
Published by

Dietz, Mary G.
Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81019
The world was falling apart before the very eyes of seventeenth-century Englishmen. The specter of disintegration and atomization transfixed the vision of poets and political philosophers alike. John Donne felt that Nature herself was crumbling to bits under the doubting gaze of the “new Philosophy.”

And freely men confesse that this world’s spent,  
When in the Planets, and the Firmament  
They seeke so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.  
’Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone.¹

Some years later, Sir Robert Filmer feared a more troubling, if less metaphysical, incoherence in parliamentary politics. The people’s representatives, he charged, “are constrained to epitomize and sub-epitomize themselves so long, till at last they crumble away into the atoms of monarchy, which is next to anarchy.”² Filmer sought order and wholeness in, among other places, the dictates of Scripture. But Thomas Hobbes espied disintegration and atomization there, too, especially when Holy Writ was interpreted by the enemies of peace and truth. Seeking their own advantage, they obscured everything by “casting atomes of Scripture, as dust before mens eyes.”³

What would put the world back together again? Hobbes certainly had some ideas regarding Scripture—not to mention politics.
and the new philosophy. Hobbes's full passage deserves quotation, for it brings to a close his (unfortunately still neglected) account "Of a Christian Commonwealth" (part 3, *Leviathan*); and it prepares a bridgehead for his furious assaults against the "Kingdome of Darknesse" (part 4, *Leviathan*), the first chapter of which is "Of Spiritual Darknesse from MISINTERPRETATION of Scripture." It also contains a summary of what Hobbes alleged to be his own method of scriptural interpretation. He began with a glance back (at part 3), and he followed immediately with a disclaimer that is not above suspicion.

And this much shall suffice, concerning the Kingdome of God, and Policy Ecclesiastical. Wherein I pretend not to advance any Position of my own, but onely to shew what are the Consequences that seem to me deducible from the Principles of Christian Politiques, (which are the holy Scriptures,) in confirmation of the Power of Civill Soveraigns, and the Duty of their Subjects. And in the allegation of Scripture, I have endeavoured to avoid such texts as are of obscure, or controverted Interpretation; and to alledge none, but in such sense as is most plain, and agreeable to the harmony and scope of the whole Bible; which was written for the reestablishment of the Kingdome of God in Christ. For it is not the bare Words, but the Scope of the writer that giveth the true light, by which any writing is to bee interpreted; and they that insist upon single Texts, without considering the main Designe, can derive no thing from them cleerly; but rather by casting atomes of Scripture, as dust before mens eyes, make every thing more obscure than it is; an ordinary artifice of those that seek not the truth, but their own advantage.4

The careful reader—whether in the seventeenth or the twentieth century—would notice at least two things about this summary passage. First, in the course of *Leviathan* up to that point—not to mention his other works—Hobbes himself flung great dustbins full of "atomes of Scripture" before the eyes of his readers. Even in the most famous and widely read part of *Leviathan* (part 2, "Of Commonwealth"), for example, he supported "the Rights of Monarchy" by citing, in this nearly random order, verses from Exodus, Samuel, Kings, Samuel, Colossians, Matthew, Titus, Matthew, and (first coming last) Genesis.5 In none of Hobbes's works, including *Leviathan* where Scripture receives its most sustained attention, do we find an epistle read in its entirety, a gospel faithfully reflected upon from beginning to end, a book perused for its meaning or guidance. Hobbes
hurled atomes of Scripture as ably and cleverly as any pastor, presbyter, or priest.

Second, except for the truthful and even understated confession that Hobbes was writing "in confirmation of the Power of Civill Sovereigns, and the Duty of their Subjects," so very much else in the passage conflicts with what he said and did in *Leviathan* and elsewhere. The "sense" which he found in certain texts (or atomes) of Scripture is not always "most plain"; and even the distinction between "obscure" and "plain" passages fails to capture another class of metaphorical passages with which he wrestled. Insisting that interpreters seize not upon "bare Words" but upon the "Scope of the writer" sounds like an appeal, among other things, to the intentions of a particular writer as expressed in many texts. But Hobbes elsewhere observed how often "we cannot safely judge of men's intentions" within recent history, much less during the times of the Bible's composition. Even then, the Bible was written and transmitted (with possible falsifications) not by one writer but by many diverse writers whose collective intentions do not conspire to produce one "main Designe." Indeed the very identity of these many writers is unclear: "Who were the originall writers of the severall 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)."

Finally, the whole summary passage does not appear to underwrite the often incredible interpretations of Scripture that Hobbes offered. Even the modern secular reader could be forgiven for agreeing with the Puritan minister Richard Baxter in *A Holy Commonwealth* (1659): "If any man will but read Scripture, he need no other confutation of Hobbes." If the rules expressed in Hobbes's summary passage in part 3 of *Leviathan* do not capture what he said and did when he interpreted Scripture, which implicit ones do? This question has hardly ever been posed in this way—one of the unfortunately simple and simply unfortunate consequences of the fact that Hobbes's writings on or invoking of Scripture are themselves hardly ever read. And when read, they are often passed off as preserving a merely "decorous orthodoxy" and/or dismissed as a pioneering example of purely "destructive biblical criticism," as Basil Willey put it half a century ago. This differs little from the reception accorded Hobbes by his contemporaries who thought him an atheist, and all the more dangerous an atheist because of his literary genius and savage wit. More recently and sympathetically, David Johnston has recognized the principled and skillful way that Hobbes interpreted Scripture. But in reference
to the principles articulated in the summary passage, he has surpris­
ingly concluded that "Hobbes applies these interpretative principles
to the Scriptures with relentless virtuosity."  

In this essay, I try to disinter the rules that actually underlie Hobbes’s assuredly relentless interpretative practice. I also consider Hobbes’s political and philosophical intentions in the matter of biblical interpretation. In short, I assay Hobbes’s hermeneutical strategies in an account that is chiefly internal to his texts. To anticipate some of my conclusions, Hobbes sought to use Scripture to confirm his rationalism, his natural philosophy of body, and his political philosophy of absolute obedience; to interdict any special scriptural claims to political or ecclesiastical power on the part of churchmen; and to exorcise the enthusiastic and superstitious strains in Christianity which unglued reason and undermined obedience. Read aright, Scripture served what Hobbes repeatedly called “peace and truth”—though hardly a policy of civil toleration. Wildly diverse scriptural interpretations had helped to fuel the fires of civil war; and Hobbes hoped to use his own scriptural interpretation to help put them out. Should he succeed in convincing his readers—among them the sovereign—that his reading was the only one consistent with peace and truth, he would have helped to reconstitute the language and political community of his time.

