

The Bible and Science: Calvin, Newton & Other Writers

EXHIBIT: *Galileo's World*
GALLERY: The Galileo Affair



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Each quotation below illustrates at least one of the following principles of interpreting biblical statements of relevance to natural science:

- A. *Multiple Interpretations*
- B. *Unity of Truth*
- C. *Accommodation*
- D. *Phenomenalism*

Which principles are most evident in each quotation below?

1. "This is my explanation, unless someone can propose an interpretation that is clearer and more in keeping with the text." Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Bk. V, ch. 5; 1:155-156.
2. "But Moses makes a distinction and calls the Sun and the Moon the larger lights. The fact that astronomers debate the size of these bodies really has nothing to do with this passage... for the astronomers are the experts from whom it is most convenient to get what may be discussed about these subjects...." Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*
3. "The Holy Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy; and in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated person, he made use by Moses and the other prophets of the popular language, that none might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity." Jean Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*
4. "This is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere. Here the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception..." "It must be remembered, that Moses does not speak with philosophical acuteness on hidden mysteries, but relates those things which are everywhere observed, even by the uncultivated, and which are in common use." "It is well again to repeat what I have said before, that it is not here scientifically discussed, how great the Sun is in heaven, and how great, or how little, is the Moon... For Moses here addresses himself to our senses... For as it became a theologian, he had respect to us rather than to the stars. Nor, in truth, was Moses ignorant of the fact, that the Moon had not sufficient brightness to enlighten the Earth, unless it borrowed from the Sun; but he deemed it enough to declare what we all may plainly perceive, that the Moon is a dispenser of light to us. That it is, as the astronomers assert, an opaque body, I allow to be true..." Calvin, *Genesis*

5. “Moses makes two great lights; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that Saturn, which on account of its great distance appears least of all, is actually greater than the Moon. Here lies the difference: Moses wrote in a popular style of things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend... The Spirit of God here opens a common school for all...” Calvin, *Genesis*

6. “In treating of Moses’ doctrine, one must take diligent care to completely avoid holding and saying positively and categorically anything which contradicts the decisive observations and reasons of natural science or other disciplines; in fact, since all truths always agree with one another, the truth of Holy Scripture cannot be contrary to the true reasons and observations of human doctrines.” Pererius, *On Genesis*, quoted by Galileo, *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615).

7. “The distinctions of the various days by the light of the heavens, as described in Sacred Scripture, ought not to be understood absolutely as in itself and as in nature, but only in respect to the Earth and to us who inhabit it, and thus in respect to us. Hence there is nothing new or unusual in saying that Sacred Scripture speaks of things in respect to us, in relation only to us, and according to appearances, and not according to things themselves and according to nature.” Paolo Antonio Foscarini, letter in defense of Galileo, trans. Richard Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine and the Bible* (Notre Dame, 1991).

8. “Truth cannot be an enemy to Truth, God is not divided against himself.” Thomas Burnet, *Theory of the Earth* (1684), p. 16.

9. “As to Moses, I do not think his description of ye creation either philosophical or feigned, but that he described realities in a language artificially adapted to ye sense of ye vulgar. Thus when he speaks of two great lights, I suppose he means their apparent not real greatness. So when he tells us God placed these lights in ye firmament, he speaks I suppose of their apparent not real place, his business being, not to correct the vulgar notions in matters philosophical, but to adapt a description of the creation as handsomely as he could to ye sense and capacity of ye vulgar. So when he tells us of two great lights and ye stars made ye fourth day, I do not think their creation from beginning to end was done the fourth day nor in any one day of ye creation, nor that Moses mentions their creation, as they were physical bodies in themselves, some of them greater than this Earth, and perhaps habitable worlds, but only as they were lights to this Earth....”

Isaac Newton, letter to Thomas Burnet, reprinted as Appendix VI in David Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton* (Edinburgh, 1855), vol. 2, pp. 447-454; quotation on p. 450.