CHAPTER TEN


James J. Bono

From Ficino in the late fifteenth century to Newton in the late seventeenth, students of nature and the Scriptures generated a variety of narratives concerning the ‘book of nature’ in the attempt to redefine the relationship of that book to its divine author. Such thinkers did so in light of religious beliefs and theological understanding of the effects of the Fall. In particular, attention to the biblical stories of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the destruction of the Tower of Babel, and the Pentecost resulted in a variety of claims concerning humankind’s postlapsarian access to knowledge of God, his Word, and his creation. Such narrative re-workings of foundational biblical stories prompted students of nature to construct a variety of hermeneutic principles for ‘reading’ the book of nature that reflected shifting and conflicting religious views of the nature of God, man, nature, and the relationship between words and things. Hence, this essay argues that the early modern turn to the study of ‘natural particulars’—and ultimately a related, but not identical, turn to the ‘literal’—was inseparable from just such biblical narratives. Further, this thesis regarding religion, the Bible, and the Scientific Revolution suggests that the emergence of the literal in science was neither conditioned by narrow confessional commitments, nor the outcome of exclusively Protestant practices of literal interpretation of the Bible. In turn, such stories and hermeneutic principles produced an array of different interpretive strategies and material practices among such figures as Paracelsus, Fernel, Galileo, Harvey, Bacon, Gassendi, Descartes, Charleton, Boyle, and Newton.¹

¹ See Bono 1995. Among recent work on the book of nature, see in addition, Berkel and Vanderjagt 2005; 2006; Bennett and Mandelbrote 1998.
The trope of nature as a book fostered seemingly endless playful speculation in which the relationships among God, humans, and nature were figured in linguistic terms as the semantic, grammatical, and material operations and consequences of the divinely creative Word. Given longstanding traditions in which nature was seen as, for example, a mirror of the Divine, as testament to his majesty and providence, as repository of those hidden footsteps through which pious humans could trace their way back to God, much was at stake in the various readings that early modern interpreters attributed to the book of nature. Whether concerned with fostering piety among Christian believers through proper understanding of Scriptures and God’s role in the world, with expressing the fundamental truths of the Christian God and his creation in a universal philosophical vocabulary to persuade and convert the ‘infidel,’ or eventually, with teaching the unlettered ‘heathen’ in the new world the truths of Christianity accessible to the fallen intellect through God’s visible works, the trope of nature as a book held considerable power and utility.

Consider an example from the seventeenth-century English natural historian, Edward Topsell. For Topsell, God had commanded Noah to preserve all animals from the destructive effects of the Flood to ensure that postlapsarian humans would have access to a source of knowledge that might permit Adam’s progeny some measure of material and especially spiritual progress: “it was for that a man might gaine out of them much devine knowledge, such as is imprinted in them by nature, as a tipe or spark of that great wisdome whereby they were created.”2 As creator, God was nature’s author; as God’s visible and material Book, nature was that

Chronicle which was made by God himselfe, every living beast being a word, every kind being a sentence, and al of them together a large history, containing admirable knowledge & learning, which was, which is, which shall continue, (if not for ever) yet to the world’s end.3

As fundamental units of the very language of nature, firsthand knowledge of animals—Topsell’s living beasts—was essential to apprehending the divine order in the created universe and therefore to understanding

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2 Topsell 1607, from the Dedicatory Epistle, no pagination.
3 Ibid.