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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hebrew Grammar as Potential Corrosive Tool of Modernity: The Case of Spinoza's Unfinished *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*

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Abstract

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was an important early modern thinker. Spinoza came from the Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam. After his ban from the Jewish community Spinoza emerged as a towering figure in the Radical Enlightenment. His famous work in political philosophy, *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), was instrumental in the development of modern biblical criticism. Among his least known works, however, was Spinoza's incomplete Hebrew grammar. Spinoza intended his Hebrew grammar, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, as a practical guide to help his friends learn the Hebrew language so that they could better understand the Bible in Hebrew. This article argues, however, that Spinoza had another intention for this grammar. Spinoza's grammar was more than just a guide to learning the Hebrew language. Spinoza intended his grammar to be another corrosive tool of modernity, another means of destabilizing trust in the Bible by highlighting what he understood to be the corrupt nature of the Hebrew language and the inescapable impossibility of sufficiently learning the original Hebrew of biblical times, which he maintained was a necessary first step in understanding the Bible. His *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* was thus intended as another tool to foster skepticism of the Bible and of traditions of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation.

Keywords: Spinoza; modern biblical criticism; Hebrew grammar; modernity; biblical hermeneutics.

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1. Introduction

Spinoza has long taken his place among the most significant Enlightenment figures numbered among the architects of modernity, the intellectual and very real landscape we occupy.¹ At first, both Spinoza's apologists and his detractors placed him in this prominent role. More recently, Jonathan Israel's work has confirmed Spinoza's very important position throughout segments of the various Enlightenments, particularly the Radical Enlightenment, that transformed Europe and European colonies.² Much has been written on the transformation of the Bible in modernity, from theologically Sacred Scripture to a desacralized book.³ Spinoza's 1670 *Tractatus theologico-politicus*⁴ has justly been identified as a key early text inspiring this transformation of the Bible and of biblical interpretation. Most of the credit, in this regard, has been given either to the philosophical underpinnings of Spinoza's method, rooted in Descartes or Francis Bacon, or in Spinoza's use history as a method for interpreting the Bible. Jon Levenson asserted, for example, "History supplied Spinoza with the coffin into which he placed the Torah."⁵

¹ I understand that we currently live in a postmodern age, nonetheless, commonalities remain between modernity and postmodernity, both of which have been shaped by a common past in which Spinoza was a key player. See, e.g., Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Harvard University Press, 2012). I also recognize the Enlightenments which emerged in Europe were far from monolithic; we may even speak of a "Catholic Enlightenment." See Ulrich L. Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

² See, e.g., Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford University Press, 2006); and Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ E.g., Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2005). There are of course theological components to this transformation. See, e.g., Michael C. Legaspi, "From Thomasius to Semler: History, Civil Philosophy, and Theology in the German Enlightenment," in *Theology, History, and the Modern German University*, ed. Kevin M. Vander Schel and Michael P. DeJonge, 11-26 (Mohr Siebeck, 2021). Furthermore, there are likewise "theological origins of modernity." See, e.g., Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). And, of course, for many people today, as in generations past, Scripture remains a theological source.

⁴ All references to the Latin text of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in this article will be taken from Spinoza, *Œuvres III: Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Traité théologico-politique*, 2nd ed., ed. Pierre-François Moreau, text established by Fokke Akkerman, trans. and notes by Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau (Presses universitaires de France, 2012). Unless otherwise mentioned, all English translations will be taken from Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza Volume II*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton University Press, 2016). When I quote or cite Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in this article, the first reference will be to the critical Latin text, chapter number, paragraph number (as Akkerman divides the text), page numbers to the Moreau and Akkerman critical edition, followed by the page number to Curley's English translation (ET) in parentheses when relevant.

⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 95.

What remains understudied, however, is the role of Spinoza's view of the Hebrew language itself, and of Hebrew grammar as part and parcel of his modern project, something which was already at work in Spinoza's much-studied *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Recently, in his masterful and voluminous scholarly biography of Spinoza, Jonathan Israel points out that:

one finds no more subversive feature of his transformation of Bible criticism than his insistence that without analyzing the grammar, and using grammar to reconstruct the complex language "history" of biblical terms and concepts, including the New Testament's Semitic language pre-history, there is scant chance of understanding the Bible correctly.⁶

It is often forgotten that Spinoza actually wrote a grammar of the Hebrew language, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*,⁷ although he never completed his work on it. Spinoza provided clues in his grammar that help the reader dethrone Scripture from its sacred pedestal. His grammar thus was intended to form an integral part of his overall modernizing project of creating a method for biblical interpretation that would destabilize and eventually overthrow the Bible's authority. It is Spinoza's Hebrew grammar, his *Compendium*, and its place within his biblical critical project that this article seeks to explore.

2. Spinoza's Biblical Criticism and Significance for Modernity

Spinoza's place within the history of the development of the historical critical method can be overemphasized, especially considering how different modern sophisticated approaches are in

⁶ Jonathan I. Israel, *Spinoza, Life and Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 689.

⁷ At present, no contemporary critical edition of Spinoza's *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* exists. It appears that, under the direction of Pierre Moreau, the Presses universitaires de France will be publishing a modern critical edition at some point in the future, as they have for his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. This will be a tremendous scholarly boon. All references to the Latin text of Spinoza's *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* in this article will be taken from Spinoza, *Opera I*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Carl Winters, 1925), 283-403. Unless otherwise mentioned, all English translation will be taken from Spinoza, *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Hackett, 2002), 584-675. In some instances, I will note where I modify Shirley's English translation. Occasionally I will reference the 2005 Spanish translation or the 2013 Italian translation, which editions are, in my opinion, the most important modern editions to date: Baruj Spinoza, *Compendio de gramática de la lengua hebrea*, trans. Guadalupe González Diéguez (Trotta, 2005); and Baruch Spinoza, *Compendio di Grammatica della Lingua Ebraica*, trans. Massimo Gargiulo (Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2025 [2013]). When I quote or cite Spinoza's grammar in this article, the first reference will be to the Latin text, chapter number, page number to Spinoza's text, line number, page number in Gebhardt's edition, followed by the page number to Shirley's English translation (ET) in parentheses. Occasionally I will reference the Spanish edition (SP) or the Italian edition (IT) including page numbers in parentheses.

comparison to Spinoza's more general exegetical comments. Spinoza's importance, however, was so underacknowledged for so long, that it is perhaps understandable why contemporary scholars might overemphasize his significance within this history. Spinoza did not construct elaborate compositional theories, nor did he apply specific historical critical strategies to draw the sort of concrete literary, exegetical, or historical conclusions that would emerge in the nineteenth century. Moreover, many of the conclusions he reached, concerning the origin of various biblical books, and hypothetical histories behind the biblical texts, had already been written about by others, some of whose books found a space on the shelves of Spinoza's personal library. For instance, that Ezra not Moses was the compiler of the Pentateuch, in an age long after the recorded events of the Pentateuch took place, was a well-known hypothesis in intellectual circles.⁸ Spinoza's real significance, however, lies in the thorough construction of a method for interpreting the Bible in a "scientific" way, along the lines of the then-developing discipline of "natural history."⁹

