

PROPHECY AND SOVEREIGNTY IN HOBBS'S *LEVIATHAN*

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the topic of prophecy in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* with an eye toward its relationship to other fundamental aspects of his teaching. In particular, it attempts to situate Hobbes's account of prophecy within the larger, scientific and political, framework of his thought. Such an effort, it is argued, is indispensable for a proper understanding of *Leviathan* and, therewith, Hobbes's mature philosophy. In order to study prophecy in *Leviathan*, it is necessary to approach it from a variety of angles. First, in Chapter 2, prophecy is investigated as a form of knowledge. The dissertation begins therefore by placing prophecy within the context of Hobbes's theory of knowledge. Second, in Chapter 3, the meaning of the distinction that Hobbes makes between the natural and prophetic halves of his book is considered by attending to Chapter xxxi, the final chapter of the first half of *Leviathan*, which constitutes Hobbes's account of natural religion. On the basis of an understanding of religion from the perspective of nature, the dissertation moves on to consider the prophetic half of the work. In particular, it begins, in Chapter 4, with a thorough account of the transition to the second half in Chapter xxxii, followed, in Chapter 5, by an account of Hobbes's view of scripture in Chapter xxxiii. Coming to terms with Hobbes's account of scripture is necessary, it is argued, because the Bible is, according to Hobbes, the only access human beings have to prophecy since the Pentecost and until the Second Coming. The status of prophecy, in other words, depends crucially on the status of scripture. Finally, prophecy is considered from a political point of view by investigating Hobbes's notion of the "sovereign prophet." In this way,

Hobbes's view of prophecy is accounted for in such a way that his epistemology, ontology, and politics are all brought into contact with his religious teaching in order to provide the greatest possible insight into the place of prophecy in Hobbes's teaching.

TO MY GRANDMOTHER AND TO MY PARENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Ways of Reading <i>Leviathan</i> : Introduction and Review of Literature.....	1
Understandings of <i>Leviathan</i> .....	2
The Method and Plan of this Dissertation.....	13
Chapter Two: Prophecy as a Form of Knowledge.....	16
The Complexity and Contradictions of <i>Leviathan</i> .....	16
Prophecy as Knowledge.....	21
Knowledge and Names.....	30
Prophecy as Inspiration.....	36
Prophecy according to Nature.....	40
Chapter Three: Prophecy and Natural Reason.....	42
The Problem of Divine Law.....	44
The Nature of the Divine Lawgiver.....	54
Natural Religion.....	62
A. God's Existence.....	63
B. God's Care for Mankind.....	73
C. The Infinity of God.....	77
D. The Actions of Divine Worship.....	84
Chapter Four: Prophecy in a Christian Commonwealth.....	99
Revelation and the Captivation of the Understanding.....	99
How God Speaks.....	103
Marks of a True Prophet.....	112
Chapter Five: Prophecy and Scripture.....	116
Who Wrote the Bible and Why?.....	116
The Scope of Scripture.....	128
The Authoritative Interpretation of Scripture.....	130
Chapter Six: The Sovereign Prophet.....	134
The Spirit of God.....	136
Angels and Inspiration.....	145
The Sovereign Prophet.....	147
Conclusion.....	150
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	154

## Chapter One: Ways of Reading *Leviathan*: Introduction and Review of Literature

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the topic of prophecy in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* with an eye toward its relationship to other fundamental aspects of his teaching. In particular, I will attempt to situate Hobbes's account of prophecy within the larger, scientific and political, framework of his thought. Such an effort, I will argue, is indispensable for a proper understanding of *Leviathan* and, therewith, Hobbes's mature philosophy. Not only is prophecy a topic that Hobbes discusses many times throughout *Leviathan*, but prophecy is also a *methodological principle* of the work, the second half of which is, according to Hobbes, grounded in prophecy (xxxii.1).<sup>1</sup> Understanding the second half of the work,<sup>2</sup> and *a fortiori* understanding the work as a whole, requires the reader to grasp Hobbes's account of prophecy, especially as it relates to the methodological foundation of the first half of the work, *viz.* "the principles of nature only" (*ibid.*). The primary task of this dissertation is to show how Hobbes understands the relationship between these twin foundations of his work. Uncovering the meaning of the distinction between nature and prophecy, and the way in which that distinction operates in structuring *Leviathan*, allows us to grasp the full import of Hobbes's primary teaching in the book, which is a political teaching. Thus, even though inquiring into the foundational distinction between nature and prophecy will require much consideration of Hobbes's epistemological and ontological theories, I shall always be oriented by Hobbes's main concern in *Leviathan*—to provide the foundation for a stable, peaceful, and prosperous regime.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations to *Leviathan* are to the chapter and paragraph numbers in Edwin Curley's edition (Curley 1994). Curley's paragraphing follows the 1839 Molesworth edition, "which is almost identical to that of the Head [*sc.* the original 1651] edition; so a close approximation of the original paragraphing will be evident to anyone" Curley 1994, pg. lxxv).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1651 Head edition, the first half of the book (Epistle Dedicatory-Chapter xxxi) is 193 pages; the second half (Chapter xxxii-Review and Conclusion) is 203 pages. Counting only numbered chapters, these numbers are 190 and 193, respectively.

In this first chapter, I will begin by describing the current state of research into Hobbes's religious teaching in general and his view of prophecy in particular. The field of Hobbes studies goes back to the 1650s, when the first book-length critiques of Hobbes's work were published. It has seldom waned since then, as Hobbes has remained a key figure in early modern thought. While much extremely valuable work has been done, I hope to show that the focus and method of the present study adds useful information to the conversation. Following this review of the literature, I will next describe the focus and method of this dissertation as well as its plan, providing a roadmap for what is to follow.

### *Understandings of Leviathan*

Questions regarding Hobbes's religious teachings, and his own religiosity, have been central to criticism of *Leviathan* since its publication.<sup>3</sup> Initial reactions to the book in 1651 held it to be "heretical and blasphemous," and by 1654 Hobbes was being accused of atheism in print by Oxford astronomy professor Seth Ward (Parkin 2007, pg. 133). In 1655, the man who would become Hobbes's nemesis, John Wallis,<sup>4</sup> wrote the following in his work *Elenchus geometriae Hobbianae*:

Who does not see that thereby [*sc.* through his materialist philosophy] you not only deny (and not just in words) angels and immortal souls, but the great and good God himself; and if you were not wary of the laws (which to you is the highest 'rule of honoring and worshiping God') you would profess this openly. And however much you may mention God and the Holy Scriptures now and again (although I do not recall your mentioning the immortal soul), it is nevertheless to be doubted whether you do this ironically and for the sake of appearance rather than seriously and from conviction. (Quoted by Parkin 2007, pg. 152; cf. Jesseph 1999 pp. 313f.)

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<sup>3</sup> The best sources for the reception of *Leviathan* among Hobbes's contemporaries are Samuel I. Mintz 1962, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*; and Jon Parkin 2007, *Taming the Leviathan: The Reception of the Political and Religious Ideas of Thomas Hobbes in England 1640-1700*.

<sup>4</sup> On Hobbes's contentious relationship with the Oxford mathematician John Wallis, see Douglas M. Jesseph 1999, *Squaring the Circle: The War between Hobbes and Wallace*.



While Hobbes never professed atheism, indeed while he consistently maintained that he believed in God, his contemporaries, especially Oxford dons like Seth Ward and John Wallis, were inclined to call him a liar. As Jesseph puts the point, “[Hobbes’s] contemporaries saw a seamless connection between materialistic metaphysics, the denial of an immortal soul, a moral philosophy of pure egoism, and atheism” (Jesseph 1999, pg. 53). Hobbes was “the ‘Monster of Malmesbury’, the arch-atheist, the apostle of infidelity, the ‘bug-bear of the nation’” (Mintz 1962, pg. vii). According to Oakeshott, “that the vilification of Hobbes was not greater is due only to the fact that Machiavelli had already been cast for the part of scapegoat for the European consciousness” (Oakeshott 1975, pg. 59). To again quote Jesseph,

Literally dozens of Hobbes’s contemporaries took him to be an atheist, and it is not difficult to see why: what Hobbes says on matters of religion leaves very little of established doctrine standing, and it is precisely for this reason that his religious writings were so controversial. In light of such facts, it is hardly a great interpretive leap to see the Malmesburian sage as engaged in a sly campaign to discredit the basis for any religious belief. (Jesseph 1999, pg. 321).

As Mintz has it, “to the greater majority of his contemporaries he was the *pontifex maximus* of infidelity” (Mintz 1962, pg. 20). Indeed, Mintz (*ibid.*, pg. 21) prints a selection from a broadside *Elegie Upon Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, which appeared after Hobbes’s death:

*Old Tom*, with a Recanting Verse,  
Must his *odde Notions* dolefully rehearse  
To *new Disciples* in the *Devils-Ar*—.

Hobbes’s name became a by-word for atheism. Praising Hobbes or his philosophy was tantamount to denying the truth of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Even John Locke, who was, according to Peter Laslett, “fascinated” by Thomas Hobbes his entire life, still felt the need to claim in print to be

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<sup>5</sup> According to Noel Malcolm, Hobbes’s poor reputation was among the main reasons he was not invited to join the Royal Society (Malcolm 2002, pg. 330).

“not so well read in Hobbes” and to call his name “justly decried” (Laslett 1988, pg. 74; cf. Strauss 1953, pg. 211).

As Jesseph remarked, “it is not difficult to see why” Hobbes earned this reputation. Hobbes’s analysis of Christianity, as we will see in great depth later in this dissertation, is extremely idiosyncratic. It is certainly unorthodox, and it is at least very near to heresy, if not blasphemy.<sup>6</sup> Of primary concern to Hobbes’s contemporaries was his “shockingly novel” approach to reading and understanding the Bible (Parkin 2007, pg. 92). Indeed, Parkin calls it an “extraordinary theology” that is “nothing less than a completely revised account of Christianity” (*ibid.*). When this bizarre religious teaching was compared to the ruthlessly materialistic philosophy that Hobbes’s offers in the first half of *Leviathan* (to say nothing for the moment of his other works, such as *De Corpore*), it seemed quite clear to Hobbes’s contemporaries that he was more likely making fun of Christianity than a believer in it. Parkin describes this in the following way:

As he goes about the reconstruction of Christianity, Hobbes deploys not the reverent tones of the scriptural scholar (affected in *De Cive*), but deals with the subject in a more obviously ludic manner. For example, Hobbes...notes that ‘prophet’ can mean one who is distracted, and that the best prophets are the ‘best guessers’. The text is peppered with such comments and the satirical mood often raises the suspicion that Hobbes is not so much reorganizing Christian theology as hinting at its ultimate absurdity... The suspicion that Hobbes might actually be offering a burlesque or travesty of Christianity was one that would occur to many of Hobbes’s early readers; the tension between that thought and

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<sup>6</sup> In the late 1660s, Hobbes became very concerned to show that he was not a heretic after *Leviathan* was blamed for spreading atheism and bringing on God’s wrath in the form of the Great Fire of London of 1666. It was rumored that *Leviathan* was to be publically burned. Between 1666 and 1668, Hobbes dealt with the topic of the English law of heresy in four works: *The Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, *Behemoth*, the appendix of the Latin version of *Leviathan*, and most particularly his *Historical Narration Concerning Heresy and the Punishment Thereof*. In this last work, Hobbes presents his argument for why there is no heresy in *Leviathan* by making reference to the context provided by the English Civil War: “[T]here [were not] any human laws left in force to restrain any man from preaching or writing any doctrine concerning religion that he pleased. And in the heat of the war, it was impossible to disturb the peace of the state, which then was none. And in this time it was, that a book called *Leviathan* was written in defense of the King’s power, temporal and spiritual...” (Hobbes 1840, *English Works* IV:407). The argument is that he cannot have committed heresy because, at the time, heresy was impossible. On this episode, also see Parkin 2007, pg. 240f.; Malcolm 2012, pg. 154; and Martinich 1999, pg. 320f.

the apparently serious purpose of Hobbes's theology was an issue that perplexed his readers then just as it does today. (Parkin 2007, pg. 93).<sup>7</sup>

Hobbes's reputation is such that it is more perplexing for him to have taken religion seriously than for him to have ignored it entirely. To his contemporaries, and to most readers since, Hobbes's antipathy to religion seems easier to explain than his odd religious program, which appears to be an intentional mockery of Christianity rather than an earnest attempt to understand it.

This view of Hobbes remained the consensus view for approximately 300 years, when mid-twentieth century scholars began contesting the conclusion that Hobbes was an atheist. If Hobbes takes religion seriously enough to devote hundreds of densely argued pages to it, these scholars reasoned, then we should begin from the assumption that he took religion seriously for the same reason that most people do—he was a believer. An early version of the case was put this way by Willis Glover:

Those who consider Hobbes an atheist are forced to assume that he did not mean what he said on religion, and he said a great deal. This is a dangerous method of interpretation. Almost anyone can be presented as an atheist on the assumption that whatever he may have said to the contrary was not seriously or literally meant. That such a method should have held the field for so long is due principally to the fact that the religion of Hobbes has not been the object of serious study but has been commented upon by scholars primarily interested in his politics or metaphysics. This is understandable, for his theology is of little intrinsic worth... (Glover 1965, pg. 146)<sup>8</sup>

We must begin, in other words, from the assumption that Hobbes meant what he said, for to assume otherwise is to hold that he spent a “great deal” of time creating a fanciful theology in which he did not believe. As A.P. Martinich later put the first point, “the correct understanding

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Hobbes's use of satire, see Skinner 1996, pp. 403ff., which discusses how Hobbes uses irony to “ridicule” and “scorn” his “religious antagonists,” even coming “remarkably close to concluding that...the Scriptures make no sense.”

<sup>8</sup> Among this generation of scholars there was a vital discussion of whether Hobbes's moral doctrine was a species of deontology based on rational acceptance of the natural law as created by God, rather than the self-interest-based doctrine that is traditionally understood to be Hobbesian. For this debate see the following: Warrender 1957; F.C. Hood 1964; Warrender 1965; Taylor 1965; Plamenatz 1965; Skinner 2001, pg. 282 [reprinting a 1966 article].

of [Hobbes's] moral and political philosophy depends upon interpreting what he said literally, when he writes ex professo on a topic" (Martinich 1992, 16).<sup>9</sup> J.G.A. Pocock expresses the second point as follows:

Although esoteric reasons have been suggested why Hobbes should have written what he did not believe, the difficulty remains of imagining why a notoriously arrogant thinker, vehement in his dislike of "insignificant speech" should have written and afterwards defended sixteen chapters of what he held to be nonsense, and exposed them to the scrutiny of a public that did not consider this kind of thing nonsense at all. (Pocock 1989, 162)

And:

...if Hobbes had meant that sacred history had no meaning of itself and that the sovereign might rewrite it to suit the permanent or passing needs of society, he would hardly have written chapter after chapter of exegesis with the proclaimed intention of arriving at the truth about it. (*ibid.*, 167)

These scholars, while relieved of the burden of explaining why Hobbes wrote what he did not believe, are instead compelled to answer a different set of questions: How could Hobbes have believed such strange arguments? and How did nearly all of his contemporaries misunderstand this sincere believer to the extent that they labeled him an atheist?

The answers give to these questions are, first, that Hobbes's arguments are less strange than we think, and, second, that it is we who misunderstand Hobbes's contemporaries, rather than them misunderstanding him. To begin, these scholars hold that Hobbes was a pious Calvinist. Martinich argues that "Hobbes's conclusions in religion are conservative, but he used liberal arguments" (Martinich 1992, pg. 34). Martinich makes clear that by "conservative" and "liberal" he means "traditional" and "innovative" respectively. According to Martinich, Hobbes, acting the part of a good Anglican is searching for new arguments to prop up a failing system, *viz.* the Stuart church. He compares Hobbes to Aquinas, who was also condemned by his

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<sup>9</sup> Martinich's 1992 book *The Two Gods of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics*, along with his 1999 book *Hobbes: A Biography*, are the current standard texts for the view that Hobbes was a theist.

contemporaries for being too innovative, despite his earnest desire to benefit the church (*ibid.*, pg. 35). The main difference between Hobbes and Aquinas, according to Martinich, is the historical accident that “it was Hobbes’s misfortune never to have been adopted by a sect that was promoted to church status...” (*ibid.*). Hobbes, the Calvinist, is locked in a theological battle with the Arminian sect of theologians, who deny Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. The scorn dripping from Hobbes’s pages is born of internecine strife, not out of anti-religious animus, and it is this same sectarian hatred that led men to call Hobbes an atheist. This is the second point referred to above: according to Martinich, we misunderstand 17<sup>th</sup> century Englishmen if we think they used the term “atheist” to refer exclusively to non-believers. Rather, Englishmen called anyone they disagreed with on religious matters atheists, especially when those disagreements coincided with political differences (*ibid.*, 19ff.).<sup>10</sup> That Hobbes upheld a minority religious view, therefore, led him to be unfairly maligned by his opponents, and we have been misled by these same accusers into believing Hobbes an atheist. Michael Gillespie puts the point this way:

The fact that [Hobbes] defends unpopular doctrines<sup>11</sup> at some danger to himself suggests that he did not do so insincerely or in order to conceal his real views. Had he said nothing about religion, he would certainly have put himself in less danger, and if he merely wanted to camouflage his atheism, there were many other more orthodox versions of Christianity he could have used. To believe that Hobbes was irreligious is thus historically anachronistic and contradicted by his own actions. (Gillespie 2008, pg. 247)

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Jesseph 1999, pg. 309 on the extended sense of “atheist.” It must be noted, however, that Jesseph does not agree with Martinich’s broader claims.

<sup>11</sup> The unpopular doctrine that Gillespie has in mind is Erastianism, or the view that “the civil sovereign [must be granted] both temporal and ecclesiastical dominion” (Gillespie 2008, pg. 246). This doctrine, which was primarily a theological rather than a political doctrine, was arrayed both against the rule of priests, as in Catholicism, and also against the rule of synods, which Presbyterians like Ward and Wallis did not appreciate (see Malcolm 2012, pp. 149ff.). The unity of temporal and spiritual power in the sovereign, however, is also a consequence of the purely natural (*viz.* not theological) arguments made in the first half of *Leviathan*. It is unclear, therefore, which is tail and which is dog: Is Hobbes’s Erastianism driven by his theory of sovereignty or is his theory of sovereignty ultimately an outgrowth of his prior religious commitment to Erastianism? This question will be developed in the course of this dissertation.

Now, from what we have seen of the reception of *Leviathan* among Hobbes's contemporaries, this argument seems untrue to the facts. John Wallis does not seem to simply strike out at Hobbes as an Arminian with a bone to pick with a "non-standard" Calvinist.<sup>12</sup> Rather he calls Hobbes a materialist and claims that his materialism clearly implies a rejection of the immortal soul, angels, and God himself (see above). But Martinich has a response for this objection. He argues that "atheism by consequence" is not a valid form of argument, for even if Hobbes's premises do entail the rejection of God, we cannot conclude thereby that Hobbes did in fact reject him. Such a test would only be "defensible to the extent that a person sees all the logical consequences of his or her own view," adding that "most people, even philosophers, do not" (Martinich 1992, pg. 23). Thus he holds that

Sometimes a person's conscious beliefs and explicit assertions about God are inconsistent with the unrecognized consequences of his or her principles; that is, that the person is a sincere, though inconsistent, theist. (*ibid.*)

Martinich adds, "If his theories are logically absurd, it is not because he wanted them to be absurd but because he was struggling with an enormous problem and could not see anything better" (*ibid.*, pg. 28). Thus, according to Martinich, Hobbes believed both in his materialist science of nature and in the doctrines of his own idiosyncratic form of Calvinism, while being either unaware of the inconsistencies or unable to remedy them.

The understanding of Hobbes's account of prophecy that springs from this view, therefore, must take that account at face value. As we shall see later in great detail, Hobbes goes to great lengths throughout *Leviathan* to argue that most so-called prophets are not to be believed, despite the fact that, nominally, he admits that prophecy is possible. Martinich sees this

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<sup>12</sup> Martinich develops a distinction between "orthodox" and "standard" religious views, where orthodox means adhering to the laws of England as decided by the High Commission, and argues that Hobbes's views were non-standard but not unorthodox (Martinich 1992, pp. 2f.).

procedure as a pious attempt to determine who the true prophets are, so that the people are not led astray by false ones (Martinich 1992, pp. 228ff.). Hobbes's concern, according to Martinich is political, because concerned with peace and stability, but also genuinely religious. Hobbes "wants to make belief in genuine prophets as plausible as possible by acknowledging supernatural intervention only when the text of the Bible absolutely demands it" (*ibid.*, pg. 234). Hobbes is so ruthless in pointing out false prophets, according to this theory, because he does not want their ilk to pollute our pious conception of the true prophets, like Moses, David, and Jesus. Martinich does not discuss how this high bar for prophets relates to the prophetic power which Hobbes believes to be inherent to sovereignty itself (see, *e.g.*, xxxvi.13, 20; xli.3). Indeed, it is by failing to account for such details that Martinich is able to construct a pious Hobbes. Because he has decided that Hobbes is unaware of his own contradictions, and because he has decided to take Hobbes's word regarding his own piety, Martinich does not confront Hobbes with challenging questions about his doctrines. Because we need not believe these doctrines to be rational or consistent, such a task would be unnecessary from Martinich's perspective. We read Hobbes to glean his *ideology* not his teaching, for how could the inconsistent theological speculations of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Erastian Calvinist hold any lesson for us today. Recovering Hobbes's piety is a strictly antiquarian effort for Martinich—his Hobbes exists as a set of dead doctrines which can be either accurate or inaccurate as they relate to this historical Hobbes, but which are certainly not likely to be true and worthy of *our* belief, whatever we might think of what is worthy of Hobbes.

Modern arguments against Hobbes's theism, or perhaps in favor of his atheism, come in a variety of colors from the historical/political to the ontological/scientific and all shades in between. The most common, and least sophisticated, form that these arguments take is much like

that of Hobbes's contemporaries—the smell test. Can we really believe that Hobbes believes his own religious doctrines? If so, then we should follow Martinich, if not, not. Jesseph puts the point this way:

The matter of Hobbes's religious belief can thus be reduced to the question of whether he was sincere or ironic in his many discussions of religion. I take it that if an "ironist" reading of Hobbes can be shown to be more plausible than a "literalist" interpretation, then there are good grounds for concluding that Hobbes was probably an atheist. The issue to resolve is therefore: can we justify taking Hobbes's pronouncements on religion as ironic?...Hobbes's contemporary critics were unanimous in their conviction that he used irony in his writings on religious issues. We saw, for example, that Wallis accused Hobbes of treating theological matters "ironically" and "sarcastically," and he was convinced that Hobbes would have professed his disbelief openly, had he not feared legal sanction....I suppose it is possible that seventeenth-century readers were not in a position to appreciate Hobbes's intentions, but it seems much more likely that his contemporaries could detect irony more readily than we can. In light of these facts, I take it that the ironist interpretation of Hobbes's religious writings is more plausible, and I conclude that Hobbes was probably an atheist. (Jesseph 1999, pp. 326f.)

Jesseph's point is that Hobbes's contemporaries were more in tune with the standards of ridicule and irony that Hobbes would be recurring to than we are today, and thus their near universal view that Hobbes is being ironic should count heavily in our calculation of probabilities. This is especially true, Jesseph argues, given what Skinner has shown regarding the ways in which irony was used by Hobbes and his contemporaries more broadly (Skinner 1996, pp. 390-425). In other words, Jesseph relies on a smell test, but he uses an aggregate of noses which he believes to be more sensitive than his own.

Jeffrey Collins, on the other hand, relies more on his own resources to make this determination. In his work, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes* (2005), Collins develops an argument that views Hobbes's religious doctrines entirely within the lens of the English Civil War. The views Hobbes outlines in *Leviathan*, according to Collins, are strategically chosen to gain advantage over his political enemies, primarily (though far from exclusively) Catholics and Presbyterians. According to Collins, Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* as a form of *rapprochement* with



the Cromwell regime, offering it a ready-made justification for its own legitimacy (*i.e.* sovereignty by acquisition) as well as a religious doctrine in keeping with Cromwell's own authoritarian temper. The religious doctrine, for Collins, is entirely political and is only framed in terms of religion because the masses are unable to live without it. Collins explains the point in this way:

[Hobbes's] conviction that religion was psychologically irresistible, combined with his belief that Christian orthodoxy undermined his own philosophy, forced him to publish a dangerously heretical recasting of Christian dogma. He did not publish these heresies as an end in themselves, but to reconcile his civil science with a hegemonic Christianity that was the imperfect but inevitable object of early modern religious instincts. In order to control the political threat posed by religion, sovereigns needed to control not just the jurisdictional power of the church, but the content of religious doctrine as well. The theology of *Leviathan* was intended to be both sufficiently Christian to attract the allegiance of the philosophically unsophisticated, and sufficiently detached from those aspects of Christianity that were irretrievably incompatible with sound civil science. In this sense Hobbes's mature theological project was to prove fundamentally esoteric in nature. (Collins 2005, pg. 32)

Despite being worried that the mention of esoteric writing will raise the "hackles" of his readers, a concern that he attempts to moderate by citing the passages of Skinner on Hobbes's irony recently cited above, Collins is nonetheless committed to the notion that *Leviathan* communicates to multiple audiences simultaneously, principally a group of "enlightened readers (particularly sovereigns)," as well as a group that needs the truth "sweetened" for it to be "palatable for general consumption," which requires "a certain elusiveness on religious questions" (*ibid.*, pg. 33). Collins believes that Hobbes hopes to make Christianity "as politically malleable as the pagan religious doctrines had been" so that he could "costume the virtues of the 'golden age of antiquity' with a Christian cloak" (*ibid.*, pg. 45). While Collins does not discuss prophecy at any length, it is tolerably clear what role it plays in his reading. Prophecy must be controlled by the sovereign just as all religion must—so that the people may be ruled well despite their penchant for irrational superstition, and therewith, rebellion.

Collins's procedure appears to be superior to that of Jesseph. Jesseph is content to identify *that there is* irony operating in the text; he does not concern himself overmuch with the *purpose and effect* of that irony, beyond intimating that as a non-believer Hobbes wants to make religion look bad. Collins, on the other hand, attempts to account for the presence of irony by showing how it operates in the text to accomplish a rhetorical and strategic goal that Hobbes has set for himself, namely to make religion unbelievable for some, while replacing superstition with lawful, peaceful religion in others. In the remainder of this dissertation, I will argue along similar lines with respect to Hobbes's political goal, though I believe that his sight extended beyond the Cromwell regime. However, I also believe that Collins has under sold the complexity of the task he has undertaken. It is one thing to decide that Hobbes has written his text "esoterically," but it is a radically different thing to determine what that text is communicating to its different audiences. Collins does not engage in the close reading that would be necessary to isolate each strand of the text in order to understand how it was woven together and according to what plan. His view that *Leviathan* is written esoterically is thus, so far as he takes it, a conjecture, which he has used to motivate his desired conclusion, *viz.* that Hobbes's religious teaching is really just about politics.

Other authors have undertaken this same task with much more skill and much more success. Unlike Collins's exclusive focus on the political crisis of the Civil War, Hobbes himself understood his teachings to have lasting significance beyond their connection to his own circumstances. Hobbes, by his own telling, believed himself to have discovered the true science of politics, just as Galileo had discovered the science of motion (*De Corpore*, Epistle Dedicatory). If this is the case, then Hobbes's religious teaching, his science of Biblical interpretation, must also be a part of this truth, since Hobbes invariably presented them together,

as he did in *Elements of Law* and *De Cive* before *Leviathan*. If Hobbes was not a believer, but still believed that the Bible had a place in the true science of politics, then commentators must explain the character of Hobbes religious teaching from the perspective of his political science. The thinker to explore most fully the multiple levels of Hobbes's teaching is Leo Strauss, who considered Hobbes in a number of books and essays throughout his career (see Strauss 1965; Strauss 1952a; Strauss 1953; Strauss 1959; and Strauss 2011). Strauss's work combines an understanding of Hobbes's political context with an appreciation for his place within the Western philosophical cannon that other commentators have lacked, though there are a number of studies that have followed upon his example to achieve worthwhile results (see especially Cropsey 1964; Mansfield 1971; Weinberger 1975; Kraynak 1982; Kraynak 1990; Pangle 1992; Cooke 1996; Ahrens Dorf 2000). Strauss has shown that Hobbes is a modern philosopher in the most decisive sense—he has rejected the ancient teaching that man is a political animal—and Strauss has deduced myriad implications of this fact for Hobbes's teaching, including the “constructive” nature of knowledge, the specially political character of Hobbes's hedonism and atheism, and the new morality that Hobbes's system institutes (Strauss 1953, pp.166-202, *passim*). Discussing any one of these topics in isolation from Hobbes's text would be a fool's errand, as would taking up such a discussion in this context. Strauss's work, however, shall recur throughout this dissertation, and through my own work, I hope in the process to make clearer the contributions to Hobbes studies made by Strauss.

### *The Method and Plan of this Dissertation*

As stated above, the purpose of this dissertation will be to grasp the relationship between the natural and prophetic methods that structure *Leviathan*. I will pursue this task via an

analysis of Hobbes's treatment of prophecy in particular. Prophecy emerges as a theme many times in *Leviathan*, is seemingly resolved as a problem, and then reemerges again. By following Hobbes's argument very closely, I aim to show not only *what* Hobbes says in various parts of the book about prophecy, but *why* he says these things in the particular contexts in which he says them. I hope to show that Hobbes is often motivated by questions that he has not explicitly stated, but which gather in the penumbra of his work. Hobbes has a very forceful and brisk style of writing, and it is very easy, as a reader, to be swept along in the current of his rhetoric and to miss the complications and questions often inherent in his arguments. I will in all cases fight this temptation and instead focus intently on Hobbes's arguments to tease out their implications in order to fully map the progress of Hobbes's concerns. One method of doing this will be to pay special attention to Hobbes's use of allusion and citation, to both classical and Biblical sources. It is often the case that Hobbes will point us to a passage that seems to be an example of his present conclusion, but when this passage is fully considered in the light of Hobbes's argument, we see that it adds depth and complication to Hobbes's argument, and often uncovers a second line of argument playing out beneath the surface of the text. Such a method of writing is not original to Hobbes, but had been widely used by one of his mentors, Francis Bacon. As Jerry Weinberger explains,

Because Bacon employs the "enigmatical method," our study must take the form of a close textual commentary. Since our task is to "pierce the veil," we have to see that Bacon teaches as much by what he does not say as by what he does. But what he does not say is always clearly indicated by something he has said by way of contradiction or by way of an allusion that is inappropriate, given the purpose it is ostensibly to serve. (Weinberger 1985, pg. 35)

I will show instances in which Hobbes uses these techniques and I will attempt to discern their import in each case. By attending to these features of the text, I hope to uncover aspects of Hobbes's argument that he has made less than explicit in the text.

In order to study prophecy in *Leviathan*, it is necessary to approach it from a variety of angles. First, in Chapter 2, I will investigate prophecy as a form of knowledge. If God has granted the prophet a supernatural gift for foretelling the future or for discovering what is secret, then he seems to have given a gift of knowledge. I begin therefore by placing prophecy within the context of Hobbes's theory of knowledge. Second, in Chapter 3, I will begin to consider the meaning of the distinction that Hobbes makes between the natural and prophetic halves of his book. I will do this by attending to Chapter xxxi, the final chapter of the first half of *Leviathan*, which constitutes Hobbes's account of natural religion. On the basis of an understanding of religion from the perspective of nature, I will move on to consider the prophetic half of the work. In particular, I will begin, in Chapter 4, with a thorough account of the transition to the second half in Chapter xxxii, followed, in Chapter 5, by an account of Hobbes's view of scripture in Chapter xxxiii. Coming to terms with Hobbes's account of scripture is necessary, because the Bible is, according to Hobbes, the only access human beings have to prophecy since the Pentecost and until the Second Coming. The status of prophecy, in other words, depends crucially on the status of scripture. Finally, I will consider prophecy from a political point of view by investigating Hobbes's notion of the "sovereign prophet." In this way, I hope to account for Hobbes's view of prophecy in such a way that his epistemology, ontology, and politics are all brought into contact with his religious teaching in order to provide the greatest possible insight into the place of prophecy in Hobbes's teaching.

