Abstract: Nowhere was the ambiguous intellectual, cultural, and political legacy of Spinoza more deeply felt than in Germany, especially in the tumultuous period before and during the Weimar Republic. This essay examines the reception of Spinoza’s political philosophy in this period by three thinkers. Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) claimed that Spinoza’s conception of a state based on the ideas of individual rights and freedom of conscience was an important cause of the instability of the liberal Weimar state. Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) criticized Spinoza’s pantheism for undermining ethics, and he had little sympathy for Spinoza’s utilitarian version of the social contract. Although critical of Spinoza in his early writings, Leo Strauss (1899–1973) offered a more nuanced appreciation of the Theological-Political Treatise: Spinoza’s work was important for Jews because it presented the essential tensions they faced in the liberal Weimar Republic and in the modern world.

1. Introduction

Spinoza’s critique of Scripture in the Theological-Political Treatise (1670) was instrumental in producing the Enlightenment view that superstitious claims of religion were to be replaced with the cool analysis of scientific reason.¹ His analysis of the ancient Hebrew state served a similar function. Spinoza challenged the church’s claim that the structure of the

¹ References to this work are from Benedictus de Spinoza, Theological-Political Treatise, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).
biblical Hebrew state justified its political authority. Instead he argued, in Erastian fashion, that the state ought to have authority over the church and then claimed, switching to a kind of republican ethos, that both state and church were ultimately dependent on the tacit and explicit consent of individuals.

It might seem that the purpose of Spinoza’s extensive analysis of the Bible and its examples was just to undermine its supernatural claims and its authority based on them. Certainly many subsequent thinkers read Spinoza in just this way, placing him within the narrative of progress that marked the modern world and emphasized the rise of the individual and the decline of religious belief, or “secularization.” The Hebrew state may have been instrumentally valuable for those within this narrative, but ultimately it ought to be discarded. To the extent that individuals were led by their religious imaginations and passions, such stories and their proper interpretations could be useful. However, as religion increasingly became subject to critique, belief was less of a motivating factor, and the relevance of religious examples to everyday life became more tenuous.

With progress, however, also came various new forms of discontent. If individuals were no longer bound by the unjustified constructs of the religious imagination, then, as Max Weber famously put it, they found themselves prisoners in the “iron cage” of reason itself. Modern individuals were now caught in the inexorable and impersonal mechanical laws of society. Likewise, the state, in the process of shedding its mythical skin, became even more nakedly ruthless, driven by the technical imperative of the mastery of nature, both human and non-human, to the ever-increasing domain of its activities. Spinoza had helped Jews find a modern voice in the impartial state, but only at the cost of devaluing their own culture and discarding the relevance of its political traditions.

Nowhere, of course, was the ambiguous intellectual, cultural, and political legacy of Spinoza more deeply felt than in Germany, especially in the tumultuous period of the Weimar Republic. In this paper I seek to examine the reception of Spinoza’s political philosophy in this period by such

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thinkers as Hermann Cohen, Leo Strauss, and Carl Schmitt. I shall claim that we find clear evidence of Spinoza’s ideal of Enlightenment in the various writings of these thinkers, and that our seventeenth-century Dutchman is held up as an important exemplar of Bildung and a pioneer in the path to assimilation. We shall also find examples of the criticism of Spinoza (by Jews and non-Jews alike) as having helped produce this empty and dehumanizing ideal. Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), for example, blamed Spinoza’s pantheism for undermining ethics, and Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) claimed that Spinoza’s conception of a republican state was an important cause of the instability of the liberal Weimar regime. However, I shall argue that, just as the Enlightenment ideal of Spinoza was more of a caricature than a true portrait, so too was the criticism of this ideal misguided. In particular, I find Spinoza’s critique of the ancient Hebrew to have been a stepping-stone not to the abolition of the model, but rather to a reconsideration of its relevance in light of the changing condition of modern political society. Likewise, although some in interwar Germany clung to an Enlightenment model of Bildung and a liberal state, others attempted to reread Spinoza in light of the dramatically new conditions of modernity. Thus, for all their criticism of Spinoza, the early writings of Leo Strauss (1899–1973) offer a nuanced appreciation of the Theological-Political Treatise. By closely examining these debates concerning Spinoza’s political philosophy in general and his use of the Hebrew model in particular, and situating them in the larger context of debates over the nature of the modern state, I hope to present a case study of the continued, though always contested, relevance of the early modern tradition of political Hebraism.