Spinoza's method was as thoroughgoing as could be imagined. We could isolate twenty-two rules, as it were, which he explains, though he did not himself number them:

- (1) a natural history of the Bible must be constructed.¹⁰
- (2) such history must utilize Scripture alone.¹¹
- (3) the construction of this history must proceed step-by-step through several successive stages.¹²

⁸ Examples include: Aphonsi Tostati Hispani [Alfonso Tostado de Madrigal], *Opera omnia, quotquot in Scripturae sacrae expositionem & alia, adhuc extare inuenta sunt. Commentaria in Deuteronomium mendis nunc sanè quàm plurimis diligenter expurgate. Cum Indice copiosissimo* (Venice: apud Io. Baptistam & Io. Bernardum Sessam, fratres, 1596), e.g., 184; Andrea Masio [Andreas Masius], *Iosuae imperatoris historia illustrata atque explicata* (Antwerp: Ex Officina Christophori Plantini, 1574), e.g., 119 and 301; Iacobo Bonfrerio [Jacques Bonfrère], *Pentateuchos Moysis commentario illustratus; praemissis, quae ad totius Scripturae intelligentiam manuducant, praeloquiis pertuilibus* (Antwerp: Ex Officina Plantiniana, apud Balthasarem Moretum, et viduam Ioannis Moreti, et Io. Meursium, 1625), e.g., 1062; and Isaac La Peyrère, *Systema theologicum*, book 4, chapter 1 in the critical edition (Latin text with German translation), Isaac La Peyrère, *Praeadamitae – Systema theologicum* (1655), ed. Herbert Jaumann and Reimund B. Szdziej (Frommann-Holzboog, 2019), 536-549. See the helpful discussion in Jean Bernier, *La critique du Pentateuque de Hobbes à Calmet* (Honoré Champion, 2010), esp. 23-25, 132-134, and 144-145; and Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Clarendon Press, 2002), 383-431, especially the chart on 412. On La Peyrère see especially Jeffrey L. Morrow, "French Apocalyptic Messianism: Isaac La Peyrère and Political Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 27, no. 2 (2011): 203-213.

⁹ See, e.g., Anthony Grafton, "Spinoza's Hermeneutics: Some Heretical Thoughts," in *Scriptural Authority and Biblical Criticism in the Dutch Golden Age: God's Word Questioned*, ed. Dirk Van Miert, Henk Nellen, Piet Steenbakkers, and Jetze Touber, 177-196 (Oxford University Press, 2017), esp. 180, 187, 189, and 194; and J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 11, 16-17, 22, 32-33, 124-131, and 156-166.

¹⁰ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 2, 278-281.

¹¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 2-5, 280-283.

¹² Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 282-283.

- (4) all aspects of the original languages (mostly Hebrew) that were spoken by the authors of the biblical books must be understood.¹³
- (5) every possible meaning of each phrase must be thoroughly investigated.¹⁴
- (6) the teachings in each book must be organized by subject to create a clear pool of data based on biblical subjects treated.¹⁵
- (7) all possible ambiguities, difficult passages, or apparent contradictions must be noted.¹⁶
- (8) the historical contexts and circumstances of each biblical book must be clearly explained.¹⁷
- (9) the biography of each author of the various biblical texts must be investigated.¹⁸
- (10) all aspects of the character of each biblical book's author must be thoroughly investigated.¹⁹
- (11) all of the interests of the authors of the various biblical books must be investigated.²⁰
- (12) one must discover who was the real author of each individual book, even when the books are anonymous.²¹
- (13) one must discover the reason each other wrote their book and what the historical circumstances were.²²
- (14) one must discover the original intended audience for each biblical book.²³
- (15) one must discover the original language in which each biblical book was first written.²⁴
- (16) each biblical book's reception and later history must be thoroughly investigated.²⁵
- (17) one must discover how each book was initially received by its audience.²⁶

¹³ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 282-283.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 282-283.

¹⁵ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 282-283.

¹⁶ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 284-285.

¹⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

¹⁸ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²⁰ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²² Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²³ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²⁴ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²⁵ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²⁶ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

- (18) one must also discover who first received each book.²⁷
- (19) all the variant readings in the manuscript tradition must be investigated.²⁸
- (20) it must be determined who made the decisions that acknowledged these books as sacred.²⁹
- (21) the canonization process of Scripture must be thoroughly investigated.³⁰
- (22) this entire process must be completed in order to construct a history of Scripture, which must be prior to any theological interpretation.³¹

It is this last rule that makes Spinoza's method so unique.³² David Dungan clarifies the import of his method: "Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground."³³

In his proposed historical and linguistic biblical method, Spinoza followed Bacon more than he did Descartes.³⁴ The basic outlines of Spinoza's method, which he detailed in the seventh chapter of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, remained the overarching method biblical scholars would follow up to the present. The finely detailed works in later source-, form-, and redaction-criticism built upon the methodological structure Spinoza laid down. That Spinoza's work became so notorious, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* derided as "a book forged in hell,"³⁵ aided the survival of his method. Within less than a decade, Richard Simon's ostensible response to Spinoza,

²⁷ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²⁸ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

²⁹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

³⁰ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

³¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 286-287.

³² For Spinoza's biblical hermeneutic in its historical and political context, see, e.g., Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Pretensions of Objectivity: Toward a Criticism of Biblical Criticism* (Pickwick, 2019), 48-54; Jetze Touber, *Spinoza and Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1660-1710* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 5-74; Jeffrey L. Morrow, "Spinoza and the Theo-Political Implications of his Freedom to Philosophize," *New Blackfriars* 99 (2018): 374-387; Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Theology, Politics, and Exegesis: Essays on the History of Modern Biblical Criticism* (Pickwick, 2017), 16-34; Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Three Skeptics and the Bible: La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism* (Pickwick, 2016), 104-138; and Scott W. Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700* (Crossroad, 2013), 339-393.

³³ David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (Yale University Press, 1999), 172.

³⁴ On Spinoza's unacknowledged use of Bacon see especially Jeffrey L. Morrow, "Methods of Interpreting Scripture and Nature: The Influence of the Baconian Method on Spinoza's Biblical Criticism," in *Studies in the History of Exegesis*, ed. Mark W. Elliott, Raleigh C. Heth, and Angela Zautcke, 157-173 (Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

³⁵ Taken from the title of Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton University Press, 2011), which is a marvelous study of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Nadler took his title from one early critic of Spinoza's work, which Nadler leaves unattributed (xi).

Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*,³⁶ would in some ways further Spinoza's project.³⁷ Spinoza's works were translated widely even as they were vilified, ensuring a productive future to his thought. Spinoza's unfinished Hebrew grammar, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, was intended to form a part of his revolution in biblical interpretation, even though it would not gain as wide an audience as his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, and thus would have little effect upon the future of biblical scholarship.

Spinoza's biblical scholarship would prove to be an important part of early modernity and of the secularization that would ensue.³⁸ Even the notion of the "secular" as distinct from the "religious," which became a hallmark of modernity, is in some ways indebted to Spinoza, among other early modern political thinkers.³⁹ Perhaps no one has drawn attention to how significant and influential Spinoza's thought was to the radical Enlightenment as Jonathan Israel.⁴⁰ Israel has demonstrated how significant Spinoza's thoughts and arguments were in virtually all areas of debate throughout the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries across Europe. It was not merely

³⁶ For a critical edition see Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament suivi de Lettre sur l'inspiration*, ed. Pierre Gibert (Bayard, 2008).

³⁷ For the ways in which Simon built upon and furthered Spinoza's work see especially the dated but important studies of F. Saverio Mirri, *Richard Simon e il metodo storico-critico di B. Spinoza. Storia di un libro e di una polemica sulla sfondo delle lotte politico-religiose della Francia di Luigi XIV* (Felice Le Monnier, 1972); and Paul Auvray, "Richard Simon et Spinoza," in *Religion, érudition et critique à la fin du XVIIe siècle et au début du XVIIIe*, ed. Baudouin de Gaiffier, Bruno Neveu, René Voeltzel, Elisabeth Labrousse, et al., 201-214 (Presses universitaires de France, 1968).

³⁸ For Spinoza's important place within the history of modern biblical criticism see especially Scott W. Hahn and Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Modern Biblical Criticism as a Tool of Statecraft (1700-1900)* (Emmaus Academic, 2020), esp. 15-16, but also the entire volume for how his work was built upon. For his pivotal place within the history of specifically Pentateuchal source criticism see especially John S. Bergsma and Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Murmuring Against Moses: The Contentious History and Contested Future of Pentateuchal Studies* (Emmaus Academic, 2023), esp. 216-223.

³⁹ For a brief history of these developments see, e.g., Jeffrey L. Morrow, "Religion and the Secular State: Loisy's Use of 'Religion' Prior to His Excommunication," in *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion: Literary, Historical, and Religious Studies in Dialogue*, ed. Joshua King and Winter Jade Werner, 25-45 (Ohio State University Press, 2019), 26-31; and Jeffrey L. Morrow, "Secularization, Objectivity, and Enlightenment Scholarship: The Theological and Political Origins of Modern Biblical Studies," *Logos* 18, no. 1 (2015): 14-32. For the creation of "world religions" as a modern category in this context, see especially Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). For the religious/secular (and especially church/state) dichotomy as anachronistic before the modern period, see especially Andrew Willard Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (Emmaus Academic, 2017). For Spinoza's acknowledged place within these early modern political debates see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 57-180, esp. 124-131, which builds upon his earlier study, William T. Cavanaugh, "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (1995): 397-420.

⁴⁰ See especially Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*; and Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*.

Spinoza's philosophical inquiries that proved so important and influential, but his biblical and political work as well.

When John Milbank published his controversial *Theology and Social Theory* in 1990, Milbank wrote that, "It was therefore necessary for the new political science to 'capture' . . . the text of the Bible: to produce a new Biblical hermeneutic."⁴¹ Milbank wrote that Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* were as much about political philosophy as they were biblical interpretation.⁴² This may have seemed novel to Milbank's primary intended audience, but the melding of early modern political theory with biblical hermeneutics was ubiquitous in Spinoza's day and before. In the early modern period, to write about politics it was necessary to engage the Bible, in some shape or form. It has become increasingly recognized by scholars just how inextricably bound to biblical interpretation was early modern political philosophy, and such biblical engagement almost always included sources from the rich Jewish exegetical tradition of the early rabbinic and medieval periods.⁴³

Just over two decades after Milbank first published his work, Brad Gregroy drew attention to some of the same trends Milbank had noticed and highlighted the prominent place Spinoza, among other thinkers, occupied within this history of modernity and secularization.⁴⁴ Spinoza contributed to what Michael Legaspi has called the development of the "academic Bible," which Legaspi contrasts with the "scriptural Bible."⁴⁵ What Spinoza did was create a space for the Bible to be read and studied apart from any theological moorings.⁴⁶ Spinoza, of course, had many precursors, and, moreover, the work he began would be carried on by countless others throughout

⁴¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2006 [1990]), 19.

⁴² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 19. The work of Anthropologist Talal Asad has also been helpful in underscoring some of the shifts that took place from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in the interpretation of the Bible and how these changes participated in the emerging secular modernity, although he does not specifically address Spinoza. See especially Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 40-43 and 60-62; and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 37-45.

⁴³ See, e.g., Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010); and Gordon Schochet, Fania Oz-Salzberger, and Meirav Jones, ed., *Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought* (Shalem Press, 2008), which includes an essay on Spinoza, Menachem Lorberbaum, "Spinoza's Theological-Political Problem," 167-188.

⁴⁴ Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, esp. 345. Several of these works are important in highlighting theological and religious roots of modernity: Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*; Nelson, *Hebrew Republic*; and Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*. To this list should be added Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ Legaspi, *Death of Scripture*, vii-x. Legaspi's volume focuses on the later figure Johann David Michaelis.

⁴⁶ For how this would play out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Hahn and Morrow, *Modern Biblical Criticism*.

the later seventeenth century, through the eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

3. Spinoza's *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*

It is uncertain when Spinoza began work on his *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*; though it was likely Spinoza's penultimate work.⁴⁷ We do not know with certainty Spinoza's reasons for putting pen to paper when he composed his *Compendium*. His followers, those responsible for its survival and posthumous publication, argued it was to help his friends and create a Hebrew grammar along the lines of Spinoza's geometric philosophical method. It does seem clear that Spinoza did in fact write his grammar to help his friends learn Hebrew, to enable them better to understand the Bible. Spinoza's hope, it would seem, was to facilitate their biblical interpretation along more academically rigorous lines.⁴⁸ Spinoza had many Hebrew grammars at his disposal, both in his own library and also beyond his personal collection, considering the widespread availability of Hebrew grammars in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic. There was an embarrassment of riches in terms of both Jewish and Christian Hebrew grammars throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁹ The world of Judaism in particular

⁴⁷ See Israel, *Spinoza*, 1075; and Omero Proietti, "Il «Satyricon» di Petronio e la datazione della «Grammatica ebraica» spinoziana," *Studia Spinozana* 5 (1989): 253-274. For important background information on Spinoza's *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* see especially Israel, *Spinoza*, 1075-1083; Jean Baumgarten, Irène Rosier-Catach, and Pina Totaro, "Spinoza, grammaire et philosophie. Le *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*," in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammarien. Le Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, ed. Jean Baumgarten, Irène Rosier-Catach, and Pina Totaro, 7-15 (CNRS Éditions, 2019); and Pina Totaro, "Introduzione. Spinoza, il *Tractatus theologico-politicus* e il *Compendium grammatices linguae Hebraeae*," in *Compendio di Grammatica*, Spinoza, 1-32.

