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2010

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The Early Modern Political Context to Spinoza's Bible Criticism

El contexto político de la modernidad temprana
de la crítica bíblica de Spinoza

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Abstract

The early modern political philosopher Benedict de Spinoza is often viewed as the father of the historical critical method for studying the Bible. Building upon the work of contemporaries, Spinoza constructed the methodological foundation upon which later historical criticism would build. This paper examines the political background of Spinoza's biblical criticism, thereby placing Spinoza's work in its socio-historical context. The Thirty Years' War and the political turmoil in the Dutch Republic provide the proximate backdrop for Spinoza's political theory, and upon his biblical criticism.

Key words: Spinoza, Historical Criticism, Politics, Bible.

Resumen

El filósofo político de la Temprana Edad Moderna, Benedicto Spinoza, es a menudo visto como el padre del método crítico histórico para el estudio de la Biblia. A partir del trabajo de contemporáneos, Spinoza construyó el fundamento metodológico sobre el cual más tarde levantaría la crítica histórica. En este trabajo se examina el trasfondo político de la crítica bíblica de Spinoza, colocando así la obra de Spinoza en su contexto socio-histórico. La Guerra de los Treinta Años y la agitación política en la República holandesa proveen el trasfondo próximo de la teoría política de Spinoza y de su crítica bíblica.

Palabras clave: Spinoza, crítica histórica, política, Biblia.

Over the past several decades, it has become more commonplace to see Benedict de Spinoza listed among the pioneers of the modern historical critical method for interpreting the Bible.¹ Although studies of Spinoza and his background abound, I will attempt another look at Spinoza's methodological program by situating it within the social, historical, and political context of seventeenth century Europe.² I will proceed in four parts. First I will note Spinoza's rationale for his historical biblical hermeneutic, namely as an agent of peace in a turbulent society torn apart by religious strife. Then I will describe what I think are some of his personal reasons for his historical critique, partially as a form of revenge on the Jewish community that ostracized him. Next I will describe Spinoza's program, and how he hoped to cripple traditional theological interpretations. Finally, I will attempt to provide the broader social and political context of the time to show how Spinoza's method was at the service of modern centralized states over and against traditional theological communities. Ultimately, these parts illustrate that far from emerging as the result of some act of pure rationality, Spinoza's biblical criticism was from the beginning a political tool in the service of emerging European states.

The ideal of the historical critical method is an attempt to understand the real history behind the biblical texts; historical criticism is a hermeneutic whose goal is to discover "what really happened." Historical criticism

- 1 James Barr, "Interpretation, History of: Modern Biblical Criticism," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 322; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2; John H. Hayes, "The History of the Study of Israelite and Judaeon History," in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (London: SCM Press, 1977), 45; and Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 328.
- 2 An exhaustive list of major studies on Spinoza would require a book in itself, but a sample of some important studies dealing with his biblical criticism, from which I have benefitted greatly, include the following: Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity Volume I: Hermeneutics and Ontology and Volume II: Politics and Ethics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007); Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sylvain Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965); and C. Siegfried, *Spinoza: als Kritiker und Ausleger des Alten Testaments* (Naumburg: Druck von Heinrich Sieling, 1867).