PUTTING SCRIPTURE IN ITS PLACE

For a man who boasted of his timorousness and confessed that with the first “scent of civil war . . . I fled the shores of my coun­try,” Hobbes was bold and provocative in his writings, especially in his scriptural interpretation. This, at any rate, was his own advertise­ment—whether or not it does justice to his immediate predeces­sors. Both in the epistle dedicatory and in the review and conclusion of Leviathan, Hobbes called explicit attention to part 3 where “some new doctrines” are put forward. Further, these doctrines are not only new, they are offensive: “That which perhaps may most offend, are certain Texts of Holy Scripture, alledged by me to other purpose than ordinarily they use to be by others. But I have done it with due submission, and also (in order to my Subject) necessarily; for they are the Outworks of the Enemy, from whence they impugne the Civill Power.”

The arch-authoritarian Hobbes did not impugn the civil power, to put it mildly. Nor did he deny the truth of anything in Scripture
even as he forwarded his admittedly offensive new doctrines. He did not deny, for example, that the Bible was authoritative over Christian souls, or that it contained our warrant for believing in God’s existence and Christ’s Second Coming, or that it should be “the rule of our actions, both public and private.” Hobbes’s most personal religious (or irreligious) beliefs are not perfectly clear, to be sure; and subsequent debates about them refuse to be put to rest. But whatever one makes of those debates or of Hobbes’s deepest convictions, it bears emphasizing that when it comes to the practice of scriptural interpretation and the politics of biblical discourse, Hobbes made a rule of not denying anything outright.

Hobbes’s boldly advertised new doctrines purport to speak for “truth” as well as for “peace and loyalty.” Their “Novelty can breed no trouble” for an absolute sovereign or an obedient people. One surefire way to avoid trouble is to render unto the sovereign all manner of power, both ecclesiastical and temporal. Thus Hobbes allowed that among his (or its) many powers, the sovereign is the head of both church and state, commander of both law and canon. Accordingly, he (or it) must be an interpreter: “There is need therefore of an interpreter to make the Scriptures canon. . . . The word of an Interpreter of Scriptures is the word of God.” The power of interpretation adheres to sovereignty more generally. “For he to whom it belongs to interpret the controversies arising from the divers interpretations of Scriptures, hath authority also simply and absolutely to determine all manner of controversies whatsoever.”

This doctrine is not new with Hobbes, for it is the shared property of a number of early modern Erastian political theorists. If Hobbes made any novel contribution here, it is in the emphatic underscoring of the popular foundation of the sovereign’s power over Scripture, as in all else. This is implied in *Leviathan* and driven home in *Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*. In response to Bishop Bramhall’s view that “the positive law of the Bible, is a law without our assent,” Hobbes fired back a series of rhetorical questions, to which he, naturally, provided the answers.

The Bible is a law. To Whom? To all the world? He knows it not. How came it then to be a law to us? Did God speak it *viva voce* to us? Have we then any other warrant for it than the word of the prophets? Have we seen the miracles? Have we any other assurance of their certainty than the authority of the Church? And is the authority of the Church any other than the authority of the commonwealth, or hath the head of the commonwealth any
other authority than that which hath been given him by the members? Else, why should not the Bible be canonical as well in Constantinople as in any other place? They that have the legislative power make nothing canon, which they make not law, nor law, which they make not canon. And because the legislative power is from the assent of the subjects, the Bible is made law by the assent of the subjects.  

Having put Scripture in its political place under the popularly authorized power of the sovereign, the Erastian Hobbes could well have held his tongue or fled “the war between the pens” in any further matters of scriptural interpretation. But this he did not do, even though it would have saved him the seventeenth-century accusation of being an atheist, much less the twentieth-century slur that he was a hypocrite and possibly a communist patriarch as well. Although he granted to the popularly authorized sovereign the power to put interpretative controversy to rest, Hobbes himself did not rest content with rendering the Word unto the modern Caesar. If “peace” required the sovereign to interpret Scripture, “truth” required Hobbes to interpret it as well. In the process, he put Scripture in its textual place.

Hobbes put Scripture last, at the end. This is so in a general analytical way, at least as his argument unfolds. Thus, in both De Cive and Leviathan, he listed the threefold Word of God in this order: reason, revelation, and prophecy (where the latter is “the Voyce of some man, to whom by the operation of Miracles, he procureth credit with the rest”). But Hobbes noted for his contemporaries that “Miracles ceasing, Prophets cease, and the Scripture supplies their place.” As a matter of analysis, then, Scripture comes last. Beyond the analysis of the Word of God, Hobbes also brought Scripture to bear as a matter of literary form at the end of his various substantive discussions. This is true of whole works, such as De Cive (where the third and last part on “Religion” consists almost solely of scriptural interpretation) and Leviathan (at least if we take parts 3 and 4 together). This is also true of particular issues wherever they occur in Hobbes’s works, even in the earlier parts.

Consider a brief list of examples. Having distinguished between paternal and despotical power, and having argued that by covenant the sovereign’s power is absolute, Hobbes had his readers “now consider what the Scripture teacheth in the same point.” “Places and examples of Scripture of the rights of Government” are introduced to be “agreeable to what hath been said before.” Scripture also
comes at the end of the analysis of natural law. Hobbes belatedly cast the atome of Acts 19:40 in order to press home his argument with respect to unlawful assemblies. Proverbs and Deuteronomy duly follow upon the argument that the law must be written and promulgated. That men are bound to obey, though not necessarily to believe, divine positive law as dictated in a commonwealth Hobbes made “yet cleerer, by the Examples and Testimonies concerning this point in holy Scripture,” where Genesis does the trick. And then there is the most powerful and imaginal of Hobbes’s atomes of Scripture. Having “set forth the nature of Man” up to the last paragraph in chapter 28, Hobbes looked back upon his achievement and crowned it at the end with that “comparison out of the two last verses of the one and fortieth of Job, where God having set forth the great power of Leviathan, called him King of the Proud.”