⁴⁸ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1076-1077; Guadalupe González Diéguez, "Spinoza and the Grammar of the Hebrew Language," in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed, 483-491 (Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 484; Guadalupe González Diéguez, introducción to *Compendio de gramática de la lengua hebrea*, by Baruj Spinoza, trans. Guadalupe González Diéguez, 7-54 (Trotta, 2005), 14; and A.J. Klijnsmit, "Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens: The Application of *Analogia* in Hebrew Grammar," *Helmántica* 51 (2000): 139-166, at 147. A number of scholars have argued that Spinoza's *Compendium* is shaped by his philosophy, and particularly his geometric method, arguing deductively. One of the most recent and robust arguments along these lines is Homero Santiago, "O *Compêndio de Gramática Hebraica* de Espinosa é uma obra *more geometrico demonstrare*?" *Trans/Form/Ação* 36, no. 2 (2013): 23-44.

⁴⁹ Irene Zwiep, "Ceci n'est pas une grammaire: Le *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* de Spinoza," in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammarien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 161-184, at 161; González Diéguez, "Spinoza and the Grammar of the Hebrew Language," 485 and 488; Omero Proietti, "Johannes Buxtorf, Spinoza e la sintassi dell'ebraico," *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Macerata* 42-43 (2009-2010): 33-55; Klijnsmit, "Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens," 147 and 151-152; Anthony J. Klijnsmit, "Spinoza and the Grammarians of the Bible," in *The History of Linguistics in the Low Countries*, ed. Jan Noordegraaf, Kees Versteegh, E.F.K. Koerner, 155-200 (John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1992); and Anthony J.

evidenced a longstanding tradition of producing Hebrew grammars,⁵⁰ and this was even the case among Spinoza's own contemporary Sephardic Jewish grammarians in the Dutch Republic.⁵¹ Among Jewish Hebraists examples included David Qimhi's *Sefer Mikhlol*⁵² and Abraham de Balmes's *Miqneh Avram*.⁵³ Among Christian Hebraists, the most important for Spinoza was clearly Johannes Buxtorf and his *Thesaurus grammaticus linguae sanctae hebraeae*.⁵⁴

Beyond Jewish Hebrew grammars, there had been an increasing tradition of Hebrew grammars among Christian Hebraists throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁵ As much as Spinoza explicitly criticized the prior work of Christian Hebraists—especially, Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629)—in regard to their Hebrew grammars, it was precisely this Hebrew grammatical tradition, and Buxtorf in particular, to which Spinoza's own grammar seems to have been most indebted.⁵⁶ Spinoza's heavy reliance upon Buxtorf is especially

Klijnsmit, "Amsterdam Sephardim and Hebrew Grammar in the Seventeenth Century," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 22, no. 2 (1988): 144-164.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, "The Science of Language among Medieval Jews," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal, 359-424 (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵¹ Klijnsmit, "Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens," 151-152.

⁵² David Qimhi, *Sefer Mikhlol* (Venice: Daniel Bomberg, 1545) [in Hebrew] was originally written in the 12th century, but it was published in several editions in the 16th century. It was also published in several Latin translations, including David Kimhi, *Liber Michlol grammatices linguae sanctae* (Paris: Collegio Italorum, 1540). On the possible influence of David Qimhi's grammar on Spinoza see Judith Kogel, "Spinoza, lecteur de David Qimhi?" in *Spinoza, philosophe grammairien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 91-103.

⁵³ Abraham de Balmis [Abraham de Balmes], *Peculium Abrae: Grammatica hebraea una cum latino [Miqneh Avram]* (Venice: Danielis Bombergi, 1523). On the possibility of the influence of Abraham de Balmes on Spinoza's grammar see Saverio Campanini, "Le *Peculium Abrae* d'Abraham de Balmes et la question des sources du *Compendium*," in *Spinoza, philosophe grammairien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 105-126.

⁵⁴ Johannis Buxtorfi [Johannes Buxtorf], *Thesaurus grammaticus linguae sanctae hebraeae duobus libris methodicè propositus quorum prior vocum singularum naturam & proprietates, alter vocum conjunctarum rationem & elegantiam universam, accuratissimè explicat* (Bale: Conradi Waldkirchi, 1609).

⁵⁵ On Christian Hebraism see, e.g., Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg, *Johann Buxtorf, Impresario of Hebrew and Jewish Books* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2025); Anthony Grafton, "Christian Hebraism and the Rediscovery of Hellenistic Judaism," in *Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of David B. Ruderman*, ed. Richard I. Cohen, Natalie B. Dohrmann, Adam Shear, and Elchanan Reiner, 169-180 (Hebrew Union College and University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014); Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning* (Brill, 2012); Allison Coudert and Jeffrey Shoulson, ed., *Hebraica Veritas?: Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Sophie Kessler-Mesguish, "L'hébreu chez les hébraïsants chrétiens des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles," *Histoire Épistémologie, Langage* 18, no. 1 (1996): 87-108, at 87-89; and Stephen Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish Studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629) and Hebrew Learning in the Seventeenth Century* (Brill, 1996).

⁵⁶ González Diéguez, "Spinoza and the Grammar of the Hebrew Language," 485 and 488; Omero Proietti, "Emendazioni alla Grammatica Ebraica Spinoziana," *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 65, no. 1 (2010): 25-56, at 32; and Proietti, "Johannes Buxtorf," 34. Giovanni Licata goes so far as to write, "We can in effect consider the *Thesaurus* of Johannes Buxtorf as the subtext of Spinoza's grammar." See Giovanni Licata, "La Nature de la langue hébraïque chez Spinoza," in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammaire*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 47-62, at 50 (English translation is my own). You can see examples of Buxtorf's influence by comparing his *Thesaurus grammaticus linguae sanctae hebraeae* to Spinoza's *Compendium*, e.g., Buxtorfi, *Thesaurus grammaticus linguae*

interesting in light of the presence of many Jewish Hebrew grammars preserved in Spinoza's private library.⁵⁷ Moreover, Jacques Rozenberg has argued persuasively that, in general, the tradition of Latin grammar exercised a great deal of influence on Spinoza's treatment of the grammar of the Hebrew language.⁵⁸

Spinoza had learned Hebrew as a child. He was educated in the famous Etz Hayyim school in the Talmud Torah Sephardic synagogue community in Amsterdam. Although many scholars assume the famous Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657) taught Spinoza Hebrew⁵⁹—Menasseh did

sanctae hebraeae, 1 is similar to Spinoza's discussion in chapter 4 of his *Compendium*, and 94 is similar to Spinoza's use of the Latin grammatical idea of the infinitive in chapter 5 of his *Compendium*. Spinoza had a 1629 edition of Buxtorf's *Thesaurus* in his library.