## Chapter Two: Prophecy as a Form of Knowledge

### *The Complexity and Contradictions of Leviathan*

The goal of this dissertation is to investigate the meaning and function of prophecy in the thought of Thomas Hobbes. This task is necessarily complex. Hobbes discusses prophecy and prophets many times in *Leviathan*, and these treatments do not add up in any simple way to a teaching about the role of prophecy in human life. There are tensions and contradictions within Hobbes' statements on this subject which prevent us from declaring with unerring certainty what Hobbes' true views on these matters are. This is especially true when we compare Hobbes' statements in the first half of the book to those in the second half. Indeed, according to Hobbes, these two halves of his work are grounded on different principles. Hobbes says at the beginning of Part III, "Hitherto the rights of sovereign power and the duties of citizens have been deduced from purely natural principles...but for the things to be said concerning the nature and rights of a Christian Commonwealth, the knowledge of which depends in great part on supernatural revelations of the divine will, other principles are to be used, viz. the prophetic word" (*Leviathan*, xxxii.1, OL).<sup>13</sup> Thus, Hobbes speaks of prophecy, which he treats in both halves, according to both natural and supernatural principles. It is thus often unclear how much weight should be given to differing statements that occur in different contexts in the book.

These vagaries are the origin of the many contradictory interpretations of Hobbes' theology, which are the subject of Chapter One of this dissertation. Hobbes can be seen both as the arch-atheist and also as a genuine, if somewhat "nonstandard," Christian (Martinich 1992,

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<sup>13</sup> I quote here from Curley's translation of the Latin version of this passage, which makes the same point as the English version, but more succinctly. See Curley 1994, p. 245n.1.

pp. 3, 28ff.). Both of these interpretations involve resolving Hobbes' paradoxes on one side or the other, making of him either a scientific materialist or a revolutionary sort of Calvinist.

David Wootton, for example, argues that Hobbes's seemingly religious statements are present to conceal his real, anti-religious conclusions.

[O]ne might claim that Hobbes cannot have meant the religious beliefs presented in *Leviathan* to be taken seriously, for they had not, after all, been authorized by the sovereign, whom Hobbes insists is the only authority to be taken account of in matters of religion, even down to the question of which books are to be as counted books of the Bible.

Charron, Hobbes, and Bayle seem systematically ambiguous. One can read them as either defending or criticizing religion. But why would they write ambiguously if their real intent was to defend religion? Their ambiguity can best be explained by the thesis that they intended to convey both an exoteric and an esoteric message. (Wootton, 1988, pp 710-711)

According to this interpretation, Hobbes was a thorough-going critic of religion, and his seemingly pious statements are designed to throw unwary readers off the trail of his real anti-religious views. The glaring contradictions that exist in *Leviathan* are a rhetorical feature designed by Hobbes to allow him to convey anti-religious teachings with some security. As Leo Strauss puts it, "if an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such..." (Strauss 1952, p. 32). The coexistence and contradiction of pious and impious statements in *Leviathan* seems like it should be settled on the side of impiety.

Others, however, are less impressed by these contradictions and deny that Hobbes intentionally constructed them in the way that Wootton describes. While Martinich concedes that "there are certainly some ambiguous passages and some that are difficult to reconcile with

theism, for example, his definitions of religion and revelation,” he goes on to argue that “it is non-controversial that every distinguished philosopher has written ambiguous passages” and these passages can be “explained in ways that are simple and not ‘complex’” (Martinich 1992, p. 29). For Martinich, the simple reason that Hobbes says he believes in God is that he actually does believe in God, and if other passages would seem to tell against that conclusion, then we should perhaps conclude that Hobbes was inconsistent. “Sometimes a person’s conscious beliefs and explicit assertions about God are inconsistent with the unrecognized consequences of his or her principles; that is, that the person is a sincere, though inconsistent, theist” (Martinich 1992, p. 23). J.G.A. Pocock expressed this same idea when he wrote

Although esoteric reasons have been suggested why Hobbes should have written what he did not believe, the difficulty remains of imagining why a notoriously arrogant thinker, vehement in his dislike of “insignificant speech,” should have written and afterwards defended sixteen chapters of what he held to be nonsense, and exposed them to the scrutiny of a public which did not consider this kind of thing nonsense at all. (Pocock 1989, p. 162)

The sixteen chapters that Pocock refers to are Parts III and IV of *Leviathan*. According to this argument, if Hobbes took the time to write and publish these chapters, he must have been committed to their content. Thus, the views that Hobbes presents in these chapters must be understood to be his own views. So, while “to orthodox Christians [Hobbes’s views] seemed, understandably and perhaps rightly, incompatible both with Christian faith...and the existence of God,” “we cannot conclude that it was Hobbes’s intention to affirm God’s non-existence” (Pocock 1989, p. 194). In other words, Pocock and Martinich both deny that Hobbes had, in Strauss’ terms, “a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications.” Indeed, they go further to claim that Hobbes could not have grasped the ramifications of his own views. So, they argue that we cannot conclude from his contradictions that “he was opposed to the orthodox



system as such.”<sup>14</sup> At most, we can conclude that Hobbes must not have seen the irreligious conclusions of his philosophy and thus that he did not notice the contradictions immanent in his thought.

However, Martinich and Pocock respond only to a caricature of the opposing position, for it is not simply the case that contradictions between pious and impious statements must be decided on the side of impiety. Rather, the existence of such contradictions in an author allows us to “*reasonably suspect*” impiety and forces us to “study his whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naïveté than ever before” (Strauss 1952, p. 32, emphasis added). In other words, to suspect that an author like Hobbes may have written esoterically is not in-and-of-itself a demonstration of the content of his esoteric teaching. Wootton, we might say, makes the task too simple by focusing on the bare binary of defense or criticism of religion and then declaring Hobbes a critic. Such a view allows us either to ignore Hobbes’s seemingly pious statements or to reinterpret them straight-off as politically motivated calculations, which lack any real religious content. Such a view, in other words, really does require that Hobbes see half his work as “nonsense” and would allow us to ignore the supernatural half of the book in favor of the half based on “purely natural principles.”

Such a view, however, does not take seriously enough the question of Hobbes’s own intention in writing the book as he did. We are not permitted to treat with the religious half of the work as dispensable simply because we suspect that Hobbes did not actually believe everything he said in it. The insight that Hobbes may have been a critic of religion does not entitle one to assume forthwith that his religious views are a joke. At the least, one cannot say this is so until one has heard the punch line for oneself. It may be that Hobbes was laughing (it would be naïve

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<sup>14</sup> To be clear, Strauss is not discussing Hobbes in particular in the text I am quoting. Rather, he is relating the general principles of exoteric writing.

to assume that he is always serious, even or especially about the most serious things), but we must follow his lead if we are to know what he is laughing at and why. And this involves taking seriously things that we may later have occasion to mock. Indeed, it may involve taking seriously things which we have *already* had occasion to mock. As Strauss wrote in 1933, in an until recently unpublished book on Hobbes,

Hobbes generally proceeds by beginning with fully or mostly orthodox-sounding statements, in order to lead these statements afterward, in a more or less veiled manner, *ad absurdum*. In the further course of the investigation, however, he often makes no explicit use of the results of his critique, but rather avails himself to previously rejected opinions, as though they were self-evidently correct, in order to refute other traditional teachings covertly. (Strauss 2011, pp. 32-33)

As readers of Hobbes, we must be alert and wary. We must take care to follow the path of the argument as Hobbes has laid it out for us. If indeed the contradictions that commentators have found in his works can be resolved, and are not to be left as monuments to the fallibility of Hobbes's mind, then it is only from Hobbes that we may learn of this resolution; it cannot be prejudged or assumed without oversimplifying Hobbes's argument. For these reasons, this dissertation endeavors to show Hobbes's treatment of prophecy in its complexity, to show the many layers of Hobbes's argument as they unfold and overlap, so that coherence may be woven from chaos and not summarily imposed upon it.

Prophecy is a theme to which Hobbes returns throughout *Leviathan*. Understanding the way in which these consecutive statements extend, color, and revise previous statements is key to understanding Hobbes's ultimate teaching regarding to relationship between prophecy and politics. The very structure of *Leviathan* necessitates a double treatment of prophecy. On the one hand, Hobbes's book begins by considering man, what he is, and why he is that way. Since prophecy is a human perfection, it is proper to treat it under this heading. Hobbes asks, who is the prophet? What is the character of his knowledge? How are we to distinguish between true

and false prophets? On the other hand, the third part of the work is taken up by a description of a Christian commonwealth, in which Hobbes deduces the structure of a state that lives in the light of Christian revelation. The very ground of this part of the work is “prophetical,” according to Hobbes (*Leviathan*, xxxii.1). In this third section, Hobbes treats prophecy as it arises in scripture, asking how God speaks to his prophets, what the character of such God-given knowledge is, and who the true prophets are, in fact. In this chapter, I will consider Hobbes’s treatment of prophecy as it presents itself in his consideration of man “from the principles of nature only” (xxxii.1).

### *Prophecy as Knowledge*

Hobbes first treats prophecy as an artifact of human psychology. In the first twelve chapters of *Leviathan*, while prophecy is never made the central theme of Hobbes’s discussion, he very often digresses to investigate its relationship to various aspects of human nature. Hobbes immediately concerns himself in this book with prophecy, in other words, in spite of the fact that he was not obviously constrained by his subject matter to do so. It is certainly possible to consider imagination, speech, knowledge, the passions, and even dreams without reference to prophecy, but Hobbes’s own intentions in writing this book seem to entail that he begin his consideration of prophecy almost at the beginning of the work. This initial treatment of prophecy is, I hope to show, tremendously skeptical and debunking. However, I also wish to show that this skepticism is not without limits, and that prophecy is not, and perhaps cannot be, thoroughly debunked on Hobbes’s grounds. This fact makes possible, and indeed necessary, Hobbes’s second treatment of prophecy in Book III.

Prophecy is first seen in *Leviathan* in the guise of false prophecy. Prophecy is first mentioned by Hobbes as a tool used by “crafty ambitious persons” to “abuse the simple people”

(ii.8). This observation is made in the course of a digression on the problem of distinguishing dreams from waking thoughts. This is difficult for humans to do, because both our dreams and our sensations while awake are caused by motions affecting our sense organs. The difference is that sensations are caused by the motion of external objects whereas dreams are caused, for the most part, by internal motions, i.e. by the “decaying sense” or memory of past sensations. While we sleep, and our sense organs are “benumbed” and so do not receive stimulus from the outside world, the decaying sensations of our previous experiences can appear to us as vital realities, since “as there is no new object which can master and obscure them with a more vigorous impression, a dream must needs be more clear, in this silence of sense, than are our waking thoughts” (ii.5). Thus, dreams are inherently convincing to the dreamer, relying as they do on the same mechanisms that create waking experience. “And hence it comes to pass, that it is a hard matter, and by many thought impossible, to distinguish exactly between sense and dreaming” (ii.5).

This is a hard matter indeed, one which has bedeviled modern epistemology since Descartes and continues to provoke controversy among academic philosophers today. Hobbes, however, resolves this matter for the time being with a single sentence.

For my part, when I consider that in dreams I do not often, nor constantly, think of the same persons, places, objects, and actions that I do waking, nor remember so long a train of coherent thoughts dreaming as at other times, and because waking I often observe the absurdity of dreams, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking thoughts, I am well satisfied that being awake I know I dream not, though when I dream, I think myself awake. (ii.5)

This sentence is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it is remarkable for the trouble Hobbes takes to make the sentence about his personal experience and not about the experience of men in general. Hobbes directly refers to himself twelve times. We may therefore wonder whether these reflections would be sufficient for other men to be “well satisfied” that they know they are

not dreaming. We may also wonder whether all men are even capable of making these reflections upon their own experience. Hobbes lists three considerations that sufficiently prove to him that he is not dreaming. First, he does “not often, nor constantly,” dream of those things that he experiences while awake. Thus, while Hobbes’s days were occupied by politics and geometry, his nights were often filled with other things. But, of course, to say that you do not *often* dream of those things which consume your waking life is to say that you sometimes *do* dream of them. And indeed, to add that you do not *constantly* do so is the same as to say that you *often* do. This first criterion thus hardly seems sufficient to prove wakefulness. One could at most rely on the content of dream-experience often or sometimes to distinguish it from waking life. Furthermore, since waking life often leads us to surprising and unprecedented experiences for good and ill, such that people often say that an experience “felt like a dream,” mere regularity does not seem to be a good way to distinguish between dreams and waking sensation.

Hobbes’s second consideration involves the ability to remember a “long train of coherent thoughts.” This consideration seems most peculiar to Hobbes himself. For surely an alert Thomas Hobbes could put together a quite long train of coherent thoughts, such that distinguishing dreams from reality on this basis becomes somewhat reasonable. However, the ability to judge the coherence of such a series of thoughts, regardless of length, requires a knowledge of syllogisms and an ability to distinguish a true consequence from a non-sequitur. Such knowledge is only possessed by those with prudence and wisdom, according to Hobbes, which qualities are not natural to human beings. Thus, while a scientific human such as Hobbes may be able to rely upon the coherence of long trains of thought to distinguish between dream and sense, most humans, and especially humans in the brutish state of nature, cannot do so.

Hobbes's third consideration is problematic for a similar reason, for to determine the "absurdity of dreams" again requires one to grasp the true nature of the syllogism so that dream logic may fail by comparison. An intellect less developed than Hobbes's may fail to perceive the inherent absurdity in, for example, the notion of an incorporeal substance, and would thus fail to correctly distinguish between the real experience of such a thing and a dream. Thus, while it may be that Hobbes is able to distinguish the imagination made manifest in dreams from real sensory experience, it is unclear that all, or even most, other men can do so. And even Hobbes can only "observe the absurdity of dreams" while awake; while we are dreaming, we each believe the dream to be real. Thus, most men are liable to believe in the real existence of things that do not exist in fact, being unable to distinguish clearly between dreams and waking sensation. Overcoming this liability requires experience and science, so that one becomes prudent and wise, which is not given to all men.

It is in this connection that prophecy first appears, and we are now able to see why it must appear in this context as false prophecy. Most humans are unable to distinguish exactly in all cases between dream and reality, and they are thus led to believe in the existence of fantastic and absurd beings.

From this ignorance of how to distinguish dreams and other strong fancies from vision and sense did arise the greatest part of the religion of the gentiles in time past, that worshiped satyrs, fawns, nymphs, and the like; and now-a-days the opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts, and goblins, and of the power of witches. (ii.8)

It is ignorance of the true science of causes, either due to being born before its discovery like the gentiles or due to a simple lack of refinement today, that leads humans to believe in the monsters and spirits that their sleeping brains suggest to them. And, according to Hobbes, "[as] for fairies and walking ghosts, the opinion of them has I think been on purpose, either taught or not confuted, to keep in credit the use of exorcism, of crosses, of holy water, and other such

inventions of ghostly men” (ii.8). Thus, prophecy first appears in *Leviathan* as an imaginary remedy for an imaginary ill. The exorcism ritual, the cross, and holy water are all held to possess some God-granted virtue through which they can combat demons and ghouls. To claim to know that such remedies are effective is to claim supernatural knowledge that could only come through revelation and thus prophecy. But, since the phantasms men fear are absurd misunderstandings brought upon them by their ignorance of natural causes, the supernatural remedies cannot themselves be true prophecy.

But evil men, under pretext that God can do anything, are so bold as to say anything when it serves their turn, though they think it untrue; it is the part of a wise man to believe them no further than right reason makes that which they say appear credible. If this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away, and with it prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience. (ii.8)

There is much in this quotation that must be considered. To begin, we see that these first, false prophets are not men who are ignorant or mistaken. Rather, these are evil men who say things they themselves do not believe whenever it is to their advantage. Thus, the problem of ignorance, which makes it difficult to distinguish between fantasy and reality, leads to the problem of credulousness, which makes it difficult to distinguish between true and false prophecy. The remedy for both of these problems is the use of right reason. Hobbes does not here show us how a wise man judges claims to divine knowledge, but the effect he expects from of this change is clear: wise people will be less susceptible to fear of ghouls, less prone to the predations of the ambitious, and thus more apt to obedience, since they will be less likely to be stirred to rebellion by the crafty machinations of the false prophets. Prophecy thus first comes to light as the exploitation of natural ignorance and as being in natural conflict with orderly politics. Wisdom,

understood as knowledge of causation and understood in opposition to revelation, is the scourge of ignorance and the guarantor of order.

But there is a fly in this rationalist ointment. For though evil men exploit the fact that “God can do anything” to make up whatever pleases them, Hobbes does not deny the premise of God’s omnipotence, but rather grants it. His position, however, is subtle.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt but God can make unnatural apparitions. But that he does it so often as men need to fear such things more than they fear the stay or change of the course of nature, which he also can stay or change, is no point of Christian faith. (ii.8).

God, if he is omnipotent, could indeed create a centaur. God could, if he willed it, grant witches the power to harm and priests the power to heal. Hobbes, in other words, is willing to commit to the notion of God’s supernatural potency, and thus he must admit the possibility of true revelation. He is not willing to admit, however, that God *does* do everything he *can* do. If God is omnipotent, then the normal courses of nature are also under his sway. There is thus no reason to assume that God will act supernaturally when he may also act naturally. Simply because God may communicate to man, this does not mean that he has actually done so whenever someone claims to have heard from him. To be committed to the idea that God can suspend the natural order does not relieve the wise of their duty to determine whether that order has truly been suspended in any given case. God may be able to make a centaur, but I will still need to see one before I believe that anyone else has. The problem of prophecy is thus that it makes a truth-claim about the world based upon supernatural knowledge, knowledge which seems private and unverifiable.

The problematic status of prophecy as a sort of knowledge is further developed by Hobbes in chapter three, “Of the Consequence or Train of Imaginations,” where prophecy is again raised as an issue. This occurs in the context of a discussion of prudence, which Hobbes



argues is the ability to apply past experience to future events. The more experience one has in a certain field, “by so much also he is more prudent, and his expectations the seldomer fail him” (iii.7). For example, if a basketball team is behind by ten points with 30 seconds left on the clock, we can be fairly certain that that team will lose. However, a child may not recognize this truth, and will hold out hope for the sporting equivalent of a miracle. And perhaps occasionally this child’s faith will be rewarded. Indeed, judging the future by the past is “conjecture” and “through the difficulty of observing all circumstances, be very fallacious” (iii.7). The referees may have been bribed. A team ten points up may suffer an unprecedented and thus unforeseeable breakdown. Indeed, Reggie Miller once scored eight points in the last nine seconds against the Knicks to win the game. What almost never happens does sometimes happen, and very few people can predict it, because very few people have seen the series of events that causes it. Thus, while experience helps us to guess what will happen next, it is a far from infallible guide to the future.

This, according to Hobbes, is in part due to the ontological status of future time. While the present exists right now and “has a being in nature,” and the past exists in our memories of it, “things to come have no being at all, the future being but a fiction of the mind, applying the sequels of actions past to the actions that are present” (iii.7). The future isn’t anything, and thus the claims we make about it can be neither true nor false, since there is no object for these claims to refer to. These claims may become true or false at some point, but that is when the future becomes the present and, thus, enters being. Before such time, every claim about the future world is necessarily contingent, at the very least on the assumption that the world will persist into the future. For this reason, even a guess that turns out to be right was not for that reason a necessary truth when the prediction was made. “And though it be called prudence when the event

answereth our expectation, yet in its own nature it is but presumption” (iii.7). All prognostication about the future based on past experience of the world is epistemologically suspect, because it is ontologically ungrounded. One cannot have knowledge of the future, it seems, because there *is* no future to know.

This would seem to limit the scope of prophecy dramatically. The prophet is concerned with pronouncing the doom of the Lord. Isaiah and Ezekiel are understood by the tradition to have been men who saw the supernatural reasons for impending disaster. The predictions of the prophet, given unto him by the omnipotent God, must necessarily be true when they are uttered and cannot merely become true when the event transpires. For Biblical prophecy to be possible, the future must exist in some way that allows for the prophet to have true knowledge of it. Hobbes, who has already granted the existence of an omnipotent God who can stay or change the course of nature, must also give latitude to this being to make known the future time. Hobbes provides this latitude through recourse to God’s will. The future may not already have being, such that propositions about it are true or false, but God can display the future to the prophet and then guarantee that such statements will become true through the action of his divine and omnipotent will.

For the foresight of things to come, which is providence, belongs only to him by whose will they are to come. From him only, and supernaturally, proceeds prophecy. The best prophet naturally is the best guesser; and the best guesser, he that is most versed and studied in the matters he guesses at, for he hath the most signs to guess by. (iii.7)

Thus, Hobbes leaves open the possibility that God, who can believably promise future states of the world because he has the power to create those states, is able to communicate future truths to chosen men. Once again, prophecy, despite the stumbling blocks that reason puts in its way, is saved through the power of the omnipotent God. But this does not stop Hobbes from equating good guessing with natural prophecy. And we are thus lead once again to the duty of the wise to

determine whether the natural order has been suspended in any particular instance. We may admit with Hobbes that an all-powerful God is able to convey future truths to chosen men supernaturally, but we must never forget that a good guess has the same result when the event transpires. It is very difficult for a neutral third party to determine whether a prophet isn't really just a good guesser. A guesser, after all, may be deluded through ignorance and the power of dreams into falsely believing that God had spoken to him. Also, a guesser could simply lie about the source of his purported knowledge, since the position of prophet allows more honor and power than the position of good guesser.

Thus, we again see that Hobbes treats prophecy with a curious mix of skepticism and acceptance. In theory, prophecy is possible if there is an omnipotent God. In practice, we can hardly ever know if prophecy is genuine, mistaken, or faked. If prophecy is knowledge at all, and not the mere presumption of experienced men, it is only knowledge on the basis of God's sovereign will, which is able to execute its desires without limit. However, the unlimited and ineffable nature of God, who may if he wishes circumvent the laws of nature and may if he wishes make contingent future events into necessities, this very nature excludes God and the supernatural from the category of things we can have knowledge of. "The name of God is used, not to make us conceive him (for he is incomprehensible, and his greatness and power are unconceivable), but that we may honor him" (iii.12). It is the being of God as all-powerful that makes prophecy theoretically possible, but it is this same being that places divine action outside the bounds of human knowledge. To see why this is, we must turn now to the relationship between knowledge and speech according to Hobbes.

## *Knowledge and Names*

According to Hobbes, “the most noble and profitable invention of all other was that of Speech...without which there had been amongst men, neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears, and wolves” (iv.1). Speech is necessary for men to escape the state of nature, for contracts and promises can only be made with words. Without speech, life would remain forever “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Speech is of the utmost necessity for human flourishing. It is unclear to whom we owe thanks for this invention, however, since *Leviathan* seems to offer contradictory claims. On the one hand, Hobbes claims that “the first author of speech was God himself, that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as he presented to his sight; for the Scripture goeth no further in this matter” (iv.1). This, on the surface, is a very pious sentiment. Hobbes attributes that which is most noble and profitable to God. However, he attributes this philanthropic action to God *against* the authority of Scripture, which he grossly misrepresents. According to the Biblical account, “the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them” (Gen. 2:19). Thus, according to the Biblical account, it is man that first gives names to things, not God.

It is somewhat unclear at first why Hobbes misrepresents the Bible in this way.<sup>15</sup> Surely one does not gain a reputation for great piety by being clearly mistaken about an event that happens on the third page of the first book of Scripture. A clue to Hobbes’s intention may be

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that in the Latin version of the book, Hobbes accurately reported the story of Adam naming the animals. Perhaps this blunder is an oversight, which Hobbes later undertook to correct. However, Hobbes also uses the incorrect story at *De Corpore* ii.4. We are thus led to wonder whether Hobbes could have been simply persistently mistaken about the content of Genesis 2:19-20, or whether he has some definable reason for misrepresenting this text as he does.

found in his statement that “the Scripture goeth no further in this matter.” For Hobbes then goes on to list the words and names that God did not teach Adam.

For I do not find anything in the Scripture out of which, directly or by consequence, can be gathered that Adam was taught the names of all figures, numbers, measures, colours, sounds, fancies, relations, much less the names of words and speech, as *general, special, affirmative, negative, interrogative, optative, infinitive*, all of which are useful, and least of all, of *entity, intentionality, quiddity*, and other insignificant words of the School. (iv.1)

If Adam is understood to be the source of language, then it is not surprising that he did not name all that could be named. However, if God taught Adam the names, then it is something of a scandal that he taught him the names of every animal but failed to teach him these other names, which are useful and necessary for human life. For what good is a language that can express “sheep” and “cow” but not “the sheep is smaller than the cow.” Hobbes seems to imply that God only gave humans names, but did not teach us the secrets of propositions and syllogisms. Thus, even if God did, per Hobbes misreading, teach Adam the names of the animals, only man is to be given credit for the tremendous constructive and scientific power of human language. At the same time, Hobbes denies divine warrant to the jargon of the schoolmen. Just as God cannot take credit for the good that language does us, so too harmful language cannot hide behind the imprimatur of the divine.

That God is not the originator of the proposition or the syllogism, which require qualities, measures, relations, affirmations, negations, and the rest, has this further consequence: God is not the originator of truth. “For true and false are attributes of speech, not of things. And where speech is not, there is neither truth nor falsehood” (iv.11). Truth belongs to propositions and syllogisms, and the truth-value of these propositions depends upon the definitions of the names contained within the propositions. These definitions, according to Hobbes, are arbitrarily made. Thus, truth itself is also arbitrary, because it only adheres to propositions that use words with

pre-given definitions. Hobbes is not very clear about this in *Leviathan*. He says that definitions are necessary “for any man that aspires to true science,” and if the accepted definitions are in error, then he must either “correct them where they are negligently set down or...make them himself” (iv.13). He compares this process to the beginnings of geometry, in which “men begin at settling the significations of their words; which settling of significations they call definitions, and place them at the beginning of their reckoning” (iv.12). Hobbes speaks of definitions in *Leviathan* as though it is simply a matter of finding the right ones and agreeing to them with others. But the arbitrary character of the definitions is thoroughgoing, and it is unclear whether Hobbes is able to provide a standard for judging the correctness of a definition beyond the use that one is able to make of it.

To understand Hobbes’s views on this subject, it is useful to turn to Hobbes’s work *De Corpore*. This book was published four years after *Leviathan*, but much of it had already been written before Hobbes began work on his political magnum opus (Skinner 2001, pp. 18-19). In this more technical work of theoretical philosophy, which presents Hobbes’s views on logic, epistemology, metaphysics, and physics, we find Hobbes much more open about the arbitrariness of names, and therefore the arbitrariness of truth. According to Hobbes, “the first truths were arbitrarily made by those that first of all imposed names upon things, or received them from the imposition of others” (*DCr*, iii.8).<sup>16</sup> Thus the reason it is true that *man is a living creature* is that “it pleased men to impose both those names on the same thing.” Definitions, which Hobbes calls “primary propositions,” and “the principles of demonstration” are themselves “truths constituted arbitrarily by the inventors of speech, and therefore not to be demonstrated” (*DCr*, iii.9). The definitions of words only function by consent. Without conventional and public definitions for

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<sup>16</sup> Quotations of *De Corpore* are taken from the 1656 translation published in the first volume of Molesworth’s *English Works* (1839).

words, communication would not be possible. Since these definitions are not given by nature, require social cooperation, and are themselves prerequisite for the formation of society (since contracts themselves require language), it seems that Hobbes posits the actions of contract-making, law-giving, and name-defining in a single moment.

Indeed, while Hobbes had said in the fourth chapter of *Leviathan* that “neither commonwealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace” is possible without speech, in *De Corpore*, he says, “names have their constitution, not from the species of things, but from the will and consent of men,” which he also calls their “will and agreement” (*DCr*, v.1). Again, it seems that if speech is necessary for society and society is necessary for speech, then these two must have arisen simultaneously, most likely in the will of the first sovereign. Early in the book, Hobbes gives us reason to believe that acts by single willful men can establish the meanings of names.

Whatsoever the common use of words be, yet philosophers, who were to teach their knowledge to others, had always the liberty, and sometimes they both had and will have a necessity, of taking to themselves such names as they please for the signifying of their meaning, if they would have it understood. (*DCr*, ii.4)

The first linguistic act, which was the first political act, is also the first philosophical act, for teaching others the meanings of arbitrary names so that they may also, for the first time, know truth, as opposed to brutal sensation, is the genesis of philosophy as such.

But this notion of philosophy, based on arbitrary definitions mutually agreed upon or imposed by others, is itself based upon a sort of bargain that Hobbes is making with the world. For, in order to gain the geometrical certainty and precision that comes with arbitrarily defined, and therefore completely known, first principles, Hobbes must at the same time give up on knowledge of the world as it is in itself. This fact is briefly alluded to in *Leviathan*, when Hobbes distinguishes between the external body which, through its motion, causes sensation, and the “seeming or fancy” we call sense (i.4). These two, while related through a causal mechanism the

knowledge of which Hobbes calls “not very necessary to the business now at hand,” still remain distinct, such that “the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another” (i.3, 4). Thus, in *Leviathan*, it is cursorily explained to the reader that we only have direct experience of sensations, not things themselves, but that this is okay because these sensations are somehow caused by those things.

In *De Corpore*, the radical import of this view is made explicit. To begin, definitions are not essences, because they do not specify anything about the being of the actual object. Rather, a definition is “a speech signifying what we conceive of the essence thereof” (*DCr*, v.7). I know that my sensation of some object is defined by some set of properties it seems to have, but I have no knowledge of whether the object itself partakes in anything like those properties. The “first beginnings of knowledge” are not objects in the world but “the phantasms of sense and imagination” (*DCr*, vi.1). I may believe that my sensations are caused by external objects, and I may have defined a series of names that together coherently account for this causation, but I can never have direct experience of external objects. All experience is mediated by sensation.

Hobbes goes so far as to claim that space itself must be understood in two ways: first as it relates to the phantasms of things existing outside of the mind, and second as it relates to actual bodies that are mind independent. We only have direct experience of the first of these, which Hobbes calls “imaginary space,” whereas we can only infer the existence of what he calls “real space” (*DCr*, vii.2, viii.4-5). This imaginary space, which Hobbes also calls “place,” is a complete mental fiction, such that “place is nothing out of the mind, nor magnitude anything within it,” such that the real magnitude of objects in the world never becomes an object of knowledge. Thus, whereas Hobbes is able to state that his deductions from arbitrarily made definitions are certain, because entirely constructed by the human mind, Hobbes disallows us access to things-



in-themselves. Truth is a matter of will and consent, not a question of correspondence to the real. All knowledge is knowledge of names and the relations between them. We have no knowledge of the world itself (see Strauss 1953, p 173f.).

Furthermore, we have no knowledge of God and no knowledge of revelation. Philosophy, which gives us knowledge of the causes of bodies in so far as we conceive them, does not include theology, because God, as “eternal, ingenerable, [and] incomprehensible,” can neither be compounded nor divided, since he is without limit and without generation. The unlimited God remains outside the power of human comprehension, and in this way he is not debunked. It may be debatable whether such an unknowable God is worthy of our love, but due to his unlimited power we certainly owe him fealty and honor. Likewise, philosophy “excludes all such knowledge as is acquired by Divine inspiration, or revelation, as not derived to us by reason, but by Divine grace in an instant, and, as it were, by some sense supernatural” (*DCr*, i.8). More explicitly than in *Leviathan*, Hobbes here shows the epistemic gap separating humanity from knowledge of revelation. To the extent that knowledge is based on a system of signs arbitrarily defined by men and constructed with the end of power in mind, revelation by leaping beyond the arbitrary conceptual boundaries constructed by men, leaps entirely out of the grasp of reason. But God and revelation find good company on the outskirts, since all objects in real space, i.e. all actually existing things, also must be placed beyond the pale. God, rather than being an irrational delusion, comes to sight as the thing-in-itself *par excellence*, as the being whose being is most radically independent of human minds and, thus, ultimately unknowable to them. Revelation becomes the miraculous interference of a *deus absconditus*, and the exact relationship between this limitless being and his chosen prophet must, it seems, remain veiled by the limits of human understanding (see Gillespie 2008, p. 226ff.).

### *Prophecy as Inspiration*

When we return to *Leviathan*, however, we see that Hobbes is not especially concerned to make these doctrines apparent to the reader, despite the fact that he had already formulated them before writing *Leviathan*. Perhaps, the relative boldness of *De Corpore* is explained when Hobbes says, in the Epistle Dedicatory, “I professed to write not all to all, but some things to geometricians only.” Whatever may be the reason for this difference between the books (see Weinberger 1975), it is clear that the complete doctrine of speech, as Hobbes works it out in *De Corpore*, has a large effect on how we are to understand certain of Hobbes’s arguments in *Leviathan*, especially as regards the certainty of our knowledge of bodies and of the transcendent being of God. What is equally clear, however, is that Hobbes does not proceed on the basis of this radical epistemology. Instead, Hobbes continues to treat the practical identity between sensations and things in the world as given. He thus pursues the task of science, by constructing definitions for names and then drawing the consequences of those definitions, without owing up to the epistemic gap between mind and world that this vision of science creates. And whereas that gap leaves room for a limitless and hidden God of revelation, Hobbes’s constructed world of matter in motion, defined entirely in reference to our perception of external matter, leaves much less room for the supernatural. That this is the case, and that Hobbes is knowingly giving the possibility of revelation short shrift, can be shown by considering Hobbes’s discussion of prophecy as a form of inspiration.