Scripture comes at the end for what appears to be two reasons. It functions to confirm what has come before; and it is given the last word. That is, rhetorically, Scripture “confirms”—supports, justifies, rationalizes—the other forms of the Word of God which precede it, especially reason. Prophecy and miracles have ceased in modern England, and Scripture confirms only those reported during biblical times. Revelation hardly survives Hobbes’s skepticism and humor, however, though of course it is never denied: “To say [God] hath spoken to [a man] in a Dream, is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him.” Others need believe such a dreamer even less, for God “obliges no man to beleve . . . him that pretends it; who (being a man) may err, and (which is more) may lie.” In this way, Scripture functions as an “appendage” to the natural, first, and “undoubted word of God,” namely reason. Hobbes’s rationalism, in short, finds its confirmation in Scripture.

But in this confirmation of reason, Scripture is also given the honor of being the last word. For Hobbes’s Christian audience, it is that final invocation to which nothing else can or should be said. If not in the beginning, at least in the end, there is the Word.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER: THE WORD OBEIDENT

Once in place, Scripture still requires interpretation. Hobbes simply dismissed those who claim that Scripture requires no interpretation whatsoever. “Out of Holy Scripture: behold the book, read it,” say the simple-minded—or those who would cozen them—in support of
their self-certifying ideas. "In vain," thundered Hobbes in return. All words require interpretation, whether in speech, text, law, or Scripture. But there is danger here because of the degrees of freedom that interpretation allows. This is especially so of holy words, which seem particularly susceptible to wildly different and even licentious interpretations. These contributed to the "disorders" that Hobbes found around him and that occasioned his best writing. In 1651, Hobbes counted that "the number of apostates from natural reason is almost become infinite. And it sprang from sick-brained men, who having gotten good store of holy words by frequent reading of the Scriptures, made such a connexion of them usually in their preaching, that their sermons, signifying just nothing, yet to unlearned men seemed most divine."

In a context so confused and confusing, Hobbes took upon himself the task of interpreting the substance of Scripture. In practice, we find him dividing the words of Scripture into different sorts and then mobilizing different interpretative strategies for conquering them—or at least trying to conquer the assent of his own readers. The summary passage of part 3 of *Leviathan* signals Hobbes’s demarcation of two of these sorts; those that are “plain” and those that are “obscure.” Plain words virtually speak for themselves; or, rather, they are readily interpreted by those with the simplest command over any vulgar tongue into which the Bible has been translated, who will but take the time to consider the “harmony and scope of the whole Bible.” Obscure ones Hobbes avoided. Alas, there are some mysteries that passeth all human understanding, even Hobbes’s.

In the summary passage, Hobbes did not elaborate on the plain or the obscure. He did not articulate there what messages plain texts usually convey. He neither identifies those passages whose words are obscure nor intimates any other sort of text, say, those that lie between the plain and the obscure. But if one reads Hobbes at all closely—not only in *Leviathan*, but in *De Cive* and *Behemoth*—one finds some illumination.

Plain texts teach subjects their duty or narrate relatively simple tales. These Hobbes amassed, often in great quantities. But he left them relatively free of commentary or gloss. His readers are assured, for example, that there are even some “clear texts” which “receive no controversy.” As examples of the simple tales, we find a great string of unadorned texts about Jewish history. There is “plain” Scripture about Jesus’ first coming and overall character. And there
is a brief narrative run-through of the life of Jesus as found in Matthew.48

But, principally, plain texts harbor those "easy places which teach men their duty."49 Hobbes called attention to these easy places in Old and New Testament whenever he could; and these communicate a number of doctrines which bear on "simple obedience" to a sovereign power "as great, as possibly men can be imagined to make it."50 The Scriptures tell us "without obscurity," for example, that salvation only requires belief in the single article of faith that Jesus is the Christ; and obedience to law.51 (Indeed the latter, if "perfect," would suffice for salvation if it were not for original sin, which was itself "disobedience.")52 Even Christ's teachings are sparse and plain, as recorded in Scripture: "Obey the law" is his principal message. "Right, politie, and natural sciences," on the other hand, "are subjects concerning which Christ denies that it belongs to his office to give any precepts."53 Christians are free to speculate on these latter doctrines, at least if they do not conflict with the command to obey. For, of course, "our Saviour . . . says Give to Caesar that which is Caesars."54 Naturally, St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 13—"the most quoted of all texts on the questions of political obligation throughout the seventeenth century"55—finds its way into Hobbes's interpretation of the plain political message of the Bible. In particular, Hobbes invoked it in chapter 42 of Leviathan amidst his assaults on Cardinal Bellarmine, whom he took to be the veritable high priest of Catholic resistance since he was the most powerful representative of claims for the autonomy of the church over against the sovereign.56 However, Hobbes did not belabor Romans 13, having at the ready sufficient other atomes of Scripture with which to make the same point.

To papists, Presbyterians, Independents, and sectaries, Hobbes made Scripture plain. Therefore, on pain of their own salvation, they should not use Scripture for their personal or ecclesiastical ends, much less to counsel disobedience or resistance. The power of churchmen of any sort is utterly dependent upon the command of the sovereign; they have no independent power, including in matters of Biblical interpretation. They surely should not commit "the greatest, and main abuse of Scripture"; namely, to argue that the Kingdom of God is (with the superstitious papists) the "present church" or (with the enthusiastic sectaries) the time when the dead will "rise again at the last day" as Christ's elect.57 The Kingdom of God, shown plainly in the Old Testament, was that literal kingdom over which God ruled directly by his covenant with Abraham. In the
New Testament, it is the promise that Christ will come "to reign actually and eternally . . . on Earth," whoever is there at the time to serve him. Boastful of its novelty, Hobbes drove this unobscure point home, with all its obedient conclusions about obedience.

