In the second half of the sixteenth century, a new kind of writing about the natural world emerged, one that was explicitly Christian. Its proponents wanted to create an understanding of the natural world that was not only congruent with the Bible, but actually grounded in Scripture. This new genre was often called “Mosaic philosophy” or “Mosaic physics” because of its close connections to the story of creation in the book of Genesis. Throughout this paper I will use the term Mosaic physics. The term physics, deriving from the Greek word \( \textit{physis} \), meaning “nature,” had a much broader meaning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than it does today. A physicist could be a student of all of nature, from plants to planets. The term Mosaic physics thus captures the wide range of natural objects and natural phenomena that were connected to Scripture and scriptural exegesis. The term Mosaic physics is also appropriate because it cuts across the contemporary categories of natural philosophy, natural history, and medicine, any or all of which might be incorporated into a work of Mosaic physics. As I will demonstrate, this was actually an extremely heterogeneous type of literature. Mosaic physicists shared a common agenda but differed substantially in their ideas about nature. Mosaic physics was based both on a close reading of biblical passages dealing with the natural world and engagement with a wide variety of natural philosophical writers and ideas. In this literature, the Bible was used to adjudicate between competing views of the natural world. However, it...
was also the case that natural knowledge was used to explicate difficult passages in the Bible.

As a genre, Mosaic physics flourished in the last decades of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. By the eighteenth century, it had fallen into disrepute and was considered an improper mingling of science and theology. In the present day it has descended into almost complete oblivion. Despite the lively and ongoing interest in the relations between religion and science in the early modern period, historians of science have largely ignored Mosaic physics. In this paper, I analyze the writings of two sixteenth-century Mosaic physicists, Levinus Lemnius (1505–1568) and Francisco Valles (1524–1592). Lemnius and Valles were among the earliest, the most prominent and the most widely read Mosaic physicists. Both produced hybrid texts that were at once theological and natural philosophical. In 1566, Lemnius published a work on plants entitled, *Clear Explanation of the Comparisons and Parables Concerning Herbs and Trees Which Are Selected from the Bible*. Valles’s contribution to Mosaic physics was first published in 1587: *Of The Things Which Are Written About Natural Philosophy in the Holy Scriptures: or, Of Sacred Philosophy*. Both of these works were reprinted many times, and later Mosaic physicists frequently cited Lemnius and Valles as important predecessors. The two books obviously differ in subject matter: Lemnius’s *Concerning Herbs and Trees* deals exclusively with plants whereas Valles’s *Sacred Philosophy* covers a much wider array of natural objects and phenomena. Lemnius and Valles also connect natural knowledge and biblical exegesis in very different ways, demonstrating that Mosaic physics was by no means a unified project. However, contemporaries saw both of these books as exemplars of Christian natural philosophy. In fact, the two books were often published together.

---

4 See Blair.
5 Lemnius 1596. Lemnius’s *Concerning Herbs and Trees* was translated into English in 1587. In this paper, I have followed the English translation, but included references to the 1596 Latin edition in the notes.
6 Valles 1592. I have used an edition published in Lyon in 1592 with Lemnius’s *Concerning Herbs and Plants*.
7 For publication information, see below. On later Mosaic philosophers citing Lemnius and Valles, see Blair.
8 When they were published together, a third book was included: Franciscus Rueus’s *De gemmis aliquot, is praesertim quarum divus Johannes Apostolus in sue Apocalypsi meminit*. Franciscus Rueus, or François de la Rue, was a French Catholic physician. His book, whose title could be translated as *On a number of gems, especially those which St. John the Apostle mentioned in Revelation*, deals with gems and their divine natures and properties