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## *Review of Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700*

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## Book Review of *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700*,

edited by Jitse M. van der Meer and Scott Mandelbrote.

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The 36th entry in Brill's Series in Church History, this impressive anthology of two volumes resulted from a workshop held in 2005 at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, involving historians of interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible of Old and New Testaments, and the *Qur'an* (scripture), and historians of science from colleges and universities in Canada, the United States, England, Spain, Germany, and The Netherlands. Their aim was to fill gaps in research conducted within the confines of their respective disciplines by probing the interaction between the interpretation of scripture and the interpretation of natural phenomena by philosophers and scientists through the seventeenth century, and explain why this interaction occurred (pp. 3-4). The result of their deliberations is a compilation of twenty-three informative essays divided into four parts, each of which spans a specific period of time.

In the first volume are three parts that cover the years 100–800, 800–1450, and 1450–1700. Addressing the first period are illuminating essays by Pamela Bright, who specializes in the first five centuries of Christian communities, Kenneth F. Howell, whose research focuses primarily

on the early Greek fathers of the Christian Church, and Paul M. Blowers, who concentrates on early and Byzantine Christianity. Bright's treatment of the interplay between the interpretation of the Christian Bible and of the natural world as 'two witnesses' to God in reflections by Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan, Ephraem the Syrian, and John Scottus Eriugena underscores the viability of a hermeneutical principle that she contends convincingly could 'set the tone' for interdisciplinary dialogue today (p. 113). Focusing on Augustine of Hippo's efforts to interpret the Christian Bible from his faith perspective that God is the source of all truth and, therefore, that truth in the scriptures and truth gleaned through studying the world are complementary, Howell explores the great theologian's exegetical method of reconciling the language of scriptural passages that appeared contradictory or in tension with one another and passages that appeared to be contradictory with truths about the natural world. Particularly instructive is Howell's discussion of how Augustine's concept of *rationes seminales* functions when interpreting the Genesis 1 story of creation, though a distinction should have been made between his understanding that all entities were created by God at the beginning of the world to appear subsequently and the contemporary scientific understanding that species evolved from other forms of life through natural selection. Blowers adds superbly to this part by focusing on representative theologians of the period, including Origen of Alexandria, Evagrius Ponticus, and Maximus the Confessor, who chose to contemplate the natural world through the lens of the scriptures from their pre-scientific understanding of the world 'as the theatre of divine action and of the resourcefulness of God in guiding the universe through the tragedy of sin toward a glorious healing and restoration' (p. 169).

The second part of volume one explores the relationship between interpretations of various scriptures and the natural world primarily during the medieval period. Ecclesiastical historian Charlotte Methuen provides an introductory essay in which is sketched the trajectory of context-driven developments in medieval theology and philosophy that prompted a variety of complex exegetical approaches to the 'two books' of God's self-revelation that were used in the Renaissance and Reformation periods. Among these approaches were the scholastics' 'reading' the world to discover its nature and reading it allegorically to discover attributes of the divine. William E. Carroll adds an exemplary in-depth examination of Aquinas's analysis of the natural world from both theological and philosophical perspectives that demonstrates his approach to reading biblical texts, distinguishing the roles of reason and faith when seeking knowledge of God, and understanding reason and faith as complementary ways of knowing. Robert G. Morrison's essay examines Islamic commentators' reading of a theologically problematic verse in the *Qur'an* (2.6-7) from a natural philosophical perspective to elucidate how God's power operates in the world while upholding human free will and responsibility. Unfortunately, this is the only essay that explores Islam in a two-volume work that purports to cover the Abrahamic religions!

