

**spinoza's compendium of
the grammar of the hebrew
language**

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*[W]e are to consider one Jewish tradition
as uncorrupt, namely the meaning of the
words in the Hebrew Language.*

Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* VII

Spinoza's *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language*¹ is a work that, despite the innovative spirit of its content and the ingenuity of its author, never came to shape modernity. It contains the impulse that could have changed our understanding of the Scriptures, based on no other sources than the meaning and the use of the Hebrew language. A project notably different from the Christian Hebraism of the Lutheran Reformation, as I will try to show here, it could have had ground-breaking consequences, had it ever found a scholarly audience to take it on.

To be sure, the European Enlightenment shed light on the superstitions, naïve beliefs, theological dogmatism and institutional clericalism, but less on what the Scriptures teach. What followed from a religion cleared of superstitions and dog-

matism after the Enlightenment, was not a new, more *enlightened* understanding of Scriptures, but the separation of religion from the biblical text. A religion of internality, which can tell us what a person feels, believes or reasonably thinks, but not what Scriptures teach. And a theology of historical-critical exegesis, which demonstrates great difficulty in providing historical truths with a necessity of meaning. What remained for our understanding of religion and Scriptures after the Enlightenment, were Reason and History. That is, the assumption that the universality of reason does not require a reference to a particular text. And the assumption that historical contingency reveals the complexity of a cultural history, rather than truths with a meaning of their own. Both critiques, the one of reason and the one of history, remain negatively determined in their relationship to the biblical text, without establishing a positive ground from where to discern the *thoughts* conveyed by the language in which the Scriptures were originally written.

In what follows, I give an account of the purpose of the *Compendium*, and a brief answer to Steven Nadler's question of "Aliquid remanet: What Are We to Do with Spinoza's *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*?"²

SCRIPTURES VERSUS ESTABLISHED RELIGION

The idea to turn Scriptures against religion, i.e. the meaning of words in the biblical text against established religious doctrines, can occur only to those aware of the chasm between them. Such occurred to Luther, after having learned some Hebrew, as he famously puts it: "The Hebrew language is the best and richest language of all. ... If I were younger I would want to learn this language, because no one can really understand the Scriptures without it. For although the New Testament is written in Greek, it is full of Hebraisms and Hebrew expressions. It has therefore been aptly said that the Hebrews drink from the spring, the Greeks from the stream that flows from it, and the Latins from a puddle" (Luther, *Table Talk*³). What made this linguistic turn in biblical scholarship possible, was the Hebrew revival in Christian Europe, i.e. the progressive recovery of Hebraica, first by the proto-reformation in Italy (with Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino), and then by the subsequent introduction of biblical Hebrew at all main universities across the Protestant United Provinces, Northern Germany and England by the mid-sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the 'Christian Hebraist' was to become the new academic, a scholar that not only teaches biblical Hebrew at a university, but translates biblical texts, interprets them, and compiles grammars of biblical Hebrew. By the end of the seventeenth century, the entire corpus of

rabbinic biblical commentaries had been translated into Latin, and the new Christian, mainly Protestant scholarship of biblical studies experienced a publishing boost of multilingual editions of the so called ‘polyglot Bibles’ (where Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Syriac versions of the same biblical passage were printed on one page, as in the Plantin Polyglot Bible from 1568), and of a considerable number of important grammars of biblical Hebrew: Reuchlin’s *De rudimentis hebraicis* (1509), which Luther used for his translation of the Bible; Franciscus Junius’s *Grammatica Linguae Hebraeae* (1590), written at Leiden, and used by Hugo Grotius and Peter Cunaeus; and Buxtdorf’s *Thesaurus Grammaticus linguae sanctae Hebraeae* (1609, 1620), which Spinoza had in his library, together with Vossius’s *Aristarchus: sive de arte grammatica* (1635), and numerous other publications of grammars of biblical Hebrew. In the Jewish community of Holland, grammars of Hebrew were printed in Portuguese, and often circulated as manuscripts within the community: Menasseh ben Israel, who entertained close relationships with Vossius, Grotius, L’Empereur, and Salmasius wrote his ‘lucid language’ *Sapha berura, hoc est Labia clara da grammatica hebraea* (written in 1621, published 1647); Isaac Morteira his ‘the craft of grammar’ *Melekheth Hadikduk* (1642); and many “other contemporaries of Spinoza were also engaged in the art of grammar,” including Mosse Rephael d’Aguilar (1659/60) and Selomoh de Oliveyra (1688/89)⁴.

Around the time when Spinoza, either wrote, or would have thought of writing, his *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language* (1674/75), it seems that everything relevant had already been done in terms of Hebrew scholarship and grammar, by Christian and Jewish scholars alike. From the late fifteenth century, Hebrew texts and grammars were progressively available to Christian scholars, and Luther’s *sola scriptura*, that is, the principle to interpret the Bible only with the biblical text itself and no longer with philosophy (scholastic Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism), had long since put the study of Hebrew at the core of Christian ministry.

The question here is: if there was no need for a new grammar of biblical Hebrew in the scholarly world of mid-seventeenth century Europe, what is, if anything new about Spinoza’s *Compendium*? Spinoza himself tells us that “there are many who wrote (a grammar) of the Scriptures, but none who wrote a grammar of the Hebrew language.”⁵ But, if “Spinoza apparently saw it as being the first true grammar of the Hebrew language, and not merely another grammar of Scripture,”⁶ what exactly is the difference then between a grammar of biblical Hebrew, and a grammar of the Hebrew language derived from the Bible? And more importantly, to what

purpose should such a ‘grammar of Hebrew language,’ be used? Put differently, let us imagine we follow Spinoza’s advice that “Without a thorough knowledge of Hebrew, we cannot properly understand the Bible” (*TTP* VII, 100-101), and learn Hebrew from his *Compendium*. What is it that we now understand differently and could not have seen in the text, had we learned biblical Hebrew from another grammar and followed another method of biblical hermeneutics than Spinoza’s?