2. Carl Schmitt and the Mythological Machine of the Modern State

One of the most strident critics of liberalism during the interwar period in Germany was the notorious legal theorist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s thought underwent various changes over his career, but at least two things remain constant throughout his works. First is his prose style, which was quite atypical of German academics at the time and reflected his view of modernity itself. Schmitt characterized modernity by the combination of “on the one hand, the abstractly formal elements of science, technology,
and economics and, on the other, a concretely content-oriented fascination that is expressed most notably in romanticism that often manifests itself in neomythology.”

We find both aspects in Schmitt’s own writings, but, as John McCormick points out, after starting off with an apparently dispassionate analysis, he inevitably “exalts” the mythological and the romantic. The second consistent feature of his works is his unrelenting critique of the modern state and of the Weimar Republic as a particularly pathological example of it. Deeply influenced by Max Weber, Schmitt criticizes the modern state not only for destroying the value of modern life but also for being inherently weak and unstable. Some have suggested that anti-Semitism was a third consistent feature over Schmitt’s intellectual career, while others disagree. Whatever the truth of this matter, it is indisputable that Jews play an important role in his critique of modernity.

Nowhere is this clearer than in The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes, which actually was written after the Nazi seizure of power but nonetheless reflects the essential critique of liberalism that Schmitt had expressed since the early Weimar years. For both Schmitt and, as we shall see in a later section, Leo Strauss, Hobbes was in fact the key political thinker of modernity. Schmitt’s analysis of Leviathan is unusual not least for the fact that it interprets the work through an analysis of the symbolism of its title. Although Hobbes’ chosen title obviously refers to the biblical beast that battles the Behemoth, Schmitt at first appeared to think of it merely as a metaphor for the overwhelming power of the state achieved through the mechanical unity of its parts. So, on the famous title page, Hobbes has the sovereign depicted as literally composed of innumerable citizens. However, influenced by the writer Helmut Schelsky, Schmitt decided to explore the mythological resonances of the symbol and claimed that Hobbes attempted to synthesize the mechanical image of state formation so common in the seventeenth century with an older tradition in which the unity of the state is also imagined mythologically.

5 McCormick, Carl Schmitt’s Critique, p. 16.
6 Ibid.
The references to the Bible throughout the work could not merely be accidental. According to Schmitt, they signify the central problem for Hobbes, which was to restore the original unity of the state over and against the rupture of that unity by the church. The means to that end are found in the sovereign authority itself, which first usurps the independent power of the church and then secures itself through its poetic fusion of mythical, religious, and mechanical language in the image of itself as Leviathan, mortal god, or sovereign power. The modern state is “technically neutral,” that is, it is a mechanism that is over and above the community rather than, as in the medieval conception, an organic part of it. But such a state still requires a mythical dimension to establish the allegiance of its citizens and to mobilize itself as a unit against hostile enemy states.

Hobbes is the brilliant innovator who manages to see how the state must combine these rational and irrational elements into a new whole.

There is, unfortunately, a fatal flaw in Hobbes’ account. Recent liberal theorists like to read Hobbes as a radical individualist who from the most basic (or “thin”) description of human nature—man’s being first and foremost an individual who endeavors to preserve himself—attempts to explain how authority is established in the state of nature by means of a self-interested social contract. But Schmitt, like most seventeenth-century readers of Hobbes, emphasized the authoritarian nature of the project. According to Schmitt, two fundamental ideas combined to create the modern liberal state in the seventeenth century. The first is the evolution of the state into a “justifiable external power.” Hobbes is admirable just because he shows that once the sovereign has been established, he has absolute power over the citizens. The second is the juridical origin of freedom of thought and other freedoms characteristic of liberalism, and the concomitant notion of a “neutral” state that does not interfere with these freedoms. These freedoms stem from the original natural right of the individual in the state of nature. Together these ideas produce the basic distinction between public and private. The state has exclusive control over things in the public domain, in the sphere of actions, while the individual remains in charge of the inner domain, in particular, over his beliefs. It is the second part of the liberal synthesis that spells its doom. As Schmitt writes:

10 Schmitt, Leviathan in the State Theory, p. 47.
12 Schmitt, Leviathan in the State Theory, p. 56.
but, above all, [Hobbes] focuses attention on the distinction between inner and outer. Also, his answer to Bishop Bramhall (1682) confirms that he has dealt with this sensitive point by underscoring the importance of absorbing the right of private freedom of thought and belief into the political system. This contained the seed of death that destroyed the mighty leviathan from within and brought about the end of the mortal God.13

If the purpose of the Leviathan is to overcome internal conflict generated by differing religious beliefs, then it is bound to fail. The Erastian solution to the wars of religion, in which the sovereign dictates the religion of the state in order to forestall conflict, has been restricted to actions, and that leaves the door open to lingering dissent.

