

## Spinoza's *Respublica divina*

### The Rise and Fall, Virtues and Vices of the Hebrew Republic (Chapter 17–18)

Chapters 17 and 18 of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* constitute a textual unit in which Spinoza submits the case of the ancient Hebrew state to close examination. This is not the work of a historian, at least not in any sense that we, twenty-first century readers, would recognize as such. Many of Spinoza's claims in these chapters are highly speculative, and seem to be poorly backed by historical evidence (Cf. Verbeek 2003, 126). Other claims are broad-brush, ahistorical generalizations: for example, in a marginal note (to be discussed shortly), Spinoza refers to his Jewish contemporaries as if they were identical with the ancient Hebrews. Projections from Spinoza's own experience of his Jewish and Dutch contemporaries are quite common, and the Erastian lesson that Spinoza attempts to draw from his „history“ of the ancient Hebrew state is all too conspicuous. Even Spinoza's philosophical arguments in these two chapters are not uniformly convincing, as I will attempt to show. Yet in spite of all these faults, the two chapters are a masterpiece of their own kind: a case study of the *psychological foundations of politics and religion*. The work that comes closest in my mind is Freud's *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1939). The two works are similar not only in terms of their chronological subject matter – the Hebrews of Moses's time – but also in their attempt to reconstruct the communal psyche of the Hebrews in order to demonstrate their respective social theories about the foundation of civilization. Needless to say, there are numerous differences between the two works, not the

least of which are their distinct aims and the very different political contexts in which they were produced.

We will return to this comparison with Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* toward the end of the essay, but let me first stage the background for our discussion. Chapter 16 of the *Tractatus* begins a new section of the book which primarily deals with the foundations of Spinoza's political theory and the relation between religion and the state. In this chapter Spinoza presents an outline of his political theory and his understanding of key notions such as right, power, the state of nature, the social contract, sovereignty, democracy, and justice. The title of chapter 17 announces its aim and focus: „showing that no one can transfer everything to the Supreme Power, and that this is not necessary; on the Hebrew Republic, as it was during the life of Moses, and after his death, before they elected Kings, and on its excellence; and finally, on the causes why the divine Republic [*Respublica divina*] could perish, and could hardly survive without rebellions“ (cf. TTP XVII, 254).<sup>1</sup> The far less ambitious title of the eighteenth chapter states that in it „certain Political doctrines are inferred from the Republic and history of the Hebrews“ (cf. TTP XVIII, 282). Essentially, the two chapters present a surprising, ironic, and penetrating reading of the story of the divine Hebrew Republic, a reading which highlights both how much and how little was achieved by the use of the fantastic political device of attributing divine sanctification to the state and its sovereign.

### 11.1 „It's obedience which makes the subject, not the reason for the obedience“

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Tractatus* Spinoza argues that the right of any individual extends as far as his power does (cf. TTP XVI, 238), and that it is „a universal law of human nature that no one neglects to pursue what he judges to be good,

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise marked, all quotes from the TTP are taken from the drafts of Edwin Curley's translation of these works, and I thank him for the permission to use this superb translation. I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., Heidelberg 1925) for the Latin text of Spinoza. Page references are given to Bartuschat's German translation of the TTP (*Baruch de Spinoza. Theologisch-politischer Traktat*, Hamburg 2012). I am greatly indebted to Zev Harvey, Nick Kauffman, Oded Schechter, and Theo Verbeek, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

