



Dr. Pablo de Felipe

***Curiosity in the Early Christian Era:
Philoponus' Defence of Ancient Astronomy
against Christian Critics***



A negative view of curiosity among early Christians



What, indeed, has Athens [meant to represent pagan scholarship] to do with Jerusalem [representing Christian religion]? What concord is there between [Plato's] Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? ... Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectical composition! We have no need for *curiosity* beyond Christ Jesus, no investigation beyond the Gospel.



Tertullian (c.155-c.240)

... because of this disease of *curiosity* ... men proceed to investigate the phenomena of nature, though this knowledge is of no value to them: for they wish to know simply for the sake of knowing.



Augustine (c.354-c.430)



... some supposed to be Christians, holding divine scripture of no account but despising and looking down upon it, assume like the Pagan philosophers, that the form of the heavens is spherical, being led into this error by the solar and lunar eclipses.

Were one to call such men double-faced he would not be wrong, for, look you, they wish both to be with us and with those that are against us, thus making void their renunciation of Satan whom they renounced in baptism, and again running back to him. Now, such men cannot be with us at all; but they occupy a middle position, ...



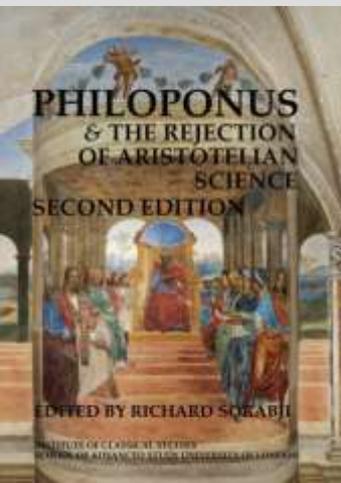
Cosmas Indicopleustes (6th century)



No one considering the systematic treatment of nature by later writers is going to ask Moses' scripture ... what has been thoroughly researched on these subjects by specialists. ... That was not the excellent Moses' intent; he was rather the first chosen by God to lead people to knowledge of God and to teach a way of life befitting that.

... do not let anyone ask if Moses is writing a work of astronomy or a technical treatise on natural causes. This is not the scope of theologians, nor the teaching for leading people to knowledge of God, but rather a job for specialized workers...

What Basil the Great called accurate were not astrological observations but astronomical ones, which accurately explain the stars' motions, their forward and retrograde motions, stations and conjunctions, full moons, solar and lunar eclipses, and in how much time each of the planets completes its orbit, and whatever things pertain to this method.

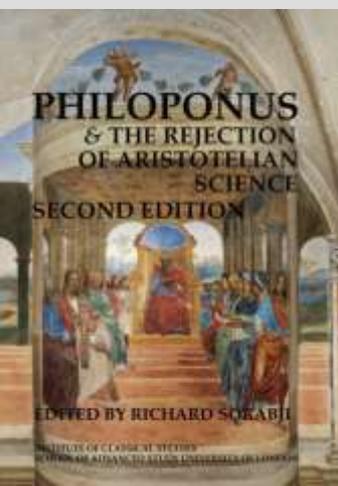


John Philoponus (c.490-c.570)



If certain people, owing to the uneducated state of their soul, cannot attain to what has been said and are troubled about the way the facts are put together, silence will help them to cover up their own ignorance. And let them not tell lies about God's creation out of their own lack of experience and the slowness of their mind, fearing the retributions for a lie. ... What punishment do they deserve who lie about such works of God? Let them hear it from him: "My name is blasphemed by you everywhere among the nations." (*Romans 2:24*)

...since the cause of each of these things is accepted by people willing to learn, so they know these and similar matters through scientific knowledge [probably a less anachronist term could be 'systematic knowledge'], and know the phenomena by their own observations. When they encounter those of good old Theodore or one of his followers and observe the great stupidity of what they say, how can they not jump on our reverent teaching like flies on wounds in bodies, and how would they not blaspheme against us, or I should say against God, and flap their jaws attributing the absurdity of their words to the whole dogma?





Hardly was it published, however, before this purely scientific idea was seized upon in the interests of atheism and turned into something quite different. ... 'Evolutionism' became a name for a whole anti-religious philosophy, in which 'Evolution' played the role of a more or less personal deity, as the 'real force in the universe'.