This is the point at which Spinoza enters into Schmitt’s account of the state. The liberal state is weak precisely because it remains neutral in principle in relation to conflicting (or at least potentially conflicting) beliefs. Hobbes “laid the groundwork for separating the internal from the external,” though he curtails as far as possible the domain of the internal. However,

Only a few years after the appearance of the *Leviathan*, a liberal Jew noticed the barely visible crack in the theoretical justification of the sovereign state. In it he immediately recognized the telling inroad of modern liberalism, which would allow Hobbes’ postulation of the relation between external and internal, public and private, to be inverted into its converse.14

Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* was deeply influenced by Hobbes, but he emphasizes in the very subtitle of the work the importance of the *libertas philosophandi*. Spinoza tries to show that in order to maintain its authority, the sovereign must grant freedom of thought to its citizens. But this freedom is what ultimately destroys the authority of the state.

Hobbes laid the groundwork for separating the internal from the external…. The Jewish philosopher pushed this incipient form to the limit of its development until the opposite was reached and the leviathan’s vitality was sapped from within and life began to drain out of him.15

13 Ibid., pp. 56–57.
14 Ibid., p. 57.
15 Ibid.
From at least the time he wrote *Political Theology* (1922), Schmitt had attacked the liberal state for its weakness, which he saw embodied in the unstable politics of the Weimar Republic. The core of that weakness was its deference to the pluralistic beliefs—political and religious—of its citizens, and an insufficiently powerful central authority. This was expressed in the bitter factional politics of Weimar and the insufficient authority of the president under the constitutional regime. If it was impossible to return to the organic unity between the state and community that was perceived to have existed during the medieval period, it was nonetheless necessary to find a new source of political authority and unity. Schmitt found his solution in the irrational power of the sovereign itself, which was justified mythically. When the state was threatened by factional disputes, the sovereign, who must be above the law, could create an exception to the law in order to defend the state. In that act of exception, the sovereign—as the somewhat later work *The Concept of the Political* (1929) explains—essentially defines a distinction between the state and its enemies and thus constitutes the state itself. With this in mind, we see that it cannot have been mere opportunism on Schmitt’s part when he was the first jurist to defend Hitler’s actions on the so-called “Night of the Long Knives,” through which he brutally suppressed all opposition to the regime. Schmitt finds both possibilities in the modern liberal state: one represented by Hobbes, which offers a new and viable state modality through a mythically justified mechanistic authority; the other represented by Spinoza, which explains the pathetic politics of Weimar. Whereas “Hobbes focused on public peace and the right of sovereign power,” Spinoza emphasized individual freedom. One path led to the consolidation of state power; the other to its dissolution. It is obvious where Schmitt’s sympathies lay.

16 See Miguel Vatter, “Strauss and Schmitt as Readers of Hobbes and Spinoza: On the Relation Between Political Theology and Liberalism,” *New Centennial Review* 4:3 (2004), pp. 161–214. In this interesting article, Vatter argues that the sovereign’s decision and the modern state apparatus are made possible through the secularization of Christianity (p. 184), while for Strauss, as we shall see, it is always crucial that the foundations of liberalism be atheistic (p. 189).

17 See Carl Schmitt, “Der Führer schützt das Recht” (“The Leader Protects the Law”), which he wrote in 1934. See Balakrishnan’s discussion in *Enemy*, ch. 15.


It is not incidental that Schmitt identifies Spinoza as a Jew. The “small intellectual switch” in emphasis from the external power of the sovereign to the internal right of the individual is not the act of an individual philosopher but something that “emanates from the nature of Jewish life.” Indeed, throughout the work, Schmitt claims that Hobbes is fighting what he calls either the “Christian theological” or the “Jewish-cabalist” interpretation of the symbol of the leviathan, one which views it as the odious beast that the church must slay. In the seventeenth century the church was in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it still claimed power, but, on the other, as the conflicts it provoked weakened its authority, it had to settle for supporting the demand for freedom of conscience. If it could not rule the state directly, it could at least weaken it and exert its power indirectly. Schmitt claims that Hobbes was happy to accept the Erastian doctrine that the state and the church should be one and the same. Whereas Hobbes sought “to remain within [the beliefs of his people]… the Jewish philosopher [Spinoza]… approached the religion of the state as an outsider, [and] naturally provided a proviso that emanated from the outside.”

Spinoza’s Hebrew state was alien to the spirit of the German people, and the Weimar Republic, with all its legal formalisms designed to protect individual freedoms and limit state authority, was an aberration foisted upon them by the Jews.

