
How did Galileo reconcile heliocentric astronomy with Holy Scripture? “If the wording of Scripture appeared to presuppose and sanction the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic world system” (p. 29), how did Galileo uphold the sanctity of the Holy Spirit, whose inspiration had led biblical authors to paint a world picture seemingly in contradiction with Copernican principles? Claiming that “the Holy Spirit conformed to the intellectual capabilities of the common and uneducated peoples of biblical times,” Galileo reinforced biblical exegesis with the findings of natural philosophy, including “compelling evidence of Copernican astronomy” (p. 29). He relied heavily on St Augustine, who had argued that biblical authors spoke little about “the form of the heavens,” since the Holy Spirit had “not wished to teach those things to men that would be of no use for salvation” (p. 315). Consequently, biblical authors had been given an accommodated account of the cosmos, evoking the worldview of their unenlightened contemporaries. After all, it was the priority of the Holy Spirit, as Cesare Baronio (1538–1607) had quipped, “to teach us how to go to heaven, and not how the heavens go” (p. 317).

In the present volume, Hans Bieri shows that Galileo was not the only early Copernican who supported such an accommodationist approach. In 1615, Paolo Antonio Foscarini (1565–1616) suggested that Holy Scripture spoke “according to our [historical] standpoint, only with respect to us, according to the standard form of speaking” (pp. 215–219), an effective recipe for obscuring the reality of the heliocentric hypothesis. Also in support of Copernican astronomy, Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514–1574) wrote that the Holy Spirit had not spoken to biblical authors with the intention of formulating “a natural philosophy, but rather a rule of life” (p. 477). According to Galileo, even Copernicus himself had practiced a policy of accommodation by referring to “the rising and setting of the Sun, so as not to increase the difficulty and disorder in our thought” (p. 355). Though Galileo’s connection with Copernicus is sufficiently clear, Bieri leaves much to the imagination when drawing connections to other advocates of accommodation. His discussion of Nicole Oresme (c. 1323–1382), for example, is introduced with the admission that “Galileo was not acquainted with Oresme’s book, nor could he have read it” (p. 400). Bieri’s evaluation of Calvin as “the first theologian who, on biblical
claims concerning nature, took a significant step in the direction of historical interpretation,” suggests two equally ambiguous ties to Galileo’s interpretation of Scripture: either Galileo arrived at “indirect knowledge of Calvin’s accommodation theory through the reading of Kepler’s Astronomia Nova [1609],” or Calvin’s theory was simply ‘in the air,’ owing to the wide diffusion of his works “throughout Europe in the sixteenth century” (pp. 116–120). Neither possibility is backed by bibliographical references, making it the reader’s responsibility to assess Bieri’s assembly of authors who are not historically linked to Galileo. Under similarly vague circumstances, Bieri associates Galileo’s conversion to Copernicanism with the idea of “the ebb and flow [of the ocean] through the motion of the Earth” (pp. 20–22). Without adequate evidence, Bieri boldly suggests that Galileo drew the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church only “a few years after 1610,” since “natural philosophers, theologians and astronomers concurringly received the Copernican world system as plainly absurd” until then (p. 87).

If Bieri is on occasion guilty of unsupported generalizations, his book provides an unprecedented and useful collection of primary sources that focus on Galileo’s accommodation theory, many now in German translation for the first time. Most of the translations are by Virgilio Masciadri, a classical philologist and historian of religion. Accounting for nearly two-thirds of the book, the primary sources consist in the original writings of Galileo and theological scholars such as Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), and they are accompanied by facing-page reproductions. Galileo’s letter to the Grand Duchess Christina serves as the centrepiece, and it accordingly receives an introduction more extensive than Bieri’s normally brief openings. In appreciation of Galileo’s “accomplished humanist education,” Masciadri attempts to preserve Galileo’s style “in German as precisely as possible, unlike most previous translations of Galileo’s writings” (p. 9). The book’s intended audience, university instructors and students, as well as those with “an interest in the historical interrelation of science, philosophy and theology” (p. 9), should find in it a front-row seat to a fascinating exchange of ideas on the subject of scriptural interpretation. As several of the primary sources here remind us, such ideas were not without consequence. It is virtually impossible for any secondary source to capture, for example, the original force of Bellarmino’s admonition to Foscarini. If Foscarini denied that the Earth stood “immobile at the centre of the world, farthest away from the heavens,” Bellarmino pit him against “the Church Fathers and all the Latin and Greek exegetes” (p. 275). In opposition to “the commentators on Genesis, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Joshua,” Foscarini could just as well apply the same practice to positing that “Christ was not born of a virgin”