HISTORY AND REASON

The answer provided by the existing scholarship to this question about the purpose of Spinoza’s *Compendium* is twofold. And, indebted as we are to our intellectual history, it is, not surprisingly, based on the patterns of the Enlightenment. The existing literature unwittingly shares these preconceptions, which inform the development of our understanding and interpretations of matters related to Scriptures, divided along the concepts of History and Reason. This description is, of course, a rough abbreviation of existing scholarly contributions on this topic. Nevertheless, the divide between historical and philosophical approaches to Spinoza’s *Compendium* in contemporary scholarship holds, as I think, regarding the expectations we have for a work to be understood in its purposiveness, and from where we draw a certain meaning, which gives us the reason for continuous reading and research.

The historical approach

The work of A.J. Klijnsmit draws on the grammarian traditions, and its early modern “reframing of Judaeo-Arabic grammar into the scheme of grammatical description of Latin and Greek.”⁷ Klijnsmit focuses on the analysis of various features of the Hebrew grammar in the *Compendium*, and understands Spinoza in the continuity of the Jewish Hebraists outside the mainstream Christian academia: “In the literature on Spinoza’s grammar the originality of his linguistic thought has been stressed, but I would like to show what his position is within Jewish grammatical tradition.” Klijnsmit’s account is a piece of linguistic erudition, showing that Spinoza “certainly was no ignoramus of grammatical matters” within the Jewish grammarian tradition. Or, as Shirley puts it, “Spinoza deserves to be called a philologist and grammatical scholar as well as a philosopher and a scientist.”⁸

The purpose, or novelty, of the *Compendium* would, from this perspective, be to provide us with an improved grammar of the Hebrew language, one that better reframes the specific structures of Hebrew into the pattern of the more classical scheme of grammatical descriptions. And no other scholar better than Klijnsmit provides such a detailed genealogy of the most important development in the Jewish grammarian tradition, tracing from medieval grammars of Hebrew to Spinoza's *Compendium*. Klijnsmit also notes a very important fact that I will return to later, namely, that Spinoza, in contrast to other Jewish grammarians, "doesn't include in his corpus postbiblical Hebrew to derive his (grammatical) rules from," and that "The *usus*, by which since Dionysius Thrax (c. 100 B.C.E.) the usage of language of generally accepted authors is meant, from which grammatical rules must be derived is for Spinoza, even more than for other Jewish grammarians, the Bible."⁹ I have no reservations about any of Klijnsmit's claims related to the grammar of Hebrew and the reframing of grammatical forms Spinoza introduces in the *Compendium*. I found it difficult, however, to see in such grammatical reframing the purpose and motivation for which Spinoza would have written the *Compendium*. I disagree on this one specific point: that Spinoza is reframing grammatical forms, making the grammar of the Hebrew language "normative and prescriptive," as Klijnsmit holds, "because Spinoza's aim was to teach active knowledge of Hebrew." It is centred upon a remark Spinoza makes in the *Compendium* while dealing with cantillation accents (the vowel notation system introduced by the Masoretes between 6th-10th centuries CE) and says that he won't consider them here, because they are not relevant for those "who desire to speak Hebrew, not cantillate it" (CGHL, IV, 25)¹⁰. I cannot agree with the understanding Klijnsmit, but also Harvey, have on what 'to speak Hebrew' means for Spinoza. It seems that both Klijnsmit and Harvey think of an 'active' use of the Hebrew language, in the sense we think of the use of modern living languages. But Spinoza's main effort in the *Compendium* consists in his attempts to retrieve, from the biblical text, the spoken Hebrew of biblical times, that is, Hebrew *without* the vowel notation system of the Masoretes that allows for cantillation, and as it was spoken by those who wrote the Scriptures, and understood by those who listened to the public Torah readings in Antiquity. And as Harvey rightly says, "He did not imagine he could retrieve lost Hebrew vocabulary (e.g., words for fruits, birds, fish), but was convinced that he could reconstruct lost grammatical forms by way of analogy"¹¹ This means that anything which is later than this ancient version of Hebrew, Spinoza saw as "irrelevant" for his project of retrieving spoken Hebrew from biblical times. Thus, when Spinoza refers to "those who desire to speak Hebrew," I take this to mean nothing else than when we say that someone 'speaks' Latin or An-

cient Greek: understanding the language of the original version of a text, as it was spoken at that time, however complex its linguistic history might have been, as in the case of the Bible, or of Homer and Cicero for that matter.

Similar difficulties regarding the purpose of the *Compendium* arise, in my view, with the work of Philippe Cassuto, another master of the Hebrew language, who clarifies for us the important place that not only the Hebrew language occupies in Spinoza's oeuvre, but also of the rabbinic commentaries to which Spinoza refers to throughout the *Ethics* and the *TTP*, without mentioning his sources. Cassuto also reminds us that we have lost the sense that the *TTP* originally quotes all biblical passages in Hebrew, and which contemporary editions have, contrary to Spinoza's intentions, replaced with translations into modern languages. Early English editions of the *TTP* were in fact printed with Hebrew quotes.

Cassuto's analysis of the purpose of the *Compendium* is not explicitly stated, but framed within his uncovering of the important place biblical Hebrew occupies in Spinoza's thought and the use of the *Rabbinica* for his work, as a reconciliation of the two worlds, the Latin and the Hebrew world: "Il s'agit là, à notre avis, d'une tentative unique de réunir ces deux mondes que, souvent, on considère comme séparés par un fossé infranchissable." (It is, in my view, the unique attempt to reunite these two worlds, which are usually considered as separated by an insurmountable abyss)¹²

The crossing of this dividing line that Cassuto uncovers in Spinoza between the world of philosophical conceptual language and the world of Hebrew wisdom literature certainly transforms our naïve understanding of those elements we consider universal in our interpretations of Spinoza's work, by assuming a fundamental difference between Spinoza and the rabbinic tradition. And one can only wish to have a commentary to Spinoza's *TTP* published in the form Cassuto proposes, with all the parallels of similar passages from rabbinic literature, from Ibn Ezra, Rashi or Maimonides, framed around Spinoza's text, as on a page from the Talmud. It is nevertheless a commentary that makes what has grown historically an object of further reflections and comments, but still doesn't answer our question about the purpose of Spinoza's *Compendium*. Reconstructing the historical structure of a work by uncovering its influences, is still different from re-thinking this same work and philosophically acting on it.

