

Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible



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Studies tracing the rise of historical criticism of the Bible often consider Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677) the progenitor of this approach, presenting him as a quintessentially modern, rationalist thinker who developed a philological-historical method to interpret biblical texts. According to this line of thought, Spinoza cleared a path for the Enlightenment, supplying ammunition for attacks against religious belief, the Christian church, and the Bible. Frampton argues that this view, if left unqualified, is too monogenetic, for it regards modern historical criticism as the brainchild of an irreligious, rationalist philosopher who had been expelled from his religious community for unorthodoxy. Frampton reassesses Spinoza's relationship to higher criticism by drawing attention to the emergence of historical-critical investigations of the Bible from among heterodox Protestants during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He examines the theological-political context of the Netherlands during this

period to reveal the extent to which the seventeenth century was still mired in the hermeneutical uncertainties of the preceding century. Frampton demonstrates that radical, innovative, rational critiques of scripture circulated in many heterodox Christian writings decades before Spinoza incorporated them into his "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus". Frampton argues that Spinoza's "Tractatus" was in part a response to Calvinism and to Protestant debates over biblical hermeneutics. He also proposes that several rational arguments commonly accepted today by historical critics emerged from within sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant reformations rather than from within the Enlightenment. The author's description runs counter to what is commonly proposed in current discussions carried on in the fields of religious studies, history of philosophy, intellectual history, and philosophy.

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