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A Book Forged In Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise And The Birth Of The Secular Age



Synopsis

When it appeared in 1670, Baruch Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise was denounced as the most dangerous book ever published--"godless," "full of abominations," "a book forged in hell . . . by the devil himself." Religious and secular authorities saw it as a threat to faith, social and political harmony, and everyday morality, and its author was almost universally regarded as a religious subversive and political radical who sought to spread atheism throughout Europe. Yet Spinoza's book has contributed as much as the Declaration of Independence or Thomas Paine's Common Sense to modern liberal, secular, and democratic thinking. In *A Book Forged in Hell*, Steven Nadler tells the fascinating story of this extraordinary book: its radical claims and their background in the philosophical, religious, and political tensions of the Dutch Golden Age, as well as the vitriolic reaction these ideas inspired. It is not hard to see why Spinoza's Treatise was so important or so controversial, or why the uproar it caused is one of the most significant events in European intellectual history. In the book, Spinoza became the first to argue that the Bible is not literally the word of God but rather a work of human literature; that true religion has nothing to do with theology, liturgical ceremonies, or sectarian dogma; and that religious authorities should have no role in governing a modern state. He also denied the reality of miracles and divine providence, reinterpreted the nature of prophecy, and made an eloquent plea for toleration and democracy. A vivid story of incendiary ideas and vicious backlash, *A Book Forged in Hell* will interest anyone who is curious about the origin of some of our most cherished modern beliefs.

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Customer Reviews

About 25 years ago, I was engaged in serious graduate study in philosophy and preparing to write a dissertation on Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise (1670). I have had a lifelong interest in Spinoza and was interested in the Treatise because of the questions of how to interpret texts it raises in terms of its treatment of the Bible. Also, at the time, the Treatise was receiving far less attention than Spinoza's most famous work, the Ethics. I never completed the dissertation but retained my interest in Spinoza and the Treatise. The Treatise has received substantial attention since the time I was closely engaged with it. Historian Jonathan Israel has written a trilogy of lengthy, difficult books showing the great influence of Spinoza and the Treatise on Enlightenment thought and on the French and American Revolutions. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790*. Steven Nadler's new study, "A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age" (2011) is much more accessible than Israel's study and has a different focus.

The name Spinoza is well known although his books may not have been widely read in modern times. Even so, he is likely to be known as the Jewish philosopher who believed in pantheism. What was his philosophy and how did he come to embrace it? The first question is best answered by reading his two famous books, "Ethics" and "Theological-Political Treatise" ("TPT"). Steven Nadler, however, answers both questions in his 242-page book, "A Book Forged in Hell" ("BFH") in a lucid and exciting exposition which also provides a splendid biography of Baruch Spinoza, A Sephardic Jew who started in his family's dried fruit business and ended as an ex-communicated man whose masterpiece was placed in the Catholic Church's index of banned books. Spinoza started on "Ethics" but before he could finish it he was digressed to work on TPT. In "Ethics" he exhorted us to be free from irrational passions such as hope and fear, and from superstition. In TPT he exhorted the state to permit the freedom of expression and to philosophize. One reason why Spinoza is not better recognized is the lack of accurate translations of his works. That is why Nadler's book is such a welcome addition. Spinoza was strongly against sectarian religion and an anthropomorphic God. He also opposed the accusation that he was an atheist. He believed in religion, but his God is not a God who has human traits like love, anger and jealousy. He believed that God is Nature. To Spinoza, everything is reducible to Nature, and thus his God is everything and everywhere. It is not a distinct being that requires or indulges in dialogue with man. Hence Spinoza's religion is generally classified as a form of pantheism.

If Spinoza's highly neglected but highly influential "Theological-Political Treatise" exemplifies the publishing output of Hell, then we clearly need to see more books forged from this fount of human imagination. The "scandalous treatise," roundly condemned in its time, broke many hallowed boundaries and arguably influenced many who would architect new political systems that applauded toleration and freedom of expression. None of this helped Spinoza in his own time, of course. He found himself unjustifiably labeled an "atheist." Meanwhile, his peers, some of whom he thought should have known better, ridiculed the work as blasphemous either out of self preservation or genuine repugnance. Nonetheless, his reputation increased in unofficial channels. Many of the day's leading lights sought correspondence with him, though some were abhorred by the audacity of the ideas they found. Some found the devil himself in print. These same ideas that once summoned the depths of damnation don't always present themselves in an accessible manner to today's reader. As such, those lacking a background in philosophy or 17th century Dutch history may find the works of Spinoza forbidding and impenetrable. Just open up his most famous work, "The Ethics," to get a taste. Many would justifiably find their interests squashed by reading a mere page of this quasi-geometrical work filled with seemingly abstruse metaphysics that speaks of "God" in a manner that still seems arcane. Though the "Theological-Political Treatise" presents fewer challenges than "The Ethics," it nonetheless has its own difficulties that could hinder an unguided reading. Spinoza's work shares the same fate of many historical philosophical masterpieces: it's far easier to read about these works than it is to read the works themselves.

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