⁵⁷ González Diéguez, "Spinoza and the Grammar of the Hebrew Language," 485 and 488. On Spinoza's library, see J. Freudenthal, ed., *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's: In Quellschriften, Urkunden und nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* (Veit, 1899); and A. J. Servaas van Rooijen, *Inventaire des livres formant la bibliothèque de Bénédict Spinoza. Publié d'après un document inédit, avec des notes bibliographiques et une introduction* (Tengeler and Monnerat, 1888). See, however, Adri K. Offenbergh, "Spinoza's Library: The Story of a Reconstruction," *Quaerendo* 3, no. 4 (1973): 309-321, at 309, who points out that the Freudenthal edition is more reliable than Van Rooijen's. For a look at potential Jewish sources for Spinoza's grammar see Jean Baumgarten, "De quelques possibles sources juives du *Compendium* de Spinoza," in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammarien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 127-157. Spinoza's library indicates that he held several sources of relevance here, in addition to Buxtorf's works. He held numerous commentaries (e.g., Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and David Qimhi). It seems that much of his access to these commentaries, especially Ibn Ezra and Qimhi, were from Johannis Buxtorfi [Johannes Buxtorf], ed., *Biblia Sacra Hebraica & Chaldaica cum Masora, quae critica Hebraeorum sacra est, magna & parva: ac selectissimis Hebraeorum interpretum comentariis Rabbi Salomonis Jarchi, R. Abrahami Aben Esrae, R. Davidis Kimchi, R. Levi Gerson, R. Saadie Gaon, R. Jeschajae, & Notis ex authore, quem Baal Turim vocant, collectis, quibus textus Grammaticè & historicè illustrator* (Basileae: Ludovici König, 1620). Spinoza also owned Johannis Buxtorfi [Johannes Buxtorf], *Tiberias sive Commentarius Masorethicus triplex historicus, didacticus, criticus, ad illustrationem operis biblici Basiliensis conscriptus, quo primum historia Masoretharum Tiberiensium, sive à quibus Masora conscriptasit, excutitur: quid item tractet, quae ejus methodus, & quo sine inventa sit, amplè explicatur: secundò clavis Masorae traditur, per quam ad maxima & minima Masorae penitus cognoscenda, facillimus datur aditus. Tertio castigationes innumerum mendorum per universam Masoram propuntur* (Basileae: Joh. Jacobi Deckeri, 1665). On Buxtorf's *Tiberias* see, e.g., Grafton and Weinberg, *Johann Buxtorf*, 179-183. Additionally, Spinoza owned copies of: Constantinum L'Empereur [Constantijn L'Empereur], *Clavis Talmudica. Complectens formulas, loca dialectica & rhetorica priscorum Judaeorum* (Leiden: ex Officina Elseviriorum, 1634); and Benedicti Pererii [Benedict Pereira], *Commentariorum in Daniele prophetam* (Lyon: ex Officina Iuntarum, 1588). Pereira's commentary was originally published in 1587, and Spinoza's edition was apparently from 1602. Spinoza's engagement with Ibn Ezra may have been largely through his "super commentaries." On this, and on Ibn Ezra's super commentaries, see Jacques J. Rozenberg, "Spinoza and his Relationship to the Hermeneutics of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Super-Commentaries and the Semantics of Narrative," *Hermeneia* 33 (2024): 37-73; Tomás Visi, "Ibn Ezra, a Maimonidean Authority: The Evidence of the Early Ibn Ezra Supercommentaries," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James T. Robinson, 89-132 (Brill, 2009); David Lemler, "Abraham Ibn Ezra et Moïse Maïmonide cités par Spinoza ou l'impossibilité d'une philosophie juive," *Revue des études juives* 168 (2009): 415-464; and Tamás Visi, "The Early Ibn Ezra Supercommentaries: A Chapter in Medieval Jewish Intellectual History," (Ph.D. diss., Central European University, 2006).

⁵⁸ See Jacques J. Rozenberg, "Spinoza's *Compendium*: Between Hebrew and Latin Grammars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Verbs versus Nouns," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2024): 339-367, esp. 354-357.

⁵⁹ González Diéguez, "Spinoza and the Grammar of the Hebrew Language," 485; and González Diéguez, introducción, 20.

teach Hebrew at his school⁶⁰—it is not clear that this was the case. Jonathan Israel maintains that it seems more likely that Spinoza learned Hebrew (and grammar in general) from Ḥakham Isaac Aboab da Fonseca (1605-1693), since the dates and ages Aboab da Fonseca taught, evidenced in the Etz Hayyim archives, fit what we know about the timeline of Spinoza's early education better.⁶¹ In the past, scholars had assumed Spinoza was exceptional for his formal Jewish learning. This was due, in part, to an uncritical acceptance of *La vie de Monsieur Benoit de Spinoza*,⁶² which now seems to be a re-narration of Spinoza's life fabricated by his followers and apologists.⁶³ The archival evidence indicates, however, that Spinoza did not receive formal Jewish learning after the age of fourteen.⁶⁴ At the same time, it must be emphasized, the Etz Hayyim community where Spinoza was educated, was the envy of European Jewry; it was renowned for its impressive pedagogy.⁶⁵ Spinoza clearly knew Hebrew well. Some have, however, attributed more importance to Spinoza's incomplete grammar than is warranted.⁶⁶ When it came to engaging other languages,

⁶⁰ González Diéguez, introducción, 20; and Klijnsmit, "Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens," 148. On Menasseh see, e.g., Steven Nadler, *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam* (Yale University Press, 2018).

⁶¹ See Israel, *Spinoza*, 52-53 for Spinoza's possible acquaintance with Menasseh, and 150-155 for the sort of education Spinoza would have received at Etz Hayyim, including the likelihood of his learning Hebrew from Ḥakham Isaac Aboab da Fonseca. Both Menasseh ben Israel and Ḥakham Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, furthermore, had written unpublished Hebrew grammars that were in the Etz Hayyim library. See Adri Offenberg, "A Mid-Seventeenth-Century Manuscript of the (Unpublished) Hebrew Grammars of Menasseh ben Israel and Isaac Aboab da Fonseca Recovered," *Zutot* 4 (2003): 98-107.

