

God's Two Books, Doug Hayhoe, October 2022

Many Christians focus on just one of God's books, the book of scripture. However, God has another book, the book of nature, in which he also reveals himself. Both books are important.

Conservative Christians have strong beliefs. One of the strongest is this: they take God's book of Scripture seriously. Unfortunately, some of them do not take God's book of nature as seriously, the facts and scientific truths we learn from creation. But God revealed himself first in his created world, and sometimes he speaks very clearly in this book, though not using words. He later revealed himself in his written Word. Since these are both God's books, we need to respect the authority of both (Figure 1). Here are three reasons why we believe creation to be God's first book of revelation with the Bible being God's second book.



Figure 1a My students looking at creation through binoculars and a telescope, many years ago

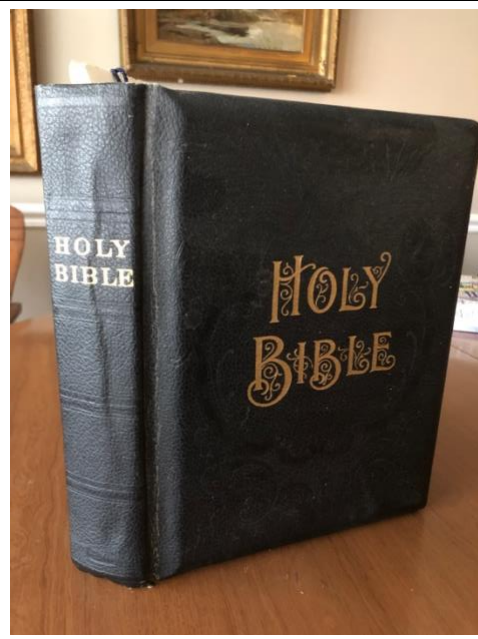


Figure 1b The family Bible my wife gave her parents on their 25th anniversary.

1. We personally experience God speaking to our hearts through creation

Several winters ago, I was skiing in the Blue Mountains on a sunny day with great snow conditions. On our ride home, I asked the men with me how they had experienced God's voice in creation. The eldest was thankful to God for being able to ski in his 80s, and still enjoy the exhilarating feeling of making perfect parallel turns. Another mentioned the dynamism in God's creation, as we skied through a small whirling "tornado like" snow devil. A third experienced joy at seeing God's beautiful handiwork in the always changing colours of the sky, clouds, and water in Georgian Bay. He quoted the hymn, "I sing for joy at the work of your hands." Our hearts as well as our bodies were engaged with creation that day!

Each of you has probably had similar experiences. Whether it be the beauty of wildflowers, the display of shooting star showers, or the quiet stillness of a night under the full Moon, this is how we hear God's voice in creation. It's true that we can have "transcendent"

experiences through other means such as unusual dreams, the wise counsel of a friend, or the simultaneous occurrences of unique events. These, however, are all susceptible to human error or even sin. But when God speaks through creation, he speaks infallibly.

But isn't "nature red in tooth and claw?" someone might object. When we watch nature programs on TV, we often see amazing sequences of carnivorous animals living by their claws and teeth, red with blood. This disturbs some people. The poet Tennyson first penned the phrase, "nature red in tooth and claw," in 1850 to illustrate the conflict he felt between a loving God and callous nature. Many others have picked it up since. Richard Dawkins used it in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), to argue that we should dispense with the idea of a good God, and just depend on the "survival of the fittest" to explain everything. But there is a beautiful answer to this problem in Scripture. "The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God" ([Ps. 104:21 NIV](#)). God's carnivorous animals, who must eat other mammals to stay alive, are, in fact, receiving their food from God. This is how he provides for them.

2. Christian leaders and scientists through the ages testify to God's voice in creation

A second reason for believing in God's two books is the testimony of Christian leaders from the beginning. In the 4th century, Augustine wrote, "The pages of Scripture can only be read by those who know how to read and write, while everyone, even the illiterate, can read the book of the universe." In medieval times, John Scotus put it this way: "The eternal light manifests itself to the world in two ways, through Scripture and through creatures." In 1569, the Belgic Confession of the Reformed churches in the Lowlands stated that God reveals himself to us, first, through creation, "the universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book," and, second, he reveals himself through "his holy and divine Word ... for God's glory and our salvation."