unless he hopes for a greater good, or fears a greater harm“ (242). From this Spinoza concludes that agreements have force only if it is in our interest to keep them. These realistic, illusion-free foundations of Spinoza's political philosophy explain his open rejection of Hobbes's theory of the social contract: for Spinoza we never transcend the state of nature (Ep 50). Like all other things, the rights of the sovereign in Spinoza's state extend as far his powers (cf. TTP XVI, 245). This may, at first, seem like granting the sovereign an unlimited right to all things (and indeed Spinoza warns his readers that we are obliged to carry out the commands of the sovereign, however absurd they may be (245)), but upon closer examination, it is clear that mortal sovereigns, having limited powers, are equally limited in their rights. The sovereign may order me to turn the square into a circle, but alas this task is beyond my power, and consequently, beyond his power and right. Similarly, Spinoza argues, „the supreme power would act in vain if he commanded a subject to hate someone who had joined the subject to himself by a benefit, or to love someone who had harmed him, or not to be offended by insults, or not to desire to be freed from fear“ (cf. TTP XVII, 254). In other words, as powerful as the sovereign may be, he had better be aware of what is, and is not, possible according to the laws of logic, the laws of nature, and particularly, the laws of human nature.

Knowledge of the laws of human nature should make the sovereign realize that ruthless tyranny is not likely to last long (cf. TTP V, 88), and that if the state wishes to control the hearts and minds of its people, it had better achieve this goal not through compulsion, but rather with more sophisticated, less transparent, and less violent measures. Obedience to the state can be achieved by the binding of love or reverence, just as much as through compulsion and fear (cf. TTP XVII, 255), but since fear is also certain to generate resentment and hate in the subjects' minds, it is the least reliable measure for securing a constant and peaceful obedience.

What are the aims of Spinoza's state? Paraphrasing Vergil's locution, Spinoza writes: „To establish the state so that there's no place for fraud – to establish everything so that everyone, whatever his mentality, prefers the public right to private advantage, this is the task, this is our concern“ (cf. TTP XVII, 257). Spinoza has very little sympathy for the masses which are governed by the affects, not reason, and therefore can only be restrained by opposed affects (cf. E IV,

prop. 37, scholium 2, 443 ff.). For this reason, Spinoza's political philosophy is grounded in an economy of human emotions.

Remarkably, Spinoza believes that a sophisticated sovereign may manipulate the minds of the masses quite radically: „Without any intellectual incoherence, we can conceive men who believe, love, hate, disdain, or are overcome by any kind of affect whatever, *solely in accordance with the right of the state*“ (cf. TTP XVII, 256; italics added). Spinoza also believes that the greatest threat to the state is almost always internal, and that rulers are in far more danger from their own subjects than from external enemies (cf. TTP XVII, 257 f.). This state of things makes the need for a sophisticated, non-violent means of controlling the masses all the more pressing.

## 11.2 „Would that the Indians also believed me to be a God“

Of all the political devices aimed at manipulating the masses, Spinoza is most impressed by the ascription of divine authority, or even divine nature, to sovereigns. Addressing the numerous cases of ancient rulers who demanded to be worshiped as gods, Spinoza explains this phenomenon not as insane hubris and idolatry – as both Jews and Christians saw it – but rather as shrewd, well-calculated policy. Quoting the Roman historian, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Spinoza scrutinizes Alexander's response to Hermolaus when the latter reproached Alexander for wishing to be hailed as the son of Jupiter: „It was almost enough to make me laugh when Hermolaus asked me to reject Jupiter, by whose oracle I'm recognized [as his son]. Are even the answers of the Gods in my power? He offered me the name of son.“ At this point, Spinoza interpolates and asks the reader to note well Alexander's next sentences: „*To accept it was hardly unhelpful to the affairs we're engaged in. Would that the Indians also believed me to be a God. For wars depend on reputation, and often a false belief has been just as effective as a true one*“ (cf. TTP XVII, 258; Spinoza here quotes Quintus Curtius VIII, 8). Having the sovereign recognized as God's representative on earth yields sweeping political benefits and repercussions, for it is one thing to fight or challenge a mortal ruler, quite another to oppose the

divine.<sup>2</sup> Spinoza suggests that this political device can be used in various manners, and with various degrees of shrewdness, and he notes that not all people are likely to be deceived by its coarser variants (cf. TTP XVII, 259). The stratagem of the ancient Hebrew state, while clearly distinct from the ancient cult of the ruler, went much further, according to Spinoza, in assimilating political and divine authority.