⁶² The original text is no longer extant. It seems likely to have been written between 1678-1688, although it was first published only much later in 1719 as *La vie et l'esprit de Mr. Benoit de Spinoza*. For an early English edition (*The Life of the Late Mr. de Spinoza*) see A. Wolf, ed., *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza* (George Allen & Unwin, 1927), 41-75, where this short biography is presented.

⁶³ On the discrediting of *La vie* see Travis L. Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (T&T Clark, 2006), esp. 76-158.

⁶⁴ Israel, *Spinoza*, 158-159; and Abraham de Mordechai Vaz Dias and Willem Gerard van der Tak, "Spinoza Merchant and Autodidact: Charters and Other Authentic Documents Relating to the Philosopher's Youth and His Relations," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 16 (1982): 103-171.

⁶⁵ Israel, *Spinoza*, 148-159.

⁶⁶ Though Klijnsmit does point out that, "The first grammarian of Hebrew who applied *analogia* rigorously was Spinoza" ("Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens," 162).

Spinoza only rarely compared Hebrew to Aramaic, which he sometimes referred to as “Syriac” [“Syriacus”],⁶⁷ but not to any other Semitic languages.⁶⁸

The context of Spinoza’s composing his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* must be borne in mind when thinking about his *Compendium*. Already, in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Spinoza declared that in order to complete a history of Scripture, which, for Spinoza, was a prerequisite of biblical interpretation, an exhaustive knowledge of the original language (Hebrew) was essential.⁶⁹ This required the investigation of “all the meanings each utterance can admit in ordinary conversational usage.”⁷⁰ Spinoza underscored here that Hebrew was the most important language to learn for biblical interpretation, including of the New Testament, since he believed Hebrew was the original spoken language of the authors of the biblical books in both Testaments.⁷¹ The key challenge that Spinoza highlighted, and this is where his *Compendium* becomes important, is that such a method “requires a complete [*integram*] knowledge of the Hebrew language.”⁷² Spinoza then mentioned that “we cannot have a complete [*perfectam*] history of the Hebrew

⁶⁷ It is clear, for example, that in Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, II, 3.6-7, 289 (ET 589-590), when Spinoza refers to “Syriacus” [Syriac] he means Aramaic. Here, Spinoza claims that Ezra and the Pharisees preferred the “Syriac script” [LT: “character est Syriacus”]. In the Spanish edition, there is a footnote (SP 61n7) that explains Syriac as a synonym for “cursive Aramaic,” for Spinoza. This might be an apt description of Syriac (which is a dialectical variant of Aramaic), but not for the script to which Spinoza referred. Spinoza’s clear contrast is the Aramaic block script that Second Temple and later Hebrew employed in contrast to the old Hebrew which is closer to a Phoenician script. The note in the introduction to the Spanish edition is more accurate: “The ‘Syriac’ script to which here he [Spinoza] makes reference is that known as ‘Aramaic block script’ [‘grafia aramea cuadrada’], that was imposed on the sacred texts in the middle of the second century C.E. by the Jewish rabbis. Prior, from the tenth century B.C.E. until the sixth century B.C.E., the writing employed by the Israelites was called paleo-Hebrew or Canaanite-Hebrew” (SP 14n15, English translation is my own). See also the helpful footnote in the Italian edition (IT 46n8) which contrasts the block Aramaic script used with paleo-Hebrew alphabet, “The ancient Hebrew alphabet” [“L’antico alfabeto ebraico”] (IT 46n8). It is possible that Spinoza is simply not making a distinction between Aramaic dialectical variants. It should be noted that the specific dual-language (Greek and Syriac) New Testament by Immanuel Tremellius that Spinoza owned (the 1569 ed.), printed the Syriac text using block Aramaic script, which Tremellius referred to as “printed in Hebrew font” (Hebraeis typis descripta), rather than Syriac script. See, e.g., Immanuele Tremellio [Immanuel Tremellius], *H KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ. Testamentum Novum. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ חֲדָשָׁה. Est autem interpretatio Syriaca Novi Testamenti, Hebraeis typis descripta, plerisque etiam locis emendate. Eadem Latino sermone reddita* (Henr. Stephanus, 1569). On the significance of this edition see Robert J. Wilkinson, “Immanuel Tremellius’ 1569 Edition of the Syriac New Testament,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 58, no. 1 (2007): 9-25.

⁶⁸ Klijnsmit notes this lack of engagement with other languages beyond Latin as well in “Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens,” 160.

⁶⁹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 2, 278-281 (ET 173).

⁷⁰ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 282-283 (ET 173).

⁷¹ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 5, 282-283 (ET 173). At the same time, it should be noted that Spinoza argued, earlier in the same paragraph, that would-be biblical interpreters must investigate “the nature and properties of the language in which the books of Scripture were written, and which their Authors were accustomed to speak.”

⁷² Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 11, 296-299 (ET 180).

language.”⁷³ For Spinoza, this was because of “the very nature and constitution of this language. So many ambiguities arise from this that it is impossible to devise a method which will teach you how to find out with certainty the true meaning of all the utterances of Scripture.”⁷⁴ Writing further, in regard to the Hebrew language, Spinoza explained the ultimate futility of such an exhaustive quest to understand perfectly the Hebrew language: “so many ambiguities must occur that there can be no method for resolving all of them.”⁷⁵

What is significant to underscore here is that Spinoza’s method, which he laid out in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, required a history so exhaustively and meticulously detailed—not only the history of the biblical books themselves, but also of the Hebrew language—that it would be impossible to complete. And yet, such a complete history, such a “complete” knowledge of the Hebrew language, Spinoza’s method demanded in order for the work of exegesis to begin. Spinoza did not add encouragement to the prospect of accomplishing this Herculean task, quixotic at best. Rather, Spinoza emphasized the insurmountable obstacles. In fact, he was quite up front about the impossibility of sufficiently recovering what was lost, but necessary for proper understanding of the Hebrew language of biblical times. This is where his *Compendium* was to come in and play the role of a further acid in which to dissolve the biblical text and traditions of interpretation.