3. Hermann Cohen and the Liberal Critique of Spinoza

If Schmitt represents the end of Weimar and the authoritarian critique of the modern liberal state, then Hermann Cohen represents something closer to its founding spirit. If, for Schmitt, the Jews embody the alien force that becomes internalized in the liberal state and subverts it, for Cohen, they embody the very values that lie at the core of that state. So in a certain sense, Cohen confirms Schmitt’s reading of liberalism as a Jewish invention. But, interestingly enough, what both these thinkers have in common is that they utterly detest Spinoza. Whereas Schmitt thinks of Spinoza as the exemplary modern Jew whose idea of the Hebrew state is the corrupting spirit of modern liberalism, Cohen views him as both an essentially self-hating Jew who betrayed his people and a philosopher


20 Schmitt, Leviathan in the State Theory, p. 58.
21 Ibid.
alien to the true spirit of Judaism. Neither Jews nor Gentiles, in his view, should follow the teaching of this justly despised man.22

In his long and impassioned essay, “Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum,” found in the third volume of his collected Jüdische Schriften (Berlin, 1924), Cohen argued that the Amsterdam community was justified in banning Spinoza.23 His reasoning is as follows: The fact that the title of the Theological-Political Treatise omits the word “philosophy” is already suspect. It is not a philosophical treatise, but a combination of philological tract and political pamphlet. Because Spinoza sees no need for a philosophical critique of Judaism, it is fair to say that the purpose of the philological critique is to show that the sole goal of the religion is the establishment of the state.24 And for Cohen, the whole point of this critique is to destroy the Jewish concept of religion itself,25 which was not motivated out of any philosophical motive but out of the basest personal resentment caused by the excommunication.26 Although he grants that Spinoza had contributed to the development of the historical and philological sciences of the Bible, he thinks Spinoza’s use of these tools cannot ultimately be fruitful, because he has, like the Protestants, disconnected rational knowledge from faith.27 Spinoza willfully ignores the ethical truth at the heart of the prophets and thus of the Bible itself.

In an earlier work, the Ethics of Maimonides (Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis), published in 1908 in commemoration of the 700th anniversary of Maimonides’ death, Cohen had outlined the main philosophical

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24 Ibid., p. 293.

25 “Auf die Vernichtung des jüdischen Religionsbegriffs steuert diese ganze philologische Forschung hin.” Ibid.

26 Of course, as Strauss points out in “Cohen’s Analysis of Spinoza’s Biblical Science” (p. 147), Cohen does not consider that, unlike the New Testament, which calls for a strict separation between church and caesar, the Hebrew Bible has implicit political content, which the Calvinists used to justify their political theory. Thus, if Spinoza wants to criticize that theory, he must consider the political rather than other aspects of the Bible.

27 In this context it is worthwhile to note the critique of historicism common to these thinkers. See David N. Myers, Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
reasons for his rejection of Spinozism. This was part of a broader project, in which Cohen turns from the early modern Enlightenment—which he found deeply imbued with anti-Jewish sentiment—to the medieval Enlightenment, as exemplified by Maimonides. More specifically, he claimed Maimonides is better understood as a follower of Plato than of Aristotle. The Platonic idea of a “good beyond being” was a more suitable foundation for ethics than Aristotle’s more contingent conception, and just as importantly, it better served the goal of synthesizing philosophical with prophetic knowledge. The Platonic reading of Maimonides emphasized the transcendent ground of both prophetic and philosophical knowledge. Throughout the text, as Cohen develops his Platonic reading, he also engages in a running dispute with the ever-present danger within monotheism, that is, the pantheistic interpretation of God. The problem with pantheism is that it undermines the prophetic call to action. According to Cohen, Spinoza’s god is the god of nature (deus sive natura) and not the God of ethics. There needs to be something beyond being that gives nature its purpose, and without that telos no imperative ought can exist. Whereas Spinoza denies that there is in God any distinct power of volition, Maimonides subsumes divine cognition within volition, and hence knowledge of God is identical with the imperative to follow his commandments. As Cohen notes in his later essay on Spinoza, the Enlightenment—and in particular Kant—relied on Spinoza for its knowledge of Judaism, and hence Spinoza’s resentful mischaracterization of it in the Theological-Political Treatise and his immanent metaphysics, which are completely alien to the ethical spirit of the prophets, have completely perverted and undermined the subsequent role of Judaism in a philosophical theology. Going back to Maimonides, then, helps revive a concept of the philosophical core of Judaism that in fact serves better than Christianity to found rational religion.

The political implications of the personal and philosophical critique of Spinoza are quite clear, especially in the passage in “Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum,” where Cohen discusses

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29 For some of the general background of Cohen’s project, I am indebted to Bruckstein’s useful introduction to Cohen, Ethics of Maimonides.