### 11.3 The Hebrew State at the Time of Moses

The condition of the Hebrews upon their exodus from Egypt provides, for Spinoza, an example of a human multitude living under no law. Having escaped slavery, they had the power to decide whether to institute new laws, keep their unadulterated natural right, or transfer it to someone else (TTP XVII, 259 f.; cf. V, 88 f. ). Upon Moses's advice they decided to transfer their rights collectively, not to any mortal, but to God. Spinoza stresses that this transfer of rights to God „was made in the same way we have conceived it to be done in ordinary society“ (TTP III, 261). It was an explicit covenant through which the Hebrews freely agreed to transfer their rights and to abide only by laws established through prophetic revelation. Spinoza's insistence that the Hebrews freely chose to adopt the covenant is not trivial, since a famous midrashic source suggests that they were compelled under threat to accept it.<sup>3</sup> Spinoza could not adopt this view, since it was essential for his argument to show that the covenant was binding (i. e., that it was considered as such by the Hebrews).

The result of this unique event was a political arrangement that was equally unique. „God alone, then, had sovereignty over the Hebrews. By the force of the covenant this [state] alone was rightly called the Kingdom of God [*Regnum Dei*], and God was rightly called also the King of the Hebrews [*Rex Hebraeorum*]. As a result the enemies of this state [were rightly called] enemies of God, and citizens who wanted to usurp his authority [were rightly held] guilty of treason against

2 Cf. Spinoza's claim in chapter five that for a monarchy to be stable, the monarch „ought to have something above ordinary human nature. If he does not surpass ordinary human nature, he at least must strive with all his might to persuade the common people of this“ (cf. TTP V, 88).

3 See Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Shabbat*, 88a. According to one of the opinions cited in this source, it was only at the time of Esther that the Jews freely accepted the Torah.

God's majesty. And finally, the laws of the state [were rightly called] laws and commands of God [*jura & mandata Dei*]" (TTP XVII, 260 f.). Attempting to characterize this first stage of the Hebrew state, in which civil and religious law were strictly identical, Spinoza suggests that it may be properly called a theocracy, since God was the Hebrews' only sovereign. Yet, claims Spinoza, this political arrangement was also quite close to democracy, since all citizens were equal, and had an equal right to consult God and interpret God's laws. Here, Spinoza is following a long, common (though not exclusive), line in traditional Jewish literature, according to which divine and human dominion are taken as *essentially* contradictory.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Kingdom of God (or Theocracy) would not only be compatible with democracy (i. e., the lack of human dominion over others), but would actually require it.

According to Spinoza this first stage of the Hebrew state, in which all citizens could approach God equally, lasted for only a brief time, since when God was revealed at Mt. Sinai the Hebrews were completely terrified by the experience, and immediately asked Moses to serve as mediator between them and God (Deut 18, 16 and 5, 24–27). As a result, Spinoza claims, they abolished their first covenant, transferred to Moses the right to consult God, and made him God's sole representative among the Hebrews (cf. TTP XVII, 262).

Spinoza notes that the doctrines of the Hebrews' religion (which were also the state's civil laws) were commands and obligations and not any speculative teachings (cf. TTP XVII, 261). This point would serve Spinoza's later argument that the state should not intervene in purely philosophical disputes (cf. TTP XVIII, 287). The vast proliferation of commandments in the Hebrew religion had the distinct function of training the subjects to be obedient (TTP XVII, 274).

Spinoza stresses that had Moses chosen a successor who would have inherited all of his powers, this second stage of the Hebrew state could have been considered a genuine monarchy, indeed, a very powerful monarchy, since the subjects of this state would consider obedience to the monarch tantamount to obedience

4 This tradition can be traced back to various biblical passages, such as scripture's justification for the severe restrictions on slavery: „For the children of Israel are my slaves“ (Lev 25, 55), which the talmudists explicate: „they are my slaves, and not slaves to slaves“ (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia*, 10a). This topos has wide repercussions in rabbinic literature, Jewish philosophy (see, for example, Harvey 2012), and even poetry (see Yehuda Halevy's poem „*Avdey Zman*“ [Slaves of Time]). For a similar view of God's kingdom in Hobbes, see Harvey 2006, 318.

to God (cf. TTP XVII, 262). However, instead of choosing one successor Moses left to his successors a form of state in which authority was divided between the high priest, who retained the sole right to interpret the law and communicate with God, and a supreme commander, who administered the state according to the law (cf. XVII, 263).

