He was widely condemned in his own lifetime as an atheist, a label that continued to adhere to him long after his death. In other circles he became known as the “God infatuated man”. Many looked upon him as a perverse individual, a corrupter of social morals. Others viewed him as the very model of the saintly philosopher. He was the mutual enemy of Church and Synagogue. He was the hero of those seeking to free themselves from the shackles of the clerical establishment and from adherence to religious “orthodoxy”. If from among the philosophers studied here, Maimonides is the one whose philosophy gave rise to the most conflicting interpretations, the 17th century Dutch Jewish philosopher, Spinoza (1632-1677), is the one whose philosophy elicited the most conflicting sentiments. It is easy to understand why he was so maligned at a time when the vast majority of the population still remained deeply committed to a religious creed. It is also easy to understand why he was viewed with growing admiration as the Western world became increasingly secular and liberal in its outlook.¹

¹ There is an immense bibliography on the philosophy of Spinoza and the history of its reception. For a recent excellent collection of essays devoted to different aspects of his thought see David Garrett ed., The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996). The classic, though controversial, study of Spinoza’s views on religion and politics is the 1930 work of Leo Strauss in German, which was translated by E. M. Sinclair, Spinoza’s Critique of Religion (New York: Schocken Books, 1965). I find myself in basic agreement with Strauss’s basic approach, though not on many of the particulars. For a more recent study dealing with Spinoza’s political-theological thought see in particular Steven B. Smith, Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity (New Haven: Yale University, 1997). See also Yirmiyahu Yovel, Spinoza and Other Heretics, 2 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989).
Spinoza was very much an individualist. He left the Synagogue before it formally cut him off from its midst, but he never joined the Church. He refused an academic position out of fear that it would fetter his teaching rather than provide him with a more conducive setting to develop and promulgate his thought. He continued to earn his livelihood by grinding lenses instead. He possessed a strong sense of social responsibility, but basically desired to be left alone. He wanted to enlighten his contemporaries but feared their reactions to his teachings. He published his major theological work, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* anonymously (though the public soon discovered who was the author), and arranged for his philosophical *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, to be published only after his death. It appears that his main desire in the former work was to make the world a better and safer place for philosophers. He postponed the publication of the latter work because he realized that there was still quite a distance for society to travel until this will be the case.

I indicated in the introduction to this book that the inclusion of Spinoza here is a problematic one. If Jewish philosophy is defined as rational conceptual schemes advanced by Jews regarding the meaning of Judaism, or of an essential aspect of Judaism, developed by them for the purpose of enlightening their coreligionists, then Spinoza deserves to be left out. He did not appear to be at all concerned with the enlightenment of his fellow Jews. He was concerned with the enlightenment of the dominant Christian society. He wrote *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in a language known by few Jews but by all educated Christians in the West — Latin. Even if we broaden our definition of Jewish philosophy so as to disregard the consideration of the intended audience, it is still not clear that Spinoza should be included. He apparently no longer regarded himself as a Jew, and certainly the main purpose of his work was not to elucidate the nature of Judaism. What he said about Judaism and the Bible was ultimately for the purpose of advancing what was for him a more important objective, one largely political in nature. That is,

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2 All references to this treatise in the chapter are to the translation of Samuel Shirley (with an introduction by Brad S. Gregory) published by E.J. Brill (1991). Latin citations are taken from Carl Gebhardt’s edition in: *Spinoza Opera*, III (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitats, 1925).