CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GALILEO AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN: HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS ON CREATIONIST HERMENEUTICS

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If everything scientific has to be harmonized with the Bible one way or another, then there is no logic that is unique to science. In these terms, science is not a particular way of thinking, or even an organized body of knowledge. It is only a corpus of exegetical evidence.

—Christopher P. Toumey, God's Own Scientists, 130

Around the middle of 1615, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) penned a long open letter to Christina of Lorraine, mother of his patron Cosimo II de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany. About eighteen months earlier, the dowager Duchess had asked Galileo’s friend Benedetto Castelli whether Copernican views were acceptable for a good Catholic. In several places the Bible seems to speak of the motion of the Sun and/or the immobility of Earth (e.g., Josh. 10:12–14, Pss. 19:4–6, 93:1, and 104:5, Isa. 38:8, and Eccles. 1:5), so that her question needed a careful answer. In drafting his reply, Galileo relied heavily on the Augustinian notion of accommodation. Augustine had cautioned Christians not to take literally those portions of the Bible that dealt with astronomy; wishing to convey spiritual truths to everyone, the Holy Spirit had employed popular language that was not meant to be scientifically correct.

Since the early nineteenth century, Christian scientists and theologians have typically followed Galileo’s lead, using similar strategies to ‘harmonize’ Genesis and geology. Such strategies were accepted by many Christians, including conservative Protestants, between 1850 and 1960. Since the publication of The Genesis Flood by John C. Whitcomb, Jr.

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(b. 1924), and Henry Morris (1918–2006) in 1961, however, things have changed quite dramatically, with the rise of ‘scientific creationism’ in the United States and several other nations.\(^3\) Creationists believe that the universe, Earth, and living things were specially created in the space of six days, no more than ten to twelve thousand years ago. They are convinced that science supports their view and that the Bible demands it—any interpretation of the Bible consistent with evolution and modern geology is utterly unacceptable to them.

We do not have space here to provide a full history of modern creationist hermeneutics. Instead, we will focus on an important historical theme that is central to their position. How do creationists respond to the hermeneutical strategy of Galileo? Which parts do they accept, and why? Which parts do they reject, and why? By investigating these questions, we hope to provide a better understanding of creationist hermeneutics.

Our approach is as follows. First, we study what Galileo himself said about the Bible and natural science, comparing this with what his principal Vatican opponent, Roberto, Cardinal Bellarmine (1542–1621), said on the same topic. Next, we see how members of a creationist subgroup, the modern geocentrists, approach the same issue, comparing their hermeneutical principles with those of Galileo and Bellarmine. Finally, we study what other creationists say about their geocentrist colleagues and about Galileo’s hermeneutical strategy.

**Galileo and Bellarmine on Biblical Interpretation**

Much can be learned from studying key passages from Galileo’s *Letter to Christina* and comparing his points with those of Bellarmine. Our discussion of the *Letter* will focus on the following points:

- What conceptual models for the relationship between science and faith did Galileo mention, and what did he say about each?
- What did Galileo believe in general concerning the language of Scripture? What did he believe specifically about the use of the Bible in matters of science? What principle(s) of interpretation did he endorse, and why?

\(^3\) Numbers 1992.