The philosophical approach

It was Warren Zev Harvey who, in his article “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Hebraism” (2002) pointed out the connections, and “striking parallels” between Spinoza’s metaphysics in the *Ethics* and his treatment of the noun in the *Compendium*, which according to Harvey “plays a role similar to that of God in the *Ethics*,” where “the substantive noun (i.e. the proper noun or the common noun) and the infinitive (‘a pure unadulterated noun’) correspond to *substantia*, adjectives and verbs to *attributa*, participles and adverbs to *modi*.”¹³ This is a valid observation that found some resonance among prominent Spinoza scholars. It is often taken up as a proof of relevance of the *Compendium* for philosophy, as by Curley, Nadler or Melamed, but without them going into any further analysis than already provided by Harvey. And indeed, one cannot go much further here if we take philosophy to be the criterion for our understanding of the purpose of the *Compendium*, since there are no other visible intersections between philosophy and Spinoza’s grammar of Hebrew.

We could, however, try to follow Harvey’s broader question that arises from such parallel, namely if there is not in Spinoza’s view “some potent metaphysical presuppositions about the Hebrew language.”¹⁴ One could see a reference to the rabbinic tradition here as expressed by Rashi, whom Spinoza calls *R. Selomo* (Rabbi Salomon) in the *TTP*, and *R. Shelomo Jarhi* in the *Compendium*: Rashi’s statement that “the world was created in Hebrew” (from Rashi’s *Commentaries on the book of Genesis*). But as for any other ‘topos’ from the Jewish tradition in relation to Spinoza, this one too tells us only that there is perhaps a connection, but not how exactly Spinoza understands these topoi, or how he eventually transforms them into novel claims. In this case of the parallel between metaphysics and language in the *Compendium*, we would also have to reconcile such assumption with Spinoza’s views on the universals in the *Ethics* (E IV, Pref), which would prove highly problematic. Put differently, and in relation to the history of philosophy, we would have then to place Spinoza’s *Compendium* and understand its purpose within the early modern project of a “universal language” from Bacon to Leibniz., that is, within the framework of the three questions that framed the seventeenth century philosophy of language: universal language, universal grammar, and the origins of language. And it would matter little, whether this universal language is Latin or Hebrew, composed of logical terms (*characteristica universalis*) or based on vernacular languages, as Esperanto was. It would in any case be based on logic, truth and universality as the language used by the Utopians in Thomas More’s *Utopia*.

Words would truly reflect reality and could serve as a common tie to the whole of humanity. A linguistic paradise. This is not, I argue, Spinoza's view. Neither on the concept of universality of words, nor on human or Jewish history. In fact, there is no support in the texts of Spinoza that would allow us to see in the *Compendium* another early modern search for the "lingua adamica," a kind of introduction to the universal language, as the key to mutual understanding once lost at Babel.

The philosophic-historical approach

The work of Giovanni Licata argues differently, but in a similar speculative vein. In his "Spinoza and the Universal Cognition of Hebrew. Grammatical Speculations and Demystification in the *Compendium*," (2009), Licata argues that: the *Compendium* is a decisively speculative work, which shows the coherence of Spinoza's thoughts: it shows that a perfect and thorough knowledge of biblical Hebrew, which is in fact the essential instrument for the historical-critical exegesis of the Bible, that is, for the critique of all superstitions of Christian and Jewish religious traditions in the *TTP*, actually represents Spinoza's theoretical attempt to isolate the structures and potentialities of the Hebrew language, and now *grammatically* express the concepts and thoughts of Spinoza's philosophy.¹⁵ Licata combines the historical-rationalist elements of grammar and philosophy into a speculative philosophy of language for his understanding of the *Compendium*.

Another possibility of such combination between history of language and reason was formulated earlier by Ze'ev Levy, in his "The Problem of Normativity in Spinoza's 'Hebrew Grammar,'" (1989) where, according to Levy, "Spinoza's proclaimed aim (for the *Compendium*) was to show that the determinism which reigns in nature and philosophy applies to the Hebrew language as well."¹⁶ Spinoza, in Levy's view, is trying to discover prescriptive (normative) grammatical rules, "which did not exist in the biblical text itself, in order to corroborate the allegedly inherent norms of Hebrew grammar."¹⁷

Both, Licata and Levy suggest a highly speculative reading of the *Compendium*, where a grammar of a language is understood as fully determined by ontology and metaphysics. And according to which the purpose of the *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language* would have been for Spinoza to express his metaphysical thoughts now in form of a language grammar. Here the idea of a philosophical reading is transformed into the assumption of its own ultimate foundation in

metaphysics. It is the assumption that the *Compendium* is lacking its own purposiveness, and needs to be determined through Spinoza's metaphysics.

Finally, to my knowledge the most recent book published on Spinoza's *Compendium*, *Hébreu – du sacré au maternel* (Hebrew – From sacred to Mother tongue) by Keren Mock (2016), represents another account of a philosophy of language, prefaced by Julia Kristeva, it is written in the tradition of psychoanalysis and semiotics.¹⁸

In sum, the existing scholarship derives the purpose of Spinoza's *Compendium* either from a given historical context: of linguistics or grammarian traditions, that is, from History. Or from its connections with philosophy: either philosophy of language or metaphysics, that is, from Reason. It proceeds along the same pattern with which the Enlightenment determined the scope of the interpretations of Scriptures. And this model seems to be a greater obstacle to overcome for the reader of the *Compendium* than the Hebrew language.

