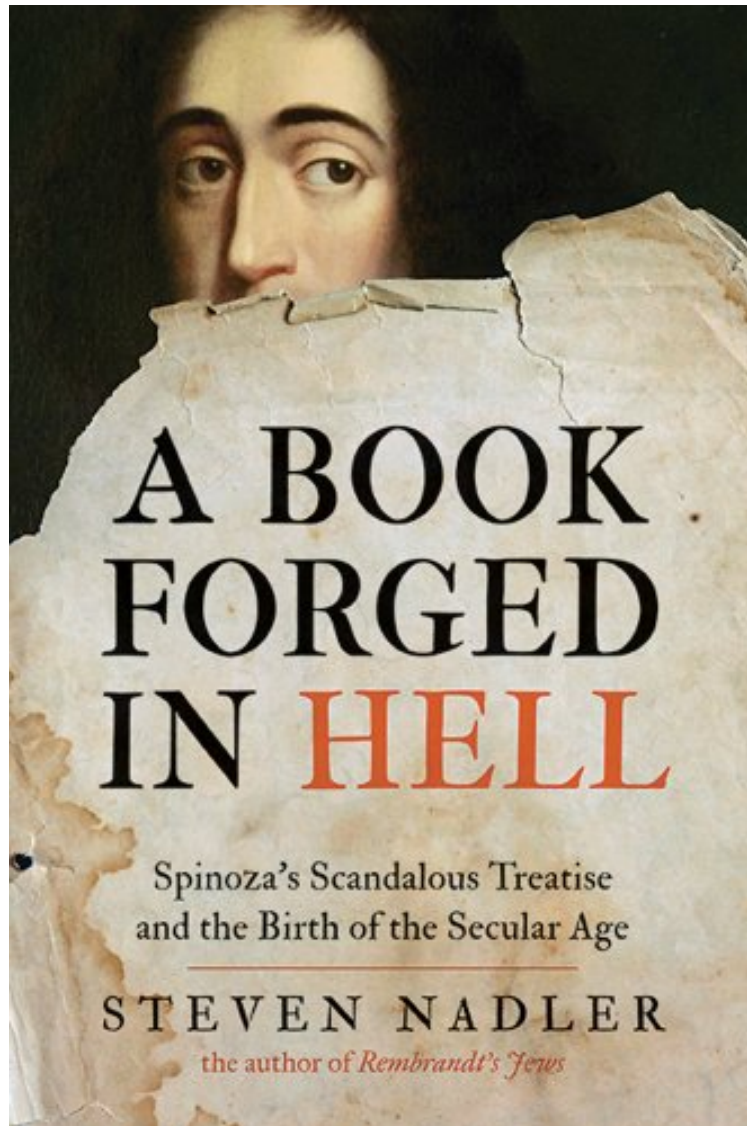


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A Book Forged in Hell: Spinozas Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age

Steven Nadler

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Steven Nadler : A Book Forged in Hell: Spinozas Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Book Forged in Hell: Spinozas Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Rigorous, entertaining, accessible, timely, and necessary By Rick J. Strassman Nowadays, when politicians lead with their religion, and clerics and the otherwise "religious" meddle in

secular life, Spinoza's "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" is as timely now as it was 250 years ago. Like Spinoza's book, Nadler's requires slow and careful reading. The patient and persistent reader, however, is similarly rewarded. There are three outstanding features I would like to mention. First, Nadler's cogent introductory summary of Spinoza's Ethics is extremely valuable because it places in context the latter's notions of God, virtue, and in particular Spinoza's views of Nature (as a proper noun), Thought (mental activity), and Extension (materiality). From these fundamental categories of reality, Spinoza develops his ideas of God, psychology, cause and effect, the virtuous life (which leads to blessedness or salvation). Second, Nadler repeats many of the basic ideas contained in the TTP throughout his book in a way that I found quite useful. This allows us to see Spinoza's basic tenets stand out in bold relief in a variety of different contexts; e.g., the Bible as a work of man; the necessity of the separation of church and state (and, the regulation of public worship and piety [but not belief, opinions, or verbal/written expression of them] by secular authorities in order to maintain social stability); the necessary beliefs leading to a "national religion" that leads to a polity that is peaceful, virtuous, and flourishing; and the relationship (or lack thereof) between theology and philosophy/science. Finally, Nadler provides us some valuable and entertaining, expert, and insightful breathing room with a behind-the-scenes account of the political, social, historical, theological, philosophical and cultural forces swirling around Spinoza and throughout early modern Europe, in particular Amsterdam and the Dutch States.⁴ of 4

