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Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind by Steven Nadler

Review by: W. H. Beardsley

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Steven Nadler. *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*.

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Even as they prospered financially, Amsterdam's thriving community of "Portuguese" merchants were burdened by the mandate imposed by the city's regents in 1619 when they granted these ex-converso refugees from Iberia the right to openly practice their Judaism. The Dutch authorities expected them to regulate the social, moral, and religious life of their community and to ensure that it kept to a strict observance of Jewish law. This led the community to be especially sensitive to the concerns of their Christian neighbors. The famous toleration of the Dutch could never be taken for granted and the Jewish community was aware of the many political and theological divisions within their host community that constantly threatened to upset the delicate balance supporting continued toleration. Furthermore, after generations of practicing Judaism in secret, the community had but a tenuous grasp of their religious identity and needed to rediscover or even reinvent central religious practice. This sense of insecurity arising from the perceived precariousness of their place in the city led them to reinstate the practice of expelling "heretics" from the community. The issuance of writs of *herem*, or expulsion, became common and took on a political as well as a religious dimension.

On 27 July 1656 the community issued an unusually harsh *herem* to twenty-three-year-old Baruch Spinoza, who had recently taken over his family's importing concerns. They accused him of "monstrous deeds" and of practicing and teaching "abominable heresies," researching carefully older writs to find the harshest and most colorful formulations. Young Spinoza had as yet published nothing and the writ of expulsion gives no clue as to the precise nature of these deeds and heresies. Steven Nadler, in this sequel to his fine biography (*Spinoza: A Life* [1999]) addresses this mystery. The task is doubly difficult. In the absence of any documentary "smoking gun" and given that any number of Spinoza's later published doctrines (for example, his denial of the divine origin of the Torah) would have been cause enough, establishing "the cause" of his expulsion is, according to Nadler, a bit like finding the cause of the French Revolution. Yet here the historian faces the "supreme gift," a situation of "overdetermination," and is free to pursue interesting subplots (15). Based on some hints in the documentary record, Nadler chooses a particularly fascinating, if controversial, subplot, Spinoza's views on the eternity of mind and his apparent denial of personal immortality. This then becomes the occasion for a detailed discussion of Spinoza's philosophy, Jewish theology, and the views of the great Jewish Aristotelians concerning the nature of mind and intellect.

That Spinoza in his mature writings rejected any notion of an individual mind or soul as a distinct, independent substance is clear. This rejection of the Cartesian basis for immortality is a central component of his monism. Yet many have seen in his cryptic remarks concerning the eternity of the mind some basis for a version

of personal immortality. Even after the destruction of the body, Spinoza writes, there is something of the human mind that remains and is eternal. The question is whether this “something” is enough to secure personal immortality. The heart of Nadler’s book is a persuasive argument that these remarks in fact constitute a denial of immortality. Nadler demonstrates that Spinoza is developing the views of Maimonides and especially Gersonides and presents an interpretation on which Spinoza’s philosophy of mind constitutes “the culmination of Jewish rationalism.” In rejecting any version of individual immortality, offering instead a vision of a single, divine eternal intellect, Spinoza can be seen as “pushing a particular intellectualist account of the mind to its ultimate logical conclusion” (131).

Concerned that their Christian hosts would take offense if the community accepted someone who seemed to undermine morality by removing the support of eternal reward and punishment, hoping that their cousins in Portugal would, despite their outward rejection of Judaism, still have a share in the world to come and, most importantly, committed to a version of Judaism still colored in various ways by Catholicism, the Amsterdam community expelled the young heretic with prejudice. Nadler has not settled the question of Spinoza’s expulsion, but his well-researched exploration of this aspect of the story will fascinate anyone interested in Jewish thought or early modern philosophy.

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