

# The Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship<sup>1</sup>

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Spinoza is usually credited with being the Father of Modern Biblical Scholarship for setting forth in chapters VII to X of *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* "a number of contentions of far-reaching significance. These were stated with such clarity that modern biblical criticism can be said to begin with him."<sup>2</sup>

Spinoza attributes his own interest in Biblical criticism to some cryptic remarks in the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra, the twelfth century Spanish exegete.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by this discovery, Spinoza went on to construct his case for the need to apply to the Bible techniques of scholarship that went beyond commentary and philology.

Spinoza builds his case on the following twenty points:<sup>4</sup>

1. The election of Israel lasted only to the end of the monarchy (133).
2. The observance of the law was no longer necessary after the destruction of the Temple (147).
3. The Scriptures were tampered with by the impious, or they were subject to errors and corrections (175).
4. We do not know the history of the preservations of the text of the books (182).
5. A succession of impious high priests were the custodians of the Law (189).
6. The work of Moses is mentioned in Exod. 17:14; Deut. 1:5, 24:14, 31:9. Some of the Torah is identified as Moses' work (Num. 21:12, 33:2; Exod. 24:4—referring to the Covenant Code; Exod. 20:22–24 end) (194–96).
7. The whole Torah was capable of being read at one sitting (196).

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I Grateful acknowledgment is made to the University of California, Davis, for grants that supported the research and that made it possible to deliver a version of this paper entitled "The Shift in Muslim Views on the Pentateuch in the Eleventh Christian Century" at the conference "Europe and Asia: 600–1600, Institutions and Ideas," University of Hawaii at Manoa, January 4, 1983.

Translations of Ibn Hazm's works were prepared for me by Everett Rowson, then on a grant at the University of Cairo.

I discussed my conclusions with the late Prof. Moshe Zucker of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, only to learn that Professor Zucker had delivered a paper twenty-five years ago that anticipated the current conclusions.

2 S. Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures. An Introduction to Their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York, 1978), 328.

3 Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, trans. R. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951; reprint of 1883 ed.), 6.

4 Page numbers in parentheses are those of the Latin edition of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, Vloten-Land ed., vol. 2.

8. The only actual compositions by Moses were his second covenant and his song, "which he caused to be religiously guarded and preserved" (197).
9. The Torah and Joshua-Judges-Ruth-Samuel-Kings were the work of one hand (198-99).
10. Ezra was the author (199).
11. Ezra did not turn out a finished product, as the parallel passages prove (201).
12. The Torah has chronology problems: Judah and Tamar have only twenty-two years to produce three generations; Jacob's age given to Pharaoh in Genesis 47 coupled with Joseph's age of 39 and the seven years of work for Rachel would mean that Jacob would mean that Jacob was eighty-eight when they were married, and that Dinah was raped at the age of seven (202-3).
13. Passages and stories are repeated (203).
14. Stories are in promiscuous order (203).
15. Another chronological problem: the years from the Exodus to the building of the Temple do not come to 480 (*contra* 1 Kings 6), but to 580 (204-5).
16. The Jews exhibited no diligence in preserving books (207).
17. The *ktiv-qrei* variants are attestations of actual variants found in exemplars (208-9).
18. There were few exemplars because of the persecutions and turmoil (212).
19. There was no real canon—not even of the Torah—before the Maccabees (221).
20. The Rabbis were actually responsible for the present form of the Torah (222).

When we investigate the origins of these points, we discover that Spinoza was a mere purveyor. If Spinoza had written in a vacuum and if he had not been the descendant of Jews exiled from Spain, one might be willing to attribute some originality to these points, rather than to see in them the "assured results" of centuries of anti-Jewish polemics.