4. Hebrew Grammar Redeployed as a Corrosive Tool

It must be borne in mind that Spinoza’s *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* clearly served as a Hebrew grammar, first and foremost. That is, its primary point was almost certainly to facilitate grasping the fundamentals of Hebrew grammar for his circle of friends, to aid them in their understanding of the Bible.⁷⁶ Where he could, Spinoza hoped to provide the proper interpretation of Hebrew expressions in the Old Testament, and, he believed, undergirding the New Testament.⁷⁷ Beyond this, however, it appears that Spinoza hoped as well that his

⁷³ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 12, 298-299 (ET 180). Earlier, Curley translated Spinoza’s Latin “integram” as “complete,” but here translates “perfectam” as “complete.” Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel translated “integram” as “perfect” and “perfectam” as “fully.” See Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 106.

⁷⁴ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, VII, no. 12, 298-299 (ET 180).

⁷⁵ Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, no. VII, no. 14, 302-303 (ET 182).

⁷⁶ On this fundamental point see Inja Stracenski, “Spinoza’s *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language*,” *Parrhesia* 32 (2020): 122-144, at 130; and the translator’s notes (IT 120n265).

⁷⁷ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1080.

Compendium could serve as a tool of modernity, as a corrosive to dissolve trust in the Bible as Scripture, as a theological wellspring. It seems that Spinoza's *Compendium* was inextricably bound to his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* and his modern project.⁷⁸ Spinoza's work in biblical criticism was inextricably bound to his political program, his hope to free philosophers from the dangers of theocracy, especially that of Dutch Calvinists, but also in the Jewish community, and Catholic regions of Europe, or anywhere that linked Church and state.⁷⁹

Spinoza began his work by setting his *Compendium* apart from prior grammars. He emphasized that most prior grammars pertained to the Hebrew of the Bible, and thus were Scriptural grammars, whereas his *Compendium* was intended to be a grammar of the Hebrew language, as a living and evolving language, even though it was no longer a spoken language.⁸⁰ The Bible was an ossified partial record of the Hebrew language of biblical times, and one that had in fact been tampered with by the later imposition of vowel pointing. Thus, much of the original vocabulary, and much of the original living language, and probably literature as well, was necessarily lost.⁸¹ Spinoza wrote, "For, in a word, there are many who have written a grammar of the Scriptures, but none who have written a grammar of the Hebrew language."⁸²

Jonathan Israel explains further:

⁷⁸ González Diéguez, "Spinoza and the Grammar of the Hebrew Language," 484; and Stracenski, "Spinoza's *Compendium*," 134 and 141.

⁷⁹ See Israel, *Spinoza*, 648-683 for Spinoza's immediate political context.

⁸⁰ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1077; Stracenski, "Spinoza's *Compendium*," 132; Martine Pécharman, "Loin de Port-Royal: Le statut linguistique de l'hébreu dans le *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* de Spinoza," in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammarien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 223-272, at 231; González Diéguez, introducción, 13-14; Klijnsmit, "Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens," 147-148; and Philippe Cassuto, *Spinoza hébraïssant. L'hébreu dans le "Tractatus theologico-politicus" et le "Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae"* (Peeters, 1999), 16, 19, 22, and 123. Jonathan Israel explains Spinoza's critique of other grammars: "What was chiefly wrong with the grammarians of the past . . . causing rare usages constantly to be wrongly classified as exceptions or irregularities when they were not, as with passive verbs and actions, was preoccupation with composing grammars of the actual Scriptures as an imagined linguistic unity rather than thinking historically and writing a grammar of the evolving Hebrew language from which the Scriptures sprang" (*Spinoza*, 1077). Spinoza would even, "reconstruct analogous verbal forms based on *hapax legomena* or rare verbal forms. He does not doubt that his reconstructions had been existent; only, they are not found in the Scriptures, no wonder, since the Bible represents a small portion of Hebrew as it actually was spoken," as Klijnsmit points out ("Vossius, Spinoza, Schultens," 150). On this last point, see also (IT 189) and the translator's comments (IT 189n460).

⁸¹ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1079.

⁸² Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, VII, 24.10-12, 310. Here, the English translation is my own, but compare with ET 604. I think the Spanish and Italian editions are closer to the Latin than Shirley's English translation (SP 87 and IT 76). Spinoza later contrasts his grammar with all prior grammars as grammars of Scripture (the prior grammars) instead of being grammars of the Hebrew language itself (as he stylizes his grammar). See Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, XVII, 72.8-9, 358 (ET 642). Jacques Rozenberg points out, however, that Spinoza is not precisely correct here; Mosheh Raphael Aguilar had produced a grammar of Hebrew (1660) as a language beyond simply biblical Hebrew. See Rozenberg, "Spinoza's *Compendium*," 346.

His notion of biblical Hebrew as a set of incidental snapshots in time recording ancient Israelite Hebrew's long evolutionary process, even if only fragmentary, was pivotal to Spinoza's conclusions because, as he saw it, much depends on how one understands the ancient Hebrews to have meant their words and phrases in particular periods and how exactly post-Babylonian Captivity editors developed, misunderstood, and mangled earlier suppositions and beliefs.⁸³

Spinoza argued, likely inspired by the reception of Elias Levita's work, that the Hebrew language was completely corrupted.⁸⁴ Spinoza had a copy of Levita's influential grammar, including a Latin translation by Sebastian Münster, in his library.⁸⁵ Levita had argued for the late creation of vowel-pointing in the Hebrew of the Bible, that such were the later additions of the Masoretes and thus a merely human development. Buxtorf, in fact, took up pen to argue against Levita.⁸⁶

One area Spinoza emphasized is the ambiguity of ancient Hebrew precisely because it had no vowel pointing.⁸⁷ Consider Spinoza's comments, "For it appears that the Hebrews were not by any means strongly moved to avoid ambiguity, a thing which I could demonstrate with many examples, except that I judge this superfluous."⁸⁸ Spinoza emphasized throughout the many confusions in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.⁸⁹ With regard to the regular substitution of letters that sound alike throughout the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza wrote, "The reason for this, I think, is that the Scriptures were written by men of various dialects, and that now the dialects are not recognizable, namely from which tribe this or that dialect originated."⁹⁰

⁸³ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1077.

⁸⁴ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1076 and 1079; and Pécharman, "Loin de Port-Royal," 225. It should be noted, however, that Spinoza nowhere explicitly cites Levita, though Levita was on Spinoza's bookshelf in his personal library. On the reception of Levita in this context, see Deena Aranoff, "Elijah Levita: A Jewish Hebraist," *Jewish History* 23, no. 1 (2009): 17-40.

⁸⁵ Elia Levita, *Grammatica Hebraea Eliae Levitae Germani, per Sebastianum Munsterum uersa & iam ultima manuscholijs illustrata. Index copiosus iam recens adiectus. Item Institutio elementalis in eandem linguam, ex Eliae uarijs libellis concinnat, iam denuo plurimum aucta. Quibus omnibus & tabula coniugationum pulchre explicata accessit* (Froben, 1537). Apparently Spinoza's edition was from 1543.