THE PURPOSE OF THE COMPENDIUM

The *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language* is the only work, besides the *Ethics*, which Spinoza supposedly intended to demonstrate 'more geometrico.'¹⁹ But the *Compendium* is unfinished²⁰, and the text we have is not demonstrated in geometric manner. We do not know how such a grammar of the Hebrew language would have looked like, but we do know that the choice of the geometric method, just like in the *Ethics*, would have claimed the apodeictic certainty of an 'exact science'; here of a science of the Grammar of the Hebrew language. Its first lines could have begun with Spinoza's definition of the noun: "By a noun I understand a word by which we signify or indicate something that falls under the intellect (*sub intellectum cadit*),"²¹ since all words in Hebrew have for Spinoza "a force of a noun,"²² i.e. a force of a signifier that falls under the intellect. It is uncertain even so, whether an accomplished project of the *Compendium*, written in geometric manner, would have had a different reception history, since the geometric method, as we know from the *Ethics*, does not explain to its readers the purpose of its undertaking.

From the text we have, it is nonetheless clear that the purpose of Spinoza's *Compendium* is, in the first place, for the reader to learn Hebrew from it. It would be a mistake to think that we could bypass this simple purpose of Spinoza's *Compen-*

dium, and let our judgement find its way around it, without acknowledging the fact that understanding occurs in the medium of language. Hence, to think out the consequences of learning Hebrew in the way Spinoza suggests is the next, and more compelling, question about the purpose of his *Compendium*. Such learning of the Hebrew language concerns, I argue, our better understanding of the Scriptures, that is, of the second of the two ‘separate,’ but *not* conflicting ‘footings’ upon which philosophy and Scriptures stand.²³ We know that Spinoza “found nothing in what *Scripture* expressly teaches that does not concur with our understanding and nothing that is in conflict with it.” (*TTP*, Pref. 9)²⁴

What is at stake then with Spinoza’s *Compendium* is the comprehension of *how* biblical texts do *not* conflict with our understanding. In other words, it is about the overturn of “our most powerful prejudices about religion,” this time not with the help of philosophy, where for Spinoza “teaching is nothing more than the speculations of the Aristotelian and the Platonists ... with the Greeks, to render the prophets equally nonsensical” (*TTP* Pref., 8), nor with traditional theology “to reduce religion to ridiculous mysteries and revile understanding as corrupt by nature” (*TTP* Pref., 8), but “to derive it from Scripture itself,” i.e., to turn Scriptures against established religious doctrines, now with the help of the meaning conveyed by nothing else than the Hebrew language.

Spoken Hebrew

Luther’s *sola scriptura*, which made the study of Hebrew a Christian duty, and for whom salvation was no longer to be sought through any other authority than the biblical texts themselves, has much in common, or so it seems, with Spinoza’s method of interpreting the Scriptures, according to which “we must derive all our knowledge of it and of spiritual matters from Scripture alone” (*TTP* Pref., 10). Both, Luther and Spinoza are convinced that without Hebrew, “no one can really understand the Scriptures ... For although the New Testament is written in Greek, it is full of Hebraisms and Hebrew expressions” (Luther, *Table Talks*)²⁵; or, in the words of Spinoza, “without a thorough knowledge of Hebrew, we cannot properly understand the Bible,” “because all the writers of both the Old and the New Testament were Hebrews undeniably the history of the Hebrew language is more essential than anything else not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament which were first written in this language, but also those of the New Testament. For while the latter were propagated in other languages, they are full of Hebrew idioms” (*TTP* VII, 100).

And yet, these two statements, from Luther and from Spinoza, which share a view on the necessity of knowing Hebrew for understanding what the Scriptures teach, reflect two very different positions: Luther is concerned with the knowledge of biblical Hebrew, that is, with the knowledge of Hebrew as we find it in the biblical text. For Luther, knowledge of biblical Hebrew is the final aim, and its result a translation of the Bible into modern languages, getting as close as possible to the original texts of Scriptures, as all modern translations of the Bible proceed²⁶. By contrast, Spinoza is concerned with the knowledge of *spoken* Hebrew from biblical times. For Spinoza, the biblical text represents a linguistic platform from where to ‘recover,’ as far as this can be done, ancient Hebrew as it was spoken by the authors of the Bible, and its meaning and connotations understood by its audience. And this is, Spinoza tells us, what his intention with the *Compendium* is, namely, that “There are many who wrote (of the grammar) of the Scriptures but none who wrote a grammar of the Hebrew language” (CGLH VII, 36), and the reason why “the history of the Hebrew language is more essential than anything else” (*TTP* VII, 100). For Spinoza, the result is knowledge of ancient spoken Hebrew, with no translation, getting as close as possible to the understanding of meanings conveyed by the Ancients.

Spinoza’s *Compendium* undertakes the transformation of the text back into language, where a written tradition is no longer a fragment of the past, but our immediate concern, insofar as this past has raised itself far beyond the meaning handed down to us by the Ancients, into an established ideality of words that constitutes the sphere we call ‘religion.’ Or to say it with Gadamer, “It is not at all a matter of securing ourselves against the tradition that speaks out of the text then, but, on the contrary, of excluding everything that could hinder us from understanding it in terms of the subject matter.”²⁷

The written word

The fact that the tradition is essentially verbal, or ‘spoken,’ had consequences for the interpretation of its written form for all three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And, in a sense, this was already the case for the written compilation of the tradition, i.e. the biblical canon, since the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Moses (or of the Torah), represents a commentary to the previous four books. This biblical tradition itself allows for comments from within its own matrix, enabling further comments, for which the prophets were in fact the first interpreters. Judaism preserves this verbal character through its oral

tradition of rabbinic commentaries and succession of teachers, allowing different interpretations and discussions throughout generations. Christianity preserves it through its view about the connection between understanding and interpretation, in the form of 'true' teachings, or *doxa*, that allows for a continuity, and which tries to translate the verbal character of tradition into a conceptual one. And Islam preserves the verbal character of tradition through the introduction of an interpreter who is contemporary with the text, the last prophet, trying to secure the immediacy of the spoken word in the succession of his followers.

