and not by faith alone (see *James* 2:24) and, having set aside all those arguments of Paul, he expressed the whole doctrine of religion in a very few words.

Finally, there is no doubt but what the fact that the apostles built religion on different foundations gave rise to many disputes and schisms; these have tormented the church incessantly from the time of the apostles to the present day, and will surely continue to torment it forever, until at last someday [158] religion is separated from philosophic speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple tenets Christ taught his followers.

This was impossible for the apostles, because the Gospel was unknown to men; so lest the novelty of its doctrine greatly offend their ears, they accommodated it as much as they could to the mentality of their contemporaries (see 1 *Corinthians* 9:19-20) and constructed it on the foundations which were best known and accepted at that time. [24] That is why none of the apostles philosophized more than Paul,

who was called to preach to the nations. But the others, preaching to the Jews who had no respect for philosophy, also adapted what they said to the mentality of their audience

(on this see *Galatians* 2:11-14) and taught a religion devoid of philosophic speculations. How happy our age would surely be now, if we saw religion again free of all superstition!