PART III

1450–1700
A comprehensive history of biblical hermeneutics with respect to nature between ca. 1500 and 1700 is still to be written. One of the most understandable reasons for this lacuna is the sheer volume of writings that would need to be mastered to produce such a study. The Bible was alluded to and quoted in treatises ranging from alchemy to astronomy, from classics to chemistry, from medicine to metallurgy, and from theoria to theology. It is difficult for people in the twenty-first century to grasp how influential the Bible was in early modern Europe. The Scriptures were not viewed as simply a religious book which was thereby limited to human salvation and conduct. The Bible was considered a source of truth about history, geography, nature, human origins, and whatever else its words happened to touch. The Bible was, as the Marxist historian Christopher Hill once remarked, universally believed to be the word of God in 1600. This meant that it carried an authority far greater than even the most expert treatises in many fields.

In this chapter, I can do little more than illustrate the diverse uses of the Bible in a natural-philosophical context. Even in a highly selective survey, however, the vastly different hermeneutics employed by the early modern people become evident. First, we examine some of the attempts of well known astronomers to read the books of nature and Scripture in harmony as they adopted the emerging cosmological realism that gained ascendency in this period. Then, what can be cautiously cast

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1 Introduction to Part 3.
2 To my knowledge there is still not a comprehensive study of biblical interpretation in the major figures of the Protestant and Catholic reformations for these two centuries though there has been a decided increase in the study of the interpretative methods of the magisterial Reformers. See Steinmetz 1990 and Muller & Thompson 1996.