From this point of view, of the verbal character of tradition based on the Hebrew Bible, as source of all monotheism, the question of language and meaning does not present itself in the way philosophy of language or historical exegesis raises it. Because the transformation of a written tradition back into its spoken language cannot mean here merely acknowledging what has been established, either historically or linguistically. Rather, the fact that the tradition is essentially verbal in character, means that *understanding* of the spoken word has always determined the very existence of that which is transmitted.

Spinoza's Method

If Spinoza's method, as I argue here, is different from the method of rabbinic commentaries in Judaism, and from the method of doctrinal teachings in Christianity, then his method offers an alternative to both. In Judaism, an alternative to the method based on the experience of the exile, trying to recover the meaning of the Written Law through the Oral Law. But also, an alternative to Jewish philosophy, where the meaning of tradition is recovered through the convergence of meanings with philosophy, whereby language represents an extreme challenge to their Jewish authors, i.e. an obstacle that is not actually possible to overcome. And in Christianity, an alternative to the method based on the experience of being separated from the older Hebrew tradition which Scripture originated from, and recovering its meaning through various attempts of transforming it into the universality of conceptual language, and where the variety of meanings and the apparent contradictions in the text, represent a major obstacle to Christian theologians that cannot really be overcome. When such contradictions are forced into the universality of conceptual language, the result is an uncompromising world of dogmas. In this sense, Judaism and Christianity figure both as two different forms of 'exile' literature preserving the meaning of the text from outside of it, and not from within.

The only way out, from such ‘exile’ literature, seems almost obvious: to regain the coherence of the verbal tradition through the language of Scripture itself. Without any external reference to unfold its meaning, be it an additional narrative of wisdom literature; the legal deductions of the praxis; or the wrapping into a concept of abstraction. The meaning of biblical texts resides in the vast field of its own language according to Spinoza. But this meaning becomes intelligible only in and through the language itself, that is, in Hebrew. “In fact, it is very difficult to alter the meaning of a word” and Spinoza is “thus wholly convinced, for these and other reasons, that it could never have entered anyone’s mind to corrupt a language” (*TTP VII*, 105), so that “we must investigate a passage’s sense only from its use of the language or from reasoning which accepts no other foundation than Scripture itself” (*TTP VII*, 100).

Spinoza’s method of interpreting biblical texts – “The universal rule ... for interpreting Scripture is to claim nothing as a biblical doctrine that we have not derived, by the closest possible scrutiny, from its own history” – includes first, “the nature and properties of the language,” and second, the history of each of the biblical books: the history of their transmission and canonization, and the history of their authors and their audiences.

On that account, Spinoza’s *Compendium* concerns the first of these two tasks, namely the knowledge of spoken Hebrew:

Firstly, such a history must include the nature and properties of the language in which the biblical books were composed and which their authors were accustomed to speak. We can then investigate all the possible meanings that every single phrase in common usage can admit; and because all the writers of both the Old and the New Testament were Hebrews undeniably the history of the Hebrew language is more essential than anything else not only for understanding the books of the Old Testament which were first written in this language, but also those of the New Testament. For while the latter were propagated in other languages, they are full of Hebrew idioms.
(*TTP VII*, 100)

The first sentence of this quote describes the content of the *Compendium*, where we find “the nature and properties of the language in which the biblical books were composed and which their authors were accustomed to speak,” that is, Spi-

noza's 'retrieved' spoken Hebrew in the *Compendium*, with its grammar and its properties. And the second sentence of this quote essentially summarises the task of the reader who is to learn Hebrew from the *Compendium*, namely, "to investigate all the possible meanings that every single phrase in common usage can admit" and, "organize them by subject so that we may have available by this means all the statements that are found on each topic." Thus, if we are to understand what 'religion' truly teaches, i.e. the biblical canon, "undeniably the history of the Hebrew language is more essential than anything else" (*TTP VII*, 100).

From all this, it follows that the actual question about the purpose of Spinoza's *Compendium* is: *How* are we "to stick to the literal sense" of words and "investigate all the possible meanings common usage can admit"? For instance, the common usage and literal meaning of the words: 'world,' 'whole,' 'inhabit,' 'beginning,' 'God,' or any other Hebrew word from the text. As Spinoza writes, "we are concerned here only with their meaning, not with their truth" (*TTP VII*, 100) and, "Moreover, in seeking the sense of Scripture we must take care especially not to be blinded by our own reasoning, in so far as it is founded on the principles of natural knowledge (not to mention our preconceptions)," which means that we are "not permitted to adjust the meaning of Scripture to the dictates of our reason or our preconceived opinions; all explanation of the Bible must be sought from the Bible alone" (*TTP VII*, 100). Spinoza's method of reading, which, at first sounds naively 'literal,' perhaps suffices, in fact, to overturn our "most powerful prejudices about religion."

Meaning of words

Every language embodies a coherent system of meanings, expressed through its grammar and linguistic features. The connotations, allusions or disruptions of meaning are all part of the convention that makes those who speak the language understand each other well. And although words signify concepts and things, they are not for Spinoza identical with the things they signify, but rather gain their meaning from the language that is alive in speech. This is demonstrated in Spinoza's example regarding the word 'fire,' where "we must first ask whether this unique expression, 'God is fire,' admits any but a literal sense, i.e., whether the word 'fire' has any other meaning apart from natural fire". Further, "the word 'fire' also stands for anger and jealousy (see Job 31.12), and therefore Moses' statements are readily reconciled, and we are justified in concluding that they are one and the same," "since Moses also plainly teaches, in many passages, that God has

no similarity with visible things” (*TTP* VII, 101).

