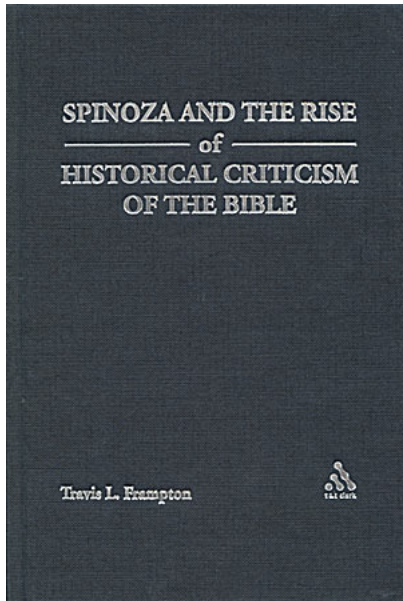


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Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible

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Travis L. Frampton is Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies of the Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. His subject is the exile of the pantheistic Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), who was sheltered from persecution among the intellectuals of seventeenth-century Protestant Holland. He attempts to carefully reassess Spinoza’s relationship to higher criticism with the rise of the historical-critical approach among heterodox Protestants during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was a confusing time when what we see now as distinct areas of inquiry (e.g., theology, philosophy, astronomy, natural science, and political science) were not easily divided from one another. He claims that, regardless of their intentions “the Reformers had successfully modeled to others how to use Scripture to contest traditional interpretations, how to defy political rule, how to dispute the canonicity of biblical texts, and most notably how to challenge religious authorities” (3). Like others, the pantheistic Spinoza had pleaded with little initial success for greater tolerance of religious diversity in Europe. However, many churches found this difficult to reconcile with Jesus’ exclusive claim to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Frampton recommends, among many surveys of Spinoza’s life and work, two comprehensive biographies, by Margaret Gullan-Whur (1998) and Steven Nadler (1999).

The last fifty years have witnessed an increasing interest in Spinoza studies. Nevertheless, Frampton insists that no one knows with any certainty why Baruch d’Espinoza was excommunicated from the Talmud Torah in the summer of 1656. According to Frampton, many scholars tend to let their imagination run wild even though they are writing concerning a scholar who dedicated most of his work to purging the intellect of fantastic notions.

Certainly Spinoza never recanted or reformed his ways or even sought readmission. He never became Christian or adopted a Christian worldview. Quakers and Collegiants had much in common, but differences eventually surfaced. Clearly Spinoza welcomed the friendship of Collegiants and other libertine Christians. He did not accept that the Bible had any relevance for an understanding of God or the universe. However, most study his philosophical and political positions, while interest in his biblical studies is meager by comparison. Generally, the latter examine his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and some views drawn from letters to friends, considering them to be an attack on divine revelation, miracles, and the authority of the Bible.

In fact, Spinoza insisted that the biblical text should be studied like any other text, but without prejudice or bias. He found that a book such as Genesis clearly lacked literary unity and, like his English contemporary Hobbes, did not hesitate to question traditional views such as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. His aim was not to attack the Bible but its misuse, such as the popular abuse of using it as a religious and political means of control.

Frampton considers the modern view of Spinoza to be too monogenetic, for it considers his historical criticism to be the beliefs of an irreligious, rationalist philosopher who was expelled from his own religious community because of his unorthodoxy. He quotes from David Dungan’s view of Spinoza as the father of modern historical criticism (*History of the Synoptic Problem* [ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1999]). Dungan seems to agree with Leo Strauss’s destructive interpretation: Spinoza “consciously created a method that would disembowel the Bible, rendering it useless as a weapon in the arsenal of traditional monarchist politics and state religion” (259). Dungan replied that he himself always believed that the historical-critical study of the Bible had nothing to do with politics: “I never knew that I was a foot soldier in a great a crusade to eviscerate the Bible’s core theology, smother its moral standards under an avalanche of hostile historical questions, and, at the end, shove it aside so that the new bourgeois could get on with the business at hand” (15)

Frampton insists that radical, innovative criticisms of the Bible circulated in many heterodox Christian circles and writings decades before Spinoza incorporated such

notions into his work. In fact, we currently possess an incomplete picture of Spinoza's contribution to hermeneutics because of inadequate attention to heterodox Protestant biblical studies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His work was, in fact, a response to Calvinism and other Protestant debates about biblical hermeneutics. Many Christians in the seventeenth century believed that a new era was dawning when God's written word, the Bible, had become no longer necessary, as Jeremiah dreamed: "I will put my laws within them, and I will write it in their hearts" (Jer 31:34). Reason, for them as for Spinoza, had "become the new standard, the new law and God-govern authority so that everyone who belonged to God was equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Spinoza insisted that the Bible does not provide knowledge of God but rather aims at moving the uneducated to devotion. Mixed with ancient traditions, the Bible is of little value to those able to live by reason, and it frequently has an inadequate view of God. In brief, he sought to separate religion from reason and to politicize biblical exegesis.

According to James L. Kugel (*How to Read the Bible* [New York: Free Press, 2007], 33), Spinoza was not only a controversial figure in his own time but was blackballed by the Amsterdam Jewish community and viewed with suspicion by Christian theologians. When his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was published in 1670, it was criticized as blasphemous, diabolical, and atheistic. Yet, as Kugel points out, people, including biblical scholars, kept reading and reflecting on it. Spinoza lived quietly as a lens grinder, turning down rewards and honors and even important teaching positions during his lifetime. His first published work was a study of the philosophy of Descartes (1663).