Spinoza's Biblical Scholarship

The Issues

Historians of philosophy, analyzing Spinoza's conribution to biblical scholarship, have often focused on his denial that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. This is understandable, but unfortunate. In the 12th Century Maimonides had made it a fundamental principle of Judaism that the Pentateuch came to us from God through Moses, "who acted like a secretary taking dictation." To deny this, he thought, was to be either an atheist or a heretic of the worst kind. (Twersky 1972, 420-21) By the 17th Century, when doubt about this proposition was growing, Spinoza could still write that almost everyone believed Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch. (TTP VIII, 146) Even today conservative Christians still defend the Mosaic authorship, as part of their war against critical biblical scholarship. (Apologetics Press)

Though the issue is undoubtedly important, Spinoza was not the first to deny the Mosaic authorship, and preoccupation with this issue has led historians to devote much energy to finding precursors, sometimes seeming to deny Spinoza any claim to originality as a Biblical scholar. Not only did this deprive Spinoza of credit which was his due, it also distracted us from more important questions: if Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, who was? what about the other books of the Bible? does Spinoza challenge traditional views about their authorship also? on what grounds? More fundamentally: why do modern Biblical scholars often regard Spinoza as a seminal figure in the history of their discipline, and credit him with setting Biblical criticism on a productive, properly scientific course? And most important: what do his inquiries imply about the truth of the religions which hold these texts to be sacred?

The Question of Mosaic Authorship

Before taking up these questions, though, we must discuss the authorship of the Pentateuch. Spinoza did, of course, have precursors in denying that Moses wrote it. Some problems about the traditional theory were too obvious to escape notice. The last eight verses of Deuteronomy describe Moses's death. So the Talmud, a major source for the traditional view, says only that

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Moses wrote everything in the Pentateuch except those last few verses, which it assigns to Joshua instead. (Talmud 1935, Baba Bathra 15a) Luther adopted a variant of this view, ascribing the entire final chapter to either Joshua or Eleazar. (Luther 1960, 310)

These are quite conservative solutions, which attribute only a small portion of the text to another author, and attribute that portion to an author roughly contemporary with Moses, who might have been an eyewitness to many of the events reported, and could at least have heard accounts of them directly from Moses himself. Popkin, who wrote extensively on Spinoza's Biblical scholarship, had no trouble showing that in Spinoza's day many Christian commentators accepted such conservative solutions and did not think they presented any problem for believers. (Popkin 1996, 388)

But conservative solutions don't work. One of Spinoza's contributions to this discipline was to show that in a way most subsequent scholars found conclusive. (ABD 1992, VI, 618-9) Immediately after reporting the death of Moses, Deuteronomy describes his burial, commenting that "no one knows his burial place to this day." (Deut. 34:6) Four verses later it eulogizes him, saying "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses." This language clearly implies an author writing long after Moses's death. To assign it to a contemporary is anachronistic. Clues like this don't occur only in the last chapter of the Pentateuch; they're scattered throughout the text in a way which defies any simple theory of its composition. For example, in Gen. 12:6, the author, describing Abraham's passage through Canaan, writes: "the Canaanite was then in the land." Whoever wrote that verse was evidently writing when the Canaanites were *not* in the land. But that could not be Moses or any contemporary, like Joshua. In their days the Canaanites *were* in the land.

Those are problems of anachronism; there are also problems of point of view. Often 'Moses' speaks of himself in the first person (Deut: 2:2, "Then the LORD said to me..."); but he also often speaks of himself in the third person (Num. 12:3, "Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on... earth.") If Moses was the author, why does he go back and forth between the

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first person and the third? And how could a truly humble man say that he's the humblest man on earth? Yet on the theory of Mosaic authorship, that's precisely what Moses did.

Precursors

Popkin's favorite candidate for a precursor who anticipated Spinoza's arguments was Isaac La Peyrère, a 17th Century French Millenarian best known for claiming that there were men before Adam. Though Spinoza must have read La Peyrère, and though La Peyrère did question Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch on some of the same grounds Spinoza did, it's doubtful that he had any significant influence on Spinoza. Peyrère lacked what Spinoza thought was one essential qualification for serious Old Testament scholarship: a knowledge of the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written. And his arguments against the Mosaic authorship were much more limited than Spinoza's.