To begin, Hobbes stubbornly insists on taking “inspiration” in its most mundane and material sense. It is an “absurd assertion,” he says, that “faith is infused or inspired, when nothing can be poured or breathed into anything but body” (v.10). Hobbes, here, narrowly sees

inspiration as a literal blowing-into,<sup>17</sup> whereas in *De Corpore* he mentions “such knowledge as is acquired by Divine inspiration, or revelation, as not derived to us by reason, but by Divine grace in an instant.” While it is true that Hobbes excludes such knowledge from the province of philosophy, he shows that he is perfectly aware of the usual meaning given to the word “inspiration” in this context: it is a near synonym for “revelation.” In *Leviathan*, Hobbes plays dumb, and then accuses his pious opponents of talking nonsense. Here we catch sight of Hobbes stacking the deck against his adversaries. For he is able to make arguments against “inspiration,” which is risible, that he is not able to make against “revelation,” which is not. Hobbes’s discussion of inspiration in Part I appears as a digression from a consideration of madness. “Madness” Hobbes defines as “to have stronger and more vehement passions for anything than is ordinarily seen in others” (viii.16). This definition of madness, which seems like it would include a vast array of neurotic behavior short of madness, makes an “opinion of inspiration” a shoe-in for an insanity plea. For how could a man who believes that God has spoken to him not have a stronger passion for this than is ordinarily seen in others?

According to Hobbes, however, the primary danger inherent in the madness of inspiration is not personal, but social. Madness is “not visible always” in single individuals believing themselves inspired. But if you get a group of the supposedly inspired together, watch out! “For they will clamor, fight against, and destroy those by whom all their lifetime before they have been protected and secured from injury” (viii.21). Hobbes is clearly alluding to the English Civil War, but he is also referring back to the problems that initially confronted him about prophecy: the problems of ignorance and credulity. That it is a mass that is inspired to such violence, a

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<sup>17</sup> There is, of course, Biblical warrant for this interpretation. See Gen. 2:7

mass that is ignorant and therefore credulous, points to the probable agency of the evil, ambitious men that Hobbes referred to earlier.

However, Hobbes is not now only concerned with the social implications of false claims to prophecy. He goes further and claims “if there were nothing else that bewrayed their madness, yet that very arrogating such inspiration to themselves is argument enough” (viii.21). Honestly believing oneself to be inspired can be sign, not only of ignorance, but also of vanity.

This opinion of inspiration, called commonly “private spirit,” begins very often from some lucky finding of an error generally held by others, and not knowing, or not remembering, by what conduct of reason they came to so singular a truth (as they think it, though it be many times an untruth they light on), they presently admire themselves, as being in the special grace of God Almighty, who hath revealed the same to them supernaturally, by his Spirit. (viii.22)

Just as humans would, in general, rather invent an invisible cause for some event than admit ignorance and powerlessness, so too those who alight upon a singular proposition often invent an invisible cause for their own excellence, a cause which magnifies their excellence all out of proportion. The more advanced this magnification becomes, according to Hobbes, the closer that man tends to madness, to being the otherwise sober man in Bedlam, who nevertheless calls himself God the Father (viii.21). Humans, who are naturally vainglorious, and who are not naturally skilled at recalling the conduct of their reason, are prone, not only to ignorance and credulity, but to self-flattery. The idea that God would be talking to *you* of all people is too egotistically satisfying for many humans to pass up. Thus, when we are confronted by the prophetic claims of others, we must not only ask whether they are ignorantly mistaking dreams for reality, or cynically promoting lies as the truth, but we must also wonder whether they have simply convinced themselves that they are good enough to be God’s messenger.

Hobbes, however, is still careful in this context not to deny the possibility of true prophecy emanating from the mysterious and all-powerful God. Instead, he merely denies that

such prophecy has the character of inspiration. God's Spirit does not enter the prophet any more than an evil spirit is the cause of the madman's madness. "For neither *Moses* nor *Abraham* pretended to prophecy by possession of a spirit, but from the voice of God, or by a vision or dream; nor is there anything in his law, moral or ceremonial, by which they were taught there was any such enthusiasm, or any possession" (viii.25). Even the evil spirits Jesus casts out of men are not spirits, according to Hobbes; these men were madmen in the normal sense, and "our Savior speaketh to the disease as to a person, [as] is the usual phrase of all that cure by words only, as Christ did" (viii.26). This claim, like the claim about God inventing speech earlier, is an example of Hobbes's slippery Biblical exegesis. Part of Hobbes's argument that Jesus didn't exorcise demons is that he is also said to "rebuke" the winds and a fever, which implies that he held sway over natural, not spiritual, things. But when the reader checks the passages that Hobbes cites, he finds a different tale being told. True, Jesus rebukes the winds at Matthew 8:26, but directly after that story we read another story in which Jesus rebukes evil spirits:

And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters. (Matt.8:32)

Now, it is rather hard to swallow Hobbes's analysis in this case. For how would a man's madness, his completely internal distemperment, suddenly ("behold") cause a whole herd of pigs to commit mass suicide? Hobbes signals his intention by referring the reader almost directly to a Biblical passage that gives his own interpretation the lie. The Bible does seem to believe in spirits; it is Hobbes that does not. So, while Hobbes is unable to simply deny the existence of a transcendent God or the possibility of revelation, because his principles do not allow him to do this, Hobbes is perfectly content to misrepresent Scripture for his own ends and to deride revelation as madness under the pseudonym of inspiration.

### *Prophecy according to Nature*

Hobbes's relationship to prophecy and revelation in Part I of *Leviathan* is extraordinarily complex. On the one hand, Hobbes offers naturalistic accounts of the human animal which account for our susceptibility to prophecy. Humans are naturally ignorant of the science of causation and the philosophy of demonstration, so they do not know how to appropriately distinguish between dreams and reality. This ignorance in turn makes most men credulous, such that they will believe the tales others tell, even when those tales are lies designed to "abuse the simple people." Furthermore, our natural love of glory and honor renders us liable to believing that we ourselves are God's chosen vessel. For all of these reasons, any wise man must be circumspect and wary when dealing with claims to revelation, since it is more likely that one man is mistaken or lying than that God has stopped to normal order of the universe for that man's benefit.

However, on the other hand, claims to revelation are outside the province of philosophy. If there is an omnipotent God, as Hobbes continues to admit throughout Part I, then the will and actions of that being are beyond human understanding. Prophetic claims may have no truth-value in terms of Hobbes's constructivist theory of knowledge, but neither do they admit of falsity. Hobbes, in other words, may not positively embrace prophecy, he may warn against its excesses and irrationalities, but, thus far, he cannot refute it, nor has he seriously tried to. By focusing only on the science of causation in the field of objects of sensation, Hobbes has given up access to the larger question of what in fact *is*. By forgoing that question, Hobbes necessarily allows room for revelation in his worldview, even though he tries to suffocate the phenomenon with psychological criticisms.

In the following chapters, I will turn to Part III of *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes treats prophecy according to the principle of “the prophetic word.” As we shall see, Hobbes’s treatment of the topic is quite different in this context. Indeed, the chapters of *Leviathan* between those covered here and those covered in the remainder of the dissertation are the most obviously political chapters in the book. So while political things were mentioned only in passing by Hobbes in these chapters, the later treatment takes place in the full light of Hobbes’s political teaching.

### Chapter Three: Prophecy and Natural Reason

In the next three chapters of this dissertation, I will focus on Chapters xxxi-xxxiii, which constitute the transition from the first, natural, half of *Leviathan* to the second, “prophetical,” half (xxx.4, xxxi.1). My primary goal is to understand what Hobbes means when he says that the “ground of [his] discourse” in this part of the book is “not only the natural word of God, but also the prophetical” (xxx.1). First, in the present chapter, I will consider Hobbes’s distinction between the natural and the prophetic word of God, as it is presented in Chapter xxx. Hobbes’s discussion of natural religion, it will be shown, both relies upon and subtly calls into question the notion of the omnipotent God. The curious combination of impious skepticism and pious awe before the incomprehensible, which Hobbes displayed in Part I, is repeated here at the end of Part II. Here, however, the tensions that arise between the notion of an all-powerful God and Hobbes’s own materialist science of nature become manifest: the exact ontological status of the transcendent God is seen to be problematic when viewed according to natural, and perhaps also logical, principles. The manner in which this God exists is radically unclear, even if the question of whether he does exist is still left undecided. What is much clearer, according to Hobbes, is that man has a natural duty to worship such an omnipotent being. While Hobbes describes the form and content of that worship on the basis of natural reason in Chapter xxx, he ultimately finds that certain problems can only be solved on the basis of scripture, and not through unaided reason. This leads Hobbes from natural to supernatural principles, and thus from Part II to Part III of the book.

My next task, to be undertaken in the following chapter, will therefore be to consider Chapter xxxi, the first chapter of Part III. In this chapter, Hobbes describes the manner in which



he grounds his work in the revealed word of God. Grounding one's thinking in this way requires knowledge of what constitutes true prophecy, and thus Hobbes considers how we may identify the genuine prophet. These reflections on prophets, which are grounded on supernatural principles, must be compared to the naturalistic account of prophecy that Hobbes has offered earlier in the work. Such a comparison will allow us both to specify the difference between the operative principles in these different parts of the work and also to measure the distance between the conclusions each method reaches. We will see that, while Hobbes seems more open to prophetic revelation here, he actually uses traditional supernatural arguments to constrain the meaning of prophecy. Far from providing a foundation for the inspiration of individual men by God, Hobbes instead endeavors to limit the duty of the prophet to providing "wise and learned interpretation and careful ratiocination" regarding the words of Scripture. Prophecy is reduced to proper scriptural hermeneutics, and the most authoritative reader becomes the most authoritative prophet.

Thus, the task of chapter five of this dissertation will be to understand Hobbes's treatment of Scripture itself, which is the subject of Chapter xxxiii of *Leviathan*. If prophecy is only to be had from out of the Bible, then the status of the Bible seems to be greatly enhanced, as it is our only access to God's word. But this seeming piety is again undercut, as it becomes clear that Hobbes finds the Bible's status as a *book* renders it prone to the accidents of history and the indelicacies of human hands. Thus, not only is prophecy limited to the interpretation of a sacred text, but the text that it interprets is of dubious origin and quality. We will see, however, that while these claims may be designed to lower to reader's estimation of prophecy, Hobbes's does not claim that they refute the possibility of prophetic action, nor do they render such action any less necessary in human life. Thus, I intend to show that, while Hobbes continues to display deep

skepticism with regard to religion and prophecy, he also understands both the theoretical and the practical limits to that skepticism. This practical dimension, which is related to the necessity for prophetic action in human life, will become Hobbes's concern later in Part III and will be treated in detail in the sixth and final chapter of this dissertation.

### *The Problem of Divine Law*

Hobbes begins Chapter xxxi by summarizing the conclusions of his book thus far. He says,

That the condition of mere nature (that is to say, of absolute liberty, such as is theirs that neither are sovereigns nor subjects) is anarchy, and the condition of war; that the precepts by which men are guided to avoid that condition are the laws of nature; that a commonwealth without sovereign power is but a word without substance, and cannot stand; that subjects owe to sovereigns simple obedience in all things wherein their obedience is not repugnant to the laws of God, I have sufficiently proved in that which I have already written. (xxx.1)

Here, in these four propositions, we have Hobbes's politics *in nuce*. That the state of nature is an intolerable war of all against all leads men seek peace by contracting with one another to mutually lay down their right to all things and transfer it to a sovereign body that provides safety and stability through fear of punishment and wise administration. The absolute power of the sovereign is limited only by each subject's right to preserve his own life (xxi.12-17) and, as Hobbes says here, by the laws of God. The first of these limits requires that sovereigns seeking obedience not be rampantly murderous. The second, however, could potentially predetermine the social, political, and economic structure of the state, leaving the sovereign to be God's chief administrator.

Much depends on the scope of the laws of God, for every law which God dictates is one which the sovereign cannot abrogate without forfeiting his right to the people's obedience. If the

sovereign commands a violation of the law of God, then each obedient citizen runs the risk of being punished by the omnipotent God. The eternal punishments that may be feared from God make the temporal punishments of the sovereign seem puny by comparison, so every citizen would seem to have the right to please God at the expense of the sovereign on the grounds of self-preservation.<sup>18</sup> Thus, if the sovereign declares that all subjects must eat mutton on Friday, because the shepherds need the extra income, but God commands that we must eat only fish on Friday, then we must obey God. For surely it is better sense to be martyred over mutton than to be flung into the eternal fire for want of some fish. It is necessary, therefore, that citizens know what the laws of God are if they are to know whether they must obey their sovereign's laws.

Thus, Hobbes writes that, at this point in *Leviathan*,

There wants only, for the entire knowledge of civil duty, to know what are those laws of God. For without that a man knows not, when he is commanded anything by the civil power, whether it be contrary to the law of God or not, and so, either by too much civil obedience offends the Divine Majesty, or through fear of offending God transgresses the commandments of the commonwealth. To avoid both these rocks, it is necessary to know what are the laws divine. (xxxi.1)

Knowledge of exactly what God commands is necessary for citizens to calculate whether it is more prudent to obey or disobey the commands of the sovereign. It is to clarify the duties of subjects, and thereby to provide stability to the civil state, that Hobbes must turn to a consideration of the revealed law.

Hobbes, however, had discussed the notion of divine law earlier in *Leviathan* in Chapter xxvi, "Of Civil Laws," and that prior discussion would seem to make the discussion in Chapter xxxi unnecessary. Placing Chapter xxxi within the context of this earlier treatment of divine law is necessary to fully explicate Hobbes's rhetorical strategy. Hobbes relies, in Chapter xxxi, on

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<sup>18</sup> Hobbes remained concerned with this point throughout his life. See, for example, *Behemoth*, in which he writes, "As much as eternall torture is more terrible than death, so much would they [*sc.* Men] fear the Clergy more than the King" (*Clarendon Edition of the Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Volume 10, pg. 125).

premises that he seems to reject earlier in the work. In Chapter xxvi, Hobbes discusses the “division of law” into different types. After distinguishing between natural laws, “which have been laws for all eternity,” and positive laws, which “have been made laws by the will of those that have had the sovereign power over others,” Hobbes goes on to distinguish between two sorts of positive law, human positive law and divine positive law (xxvi.37-39). Human positive law is dispensed with by Hobbes in a single, short paragraph; some laws “declar[e] to every man what it is by which he acquireth and holdeth a propriety in lands or goods,” which laws are called distributive, whereas other laws “declare what penalty shall be inflicted on those that violate the law,” which laws are called penal (xxvi.39). It is not mysterious where these laws originate; they are the declarations of the will of the sovereign. Divine positive law, on the other hand, is shown by Hobbes to be more difficult to grasp.

To begin, Hobbes stresses that “natural laws, being eternal and universal, are all divine” (xxvi.40). Humans can only create positive law, but God has seemingly built certain and knowable laws into the very essence of the world. Hobbes has detailed these laws in Chapters xiv and xv of *Leviathan*. These laws all derive from the fundamental law of nature, which requires men to seek peace for the sake of self-preservation. These, Hobbes says, are “undoubtedly God’s law” (xxvi.41). The problem is that God appears to work within the province of positive law as well. God’s positive laws are “not from all eternity, nor universally addressed to all men, but only to a certain people or to certain persons” (xxvi.40). God does not only make laws that may be known to all through reason, but he also makes laws that only apply to certain people at certain times. These laws “are declared for such by those whom God hath authorized to declare them.” For example, the laws regarding ceremonial purity in the book of Leviticus were divine positive laws laid down by the authority of Moses and were binding on the

Israelites. The New Testament, however, through the authority of Jesus and St. Paul, repeals many of these positive laws, while adding new ones, such as the ceremony of baptism. God, in other words, can (and has been known to) change the rules of what constitutes appropriate religious practice.

If God sometimes changes the divine positive law, and if we must adapt to the change or face God's displeasure, then we must be certain that we are up-to-date. However, it is far from clear who "God hath authorized" to declare the law.

But this authority of man to declare what be these positive laws of God, how can it be known? God may command a man by a supernatural way to deliver laws to other men. But because it is of the essence of law that he who is to be obliged be assured of the authority of him that declareth it, which we cannot naturally take notice to be from God, *how can a man without supernatural revelation be assured of the revelation received by the declarer? and how can he be bound to obey them?* (xxvi.40, emphasis in original).

Even if God has supernaturally revealed new positive laws to another person, we would need to verify this before we could know whether we should obey these new laws, for if the new lawgiver is not really a prophet, we would endanger ourselves by obeying his rule. But, according to Hobbes, "it is evidently impossible" for us to be certain of the genuineness of another's revelation. Hobbes argues that this is impossible by showing that those things which "induce" men to believe the revelations of others "are not assured evidences of special revelation" (*ibid.*). Hobbes lists three such inducements: the performance of miracles, "seeing the extraordinary sanctity" of the purported prophet's life, and "seeing the extraordinary wisdom or extraordinary felicity of his actions." While each of these may gain credit for the prophet, none is a sufficient reason to hearken to him. "Miracles," according to Hobbes, "are marvelous works, but that which is marvelous to one may not be so to another" (*ibid.*). Some things that seem like miracles are really just tricks, which don't appear so amazing once you know the principle involved. And since, according to Hobbes, very few people are adept at determining the true

causes of events, most people will be prone seeing the hand of God in situations where wise discernment would detect artifice (x.14, cf. ii.8, v.19, and xii.4). Without study, therefore, miraculous works are not sufficient proof of revelation.

Second, “sanctity may be feigned” (xxvi.40). We cannot trust the public faces of men, who have much to gain by a reputation for saintliness. The true character and thought of a man is hidden from view, locked up in his private thoughts, and so the character we perceive from his public persona should be distrusted.<sup>19</sup> Third, “the visible felicities of this world are most often the work of God by natural and ordinary causes.” In other words, people do not require God’s supernatural assistance to prosper. Neither success in business nor victory in battle requires extraordinary means. Now, Hobbes had repeated the word “extraordinary” twice when introducing this third inducement to belief, saying “extraordinary wisdom and extraordinary felicity.” The conclusion seems to be that actions which seem to be extraordinary are actually quite ordinary once one understands them correctly. Not even outrageous good luck can be shown to prove divine favor, since every circumstance that led to the event can be shown to have an explicable cause. Thus, according to Hobbes, “no man can infallibly know by natural reason that another has had a supernatural revelation of God’s will, but only a belief” (*ibid.*). Indeed, the use of natural reason tends exclusively to undermine that belief, not strengthen it.

It would seem then that humans without personal revelation are unable to know the divine positive laws of God, since they are unable to have certain and assured knowledge of who

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<sup>19</sup> Hobbes gives an example of this in *Behemoth*. Describing the ways in which Presbyterian ministers gained public acclaim, he writes, “...they so framed their countenance and gesture...and their pronounciation...as that no Tragedian in the world could have acted the part of a right godly man better than these did, insomuch as a man unacquainted with such art, could never suspect any ambitious plot in them, to raise sedition against the State (as they then had designed) or doubt that the vehemence of their voice...and forcedness of their gesture and looks, could arise from any thing else but zeal to the service of God” (pg. 138, spelling modernized).

is authorized to declare that law. If it is of the essence of law that it must be duly promulgated to be binding (xxvi.12), it would seem that men are not bound to obey the divine positive law. But this is not Hobbes's conclusion. Rather, despite the fact that we can only have a mere belief about who the true prophet is, Hobbes says it is "not so hard" to show that we must obey divine positive laws anyway. So long as the law is "not against the law of nature" we are bound to obey any divine positive law once we "undertake to obey it" (xxvi.41). In this case, a man is "bound by his own act" to obey. It is not immediately clear what Hobbes means by this, and indeed he proceeds to make this claim "yet clearer by the examples and testimonies concerning this point in Holy Scripture."

His two examples are Abraham and Moses, both of whom received special revelation from God. Crucially, according to Hobbes, the laws that God revealed to these men were binding on others (Abraham's offspring and the Israelites at Sinai, respectively) without those others having themselves received any revelation. In the case of Abraham, his offspring were obliged to obey "in virtue of the obedience they owed to their parents, who (if they be subject to no other earthly power, as here in the case of Abraham) have sovereign power over their children and servants" (*ibid.*). In the case of Moses, the Israelite people explicitly submitted to his rule, according to Hobbes, and so were bound to obey his commands. Thus, we are bound to obey the divine positive laws which are declared by those whom we have ourselves declared we will obey. By allowing another to have sovereign authority, we undertake to obey all of his pronouncements that are not against the law of nature, "for whatsoever is not against the law of nature may be made law in the name of them that have the sovereign power, and there is no reason men should be the less obliged by it when it is propounded in the name of God" (*ibid.*). The sovereign, therefore, has the capacity for making divine positive laws that we must obey,

even if we cannot know with certainty whether he, or anyone else, has had special revelation. The fact of that supernatural event is not the basis for our obedience in any case; rather we obey because we have undertaken to obey whatever the sovereign commands within the bounds of the natural law.

Hobbes adds, however, that while we are bound to obey divine laws given by the sovereign, we are not bound to believe they come from God. This is because “men’s belief and interior cogitations are not subject to the commands, but only to the operation of God, ordinary or extraordinary” (*ibid.*). Whereas action can be compelled, and thus commanded, this is not the case for belief. I can be held accountable for performing the actions which the sovereign commands in God’s name, but I cannot be held accountable, even to God, for believing in the real necessity of those actions. This is because “faith of supernatural law is not a fulfilling, but only an assenting to the same; and not a duty that we exhibit to God, but a gift which God freely giveth to whom he pleaseth...” (*ibid.*) Faith in the truth of the divine positive law, in other words, requires the grace of God, and God cannot require of us something which is his alone to grant. Thus, while we are required to obey the divine positive law as declared by our sovereign, we cannot be compelled to believe it to be divine mandate, save by the special action of God alone, i.e. by personal revelation.

Hobbes seems, therefore, to have dispensed with the problem that divine law poses to the power of the sovereign. There is no need to fret about citizens facing a dilemma between obeying the sovereign and obeying the divine law, for “in a commonwealth a subject that has no certain and assured revelation particularly to himself concerning the will of God is to obey for such the command of the commonwealth” (xxvi.41). Any laws which are not against the law of nature, and have been propounded by the sovereign in the name of God are to be taken for divine



laws, absent particular revelation from God to the contrary. Indeed, such contravening revelation must be “certain and assured” to warrant a subject’s disobedience, “for if men were at liberty to take for God’s commandments their own dreams and fancies...scarce two men would agree upon what is God’s commandment” (*ibid.*). It seems to be Hobbes’s position that it is no easier to know that you yourself have received special revelation than it is to know whether someone else has. We may believe that God has spoken to us, but it is hard to be certain, for, as Hobbes says in Chapter xxix, “a man’s conscience and his judgment is the same thing; and as the judgment so also the conscience may be erroneous” (xxix.7). Just as most people are poor judges of events, due to being ignorant of their causes, and poor judges in their own case, because they are always partial to themselves, so too the individual’s conscience cannot be relied upon to decide well regarding religious practice. As Hobbes wrote earlier in the book,

...men vehemently in love with their own new opinions (though never so absurd), and obstinately bent to maintain them, gave those their opinions also that revered name of conscience, as if they would have it seem unlawful to change or speak against them; and so pretend to know they are true, when they know, at most, but that they think so. (vii.4)

A subject’s opinions regarding religious practice, as mere opinions, are no surer than a subject’s opinions regarding political practice. Therefore, a subject is better off relying, not on his own private judgment, but on the law of the commonwealth, “because the law is the public conscience, by which he hath already undertaken to be guided” (*ibid.*). Just as we give up our right to be judge in our own case when we enter civil society, so too we give up the right to make use of our private conscience exclusively. We can decide what to believe internally, but we cannot each decide for ourselves how to act in public religious life. “Otherwise, in such diversity as there is of private consciences, which are but private opinions, the commonwealth must needs be distracted, and no man dare to obey the sovereign power farther than it shall seem good in his

own eyes” (*ibid.*). Not only is it convenient to rely on the sovereign to determine God’s positive law, given the impossibility of knowing the true prophet, it is also necessary if one is avoid civil strife and a possible return to the state of nature.

It is all the more puzzling, therefore, that Hobbes begins Chapter xxxi by stating that it is “necessary to know what are the laws divine” to avoid offending either God or the sovereign, since he has seemingly already shown us that these things need not, and indeed should not, be in tension. That we should learn our religious duties from the sovereign appears to have been shown on the basis of Hobbes’s epistemological and political principles. In Chapter xxxi, however, Hobbes suppresses the results of that previous discussion of divine law, treating the possible tension between human and divine law as an open question. This may be a case in which, as Strauss said, Hobbes “makes no explicit use of the results of his critique, but rather avails himself to previously rejected opinions, as though they were self-evidently correct, in order to refute other traditional teachings covertly” (Strauss 2011, pp. 32-33). While Hobbes has already argued that no subject can have a politically salient revelation from God, and must rather obey the divine laws as declared by the laws of the commonwealth, he reopens the question of prophecy again in Chapter xxxi as though this is still a question. We might be tempted to assume, therefore, that Hobbes is only entertaining the possibility of prophecy in Chapter xxxi in order to further undermine it. However, it may also be that Hobbes treats prophecy as an important question because it still remains an important question. Hobbes may be less sure of his own critique of prophecy than he at times seems. If Hobbes’s critique of prophecy, as developed in the first half of *Leviathan*, is not a sufficient critique, then the reemergence of it in Chapter xxxi may be absolutely necessary.

Indeed, Hobbes himself pointed to the central difficulty when in Chapter xxvi he argued that divine grace is required to have true faith in the divine law (xxvi.41). One can distinguish between a subject's personal religious conscience, which Hobbes's ridicules, and a human being's subjective certainty of having received special revelation, which is unassailable to the extent that one's personal certainty could be "a gift which God freely giveth to whom he pleaseth." It may be the duty of all wise men to distrust the fact that a miracle has happened, and to search for a scientific explanation, but an omnipotent God is capable of bridging this epistemic gap at will and producing absolute conviction in the elect. The scoffer may call another man's revelation a mere opinion, but that is simply to deny the possibility of an all-powerful God imparting supernatural knowledge through special dispensation, which is to beg the question. Strauss captured the problem exactly while discussing John Calvin in his book *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*:

If...the assertion of miracles, identical with the assertion of providence, is founded in faith and understandable only by faith, then faith itself cannot be founded on miracles...And the proof from miracles is a proof on the basis of human reflection. It can be of value only on the basis of the certainty brought about by the spirit...In any case, for this reason—because faith stands not on miracles, but on the contrary, the assertion of miracles stands on faith, and since obedience of faith depreciates from the outset all theoretical objections as stemming from carnal understanding, from disobedience—the assertion of miracles stands impregnable: God in His limitless power and freedom can use the things created by Him as tools, at His will... (Strauss 1965, p. 197)

If God is characterized primarily by his limitless power, as Hobbes claims he is, then Hobbes cannot easily deny him the power of communicating directly to men, and thus Hobbes's efforts in the first half of *Leviathan* to reduce the divine law to the will of the civil sovereign fall short of the mark. More would be needed to show that special revelation is not possible before subjects could be persuaded to follow the sovereign's will rather than their own subjective certainty.

Hobbes, in other words, still has work to do with respect to prophecy, which may account for its reemergence as a primary topic of the second half of the book, despite his dismissal of it in the first half.

### *The Nature of the Divine Lawgiver*

Hobbes begins his consideration of divine law in Chapter xxxi by considering the divine lawgiver. Just as all civil law is made by the civil sovereign, who is “the sole legislator” (xxvi.5), so too divine law is ordained by God in his capacity as the sovereign of the Kingdom of God (xxx.2). By understanding the character of the sovereignty of God, we can begin to understand the character of his laws. The character of God’s sovereignty, however, is somewhat mysterious. Hobbes first says, “Whether men will or not, they must be subject to the divine power” (*ibid.*). Hobbes affirms both God’s existence and his special interest in human beings. “By denying the existence or providence of God, men may shake off their ease, but not their yoke” (*ibid.*). Both the atheist and the deist (to use a convenient, though anachronistic, term), then, seem to be subject to God’s authority. Even if the first denies that there is a God and the second denies that “God has any care of the actions of mankind,” their beliefs cannot affect God’s status as sovereign of the world; they are subjects of God just as all things, animate and inanimate, are.

But, as Hobbes immediately makes clear, there is a difficulty here. The use of the words “kingdom” and “subject” must be metaphorical as applied to God, “for he only is properly said to reign that governs his subjects by his word, and by promise of rewards to those that obey it, and by threatening them with punishment that obey it not” (*ibid.*). Hobbes restricts the notion of governance, “properly” speaking, to include only specifically political forms of governance. God

may command the light to shine, but light is only his metaphorical subject because his command is only metaphorically a word. Inanimate objects and irrational animals are not subjects of God because they are incapable of understanding words, and thus, commands. “They understand no precepts as his [*sc.* God’s]” (*ibid.*). To be a subject in the proper sense, according to Hobbes, is to obey commands either through a hope for reward or a fear of punishment, and any being that does not do so, is not a subject of God. This casts the case of the atheist and the deist in a different light, since both deny that God either promises or threatens human beings. These, therefore, cannot be subjects of God, properly speaking. It turns out that one *can* will oneself out of subjection to God by refusing to acknowledge his sovereignty. By doing so, one returns to the natural state in which all beasts live, and in which all humans must have lived before the advent of language allowed them to understand God’s words. However, to deny God’s sovereignty is not the same as to deny his power, no more than refusing to acknowledge an earthly sovereign’s commands can save you from his armies. For just as the subject who denies his sovereign returns to the state of nature with respect to that sovereign, and thus opens himself to the renewal of hostilities in the war of all against all, so too the atheist and the deist, in ceasing to be God’s subjects, become his “enemies” (*ibid.*). It is thus that these men have shaken off their ease, i.e. their hope of peaceful co-existence with the all-powerful, but not their yoke, since God’s irresistible might will master them in any case. The kingdom of God, properly speaking, is a community of people committed to the existence of a providential God and committed to obeying that God’s edicts for hope of reward or fear of punishment. It is most necessary, therefore, that members of this community know what God’s commands are, for ignorance of these seems to put one in the terrifying position of God’s enemies, at war with the universal sovereign.

Hobbes, therefore, next takes up the question of how God promulgates his commands. God is subject to the same procedural requirements as all sovereigns are, for “to rule by words requires that such words be manifestly made known, for else they are no laws” (xxxii.3). “A sufficient and clear promulgation” must occur before subjects can be held responsible for obedience; otherwise, ignorance would be an “excuse” (*ibid.*). If God is to be anything but the metaphorical ruler of the world, he must act like an actual ruler does and make his will sufficiently, clearly, and manifestly known to those who must follow it. Earthly sovereigns, according to Hobbes, have only one way to do this: “proclamation, or promulgation by the voice of man” (*ibid.*). Subjects of an earthly sovereign know his commands because he has *told* them what they are. God, however, has three ways of making his laws known: reason, revelation, and prophecy.

Of these three, it is the central one that corresponds to the way in which earthly sovereigns make their will known. Through revelation, God simply tells us what he wants; he directly publicizes his law much like any other sovereign would by speaking it aloud and then nailing it to the wall for everyone to peruse and commit to memory. Through revelation, there could not be any mistake about God’s wishes, since we would hear them from the horse’s mouth, in the manner of Balaam. God, however, has not availed himself to this most direct method. As Hobbes says, “there have not been any universal laws so given, because God speaketh not in that manner but to particular persons, and to divers men divers things” (*ibid.*). Revelation always has the character of special revelation. God does not speak directly to the multitude,<sup>20</sup> but only to

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<sup>20</sup> The case of Jesus is particularly problematic for Hobbes’s argument at this point, for according to orthodox Christian teaching, Jesus somehow *is* God and also addressed the multitudes directly, as in the Sermons on the Mount and the Plain. Hobbes, in Christian theological terms, recognizes only God the Father as being God and relegates God the Son to the subsidiary status of a prophet who received special revelation. The status of Jesus will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

chosen individuals, and God does not say the same thing to each individual he speaks to. It was Moses alone who was given God's commandments on Sinai; these were not spoken to Noah or Abraham, each of whom partook of their own covenants with God. Revelation, as a method of declaring the divine law, thus collapses into the third method, prophecy, leaving only two ways in which God makes his will known—natural reason and supernatural prophecy. As Hobbes writes, "From the difference between the other two kinds of God's word, *rational* and *prophetic*, there may be attributed to God a twofold kingdom, *natural* and *prophetic*..." (xxxi.4). It is here that the ground of the distinction between the two halves of Hobbes's book, the natural and the prophetic parts, is most apparent. It is in the absence of direct, general revelation of God's will that this two-part structure of Hobbes's argument becomes necessary. Since God has declined to take the direct path, we are forced to discover his laws in other ways, either through study of his creation or through the mediation of his chosen auditors. The first of these corresponds to the natural law ("the natural dictates of right reason"), while the second corresponds to the divine positive law ("by the mouths of his holy prophets"). The distinction that Hobbes had made before, in Chapter xxvi, has now been grounded in the nature of God himself, or rather, in God's refusal to act in the fashion of earthly sovereigns and make his will known by proclamation. For the remainder of Chapter xxxi, Hobbes will focus on the method of nature ("the natural kingdom of God"), while in Part III, he will consider the prophetic revelation of God's law.