Before we turn to examine Spinoza's portrayal of the Hebrew state after the death of Moses, let me point out a noteworthy discrepancy between Spinoza's description of the early stages of the Hebrew state and the biblical text. Spinoza's claim that before the revelation at Sinai, the Hebrews all had an equal right to consult God, just like Moses, flies in the face of the biblical narrative of the events *before* Sinai. In chapters 15–18 of Exodus, it is only Moses and not any other Hebrew who consults and approaches God. Even when the Hebrews complain about their condition after the exodus from Egypt, they do not approach God directly, but turn to Moses, and it is only Moses who then approaches God (see Ex 16, 2–4 and 17, 2–4). The text makes this point very clear, and it seems that Spinoza must have had an important didactic purpose for introducing the early egalitarian stage of the Hebrew state, which is barely backed by the biblical text.

## 11.4 The Hebrew State after Moses

Following Moses's death, claims Spinoza, the Hebrew state transformed into another political arrangement in which power was split between the Priests and Levites, on the one hand, and the tribe leaders and supreme army commander, on the other. The first were the courtiers of the tabernacle, the divine court (cf. TTP XVII, 263), and the chief priest was the sole interpreter of the word of God. The leaders of the twelve tribes and the supreme commander administered the state and army, but could not consult God directly, but only through the mediation of the high priest (cf. XVII, 264). Spinoza provides a detailed and sympathetic account of the checks and balances that resulted from this division of power. The Levites, the divine courtiers, were fed and maintained by the mandatory gifts of the other Hebrews. Their wellbeing was secured, yet they were not allowed to own any land of their own (cf. XVII, 264).

Spinoza's account of this division of power between the religious authority of the Priests and Levites, and the political authority of the tribe leaders, does not

fit well either with scripture or with Spinoza's own claims elsewhere. According to the biblical narrative (which Spinoza accepts in XVII, 264 and 276 f.), the Levites and Priests were elected to their positions *during Moses's time*. Hence, if any division of power resulted from these appointments, Spinoza should have avoided ascribing to Moses *all* religious and political powers.

Interestingly, Spinoza is completely silent about the fact that Moses, the Hebrews' sole human ruler, was not permitted to enter the Land of Israel. The period of Joshua, the political and military leader who succeeded Moses and led the armies of the Hebrews in their conquest of Canaan, constitutes another distinct phase in Spinoza's account of the development of the Hebrew state. After Joshua's death, there was no need for a supreme leader who would command all the tribes, and the Hebrew state assumed the form of a federacy, one not that different, Spinoza notes, from the Sovereign Federate States of the Netherlands of his own time (cf. TTP XVII, 267). In its last phase the Hebrew state deteriorated into a regular monarchy. In agreement with scripture, Spinoza describes the election of Saul (1 Sam 8, 6–8), the first mortal king, as a desertion of the divine law (cf. TTP XVII, 279 f.). We will return to this period when we discuss the decline of the Hebrew state.

### 11.5 Spinoza's Ahistorical History

Overall, Spinoza's discussion of the Hebrew state in its various phases portrays it as an exceptional political arrangement that is exceedingly successful at achieving the loyalty and devotion of its citizens, restraining the sovereign's power, and securing internal peace and equality.<sup>5</sup> It manages this through a sophisticated appeal to divine authority in its various provisions. The rhetoric of Spinoza's text attests to his unconcealed admiration for some of the achievements of the Hebrew state: „Nowhere did the citizens possess their property with a greater right than did the subjects of this state, who, with the leader, had an equal share

5 There is some tension between this rather positive depiction of the Hebrew state and Spinoza's insinuation in Chapter Three of the TTP that the success of the Hebrew state was due to luck only, or in Spinoza's own words, „solely through God's external assistance“ (TTP III, 54).



of the lands and fields.<sup>6</sup> Each one was the everlasting lord of his own share. If poverty compelled anyone to sell his estate or field, it had to be restored to him once again when the jubilee year came ... Nowhere could poverty be more bearable than where the people had to cultivate, with the utmost piety, loving-kindness towards their neighbor (i. e., towards their fellow citizens), so that God, their King, would favor them“ (TTP XVII, 274).

