

OCKHAM, HOBBS, SPINOZA,  
AND THE *VIA MODERNA*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
PART ONE: WILLIAM OF OCKHAM .....	2
PART TWO: THOMAS HOBBS .....	4
PART THREE: BARUCH SPINOZA.....	6
CONCLUSION.....	9
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	10

## INTRODUCTION

For more than a thousand years after the death of Christ, the Catholic dogma of the authority of Tradition enjoyed an unmolested position in the Church. Early in the second millennium, however, the seeds of discontent were beginning to sprout as objections arose to the perceived corruption of the Church and unfounded dogmas that obscured the truth of the message of Jesus Christ. Philosophers and theologians in the Middle Ages capitalized on this growing unrest to further either their political or moral agendas. Religious men such as William of Ockham and Martin Luther were driven by what they considered to be an improperly ordered religious philosophy while individuals like Niccolo Machiavelli and Marsilius of Padua saw religion as merely a tool to gain control over an uneducated, superstitious proletariat.

Whatever the motivation to topple an entrenched hierarchy within the Church, once in motion, there would be no stopping the Reformation. Although most place the inception of the movement at the feet of Martin Luther, its true roots can be traced to his inspiration, a one almost William of Ockham. This paper will explore the growth of what has become known as the *via moderna* touching on the philosophies of three influential figures. Part one focuses on the nominalism of William of Ockham its implications for the future of Catholic philosophy. Part two examines Thomas Hobbes as he dehumanizes man and redefines God as a civil sovereign in his seminal work *Leviathan*. Finally, part three discusses how Baruch Spinoza charts a course to atheism that has made a lasting impact on biblical exegesis.

## PART ONE: WILLIAM OF OCKHAM

William of Ockham came on the scene in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century as vocal critic of John XXII whom he believed to be a heretic.<sup>1</sup> Deeming the papacy to be mired in corruption, he fled to Bavaria and set about examining the philosophy of the Church and unraveling some of its fundamental precepts. His nominalism would become the rallying cry of Martin Luther some 200 years later.

Ockham rejected the Aristotelian notion of universals concluding that there are only particulars. Thus, there are no species. Each object must be regarded intrinsic to only itself. Things may appear to belong to a species, but in actuality they only share common attributes.<sup>2</sup> For him, the assertion of a definitive, universal reality somehow renders the creator subservient to his creation.<sup>3</sup> The idea of this was so offensive to Ockham that he completely rejected the notion that there could be only one reality rightly ordered to the universe. The way the world exists is just one of a myriad options of which God could avail himself.<sup>4</sup> Viewed in this way, God's decisions are arbitrary, his will whimsical. "Christ could be incarnated as a stone, a block of wood, or even an ass, or more importantly, God could justify sinners directly without creating any specific habit in the individual."<sup>5</sup> By attempting to portray God as entirely omnipotent and without parameters, Ockham essentially renders him unknowable. God's decisions no longer have a basis in any measurable capacity. He has no boundaries, therefore rules simply no longer apply. The way things are is merely because that was the how he chose them to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2013), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Such a view has significant consequences on the nature of Christian philosophy which, up to this point, was largely based on realism. When the world is reduced to a set of semi-infinite particulars, nothing bears relation to anything else. It is far more difficult to draw conclusions based on the differences of objects than on their similarities.<sup>6</sup> What, then, are we to do with the Analogy of Being if we can no longer draw conclusions based on the analogous nature of objects? How do we participate in God's existence if we bear no relationship to him? Nominalism not only closes off our relationship with God, it also significantly limits scriptural exegesis by neutralizing spiritual readings of the text. A God who is fundamentally unknowable cannot impart spiritual truths of the written word. Devoid of universals, biblical interpretation can only exist in the literal-historical sense.<sup>7</sup> While it may have been unintentional and merely a reaction to the perceived injustices of a corrupt papacy, Ockham's rejection of universals reimagines the entire structure of our relationship with God.

Were it only for this, Ockham might be forgiven his righteous indignation and subsequent attempt to neutralize Aristotelian philosophy. Yet, in his reductionist view of philosophy, he leaves no room for metaphysics or physics. The only thing we can know with any surety is mathematics.<sup>8</sup> This elevation of mathematics to the rank of superior knowledge opened the door for minds such as Descartes and Hobbes to structure an entire movement of modern philosophy centered around the certitude of mathematical concepts effectively removing the mystery from Christianity and placing Jesus squarely within the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.

confines of history. The next section of this discussion will examine how Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* does just that.