Completing this volume are the first three essays of the third part that begins with Howell's introduction to the hermeneutical approaches that were used to study the world and the

scriptures at the onset of the scientific revolution. Essays follow by James J. Bono, a cultural historian of science and medicine, and Peter Harrison, who specializes in the philosophical, scientific, and religious thought of the early modern era. Howell illuminates the decline in efforts to harmonize the 'two books' of scripture and nature to the incline in portraying their discordance and separation through various methods, including 'a new natural-philosophical framework' for interpreting the Bible that was aimed at discovering their spiritual meaning (p. 294). These different hermeneutical approaches to the Bible during this time precede the development of modern biblical exegetical methodologies aimed at discovering the meaning intended by the authors of the texts. Bono's essay probes strategies used by Galileo Galilei, William Harvey, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton, and others for interpreting the 'book of nature' to repair the effects of the 'the Fall' of humans from an earlier access to knowledge of God as depicted in the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Addressing the hermeneutics employed by Martin Luther and John Calvin, Harrison highlights their preference for a literal interpretation of the scriptures over and against allegorical interpretations for several reasons, including their desire to remove control from the teaching authority of the Catholic Church and place it among 'the priesthood of all believers' (p. 352). He argues that the reformers' literalist hermeneutics prompted the study of the natural world for itself apart from its disclosures about God, thus playing a major role in the 'genealogy of modern science' (p. 359).

Assuming Harrison's thesis that the rise of modern science required studying natural phenomena for themselves and not for their disclosure of God, Jitse M. van der Meer, one of the editors of the anthology who is a biologist and specialist in the history of the philosophy of science, and Richard J. Oosterhoff, a doctoral student in the history and philosophy of science when the two volumes were prepared for publication, open the second volume by questioning Harrison's explanation of why and when this change occurred. They examine evidence in many primary and secondary sources spanning early Christianity into the early modern period and conclude that the decline in studying natural phenomena as symbols of God is better explained by the influence on natural philosophy and theology of Aristotelianism's comprehensive explanation of natural causality that reduced interest in the religious symbolism of nature prior to the reformers' turn to scriptural literalism. Unfortunately, neither these co-authors nor Harrison address the faith-based impetus that fueled the scientific revolution as demonstrated by Johannes Kepler, John Ray, and others who 'read' the 'book of nature' to know more about it. One important observation that van der Meer and Oosterhoff make is that reading the 'book of nature' both symbolically for spiritual insight and for empirical knowledge about the world occurred concurrently during the medieval and early modern periods, though the symbolic reading declined when the study of natural phenomena advanced as a distinct field of inquiry apart from natural philosophy. More research is needed to explain this interaction and the role of religious faith in stimulating the quest for scientific knowledge.

Five additional essays in the second volume complete the third part of the anthology that may be best described as a case study approach to the subject. Historian of science Kathleen M.

Crowther focuses on 'Mosaic physics', a heterogeneous genre of literature that emerged in the latter part of the sixteenth century in which an understanding of the natural world was grounded in the scriptures. She corrects the 'almost total neglect' of this genre by historians of science (p. 422) by analyzing the work of natural philosophers Levinus Lemnius, who demonstrated his commitment to explaining specific parts of the Christian Bible through facts about natural phenomena, and Francisco Valles, who believed that interpreting biblical teachings about the natural world required someone skilled in natural philosophy and medicine. Eric Jorink, whose research centers on scientific culture in early modernity, explores the many influences (e.g., rationalism and heliocentrism) that prompted in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century the radical biblical criticism of Isaac La Peyrère, to which Isaac Vossius responded to the further detriment of the authority of the Bible on natural phenomena. As Jorink indicates, key questions were raised during this time that predate Darwin's theory and understandings of biological evolution and the ongoing debate between metaphysically reductionistic evolutionists and biblical fundamentalists. Historian of science Kerry V. Magruder explores Thomas Burnet's *Theory of the Earth* (1684) in which the authoritative basis of the Anglican tradition shifted from the Christian Bible, reason, and tradition, to nature, the Bible, and ancient texts, due to the 'obscurity' of biblical texts on natural phenomena. Magruder aptly conveys how Burnet integrated reading the 'three books of nature, Scripture, and antiquity' (p. 485). Stephen D. Snobelin, a historian of science and technology, examines Isaac Newton's hermeneutical principle of accommodating biblical texts with astronomy. Most instructive is Snobelin's examination of modifications Newton made to his method in his exegetical commentaries in order to maintain his unchanging commitment to the truth of both the Bible and the natural world as 'two repositories' that 'come from the One God' (p. 528). In the final essay of part three, the only dedicated essay in these two volumes to explore Judaic perspectives on the topic, T.M. Rudavsky, a specialist in medieval Jewish philosophy, probes the hermeneutics used by Jewish philosophers from Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century, who read the Hebrew Bible in light of modern philosophical and scientific teachings, to Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth, who insisted that the Bible cannot be reconciled with the new sciences. Rudavsky concludes from his impressive research that 'the task of accommodating the words' of the Bible to the domain of natural philosophy would fall to Jewish thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (p. 558).