30 Cohen, Ethics of Maimonides, sec. 30, pp. 18–19.

31 Ibid., sec. 78, pp. 86–87.

32 Ibid., sec. 88.

Spinoza’s claim that the Hebrew state could be re-established, if only God would elect the Hebrews again. Since Spinoza apparently denies any divine teleology and rejects any corresponding conception of divine providence, this claim can be understood only on the assumption that it expresses a “daemonic irony.” The Hebrew state as Spinoza sees it is only a destructive tool. It is the reductio of the political life of those who scorned him and for whom he has only scorn. From Cohen’s point of view, to the extent that anyone tries to realize Spinoza’s model, it is antithetical to the authentic vision of the prophets. Indeed, Spinoza is symptomatic of the illnesses of modernity itself: its worldly, self-seeking, and ultimately purposeless frenetic activity.

Instead of Spinoza’s distorted secular vision of the Hebrew state, which is unrealizable as such precisely because the Jews do not constitute a proper people, there is the true Hebrew state, which we realize through rational religious action. This is not to say that Cohen was a Zionist in any practical sense of the word. Indeed, as Franz Rosenzweig noted in his introduction to the Jüdische Schriften, Cohen stridently opposed the political Zionism of his time. According to his interpretation of Maimonides, the messianic age—and the return to Zion—follows upon the completion of the prophetic imperative to ethical action. It is not an independent political course, but a consequence of ethical action in history.

Cohen is so deeply committed to the inherent rationality and goodness of the law that, as Leo Strauss pointed out in his “Preface to the English Translation” of Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, he denies that coercion is essential to the law founding the state. His view might very well have been that which, in his famous essay “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber had in mind as a token of “ethical absolutism.” Weber argued that “the proponent of an ethic of absolute ends cannot stand up under the ethical irrationality of the world.” In contrast, he proposed an “ethic of responsibility,” which takes into account the “average deficiencies of people,” that is, an ethic that does not “presuppose their goodness and perfection.”

34 Ibid., p. 333.
38 Ibid., p. 122.
The question naturally arises whether such an idealized version of politics as Cohen’s can deal with the practical problems of political life in a responsible manner.

4. Leo Strauss: Between Authoritarianism and Liberalism

Leo Strauss was engaged with Spinoza throughout his career, but the Weimar period unquestionably marks the most intense point of this dialogue. In the remarkable “Preface to the English Translation” of Spinoza’s *Critique of Religion*, written in 1962, Strauss tells the reader about his study of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*, written during 1925–1928 in Germany: “The author was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament.”

It was natural to investigate this problem through the study of perhaps the greatest treatise on the predicament that had hitherto been written, that of Spinoza.

With great precision and scope, Strauss catalogues the positions that it was possible for him to take. Most importantly, there is the sense—no doubt provoked by Schmitt, with whom he was in contact during those years, and by the general troubles of the Weimar Republic—that liberalism was a failed ideology. But unlike Schmitt, who, although an outsider, was a member of the downtrodden Catholic minority and liked to pose his problems in universal terms, Strauss considers his position first and foremost as a Jew. What is the problem of Weimar liberalism for the Jews? As Strauss saw it (at least later in his life), it was not just that the specific form or constitution of the Weimar Republic was weak, which of course it was, but there was a problem of the illusion of neutrality itself. Throughout his life, Strauss apparently accepted many of Schmitt’s key points on this matter. Even a liberal state requires a decisive and able executor, but that was lacking in person and in form. A liberal state is not truly neutral, but in fact represents the will of its strongest component. On this Strauss does not quote Schmitt, whose friend-enemy distinction is constitutive of the state it resembles. Rather, Strauss cites Herzl: “Who belongs and who does not belong, is decided by the majority; it is a question of power.” Strauss thinks that although the Jews imagined they belonged to the German nation, “[t]his assumption was not accepted by the strongest part of Germany and hence by Germany.”

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39 Ibid., p. 121.
41 Ibid., p. 4.
was experienced by the Jews as the demand to assimilate. Strauss' critique of Hermann Cohen and his reading of Spinoza, both in the “Preface,” and his 1924 review of *Jüdische Schriften*, make it clear that Strauss thinks the liberal vision ignores the hard facts of the world and political life. Liberalism may in principle demand the religious neutrality of the state, but in practice the ethical precepts and laws are interpreted and wielded by those in power. The consequences were not good for the Jews.