Spinoza discusses various measures that helped achieve such an egalitarian and restrained society. One of these was reliance on a citizen army rather than mercenaries. Spinoza thought that this measure would significantly limit the ability of the leaders to oppress the people or launch unnecessary wars (cf. TTP XVII, 269 ff.). Well, today we know better; we know that popular excitement, patriotism, and nationalism can easily make a citizen army outdo any mercenaries in barbarism and war enthusiasm.

In addition to admiring the accomplishments of the Hebrew society, Spinoza also portrays it as xenophobic, to the extent that hatred for other nations was not just permitted but even commanded. Consequently, such hatred became part of the psychological nature of the Hebrews (cf. TTP XVII, 272).

At this point I would like to address an issue I have been postponing so far, i. e., the historicity of Spinoza's claims and his frequent projection of conditions from his own times onto the case of the Hebrew state. I will not be able to discuss here all the instances of this attitude, but a few cases may help illustrate my point. First, let us have a close look at a marginal note of Spinoza's regarding the Hebrews' temple. Spinoza discusses at some length the importance of the temple, God's dwelling place or the court of the supreme majesty of the state. He marks the intricate laws governing the conduct of the Hebrews at the temple, and then notes: „To this day *they* can't read without great horror about Manasseh's disgraceful conduct [*atque adeo ut hodierni adhuc non sine magno horrore illud Manassae flagitium legant*], how he dared to place an idol in the temple itself“ (TTP XVII, 275; italics added). There is something remarkable about Spinoza's conviction that the Jews of his own day are the very same people as the subjects of the ancient Hebrew state. As I noted at the beginning of this paper, we would hardly recognize this kind of hermeneutic practice as historical writing. Yet such

6 The priestly elite was prohibited from owning any land, while the civic leadership (heads of tribes and judges) could not accumulate lands due to the law of the Jubilee.

generalizations, in which terms like „Pharisees“ or „Hebrews“ range over civilizations of two millennia, are not at all rare in the *Tractatus*.<sup>7</sup> Let us have a look at another example.

We have just mentioned Spinoza's description of the xenophobic psyche of the Hebrews. There are, in fact, numerous biblical passages that command charity and love toward the stranger [*Ger*] (see, for example, Ex 22, 20; Lev 19, 33 and 24, 22; Deut 14, 29), envision God's house as a place of prayer for all the nations (Isaiah 56, 7), and prohibit hatred even for those nations, such as the Egyptians and Edomites, with whom the Hebrews shared a hostile past (Deut 23, 8).<sup>8</sup> It seems that Spinoza's broad-brush claim about the xenophobic psyche of the Hebrews is, at least in part, a projection from his acquaintance with the minds of seventeenth-century Dutch Jews; alternatively, it may be that the claim is made in service of his political argument (i. e., proving that despite its exceptional virtues the Hebrew state should not be imitated). One striking point in this context is Spinoza's assertion that the ancient Hebrews considered other lands „unclean and profane“ [*immunda & profana*] (TTP XVII, 272). Now, such a notion of the „uncleanness of the land of the nations“ [*tumeat eretz ha-amim*] does exist within Jewish literature, but it has no trace in the Bible, and its origins can be traced at best to the second century BCE,<sup>9</sup> several centuries after the destruction of Hebrew state. Here again, I believe, Spinoza treats the Hebrews as an ahistorical category, ranging over biblical and rabbinic subjects without recognizing the fundamental and obvious divide between these civilizations.