Remember that “the purpose of the Scriptures” is not to teach us “language” (the Scripture does not provide us with a grammar of Hebrew, and, therefore, the necessity of writing one), but things, or “teachings” (CGHL XV, 90)²⁸. So that those who wish “to speak Hebrew” today (CGHL IV, 25), need to attain a “universal knowledge” of Hebrew (CGHL VIII, 40). And “While our method requires a knowledge of Hebrew and the common people likewise have no time to study that, no such objection weakens our position. For the Jewish and gentile common people for whom in their day the prophets and Apostles preached and wrote, understood their language so that they also grasped the prophet’s meaning,” so “that I can point to the common people who understood very well the language of the prophets and Apostles” (*TTP* VII, 114).

For his method of “universal knowledge,” Spinoza presents us in the *Compendium* with the ‘fundamentals’ that characterise the Hebrew language and from where he derives the grammatical rules, demonstrates its laws, explains its morphology, and comprehends its syntax. He speaks of ‘letters’ and ‘vowels,’ which are in Hebrew essentially different: the letters are the transcription of consonants, and vowels are signs, which help us read the consonants. Vowels, Spinoza tells us, are consequently “not letters” in Hebrew (CGHL I, 7). The biblical text is indeed originally written without vowels, that is, without the additional punctuation introduced later, around the seventh century by the Masoretes. Today, without the vowels, the text would be illegible to us. However, the words are intelligible to us because of the use of roots, composed of three, and sometimes two, consonants through which other words are created. It is the meaning of consonant roots in the Hebrew language, which, for Spinoza “we are to consider as incorrupt, namely the meaning of words in the Hebrew Language” (*TTP* VII, 105). From this perspective, the vocalisation system, introduced with the intention to preserve the oral tradition in its written form, necessarily confines the meaning of words in the text.

Because all words in Hebrew (nouns, adjectives, infinitives, prepositions) are subject to the same modifications introduced with the vocalisation system, as Spinoza convincingly argues, there are in biblical Hebrew no different parts of speech (as in Latin). Thus, all words in Hebrew are originally ‘nouns’ according to Spinoza. What we usually understand as a verb for instance, does not apply here, since infinitives are modified, through the vocalisation rules, in the same way as

nouns.

Hence, what matters most for our understanding of the purpose of the *Compendium* is Spinoza's definition of the noun: "By a noun I understand a word by which we signify or indicate something that falls under the intellect (*sub intellectum cadit*). However, among things that fall under the intellect, there can be either things and attributes of things, modes and relationships, or actions, and modes and relationships of actions. Hence, we sum up easily the various kinds of nouns. ... There are then six kinds of nouns: I the substantive noun, which is divided into the proper and the common. II the adjective. III the relative or preposition. IV the participle. V the infinitive. VI the adverb" (CGHL V, 28). It is by means of reconstructing the vocalisation rules that Spinoza seeks to recover the spoken Hebrew that lies, as it were, concealed behind the vowels of the written text. In a finished version of the *Compendium*, we would presumably have the vocalisation rules demonstrated in 'geometric order,' derived from Spinoza's definition of a noun. Thus, contrary to the assumptions made in the literature about normativity and Spinoza's metaphysics, nothing else than this ordering and retracing of vocalisation rules make his grammar 'prescriptive' or 'normative': "For all Hebrew words, except for a few interjections and conjunctions and one or two particles, have the force and properties of nouns. 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" (CGHL V, 28).

We can say therefore, that what 'falls under the intellect' in the Hebrew language is the consonant root, whose meaning is shared by all words derived from the same root. This meaning, together with its connotations and disruptions, which fall under the intellect, were well understood by the authors of the Scriptures and by "the common people who understood very well the language of the prophets and Apostles."

Examples

In the following, I bring first, two examples given by Shmuel Trigano in his book *L'Hébreu, une philosophie*, and for whom Spinoza allegedly plays an important role.²⁹ And second, the example of the word we translate as 'God.'

Root: *Alam* – to disappear, to be hidden

Neelam: non-visible, hidden; *Ilem*, *heelim*: to hide, to recover; *Hitaleem*: to disappear, to ignore, to neglect; *Alum*: unknown; *Olam*: world, extension; *Elem*: young, adolescent; *Alma*: young girl, non-married; *Almut*: youth.

When the word ‘world’ is used in biblical Hebrew, its author and its audience will hear a connotation of something that is in disappearance, something that is hidden: that the world manifests itself in disappearance, in the impossibility of taking hold of it, in the absence of its materiality, as it were. The identity of an adolescent is hidden within the person she is to become as an adult. An adolescent is a hidden person, unknown or absent to herself. A transitory state, which is bringing birth to what is hidden, as in *Isaiah 7:14*, where a young girl, the *Alma*, will give birth to a child. The Septuagint, the Latin version of the biblical text, translates *Alma* as *gr. parthenos/virgin*, because it was not thought that something of this world/*Olam* can give birth to something pure. The biblical audience understood it differently. The expression ‘*olam haba*,’ usually translated as ‘the world to come,’ and which some understood as a world separate from this one (afterlife), is in Hebrew simply a ‘world in coming,’ that is, the world as it will eventually be in future due to our ethical and intellectual efforts to better it. The ‘rewards’ of such efforts, are nothing else than the real possibility of changing the present.

If we just ‘stick’ to the literal sense of the root *Alam*, as Spinoza proposes, we have, among other meanings: a world, which does not manifest itself in its materiality; a simple young girl, who gives birth to a real child; and a conception of a future, which is dependent solely upon our actions in the present. The Scriptures teaches nothing mysterious: “For the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most everyday language, since they are very common and extremely simple and easy to understand” (*TTP VII*, 111).

Root: *Kol* – the whole

Kalah: a finite being, accomplished; *kilah*: to finish, to destroy; *kalah*: extinction, extermination, wholly; *kaleh*: transitory, temporary, ephemeral; *kalah*: the bride, the daughter-in-law.

When something is said to be ‘whole’ in the text, the audience would have heard ‘something that is about to destroy itself.’ A warning that, eventually, totality always contains its own end. Any totality is finite, its character ephemeral: the apogee, the entelechy, the apotheosis is prone to auto-destruction, if we succumb to

the temptation of totality/the ‘whole.’ To the ‘whole’ of Israel, there is always a ‘rest’ in the tradition, a rupture of totality that keeps the whole alive.