What, according to Strauss, is the relation of Spinoza to liberalism? First of all, as we have already seen, Strauss disagrees with Cohen's characterization of Spinoza's critique of Judaism. Both in his review and in other early writings on Spinoza, such as the synopsis of what would become his book, Strauss claims that Cohen greatly exaggerated the significance of Spinoza's personal resentment. To the contrary, Strauss tries to explain sympathetically why the philological critique has philosophical significance. He thinks that Spinoza, like other Enlightenment figures, criticized religion in general and not just Judaism in particular: “Spinoza did not turn against the ‘monotheism of Judaism’ or against the ‘social ethics of the prophets’ but rather against revealed religion in all its forms.” This is also key to understanding his relation to Schmitt. Unlike Schmitt, Strauss does not think Spinoza represents anything truly Jewish. So it cannot be the case that the modern state was undermined by the Jews. Rather, as we have just seen, Strauss thought the majority of German Jews were fervent supporters of the state in their mistaken belief that it would grant them equal rights and accept them as equal citizens. The condition of Jewish acceptance into the liberal order was assimilation.

However, although Strauss rejects Schmitt's vile identification of Spinoza with Jewish nature as such, he does accept Schmitt's view that Spinoza offers a corrupt form of liberalism. In the section on Spinoza's moral and political philosophy, we find the kernel of what would later become one of the central tenets of Strauss' mature philosophical view, namely, that Hobbes' conception of natural right is superior to that of Spinoza because it maintains a distinction between honoring a contract based on principle and doing the same based on fear: “It follows that Spinoza has no possibility at all of understanding, after the manner of Hobbes, the germination of the pacific attitude, of honesty, from men's concern to preserve their lives, thus no possibility of understanding

42 Ibid.


44 Ibid., p. 173.
the social contract.”45 This is indeed damning, if true. On this reading, Spinoza levels the distinction between reason and passion and makes it effectively impossible for reason to play a decisive, moral role in the state. Spinoza’s liberalism would be bankrupt, not because it advances freedom of conscience to the detriment of the sovereign authority’s power, but because it has no moral ground on which to defend its own principles.

If liberalism failed as an ideology, then what about Zionism? We know Strauss had been deeply influenced by Zionism since his youth. But it was the peculiar sort of Zionism that seems to have been prevalent among the more spiritual types of his age. As Michael Zank describes it, “after all, was not Zionism all about overcoming the humanism of the reform generation, and about a return to cultural inwardness?”46 Zionism was important to Strauss in several respects throughout his life,47 but in his Weimar years it was in no small measure useful to him as a way to formulate his critique of liberalism. As he wrote later in his “Preface,” “To realize that the Jewish problem is insoluble means ever to bear in mind the truth proclaimed by Zionism regarding the limitations of liberalism.”48 That is, as long as liberalism hides the reality of discrimination behind the mask of formal neutrality, it fails. If Zionism as a political movement developed as a response to the failure of liberalism and the pressures of other nationalisms, then it too would fail unless it “made peace with traditional Jewish thought.”49 Zionism makes sense only when its content distinguishes it from other national movements. But Strauss goes further and points out the vicious cycle of Jewish national identity. Even “cultural Zionism” fails to provide that content, because “when religious Zionism understands itself, it turns into religious Zionism,” which is Jewish faith first and only secondarily Zionism.50 If this is right, then the quest to provide Jewish nationalism with content tends to bring us back to the traditional sense of Jews in the galut, which emphasizes ritual practice and turns Zion into an ideal.

46 Editor’s “Introduction” to Strauss, Early Writings, p. 14.
47 Strauss was quite clear that all Jews owed a debt to political Zionism: the establishment of the State of Israel “procured a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not.” Strauss, Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, p. 5.
48 Ibid., p. 6.
49 Ibid., p. 5.
50 Strauss, Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, p. 6. As David Myers discusses, the idea of cultural Zionism—that is, a historically grounded (and changeable) sense of self independent of fixed religious belief—came under fierce attack during this period. See Myers, Resisting History. The early Strauss, as we have seen, no doubt read Spinoza as a kind of historicist, but the later Strauss saw something more and based his reading of natural law on him.
However, lest we imagine that Strauss ends up as a traditional Orthodox Jew, we ought to recall the decisive importance of his study of Spinoza. This leads to a new twist in the problem. If classical liberalism fails, and the quest for a renewed Jewish state is unrealizable for various reasons, there is another alternative, at least for some. This is the contemplative life of the philosopher. In Strauss’ reading of Spinoza, which he was developing in the 1920s and 1930s and which came to fruition in his famous essay from 1952, “How to Read Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise” in Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss claimed that religion was meant only for the masses who needed some guidance based on authority, while philosophy was meant for the rational few who could guide themselves on the basis of the truth. Hence, philosophical atheism becomes the only principled solution to the predicament of the modern Jew. The philosopher knows the esoteric truths of reason but at the same time realizes that he inevitably must also participate in the exoteric, irrational rituals of the common man, including those of religion and politics. In this way, after having bitterly criticized Spinoza in 1930, Strauss comes to take him as his master.

