Any attempt to identify a distinctively Protestant approach to biblical hermeneutics in the early modern period is complicated by a number of factors. First, the sixteenth-century movements for religious reform were initiated from within Catholicism by individuals who had been baptized into the Catholic Church, educated within its institutions, and inspired by existing elements of that tradition. What we might be tempted to identify as specifically Protestant emphases were thus almost invariably incipient within medieval Catholicism. Second, while it is possible to identify some characteristic features of what might be called a Protestant approach to Scripture, there were important differences amongst the reformers themselves on the issue of the interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, as was the case with liturgical and doctrinal matters, the attitude of some Protestants towards the interpretation of Scripture was closer to Catholic positions than to the attitudes of certain other Protestants. By way of contrast, given the degree of central control that existed within post-Tridentine Catholicism, there was much greater uniformity within the Catholic Church on questions of biblical interpretation. Third, in the sixteenth century, the reading of Scripture took place in a wide variety of contexts—doctrinal, devotional, liturgical, critical, and controversial—and was constrained by a range of external factors to do with literacy rates, access to printed texts, and the availability of suitable translations. To speak in this context simply of hermeneutics, understood as the theory of interpretation, is to overlook significant aspects of how the Bible functioned in both religious and ‘scientific’ contexts. Related to this is the fact that there could be significant slippage between the theories of interpretation espoused by various authors and their actual exegetical practices. Moreover, it can

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1 I am grateful to the two anonymous referees of this chapter for their helpful and insightful comments.
be argued that Protestant readings of certain passages of Scripture motivated scientific inquiry, and hence that the content of Scripture, as rendered by particular interpretative strategies, was as important as those hermeneutical strategies themselves. Finally, when we introduce to this complex picture the question of ‘natural knowledge,’ we are then faced with the inconvenient fact that the major reformers, Phillip Melanchthon excepted, exhibited little, if any, interest in the pursuit of formal knowledge of the natural world.

In light of these considerations, offering a comprehensive account of hermeneutics and natural knowledge in the Reformers in the span of a brief chapter is simply not possible. What is possible, however, is to point to some features of the approaches to Scripture of the major reformers and suggest ways in which, in certain contexts, these may have facilitated new approaches to the study of nature. Because of the variety of viewpoints amongst Protestants on these questions, this chapter will focus primarily on the ideas of Luther and Calvin, and on their explicit statements about the theory of biblical interpretation (rather than their exegetical practices or their readings of particular passages of Scripture). Given that neither Luther nor Calvin was seriously engaged in the study of nature, the question of natural knowledge is better discussed in the context of whether new approaches to the reading of the book of Scripture associated with these reformers had an influence—intended or otherwise—on the way in which subsequent thinkers may have come to read the book of nature. What I hope to demonstrate in this chapter is that in the early modern period the interpretation of Scripture was closely associated with the study of nature and that, inevitably, changes in the sphere of hermeneutics had important implications for natural history, astronomy, natural philosophy, and other disciplines concerned with the natural world. More particularly, Protestant critiques of some traditional medieval methods of biblical interpretation gave rise to conditions that favored the development of new ‘scientific’ approaches to the study of nature.

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2 On Melanchthon, and more generally on relations between sixteenth Lutheranism and the study of nature in the sixteenth century, see Kusukawa 1995; Methuen 1998; Kessler et al. 1997; Barker and Goldstein 2001.
3 Some elements of this thesis, in more nuanced form, have been set out in Harrison 1998. Further elaborations may be found in Harrison 2007b; Harrison 2007a; Harrison 2005.