people found the following review helpful. *Opposing Religious Dogma in Favor of Human Flourishing* By Sietze VanDerHeide A Book Forged in Hell is suited to both those readers that are new to Spinoza's work as well as ones who have previously explored this 17th-century philosopher. Spinoza pondered the role of religion in society as well as freedom of thought and speech nearly four centuries ago. And, his critical thought is relevant today as our world struggles with religious bias and strife, as well as civil liberties. Spinoza was among the first to challenge the fundamentalist rigidity of organized religion. However, he did not conclude that there was no God or no purpose to life. Rather he held that our world was an expression of an infinite essence, somewhat similar to the ideas of Taoism. He felt that the laws of nature are an attribute of God. By understanding how nature works, we can learn the principles that will help us each flourish in life. A Book Forged in Hell shows us the dangers of writing and publishing Spinoza's profoundly heretical ideas in a time of religious dogma. Steven Nadler's book reads like an adventure tale in which we get a glimpse of the leading philosophers of the 17th century and the roles they each played in supporting or opposing Spinoza's call for freedom of thought and speech.²³⁵ of 241 people found the following review helpful.

Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise By Robin Friedman About 25 years ago, I was engaged in serious graduate study in philosophy and preparing to write a dissertation on Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise (1670). I have had a lifelong interest in Spinoza and was interested in the Treatise because of the questions of how to interpret texts it raises in terms of its treatment of the Bible. Also, at the time, the Treatise was receiving far less attention than Spinoza's most famous work, the Ethics. I never completed the dissertation but retained my interest in Spinoza and the Treatise. The Treatise has received substantial attention since the time I was closely engaged with it. Historian Jonathan Israel has written a trilogy of lengthy, difficult books showing the great influence of Spinoza and the Treatise on Enlightenment thought and on the French and American Revolutions. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790*. Steven Nadler's new study, "A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age" (2011) is much more accessible than Israel's study and has a different focus. Nadler's aim is to offer a study of the Treatise to a general readership rather than simply to an academic audience in order to explain the book, its teachings, and its significance. Nadler is the William H. Hay II Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin -- Madison. He is the author of many books on Spinoza including a biography, *Spinoza: A Life*, a study of Spinoza's excommunication, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*, and a study of Spinoza's Ethics, *Spinoza's 'Ethics': An Introduction* (Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts). Nadler quite properly emphasizes the radical revolutionary character of Spinoza's Treatise. The title of Nadler's book derives from one of the many criticisms levelled at the Treatise shortly after its publication. One Willem van Blijenburgh, who had been a correspondent of Spinoza's, wrote a lengthy book refuting the Treatise in which he said: "This atheistic book is full of studious abominations and an accumulation of opinions which have been forged in hell, which every reasonable person, indeed every Christian, should find abhorrent." (p. 232) Nadler documents many similar comments about the book as well as the events which led to the ban on the book two years after its publication. More importantly, Nadler explains what it was in Spinoza's Treatise that so disturbed its contemporary readers. The Treatise concerns the relationship between religion and government and between religion and philosophy, broadly construed to include all forms of intellectual inquiry. Spinoza was concerned with religious wars, limitations on thought, and clerics' influence on civil government. In a way that manages to be both cautious and bold, the Treatise takes a naturalistic view of God and prophecy, denies the existence of miracles, and takes a historical approach to the composition and interpretation of Scripture. Spinoza finds the Bible the work of human beings writing at particular times. Religion's goals are ethical in that it teaches people to be kind to one another, but it does not have further cognitive or doctrinal teachings. In a free society, for Spinoza, people should be free to believe as they wish. As Nadler quotes the basic teaching of the Treatise: "The state can pursue no safer