⁸⁶ On Levita see especially Pierre Gibert, *L'invention critique de la Bible XV^e – XVIII^e siècle* (Gallimard, 2010), 237-245; and Gérard E. Weil, *Élie Lévi. Humaniste et massorète (1469-1549)* (Brill, 1963), 10-13 and 222-231 (on Münster's translation of Levita's work), 95-110, 156-166, and 254-271 (on Levita's work on Hebrew grammar), 197-247 (for situating Levita in the context of humanism and the recovery of Hebrew), and 286-343 (for Levita's study of the Massorah). Although dated, Weil's more than 400 pages remain an important starting point for any biography of Levita. On Buxtorf's critique of Levita see, e.g., Grafton and Weinberg, *Johann Buxtorf*, 178-211.

⁸⁷ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1076.

⁸⁸ Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, XI, 50.27-30, 336 (ET 625).

⁸⁹ Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, VIII, 26.26-28, 312 (ET 606).

⁹⁰ Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, II, 4.9-11, 290 (ET 590).

One consistent tactic Spinoza used in his *Compendium*, was to reconstruct what he believed to be the original Hebrew, even when what he asserted were later corruptions were far more commonly used throughout the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the clearest example of this is when Spinoza used the Hebrew אישים (“men”) as the plural form of איש (“man”), instead of the far more common plural אנשים (“men”).⁹¹ In the modern Spanish edition of Spinoza’s *Compendium*, the editor includes the following comment on this passage: “Spinoza opts for indicating the regular plural of איש as אישים, despite the plural אנשים being much more common. We see in this preference Spinoza’s rejection of any anomaly or exception in the language.”⁹²

Spinoza engaged in the polemic charge against what he took to be the Pharisaic and later rabbinic tampering with the biblical Hebrew text subverting the original meaning of numerous passages.⁹³ Guadalupe González Diéguez argues that Spinoza’s critique of the Pharisees and Sadducees was really a thinly veiled critique of his contemporary Jewish grammarians from the Sephardic Amsterdam community from which Spinoza came.⁹⁴ In his critique of these grammarians, Spinoza stated:

Because the grammarians did not understand this they considered many words to be irregular which according to the usage of the language are most regular, and they were ignorant of many things which are necessary to know for a proper understanding of the language.⁹⁵

Spinoza thus desacralized the Hebrew language. Jonathan Israel mentions the implications of Spinoza’s desacralizing Hebrew for the wider desacralizing of Scripture:

Spinoza’s purpose is to prove the utterances of Old Testament prophets, despite their aura of being holy visions, enigmas, and parables, actually contain nothing elevated or divine, their use of language reflecting just everyday expressions of the common people of their time designating commonplace things.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, IX, 36.9, 322 (ET 612).

⁹² SP 101n1 (English translation is my own).

⁹³ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1076; and González Diéguez, introducción, 14-16.

⁹⁴ González Diéguez, introducción, 15-16.

⁹⁵ Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, V, 17.7-10, 303 (ET 599).

⁹⁶ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1080. On this point see also Pina Totaro, “Le *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* dans le contexte des oeuvres de Spinoza,” in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammarien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 63-89, at 73; and David Lemler, “L’*Abrégé de grammaire* de Spinoza ou le paradoxe de la «langue du nom»,” in *Spinoza, Philosophe Grammarien*, ed. Baumgarten, Rosier-Catach, and Totaro, 207-222, at 211-212.

As was the case with his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Spinoza's *Compendium* was not intended to be a merely intellectual product, but rather one with political action in mind. Spinoza hoped his circle of friends would wield this grammar as a theo-political weapon in the Dutch Republic's theo-political turmoil. With his *Compendium*, "Spinoza utilized all the dimensions of his revisionist approach to Hebrew studies to drive against contemporary theology and religious authority."⁹⁷

Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* demanded an exacting knowledge of the original Hebrew as essential for understanding the Bible. Proper biblical interpretation remained unattainable, according to Spinoza, without this perfect knowledge of Hebrew. Spinoza's *Compendium*, however, underscored from the outset that such a quest was impossible because of the corrupted and helplessly fragmentary nature of the Hebrew language of the Bible that had survived to the present.⁹⁸ Martine Pécharman explains that, for Spinoza, "the history of Scripture must consist primarily in a history of *the language* used in its redaction, the language *in use* by the authors of the biblical texts."⁹⁹ But, according to Spinoza, this was impossible.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, Spinoza's *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae* was left uncompleted, riddled with typos and errors.¹⁰⁰ Spinoza's *Compendium* was intended not only as a Hebrew grammar, but would become another tool, a solvent, Spinoza hoped to employ in his modern project bent on dissolving Scripture, leaving it bereft of any authority. Jonathan Israel's assessment is correct:

Spinoza's goal, rather, was to turn the "sacred language" into a desacralizing tool and integral component of his own agenda to deconstruct the entire edifice of religious tradition and theological dogma, built, in his view, on misconstruing words and phrases of Scripture.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1083.

⁹⁸ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1076-1077 and 1079; Pécharman, "Loin de Port-Royal," 223-225 and 228; and Stracenski, "Spinoza's *Compendium*," 134 and 139.

⁹⁹ Pécharman, "Loin de Port-Royal," 224 (English translation is my own).

¹⁰⁰ Licata, "La Nature de la langue hébraïque," 52; and Proietti, "Emendazioni alla Grammatica Ebraica Spinoziana," 25-56, for the numerous textual errors. Spinoza ended his grammar prematurely at chapter 33: Spinoza, *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, XXXIII, 109-112, 395-398 (ET 673-675).

¹⁰¹ Israel, *Spinoza*, 1083.

By means of his *Compendium*, Spinoza hoped not only to provide the rudiments of the Hebrew language for his circle of friends, so they could better understand the Bible, but also to further his own hermeneutical revolution. Yirmiyahu Yovel writes that, for Spinoza, biblical exegesis was “an offensive weapon . . . biblical hermeneutics is an aggressive activity, offering the philosopher a mode of involvement in the social and cultural processes of his time.”¹⁰² This was equally true of Spinoza’s Hebrew grammar. Spinoza hoped to demonstrate to his audience that the knowledge of Hebrew, so far as it was attainable, and within those limits, was able to disenchant the Bible of its supernatural elements, desacralizing Scripture. More than this, through his off-handed comments, and methodological principles—even the way he distinguished his grammar from contemporary and prior grammars—Spinoza desired to show how the requisite complete grasp of the Hebrew language of biblical times was a hopeless quest, doomed to failure.¹⁰³

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¹⁰² Yirmiyahu Yovel *Spinoza and Other Heretics II: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 11.

¹⁰³ I owe tremendous thanks to Ryan Cataldo for helping me acquire several of the sources I used in this article.

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