In the fourth and final part of the anthology, essayists explore the diverse debates over heliocentrism from biblical and scientific perspectives. Historian of science Miguel A. Granada surveys the various approaches to relating cosmology to Christian biblical texts as demonstrated by Tycho Brahe, Caspar Peuger, and Christoph Rothmann. Peter Barker, an historian of science who specializes in the Scientific Revolution, focuses on Johannes Kepler who cleverly contradicted Philip Melanchthon's arguments against Copernican heliocentrism and the motion of Earth by making use of Melanchthonian ideas about natural law that governed the world according to God's providential plan. A specialist in Cartesian natural philosophy, Rienk H. Vermij explores the debate about the motion of Earth that occurred in the

Dutch Republic during the mid-seventeenth century, through which theologians were alerted to the need to adapt themselves to the new scientific view of reality and to recognize the study of the Bible and the study of the natural world as two separate enterprises. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, a philosopher of science who is applauded by other scholars for his research on Galileo, addresses biblical arguments against heliocentrism and the limitation of biblical authority as expressed by Galileo and his contemporaries Francesco Ingoli, Paolo Antonio Foscarini, and Tommaso Campanella. Historian of science and mathematics Volker R. Remmert finds 'much common ground' between the methods of biblical exegesis and the mathematical and natural sciences within the Jesuit community in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (p. 665), and he urges further investigation of additional ramifications of using these sciences as 'tools in biblical exegesis to the present' (p. 686). Finally, in a second essay, Snobelen writes about the hermeneutics of accommodation used by Augustine of Hippo that strongly influenced the scientific greats at the beginning of their Revolution and allowed them to affirm both the Bible and natural philosophy 'in good faith' (p. 730).

These two volumes of *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700* contribute significantly to the scant literature on how the interpretation of primary religious texts through various exegetical and hermeneutical methods and the interpretation of the natural world through natural philosophy and the natural sciences influenced one another from the early medieval period to the Scientific Revolution. Key to understanding this interplay are the contexts of the times that prompted the development and use of various methods in search of truth and/or to make a political point, as aptly demonstrated by the authors and wisely intended by the editors. Together they have planted the seeds for a new interdisciplinary field for which much research has yet to be accomplished. To aid this effort, the authors point to many specific aspects of their topics on which scholarly research is needed, beginning with the illuminating essay by historian of philosophy Carlos Fraenkel on the concept and history of philosophical religions and ending with Snobelen's second essay that concludes the volumes. They place the reader on alert to comb lists of forthcoming books and the content tables of journals for more on this fascinating topic. They also may prompt readers to yearn to know more about Islamic and Judaic perspectives pertaining to the hermeneutical interface of studying the natural world and their valued texts.

*Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: Up to 1700* should be available in all academic libraries of institutions whose faculties specialize in scriptural and theological studies, medieval history, the history of the religion–science relationship, and the philosophy of science. The complex, interdisciplinary, and in-depth nature of these essays suggests that they are best suited for use with graduate students, especially those who are studying the histories of scriptural hermeneutics and the philosophy of science. Readers will find qualitatively uniform essays that were assured through review of each by a historian of science and a historian of scripture interpretation. Informative footnotes and bibliographical entries of primary and secondary sources enhance accessing additional information.