Because this doctrine (though proved out of places of Scripture not few, nor obscure) will appear to most men a novelty; I doe but propound it; maintaining nothing in this, or any other paradox of Religion; but attending the end of that dispute of the sword, concerning the Authority (not yet amongst my Countrymen decided,) by which all sorts of doctrine are to bee approved, or rejected; and whose commands, both in speech, and writing (whatsoever be the opinions of private men) must by all men, that mean to be protected by their Laws, be obeyed.\textsuperscript{58}

The obscure passages Hobbes passed over in silence. That he did not single them out is probably no accident, for why call attention to them? There are already far too many interpreters who seek out "every obscure place of Scripture" and "praeterrnitting the easy places which teach them their duty, fall scanning only of the mysteries of religion."\textsuperscript{59} As we shall see more clearly, Hobbes wanted to eliminate or redirect the mysteries—to submit them to "reason's inquisition," as he put it with regard to the ecclesiastical authority of the temporal sovereign.\textsuperscript{60} An interesting exercise would be to peruse Hobbes's texts in this matter, in order to discover which books, chapters, or verses Hobbes left in obscurity. But one book is conspicuously absent throughout the greater part of Hobbes's discussion of Scripture, and that is Revelation or the Apocalypse.\textsuperscript{61} Faced with Gog and Magog, the loosing of Satan, and the temptations of the whore of Babylon, we can perhaps readily understand why he who wanted to confirm reason by Scripture and to teach duty plainly would leave such stories and prophecies almost entirely out of account.

THE SCRIPTURE OF ATOMES

For all his silence on obscure texts of Scripture, and for all his amassing of those atomes of plain Scripture that command obedience, Hobbes in fact spent more time wrestling with passages of Holy Writ belonging to neither of these categories. The summary passage at the end of part 3 of \textit{Leviathan} does not mention those many texts of
Scripture that Hobbes took great pains to interpret and that he admitted are "hard," "difficult," "allegorical," or "metaphorical." Of these—and let us call them collectively the metaphorical ones—many revert to the plain meaning of obedience by the time Hobbes was done with them. But there are other metaphorical passages that deal with metaphysical questions. Hobbes interpreted these in such a way as to render them consistent with his materialism. Since these metaphorical passages are not discussed in Hobbes's political works before *Leviathan*—whereas plain obedient ones are—we may presume that they are those "Texts of Holy Scripture, alleged by me to other purpose than ordinarily they use to be by others." Hobbes read out of, or into, them his offending new doctrines.

There is no little irony in this interpretative strategy, of course, since Hobbes is famous for expressing contempt for metaphor as an abuse of speech. But this posture was always overly stiff because Hobbes himself was a master of metaphor. *Leviathan* is itself a metaphor, while the argument supporting it is but an extended metaphor. In the present context, then, what is most interesting is Hobbes's insinuation of materialism into the metaphorical texts of Scripture.

Chapter 34 presents a trinity of holy words—spirits, angels, and inspiration—whose interpretation turns on what Hobbes called his natural philosophy of body. His interpretative strategy is to show how these words, though often used metaphorically, in Scripture, are not inconsistent with the literal "truths" about body as disclosed to natural reason (which, again, is the "undoubted word of God"). This is no easy task, and Hobbes knew it. But instead of consigning spirits, angels, and inspiration to a silent obscurity, he knew that "it is necessary . . . to determine, out of the Bible, the meaning of such words, as by their ambiguity, may render what I am to inferre upon them, obscure, or disputable." But in hopes of dispelling obscurity and avoiding dispute, Hobbes mobilized what we might call the materialist interpretation of Scripture.

"The World is . . . Corporeall." Its substances are corporeal bodies; indeed, the philosophical notion of "substance" is meaningless without the notion of "corporeal body." "Incorporeal substance"—that Thomistic doctrine still lingering in Romish superstition—is self-contradictory. The words, Hobbes said, when "joined together, destroy one another." Spirits, then, cannot be incorporeal substances, which is known to those who rationally and scientifically study causes. And a close reading of Scripture confirms this, Hobbes asserted. "Spirit," as discussed in Scripture, refers to many
things, often metaphorically, among them a passion or wind or extraordinary understanding or life or (yet again) subordination to authority. But it does not refer to incorporeal substance—much less to ghosts, even holy ones. Genesis, Exodus, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Job, Ezekiel, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Romans, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts are all made to deliver up their lines to show this is so. Hobbes concluded with the idea of the Holy Ghost not far from his mind: "How we came to translate Spirits, by the word Ghosts, which signifieth nothing, neither in heaven, nor earth, but the Imaginary inhabitants of mans brain, I examine not: but this I say, the word Spirit in the text signifieth no such thing; but either properly a reall substance, or Metaphorically, some extraordinary ability or affection of the Mind, or of the Body."69

Next, angels become messengers of any sort, including the air or winds which are themselves but "thin bodies."70 They may also be images that "rise in the fancie in Dreams and visions." Hobbes confessed that once he believed that angels were "nothing but" these images. However, "many places of the New Testament" have "extorted from my feeble Reason, an acknowledgment, and beleefe that there be also Angels substantiall, and permanent."71 But Scripture does not say that they are "no place." Wherever they are, they are bodies.

Inspiration meets its materialist interpretation as well. Against a backdrop of enthusiastic claims about God’s elect having prophetic certainty of things now or to come, Hobbes said bluntly that inspiration is "nothing but the blowing into a man some thin and subtile aire, or wind, in such manner as a man filleth a bladder with his breath." He allowed that there are other uses of the word (beyond the hot air of religious enthusiasts). But they are all like that "easie metaphor, to signifie, that God enclined the spirit or mind of those Writers, to write that which should be usefull in teaching, reproving, correcting, and instructing man in the way of righteous living."72 Lest we misunderstand what this "way" is, Hobbes later made it plain that "Righteousness is but the will to give to every one his owne, that is to say, the will to obey the Laws."73 Thus, once we work through the metaphors, "inspiration," materially speaking, is air blown into a man; or, politically speaking, the godly inclination to those virtues associated with obedience.