Hobbes next turns to the natural reason why we should obey God's commands, whatever they may be. This reason, according to Hobbes, has nothing to do with our gratitude for his having created us (xxxi.5). Indeed, gratitude is only necessary, for Hobbes, because the givers of gifts only become benefactors from a hope of profiting in return; if we wish to receive gifts, we must appear grateful for them, lest the well of goodwill dry up (xv.16). But God has no need of

anything from mere human beings, and he does not, therefore, base his graces on the gratitude of the receivers, which can have no effect on him, as he does not expect any profit for himself from us. As we shall soon see, merit has no necessary relationship to desert in our dealings with the divine. God, in other words, does not care whether we are grateful for having been created. The reason we must obey God is due not to his goodness but to “his irresistible power” (xxxi.5).

Working entirely within the confines of natural reason, i.e. within the confines of his own philosophy, Hobbes derives the necessity of obedience to God from his own political science.

In the state of nature, every individual has a right to all things, including, potentially, the lives and bodies of others. The limit of any person’s authority in this state is only the limit of their personal power. However, human power is always intrinsically limited; even the most powerful must sleep and even the most clever may be undone by artful conspiracies against them. It is for this reason that we compact with one another, giving up our right to all things and the power that goes along with it. It is safer to give up some of the little power we have, and enter the civil state, than to lose all of it in the state of nature. But, as Hobbes makes clear here, “if there had been any man of power irresistible, there had been no reason why he should not by that power have ruled...according to his own discretion” (*ibid.*). We give up our right to all things only because it is rational for us to do so, i.e. only because we lack the power to master all things. It would be irrational for a being of limitless power to agree to limit itself in any way. “To those, therefore, whose power is irresistible, the dominion of all men adhereth naturally by their excellence of power...” (*ibid.*). We must obey God, because it is in our best interest to do so, just as it is in our best interest always to obey a force we cannot master. God, in other words, is a sovereign by acquisition, not by institution (see xvii.15). Indeed, God’s sovereignty over us is much like the sovereignty of a mother; we do not owe obedience to our mother because she



birthed us (just as we do not owe it to God because he created us), rather we owe her obedience because she chose not to expose us at birth (xx.5). As Hobbes says in that context, “every man is supposed to promise obedience to him in whose power it is to save or destroy him.” Once we can feed ourselves, our mother’s power over us ceases, but since God has unlimited power, we owe him our unlimited obedience.

But, as remarked above, our obedience might not save us from being destroyed, just as disobedience might not bring about our destruction. God maintains “the right of afflicting men at his pleasure” (xxxi.5). Hobbes divorces sin and punishment. He writes both that “through punishment be due to sin...yet the right of afflicting is not always derived from man’s sin, but from God’s power” (xxxi.5) and also that “though it be said, ‘that death entered the world by sin’...it follows not thence that God could not justly have afflicted him, though he had not sinned, as well as he afflicteth other living creatures that cannot sin” (xxxi.6). One may sin with no repercussion, just as one may be harmed though innocent.<sup>21</sup> Hobbes admits that this is “of that difficulty as it hath shaken the faith not only of the vulgar, but of philosophers, and which is more, of the Saints, concerning Divine Providence” (xxxi.6.). That infants die of plague, while sadists become rich and old, cries for some divine justification. Faced we such a problem, we all become as Job, demanding reasons for the manifest unfairness of the world. But Hobbes provides us with God’s answer to Job: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?”<sup>22</sup> God’s power excuses God’s seeming injustice. It becomes, in effect, justice because

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<sup>21</sup> This is in complete accord his Hobbes’s view of the natural state of man, in which “the desires and other passions of man are in themselves no sin” and “no more are the actions that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them—which till laws be made they cannot know” (xiii.10).

<sup>22</sup> “For whereas the friends of Job drew their arguments from his affliction to his sin, and he defended himself by the conscience of his innocence, God himself taketh up the matter, and having justified the affliction by arguments drawn from his power, such as this, “Where wast thou, when I laid the foundations of the earth” (*Job* 38:4), and the like, both approved Job’s innocence, and reprov’d the erroneous doctrine of his friends” (*ibid.*).

God did it. But this calls into question the terms, which Hobbes had earlier (only four paragraphs above) specified, upon which we become subjects of God's divine law—that obedience will be rewarded and disobedience punished (xxxi.2). It turns out not to be that way; the “enemies” of God may prosper while his loyal subjects are tortured and maimed. Such a God is still to be obeyed and even worshiped, but not out of love; rather we worship and obey this power in fear and trembling.

It must be kept in mind that this is Hobbes's account of *natural* religion. The religion of prophecy might (or might not) allay some of the dreadfulness of this spectacle,<sup>23</sup> but if we are to rely on reason alone,<sup>24</sup> according to Hobbes, this is the God we shall be forced to acknowledge—an omnipotent but occulted God, whose ways are utterly mysterious to humanity, whose ways indeed appear arbitrary and inhumane. This is a problem which Martin Luther and John Calvin each confronted directly. Luther writes,

Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable, so that he seems, according to Erasmus, to delight in the torments of the wretched and to be worthy of hatred rather than love. (Luther 1972, pp. 62-63)

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<sup>23</sup> In Chapter xxxviii, Hobbes discusses the afterlife, in which the obedient receive eternal reward and the enemies of God are punished, which would seem to restore justice to God's government. However, given the nature of the reward (eternal bodily life on earth without marriage or procreation) and the nature of the punishment (to be resurrected, live again, and then die a second death “after which he shall die no more”), it may be doubted whether such an afterlife properly distributes desert.

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that Hobbes's soteriology is entirely prophetic; eternal life cannot be rationally deduced by the unaided intellect. This contrasts interestingly with Immanuel Kant's claim in his *Critique of Practical Reason* that the soul must be immortal, since “complete conformity” to the moral law requires “endless progress,” because no man can “hope, either here or in any foreseeable future moment of his existence, to be fully adequate to God's will (without indulgence or dispensation, which do not harmonize with justice); he can hope to be so only in the endlessness of his duration...” (Kant 1996, pp. 238-9, AK 5:122-124). For Kant, the practical necessity of eternal life, which can neither be affirmed nor disconfirmed by our experience of phenomena, requires us to postulate eternal life as a feature of the noumenal realm, since speculative reason is subordinate to practical reason (AK 5:114-115, 121). While such a route is, in principle, open to Hobbes, given the radical distinction he draws between real objects and our sensations of them (as discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation), he relies entirely on scripture to demonstrate human immortality.

Luther admits that this seeming injustice of God “cannot be comprehended,” but simply states that there is therefore “room for the exercise of faith” (*ibid.*). For Luther, we must believe God to be merciful and just despite evidence to the contrary. For Calvin, God’s vehement wrath is itself the truest form of justice. According to Calvin, humanity is “descended from impure seed” and “infected with the contagion of sin” to the extent that “before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God’s sight” (Calvin 1960, p. 248). Indeed, he claims “we are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity” (*ibid.*, p. 251). Those infants dying of plague, according to Calvin, deserve to suffer. Only God’s irresistible and entirely undeserved grace saves other children from the same just desert. The God that Hobbes finds in nature breathes this same vengeful fire, but there is a crucial difference: Hobbes’s God has by nature nothing to revenge because, according to Hobbes, sin is itself impossible until an earthly sovereign proclaims laws (*Leviathan*, xiii.10, 13). This God, entirely unpredictable and dangerous, is the only sovereign in the state of nature, and his sovereignty fails to give order to the chaos of natural human life.

Hobbes next turns to the laws of this God of nature. God is unknowable, but he has sufficiently promulgated his laws by making them available to men though unaided reason. These laws, he says, are identical to the natural laws of Chapters xiv and xv of *Leviathan* (xxxi.7). These laws are entirely for the good of humanity, designed as they are to avoid the rigors of the state of nature and to create the conditions for peaceful coexistence of men in a stable civil society. Having described the natural sovereignty of God and having reminded us where we can find his laws (*viz.* in his own book, *Leviathan*), all that remains, he says, is to

deduce the appropriate way to honor and worship this hidden, all-powerful force that indifferently doles out fate to us irrespective of our desert.

### *Natural Religion*

Amusingly, Hobbes tells us that we must honor God by thinking “as highly of his power and goodness as is possible” (xxxi.8). He has given us ample reason to question the goodness of this god, but the great power of God outweighs any lack of benevolence we may perceive. For that which is so powerful must be honored, and it is more honorable to be called good than to be called an amoral spider. Indeed, according to Hobbes, we must worship God “by those rules of honour that reason dictateth to be done by the weak to the more potent men, in hope of benefit, for fear of damage, or in thankfulness for good already received of them” (xxxi.13). We must notice that “reward” and “punishment” have now become simply “benefit” and “damage,” as befits goods and evils assigned upon no principle of merit or desert. Hobbes considers five attributes that ought to be allowed God, if he is to be properly honored, and eight actions that humans must undertake for the proper worship of God. Together, these represent the sum of Hobbes’s natural religion (“what worship of God is taught us by the light of nature”), and by considering these attributes and actions, we may further understand his view of religion more generally (xxxi.14).

## A. God's Existence

Hobbes begins by stating that “it is manifest, we ought to attribute to [God] existence.” (*ibid.*). The first duty we owe the omnipotent being is to believe that it exists. Hobbes does not here say that reason compels us to admit this existence as an indubitable fact, such that we *must* attribute existence to God; rather, he says we “ought” to do so, “for no man can have the will to honor that which he thinks not to have any being” (*ibid.*). This is a strange argument, for it seems to put the cart (worshiping God) before the horse (the existence of God) and indeed assumes that horses exist because we have a need for carts. The omnipotent and mysterious God must be worshiped “in hope of benefit [and] for fear of damage” regardless of whether we can know for certainty that he exists. Just the possibility that such a being exists makes necessary its worship in fear and trembling, and the belief that such a being *does in fact* exist is a practical necessity of proper worship. Skepticism, in other words, is foolish in the face of even the possible existence of God. To wait upon certain knowledge of God's existence before worshiping him would be to risk angering a dreadful and omnipotent being. We would require certain knowledge of God's non-existence before worship would become unreasonable.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, Hobbes provides a reasonable argument in favor of God's existence earlier in *Leviathan*, though he does not explicitly remind us of that argument here in Chapter xxxi. According to Hobbes in Chapter xi,

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<sup>25</sup> This argument is similar to Pascal's famous wager, written between 1656 and 1662 but not published until 1670. Pascal argues that God is “infinitely beyond our comprehension” and “bears no relation to ourselves.” Because of this, “we are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is, or if he is.” “Reason cannot decide” whether God exists, since “there is an infinite chaos separating us.” Thus, whether we accept God's existence or not becomes a choice we must make rather than a fact we must discover. Because choosing in favor of his existence entails no cost for being wrong and the potential of “an infinitely happy infinity of life” for being right, the chooser is rationally bound to choose to affirm God's existence as long as the probability of God's existence is non-zero: “[I]f you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!” (Pascal 1995, pp.153-154).

Curiosity, or love of the knowledge of causes, draws a man from the consideration of the effect to seek the cause, and again the cause of that cause, till of necessity he must come to this thought at last: that there is some cause, whereof there is no former cause, but is eternal, which is it men call God. So that it is impossible to make any profound inquiry into natural causes without being inclined thereby to believe there is one God eternal, though they cannot have any idea of him in their mind answerable to his nature. (xi.25)

This argument, however, is a psychological argument, showing that men are “inclined” to a certain belief about the existence of God, rather than a metaphysical argument, which would demonstrate that God does exist in fact. That the cosmological argument for God’s existence occurs to men by “necessity” does not prove that it is necessarily true. Hobbes says further that just as a blind man may “may easily conceive and assure himself” that a fire exists which he cannot see, because of the warmth it gives off (and because other men, who have a sense the blind man lacks, attribute that warmth to fire), “so also, by the visible things in this world and their admirable order, a man may conceive there is a cause of them, which men call God, and yet not have an idea or image of him in his mind” (*ibid.*). But again, that we “may conceive” of this first eternal cause is not a sufficient proof that it exists.

Indeed, in Hobbes’s book on the science of the knowledge of causes, *De Corpore*, we find that this science necessarily “excludes” knowledge, not only of God’s existence, but also of angels, revelation, and “the doctrine of God’s worship” (*DCr*, i.2, 8). Furthermore, in *De Corpore*, Hobbes argues that the universal cause of things is motion and that “there can be no cause of motion except in a body contiguous and moved” (*DCr*, vi.5, ix.6-9). So, while it is true that “profound inquiry into natural causes” may “incline” one toward accepting the existence of an eternal God as first cause, it seems that Hobbes’s own inquiry did not give him such an inclination. Perhaps it is for this reason that his account of the cosmological argument in *Leviathan* is surrounded by statements that “ignorance of natural causes disposes a man to

credulity, so as to believe many times impossibilities” and “make a man both to believe lies and tell them, and sometimes also to invent them,” as well as that men who are ignorant of natural causes are “inclined to suppose and feign unto themselves several kinds of powers invisible, and to stand in awe of their own imaginations” (xi.23, 26). In any case, the worship of God commanded by nature (which, again, according to Hobbes in *De Corpore* i.8 is “excluded from philosophy”), requires belief in the existence of God, whether or not proof, and thus knowledge, is possible.

The second of God’s attributes that Hobbes discusses is negative, i.e. it is a thing that must *not* be attributed to God if we are to honor him properly. Hobbes says that “those philosophers who said the world (or the soul of the world) was God spake unworthily of him, and denied his existence” (xxxi.15). The philosophers that Hobbes seems to have in mind are the Stoics,<sup>26</sup> whose argument is well rehearsed in Cicero’s dialogue *De Natura Deorum*:

[Chrysippus] calls the world itself a god, and also the all-pervading world-soul, and again the guiding principle of that soul, which operates in the intellect and reason, and the common and all-embracing nature of things, and also the power of Fate, and the Necessity that governs future events.... (Cicero 1951, I.39, pp.41-43; cf. Diogenes Laertius 1931, VII.137-143, pp. 241-247)

And again,

The world...since it embraces all things and since nothing exists which is not within it, is entirely perfect; how then can it fail to possess that which is best? But there is nothing better than intelligence and reason; the world therefore cannot fail to possess them....[S]imilarly a perfect and complete being is bound to possess that which is the best thing in all the world, and nothing is better than virtue; therefore virtue is an essential attribute of the world....Therefore it is wise, and consequently divine (*et propterea deus*). (Cicero 1951, II.38-39, pp. 161-163)

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<sup>26</sup> See Malcolm 2012, Volume 2, pg. 565

In Cicero's dialogue, the Academic interlocutor, Cotta, shows what is wrong with this argument: Even if there is nothing superior to the world, this does not prove the world has reason, virtue, and intelligence, for "by this mode of reasoning the world will also be an orator, and even a mathematician, a musician, and in fact an expert in every branch of learning, in fine a philosopher....[A]m I to admit that the world is not only a living being, and wise, but also a harper and a flute-player, because it gives birth also to men skilled in these arts?" (*ibid.*, III.23, pg. 307).<sup>27</sup> The world cannot itself be shown to be alive and rational, even if it can be shown to be superior to all things.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, Cotta tells the Stoic, "you intended to show what the gods are like, but you actually showed them to be non-existent" (*ibid.*, III.20, pg. 305). The Stoic theology is reduced to a rational love of the order, beauty, regularity, and necessity of nature, rather than the worship of a supernatural intelligence.

Hobbes's objection to the notion that God is the world is different than the one reported by Cicero. Hobbes writes, "For by God is understood the cause of the world; and to say the world is God is to say there is no cause of it, that is, no God" (xxx.15). We note first that he alludes to the cosmological argument he had made in Chapter xi, an argument which, as we have seen, fails to establish knowledge of God's existence. We see that the train of reasoning that "inclined" men to "conceive" of God has now fixed the meaning of God, or of what "is understood" by the word "God." God is necessarily the first cause of the world, and since nothing causes itself, God cannot be identical to the world, his creature. Were God to be the

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<sup>27</sup> Hobbes uses a similar argument, later in *Leviathan*, to show that God does not (or at least need not) have a tongue, eyes, or ears: "But if it were taken in the strict and proper sense, one might argue from his making all other parts of man's body that he had also the same use of them which we have; which would be many of them so uncomely as it would be the greatest contumely in the world to ascribe them to him" (xxxvi.9).

<sup>28</sup> "Therefore the world is not a god; and nevertheless there is nothing superior to the world, for there is nothing more beautiful than it, nothing more conducive to our health, nothing more ornate to the view, or more regular in motion" (Cicero 1951, III.23, pg. 309).



world, then the world, *qua* God, would be uncaused, and there would of necessity be no first cause of the world, i.e. no God, according to what “is understood” to be God. Hobbes has created a logical fork: On the one hand, we could hold that God caused the world, in which case he fulfills the condition of his existence (which is to be the first cause) at the expense of being rendered radically separate from the world and, by logical necessity, not being a part of it.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, we could hold that God is the whole of the world (and thus present in all its parts) at the expense of God’s being the cause of the world (since nothing is self-caused) and, thus, at the expense of God’s failing to meet the condition of his existence.

At first blush, the choice appears obvious, as though we are back with Pascal: “Wager that he exists, without hesitating!” And since Hobbes comments no further on this matter in Chapter xxxi, we might be forgiven for taking this to be Hobbes’s final word on the subject of God’s relationship to the world, *viz.* since God must be the cause of the world to exist, he cannot be (or thus be part of) the world and must be separate from it. However, we would do well to consider in this context a statement that Hobbes makes later in *Leviathan*.

The world...is corporeal (that is to say, body) and hath the dimensions of magnitude....Also, every part of body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions. And consequently, every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe. *And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing (and consequently, nowhere).* (xlvi.15, emphasis added)

Whereas one may have settled with the view outlined in Chapter xxxi that God cannot be part of the world if he caused it, Hobbes plans to pull the rug out from underneath this view, holding that anything which is not part of the world is nothing and, he adds, nowhere. The logical fork

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<sup>29</sup> If God created the world, then he created every part of it. Therefore, he could not be one such part any more than he could be the whole, according to Hobbes’s logic.

regarding God's worldliness then does not admit of the Pascalian solution, as it seemingly reduces to the following dilemma: Either God is part of the world, in which case he cannot exist, or God is not part of the world, in which case he cannot exist.

Given that each choice in the dilemma ultimately leads to the same conclusion, we are at pains to consider why Hobbes so easily chooses our path in Chapter xxxi. Knowing that God's otherworldliness also has detrimental consequences with regard to God's existence, why would he stress so strongly here that God's worldliness is offensive? Or, a slightly different question, why did Hobbes not also condemn the opinion of God's otherworldliness in Chapter xxxi, if he also believed it led to the conclusion that God is nothing?

An initial answer to the first question is provided by the third of God's attributes that must be admitted if we are to honor him. Hobbes writes, "Thirdly, to say the world was not created, but eternal, (seeing that which is eternal has no cause) is to deny there is a God" (xxx.16). This is also a negative requirement, stipulating what we ought not to say, but in this case we do not seem to be dealing with an attribute of God at all. Rather, Hobbes is here forbidding us to grant a certain attribute to the world, namely eternity, since such an attribution would deny God's existence by implication. This single sentence is all that Hobbes says here of this third attribute, so we are left to puzzle out why he may have made such a category mistake, since he has told us that this is a list of "his [sc. God's] attributes" (xxx.14), rather than a list of general attributions not be made to a number of things, including God and the world. Why then should this question of the world's eternity be so elevated as to be considered an attribute of the divine itself? The simplest answer is that for God to be what he is understood to be, he must have created the world, and therefore the world cannot be called eternal without denying the possibility of a creator God. In this way, one might say that the ephemerality of the world is a

necessary consequence of the first two attributes of God, i.e. his existence and separateness, and is thus a requisite tenant for the proper honor of God. This, of course, is only a tenable solution to the question if God's separateness is an indisputably positive attribute, which we have reason to doubt. To determine whether there are further reasons for Hobbes to deny the eternity of the world for the sake of God's honor, and thus his reasons for holding God to be separate from the world despite the difficulty of holding that claim, we must consider the claim that the world is eternal more carefully. What are the ramifications of holding or denying this view?

The most well-known exponent of this view is Aristotle, who held that "...the world as a whole was not generated and cannot be destroyed, as some allege, but is unique and eternal, having no beginning or end of its whole life, containing infinite time and embracing it within itself" (*De caelo*, 283b26-31; Aristotle 1939, pg. 131). While individual things, as parts the world, may continually be coming-to-be and passing-away, the world as a totality of these things never itself ceases to be, for if it did, there would be nothing in existence from which a new world could come to be, no substrate of change from one state of being to another (*ibid.* 280a12-27, pg. 101; cf. *Physics* 190a13-22, Aristotle 1929, pp. 73-75). The lack of a substrate in the absence of the world, according to Aristotle, is shown by the fact that there is no thing that exists outside of the world.

It is plain, then, from what has been said, that there is not, nor do the facts allow there to be, any bodily mass (*sômatos*) beyond the heaven. The world (*kosmos*) in its entirety is made up of the whole sum of available matter (*hulê*).... This world (*ouranos*) is one, solitary and complete (*teleios*). ...It is obvious then that there is neither place nor void nor time outside the heaven (*ouranos*), since it has been demonstrated that their neither is nor can be body (*sôma*) there. (*ibid.* 279a5-18, pg. 91)

This is, in essence, the same claim made by Hobbes in Chapter xlvi of *Leviathan* that “that which is no part of [the universe] is nothing (and consequently nowhere),” right down to the denial of a notion of “place” outside of the world. Aristotle, however, adds an additional facet of this argument that Hobbes does not.

Wherefore neither are the things there [*sc.* outside the heaven] born in place, nor does time cause them to age, nor does change work in any way upon any of the beings whose allotted place is beyond the outermost motion: changeless and impassive, they have uninterrupted enjoyment of the best and most independent life for the whole aeon of their existence. Indeed, our forefathers were inspired when they made this word, *aeon*. ...[T]he sum of existence of the whole heaven, the sum which includes all time even to infinity, is *aeon*...for it is immortal and divine....In the more popular philosophical works (*egkukliois philosophêmasi*), where divinity it in question, it is often made abundantly clear by the discussion that the foremost and highest divinity must be entirely immutable....For there is nothing superior that can move it—if there were it would be more divine—and it has no badness in it nor is lacking in any of the fairness (*kalôn*) proper to it. It is too in unceasing motion, as is reasonable; for things only cease moving when they arrive at their proper places, and for the body whose motion is circular the place where it ends is also the place where it begins. (*ibid.* 279a18-279b3, pp. 91-95)

Faced with the boundary between the world and what is outside of it, Aristotle reaches for the words of his inspired ancestors, in order to give a name to the time that passes in a timeless nowhere. This form of time, the aeon, the time of the beings that live unaffected by time, is the deathless eternity of the gods, and in particular of the one being we know to reside in this placeless space outside the world, namely the world itself, whose boundaries are not boundaries in relation to things in the world but only in relation to that which is not the world. Were the world to have a neighbor in the placeless space in which it exists, that neighbor, according to Aristotle, would be a deathless god enjoying the best and most independent life. It stands to reason that the world is more like its neighbors than it is like its parts, just as I am more like my neighbor than I am like my pancreas. The world is a god, according to Aristotle, and its eternity is an aspect of its divinity. As Aristotle says later in *De caelo*,

Therefore we may feel well assured that those ancient beliefs are true, which belong especially to our own native tradition, and according to which there exists something immortal and divine, in the class of things in motion, but whose motion is such that there is no limit to it. ...Our forefathers assigned heaven, the upper region, to the gods, in the belief that it alone was imperishable; and our present discussion confirms that it is indestructible and ungenerated. (*ibid.* 284a2-14, pg. 131-133)

The eternity of the world, which Hobbes claims it is necessary to deny, is itself a precondition for Aristotle's argument that the world is a god, which Hobbes has also sought to deny. We can see then the extent to which these two claims, that the world is God and that the world is eternal, are in fact parts of a single claim, a claim which is central to pagan theology, and which gives rise to the legions of worldly deities that Hobbes lampoons in Chapter xii of *Leviathan*<sup>30</sup>—the claim that matter, or some collection of it, can be divine.

Hobbes, to repeat, agrees with Aristotle in so far as both deny the existence of body, place, and time outside of the world. They part ways only in so far as Aristotle, siding with his forefathers and native tradition, uses this as evidence for the existence of placeless, timeless, incorporeal divinity outside of and immanent in the world. Hobbes, however, has his own understanding of Aristotle's intention. Two paragraphs after Hobbes's statement in Chapter xlvi regarding the nothingness of things beyond the world, in the context of a discussion of Aristotle's doctrine of essences, Hobbes speculates that Aristotle knew this doctrine to be erroneous, but propounded it for purely practical reasons: "...it may be he knew [this doctrine] to be false philosophy, but writ it as a thing consonant to, and corroborative of, their religion—and fearing the fate of Socrates" (xlvi.18). Given the close similarity of the argument Hobbes had given two paragraphs before to Aristotle's argument in *De caelo*, it is likely that he had the

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<sup>30</sup> See especially xii.13-16

above quoted passages of Aristotle in mind when referring to his desire to corroborate and remain consonant to Greek religion (emphasizing as he does his forefathers, their ancient beliefs, and his native tradition which are all being “confirm[ed]” by the “present discussion” in *De caelo*).

Leaving aside the question of Aristotle’s own stance on Greek religion, it seems clear now why Hobbes must deny that God is the world and that the world is eternal. To do otherwise would leave the door open for paganism, which, as he emphasizes many times, is a form of religion particularly given to vulgar superstition and priestly predation (Chapter xii, *passim*). Hobbes finds the Biblical view of God as a creator to be less dangerous, since it requires no deification of matter, which can be safely held to be perishable, corruptible, and above all useful, without religious scruple getting in the way. It is much easier to dam a river when that river is not understood to be divine. This may be why Hobbes leans so much on our “understanding” of God as a creator, as a countermeasure against the traditional understanding of Aristotle’s forefathers that the world itself is divine rather than created. Hobbes, then, modifies Aristotle rather than rejecting him whole cloth; he agrees with his account of the world as the totality of what exists, but introduces a Biblical understanding of God’s essence to replace the pagan understanding that Aristotle relies on in his account. This has the effect of demystifying matter in a way that Aristotle was not able to accomplish, while still allowing room for a God within the understanding of his own Christian forefathers. Thus, while it may still be the case that Hobbes does not see room in his cosmology for a radically otherworldly God, he does see how such a God can be used to align the theoretical core of Aristotelian cosmology (no bodies, time, place, etc. outside of the world) with the religious requirements of Christianity (the world as ephemeral creature of a mysterious God). It is important to recall that we are here still dealing with

Hobbes's views on natural, rather than revealed, religion. It is therefore not entirely surprising that we should find a debt to Aristotle in what is an entirely rational endeavor. We will have to attend to whether Aristotle's philosophy plays such a large role in God's revealed word when we turn to Part III.

## B. God's Care for Mankind

Returning now to the attributes that, according to Hobbes, must be attributed to God to properly honor him, the fourth such attribute is "care of mankind." He writes, "Fourthly, that they who attributing (as they think) ease to God take from him the care of mankind, take from him his honor; for it takes away men's love and fear of him, which is the root of honor" (xxxix.17). This attribute, unlike the stricture against God's worldliness, is positive, in that we must attribute care of mankind to God. However, Hobbes has managed yet again to phrase the requirement as an injunction—one must *not fail* to attribute such care to God. In so doing, Hobbes has put this opinion in the mouths of an unnamed "they." We have already seen Hobbes's reading of ancient philosophy working behind the scenes of this chapter, having now been sent to the Stoics and Aristotle for clues to Hobbes's intentions, so it is unsurprising that Hobbes is here referring to that other great ancient school, the Epicureans.

The locus classicus of the view that gods have no care for humankind is the first of Epicurus's *Sovran Maxims*: "A blessed and eternal being has no trouble (*pragmata*) himself and brings no trouble upon any other being; hence he is exempt from movements of anger and partiality, for every such movement implies weakness" (Diogenes Laertius 1931, X.139, pg.

663).<sup>31</sup> For Epicurus, the gods are said to lack care for human affairs because having such care would make them imperfect beings. A truly perfect being is sufficient unto itself at every moment, needing nothing from imperfect beings. A perfect being could not change, going from wrath to mercy for example, without leaving one state and entering another, one of which must be less perfect than the other. For a god to remain perfect, he must not change, and caring about, let alone intervening in, the daily victories and reverses of mortal beings would require constant movement and change. The view that the gods are practical men of affairs, concerning themselves with kings and tyrants, is the height of impiety, according to Epicurus. He lays his view out most clearly in the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

First believe that God is a living being immortal and blessed, according to the notion of a god indicated by the common sense of mankind; and so believing, thou shalt not affirm of him aught that is foreign to his immortality or agrees not with his blessedness, but shalt believe about him whatever may uphold both his blessedness and his immortality. For verily there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest; but they are not such as the multitude believe, seeing that men do not steadfastly maintain the notions they form respecting them. Not the man who denies the gods worshiped by the multitude, but he who affirms of the gods what the multitude believes about them is truly impious. (*ibid.* X.123, pg. 649, cf. Lucretius 1992, I.44-49, pg. 7)

The most striking thing about this passage is the similarity it bears to Hobbes's procedure in Chapter xxxi and throughout the first half of *Leviathan*. On the basis of a "notion... indicated by the common sense of mankind," in this case that God is a creator, Hobbes rationally deduces what we shall not affirm or uphold of God if we are to honor him. As we have seen, this leads Hobbes to conclude that God must be radically separate from the world he has created. For Epicurus, it is God's blessedness and immortality that are of special concern, and to secure these,

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that according to Strauss 1968 this statement from the *Maxims* may not refer to the gods, even though it is "ordinarily taken" that way (pg. 130). He posits that it could just as easily refer to the "'immortal goods' which wise men can enjoy." What follows in my presentation of Epicurus, I believe, would stand on the basis of the *Letter to Menoeceus* alone.



God is placed far from the action of the world, “solitary and complete” to use Aristotle’s phrase. According to both Hobbes and Epicurus, views held by the majority of men are not to be trusted, since they are unable to hold any particular notion for long, lacking philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

However, despite the significant overlap between his philosophy and that of Epicurus,<sup>33</sup> Hobbes here in Chapter xxxi denies the principal theological tenet of Epicurean thought. Even though this tenet derives, in part, from a concern to preserve God’s separate and immutable existence, a concern which Hobbes himself shares, Hobbes is compelled to deny the Epicurean conclusion of his premises, not to secure God’s existence, but to secure his power. Men must love and fear God if they are to worship him, and Hobbes is primarily concerned in this part of Chapter xxxi to identify the proper worship of God by nature. The Epicurean God, though he meets the criteria of deathless existence separated from a world of perishable things,<sup>34</sup> is not the all-powerful and whimsical God to whom we owe awe and reverence. Hobbes defined “honor” in Chapter x: “To pray to another for aid of any kind is to Honour, because a sign that we have an opinion he has power to help; and the more difficult the aid is, the more is the honour” (x.19).

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<sup>32</sup> See *Leviathan* xii, passim and cf. *DCr* i.2 on the distinction between philosophy and the “sense and memory of things...common to man and all living creatures.” Also see Epicurus’s *Letter to Pythocles* on the distinction between “the study of nature” and its “plurality of causes,” on the one hand, with the “myth” that we “tumble into,” on the other hand (Diogenes Laertius 1931, X.87, pp. 615-617); cf. Lucretius’s view that even those who have been “rightly taught that the gods have a life without care” may still “wonder all the while how things can go on, especially...in the ethereal regions,” and thus end up “revert[ing] again to old superstitions and...cruel taskmasters, whom the poor wretches believe to be omnipotent, ignorant as they are what can be and what cannot...” (Lucretius 1992, VI.58-67, pg. 497).