Points 1 and 2, regarding abrogation of the Law and the Chosen People concept, which are closely associated with each other, are only slightly recast from typical Christian anti-Jewish polemics from as early as the first Christian century.<sup>5</sup> Similar arguments are advanced by Muslim polemicists also from the very earliest period of Muslim polemics.<sup>6</sup>

Points 3, 4, 5, and 16-18 regarding the unreliability of the Masoretic Text are also common points made in Christian anti-Jewish polemics. In those polemics, the charge runs: there would be clearer witnesses to the messiahship/divinity of Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures, had not the wicked Jews expunged them (out of chagrin or perversity).<sup>7</sup> The same claim is made by the Muslims critics *vis-à-vis* Muhammad.<sup>8</sup> The Christian claim<sup>9</sup> was formerly bolstered by the "evidence" of "better" readings in the Septuagint (hence the origins of the apparatus in Kittel's *Biblia Sacra*), but it has been vitiated by the textual analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Points 10-15 and 17, regarding Ezra's poor redacting efforts, as well as points 6-8—that there is only a small kernel of Moses' work and that work is clearly marked—were arguments advanced by the Gnostics in the early Christian centuries against the antiquity of the Torah in their polemics against Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

5 E.g., Epistle of Barnabas 4:6-7, 13:1-14:9.

6 Cf. A. Mingana, *The Book of Religion and Empire, a Semi-official Defence and Exposition of Islām Written by Order at the Court and with the Assistance of the Caliph Muta-wakkil (A.D. 847-861) by 'Ali Ṭabari* (Manchester, 1922).

7 Cf. Dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho, chapters 71-73.

8 Cf. A. Mingana, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch Before the Caliph Mahdi," Woodbrooke Studies, Fasc. 3, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (1928), 191-94.

9 Dialogue of Justin Martyr with Trypho, loc. cit.

10 Cf. E. Stein, *Alttestamentliche Bibelkritik in der späthellenistischen Literatur*, "Collectanea Theologica," Societatis Theologorum Polonorum 16 (Lwów, 1935).

We are left with Spinoza's point 9, that the Torah and Joshua-Judges-Ruth-Samuel-Kings were the work of one hand. But even in this case, Spinoza was preceded by Ibn Hazm. In fact, Ibn Hazm anticipated Spinoza's points 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, and 20, fully two-thirds of the problems that Spinoza had with the text of the Bible. What is more, those fourteen points appear within pages 186–202 of Ibn Hazm's *Al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa-al-Ahwa wa-al-Nihal*, volume 1.

Ibn Hazm lived 994–1064. He was a great theologian who wrote a major compendium of the varieties of Muslim heresies and other sects that were known to him. He was also a man of rank, who was qualified for the position of vizier. Only the corruption of the Muslim ruler of Granada allowed the appointment of the Jew Shemuel ibn Nagrela HaNaggid to vizier in his stead. He was the first born Muslim<sup>11</sup> to produce anti-Jewish polemics that have been preserved, and the author of the only polemics produced by one of Islam's truly great minds. Ibn Hazm is also the first writer on the Jews in the western reaches of the Muslim Empire.<sup>12</sup> The contours of his polemic and the viciousness of expression in it were influenced by the nervy production of Jewish anti-Muslim polemic by Shemuel ibn Nagrela and the marooning of his political career by the success of ibn Nagrela, an upstart Jew.

Ibn Hazm's anti-Jewish polemic has two characteristics that distinguish it from earlier Muslim writing about the Hebrew Scriptures: one, he is the first in a line of Muslim thinkers who tried to dissuade Muslims from regarding the Hebrew Bible with any respect whatsoever—let alone reverence; second, Ibn Hazm wrote with such fierce invective that he can scarcely say the word "Jew" without a prefixed epithet like "stinking," "foul," "vile," "villainous," and that good old stand-by "dirty." Thus, Ibn Hazm represents a shift in Muslim attitudes towards the Pentateuch and towards the Jews.