Spinoza himself credits the 12th Century Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra with having noted many of the problems about the supposed Mosaic authorship. (TTP VIII, 146) But Ibn Ezra only hinted at the problems. Spinoza thinks that's because he realized Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch, but didn't dare say so openly. (This would not be surprising, if Maimonides correctly reported 12th Century views about the essentials of Judaism.) Ibn Ezra's style is allusive; modern scholars still debate what he thought about the problems he raised. A recent translator writes that he "no doubt wanted to make his novel approach to the Pentateuch obscure to the uninformed and unintelligent," but that he was not "an anti-traditionalist in disguise," or "a forerunner of modern Biblical criticism." (Ibn Ezra 1988, I, xv, xx) Perhaps. But Spinoza clearly read Ibn Ezra as an 'anti-traditionalist.' And the use he makes of him at the beginning of Chapter VIII – spelling out the problems Ibn Ezra had raised in a veiled way, giving him credit for being the first to call attention to these problems, and adding numerous examples of his own – shows that Spinoza himself regarded Ibn Ezra as his true precursor. If we think Spinoza's doubts about Scripture must have begun long before his excommunication in 1656, probably as early as his teens (Wolf 1927, 42), long before he could have had any contact with La Peyrère, it would be hard to find a better candidate. This was Gebhardt's view. (V, 228-235)

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By mid-17th Century Spinoza had precursors who were offering quite radical solutions, and who were open about this. In *Leviathan* Hobbes came as close to Spinoza as anyone, arguing that whoever wrote the account of Moses's burial must have been writing "long after the death of Moses," pointing out that the anachronisms are not only in the last chapter of Deuteronomy, noting the references in the Pentateuch to earlier works, now lost, and contending that only a relatively small part of the Pentateuch can reasonably be ascribed to Moses, the "Volume of the Law" set out in Deut. 11-27. (Hobbes 1994, 252-53) La Peyrère, by contrast, seems to have thought that Moses wrote most of the Pentateuch. He has no doubt, for example, that Moses gave an accurate account of the exodus from Egypt and of the laws delivered at Mt. Sinai.

On these matters Spinoza seems unlikely to have been influenced by Hobbes either. *Leviathan* was not published in a language he could read until 1667, by which time the excommunication was long past, and he'd been at work on the TTP for two years. Moreover, Spinoza makes a much stronger case for these conclusions than Hobbes had. One way he does this is by offering many more examples of anachronism. The numbers matter, because the more anachronisms there are, the harder it is to devise conservative hypotheses to explain them. He also raises problems Hobbes had not mentioned, like the problem of point of view. (La Peyrère did not mention this either.) But he reaches roughly the same conclusion about how much of the Pentateuch Moses actually wrote: mainly "the book of the second covenant," which he identifies with Deut. 11-26, but also the song attributed to Moses in Deut. 32. (TTP VIII, 150-53) That makes Moses' contribution to the Pentateuch a rather small part of the whole, much less than the high percentage conservative commentators insisted on.

The Ezran Hypothesis

The most significant point on which Hobbes and Spinoza agree is that the Hebrew Bible, *in the form in which it has come down to us*, is largely the work of Ezra, a priest in the post-exilic period. The hypothesis that Ezra did much to shape the Hebrew Bible had been around for a long time. There's a wonderfully informative account of this history in Malcolm 2002. Both Hobbes

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For Hobbes the Ezran hypothesis is simply the thesis that *the entire Hebrew Bible*, in its final form, was "set forth" by Ezra. (Hobbes 1994, 255-56) He bases this on a passage in 2 Esdras in which the author, who presents himself as the post-exilic priest Ezra, petitions God to enable him to restore the scriptures, which are supposed to have been lost. This 'Ezra' claims to have said to God:

> Your law has been burned, and no one knows the things which have been done or will be done by you. If I have found favor with you, send the holy spirit into me, and I will write everything that has happened in the world from the beginning, the things that were written in your law, so that people may be able to find the path... (2 Esdras 14: 21-22)

2 Esdras is an odd text, and not a very credible one. Modern scholarship holds that it was written after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, several centuries after the death of the historical Ezra. (ABD 1992, VI, 612) If that's correct, the historical Ezra could not have been the author of 2 Esdras. Hence the scare quotes around 'Ezra,' in referring to the author of this work.

In the passage cited 'Ezra' reports that God granted his request, and that for forty days and forty nights, without stopping for food, drink, or rest, he dictated the scriptures to five amanuenses. The amanuenses got to stop for nourishment and sleep. This process yielded ninety-four books, of which twenty-four were to be published and seventy reserved for restricted circulation "among the wise."

It's hard to believe that Hobbes actually expects us to accept this tale. It assumes that we have our present Hebrew Bible only because of a miracle. All extant manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible must derive from copies made by Ezra's amanuenses, dictated by Ezra under divine inspiration, in a superhuman feat of endurance. Elsewhere in *Leviathan* Hobbes is skeptical about miracles, cautioning us that we're too easily deceived by false stories of miracles. (Hobbes 1994, 298-

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300) In this context he invites a more specific skepticism by reminding us that 2 Esdras does not have the sanction of 'the church,' which classifies that book as apocryphal, not canonical. Hobbes explains that what this means is that though the church does not think 2 Esdras has a well-grounded claim to inspired authorship, and so does not expect members of the church to accept what it says, it does think 2 Esdras is "profitable... for our instruction." As Malcolm has shown, Hobbes' theory of Ezra's authorship of the Hebrew Bible became a common feature of skeptical attacks on religion in the Enlightenment.