## PART TWO: THOMAS HOBBS

Thomas Hobbes, who came on the scene three centuries later, is widely considered to be one of the founding fathers of modern biblical criticism.<sup>9</sup> He embraces Ockham's nominalism and sola mathematica and carries it much further. In his seminal work, *Leviathan*, he lays out a rather spartan philosophy of human nature asserting that thought and action are nothing more than "epiphenomena of the Galilean law of inertial motion."<sup>10</sup> He posited that human nature is firmly rooted in the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain; the way to power is mastery over these concupiscible and irascible appetites. This is the clear route to civil peace.<sup>11</sup>

It would seem Hobbes's regard for nobility of the human soul to be of little consequence. In fact, equates the voluntary motion of a human being with that of automata.

Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governes the world) is by the art of man as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an Artificial Animal. For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the begining whereof is in some principall part within; why may we not say, that all Automata (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch) have an artificiall life?<sup>12</sup>

Viewed through this lens, human nature is reduced to a sort of complex machine that is nothing greater than the sum of its parts. Since motion produces nothing else other than

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Morrow, "Leviathan and the Swallowing of Scripture: The Politics behind Thomas Hobbes' Early Modern Biblical Criticism," *Christianity and Literature* 61, no. 1 (2011): 34.

<sup>10</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 285.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Annotated Version of Leviathan with in-Depth Literary Analysis* (S. Skogen International, 2015), Kindle Edition, Locations 31–34.

itself, movement is merely an intrinsic act.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, an object is only available to us through the echoes of the impression it leaves on our senses. Sense becomes nothing more than the movement that occurs in our bodies when we apprehend an object. For Hobbes, there is no internal nature of a thing. There is no quiddity of an object. There are only the echoes of the impression the object leaves on our senses.<sup>14</sup>

Reason, as well, is reduced to the mathematics of subtracting or adding “parcels” for the names of things or ideas.<sup>15</sup> No longer a noble contemplative pursuit, reason becomes an instrument of our desires whereby we calculate how best to achieve what we want or avoid what we do not.<sup>16</sup> Further, the will is paramount for Hobbes. As we are ultimately made up of atoms moving in response to irascible and concupiscible appetites, we are compelled to behave only in so far as our atoms propel us.<sup>17</sup> There is no “good” or “bad.” There are only amoral actions and happiness lives only in the physical realm.<sup>18</sup> Such a bleak portrayal of existence leaves no room for a God who is knowable, who seeks communion with his creation.

What does this mean for biblical exegesis? Unfortunately, the implications are far-reaching. Driven by his political agenda, Hobbes sought to reposition Scripture entirely within an earthly context. For him, the absolute power of the sovereign is the primary goal of biblical exegesis.<sup>19</sup> The Bible becomes a tool by which the head of state can control the populace. As it no longer has any supernatural virtue, that which it contains is

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Location 82–83.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Location 88-89. "So that Sense in all cases, is nothing els but originall fancy, caused (as I have said) by the pressure, that is, by the motion, of externall things upon our Eyes, Eares, and other organs thereunto ordained."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Location 418–419.

<sup>16</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 302.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>19</sup> Morrow, "Leviathan and the Swallowing of Scripture," 39.

reduced to a sort of stratagem for civil peace. A good example of this is Hobbes's interpretation of the Kingdom of God. In his reading, it becomes a terrestrial kingdom, the kingdom of the people and, as there are multiple nations in the world, there are multiple Kingdoms of God.<sup>20</sup>

Hobbes was only able to assert this radical ideology by separating the Church from Scripture. Science becomes the new authority of the Bible.<sup>21</sup> He introduced the idea of *sola scriptura* to neuter the authority of the Church.<sup>22</sup> This created a vacancy at the head of the Christian community which was replaced by the political sovereign of the state. Dismantling Tradition in this way threw open the doors for countless reinterpretations of Scripture making revelation relativistic and, in some sense, capricious. As we will see in the next section, Baruch Spinoza continues Hobbes's mathematical-mechanical philosophy and secularization of Scripture in a radically different way.

### **PART 3: BARUCH SPINOZA**

Hobbes's contemporary, Baruch Spinoza, introduced the world to a drastic new philosophy that helped cement the historical-critical movement solidly within the framework of modern biblical exegesis. Dubbed, "the famous atheist" with a "monstrous" and "hideous" hypothesis, he systematically crafted the philosophy of extreme pantheism that effectively removed God from the picture.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>22</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Locations 4935–4937, "When God speaketh to man, it must be either immediately; or by mediation of another man, to whom he had formerly spoken by himself immediately. How God speaketh to a man immediately, may be understood by those well enough, to whom he hath so spoken; but how the same should be understood by another, is hard, if not impossible to know."

