PART II

800–1450
CHAPTER SIX

INTERPRETING THE BOOKS OF NATURE AND SCRIPTURE IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN THOUGHT: AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY*

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the relationship between interpretations of nature and of Scripture during the high medieval and early modern periods, that is from the twelfth century until the dawn of the seventeenth. It argues that this relationship must be seen as one expression of the more fundamental relationship between knowledge of God and knowledge of the world, and of the shifting understanding of how faith might be informed by reason, or theology by philosophy. This is a key theme of theology throughout the medieval period: scholastic theology was deeply and centrally concerned with defining and understanding the ways in which ‘natural knowledge’—the knowledge available to the human mind through reasoning and in particular through the use of philosophy and its methods—might be related to faith, understood as the knowledge of God gained through revelation. The concern of medieval theologians to understand and articulate the relationship between theology and philosophy gave rise not only to a range of ways of thinking about the natural world, but also to a range of strategies for reading Scripture. Medieval exegetical strategies were varied, and the famous fourfold scheme of literal, allegorical, moral, and analogical senses was only one expression of the search for the truth of God’s revelation in Scripture. This article will sketch the trajectory of developments in medieval theology and philosophy which gave rise to this range of exegetical approaches.

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1 Introduction to Parts 2–4.