Just how much of a shift there was from previous Muslim attitudes towards the Pentateuch can be seen from the Jewish reaction to the shift:

Moreover, is it not amazing that when people or nations dispute with us in good faith, not one of them ever makes claims against us that does not count our people, our princes, our kings, rational people; and we do not think ourselves superior to them except in a human way. And all the scholars of religion have taught that the whole Torah was received by Moses from the mouth of God on Mount Sinai and transmitted to the Jewish people. We never heard any scholar of religion disagree with this or deny this tenet, and the Christians and the Muslims are in agreement about this without quibble. . . . And look, the Christians, who came before the Muslims, who stray after their own error and who disagree with us on that point [viz., the divinity of Jesus] and needle us so much that they have not left any claim unused, provide an answer to this [claim]. Doubtlessly, the Christians have scholars much better versed in the Bible than the Muslims; and behold, even though they preceded them, have they ever found such corruptions, or among all their numbers has any such thing been discovered in any of their copies of the Bible? If it were true, they without doubt would have come to the same conclusion. How could this crazy man come to corrupt the holy Bible of truth that our fathers pored over all their lives, discussing the letters, counting the verses—and even the letters—of all the books, noting full and defective spellings and *ketiv-qerei* variants and words that are read but not written, and many other details? . . . But that witless idiot, how did he come to impute corruption into the venerated and

11 As opposed to converts to Islam like Ali Tabari (see note 6).

12 M. Perlmann, "Eleventh-Century Andalusian Authors on the Jews of Granada," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 18 (1949), 269–71.

so carefully and painstakingly examined Scriptures that has no rival among any book in any language? This is just blindness and madness and mental illness that afflicts him.<sup>13</sup>

Besides this rather strong reaction to the switch, we have an explicit statement by the tenth century Karaite author Qirqisani that earlier Muslim theologians were in agreement that the text of the Torah was genuine.<sup>14</sup>

The truth of the matter is that before Ibn Hazm, the Muslims by and large ignored the Jews. The Jews were too small a minority within the Muslim world, and they had no power support from the outside. Hence, there is very little special polemical literature directed at the Jews and Judaism. That attitude made itself known to the Jews, as can be seen from the fact that in Yehudah Halevi's *Kuzari* the king of the Khazars was not prepared even to ask a Jew to try to explain his perplexing dream because they were so unimportant in world affairs.<sup>15</sup> The tenth century bibliography by Ibn al-Nadim mentions five early anti-Jewish tracts, but these have not survived.<sup>16</sup> Even Abd al-Jabbar of the tenth century, although he spends some time refuting the Christians, ignores the Jews.

What Muslim writing there was about the Jews appeared in the learned encyclopedias of religion written by various Muslim scholars. What notices they have about Jews are followed, of course, by polemics; but there are no literary remains of specifically anti-Jewish tracts.<sup>17</sup>

The sources drawn on by the Muslim tracts that were to be written from the eleventh century onward are the old encyclopedias plus the anti-Jewish polemical works of Christians and Karaites. Much of the material by non-Muslims became part of the Muslim stock of argument by way of converts to Islam. In fact, even Muhammad's anti-Jewish arguments seem to have Christian origins.<sup>18</sup>

For their part, the Jews produced few polemical tracts against Islam like those that animated the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. There are, to be sure, references and points of quibble scattered throughout a wide range of Jewish writings, theological, philosophical, and legal. In fact, the formulation of so familiar an item as Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith is influenced by anti-Muslim polemic; but one could hardly state that it is exclusively anti-Muslim. None of the great Jewish minds of the first few Muslim centuries resisted the temptation to throw anti-Muslim material into their works, but we do not know of an exclusively anti-Muslim tract until the days of Shemuel HaNaggid, who carried on an active literary debate with Ibn Hazm.

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13 J. Perles, *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adereth. Sein Leben und seine Schriften* (Breslau, 1863), Hebrew section, 2-3. That this work was probably not by Ibn Adereth, but more probably by an eleventh century writer, was persuasively argued by M. Zucker, "Clarifications in the History of Religious Polemics Between Judaism and Islam," *Festschrift Armand Kaminka zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Vienna, 1937), 31-48 [Hebrew], especially 43, n. 1. It is not impossible that this work was the infamous pamphlet by Shemuel HaNaggid.