<sup>23</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 340.

Spinoza portrays the human condition as wretched and hopeless. “It lives in perpetual uncertainty, subject to the vacillation of fear and hope (*fluctuatio animi*).”<sup>24</sup> Dogma and doctrine only perpetuate this fear and, as such, Christianity must be reinvented without the superstitious entrapments of dogma.<sup>25</sup> He introduces his philosophy of “monism,” the assertion that God is everything in nature and cannot be separated from it. God IS nature. The way we come to know God is by reflecting on the mathematical-mechanical nature of existence.<sup>26</sup> By subsuming God within nature, Spinoza essentially eliminates the possibility of a supreme being that is outside of, or above, his creation.<sup>27</sup> The laws of nature become the new divine law. No longer is divine law dependent upon faith, it is firmly grounded in science, in provable facts and mathematical proofs.<sup>28</sup>

Scripture without God is a very different landscape. Prophecy and the miraculous can be shrugged off as fanciful imaginations of an uneducated, ancient people.<sup>29</sup> Skepticism becomes the standard of biblical interpretation. No longer are beliefs accepted on faith, they must be proven true through a scientific, evaluative process. An interesting ancillary side effect is the circular logic created by science proving faith. That which has been verified by science can no longer claim to be faith. Spinoza brilliantly yet mercilessly incapacitates faith, cutting off any hope of redemptive revelation.

Spinoza arrives at *sola scriptura* in a slightly different manner than Hobbes. Dogma he regards as superstitious and beneath human reason. Any evaluation of Scripture must

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<sup>24</sup> Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), Kindle Edition, Location 555–556.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 562–563.

<sup>26</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 350.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

be stripped of all allegorical and moral context. Any reading outside of one that is literal and historical only leads to confusion and misrepresentation of the text.<sup>30</sup> Here is where he inserts his political agenda. Only the educated are capable of rising above their passions to determine actual truths of Scripture.<sup>31</sup>

In his *Tractatus Theologicio-Politicus*, Spinoza argues that the only teachings relevant to the modern world are love of one's neighbor and love of God. For him, loving your neighbors means being tolerant of their beliefs and helping the needy. Love of God is obedience to the civil state.<sup>32</sup> Intimating that the only information the un-scholarly masses need to know are these two simple rules, Spinoza makes the Bible irrelevant, something that is more an historical curiosity than a revelatory text.

Spinoza's influence on not only modern biblical exegesis but on secular ideology as well is almost immeasurable. It is fascinating to see his ideas play out in the world around us. The curiosity of the Bible has replaced the reverence of it. Now firmly grounded in antiquity, it has become something only the superstitious and naïve believe in.<sup>33</sup> Well-educated, enlightened individuals look upon Christians condescendingly and with derision. The truly well-adjusted person embraces the ideologies of all, and truth is tractable. The only laws that matter are the ones mandated by the government, which knows better than the masses what is good for the world. Whatever else we might say about Spinoza, that his ideology was almost certainly realized is a conclusion that would be difficult to refute.

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<sup>30</sup> Harrisville and Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, Location 622-627.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 630-631.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey L. Morrow, "The Bible in Captivity: Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Politics of Defining Religion," *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 3 (2010): 297.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 298-299.

## CONCLUSION

Now that we have a brief snapshot of some of the leading minds of the *via moderna* we are able to see how the philosophy of the modern world was born, how it matured, and how it was fine-tuned. William of Ockham was a man devoted to his faith and passionate about his belief in a nominalist account of nature. I very much doubt he could foresee the dire consequences such an ideology had on Christianity in the upcoming centuries.

Thomas Hobbes embraced Ockham's idea that the only provable truths of the universe are mathematical ones. Because of this, the human being is nothing more than a complex automaton made up of atoms that seek only pleasure and avoid pain. There is no morality and the state must enforce strict rule over an animalistic, undisciplined populace. The Bible becomes a tool of the state; God is an earthly sovereign and Scripture is the playbook of the government.

Furthering the secularization of Scripture, Baruch Spinoza introduce the world to a radically different idea that God is nothing more than nature. The highest laws are natural ones and science is the pinnacle of truth. Anything in the Bible that can be debunked by science is an archaic belief of an ancient culture and is beneath the merits of an enlightened, modern society. This neutralizes an anagogical, revelatory reading of Scripture, resulting in the death of God and the birth of skepticism.

We must return to a pre-modern reading of the Bible if we are to rediscover God in any meaningful way. We must reject the belief that science is outside of Christianity and above God. We must reject a hermeneutic of suspicion and step off the precipice of doubt. Once we are in the air, God will not let us fall. Our faith will keep us aloft.

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