Spinoza's version of the Ezran hypothesis (TTP VIII, 155-58) is more limited, and based on an argument modern scholars might more easily regard as a serious contribution to their discipline. First, he doesn't claim that it holds for *every* book in the Hebrew Bible. He applies it only to the series of books beginning with the Pentateuch and extending through the next several books, to the end of 2 Kings, a sequence which purports to tell the history of the people of Israel from the creation down to the Babylonian Captivity. I follow Freedman 1994 in calling this sequence of texts 'the Primary History' of the people of Israel.

It's unclear how many books we should include in this Primary History. Spinoza thinks of himself as having argued for Ezra's authorship of twelve books. (TTP VIII, 158; IX, 160) He gets to that number by including the five books of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. But it's doubtful that he's entitled to include Ruth. He never really discusses its authorship, and it doesn't fit the pattern of the books he does discuss. Freedman doesn't count Ruth as part of his Primary History. So I'll count eleven books in the sequence, recognizing that Spinoza would say "twelve."

None of these books, Spinoza argues, could have been written by the author to whom tradition ascribed it. "Tradition" here means the account given in Tractate Baba Bathra of the Babylonian Talmud, 14b-15b. So not only did Moses not write the Pentateuch, Joshua did not write Joshua, Samuel did not write either the book of Judges or the books bearing his name, and Jeremiah did not write the books of Kings. In each case the reasons for denying these traditional ascriptions

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are similar to those we've already discussed, though Spinoza deals with them much more briefly.

All these books were 'written,' he thinks, by Ezra. What's the evidence for Ezra's authorship? And what does 'written' mean here? Spinoza's argument is essentially a literary one. First, if we pay careful attention to the way these books are written, we'll see that they had a single author, trying to tell a coherent story, the history of the Jews, beginning with their origin in the creation and ending with the first destruction of Jerusalem and their captivity in Babylon. (TTP VIII, 155-56) One sign of this is the way the books are linked together. As soon as the author has stopped narrating the life of Moses, he passes to the history of Joshua, using these words: "And it came to pass, after Moses, the servant of God, died, that God said to Joshua..." (Josh. 1:1) Similar transitional formulas are used to tie the other books together. What's more, the author evidently wants to tell his story in chronological order. And most crucially, there's a common theme to the narrative: the history of the Jewish people is the history of God's providential dealings with them. Moses promulgated laws, and made certain predictions about what God would do for (or to) the Jews, depending on whether or not they obeyed or disobeyed his laws. If they obeyed, he would see that they flourished. If they disobeyed, they would be punished. The subsequent history of the Jewish people is the story of how these predictions were fulfilled. When the Jews were obedient, they prospered. When they were disobedient, they did not. The author ignores things which don't contribute to his case for that perspective, or refers us to other historians for an account of them. (TTP VIII, 156) The failure of Ruth to contribute to this narrative is one reason for doubting that that book really belongs in the group Spinoza ascribes to Ezra.

So far we have an argument for a single author. But why Ezra? First, since the author carries the story into the period of the Babylonian Captivity – the last event the Primary History mentions is Jehoiachin's release from prison in the thirty-seventh year of the exile – if there was only one author, it can't be anyone earlier than that period. (TTP VIII, 156) Spinoza is apparently mistaken about Ezra's dates, taking him to have flourished in the time right after the return from Bab-

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ylon, in the second half of the 6th Century BCE. (TTP X, 175) Modern scholarship makes Ezra a contemporary of Artaxerxes I, who reigned in the mid-5th Century. (ABD II, 726-27) But whatever Ezra's dates were, the single-author theory, combined with the scope of the history recorded in these books, limits the candidates for its author to people who lived in the time of the captivity or later.

Second, Scripture describes Ezra as someone who zealously studied God's law, became skilled in it, honored it, and tried to teach it to the people of his time, amplifying it with explanations, to make it more intelligible to them. Ezra 7:1-10; Neh. 8:1-8. Spinoza can cite canonical scripture in favor of these propositions. He does not need to appeal to the Apocrypha. Given his caustic dismissal of 2 Esdras (also known as 4 Ezra) as containing "legends added by some trifler" (TTP X, 182), it seems unlikely that he would have wanted to. Furthermore, scripture does not mention anyone else in the post-exilic period who possessed all these qualifications: a zealous student of the law, who tried to explain it to the people, amplifying it as necessary. Spinoza does not advance his claim about Ezra's authorship of these books as something we can be certain of. He says he will assume that Ezra was their author "until someone establishes another writer with greater certainty." (TTP IX, 159) But if Ezra was not the author, Spinoza's arguments seem at least to make it probable that the author was someone like Ezra, particularly as regards the relatively late date at which he was writing. Perhaps that's enough for us to know.