The third and last example I would like to discuss is Spinoza's claim that the election of the Levites caused resentment that contributed significantly to the decline of the Hebrew state. The Levites were chosen to serve as the temple's courtiers and their sustenance fell on the other tribes. This, Spinoza claims, led

7 See, for example, TTP III, 60: „*Phariseae tamen contra acriter contendunt*“ (note the tense); see also VII, 142 f., VIII, 146 and IX, 168 and 174.

8 Indeed, within rabbinic tradition, salvation, i. e., having a share in the world to come, is *not* restricted to Jews only. See *Tosefta Sanberdrin*, XIII 2.

9 See Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Shabbat*, 15b. Spinoza's cites 1 Sam 26, 19 in order to show that the Hebrews considered living outside the Land of Israel as tantamount to practicing idolatry. This issue, however, is clearly distinct from the claim that other lands are ritually unclean. Furthermore, Spinoza's reading of 1 Sam 26, 19 relies heavily on the rabbinic exposition of this verse (Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Ketubot*, 110b) rather than the plain sense of scripture.

to a „continual murmuring, and a weariness with feeding men who were idle, envied, and not related to them by blood“ (cf. TTP XVII, 277). Spinoza provides no textual source to support this claim, which is very central to his explanation of the fall of the Hebrew state. As far as I can see, there is no trace in the Bible of this resentment, which Spinoza describes as „continual.“ The only evidence that Spinoza cites for his chief explanation for the decline of the Hebrew state – the election of the Levites and the ensuing resentment toward them – is the story of Korah (Num 16), but this event occurred right at the *beginning* of the Hebrew state. Furthermore, the value of this evidence is highly questionable, since Korah, the leader of this rebellion against Moses, was a Levite himself, and in his complaint he does not at all mention the alleged idleness of the Levites.<sup>10</sup>

### 11.6 „I gave them statutes which were not good, and laws by which they would not live“: The Decline of the Hebrew State

At the center of Spinoza's explanation of the dissolution of the Hebrew state lies his interpretation of two extraordinary verses in Ezekiel 20, 25 f.: „Moreover, I gave them statutes which were not good, and laws by which they would not live, for I defiled them with their own gifts, by rejecting everything which opened the womb, so that I might destroy them, that they might know that I am God.“ Unlike his usual custom, Spinoza does not quote the Hebrew original here, but rather provides his own, quite reasonable, translation. Spinoza understands these two verses as alluding to the choice of Levites to serve as the courtiers of the temple. Here Spinoza is referring to the claim that originally these were the firstborns who were supposed to serve as priests in the tabernacle and temple; only after the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex 32, 25–29), were the firstborn rejected („rejecting everything which opened the womb“) and replaced by the Levites, the only tribe that did not partake in the sin. The biblical text alludes to this issue (Num 8, 6–18), but it is far more developed in rabbinic literature.<sup>11</sup> It is note-

10 Perhaps Spinoza is relying here on Ibn Ezra's commentary on Ex 32, 29, which stresses that Korah was a firstborn.

11 See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Zevachim*, 112b, *Tractate Yoma*, 66b, *Bamidbar Rabbah*, 1:10, and Ibn Ezra's long commentary on Ex 32, 29.

worthy that according to many rabbinic sources the Levites were chosen much earlier. Indeed, quite a few sources suggest that the tribe of Levi was not enslaved in Egypt,<sup>12</sup> and according to some the descendants of Levi were elected to replace the firstborn following the sin of Reuben – Jacob’s firstborn – who defiled his father’s bed (Gen 49, 3).<sup>13</sup> Regardless of these reservations, Spinoza’s explanation of the election of the Levites as God’s response to the sin of the Golden Calf fits well with the mainstream of rabbinic sources. Yet, unlike the rabbinic sources, Spinoza presents the election of the Levites as a curse, the response of an angry God who was intent on punishing the Hebrews and destroying their unique state (cf. TTP XVII, 278).