Beyond spirits, angels, and inspiration, Hobbes found similar passages in Scripture whose metaphorical words require materialist interpretation. These, too, are novel and likely to offend, but Hobbes pressed them on his readers anyway. In the process, he proved to be
a mortalist, as well as a unitarian. The so-called and scripturally unwarranted trinity is really three persons—Moses, Jesus, and the Apostles—representing God. He further stated that "there is no reason" to believe in transubstantiation: as if "after certain words spoken over a piece of bread, that presently God hath made it not bread, but a God, or a man, or both, and nevertheless it looketh still as like bread as ever it did." The lives of the saints turn out to be "but Old Wives tales." And he found on the earth (wherever else metaphors might point) the ordinary site of so many scriptural referents: "As the kingdom of God, and Eternall life, so also Gods Enemies, and their Torments after Judgment, appear by the Scripture to have their place on Earth." These religious views earned Hobbes the reputation of being a heretic—a charge he was particularly concerned to counter, in and out of print, late in life. But he stuck to his views, nonetheless. Among other reasons, they were consistent with his general metaphysical commitments, which he claimed were the dictates of reason, and so, godly and true. Reason—and its scriptural confirmation—cannot suffer superstition and enthusiasm. The world, according to the man who referred to himself as "the little worm that is myself," is earthy and finite. It is subject to change and open to the scrutiny of our senses and our reason. It is composed of bodies, and these of smaller bodies, and these of yet smaller bodies, until at last we come to the smallest bodies of all, the atoms. Atoms are the stuff of matter, men, and worms, as well as of spirits, angels, and inspiration. Holy Writ about them is but the Scripture of Atomes.

THE SOVEREIGN READER

When all is said, we can see what Hobbes has done. He has interpreted Scripture in a systematic way, even if not quite in the way he summarized. He has shown, if he did not quite say, under which rules he has implicitly proceeded. These implicit rules can perhaps best be articulated in the form of commands, as Hobbes himself might have liked:

1. Deny nothing outright; save the word, even as it is made to convey some offending new doctrines.
2. Put Scripture in its place, at the end; let it confirm that which has come before and let it have the last word.
3. Divide the passages into three sorts: the plain, the metaphorical, and the obscure.
4. Conquer each with different strategies: pile up the plain ones that teach subjects their duties to their absolute sovereigns; interpret the metaphorical ones in a way consistent with the plain ones and/or with a materialist metaphysic; remain silent on the obscure ones.

5. Surrender all matters of interpretation—including these rules—to the sovereign should he (or it) command it.

These are Hobbes's rules; or, at least, they provide a better reconstruction of his practice of scriptural interpretation. One may well wonder why, since he was bold enough to advertise his offending new doctrines, he did not also own these rules as his. As with many other of Hobbes's pregnant silences, no definitive answer is possible. But perhaps it is a literary strategy of reassurance. Having put his Christian readers through the paces of part 3, and preparing them for the intellectual savaging of part 4, Hobbes suggested that all is really well, after all. His readers should be reassured that, although neither he nor anyone else can understand the full mysteries and even obscurities of Scripture, his reading nonetheless fits authorial purpose, the essential simplicity, and the main design of Holy Writ. Indeed, there are other literary strategies Hobbes employed. The epistle dedicatory prefixed to his (and most other) works has its own peculiar literary strategy. It seeks intellectual (if not more lucrative) patronage through humble submissions and sometimes obsequious praise. Good form requires praise for a great man at the outset; good form requires reassurance for the patient reader en route. Remember also that Hobbes himself knew of his own eloquence, even as he excoriated eloquence. And, again, he was the master metaphorist against metaphor. The summary passage simply takes some license, a pardonable offense for an eloquent master of metaphor and literary form.

One would do better to wonder, not about Hobbes's license with the "main Designe" of Scripture, but about Hobbes's main design. In other words, what was Hobbes trying to do in interpreting Scripture the way he did? The answer to this must be cast in terms of what Hobbes intended to accomplish and through whom he hoped to accomplish it. In brief, Hobbes intended and hoped to reconstitute the language and community of his contemporaries—that is, to teach obedience to English subjects and to enlighten enthusiastic and superstitious Christians in the ways of natural philosophy and reason. Peace and truth—to use Hobbes's own evidently partisan terms—could not suffer those sword-wielders who would resist established sovereign power, or those crazed and benighted Christians.
who were gulled by too many mysteries and too much magic. Their language and their community needed a radical reconstitution.

Hobbes had to be read and believed for this reconstitution to come about. Lacking either pulpit or police, he had to persuade with his pen. Not unlike the Apostles themselves, Hobbes held "nothing of power, but of Perswasion." The task was difficult, for he knew that he was trying to persuade those who might be disinclined to believe him. But to judge by the sheer scale of his literary production, he obviously thought himself up to the task. He wrote both to the sovereign and to a broader audience, to readers high and low.

To a possible sovereign Hobbes appealed directly in one of his most famous (if somewhat facetious) passages:

I recover some hope, that one time or other, this writing of mine, may fall into the hands of a Soveraign, who will consider it himselfe, (for it is short, and I think clear,) without the help of any interested, or envious Interpreter; and by the exercise of entire Soveraignty, in protecting the Publique teaching of it, convert this Truth of Speculation, into the Utility of Practice.

The mechanism of this public teaching is made perfectly clear by Hobbes: use the universities and let the teachings trickle down. It was no coincidence, of course, that he hated the dons and divines at Oxford and Cambridge; or that, in their turn, they hated him and had his books burned. In any case, his own "Discourse," as Hobbes says in the penultimate paragraph of Leviathan, may yet have its baptismal effect.

It may be profitably printed, and more profitably taught in the Universities. . . . For seeing the Universities are the Fountains of Civill, and Morall Doctrine, from whence the Preachers, and the Gentry, drawing such water as they find, use to sprinkle the same (both from the Pulpit, and in their Conversation) upon the People, there ought certainly to be great care taken, to have it pure, both from the Venime of Heathen Politicians, and from the Incantations of Deceiving Spirits.

Any judicious sovereign would have this done. Any sovereign, that is, who was dutifully concerned to protect the people in their property, to preserve order in the state, and to keep himself (or itself) in power would have the university and pulpit render the Scripture
as plain and demystified as possible. He (or it) would, by command, make the Scripture teach duty and confirm reason. In fine, any sovereign worthy of the name would make Hobbes's reading of Scripture the canonical reading.