course than to regard piety and religion as consisting solely in the exercise of charity and just dealing, and that the right of the sovereign, both in religious and secular spheres, should be restricted to men's actions, with everyone being allowed to think what he will and to say what he thinks." (p.214)Nadler's book begins with some brief biographical information about Spinoza and about his famous excommunication from the Amsterdam Jewish community. He also gives some important historical information about the Netherlands in Spinoza's day. Although there was in fact a larger degree of religious toleration in the Netherlands than in any other European community at the time, it was precarious and threatened by conflicts between monarchists and ecclesiastics on one hand and dissenting sects on the other hand. Spinoza wrote against a backdrop which thus contained both elements of liberty and the threat of repression. His aim was to increase the former. While there are universal lessons to be drawn from the Treatise, Nadler emphasizes that the book is also the product of a particular time and place. (For example, he writes: Moreover, while the Treatise remains of great relevance today, it is also a response to very particular and very complex historical exigencies, and we do not do it justice by trying to make it fit some transhistorical category of theories." p.207)Most of the book consists of Nadler's close reading and exposition of Spinoza's text on the nature of god and prophecy, miracles, Scriptural interpretation and authorship, and political philosophy. Nadler ties the teachings of the Treatise to the teachings of Spinoza's much more obscure Ethics. Nadler also draws important parallels between Spinoza and other thinkers. Thomas Hobbes receives attention throughout, both in the way Spinoza followed and the way he differed from him. Nadler also pays attention to the great medieval Jewish thinker Maimonides and offers his views on what Spinoza learned from Maimonides and where he disagreed. Nadler compares Spinoza's treatment of miracles in the Treatise with the famous work on the subject by a subsequent philosopher, David Hume, as well as with medieval Jewish and Christian understandings of miracles. Spinoza's views on tolerance and free speech are compared and contrasted with the views of John Locke, John Milton, and of the First Amendment to the United States constitution. The book considers Spinoza's alleged role as the first "secular Jew" (which Nadler rejects) and Spinoza's role as the founder of a philosophy of secularism and of secular government (which Nadler accepts.)Although long relegated to obscurity, the Treatise has been a book of pervasive and lasting influence. As Nadler concludes (p. 240):"Without a doubt, the Theological-Political Treatise is one of the most important and influential books in the history of philosophy, in religious and political thought, and even in Bible studies. More than any other work, it laid the foundation for modern critical and historical approaches to the Bible. And while often overlooked in books on the history of political thought, the Treatise also has a proud and well-deserved place in the rise of democratic theory, civil liberties, and political liberalism. The ideas of the Treatise inspired republican revolutionaries in England, America, and France, and it encouraged early modern anticlerical and antisectarian movements."I enjoyed revisiting the Treatise and thinking about it again through reading Nadler's study. Readers with a broad interest in philosophy and in ideas will benefit from Nadler's book and perhaps receive encouragement to read Spinoza's own book for themselves.Robin Friedman

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

Honorable Mention for the 2011 PROSE Award in Philosophy, Association of American Publishers" In this clearly written and accessible book, Nadler offers up a historical and philosophical analysis of Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise. . . . Each chapter not only focuses on sections of the Treatise but also explains the historical context of the Treatise and why many saw it as such a dangerous and corrupting book. . . . [Nadler] has definitely succeeded in writing an extremely rewarding and engaging book."--Library Journal (starred review)"[T]his is a groundbreaking analysis of an incendiary text."--Booklist"Steven Nadler's new study of the Treatise, *A Book Forged in Hell*, succeeds. . . . While his tasks are primarily expository and contextual, Nadler, who is the author of the standard biography of Spinoza, puts forward a substantive thesis as well. . . . Guided by this set of claims, Nadler takes us through the