The ‘bride’ is perhaps the destruction of the totality of an ego, which makes place for the other. And the ‘daughter-in-law,’ the destruction of the bond between mother and son. Whatever the Ancients might have heard in it, the connection between totality/the whole and destruction/finitude is essential to all words derived from this root.

According to Spinoza, to clearly understand what the Scriptures teach, we do not need to investigate the truth of this relationship (of finitude and totality, or of any other), only the meaning of words, for “we are concerned here only with their meaning, not with their truth” (*TTP VII*, 100). The advantage of such method of meanings, conveyed only through the Hebrew language, is that it precisely implies a particular content, which we can understand clearly (since we can understand the relationship between totality and finitude without asserting its truth) and which has a force of a signifier that falls under the intellect. Namely, “those topics that are accessible to the intellect and of which we can readily form a clear conception. For matters that by their nature are easily grasped can never be so obscurely phrased that they cannot be readily understood, according to the saying, a word is enough for a wise man” (*TTP VII*, 110).

Almost needless to say, if we follow Spinoza’s method of ‘literal reading,’ every single meaning we usually attribute to ‘religion’ (creation, salvation, blessing, messiah, love, knowledge, revelation, miracles, soul, and all others) would appear in a wholly new light, transformed into a meaning of ordinary language, intelligible to everyone as it must have been in biblical times, since “this method requires no other light than that of natural reason” (*TTP VII*, 111). This includes the meaning of the word we translate as ‘God,’ and which represents the name of names in the Scriptures, or as Harvey rightly notes, the noun of nouns for Spinoza, that is, the *Tetragrammaton*.³⁰

Root: *hyh* – to be, to become, to exist, to accompany, be with

The verb ‘to be’ is understood here as the naming of “a being that has always existed, exists, and will always exist, and for this reason Moses calls him by name, which in Hebrew expresses these three tenses of existence” (*TTP II*, 36), namely as expressing the past, present and future tense of the verb ‘to be.’ The name of names, the *Tetragrammaton*, refers to pure being. This distinguished name in the

Scripture, which refers to the infinity of existence, gives the name to all other names, that is, to all other instances, which are put in relationship to finite beings. In other words, in the biblical text, there is no such noun as ‘God,’ but one distinguished name (a noun in the form of a verb) for pure being, and other names (nouns in the form of adjectives, or of a definite noun, which is always defined grammatically through its relations to a particular thing), which designate a reference to pure being in relation to finite beings. References to pure being include: El (true divinity), Elohim (creative power, principle of justice), Adonai (Lord, i.e. the name for the privileged name), Hashem (Name), El Shaddai (the One that suffices), El Elyon (the Highest), Shekhinah (the presence of the distinguished name, or of infinite being in the world) or Hamakom (the Place where the infinite being dwells), which are all expressing multiple perspectives of the one and the same distinguished name *as* we know it according to the description of the prophets in the text, and to which Spinoza refers to in his discussion on prophecy in the *TTP* as ‘attributes.’ In brief, for what we usually translate as ‘God we have in the text of the Scriptures nothing more than one word with the meaning of pure being in the form of a verb, and other words in relation to it in the form of adjectives or definite nouns, with the meaning of different modes of this same (verb) being. Nothing else does the Scripture teach. And however surprising this might sound to us, there is no ‘God’ in the text, i.e. no noun that corresponds to the Greek ‘Theos’ or the Latin ‘Deus,’ if we keep the literal meaning of words, only pure being and modalities (ways) of being.

What the prophets knew, Spinoza tells us, is the “moral certainty” that follows from this, from the fact that what is truly divine is not a pharaoh, the sun, or anything other than pure being. The Scripture is not a philosophical treatise, but is nevertheless based on the most abstract concept of being, and for which Tacitus could say that they, the ancient Hebrews, “have ideas quite the opposite (of Egyptians). The Egyptians worship many animals and monstrous images; the Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: Iudaei mente sola unumque numen intellegunt” (Tacitus, *Historiae*, Book V, 5)³¹.

CONCLUSION

These examples of Hebrew words and remarks suffice to give us a sense of some connotations of meanings the biblical authors and audience would have been familiar with, and which no translation of the Hebrew language, however close to the text, as the remarkable translation by Buber and Rosenzweig into German for

example, will ever be able to convey to us. For Spinoza, only the Hebrew language in its spoken form can provide us with an understanding of ‘what falls under the intellect,’ that is, of anything that can ever become an object of thought. Without such ‘universal knowledge’ of Hebrew, we have little to say about the content of teachings handed down to us by the Ancients.

What would have happened if our intellectual history had taken up Spinoza’s *Compendium*, is no ‘reformation’ of religion, but indeed “the overturn of our most powerful prejudices about religion,” a revolution that “Admittedly ... because the path it shows to be the true and right one was never cultivated, or even ventured on, by men, so that owing to the passage of time, it became arduous and almost impassable, as is eminently clear, I think, from the difficulties that I have pointed out” (*TTP VII*, 111). The purpose of Spinoza’s *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language* is precisely this, a shift that could provide a common ground to all three monotheistic religions, and finally shed light on what the Scriptures truly teach. For “I make this chief distinction between religion and superstition, that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on knowledge” (Ep. 21).