14 J. Finkle, "A Risāla of al-Jāhiz," *JAOS* 47 (1927), 311, n. 3, citing Hirschfeld, *Arabic Chrestomathy*, 119.

15 *Kuzari*, Hirschfeld translation, paragraph 12.

16 M. Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics Between Islam and Judaism," in S. D. Goitein, ed., *Religion in a Religious Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 130, n. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, 106 and 130, n. 4.

18 *Ibid.*, 130, n. 7, citing T. Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islam und das Christentum* (Upsala, 1926), 198ff.

The easier aspect of Ibn Hazm's polemics to deal with is the invective. This passage is typical:

And most amazing of all is that it [the Torah] should make [the Jews], specifically the children of God—given that anyone who knows them knows that they are, of all peoples, the foulest in their appearance, the ugliest in their faces, the most revolting in their general foulness, the most complete in their depravity, the most extreme in their dishonesty, the most cowardly in their souls, the lowest in their baseness, the most duplicitous in their language, the weakest in their ambition, and the most unsteady in their character—indeed, far be it from God to make such a vile choice!<sup>19</sup>

For a folk that should be only barely tolerated according to Muslim law, the Jews have the temerity to try to live as human beings and even to take part in the affairs of state. In fairness, it should be mentioned that the high status of the Jews was due in Ibn Hazm's mind to the corruption of Muslim officials who had been ignoring Muslim law. Ibn Hazm holds out promises for these officials of their due recompense coming to them soon, and with full gravity in measure to their sin.

The vituperation of Ibn Hazm's attack can be understood from its personal context: Ibn Hazm had not been appointed vizier of Granada—his place had been taken by that upstart Jew, Shemuel ibn Nagrela, known to the Jews as Shemuel HaNaggid. Disappointed at his failure to obtain the public office that he felt he so richly deserved, Ibn Hazm struck out at the individual Jew who had taken Ibn Hazm's "rightful" place. Like Haman, not content to stop with the individual who provoked his ire, Ibn Hazm expressed his intolerance of the whole Jewish minority in Granada.

The Biblical criticism seems to have been motivated by the same feelings. Besides, Ibn Hazm's nemesis Shemuel had been so bold as to publish a pamphlet attacking the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an as a rather insipid book, hardly dictated by Gabriel, and surely not inspired by God. Ibn Hazm was furious when he heard about the pamphlet and tried to get hold of it, unsuccessfully. He had to content himself with the excerpts from Shemuel's pamphlet that were included in a refutation of it written by another Muslim. The challenge could surely not go unanswered, and Ibn Hazm rose to the occasion.

Moreover, Ibn Hazm was dismayed to find what a survey of Muslim anti-Christian polemics will show: that Muslim writers—although they point out the corruption of the Biblical text—seem to show a great reverence for the Bible.<sup>20</sup> In fact, it is the very act of searching through the Hebrew Scriptures for testimonies of the coming of Muhammad that validates the Bible as accurate and holy. Ibn Hazm sets out to destroy all Muslim reverence for the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings by undermining them from the outset.

Since the lines of argument had been pretty much set for him, it does not surprise us to find that Ibn Hazm argues that the Pentateuch was neither divinely inspired nor of ancient origin. Only because the Holy Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an mentions such works as the Torah and the Gospels do Muslims know that such books exist, but the present works bearing those names are at best extensively tampered with (as the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an attests) and are therefore invalid.<sup>21</sup> Ibn Hazm will achieve his purpose if he can show that although

19 Ibn Hazm, *Al-Fiṣal fī al-Mīl wa-l-Ahwāʾ wa-n-Niḥal*, 1:201.

20 A survey appears in the unpublished dissertation of M. Siddiqi, *Muslim Views of Christianity in the Middle Ages, an Analytical Study of Ibn Taymiyah's Work on Christianity* (Harvard, 1978), 1-112.