Treatise in a detailed but seamless account of Spinoza's arguments and aims. One measure of his integrity, indeed, is that while endorsing the common portrayal of Spinoza as a founder of modern secularism, Nadler is sensitive to some of the ways in which Spinoza is not to be taken as the harbinger of the secular mindset. In fact, *A Book Forged in Hell* raises the important question of how appropriate it is to view Spinoza as a philosophical founder of contemporary secularism and especially of contemporary liberalism. It also raises the question of whether Spinoza should be understood as a Jewish thinker, if so, to what extent."--Zachary Micah Gartenberg, *Jewish of Books*"Steven Nadler has written a delightfully lucid and philosophically thorough account of the Treatise that helps to explain how and why this singular text became the object of such opprobrium and why we should see its appearance as the 'the birth of the secular age.' . . . What makes Nadler's so welcome a contribution is the care and the clarity of his philosophical exposition, and his restraint when tracing the wider implications of Spinoza's work."--Peter Gordon, *TNR.com's The Book*"Without comparison the best among the available books on Spinoza in this category."--*British Journal for the History of Philosophy*"Nadler shows, for a general audience, why Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* evoked such opposition from contemporary religious and political readers. Nadler places Spinoza and his book in their historical context, explains the issues that were at stake, and discusses the book's subsequent influence. Persons interested in the history of political liberalism, modern Judaism, biblical interpretation, and early modern philosophy will welcome this excellent book."--Choice"A *Book Forged in Hell* is . . . without comparison the best among the available books on Spinoza in this category."--*British Journal for the History of Philosophy*"Steven Nadler, professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has written a thoroughly engaging study of a book which, not only controversial in its day, may be said to have moved Biblical studies into a modern terminology and thrust. It will be a welcome addition to seminary and university libraries."--Morton J. Merowitz, *Association of Jewish Libraries*"[A]ccomplished. . . . Few have accepted Spinoza's equation of God with Nature or his determinism. Yet his deconstruction of the Bible remains a towering achievement, a triumph of reason over ecclesiastical obfuscation. Nadler is to be applauded for making this achievement so accessible. God knows, the world still needs such enlightenment."--*Jewish Chronicle*"Philosophy professor Steven Nadler tells the story of the book that scandalized early modern Europe--and laid the groundwork for modern republican, anticlerical, and anti-sectarian movements--in his readable *A Book Forged in Hell*."--Reason"[L]ucid. . . . Nadler does an excellent job of summarizing Spinoza's sometimes convoluted arguments."--*Weekly Standard*"Nadler's book is a biography of the treatise and very much a page turner, a philosophical and political thriller, which demands to be bought, read and shared."--Derek Wall, *Morning Star Online*"In this highly readable study, Steven Nadler persuasively shows that this scandalous work of modern philosophy deserves far more attention than it has actually received from scholars."--Grant Havers, *European Legacy*"From the Back Cover"Steven Nadler's knowledge of the many influences acting on Spinoza is profound. He is as sensitive to Spinoza's reactions to Descartes and Maimonides as to the philosopher's fears of the conservative religious forces that were threatening the Dutch Republic of his day. The wide context that Nadler provides makes for a reading of Spinoza's treatise which is unfailingly rich, nuanced, and illuminating."--Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*"If there is a single theme that runs throughout Spinoza's writings, Steven Nadler says, 'it is the liberation from bondage, whether psychological, political, or religious.' Spinoza's importance as a philosopher--maybe as the philosopher of modernity--hinges on that. This Amsterdam Jew was one of the grandest and boldest mold-breakers of all time. Nadler gives us a clean, crisp, indispensable account of what made Spinoza's Treatise so revolutionary."--Russell Shorto, author of *Descartes' Bones*"*A Book Forged in Hell* is more than just an excellent and highly readable introduction to one of the most important texts of philosophy and political thought. Steven Nadler provides an eloquent portrait of Spinoza's treatise, placing it firmly in its historical, religious, political, and philosophical setting."--Jonathan Israel, author of *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*"This is an excellent book. Steven Nadler's wonderfully elegant and fluid writing style makes difficult ideas accessible and exciting without watering them down. A prime virtue of the book is that it provides just enough biographical and historical background to make the philosophy come alive and to reveal what a dramatic work Spinoza's treatise is."--Michael Della Rocca, *Yale University*About the AuthorSteven Nadler is the William H. Hay II Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His books include *Rembrandt's Jews*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *Spinoza: A Life*, which won the Koret Jewish Book Award; and *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil in the Age of Reason* (Princeton).