Before I close this paper, just a brief comment to Nadler’s question of “Aliquid remanet: What Are We to Do with Spinoza’s *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*?”³² Nadler’s article is a reaction to the fact that the most recent English edition of *Spinoza’s Collected Works* (Curley 2016) did not include the *Compendium*. It was to this fact that I commented on in the introduction to this paper presented at a workshop held at Western Sydney University in 2016, but decided to leave out here. Because it should not be a question of *whether* to publish a work written by Spinoza, *whether* to acknowledge the existing scholarship, however small, on the *Compendium*, and *whether* to withdraw the text from any future research by upcoming scholars, as Curley decided to do. It is the most alarming sign, in my view, of us having entered into the kind of oblivion which philosophical thinking faces each time when we forget, as Gadamer puts it: “that in understanding the texts of great thinkers, a truth is known that could not be attained in any other way, even if this contradicts the yardstick of research.”³³

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NOTES

Endnotes

1. *Compendium Grammatices Linguae Hebraeae* (CGLH), Carl Gebhardt, Spinoza Opera I, (Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1925), 283-403.
2. Steven Nadler, “Aliquid remanet: What Are We to Do with Spinoza’s *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56:1 (Johns Hopkins University Press 2018), 155-167.
3. Martin Luther: *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, WA TR 1 from the first half of the 1530’s, (Weimar, 1883–2009), p. 525: Wenn ich jünger wäre, so wollte ich diese Sprache lernen, denn ohne sie kann man die h. Schrift nimmermehr recht verstehen Darum haben sie recht gesagt: Die Ebräer trinken aus der Vornquelle; die Griechen aber aus den Wässerlin, die aus der Quell fließen; die Lateinischen aber aus der Pfitzen.»
4. Anthony J. Klijnsmit, *Spinoza and Grammatical Tradition*, (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 3.
5. I am using here the only translation available in English of Spinoza’s *Compendium* from Maurice J. Bloom: *Baruch Spinoza, Hebrew Grammar* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) p. 36. The *Compendium* in Shirley’s *Complete Works of Spinoza* (Hackett Publishing 2002) is a reprint of Bloom’s translation.
6. Warren Zev Harvey, “Spinoza’s Metaphysical Hebraism.” *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*. Eds Lenn E. Goodman and Heidi M. Ravven. (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2002) 108.
7. Anthony J. Klijnsmit, “Some Seventeenth Century Grammatical Descriptions of Hebrew.” *Histoire, Épistémologie, Langage* 12:1 (1990) 77-101.
8. Samuel Shirley, *Spinoza – Complete Works*. Foreword to the Hebrew Grammar. (Hackett, Indianapolis, 2002) 584.
9. Klijnsmit, *Spinoza and Grammatical Tradition*, 5.
10. Reference to the *Compendium* with chapter and page number here as CGLH for Bloom, M. transl., *Baruch Spinoza, Hebrew Grammar* (Philosophical Library, New York, 1962), p. 25
11. Harvey, (2002) 108.
12. Philippe Cassuto, *Spinoza hébraïsant*. (Leuven: Peeters, 1999) 125.
13. Harvey, (2002) 110.
14. Harvey, (2002) 111.
15. Giovanni Licata, “Spinoza e la *Cognitio Universalis* Dell’Ebraico. Demistificazione e Speculazione Grammaticale nel *Compendio di Grammatica Ebraica*.” *Giornale di Metafisica*, Nuova Serie – XXXI (2009), 626 (my emphasis and translation).
16. Ze’ev Levy, *Baruch or Benedict: On Some Jewish Aspects of Spinoza’s Philosophy*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) chap. 6, 59.
17. Ibid.
18. Keren Mock, *Hébreu – du sacré au maternel*, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016)
19. Jarig Jellesz in the Preface to Spinoza’s *Opera Posthuma* (1677).
20. Spinoza wrote thirty-three chapters of the first part of the *Compendium* (on phonetics, alphabet, morphology), and of which the last chapter is unfinished; the second part (on syntax) remained unwritten.
21. CGHL, V, 28 (Bloom transl.): “I shall now explain what I understand by a noun. By a noun I understand a word by which we signify or indicate something that is understood. However, among things that are understood there can be either things and attributes of things, modes and relationships, or actions, and modes and relationships of actions”.
22. Ibid. :”For all Hebrew words, except for a few interjections and conjunctions and one or two particles, have the force and properties of nouns. Because the grammarians did not understand

this they considered many words to be irregular which according to the usage of language are most regular, and they were ignorant of many things which are necessary to know for a proper understanding of the (Hebrew) language”.

23. The edition for all references to the *TTP* is: Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Ed. and trans. Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne, (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

24. A century later, Moses Mendelssohn is making a similar claim, namely that there is nothing in the Hebrew Scriptures that “argues against reason”, in: Moses Mendelssohn, *Correspondenz mit dem Erbprinzen von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel* [Correspondence with the hereditary prince of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel], 1776.

25. Martin Luther: *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, WA TR 1* from the first half of the 1530’s, (Weimar, 1883–2009), p. 525

26. For the history of Hebrew in Christianity see Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, (Eerdmans Publishing, 1984).

27. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York, London: Continuum, 1975) 272.

28. Spinoza formulates it as follow: “I do not know whether they (the grammarians) believed the purpose of the Scriptures to be the language rather than the teachings”, CGLH, XV, 90

29. Shmuel Trigano, *L’Hébreu, une philosophie*, (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2014)

30. Harvey, (2002) 110.

31. Tacitus, *Histories: Books IV-V*, transl. Clifford H. Moore (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1931) 183: “They bury the body rather than burn it, thus following the Egyptians’ custom; they likewise bestow the same care on the dead, and hold the same belief about the world below; but their ideas of heavenly things are quite the opposite. The Egyptians worship many animals and monstrous images; the Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man’s image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end”.

32. Steven Nadler, “Aliquid remanet: What Are We to Do with Spinoza’s *Compendium of Hebrew Grammar*?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56:1 (Johns Hopkins University Press 2018), 155-167.

33. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York, London: Continuum, 1975) Introduction, xxi: “The naïve self-esteem of the present moment may rebel against the idea that philosophical consciousness admits the possibility that one’s own philosophical insight may be inferior to that of Plato or Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant or Hegel. One might think it a weakness that contemporary philosophy tries to interpret and assimilate its classical heritage with this acknowledgment of its own weakness. But it is undoubtedly a far greater weakness for philosophical thinking not to face such self-examination but to play at being Faust. It is clear that in understanding the texts of these great thinkers, a truth is known that could not be attained in any other way, even if this contradicts the yardstick of research and progress by which science measure itself”.