<sup>33</sup> On the relationship between Hobbes and Epicurus, the best source is Strauss 1953, pp.168-172, 188-189. According to Strauss, “Hobbes joins the Epicurean tradition” by rejecting the traditional premise of political philosophy that man is a political animal. However, Hobbes modifies the Epicurean tradition by “tr[ying] to instill the spirit of political idealism” into it, thus creating “political hedonism, a doctrine which has revolutionized human life everywhere on a scale never yet approached by any other teaching.” This political hedonism “belong[s] together” with the “distinctly modern phenomenon” of “political atheism,” since they “arose together in the same moment and in the same mind.” One of the primary tasks of this dissertation is to understand the “political” character of Hobbes’s atheism as it relates to the themes of prophecy and sovereignty.

<sup>34</sup> It should also be pointed out that the Epicurean God is not a world creator and that, while things in the world are all perishable, the world itself, as a collection of all matter, does not cease to be, for if it did nothing could come to be again, since nothing comes to be from nothing (see Diogenes Laertius 1931, X.39, pg. 569; Lucretius 1992, II.1052-1067, V.351-379).

Since none can rationally pray to the Epicurean God aid, none can honor him, and public worship of the sort that Hobbes is designing becomes impossible. We must remember that Hobbes makes no promises whatsoever that God will answer our prayers, and indeed has given us evidence that he often does not, but we owe him the honor of praying for his favors anyway, as a token of his overwhelming power.

The rejection of the Epicurean position is thus different in kind from his rejection of the Stoic and Aristotelian positions. Those views had been ruled out for ontological reasons—because they gave the wrong answer to the question *quid sit deus*. The Epicurean view is not forbidden for such a reason, even though it could have been given that their God is not a creator; rather, it is ruled out for an ethical or political reason—the dictates of honor require that God be (at least potentially) active in the world for the public worship of him to be rational. This ethical or political dimension of Hobbes's natural religion is revealing of his project as a whole in Chapter xxxi. The first attribute of God was positive—God must exist if we are to honor him—while the second and third were addenda to that claim, since God cannot be the world and the world cannot be eternal if God exists. The fourth attribute is the first that is different in kind; God not only must exist to be honored, he must also be active in the world. The fifth attribute, which as we shall see is illustrated by seven examples, is also different in kind, requiring us to attribute infinity to God. Thus, to properly honor God we must attribute to him existence, concern for mankind, and infinity. We must turn now to this last attribute to determine its value to Hobbes.

### C. The Infinity of God

Hobbes write, “Fifthly, in those things that signify greatness and power to say he is *finite* is not to honour him; for it is not a sign of the will to honour God to attribute to him less than we can; and finite is less than we can, because to finite it is easy to add more” (xxx.18). Again it is a question of honor whether God is infinite or not, and Hobbes treats it as manifestly clear that it is better to be infinite than finite, since, as he reminds us, “finite is less.” The infinity of God is a common attribute in Christian doctrine,<sup>35</sup> and a reader might be inclined to accept this requirement without further ado. However, Hobbes next offers seven examples of further attributes which must not be given God, lest they conflict with his infinity. In brief these are as follows:

- 1) God has no figure (i.e. shape)
- 2) God is inconceivable and unimaginable
- 3) God has no parts or totality
- 4) God is in no particular place
- 5) God neither moves nor rests
- 6) There is only one God
- 7) God has no passions, appetites, or sensations (i.e. anything that implies he is passively acted upon)

Taken together these seven addenda to the requirement of God’s infinity allow us to add considerable detail to the view of God already offered through these attributes. Bearing in mind what we already know about this God—that he exists in a state radically separate from the world, being neither the whole nor a part of it, and that he is nevertheless concerned for the world and

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Aquinas 1948, *Summa Theologica* Pt. 1, Q. 7, pp. 30ff. and Aquinas 1975, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.43, pp. 165ff.

especially human beings—we now must consider the further conditions placed on God's being by his infinity.

First, to be infinite God must be shapeless, since to have a shape is to have boundaries, and nothing can be infinite that is bounded. My skin demarcates the boundary between myself and what is not myself; God has no skin. His interior is set against no exterior; his nearest neighbor is still just more of himself. This immediately raises a host of difficult questions: How am I to conceive of a shapeless entity? If God has no boundaries, then he must be everywhere; does that make me and my skin a part of God? Wouldn't God in this case again be identical to the world and everything in it? And if not, then where would this infinite being be located, such that it is different than me but is in no way limited by the borders of my skin? Without explicitly raising these questions, Hobbes proceeds to answer each in turn.

To begin, we are not to believe that we are able to conceive of God. If his necessarily shapeless infinity makes thinking of him paradoxical, so much the better. Anything that can be thought is itself necessarily finite because of the finite capacities of human reason and cognition. The character of God as a *deus absconditus* is due, not only to his metaphysical characteristics, but also to our inability to grasp a being so categorically different than ourselves. This lightens the load that Hobbes's argument must bear, for he need not make sense of the notion of God as real, separate, concerned, and infinite—making sense of it is not a requirement, indeed it is forbidden to say we can even conceive of God as an idea. Despite that, Hobbes is able to offer definite answers to the other questions prompted by God's shapelessness, since these can be logically derived from the requirement of God's infinity. Thus, Hobbes denies that, just because God has no boundaries, that we are each parts of God, because only finite beings have parts. To be a collection of finite parts is to be finite, just as the sum of any finite series of numbers is a

finite number. Since there is only a finite number of finite things, even if God were to be the totality of all of those things, *viz.* even if God were to be the world, he would still be finite.<sup>36</sup>

This immediately raises the next question: if God is not the world, but God is infinite, then where could an infinite thing be located, such that the world's boundaries did not limit and draw boundaries for the non-worldly God?

The answer to this question helps to clarify what Hobbes may mean when he says that anything that is "no part of the universe" is "nothing (and consequently nowhere)" (xlvi.15). God is not in "this or that place," according to Hobbes, since a place is defined by its boundaries, and God is unbounded (xxxi.22). God, in being radically separate from the world, is nowhere, and this too is as it should be, according to Hobbes. The very possibility of being placed would make God a mere finite thing. To be infinite, and thus to be honored as much as possible, God *must* be nowhere, for an infinite and unbounded being could only exist in a world of bounded and finite things by having no part and no place in that world. God's being is utterly otherworldly. This infinite and infinitely powerful being, who is concerned with our actions, is literally nowhere to be found, debarred, the sort of entity that Kant would later dub a noumenon.<sup>37</sup> This again coheres with Hobbes's understanding of knowledge in *De Corpore*, which was discussed in the previous

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<sup>36</sup> The question of whether the world itself is finite or infinite is discussed by Hobbes at *DCr* vii.12: "[W]hen we make question of whether the world be finite or infinite, we have nothing in our mind answering to the name *world*; for whatsoever we imagine, is therefore finite, though our computation reach the fixed stars, or the ninth or tenth, nay, the thousandth sphere. The meaning of the question is this only, whether God has actually made so great an addition of body to body, as we are able to make of space to space."

<sup>37</sup> For Kant's view of the relationship of God to the world, and to space in general, see Kant 1997, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B71-72 and A254/B310-A255/B311. Also see A632/B660-A642/B670, especially the end: "Necessity, infinity, unity, existence outside the world (not as the soul of the world), eternity without all conditions of time, omnipresence without all conditions of space, omnipotence, etc.: these are purely transcendental predicates, and hence a purified concept of them, which every theology needs so very badly, can be drawn only from transcendental theology." Also see A817/B845-A818/B846: "A greater refinement of moral ideas...made reason attend more sharply to its object...and...produced a concept of the divine being that we now hold to be correct, not because speculative reason convinces us of its correctness but because it is in perfect agreement with the moral principles of reason." It is my contention that, while Kant postulates God, despite the great paradoxes involved, on the basis of moral necessity, Hobbes does so on the basis of a political necessity.

chapter of this dissertation. There, we saw that Hobbes distinguishes between “imaginary space,” which is space as humans experience and understand it, and “real space,” which is the actual place of mind-independent objects but of which we have no experience whatsoever (*DCr*, vii.2, viii.4-5). Despite the fact, mentioned in the last chapter, that this part of *De Corpore* had been drafted before Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*, he does not rely on this distinction here when discussing God’s lack of place in the world. It seems that our inability to conceive of God is intimately tied to his lack of place in the world, since *all* place in the world, according to Hobbes, is only a function of human imagination. The epistemic gap between the finite human mind and the infinity of its creator is, for Hobbes, the proximate cause of the apparent ontological gap between them. In other words, only objects of human cognition have a “place” in the imaginary space that the human mind constructs, and since God cannot be an object of human thought, he can have no place, is nowhere, and appears to be nothing. This is why theology is “excluded” from philosophy, according to Hobbes (*DCr* i.8). If God exists, we can know nothing about him except what can be logically derived from his defining features.

Since one of these features is infinity, and since infinity requires placelessness, Hobbes next adds that God can neither move nor rest, for moving implies moving from one place to another, while rest implies staying in one place. This is another ontological paradox derived from God’s radical separateness; he is neither in motion nor at rest. This would seem like a clear case in which the law of the excluded middle would be applicable, since surely one must be either moving or not moving, but again, the inconceivability of God’s state of being is a feature, not a bug, of Hobbes’s analysis. God’s infinity requires his placelessness, which requires his not being subject to the metaphysics of place,<sup>38</sup> viz. not being a moving or a resting entity. Our incapacity

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<sup>38</sup> Kant’s phrase for this, above, was “omnipresence without all conditions of space.”

to form a clear idea of this is to be expected, and it has indeed been decreed a necessity, if we are to honor God, that we *not* say we have such a clear idea.

The next view that must be believed to uphold God's infinity is his unity. There can be only one God, because the existence of another infinite being would impose a boundary upon God, rendering him finite. A plurality of gods would be a plurality of finite figures, each with shapes and skins of their own. When they concerned themselves in human affairs, as honorable gods must, they might find themselves at odds with one another, and would be forced to test their finite, though great, powers against each other. An infinite God must be the lone God, "solitary and complete." However, if God's infinity is such that it somehow does not include the world and its parts, since they are creatures of God and not God himself, then it is hard to see why other additional entities could not exist outside of God without violating his otherworldly unboundedness. Indeed, both Aristotle and the Epicureans considered that the region beyond the universe could be populated by innumerable deathless beings (Aristotle 1939, 279a18-23; Lucretius 1992, II.1048ff.). Given that such questions are outside the purview of philosophy, according to Hobbes, we must expect that his final answer regarding the possibility of a plurality of otherworldly infinities would be that it is impossible to know and useless to ask, if what you seek is the truth of the matter. However, if the question is whether monotheism or polytheism is a better doctrine for public worship, then Hobbes is able to, and has already provided the answer. Because polytheism leads to greater amounts of irrational superstition, and because it is so prone to the depredations of priestcraft, monotheism is preferable, even if it cannot be proven true, strictly speaking (xii.13-22).

Much as this fifth and last attribute of God, infinity, has proven to be multifarious, so too the seventh and last attribute that springs from infinity is the most complex. On a general level,

we can say that Hobbes forbids referring to God as the passive member of any relationship. Nothing can be said to affect God, because to be affected by something else is to be limited by it, since it has exercised its power over the thing affected (xxxi.25). Therefore, when certain attributions are made to God, according to Hobbes, they can only be made “metaphorically,” since God could not actually be, for example, angry, merciful, or hopeful, without being affected by the object of his anger, mercy, or hope (xxxi.25, cf. vi.13f.). God cannot want revenge any more than God can crave food or sex. God does not have appetites for things outside himself; he is not affected by external things. Likewise, any talk of God’s “will” is necessarily metaphorical, since the human will, for Hobbes, is “the last appetite or aversion immediately adhering to the action, or the omission thereof” (vi.53). Because God does not have appetites or aversions, he does not make choices among external objects or ends, which is the meaning of human volition. Indeed, God is so far from being affected by external objects that concepts like sight and hearing can only apply to him metaphorically, since to see a thing is to have one’s body affected by an external thing such that an image is created in one’s mind. God does not have eyes, because he is not a biological being. He is not affected by objects as we are and does not see them in the sense that we see.<sup>39</sup> This final required belief to adequately honor God is the most difficult to accept. The God whom we must love and fear, to whom we must pray without being answered, whom we must honor in every way possible, despite the fact that dishonoring him yields equivalent results, this god is entirely unaffected by us. We are bound to believe that God has care for mankind, so that we will love and fear him, but we are also bound to understand his anger and

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<sup>39</sup> This argument is similar to the argument in Cicero against the Stoic who believes the world to be intelligent, and Hobbes’s own variation of this argument later in *Leviathan* to show that we only say God can see or hear in order to honor him, not to imply that he has eyes or ears: “...one might argue from his making all other parts of man’s body that he had also the same use of them which we have; which would be many of them so uncomely as it would be the greatest contumely in the world to ascribe them to him” (xxxvi.9).



mercy in purely metaphorical terms, because it would contravene his infinity were he to be affected by an outside object, such as a human being.

The infinity of God is a necessary complement to his separate and otherworldly existence, but like that otherworldliness, it cuts against God's active concern for human affairs. The tripartite understanding offered by Hobbes of an honorable God according to the standards of natural reason alone—that he exists apart from the universe he created, that he is concerned for mankind, and that he is infinite—is weakest at its center. The requirements of separate existence and infinity together yield a God that is sealed off from humanity by ontological and epistemological chasms, which are eventually so wide that God is no longer able to take notice of humanity in any meaningful way. That this God simultaneously cares for mankind is difficult to accept, especially since Hobbes's reasons for rejecting the Epicurean teaching appeared to be entirely ethical and political, dealing with the appropriate way to honor God, rather than the best way to understand his existence. Theoretically, Hobbes is almost entirely Epicurean—by all rights his God should be living an infinite, perfect, and imperturbable existence with nary a care for a bunch of blokes in England killing each other over the bureaucratic structure of the church—but, practically, the Epicurean doctrine is useless, precisely because it has nothing to offer those feuding Englishmen. Hobbes's England needs answers, and since God has forgone direct revelation, since indeed it seems to be philosophically necessary that God could and would never provide England with his guidance, it is up to Hobbes to tell us how God would like us to worship him. This involves loving and fearing a shapeless, locationless infinity that neither sees, nor hears, nor loves, nor hates you. It involves placing your hopes in a being whose essence involves a logical contradiction and the very idea of whom you must be forbidden from attempting to adequately conceive. But this hidden God, who rewards and punishes with no more

moral regularity than blind chance, must be made the basis of uniform, public worship if Englishmen are to live in peace.

#### D. The Actions of Divine Worship

Hobbes concludes his discussion of the honorable attributes of God with a summary. He writes,

He that will attribute to God nothing but what is warranted by natural reason must either use such negative attributes (as *infinite, eternal, incomprehensible*) or superlatives (as *most high, most great*, and the like) or indefinite (as *good, just, holy, creator*), and in such sense as if he meant not to declare what he is (for that were to circumscribe him within the limits of our fancy,) but how much we admire him, and how ready we would be to obey him, which is a sign of humility, and of a will to honour him as much as we can. (xxxi.28)

Ultimately, the question of what God is, *quid sit Deus*, the question relating to the *hoti* of God rather than to the *dioti* of God, is ruled out of bounds (cf. *DCr* vi.1-2). Confessing his existence and infinity is an aspect of worship, not the foundation of a coherent theology. Since confessing his care for human matters is also a practical necessity of worship, it is included, heedless of any ontological coherence with the other attributes. Holding that God is both incomprehensible and also just may require that his justice be itself incomprehensible, but that is of no concern to worshipers, whose prime concern is to attribute only good and honorable things to the most powerful being. Any further concern is disallowed as unwarranted by “natural reason,” according to Hobbes.

While natural reason does not ultimately tell us what God is, but only how to honor him, it is able to give us more guidance about how to worship an all-powerful being correctly. Hobbes gives us eight “actions of divine worship” that must be undertaken according to the dictates of natural reason. As a “most general precept of reason” these actions are to be “signs of the intention to honour God” (xxxi.29). The first of these is prayer. The reader might think, on the basis of what Hobbes has already said, that the necessity of love and fear of the powerful God would explain why prayer is necessary; we show honor to God and confess his power to help or hurt by praying for his mercy rather than his anger, or at least for benefit rather than damage (cf. xxxi.13). While Hobbes does not deny this reasoning, and continues to rely on it, it is not the reason he gives for the necessity of prayer. Rather he says, “For not the carvers, when they made images, were thought to make them gods, but the people that *prayed* to them” (xxxi.29, emphasis in the original). This is Hobbes’s full statement regarding the necessity of prayer. Chunks of marble and bronze are *made* gods when people *treat* them as gods. One might say that the first step toward an adequate public religion on the basis of natural reason is to fashion for oneself a God to worship (cf. xii.20-21 on Numa’s role in Roman religion). The crucial second step, the *sine qua non*, is to make the people pray to this God. Once people pray to it, it is a God, be it a statue of a man or a woman or “a bird, a crocodile, a calf, a dog, a snake, an onion, a leek...” (xii.16). Hobbes’s religion will have no statues (xxxi.34), but it still requires prayer to the deity as its first step.

The second necessity is thanksgiving. Just as we must pray for future good things, we must give thanks for past and present goods. The goal of both prayer and thanksgiving is to “acknowledge God for author of all benefits” (xxxi.30). We must remember that we do not give thanks to God as a form of gratitude, but as a way of acknowledging his overwhelming power

(cf. xxxi.5 and above). God has no need of our thanks and cannot expect anything from our gratitude that he would desire, principally because he has no desires whatsoever (because, again, to have any would imply a limitation of his power). Thus, we are left with the extreme limit case of the question, what do you get for the guy who has everything? Hobbes's answer, which is the third required action of worship, is that we should give God gifts, namely "sacrifices and oblations (if they be of the best)" (xxx.31). Gifts are a sign of honor, and the best gifts convey the most honor. Whether God needs or even wants your firstlings and your unbruised lambs is of no consequence, since honoring him is more important than understanding him.

That honoring is more important than understanding is further underlined by the fourth action of divine worship. Hobbes writes,

Fourthly, *not to swear by any but God* is naturally a sign of honour; for it is a confession that God only knoweth the heart, and that no man's wit or strength can protect a man against God's vengeance on the perjured. (xxx.32)

We honor God by showing that only he has the power to judge whether we have kept our contracts and that he will certainly punish us for breaking them. This is problematic in a number of ways. First, on the level of theology, we have just recently been told by Hobbes that God is only angry in a metaphorical sense, and indeed only wills things in metaphorical sense, so God's will to avenge himself upon the perjured seems merely useful rather than warranted by the concept of God. This is especially true, because we have already seen that God does not infallibly punish the liar and, in fact, seems often to punish the innocent (xxx.5-6 and above). Most problematically, the notion of a perjured contract is only possible within the context of civil society (xv.2-3). Before the institution of the sovereign to be the arbitrator of disputes, all covenants are "but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all," and in such a state "every

man will, and may lawfully rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men” (xvii.2). Before the institution of the sovereign, “the desires and passions of men are in themselves no sin” and “nothing can be unjust” (xiii.10, 13). God does not hold men to their contracts; the sovereign does. It may do honor to God to only swear by him, but if someone bilks you in a deal, you are better off relying on the king’s justice than God’s, whose vengeance is so uncertain and whose will is utterly unlike our own.

It is perhaps to forestall such questions about divine justice, questions that Hobbes’s own book has taught us to ask, that he turns to the fifth action of divine worship, which gets by far the longest treatment: “Fifthly, it is a part of rational worship to speak considerately of God; for it argues a fear of him, and fear is a confession of his power” (xxxi.33). To begin, this means that we should not use God’s name “rashly” or “in vain” but should only invoke him in the most serious of circumstances, such as to “avoid war” or when it is by the “order of the commonwealth” (*ibid.*). However, speaking considerately of God has a further meaning, which further forecloses rational interrogation of the concept of God. Hobbes writes,

[D]isputing of God’s nature is contrary to his honour; for it is supposed that in this natural kingdom of God, there is no other way to know anything but by natural reason, that is, from the principles of natural science, which are so far from teaching us anything of God’s nature as they cannot teach us our own nature, nor the nature of the smallest creature living. And therefore, when men out of the principles of natural reason, dispute of the attributes of God, they but dishonour him; for in the attributes which we give to God, we are not to consider the signification of philosophical truth, but the signification of pious intention, to do him the greatest honour we are able.” (xxxi.33).

This argument, which on the surface is very pious, is actually quite explosive. Its piety lies in its Pauline insistence that the corrupted human mind with its vain philosophy cannot hope to understand the transcendent, mysterious creator and so should not try. Science cannot even

understand how gnats hum,<sup>40</sup> let alone why human beings act as they do. How can it hope to grasp the being of God? In the face of the divine, piety, rather than philosophy, is the appropriate response.

However, certain details of Hobbes's account serve to undermine its piety. To begin, he emphasizes that "in the natural kingdom of God," *i.e.* prior to revelation of the positive divine law, "there is no other way to know anything but by natural reason, that is, from the principles of natural science." All that we know or could know, absent either direct or authoritative revelation from God, we know through unaided reason alone. And it is from "the principles of natural reason" that ideas arise which "dishonour" God. Remember, that Hobbes has identified the natural law, which he has described in Part II of *Leviathan*, as being of divine origin. That God remains mysterious and ungraspable by natural reason, while the natural law does not, is a feature of that form of reason as God created it. Indeed, it seems to be a feature, not only of our reason, but of nature itself. It appears from Hobbes's writings that a complete science of causation is possible in principle,<sup>41</sup> but it also appears that God can have no part in that science, *i.e.* that God is not a cause, scientifically speaking.<sup>42</sup> If God created the world, he did so in such a way that human beings could not come to know him by any human means. Indeed, it is the unproven assumption, or set of assumptions, that such a being exists, is all powerful, and is

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<sup>40</sup> See Aristophanes 1998, *Clouds* 155-168; cf. Strauss 1966, pg. 14: "Men who know their way in the intestines of gnats can easily defraud human creditors."

<sup>41</sup> This is particularly the case because, for Hobbes, a systematic presentation of all truth would consist of list of all true propositions and syllogisms, the truth of which would rely upon definitions arbitrarily made by men. In other words, Hobbes's natural philosophy is a constructive philosophy in which all truth is created by humans; nothing outside of the system of defined names has truth or falsity. It is simply nonsense. See *DCr* i.6-7, ii.4, iii.7-8, v.1, vi.1, 4. See also Strauss 1953, pg. 173: "The world of our constructs is wholly unenigmatic because we are its sole cause and hence we have perfect knowledge of its cause. The cause of the world of our constructs does not have a further cause, a cause that is not, or not fully, within our power; the world of our constructs has an absolute beginning or is a creation in the strict sense."

<sup>42</sup> See *DCr* 1.8 and cf. vi.1

concerned with human beings that makes honoring him necessary at all. And now, we have learned that honoring this God means giving up on the only means through which humans can naturally come to know anything. Piety requires the active suspension of the human intellect, the proscription of the search for the causes of all things, and the limitation of human power<sup>43</sup> for the sake of honoring the divine power. Hobbes attempts to argue in favor of this stipulation by disparaging human reason, saying it is incapable of understanding mankind, let alone the divine. But Hobbes does not actually believe that science despairs of understanding mankind. To say nothing of his work dedicated to the subject, *De Homine*, here in *Leviathan*, in its Introduction, Hobbes has said,

He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind, which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science, yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly and perspicuously, the pains left another will be only to consider if he also find not the same in himself.

Hobbes not only believes that natural reason *can* “teach us our own nature,” he believes that the very book he has written *does so*. If natural reason is unable to make sense of God, it may not be the weakness of natural reason that is to blame, at least on Hobbes’s account.

We are yet again left with the impression that Hobbes’s account of properly honoring God is entirely political, *i.e.* sub-philosophical, rather than supra-philosophical or theological. Just as Numa was said to have crafted Roman religion in order to “keep the people in obedience and peace” (xii.20), so too Hobbes appears to design the religion of nature with the end of public order as his primary motive. This impression is strengthened by the final three required actions

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<sup>43</sup> “The *end* or *scope* of philosophy is, that we may make use to our benefit of effects formerly seen; or that, by application of bodies to one another, we may produce the like effects of those we conceive in our mind, as far forth as matter, strength, and industry, will permit, for the commodity of human life.” (*DCr* 1.6)

of divine worship, which are that it is to be lofty, public, and legal (xxxi.34-36). First, according to Hobbes, our prayers, thanksgivings, and sacrifices must be accomplished in the best way possible, so as to honor God most. This means that they must be “made in words or phrases, not sudden nor light, nor plebian, but beautiful and well composed” (xxxi.34). The proper words to speak to God cannot be found by just anyone. While disparaging the ancients for “absurdly” worshiping the images of gods, like statues, he praises their doing so “in verse, and with music both or voice and instruments” as “reasonable.”<sup>44</sup> If the proper words must be had, then they should be gotten from some more or less authoritative source, such as a Homer or a Virgil. The English *Book of Common Prayer*, first published in 1549, might serve the same essential purpose for a Christian society, giving appropriately lofty words to mark social events. Given that it is “the best” prayer we are looking for on each occasion, it is reasonable to suspect that Hobbes is suggesting that one set of prayers be authoritative for all worshipers, so that everyone could appropriately honor God with the best prayers.

The communal nature of these lofty prayers is further confirmed by the next action of worship, which is that the worship must be public. Hobbes writes, “Seventhly, reason directeth not only to worship God in secret but also, and especially, in public and in the sight of men” (xxxi.35). The reason that it is best to honor God publically is not that it affects the quality of the honor you bestow. Rather, we must worship God in public because “that which in honour is most acceptable,” *i.e.* the greatest advantage one can derive from being honored, is “the procuring others to honour him” (*ibid.*). We must worship publically, so that others will worship as we do.

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<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, Hobbes also approves of the manner in which the ancients sacrificed animals and offered gifts, as well as their “actions in worshiping,” as “according to reason,” because they were “full of submission, and commemorative of benefits received” (xxxi.34). One supposes that the correct posture for worship would be belly down with hands outstretched, palm up.



Praying to statues makes them gods; praying to statues publically makes them, as others join in, the gods of a cult. Praying publicly, with the approved, best, and most beautiful words, so as to stir others to pray as you do, is the way to create the conditions for divine worship, according to the dictates of natural reason. All that is left to add is that men must obey the laws that God has given by nature, *viz.* the natural laws that Hobbes has detailed in Part II of *Leviathan*, up to and including the directives for the worship of God just enunciated (xxxi.36). Obedience to the natural law, seeking peace through social contract, is “the greatest worship of all” and is “more acceptable to God than sacrifice.” Hobbes adds that, “seeing a commonwealth is one person, it ought also to exhibit to God but one worship, which then it doth when it commandeth it to be exhibited by private men publicly” (xxxi.37). And ultimately, it is the sovereign who decides upon the “attributes” of this worship, including, we assume, what prayers are the best and, perhaps, which attributes should be granted God (xxxi. 38). This uniformity of religion, in the name of honoring God most highly by honoring him in the best way, all together, is the consummation of Hobbes’s natural religion. To agree to worship as your fellow citizens worship, and at the direction of the sovereign, is the ultimate expression of the first law of nature.

The public and authorized worship of the incomprehensible divine, without any undue public questioning of God’s nature,<sup>45</sup> is the crowning moment of the most peaceful society that natural reason can create. The natural religion described in Chapter xxxi is the final step in his argument, insofar as it relies on reason alone. But Hobbes is far from triumphant at this moment. He writes,

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<sup>45</sup> In *De Corpore*, when discussing the logical difference between saying “man can not sin” and “man cannot sin” (the first means it is possible for him not to sin, whereas the later means it is impossible for him to sin), Hobbes adds this advice regarding the philosophical work of logic-chopping: “But they [*sc.* they that learn philosophy from masters] ought to do this silently by themselves, or betwixt them and their masters only; for it will be thought both ridiculous and absurd, for man to use such language publicly” (*DCr* iii.12). Unlike religion, which must be practiced in public, philosophy is compelled to take place only “in secret” (cf. xxxi.35).

...I am at the point of believing this my labour as useless as the commonwealth of *Plato*. For he also is of opinion that it is impossible for the disorders of the state, and the change of governments by civil war, ever to be taken away, till sovereigns be philosophers. (xxi.41; cf. Plato 1968, *Republic*, 473c-e)

Hobbes says that Plato “also” holds this opinion, implying that Hobbes also believes that the ills for the cities will not rest until they have philosophers as rulers. The commonwealth that Hobbes has described, built upon the foundation of human beings as they really are, not as we would wish them to be, and constructed according to the laws of nature as discoverable by unaided reason, this commonwealth may be just another utopia. Considering how “different this doctrine is from the practice of the greatest part of the world, especially these western parts” and considering “how much depth of moral philosophy is required in them that have the administration of the sovereign power,” Hobbes is on the verge of despair—as a philosopher he can point to the stable and peaceful political order, but he cannot bring it into being.

But Hobbes quickly recovers. He “consider[s] again” and realizes that only the “science of natural justice” is needed to be a sovereign, and that mathematics and all of the “theorems of moral doctrine” and the rest of the knowledge that philosopher kings must have is unnecessary to rule well (xxxi.41). Since he has provided the science of natural justice in Parts I and II of *Leviathan*, he can console himself:

I recover some hope that, one time or other, this writing of mine may fall into the hands of a sovereign who will consider it himself (for it is short, and I think clear), without the help of any interested or envious interpreter, and by the exercise of entire sovereignty in protecting the public teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation into the utility of practice. (*ibid.*)

It is amazing how final this sounds, as though there were not hundreds of pages left in the book. He even calls the book “short,” clearly neglecting the many extremely dense passages to come, including the 60-plus page Chapter xlii, which is a small treatise in itself on ecclesiastical power. In some ways, Chapter xxxi is the end of the book.<sup>46</sup> Hobbes is indicating here, to the potential sovereign who may be reading *Leviathan* “one time or other,” that for all “practical” purposes the book is over. With the natural religion in place, especially with the final proviso that the sovereign may direct it as he sees fit, the political question, at its most broad and general level, has been solved. These principles, derived by natural reason, are the principles most conducive to stable and peaceful political order.

But the book is not finished, which raises the question for whom, if not the sovereign, if not the Leviathan himself, is the rest of the book? To this, there are two answers, distinct but related. Parts III and IV of the *Leviathan*, which deal in depth with controversies of theology and ecclesiology, are far too in the weeds for a practical man of action like the sovereign. They are much better suited to his counselors, those who must explain the practical effects of arcane matters (*e.g.* where will the New Jerusalem be located?<sup>47</sup>) and ensure that only appropriate doctrines are disseminated by the universities which train the civil service. Theoretical men, and the sort of detail they need to advise the king in the fine points of doctrine and to ensure uniformity among the people, are the audience, and concern, of the second half of *Leviathan*. This explains the lengthy treatise on church government; it is the men who are to govern the church, as the king’s reagents, who must be familiar with the most rational way of designing

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<sup>46</sup> On this point, cf. Oakeshott 1975, pg. 50: “Now even an attentive reader might be excused if he supposed that the argument of *Leviathan* would end here. Whatever our opinion of the cogency of the argument, it would appear that what was projected as a civil philosophy had now been fulfilled. But such is not the view of Hobbes.”

<sup>47</sup> See Hobbes’s discussion of this point at xxxviii.17f.

such a system. Such detail is useless to a king, whereas the discussions of common law, war, punishment, and the like in the first half of the book are more germane to a king's interests.

Beyond this general distinction between practical and theoretical, or king and counselor, there is another use which the second half serves. While the natural religion outlined in Chapter xxxi could, in theory, be put into practice anywhere and at any time, deriving as it does from permanent features of reality and the human animal, the situation in which Hobbes and his contemporaries find themselves is not a generalized situation. It is instead a very path dependent situation, in which there is already an established religion to attend to, with its own teachings and doctrines. While dealing with these complications must ultimately fall to men with more time on their hands than the king has, they must be dealt with for peace to become possible, given the historical situation Hobbes found himself in. Any solution to the English Civil War was going to have to be a Christian solution, and so Christianity must be drafted onto the side of peace. This is all the more necessary given the theoretical flaws we have noticed in Hobbes's civil religion, which is not able to account for God's being and must settle for mandating what is most honorable. While the theology that Hobbes provides, if inspected closely, moves as far in the direction of the Epicurean god as possible without destroying the basis for public worship altogether, it is not able to disprove other features of the divine being, most importantly the possibility of direct revelation. As discussed above, unless one can disprove the possibility of special revelation, then "the assertion of miracles stands impregnable."