5. Conclusion

We should be careful not to draw rigid conclusions from these all-too-brief discussions of the various ways in which Spinoza was read during the first third or so of the twentieth century in Germany. Two thinkers we considered did express different views later in their lives about these topics. As we just saw, Strauss changed his mind about Spinoza and read him differently after the war than before, though he claimed to have been inspired in this general re-orientation at least in part through his earlier reading of Spinoza. As we shall see, Carl Schmitt also apparently modified his general view toward the Jews, if not toward Spinoza himself, though it is always hard to know with him whether it was a change in principle or just another wily accommodation of his views to the reigning ethos of the time. But with these qualifications in mind, the question remains: why was Spinoza the focus of such intense debate among Weimar

51 Zank describes just how Strauss vacillates between these options in 1935: “He cannot be orthodox; he cannot be a political Zionist; he cannot be a cultural Jew with a merely historical sense of himself either; he needs another way to be in the world.” Editor’s “Introduction” to Strauss, Early Writings, p. 15. See also Eugene R. Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2006), who claims that Strauss, during this time, “was moving toward a radical self-understanding of modern atheism” (p. 35) on the road to “an alternative response that would neither abandon nor dull his competing loyalties as a philosopher and Jew” (p. 70).
intellectuals, and what, if anything, is the enduring significance of this debate for political theory?

The first possible answer is that Spinoza had become a cultural icon of Jewish identity for German Jews at that time. Strauss makes this clear, as we have seen, in his 1962 preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, which he wrote in the 1920s. Cohen too attacks Spinoza precisely because of the significance the seventeenth-century philosopher had for Cohen’s contemporary audience. In addition to the scholarly interest we noted above, there was a lively popular interest as well. As Michael Brenner has described it, Spinoza fit within “the heretical ideal,” and several novels and plays developed his character in ways that spoke to the self-conception of many Jews in Weimar. As Brenner puts it, these Jewish novelists were no longer content with the traditional definitions of Judaism. They were convinced that Judaism could not be reduced to a religious essence and that factors other than religion bound Jews together. By portraying Jewish figures outside or on the fringes of traditional Judaism—apostates, heretics, and false messiahs—they offered themselves and their fellow German Jews alternative role models that would suit their own situation outside Jewish tradition.

Spinoza fit this bill perfectly because he heroically prefigured the situation of Weimar Jews. This use of Spinoza also fits well with the secularization thesis with which we began. In a modern society, it was difficult to maintain identity solely on religious grounds. Indeed, in a world defined by ideals of progress and rationalization, those who still cleaved to traditional religious beliefs and practices were considered hopelessly outdated. Spinoza seemed to offer a new conception of Jewish identity based not on dogma but on cultural or even sociological criteria loosely defined as “peoplehood.” It was precisely the popularity of this new ideal that alarmed both Cohen and Strauss. In their view, it failed as an adequate criterion of Jewish identity, and more importantly, it failed as the basis of Jewish political life.

The second reason Spinoza became a central figure in Weimar political thought was his discussion of the Hebrew state and the new meaning it

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54 Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 46.
took on with the revival of political Zionism. In the third chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza wrote:

The mark of circumcision, too, I consider to be such an important factor in this matter that I am convinced that this by itself will preserve the nation forever. Indeed, were it not that the fundamental principles of their religion discourage manliness, I would not hesitate to believe that they will one day, given the opportunity—such is the mutability of human affairs—establish once more their independent state, and that God will again choose them.\(^{54}\)

This was no doubt the passage that inspired David Ben-Gurion to attempt to lift the ban placed on Spinoza by the seventeenth-century Amsterdam Jewish community and to proclaim him the Jewish people’s “greatest and most original thinker.”\(^{55}\) Spinoza transformed the meaning of the ancient Israelite state as he made sense of it in terms of his own theory, but he used this exemplum at a time when the critique of religion was new, or, in Weberian terms, when the world was still enchanted. But what meaning does the exemplum of the Hebrew state have once the process of disenchantment that Spinoza inaugurated has come to fruition? One possible answer, embraced by Ben-Gurion, is that modern Zionism is the only way the idea of the Hebrew state can survive in the modern world.\(^{56}\) In other words, as religion became less important, so did the exemplary role that the ancient Hebrew state had played in political thought. All that remained was the actual Jewish people, and the time had come when the fiction of a Jewish state had to become a reality.