Now Hobbes was probably aware that no readily available sovereign—certainly neither Cromwell nor Charles II—was presently going to do this. He was, in any case, fully aware of an incredible tension in this feature of his politics of biblical interpretation. He wanted Scripture put last and divided and conquered in the way he showed it should be done. But the sovereign, on Hobbes's own account, can do with or to Scripture what he (or it) likes, including, for example, making Hobbes's reading of it a civil offense punishable by any number of horrors meted out against seventeenth-century heretics or accused unbelievers. (Hobbes himself seemed sufficiently sensitive to this. Thus, he pleaded that his own doctrines should not be—as he may have feared them to be—excluded or condemned. “Me thinks, the endeavour to advance the Civill Power, should not be by the Civill Power condemned.”86) With some fear, then, Hobbes went ahead and published his offending new doctrines, Erastianism notwithstanding. He took his message directly to the people, or at least to them through their literate betters. To say that Hobbes went over the head of the sovereign to the people would be the wrong metaphor. Given the frontispiece to Leviathan, it would be more apt to say he plunged his message into the very body of that mortal god. In other words, Hobbes may have had a more direct route in mind in the matter of persuasion. The culture of disobedience and rebellion, of enthusiasm and superstition, may yet have been reconstituted by that greater community of readers in whose assenting opinions sovereign power ultimately rested. So Hobbes, unlike the deceitful Machiavelli,87 put his work before a larger audience. We must presume he hoped to influence them thereby.

“Read thy self,” Hobbes told his readers in the preface of Leviathan.88 “Read my booke, and then Read thy self,” he might better have told them. The transformative power of the word is the only power that wordsmiths have, and Hobbes was a powerful wordsmith. There is not only the demonstrative logic and the geometric form. There is also eloquence and metaphor and all the tools of rhetoric. There is sport and sarcasm, acerbic humor and earthy hilarity, all alongside the evocative terrors of a disordered life. The dreadful gloom of the puritan or the superstitious amazement of the papist are dispelled by Hobbes's alternating appeals to our natural reason or to our mortal fear of death. Hobbes's “ideal reader”89 is one who
has made it through *Leviathan* with its exercises in logic, civil science, the psychology of terror, and the Scripture of atomes. He or she is one who is willing to be and in fact has been cajoled, entertained, baited, subjected to novelty upon novelty, and pelted with countless atomes of Scripture. This ideal reader, in short, is the reader persuadable in the ways of truth and peace, as Hobbes understood them. Should Hobbes actually persuade readers he would have not only authored some new doctrines but created new vessels for them. To use his own imagery, he would have poured “New wine . . . into New Cask.”

TOLERATING THE TRUTH, AND NOTHING BUT

In an intolerant world—one, say, where puritan hates papist, presbyter hates independent, and everyone hates heretics—a reconstitution of language and community could conceivably lead to a more tolerant society, or at least to one with a policy of civil toleration. Does Thomas Hobbes have such a policy in mind as part of his main design? Very few have been confident of answering this question affirmatively, whether or not they favored such a policy or wished Hobbes had. Reviving Leslie Stephen’s view, Alan Ryan has recently made a cautious case for this reading of Hobbes’s intent. Richard Tuck has gone so far as to claim that *Leviathan* is itself “a defense of toleration.”

This interpretation counts a number of things in its favor. Our “beliefs, opinions, and interior cogitations” are free from the commands of anyone, including the sovereign, simply because we have no causal control over them. They *must* be tolerated because we have no choice in the matter. It was the effect, if not the intent, of this line of reasoning to create enclaves of free thinking for philosophers or scientists, at least for those who kept the peace. In the tract on Heresy, Hobbes also argued (in part to clear himself from such charges) that heresy was originally conceived of as merely a private opinion that did not deserve punishment. More generally, Hobbes skeptically demolished the arguments of his clerical contemporaries who (with few exceptions) were against toleration. If logic ruled the contest of texts, much less the world itself, Hobbes’s views might help serve toleration, if only because the effect of his writing would be against those against toleration. Taking a century and more at a glance, Hobbes certainly figures in the history of enlightened skepti-
Hobbes and the Politics of Biblical Interpretation

icism, whose eventual outcome was to make toleration a matter of principle.

Then, too, there is the important, if these days often overlooked, passage near the very end of *Leviathan*. Having for almost the last time blasted Catholic and Presbyterian doctrinaires as the principal architects of the kingdom of darkness—but reminding his readers that the civil wars had largely swept them aside anyway—Hobbes remarked:

And so we are reduced to the Independency of the Primitive Christians to follow Paul, Cephas, or Apollos, every man as he liketh best: Which, if it be without contention, and without measuring the Doctrine of Christ, by our affection to the Person of his Minister, (the fault which the Apostle reprehended in the Corinthians,) is perhaps the best.

Hobbes then gives his reasons, among them the power of Scripture. "First, because there ought to be no Power over the Consciences of men, but of the Word it selfe, . . . and secondly, because it is unreasonable in them, who teach there is such danger in every little Error, to require of a man endued with Reason of his own, to follow the Reason of any other man, or of the most voices of many other men." 94

*But*, beginning even with Hobbes's next paragraph, the case for Hobbes as a defender of toleration is not further supported when we closely consider this passage or when we look one final time at Hobbes's account of scriptural interpretation more generally. The Independents and sectaries, of whom Hobbes spoke in the above passage, insist on and persist in "measuring the Doctrine of Christ"; and they had done so with "contention" to the point of civil war. *Behemoth* records again and for the last time Hobbes's oft-expressed judgments in this matter. Among the seven sorts of "seducers" of the people during the time of the Long Parliament were those who cried out for a "liberty of religion." They meet with Hobbes's characteristic accusations. "These were the enemies which rose against his Majesty from the private interpretation of the Scripture, exposed to every man's scanning in his mother-tongue." 95 He continued a few pages on: "This license of interpreting the Scripture was the cause of so many several sects . . . to the disturbance of the Commonwealth." 96 Earlier in *Leviathan*—and quite different from the tone of the Independency passage—Hobbes reminded his readers that "it is the Civill Soveraign that is to appoint Judges, and Interpreters of the
Canonical Scriptures," as well as to make "such Laws and Punishments, as may humble obstinate Libertines, and reduce them to union with the rest of the Church." 97 Since the reading of Scripture is not a purely private act but a public ceremony as well, Hobbes included it in the "Uniformity" of worship upon which he advised a sovereign to insist. 98 And anyway, toleration does not in turn breed more toleration. Indeed, as the English translation of De Cive puts the point, the "diversity of worshippers" actually causes intolerance, for they judge one another's worship as "uncomely, or impious." 99