Why was the election of the Levites such a momentous event according to Spinoza? We can discern at least two reasons. First, the egalitarian order was essential for the Hebrew state to function properly, and once this strict egalitarianism broke down, all the social and psychological maladies of inequality followed. Resentment, envy, and the desire to usurp power brought about constant struggles, instability, and corruption, and once the delicate equilibrium of the original state was shaken, the descent into civil strife and tyranny was just a matter of time.

Second – and here comes the proto-Freudian element I alluded to at the beginning of this article – Spinoza suggests that the various gifts which the other tribes were always obliged to give to the Levites continually reminded them of their great sin, the worship of the Golden Calf, which was the reason for the elevation of the Levites and the rejection of all the other tribes (ibid.). This feeling of defilement and rejection, the constant presence of the reminders of their original sin, made them resent the Levites even more and left them dissatisfied with God, the sovereign of their state. The result was a constant push toward new forms of worship and new political arrangements.<sup>14</sup>

12 See *Shemot Rabbah*, 5, 20. Cf. Nachmanides’ Commentary on the Pentateuch, Gen 5, 4.

13 See the commentary of *Kli Yakar* (Shlomo Ephraim of Leczyca, a sixteenth-century commentator) on Gen 49, 4. Cf. the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn-Ezra and Sforino on Gen 49, 3–4, and *Beresbit Rabbah* 99, 6.

14 For an insightful discussion of Spinoza’s description of the last phases of the Hebrew Republic, see Rosenthal 2002, 239–241.

## 11.7 Political Lessons from the Case Study of the Hebrew State

The divine Hebrew Republic occupied the imagination of quite a few early modern minds (Nelson 2010, Melamed 2010, and Totaro in this volume), and the question of whether the achievements of this state could be imitated was broadly in the air. Spinoza's paradoxical interpretation of this political myth, his view of the Hebrew state as combining ingenious political thinking with base affects (e. g., the hatred of strangers), was at least in part intended as a spoiler for these nostalgic fantasies.

In order to show that a resort to the Hebrew state is neither possible nor desirable, Spinoza presents two explicit arguments. First, he claims, the Hebrew state was based on a genuine covenant with God. But, as he goes on to remind his Christian readers, God's new covenant is not written in ink or on stone tablets, but „written on the heart, by the Spirit of God“ (TTP XVIII, 282). In other words, one cannot resort to the Jewish law and remain Christian. This is an argumentative strategy that Spinoza often employs: he charges his adversaries with Judaizing, or following the path of the Pharisees.<sup>15</sup>

Spinoza's second argument is even more interesting. Modern mercantilism, with its crucial reliance on close, friendly interactions with foreign cultures and states, is incompatible with the xenophobic and isolationist nature of the Hebrew state. Put simply, were the Dutch to adopt the essential features of the Hebrew state, they would have to shut themselves within their borders and forfeit their immense economic achievements (cf. TTP XVIII, 282). Thus, both in terms of the Flesh (the economy), as well as in terms of the Spirit (the irrelevance of the Jewish law) Christian Netherlands cannot and should not aim at imitating God's Divine Republic.

Although we should not revive the Hebrew state as a whole, Spinoza points out several important lessons from this extraordinary case study. He begins by noting two features of the Hebrew state which are „perhaps worth imitating“ (TTP XVIII, 282) First, Spinoza marks, it is not contrary to God's rule to choose a supreme majesty, as we can see from the transfer of rights to Moses in Sinai.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Spinoza's claim that the belief in ghosts is truly of a Pharisee, not Christian, origin, and that therefore good Christians should reject it (cf. TTP II, 48). For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Melamed 2012, 143.

Second, Spinoza argues, we can learn from the history of the priesthood after Moses's death that the right to excommunicate should not be granted to the religious authorities, but should rather belong to the civil sovereign (cf. TTP XVIII, 283). Spinoza supports this last claim with a somewhat creative reading of three incidents in which judges or kings (but not priests) cursed those who disobeyed their commands.

