CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THOMAS BURNET, BIBLICAL IDIOM, AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY THEORIES OF THE EARTH

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INTRODUCTION

In the seventeenth century, a sustained tradition of critical debate emerged about the nature and history of the Earth, a contested print tradition often referred to as “Theories of the Earth.” This population of hundreds of published texts spanned the era between the Printing Revolution and the later emergence of geology as a discipline and provided a public arena for diverse writers to contest the nature of the Earth and to debate the kinds of evidence from various technical traditions that might best resolve the enigmas of Earth’s history.¹

In this contested print tradition, biblical idiom became a useful raw material for the development of ideas, and a currency for their exchange across various disciplinary divides. Historians have generally assumed that writers of Theories of the Earth invoked Genesis primarily authoritatively to underwrite their theories, and that they were motivated to produce theories that conformed to its testimony. However, these assumptions are confining and sometimes misleading. They are confining when they obscure questions about the significance of biblical language for print communication about the Earth before the emergence of geology as a discipline, and they are misleading if they fail to discriminate between the various uses of biblical language by writers with such disparate aims and methods as, for example,

¹ On Theories of the Earth as a contested print tradition see Magruder 2006; Magruder 2000, 7–8. Other interpretations are Roger 1973; Rudwick 1976. In this chapter I use “Theory of the Earth” (initial uppercase) to refer to any work published in the historical tradition. That is, a “Theory” was a book and a “theory” is an idea, although in actual practice these two meanings may be combined. In addition, lowercase “earth” refers to a type of mineral, or a small region of land, while “the Earth” is used for reference to Earth as a whole, with respect to some general aspect such as continents or mountains which might provide evidence for the manner of its formation.
René Descartes (1596–1650), Nicolaus Steno (1638–1686), Thomas Burnet (ca. 1635–1715) or Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788). Surely some Theorists did regard the Bible as especially authoritative and some were involved in apologetic enterprises; but the language of the Bible also shaped theorizing in more subtle ways. Biblical vocabulary offered a source of proto-terminology, much of it carrying affiliated conceptual resources. Biblical turns of phrase and narrative structures, such as the gathering of the waters and the pattern of the six days, offered a cognitive scaffolding for the development and communication of ideas about the history of the Earth regardless of the specific content of the theories and regardless of a writer’s individual area of technical expertise.

Theories of the Earth take their name from the work of the same title by the English scholar Thomas Burnet, first published in 1681 as Telluris Theoria Sacra. The title pages of all English editions published in Burnet’s lifetime refer to the work simply as The Theory of the Earth, omitting the “Sacra” of the Latin title to emphasize the leading role of reason rather than Scripture in this work of natural philosophy. Nevertheless, in his opening words Burnet explained why his book should be considered more than just speculative natural philosophy as he outlined the work’s epic sweep from creation to consummation:

This Theory of the Earth may be call’d Sacred, because it is not the common Physiology of the Earth, or of the Bodies that compose it, but respects only the great Turns of Fate, and the Revolutions of our Natural World; such as are taken notice of in the Sacred Writings, and are truly the Hinges upon which the Providence of this Earth moves; or whereby it opens and shuts the several successive Scenes whereof it is made up.2

Burnet’s Theory of the Earth was ‘sacred’ not because it proved Scripture or derived its authority from Scripture, but because of the significance of the events it addressed. Burnet’s Theory would calibrate the grand sweep of human history from the Creation to the apocalypse with an equally expansive view of the natural history of the Earth, involving the whole Earth as opposed to its parts or mineral constitution, and

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2 Burnet 1684, “Preface to the Reader,” a1r. The first Latin edition (1681) included the first two books, as did the first English edition (1684). The last two books appeared in English in Burnet 1690a. Portions of this description of Burnet are adapted from Magruder 2000, and Magruder and Taylor 2003. Thomas Burnet, the Theorist should not be confused with his contemporaries Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, or Thomas Burnett, a friend of John Locke; cf. Magruder 2003.