“Spinoza and the Theo-Political Implications of his Freedom to Philosophize.”

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The claim is often made that modern biblical criticism, at least in its historical critical form, is neutral and objective. Even when biblical scholars concede that an individual exegete may use the historical critical method in a biased way, they often make a clear distinction between the method, which they maintain is neutral, and the specific biased exegete. Consider Joseph Fitzmyer’s comments that ‘the historical-critical method is per se neutral’, and elsewhere that, despite the problem with how it has been used at times it remains ‘an otherwise neutral method’.

Joseph Ratzinger pointed out, however, that what often emerges in such reconstructions, wherein the Bible is dissected into hypothetical original fragments, is a new form of secular allegory. He writes that, ‘The dismemberment of the Bible has led to a new variety of allegorism: One no longer reads the text but the supposed experience of supposed communities. The result is often highly fanciful allegorical interpretation…’.

In fact, Ratzinger challenged the ostensible objectivity of modern biblical criticism in his justly famous 1988 Erasmus Lecture, ‘Biblical Interpretation in Conflict’.

In order to examine the theo-political implications of the framework of modern historical biblical criticism, I propose taking a look at Baruch Spinoza’s (1632-1677) programmatic method. The reason for turning to this seventeenth century figure is because of his significance in helping construct modern biblical criticism. His hermeneutic marks a turning point in the development of modern biblical criticism, and left its imprint on the method, in its various forms, through


the early years of the twenty-first century. One of the primary motivating factors for Spinoza’s method is the fear of religious violence. The idea of creating one objective method that anyone, regardless of religious affiliation, can use and arrive at the same conclusions, remains one of the guiding principles of modern historical biblical criticism.

In this article, I attempt to unmask the hidden agenda implicit in Spinoza’s methodology, which carries a sort of violence of its own. I begin with some comments concerning Spinoza’s milieu and what he identifies as the religious violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then I turn to a brief examination of Spinoza’s proposed hermeneutic, followed by situating Spinoza in the broader intellectual and historical context of the development of modern biblical criticism up to his time. Finally, I attempt to deconstruct the pretensions of neutrality of such methods. My argument is that historical criticism has not secured its desired goal of placing every exegete on equal footing, but rather privileges those scholars who are willing to privatize theological commitments within scholarship. It thus inhibits any forms of biblical interpretation that are unwilling to part from particular assumptions and commitments, other than those permitted by historical criticism’s own canons and dogmas.

Spinoza and the Concern Over Religious Violence

Early in his foundational work of modern political philosophy, Tractatus Theologico-politicus, Spinoza states his reason for writing. He is motivated by the perils of disparate theologies which he blames

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6 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are my own. All citations of Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-politicus will be taken from Spinoza, Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Tract théologico-politique, 2nd ed., ed. Pierre-François Moreau, text established by Fokke Akkerman, trans. and notes by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012). Citations will be to the page number and line of the Latin text.
for the violent conflagrations which engulfed Europe during their long sixteenth and seventeenth century 'wars of religion.' In his own words: 'this inconstancy [caused by religious superstition] has caused many disturbances and atrocious wars.' The extent of damage these conflicts caused is difficult for us to fathom. Michael Gillespie explains the severity of these wars in his insightful work, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, when he writes:

the Wars of Religion were conducted with a fervor and brutality that were not seen again until our own times. Indeed, the ferocity of the combatants may even have exceeded our own, for almost all the killing took place at close quarters, often in hand-to-hand combat, and thus without the emotionally insulating distance that modern technologies make possible.... During the Peasants Rebellion in the 1520s, over one hundred thousand German peasants and impoverished townspeople were slaughtered.... In 1572, seventy thousand French Huguenots were slaughtered in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.... Cromwell's model army sacked the Irish town of Drogheda in 1649, killing virtually everyone. They burned alive all those who had taken refuge in the St. Mary's Cathedral, butchered the women hiding in the vaults beneath it, used Irish children as human shields, hunted down and killed every priest, and sold the thirty surviving defenders into slavery.... By conservative estimates, the wars claimed the lives of 10 percent of the population in England, 15 percent in France, 30 percent in Germany, and more than 50 percent in Bohemia. By comparison, European dead in World War II exceeded 10 percent of the population only in Germany and the USSR. Within our experience only the Holocaust and the killing fields of Cambodia can begin to rival the levels of destruction that characterized the Wars of Religion.8

Spinoza was sixteen years old when the last of these conflicts, the Thirty Years' War, was brought to a close.

A bit closer to home, Spinoza was intimately aware of other more personal violence and severe punishments he could attribute to religious causes. The trial and arrest of his dear friend Adriaan Koerbagh (1632-1669), who languished in prison while Spinoza prepared his *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* for publication, was but a recent example for Spinoza. Although Koerbagh's actual punishment was less severe than the chief sheriff preferred, the sheriff made it quite clear what he thought should be the punishment: Koerbagh was to be dragged out in public, his right thumb was to be chopped off. After which an iron poker was to be heated and then, once heated, would

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7 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, p. 60.18-19.