21 *Fiṣal*, 1:104, 203f.

the Torah had been revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Jews did not preserve the text of that revelation.

Altogether, Ibn Hazm analyzes some sixty verses, mostly from the Pentateuch—and of those, mostly from Genesis. He may have read Genesis in Arabic, but he knew the rest of the Pentateuch less well, and material from the rest of the Hebrew Bible he probably knew only from excerpts.<sup>22</sup> His methodology is simple: he points to the political, social, and religious turmoil of Biblical Israel and asks how any Scripture could be maintained intact through such privations. He writes:

Now tell me, dear readers, how is it possible for a country in which idols are worshipped openly and temples are built for them, and in which those prophets who appear are killed—how could the Book of God remain safe and sound in such a country? (1:192)

The fact is, Ibn Hazm argues, that only the Levites had possession of the entire Torah—the people were only taught Deuteronomy 32—and the witness of Samuel and Kings is that the Levites were as much involved in the apostasy to Canaanite syncretism as were the rest of the people.

And he about whom such things are said cannot be trusted not to change that of which he is the sole keeper. All these are proofs clearer than the sun that their Torah has been corrupted and interpolated. (1:199)

But there were political vicissitudes of another sort that made the transmission of the text completely unreliable, namely, all the troubles of the Exile to Babylonia. Indeed, it was only after the Exile that the Torah was pieced together from the scraps and memories that people had, and that editorial work was done by Ezra, the Levite scribe.<sup>23</sup> Even so, Ezra could not foist his forgery on the people: it was not until the days of the Hasmoneans and the early rabbis (Ibn Hazm mentions Hillel and Shammai of the pre-Christian Era and Akiba, who died a century and a half into the Christian Era).<sup>24</sup> Thus, whatever text of the Pentateuch the Jews have in their hands comes from an age when the Jews themselves admit that there was no prophet to confirm the text.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Ezra the Aaronic Scribe dictated it to them from memory. They affirm that he found it among them in a very defective state, and emended it. This is sufficient [to prove our point], for the fact that Ezra's writing of the Torah occurred more than seventy years after the destruction of Jerusalem and of their books shows that Ezra wrote it down and emended it for them only after about forty years since their return to Jerusalem, and this after seventy years of Exile, during which they had no prophet at all. . . . From that time the Torah was copied and disseminated, although still in too small supply to meet the demand. Then Antiochus, the king who built Antioch, set up an idol for worship in Jerusalem and enjoined the children of Israel to worship it, and pigs were sacrificed on the altar of the Temple. Then, after 200 years, a family from the sons of Aaron [the Hasmoneans] took power over them and the sacrifices ceased. At that time they

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22 Perlmann, "Eleventh-Century Andalusian Authors on the Jews of Granada," 272–75; Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics," 111.

23 *Fisal*, 1:117, 187, 198, 210.

24 *Ibid.*, 1:113, 192, 193, 196, 199, 209; 2:83.

25 *Ibid.*, 7ff., 84.

disseminated copies of the Torah which is in their hands today; and their rabbis devised prayers for them which they had not had before, in place of sacrifices, and made up a whole new religion for them. (1:197)

Ergo, Ibn Hazm has demonstrated to his own satisfaction that the only viable attitude that a Muslim should have towards the Hebrew Scriptures is complete rejection.

Curiously, stuck right in the middle of all this insistence that the Bible has no validity at all is the assertion that the *only* texts that have validity are those that give testimony to the coming of the Prophet: Deut. 18:18 and 32:2. He writes: "We do not believe in any Torah or Gospel that does not contain a premonition of Muhammad's message."<sup>26</sup> And here Ibn Hazm falls into the same pit that trapped all the Muslim writers on the Pentateuch—the logical contradiction of rejecting a text as corrupt and then turning to that text for evidence!<sup>27</sup>

From the above brief discussion of the Pentateuchal criticism of Ibn Hazm, it is easy to regard Ibn Hazm's work as a source for Spinoza. The influence of Ibn Hazm's approach, if not his writings, on later Muslims is such that we have in our days several copies of writers who took up where Ibn Hazm left off.<sup>28</sup> We also have Jewish refutations of Ibn Hazm himself.<sup>29</sup> That Spinoza should have had access to excerpts of Ibn Hazm in later refutations is a safe assumption.