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\(^{55}\) But it is by no means obvious that Spinoza had Ben-Gurion’s Zionist vision of the state in mind. Steven Smith points out that Spinoza “believed that the restoration of Jewish sovereignty would be possible only after a profound alteration of historical Judaism.” The possibility of a modern state would be based on the complete secularization of Jewish identity: “Not political Zionism but rather the democratic republican state is the option most consistently favored in the *Treatise* as a replacement for historical Judaism.” Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 103. What has emasculated the Jews is precisely revealed religion, and Smith refers to Machiavelli’s use of the same word, *effiminare*, to “describe the impact of Christianity on the moral and political practices of pagan antiquity” as the background to Spinoza’s claim. Revealed religion makes men unfit for politics because it is “inimical to the spirit of liberty.” Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism*, p. 101. The only possibility of a renewed political life for the Jewish people is, paradoxically, the dissolution of its Jewish identity. Here we are back at one Weimar view of Spinoza (Cohen’s, for instance), in which he is synonymous with modern liberalism and its blind insistence on assimilation.
We know, of course, of Ben-Gurion's enthusiastic embrace of Spinoza, but it is perhaps somewhat more surprising to hear that at about the same time, Schmitt, who has been disparagingly dubbed “the crown Jurist of the Nazi Reich,” echoed those sentiments. As we saw, in his earlier writings (before his imprisonment after World War II) Schmitt blamed the Jews, and in particular, Spinoza, for the fatal weaknesses of the liberal state. However, George Schwab, one of Schmitt’s English translators and biographers, notes that “[o]n numerous occasions Schmitt expressed the view to me that the situation of the Jews dramatically changed with the creation of the State of Israel.” Schwab quotes him directly as having said, “At last they [the Jews] again have contact with a soil that they can call their own.” What the views of Ben-Gurion and Schmitt have in common is the conviction that the Jews require a sovereign state of their own to reconstitute their nation. Spinoza served the purpose of political Zionists, to some extent, both during and subsequent to the Weimar period.

The third reason for Spinoza’s significance was his contribution to the development of the idea of Jewish citizenship in this period. This is not just a matter of theoretical significance. In other words, it is not the question, which Leo Strauss considered, of whether Spinoza or Hobbes was a better foundation for liberalism and its notion of rights. Rather, it is the question of whether Spinoza has something to teach about the relation of the Jews, and perhaps other political minorities, to the modern state.

For Carl Schmitt, Spinoza represented liberalism in its purest and most dangerous form. Spinoza put the individual and his freedom of conscience at the center of the modern state, and that was precisely what led to its instability and its dissolution. When we couple this analysis with the fact that in Schmitt’s post-Weimar work of the 1930s he presented liberalism (ironically through the heretic Spinoza) as quintessentially Jewish, the lesson may very well be that Jews and the modern state simply cannot accommodate each other.

Hermann Cohen, at the other extreme, found Spinoza to be not liberal enough. Spinoza emphasized, as we have just seen, the mere sociological and historical continuity of Jewish identity and profoundly obscured the fundamental moral insight of prophecy. The only way Jews could maintain their identity in the modern world was to articulate the insights of their tradition in pure ethical terms that constituted a standard not only for individual behavior but also for the moral legitimacy of the modern

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state. In this way, Jews could remain true to themselves and to the modern liberal (and German) state.

Leo Strauss’ view was more nuanced. He could not accept Cohen’s idealistic solution to the problem of Jewish political life in Weimar. He was skeptical that the complex body of Jewish thought and practice could be formulated in terms of a system of ethical imperatives. He was surprisingly close to Schmitt’s view in that he questioned whether liberalism—in either its Kantian or its Spinozistic form—could maintain the state. Still, he certainly did not consider Spinoza’s political philosophy to be essentially Jewish. Indeed, one purpose of Spinoza’s Critique of Religion was to show that the Theological-Political Treatise was not a Jewish work but belonged to a more general tradition. On the other hand, as his writings from the end of the Weimar period show, Strauss thought Spinoza’s work remained exemplary for Jews. Spinoza understood that historical and sociological factors, both internal to the tradition and external to it, remained necessary (if not sufficient) for the identity of the Jewish people. Thus, Jews in the Weimar period could not escape their predicament through assimilation or the reconstitution of themselves as bearers of a purely ethical tradition. Moreover, though he valued reason over revelation, Spinoza understood that religion was a problematic necessity in a modern state: it could be used to buttress the authority of rulers but also to undermine it. This would be true in a republican Germany and also in a Zionist state. Hence, through his reading of Spinoza in the Weimar period, Strauss presented—even if he failed to resolve—the essential tensions liberalism posed for modern Jews.