

SPINOZA

Bento (Benedictus, Baruch) Spinoza (1632–77) was one of the most important philosophers of all time; he was also one of the most radical and controversial. The story of Spinoza's life takes the reader into the heart of Jewish Amsterdam in the seventeenth century and, with Spinoza's exile from Judaism, into the midst of the tumultuous political, social, intellectual, and religious world of the young Dutch Republic. This new edition of Steven Nadler's biography, winner of the Koret Jewish Book Award for biography and translated into a dozen languages, is enhanced by exciting new archival discoveries about his family background, his youth, and the various philosophical, political, and religious contexts of his life and works. There is more detail about his family's business and communal activities, about his relationships with friends and correspondents, and about the development of his writings, which caused such scandal among his contemporaries.

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Map of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Cartography Lab.

Spinoza

A Life

Second Edition

Steven Nadler
University of Wisconsin–Madison



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for my family

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 Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Cartography
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Preface to the Second Edition

IT HAS BEEN almost three hundred and fifty years since the death of the philosopher Bento/Benedictus de Spinoza, in 1677, and over two decades since I completed the first edition of this biography. Remarkably, we are still uncovering new facts related to his life – in archival documents, in published and unpublished treatises and broadsheets, and in a wide variety of correspondences – as well as putting together already known facts in new and illuminating ways. Despite the still relatively impoverished information about his ancestry, his parents and other relatives, his youth, and even the years of his maturity, a better picture is emerging of his family background, his activity as a merchant, and his life after his extraordinary expulsion from the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish congregation. We are also, I believe, gaining a deeper understanding of his grand philosophical project, especially as Spinoza scholars are now more open than ever to the various intellectual contexts of his thought.

In this second edition, I have also been able to take advantage of Edwin Curley's completion of his magisterial, two-volume English edition of Spinoza's writings. This means that, for the most part, I can refer the reader consistently to just one source for translations of Spinoza's works and letters (although in some cases I have modified these translations).

I have benefited enormously from colleagues and friends who, over the years, have generously shared their research with me or responded to my queries, as well as from total strangers who sent me corrections and suggestions for improvement. I would especially like to express my deep gratitude to Rachel Boertjens, Erik-Jan Bos, Edwin Curley, Albert Gootjes, Jonathan Israel, Yosef Kaplan, Adri Offenberg, the late Richard Popkin, Henriette Reerink, Piet Steenbakkers, Pina Totaro, Odette Vlessing, Wiep van Bunge, Jeroen van de Ven, and Thijs Weststeijn. I hope I

have done justice to the fruits of their efforts. My thanks, too, to Hilary Gaskin and Cambridge University Press, for their willingness to take on this updated edition, one that both incorporates the latest research into Spinoza's life and, just as important, corrects any errors in the first edition.

Steven Nadler
Madison, Wisconsin

Preface to the First Edition

Baruch de Spinoza (1632–77) was the son of a prominent merchant in Amsterdam’s Portuguese-Jewish community. He was also among the more gifted students in its school. But something happened around his twenty-third year – whether it was sudden or gradual, we do not know – that led to the harshest excommunication ever proclaimed by the leaders of the Amsterdam Sephardim. The result was Spinoza’s departure from the community – indeed, from Judaism entirely. He would go on to become one of the most important and famous philosophers of all time, and certainly the most radical and controversial of his own.

The young man’s transformation (if that’s what it was) from ordinary Jewish boy – living, to all appearances, a perfectly normal orthodox life and remarkable perhaps only for his intelligence – to iconoclastic philosopher is, unfortunately, hidden from us, possibly forever. We have only the *herem* document, full of oaths and maledictions, that was composed by the community’s governors. There is so little surviving material, so little that is known for certain about the details of Spinoza’s life, particularly before 1661 (when his extant correspondence begins), that we can only speculate on his emotional and intellectual development and on the more mundane matters that fill out a person’s existence. But what a rich field for speculation it is, particularly given the fascination of its subject.

Metaphysical and moral philosopher, political and religious thinker, biblical exegete, social critic, grinder of lenses, failed merchant, Dutch intellectual, Jewish heretic. What makes Spinoza’s life so interesting are the various, and at times opposing, contexts to which it belongs: the community of Portuguese and Spanish immigrants, many of them former “marranos,” who found refuge and economic opportunity in the newly independent Dutch Republic; the turbulent politics and magnificent

culture of that young nation which, in the middle of the seventeenth century, was experiencing its so-called Golden Age; and, not the least, the history of philosophy itself.