Amidst all the false and seditious doctrines, Hobbes called out for (if I may put it this way) toleration for the truth, and nothing but the truth. As he proclaimed in one of his many heated exchanges with Bramhall (an exchange marked once again by his fulminations against that "canting tribe" of Presbyterians and the "fractions of fractions of religion here in England"): "What use soever be made of truth, yet truth is truth, and now the question is not, what is fit to be preached, but what it true." 100 As we have seen, this means the "truth" of what Hobbes took to be reason, the doctrine of absolute obedience, and the Scripture of atomes. Needless to say, this would appear to entail a healthy dose of intolerance not only for intolerant clerics but for dissenters, sectarians, and enthusiasts, who in fact pressed from below their case for toleration of public expression and open worship. Indeed, Hobbes's "truth" might appear to entail a healthy dose of intolerance for everything except what John Locke would later call "the religion of Hobbes and Spinosa." 101 There were others in Hobbes's time who better deserved recognition in matters of toleration, especially William Walwyn, Richard Overton, John Lilburne, Roger Williams, or Gerrard Winstanley. There is not very much in De Cive, Leviathan, or Behemoth to place Hobbes in their company, or in the company of John Milton, whose passionate pleas for censureless publication surely make Areopagitica a genuine defense of toleration. Very little in any of Hobbes's writings place him in the company of the later Locke, whose arguments for the freedom of "indifferent" practices as well as belief surely make the Letter concerning Toleration a genuine defense of toleration. It is important, in the end, to recall that Hobbes was not writing about toleration, and such strains of it that we find in his work exist alongside more virulent strains of intolerance.

Let us give to Locke a final reflection. In my mind, he provides a startling contrast to Hobbes, not because his ideas are in every instance so different, but because in places they are so similar, even beyond the window of time that the 1660s and 1670s represent.
Given the circumscribed concerns of this essay, it bears observing that Locke, like Hobbes, feared those who would have "Scripture crumbled into verses." He too purported to subscribe to a method of scriptural interpretation that relies upon authorial design, the whole text, and a plain reading. But Locke would appear to actually interpret Scripture in terms of this stated method. This reading of Locke's method and practice, at any rate, would conform to the author of *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, who "continued to read the same epistles over and over, and over again"; and who counseled "he that would understand St. Paul right, must understand his terms, in the sense he uses them, and not as they are appropriated, by each man's particular philosophy." In the passage in which he referred with apparent horror to "the religion of Hobbes and Spinoza," Locke may well have had in mind one particular philosopher who had put forward and loudly advertised some bold new offensive doctrines in an attempt to engineer a mortal god. "Perhaps it would better become us to acknowledge our ignorance, than to talk such things boldly of the Holy One of Israel, and condemn others for not daring to be as unmannerly as ourselves."

NOTES

This essay benefited from comments or criticisms supplied by Mary G. Dietz, Don Herzog, Jeffrey Isaac, Dana Chabot, Terence Ball, and (especially) Mark Goldie. I would also like to thank James Boyd White for his commentary at the Benjamin Evans Lippincott Symposium on the Political Philosophy of Hobbes at the University of Minnesota (spring 1988).

5. Ibid., ch. 20, pp. 258–59.
8. Ibid., ch. 33, p. 416.
14. Alan Ryan states that “the purpose of Hobbes's argument seems to be to drive scriptural considerations out of politics, in order to deprive the church of any independent political power.” See his “Hobbes, Toleration, and the Inner Life,” in *The Nature of Political Theory*, ed. David Miller and Larry Siedentop (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 203. As I hope to make clear, I agree with the judgment regarding the deprivation of churchmen of any independent political power. But should Hobbes's interpretation of Scripture prove successful with his readers, it could stay in the politics of “a truthful and peaceful” commonwealth. Indeed, it would help constitute such a commonwealth.
17. *Leviathan*, Epistle Dedicatory, p. 76.
20. See especially *Leviathan*, ch. 33.

22. De Cive, p. 385.
24. Behemoth, p. 266.
25. Consider Basil Willey’s judgment that “it was impracticable for Hobbes, as indeed it had proved for most people until the times of his modern disciples the Soviet rulers, to ‘boot the Bible into the dustbin.’ And yet it would have saved him a great deal of trouble and hypocrisy if he could have done so” (The Seventeenth Century Background, p. 120). Leo Strauss offers a similar judgment of Hobbes’s “circumspection” in the matter of his allegedly atheistic beliefs, in Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 199.
26. This contrasts with the judgment of Howard Warrender who, in a work surprisingly less concerned with Scripture than one would have thought, states that “far from basing political obligation upon Christian Scripture, Hobbes is able to give the political sovereign such wide powers to interpret Scriptures because in his opinion, their significance is limited” (The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: His Theory of Obligation [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957], p. 228). Though I agree with Warrender’s premise that Hobbes does not “base” obligation on Scripture, the conclusion does not follow. Indeed, I am inclined to say that, politically and rhetorically, the significance of Scripture is virtually unlimited! Conversely, F. C. Hood overstates the case about the source of Hobbes’s doctrines when he claims that “Scripture was the only source of Hobbes’s moral conviction.” This flies in the face of what Hobbes said about morals being founded in reason (the “undoubted word of God” outside Scripture) and with what Hood himself says in a rather more Warrender-like moment: Hobbes’s “odd interpretations of some texts need cause no surprise; in most cases he had little commitment to them” (The Divine Politics of Thomas Hobbes [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964], pp. 3-4).
27. De Cive, p. 291; Leviathan, ch. 31, p. 396.
31. Ibid., p. 154.
32. Leviathan, ch. 22, p. 288.
33. Ibid., ch. 26, p. 319.
34. Ibid., ch. 26, p. 333.
35. Ibid., ch. 28, p. 362.
36. The language of “confirming” pervades Hobbes’s discussion. For an early striking use, see De Cive, p. 154.
37. Leviathan, ch. 32, p. 411.
38. Ibid. Don Herzog points out that “may err” was mistakenly omitted in the Penguin edition. See his Happy Slaves (forthcoming), ch. 3, especially the concluding observations about Hobbes’s “singularly eccentric interpretations of Scripture playing a ‘central political role.’”
41. For law, see Leviathan, ch. 26, p. 322. There is at least one rhetorical
flourish in Behemoth where we encounter texts of Scripture “so easy, as not to need interpretation” (p. 233).

