**Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy**

**Abstract**

**Breaking new ground in the study of Spinoza's philosophy, the essays in this volume explore the extent to which Spinoza may be considered a Jewish thinker. The rich diversity of Spinoza scholarship today is represented here by a wide range of intellectual methods and scholarly perspectives from Jewish philosophy and history, to Cartesian-analytic and Continental-Marxist streams of interpretation, to the disciplines of political science and intellectual history. Two questions underlie all the essays: How and in what measure is Spinoza's a Jewish philosophy, and what is its impact on the project of Jewish philosophy as a living enterprise now and for the future? The contributors' varied perspectives afford a highly nuanced vision of the multifaceted Judaic tradition itself, as refracted through the Spinozist lens. What draws them together is the quest for enduring insights that emerge from the philosophy of Spinoza."**

**The current anthology presents an important contribution to the study of Spinoza's relation to Jewish philosophy as well as to contemporary scholarship of Spinoza's metaphysics and political theory.**

**In the opening essay, Lenn Goodman takes upon himself the ambitious task of evaluating Spinoza's positions as to several central disputes throughout the history of philosophy. In this rich and extensive essay Goodman argues that Spinoza's radical rationalism makes him pursue syntheses between traditionally opposed poles. Lee Rice's article, "Love of God in Spinoza," carefully analyzes Spinoza's concept of love and suggests the existence of three kinds of love parallel to the three kinds of knowledge. Warren Montag addresses the unresolved issue of Spinoza's relation to the *Kabbalah*. Montag sides with Deleuze against the association of Spinozism with the Neo-Platonic theory of emanation, arguing that unlike the Neo-Platonists and Kabbalists, Spinoza's view of God rules out any hierarchy, and does not assume a descent from primal simplicity into complexity. Edwin Curley contributes a beautiful reading of the story of Job and of Maimonides' interpretation of the story. Curley follows Maimonides' discussion of the various positions regarding the question of divine providence and his attempt to identify the speeches of the characters of the book of Job with each of these positions. Following a sensitive consideration of various attempts to [End Page 417] recover Maimonides' own rather concealed view about providence, Curley concludes that "[W]hatever you think Maimonides' final word on Job is, our examination of him certainly supports [Spinoza's] claim that [Maimonides] reads Scripture in terms of Platonic or Aristotelian speculations" (170).**

**Warren Zev Harvey's essay addresses Spinoza's most neglected work, the *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language.* Apart from providing an outline of Spinoza's work as a Hebrew grammarian ("a noun-intoxicated grammarian") and pointing out some of Spinoza's more eccentric views about the nature of the Hebrew language, Harvey makes a compelling case for the importance of the book for the study of Spinoza's metaphysics. He points out a fascinating analogy which Spinoza draws between the parts of speech: (proper) noun, adjectives, and participles, and Spinoza's key metaphysical terms: substance, attributes, and modes. (Think about the weighty implications of this analogy for Curley's interpretation of the substance-mode relation.) According to Harvey, Spinoza's claim that all Hebrew words are derived from nouns is a linguistic parallel to Spinoza's pivotal metaphysical doctrine which makes all things be *in* the substance (or God). Kenneth Seeskin's article discusses the views of Maimonides and Spinoza on the question of creation and God's relation to the world. Seeskin reconstructs an interesting critical dialogue between these two philosophers. According to Seeskin, both philosophers held that an effect must be similar to its cause. Maimonides' commitment to Negative Theology and to the denial of any common measure between God and finite things forced him to deny causal or explanatory relation between God and the world. What Maimonides can suggest instead is rather to prove that the emergence of the world *ex nihilo* and according to the divine will, is possible, and even likely given certain astronomical facts of medieval science. Thus, Maimonides would hold that "although we have grounds for believing *that* creation occurred, we will never be in a position to say *how*" (120). For Spinoza, such a view constitutes nothing but a "sanctuary of ignorance." Thus, according to Seeskin, Spinoza affirms a clear causal relation between God and the world of finite things insofar as God is said to explain the world. While I tend to agree with most aspects of this analysis, it is important to note that Spinoza also claims that "between the finite and infinite there is no relation" (*Letter* 54). This...**

**Breaking new ground in the study of Spinoza's philosophy, the essays in this volume explore the extent to which Spinoza may be considered a Jewish thinker. The rich diversity of Spinoza scholarship today is represented here by a wide range of intellectual methods and scholarly perspectives—from Jewish philosophy and history, to Cartesian-analytic and Continental-Marxist streams of interpretation, to the disciplines of political science and intellectual history. Two questions underlie all the essays: How and in what measure is Spinoza's a Jewish philosophy, and what is its impact on the project of Jewish philosophy as a living enterprise now and for the future? The contributors' varied perspectives afford a highly nuanced vision of the multifaceted Judaic tradition itself, as refracted through the Spinozist lens. What draws them together is the quest for enduring insights that emerge from the philosophy of Spinoza.

“This is the first serious attempt to offer a sophisticated look at Spinoza's relationship to Jewish philosophy and religion. It is an excellent collection of essays, and absolutely central to understanding Spinoza and his place in the history of Jewish philosophy.” — Steven Nadler, author of *Spinoza: A Life*“Without imposing upon themselves or Spinoza a single definition of Judaism or 'Judeity,' the authors manage to refresh inquiry in three fields: the history of European thought, premodern Jewish intellectual history, and the scope of Jewish culture in postmodernity.” — Kalman P. Bland, author of *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*Contributors include Edwin M. Curley, Lenn E. Goodman, Warren Zev Harvey, Warren Montag, Richard H. Popkin, Heidi M. Ravven, Lee C. Rice, Michael A. Rosenthal, and Kenneth Seeskin.

Heidi M. Ravven is Professor of Religious Studies at Hamilton College. Lenn E. Goodman is Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of many books, including *Jewish and Islamic Philosophy: Crosspollinations in the Classic Age,* and the editor of *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought,* also from SUNY Press.

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