As a Jew, even an apostate one, Spinoza was always, to a certain extent, an outsider in the Calvinist land in which he was born and from which, as far as we know, he never traveled. But after his excommunication from the Talmud Torah congregation and his voluntary exile from the city of his birth, Spinoza no longer identified himself as a Jew. He preferred to see himself as just another citizen of the Dutch Republic – and perhaps, as well, of the transnational Republic of Letters. He nourished himself not only on the Jewish traditions to which he had been introduced in the synagogue's school, but also on the philosophical, theological, and political debates that so often disturbed the peace of his homeland's first hundred years. His legacy, of course, was as great as his appropriation. In many respects, the Dutch Republic was still groping for its identity during Spinoza's lifetime. And as much as Spinoza's Dutch contemporaries reviled and attacked him, there can be no denying the significance of the contribution that he made to the development of Dutch intellectual culture. It is, perhaps, as great a contribution as that which he made to the development of the character of modern Judaism.

This is the first full-length and complete biography of Spinoza ever to appear in English. It is also the first to be written in any language in quite a long time. There have, of course, been short studies of one aspect or another of Spinoza's life, and practically every book on Spinoza's philosophy begins with a brief biographical sketch. But the last substantial attempt to put together a complete "life" of Spinoza was Jacob Freudenthal's *Spinoza: Sein Leben und Sein Lehre* at the beginning of this century.¹ A great deal of research into the history of Amsterdam's Portuguese Jews and on Spinoza himself has been done since Freudenthal published his valuable study, however. As a result of the enormously important work of scholars such as A. M. Vaz Dias, W. G. Van der Tak, I. S. Révah, Wim Klever, Yosef Kaplan, Herman Prins Salomon, Jonathan Israel, Richard Popkin, and a host of others, enough material

¹ There is also K. O. Meinsma's *Spinoza en zijn kring*, first published in 1896, which was translated into French (as *Spinoza et son cercle*) and updated in 1983. And for quick and illustrated overview, a reader with a knowledge of Dutch may want to look at books such as Theun de Vries's casual *Spinoza: Beeldenstormer en Wereldbouwer* (Spinoza: Iconoclast and Worldbuilder).

has come to light over the last sixty years about Spinoza's life and times, and about the Amsterdam Jewish community in particular, that any earlier biography is, essentially, obsolete. And I should make it clear for the record that, without the labors of those individuals, this book could never have been written. I can only hope that I have made good use of their work.

Let the scholarly reader beware: it was not my intention to track down and present the various sources of Spinoza's thought, all the possible thinkers and traditions that may have influenced him. That would be an infinite task, one that no individual could accomplish in a lifetime. This is, in other words, most definitely not an "intellectual" biography. At certain points it was important – indeed, essential – for me to look closely at what seemed to be Spinoza's intellectual development. But I make no claims for exhaustiveness in my research on his philosophical origins. Nor is this a study of Spinoza's philosophy. Books and articles on his metaphysical and other doctrines are a dime a dozen, and I had no desire to add to the growing bibliography of literature for specialists. Rather, I have tried to provide the general reader with an accessible overview of Spinoza's ideas. If I appear to some Spinoza scholars to be guilty at times of simplification or distortion, then I plead *nolo contendere*: I do not want to pick any academic fights on the finer details of Spinozism. Let that be for a different time and place. What I am interested in – and what I hope my reader is interested in – is the life and times and thoughts of an important and immensely relevant thinker.

The question that lies at the heart of this biography is how did the various aspects of Spinoza's life – his ethnic and social background, his place in exile between two such different cultures as the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community and Dutch society, his intellectual development, and his social and political relationships – come together to produce one of history's most radical thinkers? But there is another, more general question that interests me as well: what did it mean to be a philosopher and a Jew in the Dutch Golden Age? The quest for answers to these questions must begin almost two hundred years earlier, in another part of Europe.

Acknowledgments

No project such as this can be accomplished without a great deal of help. I have asked for a lot of favors over the past few years, and at this point all I can do is express my thanks to various individuals and institutions for their services, generosity, support, and friendship.

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Some of the material from Chapter 6 on the reasons behind Spinoza’s excommunication was presented to audiences at University College, London; the University of Chicago; and the History of Science Department and the Logos Society of the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I am grateful for the invitations to speak, and especially to Martin Stone in London, and for the comments and suggestions that I received on those occasions. My thanks, too, to Hadley Cooney for her work on the index.

And then there are those to whom this book is dedicated, whose love and support kept me going: my wife, Jane, and my children, Rose and Benjamin; my parents, Arch and Nancy; my brother, David, and my sisters, Lauren and Linden. I owe you more than words could ever express.