Hobbes has done all he can on the level of natural reason—he has rendered god a shapeless, placeless, infinite non-thing that neither loves us, nor hates us—but he has not proven that John Calvin is wrong. And as long as special revelation is possible, commonwealths are not safe from potential turmoil, since any subject can overrule a king when God is speaking through

him. In lieu of a proof against revelation, Hobbes begins in Chapter xxxii to meet his Christian opponents on their own battlefield by interpreting scripture. If reason is not capable of disproving the possibility of special revelation, perhaps the ground of that belief can be removed by reinterpreting the texts at its basis. The way in which Hobbes begins this task will be the subject of the next chapter.

#### Chapter Four: Prophecy in a Christian Commonwealth

Hobbes begins Chapter xxxii by reminding his readers that, in order to deal with a specifically Christian form of politics, he will no longer be able to rely on natural reason alone. So, while the natural religion offered in Chapter xxxi, and described in the last chapter of this dissertation, was derived by unaided reason, the rest of *Leviathan* will have to be supplemented by revealed truth. Hobbes writes,

I have derived the rights of sovereign power, and the duty of subjects, hitherto from the principles of nature only; such as experience has found true or consent (concerning the use of words) has made so; that is to say, from the nature of men, known to us by experience, and from definitions (of such words as are essential to all political reasoning) universally agreed on. But in that I am next to handle, which is the nature and rights of a CHRISTIAN COMMONWEALTH, whereof there dependeth much upon supernatural revelations of the will of God, the ground of my discourse must be, not only the natural words of God, but also the prophetical. (xxxii.1)

The first half of *Leviathan* was based on the “principles of nature” and the “nature of men,” discovered through experience with the world along with careful definitions of words. Hobbes relies on this same two-part understanding of science, empirical and linguistic, in *De Corpore*. There, he distinguishes “two methods of philosophy.” The first method is based on true definitions “made and constituted” when “we consent and agree about the appellations of things,” and is for the purpose of going “from the generation of things to their possible effects” (*DCr* xxv.1). The second method, the purpose of which is to move “from [the] effects and appearances [of things] to some possible generation of the same,” is based upon “sense,” which shows us “ways and means” by which a thing might be generated (*ibid.*). The principles of this sensation-based science, also called “Physics,” are to be found “placed in the things themselves by the Author of Nature” in “the appearances of nature.” The knowledge provided by the first form of philosophy is constructive in Strauss’s sense, creating a world that is “wholly unenigmatic because we are its sole cause” (Strauss 1953, pg. 173). The knowledge provided by

the second form, which relies upon clues placed in things by God, is more tentative, since we are often incorrect when we try to determine the causes of any particular effect. Ideally, we would wish to understand each effect so well that we could produce it ourselves, but this process, the method of which was first described by Francis Bacon, is extremely laborious.<sup>48</sup>

Hobbes, although he recognized the need for empirical, experimental science, was not himself an avid practitioner of it. Hobbes primarily pursued the first method, linguistic and geometric. Indeed, it appears from another of his writings from the 1650s that Hobbes saw the work undertaken in *Leviathan* as being almost entirely of the geometric, rather than experimental, variety:

[T]he science of every subject is derived from a precognition of the causes, generation, and construction of the same; and consequently where the causes are known, there is place for demonstration, but not where the causes are to seek for. Geometry therefore is demonstrable, for the lines and figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves; and *civil philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the commonwealth ourselves*. But because of natural bodies we know not the construction, but seek it from the effects, there lies no demonstration of what the causes be we seek for, but only of what they may be. (*Six Lessons to the Professors of Mathematics*, *EW* VII:184, emphasis added; cf. Jesseph 1999, pg. 221).

The proper constitution of the political world can be demonstrated, after the manner of geometry, because that world has been entirely constructed by the human will in its word-defining capacity. As Hobbes says in Chapter xxxii, the only thing that experience has added to political science is knowledge of “the nature of men” (xxxii.1). That natural account of man as a body in motion, is given in Part I of *Leviathan* and is, according to Hobbes, based on the closest form of empirical observation possible—observation of oneself (“*nosce teipsum, read thyself*”) (Introduction.3).

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<sup>48</sup> Bacon describes a similar methodological distinction in *The Great Instauration*: “For the end which this science of mine proposes is the invention not of arguments but of arts; not of things in accordance with principles, but of principles themselves; not of probable reasons, but of designations and directions for works. And as the intention is different, so accordingly is the effect; the effect of the one being to overcome an opponent in argument, of the other to conquer nature in action” (Bacon 1989, pg. 21; cf. pg. 47).

From *De Cive* on, Hobbes holds that he has adequately grasped the relevant empirical facts of humanity, such that he can proceed, geometrically, to produce his desired effect—a peaceful commonwealth.<sup>49</sup>

The distinction between “experience” and “consent” in Chapter xxxii, which is equivalent to the methodological distinction between physics and geometry, is mostly *pro forma*, since Hobbes has almost entirely followed the geometric method in constructing his commonwealth.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Parts I and II of *Leviathan* represent, according to the principles of natural reason, a complete system of politics, the results of which are as certain as a Euclidean theorem. I have dwelled on this point in order to put into relief the fact that Hobbes, at the beginning of Part III, is announcing that the remainder of his work will serve as a *supplement* to an already complete system, in which “the ground of my discourse must be, *not only* the natural word of God [*i.e.* that which is known by reason alone], *but also* the prophetic [i.e. ‘supernatural revelations of the will of God’]” (xxxii.1). The God of reason, radically separate from the world, has, according to Christian doctrine, entered the world through his revealed word. Thus, while this revelation is no part of the complete, rational system of politics, it must nonetheless be dealt with as an addendum to this system. But how shall it be dealt with? If its claims were demonstrable on the

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<sup>49</sup> As Hobbes writes in the Epistle Dedicatory of *De Cive*, “If the moral Philosophers had done their job with equal success [*sc.* equal to the geometers], I do not know what greater contribution human industry could have made to human happiness. For if the patterns of human action were known with the same certainty as the relations of magnitude in figures, ambition and greed, whose power rests on the false opinions of the common people about right and wrong [*jus et iniuria*], would be disarmed, and the human race would enjoy such a secure peace that (apart from conflicts over space as population grew) it seems unlikely it would ever have to right again” (Hobbes 1997, *DC*, pg.5). Despite the fact that Hobbes says in *De Cive* that “we are all poor judges of our own discoveries because we love them,” in the later *De Corpore* Hobbes writes, “Civil Philosophy [*is*] yet much younger, as being no older (I say it provoked, and that my detractors may know how little they have wrought upon me) than my own book *De Cive*” (*DCr.* Epistle Dedicatory).

<sup>50</sup> On this point, see Malcolm 2002, pg. 180: “[Hobbes] did in fact believe that a truly scientific ‘*philosophia civilis*’ could be established—and that he had been the first to do so, when he wrote *De cive*. Only later, in *De homine*, did he try to clear up some of [the] uncertainties. He now placed geometry and civil science on one side of the divide as demonstrations *a priori*, because in their cases we have actual knowledge of causes, ‘making’ the objects of the sciences ourselves...; and he left physics on the other side as an *a posteriori* science of possible causes—a science, that is, but one of lower status.” Malcolm cites *De Homine* x.5, *OL* II:93-94



basis of reason, it would have been included in the first half of the book. The truths of revelation are not truths we can have real, certain knowledge of, *i.e.* knowledge that we have ourselves constructed. This is why it is important that Hobbes has remarked that the empirical or experimental method is also different in kind than the knowledge needed to frame a specifically Christian commonwealth. Even *a posteriori*, empirical knowledge, which as we have seen is a kind of second-rung, uncertain knowledge, is more certain than the knowledge we arrive at supernaturally. By distinguishing between the geometric and empirical forms of science, Hobbes has alerted us to the fact that the knowledge based on revelation is unlike either of them. Since geometric and empirical truth are themselves dissimilar in the way we have described above, we are left to wonder about the precise status of the truths of revelation as well as the method according to which we must apply to arrive at knowledge of them. The first task, concerning the status of this revealed truth, requires a reconsideration of prophecy, which is Hobbes's topic in Chapter xxxii. The second task, concerning the method for arriving at knowledge, is discussed by Hobbes in Chapter xxxiii and will be the topic of the next chapter of this dissertation.

### *Revelation and the Captivation of the Understanding*

Crucially, Hobbes does not say that we are leaving natural reason behind as we cross this border into the supernatural. Rather, “we are not to renounce our senses and experience, nor (that which is the undoubted word of God) our natural reason” (xxxii.2). This is because we must use these “talents” to “negotiate till the coming again of our blessed Saviour” (*ibid.*). God gave us natural reason so that we could make due until the second coming of Christ, and so we should use that reason “in the purchase of justice, peace, and true religion,” and not suffer it to be “folded up in the napkin of an implicit faith” (*ibid.*). Thus it sounds as if Hobbes intends to

subject the dictates of revelation to the searching criticism of reason, for until the second coming, we have no surer guide. Indeed, Hobbes strengthens this impression by adding,

For though there be many things in God's word above reason (that is to say, which cannot be natural reason be either demonstrated or confuted), yet there is nothing contrary to it; but when it seemeth so, the fault is either in our unskillful interpretation or erroneous ratiocination. (xxxii.2)

This distinction between being "above reason" and being "contrary to it" is another example of Hobbes hiding a shocking statement within a pious one. It is, of course, pious to say that there is nothing irrational in God, for irrationality is an imperfection, just as it is pious to say that God is too great for human comprehension. Thomas Aquinas says as much himself, writing on the first point,

[N]o perfection found in any genus of things is lacking to God. Nor on this account does any composition follow in Him. But among the perfections of things the greatest is that something be intelligent, for thereby it is in a manner all things, having within itself the perfections of all things. God is, therefore, intelligent (Aquinas 1975, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.44.6, pg. 171-172).

And on the second point,

And indeed if man were ordained to no other end than that which is proportionate to his natural faculty, there would be no need for man to have any further direction on the part of his reason, besides the natural law and human law which is derived from it. But since man is ordained to an end of eternal happiness which is inappropriate to man's natural faculty...therefore it was necessary that, besides the natural and the human law, man should be directed to his end by a law given by God. (Aquinas 1948, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I-II, Q.91, A.4, pg. 998)<sup>51</sup>

It is eternal life in particular, Aquinas argues, that is the supernatural fact which requires divine knowledge to accept. Earthly happiness could be complete with only the natural and human law, but eternal happiness requires a supplement. Hobbes also sees the need for this supplement, but he adds that anything found abhorrent to reason, *i.e.* anything conflicting with the system set

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<sup>51</sup> Also see Aquinas 1948, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I-II, Q.62, A.3, pg. 852: "[M]an needed in addition [*sc.* to intellect and 'rectitude of will'] something supernatural to direct him to a supernatural end."

forth in Parts I and II of *Leviathan*, must be understood to be the “fault” of either “unskillful interpretation or erroneous ratiocination” (xxxii.2). So while for Aquinas, it may be the case that “human intellect in the present state of life cannot understand even immaterial created substances, must less can it understand the essence of the uncreated substance,” for Hobbes the very existence of “immaterial substances” will have to be more skillfully interpreted so as to eliminate the “erroneous ratiocination” that gave rise to that faulty notion (Aquinas 1948, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q.88, A.3, pg.451; cf. *Leviathan*, xxxiv.5-15 on the meaning of “spirit” in the Bible).

But while Hobbes does in fact seem to follow this rationalizing and debunking procedure in what follows (many examples with appear in the pages ahead), here in Chapter xxxii, he instead doubles down on the pious side of his statement regarding the limits of human reason.

Hobbes writes,

Therefore, when anything therein written is too hard for our examination, we are bidden to captivate our understanding to the words, and not to labour in sifting out a philosophical truth by logic, of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of natural science. For it is with the mysteries of our religion as with wholesome pills for the sick, which, swallowed whole, have the virtue to cure, but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect. (xxxii.3)

The request being made (for “we are bidden” to act in this way) is that we must suspend the work of philosophical logic, *i.e.* the work of the linguistic and geometric science that is the only certain path to truth, and instead “captivate our understanding to the words.” Hobbes is using captivate here in its older, etymological sense of being held captive. When scripture (the “written” text Hobbes has in mind) is “too hard for our examination,” *i.e.* when it speaks of matters “above reason,” we must shackle ourselves to the revealed word and not “labour” to “sift out a philosophical truth.” The reason we must so imprison our reason, and keep it from freely dissecting and weighing the supra-rational claims of scripture, is that the action of reason is

inherently destructive to our belief in these claims. The claims of scripture, when swallowed whole without any destructive probing, are somehow medicinal. They can cure a natural defect of the body politic. But when these truths are chewed, *i.e.* analyzed by natural reason and torn apart in search of truth, then attempting to believe them (to “swallow” them) is more likely to make us wretch. Christianity becomes unpalatable when analyzed, but it may cure some of our ailments when taken whole. We must beware that in dissecting the claims of scripture (to make sure we are avoiding “erroneous ratiocination”) we do not, in so doing, destroy the palliative effect that religion can have on the body politic. This tension, between eliminating what is “contrary” to reason and preserving the useful qualities of religion, animates Hobbes’s analysis of revelation moving forward.

That Hobbes has political motives, rather than philosophical or theological motives, in thus captivating reason, is shown in his next paragraph. He rushes to make clear that “by the captivity of our understanding is not meant a submission of the intellectual faculty to the opinion of any other man, but of the will to obedience, where obedience is due” (xxxii.4). We are not shackling reason to scripture for the sake of scripture, but for the sake of obedience. The obvious repost here is that since we owe obedience to God and scripture is God’s word, then we must believe scripture for God’s sake. However, Hobbes makes clear that he has another variety of obedience in mind.

We then captivate our understanding and reason when we forbear contradiction, when we so speak as (by lawful authority) we are commanded, and when we live accordingly; which, in sum, is trust and faith reposed in him that speaketh, though the mind be incapable of any notion at all from the words spoken. (xxxii.4)

We must be obedient to the lawful commands of those whom we have authorized to command us. We put “trust and faith” in the words of these commanders, regardless of whether they make philosophical sense or not. It could perhaps be thought that, since God especially is our

commander due to his great power, that these words should be applied principally to him. However, this seems not to be the case, because this authority is shown to authoritatively speak to all of his subjects, and we have seen, in the last chapter, that God's positive law is not promulgated in so direct a fashion. Rather God speaks through prophets, and it is the prophet who the people must trust and have faith in when they captivate their reason to the "words spoken." That this prophet who commands us is a lawful authority, and the political ramifications of this, will become clearer as we proceed.

### *How God Speaks*

Hobbes next proceeds to discuss, as though he had not already done so (see last chapter), the question of how God communicates to humans. This question is given new urgency by the requirement that we captivate our understanding to his word. Hobbes distinguishes two ways for God to communicate, "...either immediately or by mediation of another man to whom he had formerly spoken by himself immediately" (xxxii.5). Once again, we have the dichotomy between special revelation, on the one hand, and the mediation of prophets, on the other. Once again, Hobbes concentrates on the second half of the division. Regarding special revelation, he says little, but he does say is of great interest.

How God speaketh to a man immediately may be understood by those well enough to whom he hath so spoken;<sup>52</sup> but how the same should be understood by another is hard, if not impossible, to know. (*ibid.*)

Hobbes does not gainsay the experience of special revelation; he merely says that only those who have experienced it could ever understand it. Granted, his language, especially in the later Latin

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<sup>52</sup> In the Latin version, Hobbes says only that these people will "perhaps" understand how God speaks immediately: "*Quo modo hominem Immediatè alloquatur, intelligi fortè potest ab iis, quos ita alloquutus*" (Hobbes 2012, pg. 579). Edwin Curley and Noel Malcolm both translate this as "perhaps" (Curley 1994, pg. 246, fn.4; Malcolm 2012, pg. 578, fn.14).

version, makes clear that even the recipient of special revelation may fail to understand it, but such understanding may not be a necessary precondition for believing in the reality of such revelation. We are faced again with the problem that Strauss identified in dealing with John Calvin:

...because faith stands not on miracles, but on the contrary, the assertion of miracles stands on faith, and since obedience of faith depreciates from the outset all theoretical objections as stemming from carnal understanding, from disobedience—the assertion of miracles stands impregnable: God in His limitless power and freedom can use the things created by Him as tools... (Strauss 1963, pg. 197).

Because of the mysterious and radically unworldly being of God, there is no rational proof or disproof that a man has been made his tool. The genuine, thoroughgoing belief in such an event speaks “well enough” for itself and cannot be chewed up and rendered unpalatable by philosophic logic. Hobbes cannot stop individuals, in other words, from believing that God has picked them out of the heap to be his personal messenger. Instead, Hobbes focuses on the other side of the equation. What to do about this messenger’s auditors? Under what conditions should *they* believe that they are hearing the mediated words of God?

As Hobbes has said already, this is “hard, if not impossible, to know.” It would be hard to know for certain, even if one were inclined to believe it. I might believe with all my heart that some man speaks for God, but I still cannot know this to be true until God speaks to me and confirms the fact. Until then, I have only my faith in my prophet. And this, again, is when I am predisposed to believe, which is not how Hobbes frames this question. He writes,

For if a man pretend to me that God hath spoken to him supernaturally and immediately, and I make doubt of it, I cannot easily perceive what argument he can produce to oblige me to believe it. (xxxii.5)

If we begin from the position of the skeptic, which Hobbes has done everything in his power to encourage in the first half of his book, then another’s private belief of special revelation has no

obligatory power. He may as well be the man in Bedlam, proclaiming himself God the Father (viii.21). We should be more likely to think a person mad for believing that God has spoken to him personally, than to think he is a prophet. Unless, that is, the person making such a claim happens to be your sovereign:

It is true that if he be my sovereign, he may oblige me to obedience (so as not by act or word to declare I believe him not), but not to think any otherwise than my reason persuades me. But if one that hath not such authority over me shall pretend the same, there is nothing that exacteth either belief or obedience. (xxxii.5)

But even in this case, we are not compelled to *believe* the sovereign, only to act and speak in such a way that we do not contradict him. The sovereign can compel worship, including, as we have seen, the appropriate words to speak and actions to undertake when honoring God publically. Even the sovereign cannot compel us to believe that which natural reason tells us is false. As Hobbes says,

For sense, memory, understanding, reason, and opinion are not in our power to change, but always and necessarily such as the things we see, hear, and consider suggest unto us; and therefore are not the effects of our will, but our will of them. (xxxii.4)

Just as faith precedes miracles, rendering belief in miracles impregnable, so too our beliefs and opinions are less the products of our will, than the basis for our willing at all. Our beliefs, which are based on our sense, memory, and understanding are not a decision we have made. Whether we act on those beliefs, or instead act in obedience to our sovereign, is a different question, because I can rationally believe that my private opinions on a subject are, from the perspective of the good society, unfit for public avowal. So, according to Hobbes, while the sovereign cannot rationally punish us for our thoughts, over which we have no control, he can legitimately punish us for words and actions contradicting the beliefs he has mandated, whether we share those beliefs or not. But surely this act of prudent obedience to the sovereign, in thus dissimulating our

private beliefs in favor of his, is a far cry from having located a rational basis upon which we can believe that another human being is a prophet.

Hobbes underlines this fact by again rehearsing all of the reasons one has for doubting any claim to prophecy. To begin, scripture does not count as immediate communication because it is mediated by “the prophets,...the apostles, or...the church” (xxxii.6). God speaks to “all other Christian men” in the same way, and so none can claim special authority based on scripture alone. This claim will become progressively more important and will be the major subject of the next chapter of this dissertation. Following upon this, Hobbes reminds us that dreams and visions are not a fool proof prophecy delivery system, because when a person says that God spoke to them in a dream that “is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him” (*ibid.*). He adds further on the subject of dreams that such they often arise “from self-conceit, and foolish arrogance, and false opinion of a man’s own godliness, or other virtue, by which he thinks he hath merited the favour of extraordinary revelation” (*ibid.*). Far from being a sign from God, prophetic dreams are more likely the sign of acute narcissism. Further, some people claim that they have been supernaturally inspired to speak, as though God were speaking through them. According to Hobbes, this means merely that this person “finds an ardent desire to speak, or some strong opinion of himself, for which he can allege no natural and sufficient reason” (*ibid.*). Again, claims to prophecy should be met with skepticism bordering on derision. For it is only sometimes the case that men are mistaken about being the messengers of God; they also lie about it. Hobbes says that anyone who claims to be a prophet “obliges no man to believe he hath so done to him that pretends it, who (being a man) may err, and (which is more) may lie” (*ibid.*). Thus, we find that Hobbes has yet again followed his familiar two-step pattern; first, he admits



that special revelation is in principle possible, and then he shows that any claim to it is almost certainly bunk in practice.

Hobbes is not willing to argue that there have *never* been true prophets, however, since doing so would be to deny the authority of the Christian religion, and in a “Christian commonwealth,” such as the one he is describing, that would not be rational. Hobbes is required to ask again, therefore, “How, then, can he to whom God hath never revealed his will immediately (saving by the way of natural reason) know when he is to obey or not obey his word, delivered by him that says he is a prophet?” (xxxii.7). Answering this question leads him into a confrontation with scripture that will last the remainder of the book.

The first two passages that Hobbes refers to, here in the prophetic second half of his book, are both from 1 Kings. Each is presented in order to motivate the following question: “...what certainty is there of knowing the will of God, by other way than that of reason” (*ibid.*). In each case, Hobbes significantly understates the import of each story, suppressing details that, when brought into focus, add new depth to his argument. Of the first case, he writes, “Of 400 prophets of whom the king of Israel asked counsel concerning the war he made against *Ramoth Gilead* (1 Kings 22) only *Micaiah* was a true one” (*ibid.*). Such a terse retelling of the tale leaves it open to serious misinterpretation. It is a commonplace of the Hebrew Bible for one true prophet to be surrounded by many false ones. So we may think that this is just one of those stories—lots of people claim to be prophets, but only one in 400 is a true prophet. Such a reading is perfectly coherent within the context of Hobbes’s argument, but it does a disservice to the text that Hobbes has cited. The 400 prophets that told Ahab to go up to Ramoth Gilead were not false prophets in the sense of being fakers, but were on the contrary divinely inspired. And *Micaiah*, who said the exact opposite thing, was also divinely inspired.

And the LORD said, who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets...(KJV, 1 Kings 22:20-23)

It is true, as Hobbes has already said, that men, being human, may lie. What this Biblical story portends is that, occasionally, they are divinely inspired to do so. God actively sends false prophets into the world with the intention of catching his enemies in a snare of lies. Divinely inspired lies, especially those *designed* to destroy someone, can hardly be anything but convincing. Ahab is not being given a chance to see the golden truth among so much dross. Rather, he is being pushed toward the wrong end, and Micaiah is there to make sure he knows, when it all comes crashing down, that the God of the Israelites was responsible. When God uses humans in this way, as his “tools,” how can we possibly know the true word of God from the divinely inspired lie?

There is an additional reason for Hobbes to find this passage interesting, and that is the fact that God is presented as a king in his court. The lying spirit “stood before” him and addressed him as a vassal might. Some of this may be Micaiah’s artistic license, since he was at the moment of his speaking these words addressing a king in his court. But the words, ultimately, are to be understood as God’s, and so, we are left with a God who wishes us to understand him as an embodied king. And this is a notion that Hobbes cannot abide. Again and again, he has argued that God cannot be a thing, that he cannot have shape, that he is no part of the universe, and so on. He never tires of insisting, as we saw in the last chapter, that certain attributes of God, like his having a will at all, are only said metaphorically. But here in 1 Kings, we see a fully embodied God, who almost certainly is sitting on a throne, and very clearly enjoys a hearty,

spiteful laugh at the misfortunes of his enemies. Almost every aspect of this story is problematic for Hobbes, because almost all of it violates his stricture that no part of the revealed word be contrary to reason (by, for example, attributing finitude to God by attributing him a shape—let alone a body part designed to be sat upon).<sup>53</sup> This is the first time Hobbes has cited the Bible since he has discussed the being of God according to natural reason, and the juxtaposition could not be more jarring. If the Bible must be brought into accord with natural reason, there may be many sacrifices that will have to be made, starting perhaps with charming scenes like the fall of Ahab.<sup>54</sup>

The second Biblical citation that Hobbes gives us to motivate the question of whether there is any way beyond reason to know God's will is also from 1 Kings. He reports the story like this:

The prophet that was sent to prophecy against the alter set up by *Jeroboam* (1 Kings 13), though a true prophet, and that by two miracles done in his presence appears to be a prophet sent from God, was yet deceived by another old prophet that persuaded him, as from the mouth of God, to eat and drink with him. (xxxii.7)

Hobbes is more forthcoming in the way he describes this example, but he still leaves out the most startling features of the Biblical account. The prophet in 1 Kings 13 is unnamed. He is simply a “man of God.” He has been sent by God to proclaim that “a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name,” and that this Josiah will one day “burn incense upon thee [*sc.* King Jeroboam], and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee” (KJV, 1 Kings 13:2). As a sign that this prediction is from God, the man performs his first miracle, when Jeroboam's alter is rent and

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. xxxvi.9: “...one might argue from his making all other parts of man's body that he had also the same use of them which we have; which would be many of them so uncomely as it would be the greatest contumely in the world to ascribe them to him.”

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Plato 1968, *Republic*, 382a-b: “[N]o one,” I said, “voluntarily wishes to lie about the most sovereign things to what is most sovereign in himself. Rather, he fears holding a lie there more than anything.” “I still don't understand,” he said. “That's because you suppose I mean something exalted,” I said. “But I mean that to lie and to have lied to the soul about the things that are, and to be unlearned, and to have and to hold a lie there is what everyone would least accept; and that everyone hates a lie in that place most of all.”

the ashes pour out. In the process, Jeroboam's hand is withered ("dried up"). Jeroboam begs for his hand to be restored in the name of the Lord, which the man of God does, performing his second miracle. The man of God is offered refreshment and reward by Jeroboam, but he refuses, explaining, "For so it was charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way thou camest" (KJV, 1 Kings 13:9). For Hobbes, as for any reader of the Biblical text, these events pretty well confirm the man of God as a prophet according to the Israelite tradition.

It is what happens next that is so confounding. An "old prophet" hears about the miracles that have been performed and he, with the help of his sons, locates the man of God, sitting under a tree. The old prophet, after making sure he had the right man, asks the man of God to accompany him back to his house and to eat bread. The man of God rebuffs the prophet as he had the king—God has forbidden him to eat bread or to retrace his steps. Then comes the extraordinary moment.

[The old prophet] said unto him, I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him. So he went back with him, and did eat bread in his house, and drink water. And it came to pass, as they sat at the table, that the word of the LORD came unto the prophet that brought him back: And he cried unto the man of God that came from Judah, saying, Thus saith the LORD, Forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the LORD, and hast not kept the commandment...thy carcase shall not come unto the sepulchre of thy fathers....And when he was gone, a lion met him by the way, and slew him: and his carcase was cast in the way, and the ass stood by it, and the lion also stood by the carcase. (1 Kings 13:18-24)

This time it is not the king who is fooled by a prophet's lie; it is another prophet. It seems that not even prophets can correctly discern true from false prophecy. Hence, Hobbes's question at the conclusion of this tale, "If one prophet deceive another, what certainty is there of knowing the will of God, by other way than that of reason?" This much is certainly problematic. If even prophets can be so deceived then we can better understand Hobbes's unstated skepticism

regarding whether those to whom God has spoken immediately actually understand their own experience (see xxxii.5 and above). But there is still more to chew on here. The old prophet is consistently called a prophet, even when he lies. Unlike in Hobbes's first example, God is not said to have inspired this lie, but God is said to inspire the curse that the old prophet lays on the man of God. We might think that the old prophet acted spitefully in the first instance, and that God nonetheless confirmed the punishment of the man of God because he had given in to human temptation.

The sequel, however, tells against such a reading. For the old prophet saddles up his ass, and goes to where the carcass of the man of God lay, and he finds "the ass and the lion standing by the carcass: the lion had not eaten the carcass, nor torn the ass" (KJV, 1 Kings 13:28). The old prophet picks up the corpse, takes it home, mourns over it (saying "Alas, my brother!"), and he buries the man of God in the grave meant for himself, saying, "When I am dead, then bury me in the sepulchre wherein the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones," and adding that the man of God was a true prophet (*ibid.* 13:31). This story is a morality tale for prophets, and it is exceedingly dark, both in the sense of being macabre and in the sense of being difficult to interpret. Still, a few suggestions are possible. First, the suspicion that the old prophet did not knowingly lie to the man, but rather that he was possessed by a lying spirit, is strengthened. The old prophet shows no guilt, but appears to do as he does out of a sense of filial piety. He seems to accept that this series of events was entirely God's will, and he merely pities the man of God for having become the object of God's wrath, rather than sharing God's anger for the sake of justice or, at least, obedience. Where justice lies in this story is as dark as the symbols of the ass and the lion. Indeed, and this is crucial, this story presents an entirely different image of God than the previous one did, one much more distant and mysterious, one closer to the God of natural reason.

This God is not sitting on a throne, because he is not embodied. He appears to speak through people, inspiring them suddenly and leaving them just as quickly. He seems to punish the innocent with righteous fury and then to explain himself with symbols. This is truly a God of metaphor and otherworldly remoteness, whose meanings and messages are veiled and uncertain.

The problem unearthed by this story in 1 Kings is not merely that one prophet may trick another, it is that even prophets must stand in numb awe before the ungraspable, unnamable being that nonetheless is grasping them. This is in stark contrast to the regal God of the first story, who is so palpable that he must be wearing shoes. The first story shows us that prophets may lie because God is duplicitous; the second shows us that prophets may lie because God is unfathomable. The former story is prime for debunking, since God doesn't have a throne room, whereas the later story is a challenge, since it is much nearer to describing the God of reason and the sort of divine intervention that Hobbes must recognize as possible. Even as prophecy is being ridiculed and questioned by Hobbes, the possibility of special and irresistible revelation from the hidden God retains its pathos.

### *Marks of a True Prophet*

Hobbes, having asked his readers to be skeptical of those who have pretenses to prophecy, and having referred us to some of the puzzles lying within the Bible, goes on to explain to us how we can tell when a prophet is genuine. This is striking news. God can send false prophets that are entirely convincing, so convincing that even another prophet cannot know that he is being told a lie, so convincing, perhaps, that even the prophet telling the lie believes it to be true. Despite this, and despite the ineffability of the God that communicates to man, Hobbes is able to provide a solution from another part of scripture. "...I answer out of the Holy

Scripture that there be two marks by which together, not asunder, a true prophet is to be known. One is the doing of miracles; the other is the not teaching any other religion than that which is already established” (xxxii.7). Hobbes draws the second principle from Moses in the thirteenth chapter of Deuteronomy (vs.1-5), who says, if a “dreamer of dreams” performs a miracle and then suggests the worship of other gods, “that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death.”

Moses forbids the Israelites from accepting any prophecy that contradicts the established order, i.e. the order *Moses himself* established. He reminds them in verse four to keep the Lord’s commandments and in verse five that the Lord brought them out of bondage in Egypt. Moses makes a claim for his own prophecies and miracles against any future prophecies and miracles. Hobbes understands Moses in precisely this way. “For they had made God their king by pact at the foot of Mount Sinai, who ruled them by Moses only; for he only spake with God, and from time to time declared God’s commandments to the people” (xxxii.7). The religious order was established by pact in the wilderness on the basis of a table of law. The Immortal God was made their king in perpetuity, and the Mortal God, Moses, was made his solitary representative for the duration of his life and was to be obeyed as God himself. This, of course, sounds familiar to Hobbes’s readers, since he had described the sovereign in precisely these terms in Part II of *Leviathan*.

Moses will be treated in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation. Now, I must return to Hobbes’s elaboration of prophecy. After identifying the marks of the true prophet, Hobbes makes a startling deduction: Miracles are required for prophecy, but miracles have ceased in our age; therefore, prophecy itself has ceased.

