

Susan James. *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*.

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There has been a recent swell of interest in Benedict de Spinoza's 1670 *pièce d'occasion*, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, which intervened in public debates in the Netherlands (then the United Provinces) in ardent defense of the freedom to philosophize and express political dissent in a climate of religious and political instability. Since such debates mutate rather than disappear, it is unsurprising that we should seek insight from compelling historical figures. For today's reader, however, the *Theological-Political Treatise* is not very accessible. In addition to the interpretive complexities proper to any philosophical work, the particular theological conflicts, the political sensitivities operative at the time, and the detailed discussions of scripture and its rabbinic interpreters are alien to many current readers. Susan James's study, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, illuminates some of the darkest corners of the *Treatise*, treating Spinoza's arguments concerning the appropriate relationship among philosophy, politics, and religion as part of "ongoing conversations and debates" (4). She succeeds brilliantly at "reconstruct[ing] the variety of interconnecting polemics that organize the *Treatise*" (5). This is a wonderful service to today's reader, since we are likely both unfamiliar with the nuances of the political and theological positions maintained by Spinoza's contemporaries and unequipped to make sense of their motivations and principles. Thus, James produces the first study to present the *Treatise* as a whole in its relationship to the doctrines and political ambitions of Dutch Calvinists, and to the most audible alternatives of the period (especially Cartesians and Arminians). Her book is indispensable for making sense of the particular tactics and aims Spinoza brings to his "fight against a powerful and entrenched outlook" (4).

James allows us to better grasp how Spinoza's arguments were disguised (disguises that are much more effective for the contemporary reader than for his contemporaries) assaults on the views and policies of, especially, the Dutch Reformed Church. She also develops interpretations of Spinoza's philosophy that are sure to be controversial among scholars. Most obviously, in contrast to influential portraits, James does not see Spinoza as an unrelenting critic of religion (213). Many readers celebrate Spinoza as an uncompromising atheist who understands a pious life as, at best, an ersatz version of the good life appropriate to those incapable of philosophy, or, worse, a pernicious tool cynically employed by the powerful to enslave the many. James, however, affirms the necessity that all human beings, capable of philosophizing or not, rely on imaginative narratives to guide their daily life. She also provides a compelling outline of the spiritual affinity between the views that Spinoza defends rationally in *Ethics*, his magnum opus, and his account of the essential features of true religion (199). Although James presents Spinoza as a pugilist, engaged in a kind of battle, she does not represent religion, theology, or even the institutional Church as the enemies against which Spinoza is fighting. She presents Spinoza's position in very subtle terms, more difficult to grasp than the currently popular labels of *heretic*, *atheist*, or *secularist* allow.

Since James opted to provide “an overall picture” of Spinoza’s text, its arguments, and their context, a number of dark corners remain. In particular, her approach portrays the rabbinic interpreters only as stand-ins for Spinoza’s Christian contemporaries (chapters 6–7). Although it is true that Spinoza’s complaints about Rabbis Maimonides and Alpakhar are partly directed at his contemporary opponents, it strikes me as reductive to treat the conversations and debates into which Spinoza is intervening as exclusively Christian. One will not learn much from this study about Spinoza’s relationship to Jewish contemporaries or traditions. Nevertheless, James provides much needed historical context and offers compelling reasons to revise currently popular portraits of Spinoza.

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