Faced with such a confusion of issues, it is hardly surprising that some Christians of the last [19th] century were induced to direct their fire in the wrong quarter, and to attack the technical theory instead of its philosophical parasite.

Donald M. MacKay. *Clockwork image. A Christian perspective on science*. London, IVP, 1974, p. 52.



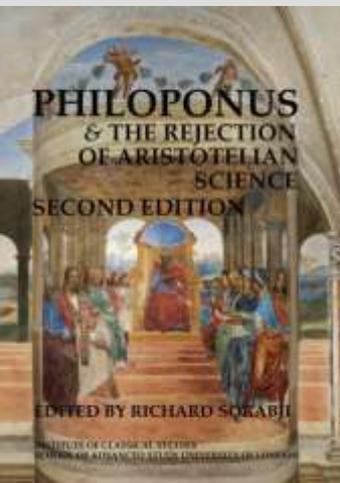
Donald M. MacKay (1922-1987)



I have often said that he [Moses] wrote this book to lead people to knowledge of God for those subject to him, those who for a long time had also been brought up with the Egyptians and infected with their impious forms of worship. Almost all the barbarians up to now ... believe that the sun and moon and the other stars are gods.

The aim of the present work is to show, as far as possible, that nothing in the prophet's cosmogony disagrees with the arrangement of the universe, ...

As I have shown that Moses cosmogony agrees with extant reality, I have also taken those more highly reputed in astronomy than all their predecessors, Hipparchus and Ptolemy, as witnesses ...



John Philoponus (c.490-c.570)



Zealous faith could easily mislead, as shown for instance by Philoponus' repeated insistence that the Mosaic cosmogony was in full accord with the scientific (Aristotelian) world picture. ... Philoponus spared no effort to prove that for Moses the earth was not flat but spherical.

Clearly, the time was still far away when theologians were ready to do justice to the principle that Genesis was written for spiritual and not for scientific instruction. The first to state this programmatically was Philoponus himself, but he was also the first to ignore this wise principle.

Stanley L. Jaki. *Science and Creation*. Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1990, p. 187.



Stanley L. Jaki (1924-2009)



Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend.



John Calvin (1509-1564)



For although they [the sacred writings] adjusted themselves to the common method of understanding ... yet let it be far from us to think of them as speaking in *such* a common manner that we do not believe them to be speaking truth. Thus Moses, even if he does not refer to the deep things of astronomy when treating the creation of the world in the first chapter of Genesis, because he is writing for the common people, nevertheless he does introduce that which our astronomers can concede.



Tycho Brahe (1546-1601)



Rothmann's version of the *accommodation principle*

Unless this question is decided by us, it will not be decided by anyone ... For God has not revealed anything whatever about this in his Word, because it has nothing to do with our salvation. The Scriptures, which are written for the unlearned and learned alike, the common and ingenious, do not contain such disputations which are not even understood by very many learned...

Hebrews were of the opinion that clouds in the heights could not hang [there] unless there existed some hard and impenetrable matter which supported water. God speaks accommodating Himself to the capacity of the Hebrews...

The Holy Spirit did not want to reveal them [the prophets] the wisdom that God set in nature, except for the wisdom contained in that wonderful and supernatural mystery of the Redemption of the human race.... Therefore, the authority of Sacred Scripture, even though adduced in a plausible manner, it could not be an objection in this question, since we will know only as much as we achieve to discover through mathematical demonstrations.

*Mathematicus
Christophorus
Rothmannus
Brunsburgensis.*

Christoph Rothmann (1550/60-1600?)



As a matter of fact neither St Paul nor Moses had the slightest idea of relativity. The writers of the Bible were illuminated more or less – some more than others – on the question of salvation. On other questions they were as wise or as ignorant as their generation. Hence it is utterly unimportant that errors of historic and scientific fact should be found in the Bible, especially if errors relate to events that were not directly observed by those who wrote about them.

Divine revelation never taught us what we could have found out by ourselves, at least when these natural truths are not necessary to understand the supernatural truth.



Georges Lemaître (1894-1966)

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

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THANKS!

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