Seeing therefore miracles now cease, we have no sign left whereby to acknowledge the pretended revelations or inspirations of any private man, nor obligation to give ear to any

doctrine farther than it is conformable to the Holy Scriptures, which since the time of our Savior supply the place and sufficiently recompense the want of all other prophecy, and from which, by wise and learned interpretation and careful ratiocination, all rules and precepts necessary to the knowledge of our duty both to God and man, without enthusiasm or supernatural inspiration, may easily be deduced. (xxxii.9)

This argument, for all of its orthodoxy and seeming piety, surprises the reader. Why, if prophecy is impossible, has Hobbes worried himself about it in the first place? Could he not have said this from the beginning of the work, instead of working through his own unorthodox arguments against prophecy? If the goal was keeping the people from being misled by ambitious men intent on gaining power by feigned revelations and miracles, would this argument by itself not be sufficient? At the very least, could it not have been even broached before now? This scriptural argument against the validity of all current prophecy would seem to work political wonders for Hobbes, who is so concerned about the destabilizing effects of prophecy. However, as we will see, this argument has the effect of moving the field of battle. No longer will Hobbes rely principally on natural reason; he will instead proceed through scriptural interpretation.<sup>55</sup>

Hobbes's argument in the quote above is that, direct revelation having ceased, the Bible is the proper substitute. This depends, as he says, on "wise and learned interpretation and careful ratiocination." Here, Hobbes announces the methodological principle that he follows throughout Book III. "And this Scripture is it, out of which I am to take the principles of my discourse concerning the rights of those that are the supreme governors on earth of Christian commonwealths, and of the duty Christian subjects toward their sovereigns." Hobbes will

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<sup>55</sup> Strauss charts this series of moves by Hobbes as follows: "Still, the critique of the knowability of revelation is inadequate for the complete shaking of the authority of revelation. Through this critique, surely that man who wishes to rely on his own sensible experience and rational reflection alone can *defend* himself against all demands resting allegedly or really on revelation... But he cannot, on the basis of this critique, *attack* those who, allegedly or actually instructed by divine illumination about the reality of revelation, about the revealed character of Scripture, believe in the revealed character of Scripture; he cannot even lead those believers astray from their attack on him and his like. Hence, Hobbes is compelled to question not only the knowability but also the *possibility* of revelation" (Strauss 2011, pg. 81-82).



proceed, then, in the rest of Part III to interpret the Bible, which is the source of all currently available revelation. It appears that it is Hobbes who is wise and learned in these matters and that it is Hobbes who will offer the true replacement for prophecy in our times, since it will be his interpretation of the Bible that the rational sovereign, led by his counselors, should mandate.

In the following chapter, I shall consider Hobbes's views scripture itself—how it came to be written and by whom, how trustworthy it is, and how it is best interpreted.

## Chapter Five: Prophecy and Scripture

Chapter xxxiii is a *tour de force* of Biblical scholarship. In short compass, Hobbes displays deep reading and long study of the Bible, as well as familiarity with the previous scholarly work on his topic.<sup>56</sup> His arguments are supported with dense citations to the Bible, as well as to such authorities as Josephus and St. Jerome. While it would be possible to focus an entire project on Hobbes's use of scripture, with this chapter of *Leviathan* forming the backbone of such a study, in this chapter I will restrict myself to discussing the prophetic function of the Bible and how Hobbes understands and employs it in his quest to make Christianity safe for politics. In the course of this argument, I will first discuss Hobbes's view of the Bible's origin, with particular focus on the question of who we believe when we take the Bible to be prophecy. Second, I will discuss the way in which Hobbes understands the Bible as a whole, rather than as a collection of separate works. And finally, I will discuss how Hobbes believes the Bible can be authoritatively interpreted.

### *Who Wrote the Bible and Why?*

Hobbes begins by setting the terms of the discussion. He asks, which books do we refer to as Holy Scripture? In principle, this is a very difficult question, because there is debate on the subject and, absent special revelation to clear the matter up, no good way of determining the truth. How is one to decide whether the *Wisdom of Solomon* is canonical? What is the

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<sup>56</sup> For more detail on the intellectual context in which Hobbes worked on scriptural questions, see Noel Malcolm's "Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea," in Malcolm 2002, pp. 383-431. Malcolm discusses the "unholy trinity of writers: Spinoza, La Peyrère, and Hobbes," who were understood by their contemporaries to have originated the "dangerous new idea" that Ezra was the author of the Pentateuch.

appropriate test for whether a writing is the word of God? Hobbes proceeds, as he has so many times, on the political ground of obedience. He writes,

By the Books of Holy SCRIPTURE are understood those which ought to be the *canon* (that is to say, the rules) of Christian life. And because all rules of life which men are in conscience bound to observe are laws, the question of the Scripture is the question of what is law throughout Christendom, both natural and civil. For though it be not determined in Scripture what laws every Christian king shall constitute in his own dominions, yet it is determined what laws he shall not constitute. Seeing, therefore, I have already proved that sovereigns in their own dominions are the sole legislators, those books only are canonical (that is, law) in every nation which are established for such by the sovereign authority. (xxxiii.1)

Which books are to count as canonical scripture, and thus the word and law of God, and which can be safely ignored, turns out to be a question of “natural and civil” law. Hobbes’s logic here is elliptical, and this somewhat hard to follow. He holds both that scripture determines “what laws [the sovereign] shall not constitute” and that “sovereigns in their domains are the sole legislators.” These appear to be contradictory statements, since the sole legislator ceases to have complete authority when another source of power can check him. There are two ways in which Hobbes could account for this apparent contradiction. First, since the “question of Scripture” is, in part, the question of natural law, and since sovereigns, to the extent that they are limited, are limited only by the natural law, Hobbes has simply stated the position he has held all along—that “the law of nature...is a part of the civil law in all commonwealths of the world” (xxvi.8). The rest of the statement quoted above, which holds that sovereigns, as the sole legislators, can determine which books are canonical, follows from another of Hobbes’s earlier positions, namely that “obedience to the civil law is part also of the law of nature” (*ibid.*). If a book, which could or could not be scripture, is in conflict with the civil law, then believing it to be true would be against the natural law, because it would be to risk destabilizing the social contract, or at least irrationally making yourself an enemy of the sovereign.

Hobbes is aware of the potential problem with this argument. If the possible book of scripture is in reality the word of God, and if we disregard it in favor of the sovereign, do we not risk God's judgment? Shouldn't we obey the more powerful being, God, who we have learned only communicates to us through scripture, rather than our sovereign? Hobbes replies,

It is true that God is the sovereign of all sovereigns; and therefore, when he speaks to any subject, he ought to be obeyed, whatsoever any earthly potentate command to the contrary. But the question is not of obedience to God, but of *when* and *what* God hath said; which to subjects that have no supernatural revelation cannot be known but by that natural reason which guided them, for the obtaining of peace and justice, to obey the authority of their several commonwealths (that is to say, of their lawful sovereigns).  
(xxxiii.1)

The determination of which books are canonical is distinct from the question of obeying God, because until a book has been judged canonical, it cannot be considered the word of God. No subject, in other words, can disobey the sovereign on the basis of non-canonical scripture; it would be no more reasonable than to disobey on the basis any other profane book. The question of canonicity is the question of "*when* and *what* God hath said." The *when* question, asked of any particular book (*viz.* when was this written?), helps to answer the *what* question (*viz.* what has God said) by way of a *whether* question (*viz.* whether God is responsible for this particular book at all). As we shall see shortly, Hobbes spends much time on this when-question in what follows. Importantly, however, Hobbes's bottom line argument does not rely on the outcome of such an investigation, nor does it rely on such an investigation taking place. Rather, he argues that unless you have received special revelation informing you that a certain book is the infallible word of God (keeping in mind, of course, that special revelation has ceased until the Second Coming), then your primary duty to the natural law is obedience to your sovereign, since disobedience could be death. So, while it may be possible to determine whether this or that book is likely to be the word of God, and while Hobbes will pursue such arguments, his main contention is that

reason demands obedience to the sovereign first and foremost, advanced Biblical hermeneutics be damned. If the sovereign has a particular fancy for the Wisdom of Solomon, then that book will inevitably be the true word of God, unless or until God clearly and distinctly says otherwise (or, one supposes, until the sovereign changes his mind). Thus, Hobbes says, “According to this obligation, I can acknowledge no other books of the Old Testament to be Holy Scripture but those which have been commanded to be acknowledged for such by the authority of the Church of England” (xxxiii.1). This has the practical effect of eliminating from the canon those books traditionally called Apocrypha, including among others the Wisdom of Solomon and the books of Esdras. As we shall see, however, Hobbes does not leave these works entirely aside.

It should be stressed here that Hobbes’s view of how books become canonical bore particular relevance to the political situation in which he wrote. We are tipped off to this fact by his casual mention of the Church of England as the arbiter of canonicity for Englishmen like himself. Hobbes, of course, wrote *Leviathan* while living in France as a refugee from a war that concerned, to no small extent, the organization and power of the Church of England. The English religious and political situation in the early 1650’s was, and would remain, incredibly fluid.<sup>57</sup> In such a situation as this, Hobbes could have floated a number of reforms to the canon without offending the authorities in England, though offending English authorities in France was another matter. The work that Hobbes undertakes on the *when* and *what* questions, therefore, could conceivably have had a real effect, had his work been taken up by a sovereign with interest in reforming the Christian religion along political lines.

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<sup>57</sup> On this topic see J.P. Kenyon 1966, *The Stuart Constitution*, Chapter 9. Of particular interest is the Blasphemy Act of 1650, which “by outlawing only those who asserted that they or their leader was the reincarnation of Christ and those who taught that any sin was permitted to the Elect, legalized by implication any religious deviation less outrageous than these” (Kenyon 1966, pg. 330).

Having thus determined which books he is talking about when he discusses scripture, Hobbes turns our attention to the question of who wrote the books. This is a distinct question from the *when*, *what*, and *whether* questions alluded to above. The *who* question points directly to the question of prophetic mediation—who am I believing when I believe a particular book is inspired by God? Some answers to this question would be more satisfying than others. We would prefer that whoever relates the story of the Exodus do so knowing the facts of the matter, and the traditional ascription to Moses serves this purpose. A description of the reign of David or of Christ’s birth, could gain credence if reported by eye witnesses. The difficulty, according to Hobbes, is that we are not in possession of the relevant facts for making these determinations of authorship.

Who were the original writers of the several Books of Holy Scripture, has not been made evident by any sufficient testimony of other history (which is the only proof of matter of fact), nor can be by any arguments of natural reason (for reason serves only to convince the truth, not of fact, but of consequence). The light, therefore, that must guide us in this question must be that which is held out unto us from the books themselves; and this light, though it show us not the writer of every book, yet it is not unuseful to give us knowledge of the time wherein they were written. (xxxiii.3)

Reliable historical testimony would be the only way of determining who wrote each of these books, and in the absence of such testimony, the facts cannot be ascertained. Reason itself is powerless to solve this question, because reason cannot discover facts but can only determine the consequences of facts. Thus, in the absence of data, we are forced to look for clues in the texts themselves about their authors. This is how the *who* question is replaced by the *when* question. When a book was likely written can tell us something about who may have written it, and a lot about who did not.

Very often, Hobbes comes to the same conclusion with respect to each book—they were written well after the events described. He begins with the Pentateuch, the so-called “Books of

Moses.” Traditionally, these books are said to have been written by Moses himself. Hobbes starts by pointing out that simply being called the “Books of Moses” does not necessarily even imply that Moses wrote them, since it may only denote that he is their main subject. “For in titles of books, the subject is marked as often as the writer” (xxxiii.4). After making this general comment, and making clear that it applies to all of the Biblical books named after persons, Hobbes takes up the case of Mosaic authorship based on the texts themselves, and quickly adduces the prime evidence that at least not every line of the Pentateuch was written by Moses, since, speaking of Moses’s grave, Deuteronomy claims “that no man knoweth of his sepulchre to this day” and Hobbes adds “that is, to the day wherein those words were written,” *i.e.* “after his interment” (*ibid.*). At the very least, those words were not written by Moses, since they were clearly written long after his death, though how long is unclear. Hobbes adduces two more similar examples, one from Genesis where there appears to be an anachronism regarding the Canaanites, and one from Numbers in which a book of history is cited as the source for Moses’s actions, which would not be necessary were he the writer. Thus, Hobbes claims,

It is therefore sufficiently evident that the five Books of Moses were written after his time, though how long after it be not so manifest.  
But though Moses did not compile those books entirely, and in the form we have them, yet he wrote all that which he is there said to have written, as for example, the Volume of the Law, which is contained, as it seemeth, in the 11<sup>th</sup> of Deuteronomy, and the following chapters to the 27<sup>th</sup>....(xxxiii.4-5)

Hobbes’s procedure here is interesting. On the basis of three lines that are, granted, extremely likely to have been added long after the death of Moses, Hobbes concludes that all five books are the product of a later mind or minds, with the exception of one section of the fifth book. This section he holds to be genuine on the authority of the book itself, but since we know nothing of its later author(s), it is unclear why we should trust their ascription of the Volume of Law to Moses any more than we should trust the traditional ascription of the rest of the books to him.

With the question of who is responsible for the books unresolved, but the date of composition pushed forward, well after the Exodus and the founding of the nation under Moses, let alone after the creation and flood. The veracity of all that is described becomes more questionable as prophecy must be brought in as a mechanism to explain even mundane questions like the number of people killed by Moses after the golden calf incident (“about three thousand men” according to Exodus 32:28), unless we are to presume that Moses kept very detailed records which have not survived, while a precis of them, in the form of *Exodus*, has. Otherwise the question must recur, how do they, whoever they were, know it happened like that?

This question recurs again and again as Hobbes lists anachronistic passages from each of the historical books of the Bible. *Joshua* post-dates Joshua. *Judges* and *Ruth*, we are told, were written after the captivity, and thus very long after the purported events. The books of *Samuel*, *Kings*, and *Chronicles* are also assigned to the post-Exilic period by Hobbes. Summing up these cases, we are confronted with a single thought: what if the entire history of the Israelites before the captivity were somehow constructed, *i.e.* made up, in the post-Exilic period? The first books that Hobbes mentions without post-dating their authorship are those of Ezra and Nehemiah, *i.e.*, the men who led the people back to Jerusalem after the captivity ended. In their case he says,

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written certainly after their return from captivity, because their return, the re-edification of the walls and houses of Jerusalem, the renovation of the covenant, and the ordination of their policy are therein contained.  
(xxxiii.10)

Not only does Hobbes hold that the *when* of these books is correct, but he also grants the *who* as well. We might learn of Abraham, Joshua, and Deborah second hand, but we learn from Ezra and Nehemiah directly. This, of course, has no precise bearing on the status that their works should have as revelation, but it does speak to their authenticity and general reliability. From the



perspective of history, which as Hobbes has reminded us deals in facts, Ezra and Nehemiah are much more valuable than Genesis or Judges. We will return to these two men momentarily.

Hobbes is much less ruthless with respect to the remaining books. *Esther* he accepts as written by a near contemporary of hers. *Job* does not pretend to refer to any particular time, and Hobbes accepts it as “a treatise concerning a question in ancient time much disputed, *why wicked men have often prospered in this world, and good men have been afflicted...*” (xxxiii.12, emphasis in original). In chapter three of this dissertation, we saw that Hobbes made use of this ancient “treatise” when answering this same question—God afflicted Job by virtue of his power, not by virtue of his justice, or rather the affliction was just because of God’s power. The *Psalms* Hobbes is happy to ascribe for the most part to David, though it is unclear why he accepts this ascription, especially since he points to evidence that book did not take final form until the post-Exilic period. The collection of *Proverbs*, by contrast, is dated after the lives of the wise people quoted therein, such that Hobbes gives no credence to the book being in any way a creation of Solomon. However, Hobbes believes that “the books of Ecclesiastes and the Canticles have nothing that was not Solomon’s, except it be the titles or inscriptions” (xxxiii.15). Similarly, the prophets, with the exception of Jonah, are all held to be the authors of their own prophecies.

We can see a Hobbesian counter-canon taking shape, in which the probability of locating historical facts, which natural reason can use to deduce consequences, is privileged above other concerns. The books written around or after the captivity are more trustworthy because they report contemporary events and are, in some cases, authored by the historical actors themselves. Likewise, writings ascribed to ancient heroes, such as Moses, David, and Solomon, can be admitted as genuine, so long as they contain no anachronisms that taint their authenticity. Legal

codes and poems<sup>58</sup> tend to fit this bill better than histories do. Indeed, it is Biblical history which fares the worst, with almost all of it being assigned to later, less informed (unless divinely inspired) writers.

The emphasis on the post-Exilic origins of the Old Testament culminates in the following startling claim:

[I]t is manifest enough that the whole Scripture of the Old Testament was set forth (in the form we have it) after the return of the *Jews* from their captivity in *Babylon*, and before the time of *Ptolomaeus Philadelphus*, that caused it to be translated into *Greek* by seventy men....And if the books of the *Apocrypha* (which are recommended to us by the church, though not for canonical, yet for profitable books for our instruction) may in this point be credited, the Scripture was set forth in the form we have it in by *Ezra*....(xxxiii.19, emphases in original)

In the passage which Hobbes then quotes from 2 Esdras 14, Ezra entreats God to “send down the holy spirit into me and I shall write all that hath been done in the world since the beginning, which were written in thy law....” He then quotes a further verse in which God tells Ezra to “publish openly” what he has written. He then quickly ends his discussion of the Old Testament, leaving his reader to puzzle out the implications of this last statement. One possible interpretation is that Hobbes only means to imply that Ezra collected the various texts and put them in the form we currently have them. On this view, for example, he would have finalized the collection of *Proverbs*, decided on which literary pieces to include (*e.g. Job, Esther*), and perhaps even edited existing texts (partially conflicting) into what is now the Pentateuch. This is a basically minimalist view of what Hobbes is implying with respect to Ezra. The maximalist view would be that Hobbes is implying that Ezra literally constructed the Hebrew Bible, creating or codifying a religious tradition where none had previously existed. On this account, Moses, the

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<sup>58</sup> Hobbes says very little here about the major and minor prophets. He seems to accept their works as genuine, in the sense that someone named Ezekiel wrote this book, but he does not comment on their content beyond assigning the authors to time periods. Tentatively, we might suppose that, for Hobbes, they would also be fodder for a scientific-historical survey of Holy Scripture for the purposes of uncovering the facts of the past.

Egyptian Bondage, Abraham himself, all of these people and events may have sprung from the mind of Ezra.

This was not an unheard of view in Hobbes's era. We have already cited Noel Malcolm's study of the question "Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea" (Malcolm 2002, pp. 383-431), which details the history of this claim before Hobbes took hold of it.

Malcolm's essay adds an important point to this discussion. On Christmas Eve 1696, when Thomas Aikenhead was a 20-year-old student at Edinburgh University, he was convicted of blasphemy. His crime was to hold the following opinion, according to his indictment as quoted by Malcolm;

[He believes] the Old Testament [to be] Ezra's fables, by a profane allusion to Esop's fables, and saying that Ezra was the inventor thereof, and that being a cunning man he drew a number of Babylonian slaves to follow him, for whom he made up a feigned genealogie as if they had been descended from kings and princes in the land of Canaan... (Malcolm 2002, pg. 383)

Fifteen days after his conviction for holding these beliefs, Thomas was hanged. Clearly, Thomas went well beyond what Hobbes had written 45 years earlier, but only in adding detail. The essential idea is present in *Leviathan*. Hobbes is at least implying that Ezra is primarily responsible for what we think of as the Jewish religion, even if he does not put such a nefarious spin on it as young Aikenhead. This is clear when Hobbes reiterates his view later in Chapter xlii, writing,

[T]he Scriptures of the Old Testament which we have at this day were not canonical, nor a law unto the Jews, till the renovation of their covenant with God at their return from the captivity and restoration of their commonwealth under *Ezra*. But from that time forward they were accounted the law of the Jews, and for such translated into Greek by seventy elders of Judea, and put into the library of Ptolemy at Alexandria, and approved for the word of God. Now seeing Ezra was the high priest, and the high priest was their civil sovereign, it is manifest that the Scriptures were never made laws but by the sovereign civil power (xlii.41).

Ezra was the first to use his sovereign power to make the Hebrew Scriptures into a canon. Before him, there was no law based on the word of God. To recur to the language Hobbes used at xxxiii.1, Ezra could be said to have provided “the canon (that is to say, the rules) of [Jewish] life.” Before him, Hobbes would have us believe, no such thing existed. Hobbes adds that it is “manifest” that holy writ is never instituted in any other way than through sovereignty. The political foundation of the Jewish religion, according to Hobbes, is just one example of a broader phenomenon. We remember what Hobbes had said of Numa, Mohammed, and the founder of Peru, who took care that their religious regulations “not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some god or other spirit” and “secondly...had a care to make it believed that the same things were displeasing to the gods which were forbidden by the laws” (xii.20). From the perspective of history, which collects facts so that natural reason can deduce consequences, it appears that the genesis of the Jewish religion, and *a fortiori*, the genesis of Christianity, is no different than that of other religions. Thus, Hobbes is certainly treading a fine line with respect to his treatment of Ezra. Thomas Aikenhead later learned the price of crossing that line.

Hobbes is much more circumspect in his treatment of the New Testament. He accepts the traditional authorship and date of every book, saying that “all of them [had] seen our Savior or been his disciples, except St. Paul and St. Luke” (xxxiii.20). He does, however, add that the currently canonical list was not arrived at until much later and “cannot be derived from a higher time than that wherein the governors of the church collected, approved, and recommended them to us as the writings of those apostles and disciples under whose names they go” (*ibid.*). The last clause adds a note of skepticism, as though the writings may “go under” names other than those of the actual authors. However, Hobbes does not pursue this possibility. He instead discusses the

formation of the Christian canon as a whole, including the Old and New Testaments together, and implies a must heftier charge.

And this Council [of Laodicea] was held in the 364<sup>th</sup> year after Christ, at which time, though ambition had so far prevailed on the great doctors of the church as no more to esteem emperors, though Christian, for the shepherds of the people, but for sheep (and emperors not Christian, for wolves), and endeavoured to pass their doctrine, not for counsel or information, as preachers, but for laws, as absolute governors, and thought such frauds as tended to make the people the more obedient to Christian doctrine to be pious, yet I am persuaded they did not therefore falsify the Scriptures (though the copies of the books of the New Testament were in the hands only of the ecclesiastics), because if they had had an intention so to do, they would surely have made them more favourable to their power over Christian princes and civil sovereigns than they are. (xxxiii.20)

Already at this early time in church history, before the complete Christian canon had been established, the priests were working to increase their own power at the expense of the sovereign and at the expense of the people. They treated the sovereigns like “sheep” to be managed or “wolves” to be destroyed, rather than shepherds to be obeyed. They wished to make their doctrine law and make themselves “absolute governors.” They perpetrated frauds upon the people to make them more obedient. The only reason that Hobbes has to believe that they did not tamper with the Scriptures, despite the fact that they had the opportunity, is that he believes they could have done a better job had they really set about falsifying the record in order to aggrandize themselves at the expense of the sovereign. This makes Christianity altogether different than the religions of Numa, Ezra, and Mohammed, for each of these men framed their religion with the goal to “keep the people in obedience and peace” or to secure the “peace of the commonwealth” (xii.20-21). These religions were framed by sovereigns, who used them to establish themselves and their government on secure footing. Religion was an instrument of civil concord. The birth of institutional Christianity, on the other hand, is the story of a counter-state competing with the emperor for power and control over the minds of the people. Christianity, ever since it

established itself by fixing its canon, has been a danger to peace and order, rather than a method for achieving it. One of the goals of Hobbes's Biblical interpretation will be remedy this defect.

### *The Scope of Scripture*

Hobbes concludes his review of the books of the Bible with the following declaration: "I see not therefore any reason to doubt but that the Old and New Testaments, as we have them now, are the true registers of those things which were done and said by the prophets and apostles" (xxxiii.20). This is a strange claim, because he has provided ample reason to doubt that these documents are "true registers" of anything. The Old Testament was mostly written hundreds or thousands of years after the events it relates. The only genuine evidence is all of the post-Exilic period and points to a political, rather than a prophetic, basis for the religion of the Old Testament. Likewise, the Christian scriptures were kept in secret by ambitious and scheming churchmen for hundreds of years before they were published in canonical form, during which time they had motive and opportunity to make changes to the texts. To the extent that the *when* questions have helped us answer the *who* questions, we have learned that our mediators cannot be completely trusted to be delivering the *what* we are looking for, viz. the word of God. Their motives are too easy to question for us innocently to take their words to be the only pathway to salvation.

Hobbes has a response to this critique of Scripture, and it is, unsurprisingly, political. He says that "it is not the writer, but the authority of the church, that maketh a book canonical" (xxxiii.20). Simply put, it does not matter if Ezra wrote *Genesis* or if a 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop added a happy ending to the *Gospel of Mark*. A book becomes law because the duly constituted authority has proclaimed it to be such. The magic is not in *Mark*, it resides in the power of the sovereign to

make *Mark* canonical, and thereby to make him part of “the rules of Christian life.” As Hobbes made clear before embarking on this exercise, reason and natural law demand obedience to the sovereign in matters of canonicity, unless you have (impossibly) received special revelation regarding the authenticity (or lack thereof) of any book. So Hobbes could, for example, doubt whether the exodus from Egypt occurred as described in the Bible, but this can have no effect on whether he accepts *Exodus* as canon, since that is a question of obedience, not of opinion.

Despite the doubts that Hobbes has raised and the peremptory, political solution to them, Hobbes goes on to argue that the Bible fits together as a harmonious whole. He writes,

And although these books were written by divers men, yet it is manifest the writers were all endued with one and the same spirit, in that they conspire to one and same end, which is the setting forth of the rights of the kingdom of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. (xxxiii.20)

It may be doubted whether Hobbes intended a pun between “spirit” and “conspire” in this sentence. Given Hobbes’s views on the Biblical meaning of the word “spirit,”<sup>59</sup> it is certainly possible that the bond uniting the writers is more revolutionary and political than it is the result of “inspiration,” which word “is used in the Scripture metaphorically only” (xxxiv.25). Indeed, it appears that the end result of the entire work is primarily political.

In sum, the histories and the prophecies of the Old Testament, and the gospels and epistles of the New Testament, have one and the same scope, to convert men to the obedience of God: (1) in *Moses* and the Priests; (2) in the man *Christ*; and (3) in the *Apostles* and the successors to apostolic power. For these three at several times did represent the person of God... (xxxiii.20, emphases in original)

The “scope” of the Bible is, ultimately, obedience to duly constituted sovereign authority. By obeying our appointed ruler, be it Moses or Christ or even Oliver Cromwell, we show our obedience to God. The canon of the Bible, as duly enacted by the sovereign authority, has the

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<sup>59</sup> “[T]he proper signification of *spirit* in common speech, is either a subtle, fluid, and invisible body, or a ghost, or other idol or phantasm of the imagination. But for metaphorical significations, there be many...” (xxxiv.3).

effect of increasing obedience to the sovereign authority. We must notice that Hobbes makes this claim despite the politically destabilizing effect that early Christianity had on the Roman Empire. There is a distinction, it seems, between a sovereign Christianity, designed for civil tranquility, and a priestly Christianity, designed to overturn the civil order. Hobbes aims to support the first alternative and to undercut the second. His method for doing this will be the interpretation of Scripture.

### *The Authoritative Interpretation of Scripture*

Hobbes begins his discussion of the final topic of Chapter xxxiii by fully stating the difficulty that has been underlying his entire presentation.

It is a question much disputed between the divers sects of Christian religion: *From whence the Scriptures derive their authority?* Which question is also propounded sometimes in other terms, as *How we know them to be the word of God?* or *Why we believe them to be so?* (xxxiii.21)

The three questions as stated by Hobbes are not identical, though he treats them as though they are. The first asks a political question about the authority of Scripture. It could be rephrased as *why should I obey Scripture?* From what we have already seen, this question also has a political answer—a particular book of Scripture is authoritative because the sovereign has canonized it. Obedience to Scripture is an aspect of obedience to the sovereign. The second question is an epistemic question regarding the status of the Scriptures as true prophecy. Absent special revelation, this question would appear to have no answer at all. Hobbes's overview of the books has shown us who we may or may not believe the authors of the books to be, but it has not helped us to discern whether God had any hand in the affair at all. Ultimately, this question too must have a political answer, since in the absence of special revelation, one must subordinate his opinion to the opinion of my sovereign. At the very least, he must not act or speak in a way that



implies that the sovereign is incorrect. Finally, the third question is a psychological question asking about the foundations of belief in the revealed nature of Scripture, rather than the knowledge that it is revealed. Belief, as we saw in xxxii.4, cannot be compelled, because “opinion is not in our power to change.” Answering this question would depend on the sensations, memories, and imaginations of each individual who believes or does not believe. As Hobbes says, “Because some are moved to believe for one, and others for other reasons, there can be rendered no one general answer for them all” (xxxiii.21).

Thus, people *obey* Scripture as an aspect of obeying the sovereign power; they cannot *know* that Scripture is the word of God, and so they must acquiesce to the opinion of the sovereign; and, finally, they *believe* for any number of reasons, good or bad, and in any case necessarily, since belief is not voluntary. Thus, yet again, the balance lies with the political, which Hobbes immediately makes clear, writing, “The question truly stated is: *By what authority they [sc. the Scriptures] are made law?*” (*ibid.*). Hobbes’s answer to this question is more complex than we might guess, since he does not simply say “the sovereign’s authority.” Rather, he begins by pointing out that, insofar as Scripture is conformable to the natural law, it is already law for all rational beings. The natural law, discoverable by reason, but also present in the Scriptures, is eternal law and thus is not “made” by anyone. Thus, at least some teachings of Scripture are always law everywhere (including the natural law to seek peace). For those aspects of God’s law which are not included in the natural law, Hobbes has a quite different answer.

If they be made law by God himself, they are of the nature of written law, which are laws to them only to whom God hath so sufficiently published them as no man can excuse himself by saying he knew not they were his.

He, therefore, to whom God hath not supernaturally revealed that they are his, nor that those that published them were sent by him, is not obliged to obey them by any authority but by his whose commands have already the force of laws (that is to say, by any other authority than that of the commonwealth, residing in the sovereign, who only has the legislative power). (xxxiii.23-24)

God is still subject to the same requirements that were laid out in Chapter xxxi (see chapter three of this dissertation). He must duly promulgate his positive law for it to be binding. Deputizing agents, such as prophets, to spread your law does not suffice to make it mandatory, unless all men could recognize that God had authorized them. As the stories Hobbes cited from 1 Kings made clear, it is impossible, even on the Bible's own terms, to arrive at such clear and distinct knowledge of God's messengers. Thus, those aspects of God's law which are not included in the natural law, and thus are not discoverable by unaided reason, are also not obligatory unless the sovereign, who must be obeyed according to natural law, commands these divine laws as part of civil law.

Hobbes has one last surprise for the reader. According to him, the question of the authority of Scripture boils down to this: "Whether Christian kings and the sovereign assemblies of Christian commonwealths be absolute in their own territories, immediately under God, or subject to one vicar of Christ, constituted over the universal church, to be judged, condemned, deposed, and put to death, as he shall think expedient or necessary for the common good? (xxxiii.24). The ultimate question is a political question regarding who should rule. Should kings be free to make all laws for their subjects or will the Pope have control over divine positive law, which thus may easily conflict with the civil law? This is again the distinction between sovereign Christianity, designed for peace, and priestly Christianity, designed for conflict. According to Hobbes, the question of Scriptural interpretation will be settled by the question of legal authority. "For whosoever hath a lawful power over any writing, to make it law, hath the power also to approve or disapprove the interpretation of the same" (xxxiii.25). The epistemological question—whether the Scriptures are the inspired word of God—cannot be answered by men. The only path to uniformity and peace with regard to this issue, according to Hobbes, is for a

power to decide on an interpretation, and for others to be obedient to that interpretation. The only question that remains is a political one—who has the authority to set church doctrine, the sovereign or a supra-political, universal church. Once the question of rule is answered, the work of obedience can start, and the life of peace and stability can begin, if only everyone can be taught to obediently accept rule. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Hobbes employs Scripture in his project of making Christianity safe for politics by providing a reading of Scripture that emphasizes and privileges sovereignty rather than the priesthood.