Then, Spinoza turns to draw several further lessons from the history of the Hebrew state. Most of these lessons serve in one way or another to further his overarching Erastian argument.

Addressing the Hebrews' second commonwealth, after their return from the Babylonian exile, Spinoza notes that only in this period, after the priests from the Hasmonean dynasty usurped civil authority and became kings, did the deep divisions among the various Jewish sects appear. As long as the original division of power (following Moses's death) between religious and civil authorities remained intact, the Priests' pattern of behavior was conservative and restrained. Once they gained civil power they used their priestly authority to promulgate new edicts concerning beliefs and ceremonies. These innovations did not escape the notice of their opponents, and the result was proliferation of quarrels regarding the practice of religion (cf. TTP XVIII, 283 f.).

Another crucial lesson which Spinoza draws from the destruction of the Hebrew state is that a preacher should not be allowed to pronounce judgment publicly on religious issues without obtaining permission from the sovereign. The activity of prophets who did not shy away from admonishing and scolding the sovereigns contributed significantly to the destabilization of the Hebrew state (cf. TTP XVIII, 280). Furthermore, Spinoza argues, the prophets scolded even monarchs, who, according to the testimony of scripture, rule piously (cf. TTP XVIII, 284). As a result, Spinoza summarizes, „religion derived more harm than good“ from granting prophets the freedom to criticize the sovereign (TTP XVIII, 284 f.).

Spinoza is also not particularly enthusiastic about monarchical government. He notes that in comparison with the earlier stages of the Hebrew state the period of Hebrew monarchy was characterized by the spread of civil wars, conflicts with an increasing number of prophets, and wars waged merely for the sake of glory (TTP XVIII, 285).

At the very end of chapter 18, Spinoza drives many of these lessons home, and applies them to his English and Dutch contemporaries. He argues that radical political shifts are harmful, as they result in dissonance between the psychology of the people, who were accustomed to one form of government, and the practice required by another. „The form of each state cannot be changed without a danger that the whole state will be ruined“ (TTP XVIII, 291). The State of Holland, Spinoza notes, never had kings, but only counts (cf. TTP XVIII, 290). If the Dutch wish to avoid the complete ruin of their state, they should not follow the path of the ancient Hebrew state, and should refrain from monarchical government.

## 11.8 Conclusions

At the beginning of this article I suggested that Spinoza's discussion of the divine Hebrew Republic cannot be considered as „historical“ practice in any sense remotely close to ours (cf. Gottlieb 2007, 289 and Verbeek in this volume). Throughout this paper we have seen Spinoza presenting a variety of claims that are poorly documented in the Biblical texts. It is precisely these deviations from the Biblical narratives that can help us understand the overarching aims of Spinoza's argument. His didactic history is not meant to document the past „wie es eigentlich gewesen,“ to use Ranke's trope, but rather to support his political argument in favor of Erastianism and the freedom to philosophize (the explicit aims of chapters 19 and 20).

Spinoza's account of the Hebrew Republic is not free of tensions. Key elements in this account, such as the division of power following the death of Moses, are sometimes described in positive terms, as maintaining a healthy balance of powers, but at other times are presented as the main cause of the destruction of the state. There are numerous discrepancies between Spinoza's detailed account of the Hebrew state in chapters 17 and 18, and the more succinct, and more negative, discussion of the same issue in chapter 5.<sup>16</sup> These tensions notwithstanding, the outlines of Spinoza's political thinking are presented in a concentrated form

16 Cf. Verbeek 2003, 125 f. In chapter 5 Spinoza describes the Hebrews upon their exodus from Egypt as unfit for democracy, while in chapter 18 the early theocratic stages of the Hebrew state are described in terms very close to democracy. Similarly, chapter 5 does not mention a pre-Sinai egalitarian phase, in

and in sharp relief in this focused, exemplary study of the extraordinary case of the Divine Hebrew Republic.

## 11.9 Bibliography

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which all Hebrews were equally permitted to approach God. There are quite a few other discrepancies between the two accounts.