Evidence of some sort of dependence by Spinoza on Ibn Hazm is the anti-Jewish invective in the *Tractatus* itself. We could certainly understand the temptation for Spinoza to be bitter against the Jewish community, first out of the self-hate that often besets oppressed minorities and the power that they derive from joining the majority in an ideological way. We could also understand an attempt to lash out at the community that isolated him and later excommunicated him. The anti-Jewish posturing in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is altogether out of place in a philosophical treatise. Furthermore, it occupies a much larger proportion of space than it deserves in anything but outright anti-Jewish polemics. Thus, there is a distinct polemical agenda in the *Tractatus*.

Anti-Jewish sentiment is evident in every single chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a modern anti-Semite levelling a more vicious attack at everything held dear by Jews.

As an example of Spinoza's bitterness, we can point to Chapter 2:

Yes; it has come to this! Men who openly confess that they can form no idea of God, and only know Him through created things, of which they know not the causes, can unblushingly accuse philosophers of Atheism.<sup>30</sup>

Or, more telling is this example from Chapter 10:

If it be blasphemy to assert that there are any errors in Scripture, what name shall we apply to those who foist into it their own fancies, who degrade the sacred writers till they seem to write

26 *Ibid.*, 1:104.

27 *Ibid.*, 1:212, 213, 215.

28 E.g., M. Perlmann, *Sama'ul al-Maghribi, "Ifhām al-Yahud, Silencing the Jews," Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 32 (1964). Siddiqi (see note 20) documents the influence of Ibn Hazm on later Muslim anti-Christian polemics.

29 Cf. note 13.

30 Spinoza, *Tractatus* (trans. Elwes), 27.

confused nonsense, and who deny the plainest and most evident meanings? . . . Far be it from me to call such commentators blasphemers, if their motives be pure: for to err is human.<sup>31</sup>

And you will notice that Spinoza does not forgive.

Furthermore, throughout the *Tractatus* Spinoza adopts the points of view of a Christian. First, he writes in Latin. Second, he ranks Jesus above Moses (Latin, p. 99); he asserts that the Torah was mediated through an angel (loc. cit.); he accepts the New Testament as Scripture (passim; first on p. 99); he asserts that the keeping of the commandments is not sufficient for eternal life (note 5, p. 314). In keeping with this viewpoint, the rabbis are more often than not referred to by that infamous and scurrilous (to his Christian audience) name "Pharisees"; Rabbinic Judaism is branded a "superstition" (p. 130); and he was even capable of lying about statements made by the rabbis and about the manner in which the statements were made (loc. cit.).

Spinoza's anti-Jewish invective is coupled with a form of biblical criticism that was new in Europe. There is a similar coupling of harsh invective and novel Biblical criticism in the writings of Ibn Hazm. The fact that most of Spinoza's points are to be found expressed in similar language within sixteen pages of Ibn Hazm's *Fisal* makes the conclusion that Spinoza drew on Ibn Hazm inescapable.<sup>32</sup>

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31 Ibid., 153.

32 While it would be very tempting to give the devil his due and to identify Ibn Hazm as the Father of Modern Biblical Criticism, there is a reason to conclude that Ibn Hazm was not original. Perlmann, for example, writes ("Medieval Polemics," 134, n. 18) that Ibn Hazm seems to have borrowed his theory that Ezra composed the Pentateuch because Ibn Hazm cites the theory without bringing extensive proofs. Consequently, we may have to push the threshold of "modern" Biblical criticism as far back as Julian the Apostate and Porphyry.