Why did Johannes Kepler contradict Philip Melanchthon on the biblical arguments against Copernicanism? Kepler was a second generation student of the great Lutheran educational reformer and in many ways a faithful follower in matters of religion and natural philosophy. But he came to diametrically opposed readings of the Bible passages quoted by Melanchthon against the motion of Earth. After examining each author’s treatment of the contested passages, I will attempt to explain why Kepler felt able to contradict Melanchthon by showing how he made novel use of central Melanchthonian ideas: natural law with its ideal of demonstrative proof, the status of astronomy as the clearest example of these laws, and above all, the conviction that these laws governed a cosmos that had been constructed according to a providential plan.

**Melanchthon on Natural Law, Providence, and Astronomy**

Alliances shaped the early history of that tributary in the great flow of the Reformation that would ultimately be called Lutheranism. Some of the most important alliances were between Luther and the German Princes who became his supporters and protectors (who after 1529 called themselves Protestants). A more general alliance formed between Luther’s followers and the existing temporal powers, making common cause against the people they called Anabaptists and other extremists, and aligning the new confession with the power of the courts. The forging of these alliances has been termed a reform within a reform, the Magisterial Reform of Lutheranism within the wider current of the Reformation.¹

In an age ruled by patronage, Luther’s personal alliances with particular princes were the practical and political foundation of all he achieved. But an earlier personal alliance was also crucial. Even before he became famous Luther had converted a new colleague at the University of Wittenberg to his cause. Phillip Melanchthon would become his most valuable diplomat, a major contributor to defining the new movement’s confession, and the leading reformer of the universities within the Lutheran area of Germany. It was in the latter role that Melanchthon exerted his greatest influence on the intellectual life of the sixteenth century. All his work, even on seemingly secular subjects, was permeated by his commitment to Luther’s version of Christianity. Like Luther, he was a humanist by training, and he drew upon the skills and ideas of humanism in his own intellectual work.

A case in point is Melanchthon’s intellectual response to the civil disturbances that prompted the Magisterial Reform of Lutheranism. During 1524–5 peasants and commoners revolted all over Europe north of the Alps, appropriating land and property belonging to the aristocracy and the established Church while pursuing religious ideals that were perilously close to Luther’s own. For Luther, and especially for Melanchthon, it was not sufficient to condemn the rebels on points of doctrine, and support the existing authorities in restoring order and punishing the worst offenders. Melanchthon also felt the need for a principled defense of the Lutheran position on the matters that the rebels specifically transgressed, for example private property and marriage customs. To defend claims like “Theft is prohibited” or “Adultery is wrong” Melanchthon appealed to the common humanist doctrine of natural law; such principles are innate in human beings, having been established by God as part of human nature. But there is an obvious difficulty; not everyone agrees on these principles. How are we to recognize the true natural law ordained by God from the many alternatives supported by different groups or individuals? For Melanchthon the answer again is to fall back on humanist tools. Correct opinions—here true moral laws—are those that are capable of being demonstrated, in the technical sense of the term introduced by Aristotle. Remembering that all these words mean something different in the sixteenth century, we might summarize Melanchthon’s position

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2 For example the demand to elect their own priests, which MacCulloch 2003, 154 & 160, notes Luther himself dropped in the sequel.