42. Leviathan, Review and Conclusion, p. 728.
43. De Cive, p. 249.
44. Leviathan, ch. 43, p. 626.
45. Ibid., ch. 43, p. 617.
46. De Cive, pp. 318ff.
47. Ibid., pp. 333–34.
48. Ibid., pp. 377–78.
50. Leviathan, ch. 20, pp. 259–60.
51. Ibid., ch. 43, p. 615; cf. discussion of “other words, that are plain” (ch. 43, p. 620) and those “very evident places of Scripture” (ch. 38, p. 492) that speak to the requirements for salvation.
52. De Cive, p. 370. This is in a passage in which Hobbes complained, yet again, that “the holy Scriptures ... by divers men are diversely understood.” Also see Leviathan, ch. 43, p. 610.
53. De Cive, p. 345. Also see Leviathan, ch. 43, pp. 551–52.
54. Leviathan, ch. 20, p. 259, emphasis omitted.
57. Ibid., ch. 44, p. 629.
58. Ibid., ch. 38, p. 484.
60. De Cive, p. 346.
62. See, for example, Leviathan, ch. 34, p. 440; ch. 36, p. 453; ch. 38, pp. 486, 488, 490; ch. 42, p. 557; ch. 43, p. 620; and Behemoth, pp. 175, 230.
63. Leviathan, Epistle Dedicatory, p. 76.
64. Most famously in Leviathan, ch. 4, p. 102.
66. Leviathan, ch. 34, p. 428.
67. Ibid., ch. 45, p. 659.
68. Ibid., ch. 34, p. 429.
69. Ibid., ch. 34, p. 433.
70. Ibid., ch. 34, p. 435.
71. Ibid., ch. 34, p. 440.
72. Ibid., ch. 34, pp. 440–41.
73. Ibid., ch. 43, p. 611.
74. Ibid., ch. 38, p. 483. Also see Hobbes’s evasiveness when it comes to Matt. 10:28 in Leviathan, ch. 43, p. 610.
75. Leviathan, ch. 42, p. 522.
76. Ibid., ch. 37, p. 477.
77. Ibid., ch. 46, p. 702.
78. Ibid., ch. 38, p. 485.
79. See especially An Historical Narration concerning Heresie, and the Punishment Thereof, in English Works, 3: 385-408.
80. Though Hobbes frequently picked out the eloquence of certain authors and speakers as one of the causes of civil war, he confessed to his own "eloquence" in the Review and Conclusion to Leviathan, hoping that it "may stand very well together" with reason (p. 718).
83. Leviathan, ch. 43, p. 551.
84. Ibid., ch. 31, p. 408.
85. Ibid., Review and Conclusion, p. 728.
86. Ibid., Epistle Dedicatoriy, p. 75.
88. Leviathan, Introduction, p. 82.
89. The phrase is White's, When Words Lose Their Meaning, p. 270.
90. Leviathan, Review and Conclusion, p. 726.
91. Ryan, "Hobbes, Toleration, and the Inner Life." This essay ends by "suggesting that the sense in which Hobbes has principled reasons for toleration must always and only be that he has epistemologically principled reasons, never morally principled reasons" (p. 217). Ryan makes an equally cautious but more contextual version of the same argument in "A More Tolerant Hobbes?" in Justifying Toleration, ed. Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). He shows how some of Hobbes's contemporaries were horrified by the prospects of the free thinking he represented and how Hobbes contributed over the long haul to various strands of modern doctrines of toleration. However, he also bids us to "not exaggerate" the case, for in the main Hobbes "was not writing about toleration but about the right of the civil sovereign to control the squabbling clergy" (p. 51).
92. See Richard Tuck's essay, "Hobbes and Locke on Toleration," in this volume, especially p. 165. Much else in the essay is quite compelling, especially the careful contextualization of the comparison between Hobbes and Locke. Yet, even then, I find more convincing Tuck's argument in another essay; namely, that Hobbes and the young Locke, as with Grotius and Lipsius before them, could combine in "so standard" a way "respect for the arguments of the sceptic, acceptance of a minimalist morality, and support for a potentially intolerant state" (Richard Tuck, "Scepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century," in Mendus, Justifying Toleration, p. 33, emphasis added).
93. "Internall Faith is in its own nature invisible, and consequently exempted from all humane jurisdiction" (Leviathan, ch. 43, p. 550); "The secret thoughts of a man run over all things, holy, proflane, clean, obscene, grave
and light, without shame, or blame; which verbal discourse cannot do' (Leviathan, ch. 8, p. 137).

94. Leviathan, ch. 47, p. 711. As Tuck observes, this passage was (conveniently?) omitted from the later Latin edition published after the Restoration.

95. Behemoth, p. 167. Compare this with Samuel Parker's judgment that Hobbes's doctrines had the same effect, as quoted in Tuck, "Hobbes and Locke," p. 21. This appears to be but one instance of the broader charge that Hobbes or Hobbism was committed to "libertinism." See Mintz, The Hunting of Leviathan, ch. 7.

96. Behemoth, p. 191. Also see his view that "the interpretation of a verse in the Hebrew, Greek, or Latin Bible is oftentimes the cause of civil war" (p. 343).

97. Leviathan, ch. 42, p. 576.

98. Leviathan, ch. 18, p. 233; ch. 30, p. 379; ch. 31, p. 405; ch. 42, pp. 545, 567.


100. Of Liberty and Necessity, in English Works, 4:252.


104. Locke, Paraphrase and Notes, in Yolton, The Locke Reader, p. 28.