What Ezra is Supposed to Have Done

What does Spinoza mean when he says that Ezra was the writer of these books? So far I've used the words "author" and "writer" as if they were synonyms. But Spinoza makes a distinction between the Latin terms I translate this way. When he's discussing Moses, he frames the question the way the literature typically does, as when he writes that "no one has any basis for saying that Moses was the author [*autor*] of the Pentateuch" and that it's completely contrary to reason to say that. (TTP VIII, 152) But when he's advancing his hypothesis about Ezra, he uses the term *scriptor*: Ezra was the *writer* of those books. (e.g., at TTP IX, 159) I take it that Spinoza uses *autor* to refer to someone who is the originator of a work, whereas *scriptor* is a more general

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term, which *might* refer to a work's originator, but might also refer to its editor. Spinoza really thinks of Ezra's role as more akin to that of an editor than to that of an author in the strict sense. He did not just make up the stories he told, as some polemicists against Judaism and Christianity inferred from 2 Esdras. (Malcolm 2002, 400-402) He had at his disposal manuscripts of the works of earlier historians, works now lost, which he collected and organized as best he could, sometimes adding material of his own to explain things which needed explanation and to make the overall story more coherent. (TTP VIII, 158; IX, 159)

It was not news that the writers of our present scriptures knew, and used, the works of earlier historians now lost. Our present scriptures sometimes mention these works, as when 1 Kings refers us to the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah for information about the life of Rehoboam, which the author of Kings chooses not to get into. (1 Kings 14:29) In *Leviathan* Hobbes had noted this. (Hobbes 1994, 254) So does La Peyrère. But neither Hobbes nor La Peyrère used this datum the way Spinoza does, to give us insight into the way Ezra worked when he constructed the Primary History. Given Hobbes' at least nominal acceptance of 2 Esdras, he could hardly have presented Ezra as having edited previously existing materials. La Peyrère never says anything about the Ezran hypothesis.

Spinoza does not give Ezra high marks as an editor. In TTP IX he writes that Ezra

> did not put the narratives contained in these books in final form, and did not do anything but collect the narratives from different writers, sometimes just copying them, and that he left them to posterity without having examined or ordered them. (TTP IX, 159)

What's most interesting about this passage is that in supporting his criticism of Ezra, Spinoza is led to discuss numerous passages in which the Hebrew Bible, as it has come down to us, contains inconsistencies. He takes this as evidence that however much Ezra may have wanted to tell a coherent story, he couldn't do so. Spinoza speculates that this was because he did not live long enough to complete the daunting project he had embarked on.

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Doublets

One important kind of evidence for this theory involves what modern scholars call 'doublets,' i.e., repetitions of similar passages, which differ in ways scholars take to show that the passages in which they occur originated in different sources. (Speiser 1964, xxxi-xxxiii) As an example Spinoza offers the different versions of David's entry into Saul's court in 1 Samuel. (TTP IX, 162) In one version David went to Saul because Saul had called him, on the advice of his servants, when he wanted a skillful musician to play the lyre for him. (1 Sam. 16: 17-21) In the other the initiator of the events was David's father, Jesse, who sent David to attend his brothers, soldiers in Saul's camp; David became known to Saul only when he asked questions which suggested a willingness to fight Goliath; he was taken into the court as a result of his victory in that battle. In the first story David is said to be a warrior, a man of valor. In the second, he's just a boy, who has no experience in battle. (1 Sam. 17: 17-8, 31-3, 38-9, 18:1-2) Inconsistencies of this sort occur, Spinoza says, because the editor has collected stories from different historians, "piling them up indiscriminately, so that afterwards they might be more easily examined and reduced to order." (TTP IX, 161-62)

Sometimes the 'doublets' get a different treatment. Notoriously, there are two different versions of the Decalogue. This fact evidently made an early and deep impression on Spinoza. He first brings the issue up in TTP I, where he writes:

> In the opinion of certain Jews, God did not utter the words of the Decalogue. They think, rather, that the Israelites only heard a sound, which did not utter any words, and that while this sound lasted, they perceived the Laws of the Decalogue with a pure mind. At one time I too was inclined to think this, because I saw that the words of the Decalogue in Exodus are not the same as those of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy. Since God spoke only once, it seems to follow from this [variation] that the Decalogue does not intend to teach God's very words, but only their meaning. (TTP I, 17-18)

Spinoza does not say here what the differences between the two versions were, and proceeds to give reasons for rejecting his earlier opinion. But the problem had apparently bothered him

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