## Chapter Six: The Sovereign Prophet

In this final chapter, I will consider in detail the political expression of Hobbes's teaching on prophecy. Much of the important ground has been covered previously in this dissertation. We have seen how prophecy constitutes a political problem for Hobbes, since our obedience to God might override our obedience to the sovereign, undermining the social contract that puts an end to the war of all against all. We have already seen how Hobbes has been unable to show the impossibility of prophecy on epistemological (see chapter 2) and ontological (see chapter 3) grounds. The transcendent nature of the otherworldly God confounds our reason, frustrates our sense of justice, and may inspire us with awful dread. As unpalatable as reason has made this God, by chewing up what is better swallowed whole (xxxii.3), Hobbes has been unable to prove that this being could not reach into our world to communicate directly to one of his creatures. Hobbes has given us reasons, based on human psychology, to disbelieve that any particular person has been so chosen, but there are no scientific grounds upon which to confirm or deny any attribute of God's being. In the absence of philosophy and science, which cannot cognize God (*DCr* i.8), Hobbes has relied on two allied strategies for solving the political problem posed by prophecy. First, Hobbes has argued that prophecy has ceased since the Pentecost and shall not return until the Second Coming. Thus, the only access we have to the word of God is through Scripture. Second, therefore, Hobbes has begun to pursue a dual-pronged strategy with respect to Scripture. On the one hand, Hobbes has argued that nothing in God's word can contradict natural reason, and thus that anything which seems to do so must be "wisely interpreted" to eliminate the contradiction. On the other hand, he has argued that Scripture itself is only authoritative to the extent that the sovereign has made it canonical. Scripture becomes the word of God when the sovereign declares it as such. Because we have no knowledge of whether a particular book of

Scripture is the true word of God, we must obey the sovereign's judgment in this regard, not because the sovereign has greater supernatural knowledge, but because we have already contracted to obey him in all things that are not contrary to the natural law. Thus, according to Hobbes, it is ultimately the sovereign who determines both what should count as Scripture and how that Scripture should be interpreted. However, since the sovereign may not have the time to form opinions on each of the many Scriptural controversies, Hobbes has provided a shortcut by offering interpretations designed to encourage subjects to obedience and to stimulate order and concord, rather than strife and rebellions. Hobbes has shown us that Christianity has tendencies toward these latter vices (see chapter five), but the sovereign can protect against the more virulent forms of religion if he subscribes to Hobbes's rational and political interpretation of the Bible.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will concentrate on the way in which Hobbes reinterprets Scripture according to natural reason in order to further his political goals. In particular, I will focus on the way in which he interprets passages of the Bible dealing with prophecy itself in Chapters xxxiv and xxxv. Hobbes has discussed prophecy many times before in *Leviathan*, as we have seen, but the Bible, he has told us, is the only access that men might have to the word of God. If the Bible is, as Hobbes has claimed, the only source of the prophetic word of God, then we should expect that it would deliver the final word on prophecy. That said, we have reason to believe that Hobbes does not expect to find the final truth regarding prophecy in the Bible. Rather by wisely and authoritatively interpreting the most authoritative text, Hobbes will seek to solidify his own political understanding of prophecy. Hobbes covers this ground twice in what follows. First, he discusses inspiration in Chapter xxxiv, and then he discusses prophecy itself in Chapter xxxv. I will discuss each section in turn.

## *The Spirit of God*

Following upon his discussion of Scripture in Chapter xxxiii, Hobbes takes up the meaning of the words *spirit*, *angel*, and *inspiration* in the Bible. The great problem, the barrier to our right understanding of scripture, according to Hobbes, is the way in which the word *spirit* has been understood previously. Spirit, in Scholastic thought, meant *incorporeal substance*, i.e. a thing without body.<sup>60</sup> Hobbes takes issue with this notion, because *substance* and *body*, he says, mean exactly the same thing. An incorporeal substance is a bodiless body, which is an absurdity. This is a fact of natural reason, based upon the structure of reality itself. Hobbes writes,

The word *body*, in the most general acceptation, signifieth that which filleth or occupieth some certain room or imagined place, and dependeth not on the imagination, but is a real part of what we call the *universe*. For the *universe*, being the aggregate of all bodies, there is no real part thereof that is not also a *body*, nor anything properly a *body* which is not also part of (that aggregate of all *bodies*) the *universe*. (xxxiv.2)

This argument has come up before (see chapter 3), in the context of God's relationship to the world. In that context, we considered Hobbes's similar statement at xlv.15: "Every part of the universe is a body, and that which is not a body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing (and consequently, nowhere)." God, we have learned is not a body, in part because he is no part of the universe, in part because being a body would imply limitations that would violate his infinity. Believing in a being that is not a body led many thinkers, including the Scholastics, to develop an ontology that left room for incorporeal substances like angels, souls, and God himself. Assuming that they exist, and thus are substances, but that they are not bodies made of matter, they must be incorporeal substances.

Hobbes argues that we led into this error by certain "idols of the brain which represent bodies to us where they are not (as in a looking-glass, in a dream, or to a distempered brain

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<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Aquinas 1948, *Summa Theologica*, Pt.1, Q.50, A.1 (on the incorporeal substance of angels) and cf. Pt. 1, Q.75, A. 7 (on whether the soul is of the same species as an angel).

waking)...” (xxxiv.3). Once these idols are conquered, we come to see the true signification of the word *spirit*, which for Hobbes is always metaphorical, unless it describes an invisible, fluid body (like wind) or an idol of the mind (like a ghost). He then shows in seven ways how the Bible never uses the word in any other way; it does not speak of spirit as the schoolmen and priests do. In this first place, the “Spirit of God” can refer to breath or wind. In Genesis 1:2, “The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” This, according to the principles Hobbes has previously put forth, must be meant metaphorically, because it is a point of the proper worship of God not to attribute movement (nor rest) to him (xxxi.23). Indeed, Hobbes says, “Here, if by the *Spirit of God* be meant God himself, then is motion attributed to God, and consequently place, which are intelligible only of bodies, and not of substances incorporeal...” (xxxiv.5). What must be noticed here is that Hobbes essentially admits that God must be an incorporeal substance. He does this despite having just said that the very notion destroys itself, since the two terms are opposites. Later, in Chapter xlvi, Hobbes makes this point more explicitly and also clarifies it, writing,

But for spirits, they call them incorporeal, which is a name of more honour, and may therefore with more piety be attributed to God himself, in whom we consider not what attribute expresseth best his nature, which is incomprehensible, but what best expresseth our desire to honour him. (xlvi.15)

As we saw in chapter three, God’s existence is not comprehensible to the human mind. His infinity and otherworldliness render him hidden and alien. Hobbes here says that God deserves the name of incorporeal substance, because the people who use that term mean it as a sort of ontological compliment, incorporeal substances being deemed purer and more rational. Better to reserve so lofty and abstract a notion for the lofty and abstract God, than to waste it on a ghoul in

the cemetery.<sup>61</sup> Since all positive attributes which are not logically contrary to God's nature may be attributed him without a theoretical problem arising, it makes sense that an honorific like "incorporeal substance" could be added to the list. Again, Hobbes absolutely denies that such beings exist in the universe (in which everything is a body in motion), but God is not part of the universe and is not a body. Thus, the ontological mystery of God is an unshakable feature of Hobbes's philosophy. Even if beings like God cannot exist in the universe that is still no proof that no such being exists.

The second and third metaphorical significations of "spirit" are related. The second is that "extraordinary" gifts of "wisdom and understanding" are often referred to as being "filled with the spirit" (xxxiv.6). This is one of the senses in which men are said to be prophets, as we can see from the examples Hobbes uses. Joseph, Moses, and Jesus are the three men said to have the Spirit of God in this sense. The wisdom displayed by each of these men moved sovereigns and nations, but Hobbes makes it a point to naturalize this "gift" as a "grace" rather than as anything resembling inspiration. He says, "Where manifestly is meant [*sc.* by Spirit of the Lord, spirit of wisdom and understanding, spirit of counsel and fortitude, etc.], not so many ghosts, but so many eminent *graces* that God would give him" (xxxiv.6, emphasis in original). Surpassing wisdom is evidence of great luck, or perhaps even of God's favor, but it is not evidence of God moving within you or speaking through you.

The third and related metaphorical use of spirit is to describe extremely strong affections (in the sense of being affected by something), such as "extraordinary zeal and courage in the

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<sup>61</sup> Earlier in the book, Hobbes makes a similar point, but in that case, recommends more strongly against calling God an incorporeal substance. "...men that by their own meditation arrive to the acknowledgement of one infinite, omnipotent, and eternal God, choose rather to confess he is incomprehensible, and above their understanding, than to define his nature by *spirit incorporeal*, and then confess their definition to be unintelligible; or if they give him such a title, it is not *dogmatically*, with the intention to make the divine matters understood, but *piously*, to honour him with attributes of significations as remote as they can from the grossness of bodies visible." (xii.7)



defense of God's people," as well as "zeal to punish" and "zeal" to sing praises to God (xxxiv.7). In this category, we find a different Biblical type, not the prophet, but rather the general—Othniel, Gideon, Jephtha, Sampson (all from *Judges*), and Saul (the loan king on the list). Whereas all of the Judges are grouped together as defenders of God's people, Saul is shown being zealous in two different ways. In the first instance, Saul is incensed at the behavior of an enemy king, who has offered to make a covenant with a city he is besieging on the condition that "I may thrust out all your right eyes, and lay it for a reproach against all Israel" (KLV, 1 Sam 11:2). After Saul is seized by the Spirit of God, *i.e.* his zealous anger, he marches against the enemy, slays and scatters them, and then, crucially, retires from the field in order to be newly crowned king. In this case, his zealous anger, or the way he reacted to it, earned Saul a kingdom. If it were literally the Spirit of God moving within him, one might think that God had something to do with his victory and coronation. But with Hobbes's interpretive help, we see that knowing when to channel passion into quick action can yield extraordinary political success. The second story of Saul is a very different account. In it, King Saul has been attempting to capture and kill the young upstart David, who has escaped and is in hiding with the prophet Samuel. Saul learns of David's hiding place and three times sends a group of messengers to fetch David, but each time the messengers "saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Samuel standing as appointed over them, [and then] the Spirit of God was upon the messengers of Saul, and they also prophesied" (KJV, 1 Sam 19:20). By some irresistible magic, Samuel, David, and the other assembled prophets, are able to cause men to forget their business and instead fall into a beatific frenzy. King Saul, determined to catch and kill David, goes himself to the gathering of prophets.

And he went thither...and the Spirit of God was upon him also, and he went on, and prophesied, until he came to [where they were]. And he stripped off his clothes also, and prophesied before Samuel in like manner, and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Wherefore they say, Is Saul also among the prophets? (*ibid.* 19:23-24)

Whereas in the first case, the Spirit of God moved him to his greatest triumph, in this second case it debases him. This case is also much harder to naturalize in the manner that Hobbes would like. While in the first case, Saul might have simply acted on the basis of his passions, but with good political instinct, in this second case, the three groups of messengers who have already been snared point to some other operation at work. Hobbes maintains that this story is not to be explained “a ghost” invading Saul’s body, and that may well be. Surely something affected Saul a great deal, something which also affected his messengers. However this may be, we have surely learned that, unlike the case of wisdom and understanding, the case of extraordinary affections is a mixed bag. The political men who are prone to these affections may be able to turn them to advantage, as Saul did his anger, but they may also be captivated and shamed by their affections, like King Saul was by his overwhelming desire to prophesy.

In the fourth place, Hobbes considers the signification of spirit in the case of “the gift of Prediction by Dreams and Visions.” Here Hobbes argues that prophets speak by “special grace of prediction,” as though prophets were just naturally good guessers,<sup>62</sup> rather than being inspired by God literally moving within them, like some ghost (xxxiv.8). Rather, their knowledge comes through some “supernatural dream or vision.” This is very surprising to hear given that Hobbes has, multiple times now, explained why dreams and visions are not trustworthy sources of revelation (see ii.7-8; xxxii.6). To deny that the Spirit of God is moving within these dreamers is one step in naturalization, but the further step, that nothing supernatural here is going on at all, has already been taken multiple times by Hobbes. It should be mentioned that Hobbes here reminds us of the story of Micaiah among the 400 false prophets from 1 Kings 22. One false

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<sup>62</sup> “For the foresight of things to come, which is providence, belongs only to him by whose will they are to come. From him only, and supernaturally, proceeds prophecy. The best prophet is naturally the best guesser; and the best guesser, he that is most versed and studied in the matters he guesses at, for he hath most signs to guess by” (iii.7).

prophet asks him, “Which way went the Spirit of the Lord from me to speak to thee?” Hobbes denies that there is any ghostly spirit that is wondering from person to person whispering truths or lies. However, and inconveniently for Hobbes, 1 Kings 22 describes exactly such a being, the lying spirit, who is personified and speaks like a courtier. The Bible does not reject the existence of such spirits. Hobbes must read them as metaphorical so as to make the Bible conform to reason, but this involves denying basic elements of simple stories, such as that of Micaiah. We will shortly see additional examples of this same interpretive problem for Hobbes.

The fifth metaphorical use of the Spirit of God is when it is used to signify life. Here Hobbes takes “spirit” in a literal sense and speaks of “the breath of life” which first animated man. Hobbes wants to drain this idea of all mystical significance. God has not blown a spirit into us, as though he were soulless, dead thing until God puffed into our nostrils and stirred us up. When men speak of the Spirit in this way, according to Hobbes, they simply mean to say that a thing is alive. There is no hocus pocus involved. Just because a person is alive does not mean that “any ghost or incorporeal substance entered into and possessed his body” (xxxiv.10). Humans, like all things, are bodies. We are living bodies, it is true, but that life is not provided by a different sort of entity, dwelling within us. This is shown most readily by Hobbes’s statement on the soul in Chapter xlv:

For supposing that when a man dies, there remaineth nothing of him but his carcass, cannot God, that raised inanimated dust and clay into a living creature by his word, easily raise a dead carcass to life again, and continue him alive forever, or make him die again, by another word?

The *soul*, in Scripture, signifieth always either the life or the living creature; and the body and soul jointly, the *body alive*. . . . [If] by soul were meant a *substance incorporeal*, with an existence separated from the body, it might as well be inferred of any other living creature as of man. (xlv.15)

The only reason he does not deny the existence of the soul altogether, is that he has redefined it to mean simply “life” or “alive.” The Christian notion of the immortal soul does not enter into

Hobbes's philosophy. God may miraculously cause you to live forever, but you will have to take your body with you, because that is the only life there is. For Hobbes, there is no ghost, there is only the machine.

The sixth metaphorical use of spirit involves a story from the Numbers 11 that will come up again. Here, Hobbes's primary concern is that God is said to "take of the Spirit which is upon" Moses and "put it upon" seventy elders, which certainly makes it sound as though Spirit is measured in quantity, like a substance. Hobbes interprets the passage in this way: "[T]hey had received authority so to do, and prophesied according to the mind of Moses, that is to say, by a *spirit* or *authority* subordinate to his own" (xxxiv.11, emphasis in original). Hobbes's passive voice is interesting, because it provokes the question, who authorized them to prophesy as Moses's subordinates? According to Numbers, it was God who "put" the spirit on them, so it would seem that he did the authorizing. But Hobbes's language, while it leaves this possibility open, certainly emphasizes Moses much more than it does God. The authority of these prophets is subordinate to Moses's authority. It seems reasonable that Moses himself authorized his deputies and representatives. This impression is heightened when we notice, in Numbers 11, the impetus for drafting the seventy deputies came from Moses, who complained bitterly of being overworked, ending his rant saying, "And if thou deal thus with me, kill me, I pray thee, out of hand, if I have found favor in thy sight; and let me not see my wretchedness" (KJV, Num. 11:15). God is said to do the actual spirit juggling, but the idea of getting some extra help was very clearly authorized by Moses. Hobbes's version of the story simply removes God from the story, who was mostly a sounding board and unnecessary middle-man in the transaction.

The seventh metaphorical use of spirit, according to Hobbes, is when it is used to refer to an "aerial body" (xxxiv.15). Here, Hobbes takes greater leaps toward naturalizing Scripture. He

begins by discussing two events in which Jesus appeared to be a “Spirit” to his disciples. The first is the famous story of Jesus walking on water, told in the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark. Matthew tells it this way:

And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. (KJV, Matt. 14:25-26)

What does Hobbes say about this story? He says that “the disciples of Christ, seeing him walking upon the sea, supposed him to be a *Spirit*, meaning thereby an aerial *body*, and not a phantasm” (xxxiv.15). To be clear about terms, by an “aerial body,” Hobbes means a body “real and substantial” but “subtle,” “thin,” and even “invisible” (*ibid.*). Such a body can be easily confused for an incorporeal substance, because of its wispy quality, but it is embodied and has dimension—it is a real thing in the world, unlike a ghost. Hobbes, then, is claiming that when the disciples saw Jesus waking on the sea and, in a panic, yelled “Spirit!” that what they *meant* to imply was that a subtle, but utterly real entity, which is in no way ghoulish, was heading right for them. Hobbes’s interpretation is psychologically wrong; the disciples were frightened because they thought Jesus was a ghost.

The same holds true of Hobbes’s second citation, to the Gospel of Luke. This scene takes place after the resurrection of Jesus, while he is still making himself known again to his disciples. As his disciples talk one day about the various Jesus sightings that have occurred, Jesus suddenly appears.

And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. (KJV, Luke 24:36-37)

Hobbes makes the same claim in this instance, holding that the disciples understood themselves to be reporting an aerial body sighting, whereas they are very clearly of the opinion that they are

seeing a ghost. Thus, we yet again see an example of Hobbes having to do violence to the meaning of a Biblical story<sup>63</sup> in order to naturalize its meaning. Hobbes has gone so far as to decide that having any Biblical character believe in ghosts is such an affront to reason that it must be interpreted away. Beyond being an affront to reason, it is also an occasion for the ignorant and timorous to learn to believe in and fear ghosts, which Hobbes has made clear repeatedly is bad for social order (see, *e.g.* ii.8).

Hobbes also emphasizes here what will become his next topic, the being of angels. We are told that angels are bodies, raised up God supernaturally to do his bidding. Such *ad hoc* minions, once made “are substances, endued with dimensions, and take up room, and can be moved from place to place, which is peculiar to bodies” (xxxiv.15). Hobbes has yet again brought us back to the distinction between worldly things, which must be bodies, and otherworldly entities, which must not be bodies. Hobbes derides the notion of incorporeal angels and ghosts because they would not be able to move or be in a place, being incorporeal. He says, “therefore are not ghosts incorporeal (that is to say, ghosts that are in *no place*; that is to say, that are *nowhere*; that is to say, that seeming to be *somewhat*, are *nothing*)” (xxxiv.15). Hobbes has already described the otherworldly God as nowhere and nothing (see chapter three), and he has even suggested that “incorporeal substance” may be a reasonable appellation for such a being, so long as we don’t pretend to know what it means and only understand it as an honorable trait to possess. However, despite the fact that Hobbes cannot disprove the notion that such a being exists, as has admitted as much, he can attempt to laugh it out of court. He can compare God to a ghoul and hope that people will give up belief in shapeless, placeless beings, but he cannot

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<sup>63</sup> After all, that the disciples were often frightened is a crucial fact of the Gospels, especially Mark. On this point, see the original ending to Mark at 16:5.

provide a reasoned account of *why* a person should not accept the existence of such a being. As Strauss wrote,

If God is omnipotent and incomprehensible, one can indeed, prove that human *statements* about God's activity are *absurd*, but one can never refute the claim that God's *activity* is carried out in a manner fully *incomprehensible* to man, that God therefore in particular brings forth, in a fully incomprehensible, supernatural manner, dreams and visions that, in contrast to the natural products of the imagination, have as their purpose and content the divine guidance of man. In other words, as long as the presupposition of the incomprehensible omnipotence of God, as long as the possibility of miracles is not shaken, the impossibility of prophecy and revelation has not been proven. (Strauss 2011, pg. 85, emphases in original)

Thus Hobbes has been unable to extricate himself from this problem. Revelation cannot be disproven, it can only be laughed at and undercut. We will see further examples of this strategy in the next section. We must remember, however, that Hobbes does not undercut revelation out of simple spite or hatred of religion. Rather, Hobbes seeks to discourage belief in revelation in order to encourage a more salutary belief, which I will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

### *Angels and Inspiration*

When prophets in the Bible speak of their moments of prophecy, they often tell of being visited by God's angels. According to Hobbes, an angel is "anything that makes known his extraordinary presence, that is to say, the extraordinary manifestation of his power, *especially by a dream or vision*" (xxxiv.16, emphasis added). The prophets are correct to say that they see angels, but they do not clearly specify what they mean by that. Hobbes intends to clarify this.

That [angels] are spirits is often repeated; but by the name of spirit is signified...the images that rise in the fancy of dreams and visions, which are not real substances, nor last any longer than the dream or vision they appear in; which apparitions, though no real substances, but accidents of the brain, yet when God raiseth them supernaturally, to signify his will, they are not improperly termed God's messengers (that is to say, his *angels*). (xxxiv.17).

Man is prone to create visions for himself out of his ignorance. God, according to Hobbes, takes advantage of this trait in man to communicate his will to some of them in dreams and visions. The angels men see are not real, but “some image raised (supernaturally) in the fancy, to signify the presence of God in the execution of some supernatural work” (xxxiv.19). In the same way we create idols for ourselves, God creates angels in our brains so that his work may be done. Hobbes claims that the prophets are aware of this fact, and he gives examples to show this. One which seems convincing at first is his discussion of Lot, who, when two angels appear to him, addresses them as one man, thus showing that he is aware he is really speaking to God alone (xxxiv.20, citing Gen. 19:18). This appears compelling until one checks Hobbes’s citation. When one does, he finds that, while Lot is certain they are angels, he is not certain they are images raised supernaturally in his fancy. Indeed, he offers to wash their feet, he feeds them (“and they did eat”), and to top it all off, the men of Sodom wish desperately to “know them” (Gen. 19:2-5). Far from being the private fancy of Lot, they are fancied quite publicly by an entire city. Again, Hobbes shows us by his own example that his theory is suspect. This is not what the Bible teaches; this is what Hobbes teaches. It is only Hobbes, not scripture, who teaches that God’s angels are private illusions. This does not stop Hobbes from drawing his desired conclusion regarding inspiration, of course. Inspiration “is used in the Scripture metaphorically only” (xxxiv.25). The Holy Spirit does not move in anyone; that is only a manner of speaking. Prophecy takes place only in supernatural dreams and visions – there is no more direct or certain knowledge of God’s will, even in the Bible itself.



## *The Sovereign Prophet*

What then is the status of these dreams and visions? To see this, I will now turn to Hobbes's discussion of prophets in scripture. Prophets, according to Hobbes's scripture, are those who either speak to men for God or to God for men. How is it, Hobbes asks, that God speaks to these prophetic men? How can he be said to speak at all, given that he has no mouth and no tongue? Here Hobbes quotes David, "Shall he that made the eye not see? or he that made the ear not hear?" (xxxvi.9, quoting Psalm 94:9). God made the mouth and the tongue; may he not speak? Hobbes's reply to this is priceless:

But if it were to be taken in the strict and proper sense, one might argue from his making of all other parts of man's body that he had also the same use of them which we have; which would be many of them so uncomely as it would be the greatest contumely in the world to ascribe them to him. (xxxvi.9).

Man's body does many things, and many of these things are not so noble as vision and speech.<sup>64</sup>

I will leave the reader to his own imagination to fill in examples, but it is clear that Hobbes's argument has some force. It is not so clear, however, that this argument need have been made at all. He need not have quoted David, but he did. Perhaps this is how Hobbes would like us to think of God, for this notion sticks with one, after thinking it through, much longer than the argument surrounding it remains important to the work as a whole.

Hobbes next argues, as he has before, that God "speaks" to prophets through dreams and visions. God speaks to these men either in the fancied form of angels, as he had to Lot, or by other forms in dreams (xxxvi.10). Hobbes excepts Moses from this rule, for God spoke to him "in a more extraordinary manner." To Moses, God speaks "in such a manner as a man speaketh

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<sup>64</sup> Compare xlv.33, where Hobbes has this to say regarding the chastity of the priesthood: "If the law were made because the use of wives is incontinence, and contrary to chastity, then all marriage is vice; if because it is a thing too impure and unclean for a man consecrated to God, much more should other natural, necessary, and daily works, which all men do, render men unworthy to be priests, because they are more unclean."

to his friend” (xxxvi.11). He also spoke in this way to the high priests that followed Moses, those who were allowed into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple, and to the pious kings that followed them. These prophets are supreme prophets, and all others are subordinate.

Supreme were, first, Moses, and after him, the high-priests, every one for his time, as long as the priesthood was royal. And after the people of the Jews had rejected God, that he should reign over them, those kings which submitted themselves to God’s government were also his chief prophets, and the high priest’s office became ministerial. ... Therefore, Moses and the high priests and the pious kings, who enquired of God on all extraordinary occasions how they were to carry themselves, or what event they were to have, were all sovereign prophets (xxxvi.13).

Those prophets to whom God speaks as a friend are sovereigns among prophets. This is why Moses is able to order death to any prophet that disobeys his word. Moses, being first among sovereign prophets, has established the forms of religious government for all those sovereigns that follow him. He is the lawgiver, the founder of the religious constitution, who compacted with the Israelites at Sinai and made them a people under his rule. All other prophets merely reiterate that first prophecy; they merely teach the people what Moses already taught. “When, therefore, a prophet is said to speak in the spirit, or by the spirit of God, we are to understand no more but that he speaks according to God’s will, declared by the supreme prophet” (xxxvi.15). Prophecy has been demystified and explained; to prophesy is to agree with the sovereign.

Hobbes illustrates this conclusion by once again relating a story from the eleventh chapter of the book of Numbers, but this time from another angle. Once in the camp of the Israelites, God “took of the spirit that was upon Moses, and gave it to seventy elders.” These seventy men then had the gift of prophecy. Seeing this, and not knowing that Moses was aware of the goings on, Jacob ran to tell Moses that these others were prophesying and should be forbidden from it. Moses then told Jacob not to be jealous on his account. Hobbes interprets this story in the following manner:

By which it is manifest, first, that their prophesying to the people was subservient and subordinate to the prophesying of Moses, for that God took of the spirit of Moses to put upon them, so that they prophesied as Moses would have them; otherwise they had not been suffered to prophesy at all.... Secondly, that the spirit of God in that place signifieth nothing but the mind and disposition to obey and assist Moses in the administration of the government. (xxxvi.16).

The prophets that existed contemporaneously to Moses were ministers to his sovereign power.

Just as a king needs ministers to help him govern his kingdom (xxiii.2-3), so too did Moses need help to govern the Israelites. Likewise, the high priests and kings that followed Moses may have had use of ministers in their government, but none of these ministers could be said to overrule the sovereign prophet of the time.

I believe I have begun to show what Hobbes is doing in this third part of his work. By wisely and learnedly interpreting scripture, Hobbes has rewritten it in his own image, creating a Leviathan in Moses. He goes still further. It is the duty of all Christian subjects to examine the teachings of any pretended prophet and decide whether it coincides with what the sovereign prophet has taught. If not, they have a duty to report this person to the sovereign, just as Jacob reported the men to Moses, and to stand by his judgment as to whether the prophecy is genuine or not.

For when Christian men take not their Christian sovereign for God's prophet, they must either take their own dreams for the prophecy they mean to be governed by, and the tumor of the own hearts for the Spirit of God, or they must suffer themselves to be led by some strange prince or by some of their fellow subjects that can bewitch them, by slander of the government, into rebellion (without other miracle to confirm their calling than sometimes an extraordinary success and impunity), and by this means destroying all laws, both human and divine, reduce all order, government, and society to the first chaos of violence and civil war. (xxxvi.20).

The sovereign, the ruler of the state, is the contemporary Moses. No man may prophesy against him and be suffered to live, for that would be to commit not only treason but also blasphemy.

Hobbes presents this teaching not as his own but as the authentic Biblical teaching regarding prophecy.

### *Conclusion*

Hobbes's ultimate concern in *Leviathan*, unlike in *De Corpore* for example, is political. Hobbes attempts to construct a stable political order, in the first half of the book, on the basis of natural reason alone, but he is frustrated in this attempt by the ever-present seeds of religious feeling and superstition. Natural reason, while it may render religious faith questionable, can never fully uproot it from the human heart. This is not simply because most humans lack the science of causation which provides a sufficient reason for all phenomena in the world; it is also because, even possessing such a science, no argument exists which can overcome the Calvinist's insistence that faith is the basis for miracles and not vice versa. Hobbes must therefore coopt religion, since he cannot replace it. Religion, and in particular Christianity with its transpolitical orientation, is an ever-present danger to the commonwealth, since it taps into longings and fears related to our limited understanding of the eternal, which longings and fears always contain the potential for disobedience, civil strife, and the return of the war of all against all. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss writes,

If we may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental political fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or the safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes. (Strauss 1953, pp. 181f.).

This appears to be true, and yet the case is very complicated. For we have seen that the duty that each subject has to obedience may override his own notions of piety, justice, and honor. Hobbes leaves us free to *think* whatever we wish, but he does not leave us free to *act* or *speak* however we might wish. This is not inconsistent with Strauss's statement. This is because Hobbes's

conception of rights is very different from a notion that would promote, for example, wide toleration of religious difference. Hobbes does not give us a modern doctrine of the rights of man and citizen. Rather, Hobbes's doctrine of rights is designed to persuade men to voluntarily limit their own rights in the name of the natural law of self-preservation, *viz.* in the name of reason.

The rights of man that constitute "the fundamental political fact" for Hobbes are also, at the same time, rights that cannot remain unimpaired within a political order (unless, of course, one happens to be the sovereign). The fundamental political fact of rights entails that, fundamentally speaking, there is no such thing as politics at all, but rather there is a state of nature in which all may enslave or kill all without sinning. It is the fact that politics is seen as unnatural (unlike the unexpugnable seeds of religion, which are natural), which constitutes the major break with the ancient tradition of political philosophy (*ibid.*, pg. 169). That politics is based on natural right, in Hobbes's sense of the term, means that it is based on the utterly *asocial* nature of man, and therefore must be the work of rational construction rather than a spontaneous growth of nature. This system is liberal in the sense that the primacy of individuals, rather than peoples, is recognized, but ultimately this individualism is a political problem as much as it is a theoretical advance. For how can we temper the natural vain-glory of mankind—how can we convince people that God is not speaking to them, nor to their relations or their pastors?

Hobbes's illiberal notion of obedience, which is described in the terms of natural law and in the field of religion is identical to his Erastianism, is the only basis upon which he can see to construct a political order in which the rights of each person to the enjoyment of good things (even if not "all" of the good things) is secured. For the tragedy of the state of nature is that natural right is frustrated, since one man's right to all good things impedes another's identical right. The civil state artificially maintains this natural equality by subjecting all citizens to the

same limitations, which limitations are guarded by the natural law requiring obedience. Thus, from obedience flows all of the good things which we might ever get and enjoy securely. Hobbes is banking on the idea that the secure possession of goods, impossible in the state of nature, but possible when one is obedient to the sovereign, will outweigh those parts of natural right that are necessarily abridged in civil society. But to make the secure possession of food, shelter, women, gold, and so on, worth the price we have to pay—to make it worth sacrificing your autonomy of action regarding the worship of God—Hobbes must demean the importance of what is being sacrificed. Hence, the great efforts he goes to in proving that God cares more about your obedience than he does your autonomy.

Hobbes secures this argument as well as possible by tying it to the natural law, itself an emanation of God. If the natural law requires obedience and if God demands we follow the natural law, then it is only proper for me to give up my natural right to worship as I see fit. But we have seen again and again that the status of God as a law-giver is very murky, and Hobbes's insistence that all things that are rational come from God has often run headlong into the manifest irrationality (or supra-rationality) of the divine. God has sent men to speak scorn to kings, as we have seen in scripture. Hobbes would have us believe that God will never do so again, but it is entirely unclear why we should so believe. The potential dangers inherent in Christianity, in other words, have not been eliminated. Even were a sovereign, in conjunction with hundreds of his representatives, to completely reform the educational system to institute Hobbes's theology as the one state religion (see *Leviathan*, Review and Conclusion.16), this could not entirely forestall the possibility of any subject receiving special revelation, or at least genuinely and seriously believing he had. Such a citizen, and there is no reason it should only be one at a time, would always be a potential enemy of the sovereign, and until the defects of the

human mind have been remedied, there is no surefire protection from the vain-glory of individuals.

Because Hobbes constructs a commonwealth from radically separate individuals who, until the founding moment, bear no relation to each other besides as potential or actual enemies, his politics may be said to be liberal. But to the extent that Hobbes requires obedience to the will of the sovereign, especially with regard to the most important things, Hobbes's regime may be said to be fundamentally illiberal. This is true despite the fact that Hobbes's theology is quite easy to follow—one must only confess that Jesus is the Christ and otherwise do as you are told to be saved. The ease of following a religion imposed upon us by the sovereign does not lessen the burden of having it imposed in the first place. While those who are committed to the religion, like Hobbes, because the law of nature commands it, would not be inclined to question this simple, easy-going doctrine, the history of religions, which Hobbes's knows well, is not a tale of easy-going doctrines peacefully co-existing. Hobbes believed something more was needed to secure our ability to enjoy the good things in peace—the only thing he has been unable to show is that an authentic and personal connection God does not qualify as one of these good things.

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