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Abstract

Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* pertains to matters of biblical interpretation as much as it does to political philosophy. In addition to laying the groundwork for a method of biblical interpretation in his seventh chapter, Spinoza engages in biblical exegesis throughout his work. Among the many portions of the Bible that he uses and discusses are the Psalms. An examination of Spinoza’s highly selective use of Psalms shows this use to be apologetical. Spinoza used the Psalms as part of his defense of his political philosophy, wherein he privatized religion, handing over public religious matters (such as ritual) into the hands of the secular state.
Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* is known primarily as a work of political philosophy, yet much of Spinoza’s text addresses matters of biblical exegesis. In fact, his entire seventh chapter is devoted to laying out a method for how to interpret the Bible scientifically.¹ In this article, I examine Spinoza’s use of the Book of Psalms in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, showing how the specific psalms that he selects function within his apologetic framework in defense of his political philosophy. In some instances, the psalms serve to naturalize what Jews and Christians traditionally considered the supernatural. In other places, Spinoza uses the psalms to support one or more aspects of his concept of God in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.² Particularly illuminating is Spinoza’s use of Psalm 40 in the fifth chapter of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, which pertains to the role religious ceremonies play in the Bible. Spinoza redeployed Psalm 40 to deemphasize the importance of external ritual. In doing this, Spinoza resembles certain strains of Protestant exegesis from the previous hundred years or more and the traditions of interpretation that they bequeathed. As we shall see, this use of Psalm 40 serves an important function within Spinoza’s overall political philosophy, wherein he asserts the authority of the state on all matters pertaining to the public realm, including religious ceremonies and rituals. Although Spinoza cites portions of the Pentateuch more frequently than the Psalms, of the seventy-four different sources that Spinoza explicitly cites throughout his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (see Tables 1 through 3), only six are cited more frequently than the Psalms, making the Psalms one of the most important sources on which Spinoza relies and the most important from among the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (see Table 1).³

¹ Unless otherwise mentioned, all citations to Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* are taken from Spinoza (2007). However, when the Latin text is being consulted, those citations and quotation are from the most recent critical edition (Spinoza 2012).
² This is as distinct from the way in which Spinoza describes God in his *Ethica*. Spinoza began his *Ethica* before writing *Tractatus theologico-politicus* but interrupted his work to publish the latter. After publishing *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Spinoza completed his *Ethica* but did not publish it. Although Spinoza’s discussions of God in *Tractatus theologico-politicus* are relatively easy to square with more traditional Jewish and Christian conceptions, his descriptions of God in *Ethica*, wherein God is collapsed into nature, are not.
³ Spinoza makes an explicit reference to Baruch, which seems to be a reference to the Book of Baruch, but it is possible that he is simply referencing Baruch as Jeremiah’s scribe and not referring to the actual text of Baruch, in which case Spinoza cites from only seventy-three different sources. With the exception of the Bible, whose authorship is highly contested, I am using sources to refer to authors (thus in some cases, Spinoza is relying on multiple works by the same author). With regard to biblical books, I count each book as a different source.