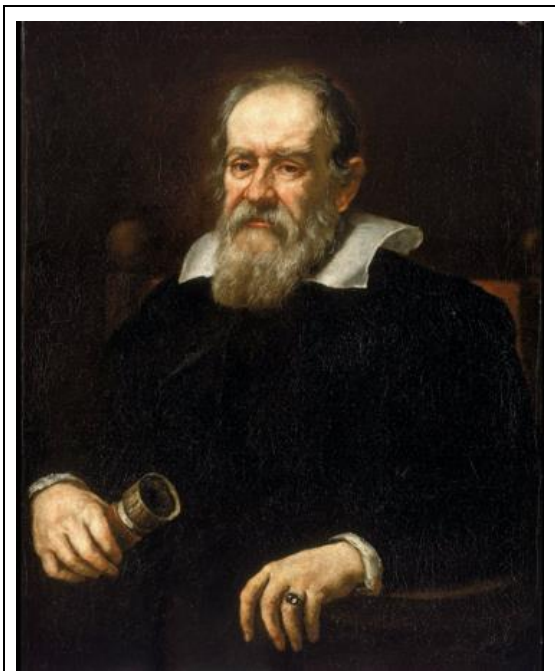


Figure 2 [A portrait of Galileo in 1636 by Justin Sustermans](#) (public domain).

The two books idea underwent a severe test in the early 17th century, however. Up to that point, the Church had accepted the geocentric theory of the Greeks, which placed Earth unmovable at the center of the universe, with the sun and stars traveling around it daily. This made sense to people as they looked out at the huge, immovable earth, and saw the sun and moon moving across the sky. It also agreed with Scriptures like "the world also is established that it cannot be moved" ([Psalm 93:1 KJV](#)). So, when an obscure Polish monk, Copernicus, proposed the heliocentric theory, which placed the sun at the centre of the solar system, with the earth orbiting the sun yearly, it was not welcomed. Then, a while later, the Italian mathematician, Galileo, built a telescope and used it to make new observations of heavenly objects. When his evidence supported the heliocentric model, science was at a crossroads (Figure 2).

Some people think that Galileo rejected the Bible. In fact, he said, “I think in the first place that it is pious to say and prudent to affirm that the holy Bible can never speak untruth, wherever its true meaning is understood.” He also pointed out that Scripture wasn’t meant to teach us how the heavenly objects moved in relation to each other. God’s other book, nature, was meant to teach us those things. Psalm 93:1 was a poem describing our awe and wonder at the greatness and seeming immobility of the earth, from our viewpoint. Galileo wrote these things in his “[Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany](#),” after she expressed her concern to him about the implications of his telescopic discoveries.¹

Following Galileo, many other leading scientists accepted the metaphor of God’s two books, including Kepler, Pascal, Boyle, Newton, Faraday, and Maxwell. Galileo’s contemporary, Francis Bacon, expressed it this way, “Let no one think that they can search too far, or be too well studied in either the book of God’s Word, or in the book of God’s works.” This belief in God’s two books has continued right down to the present. In another essay in this collection, *Contemporary Scientists Who Believe*, I profile five top scientists today who all believe in God’s two books.

Some scientists and philosophers such as Franklin, Spinoza, and Hume, it is true, never accepted the metaphor of God’s two books, mainly because they didn’t accept the authority of Scripture. But most Christian leaders who did accept the Bible as God’s Word also accepted the truth of God speaking through his creation. The principal reason for the near universal acceptance of this was that the Scripture itself speaks about God’s two books.

3. Scripture clearly teaches that God speaks to us through creation

[Psalm 19](#) is the classic text. Verses 1-6 describe God’s book of creation, verses 7-11 God’s book of Scripture, and verses 12-14 the poet’s response. We’ll focus on the first four verses.

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
- ² Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
- ³ They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
- ⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Verse 2 describes nature as “pouring forth speech” by day, when we see so many marvelous things in God’s creation. But the night also “reveals knowledge,” perhaps referring to the moon and stars. Verses 3 and 4 say that although this revelation doesn’t use human words or sounds (i.e., voices), their voice (i.e., message) still goes out to all the world. In verses 5 and 6, not quoted here, the poet goes on to mention the sun, as the brightest witness in

¹ Two professional astronomers, David L. Block and Kenneth C. Freeman, have recently written a fascinating book focused on Galileo’s Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina. In their book, [God and Galileo: What a 400-year-old Letter Teaches Us about Faith and Science](#) (Crossway, 2019) they show how relevant Galileo’s letter is to current discussions about how science relates to the Scriptures. I strongly recommend this book to anyone seriously interested in this topic.

creation, for it gives heat to the earth allowing all of life to exist. The rest of Psalm 19 describes the Law, which is part of God's second book: "The law of the Lord is perfect ... the statutes of the Lord are trustworthy ... the precepts of the Lord are right ... the commands of the Lord are radiant, etc."

The clearest New Testament text about God's two books is in the first chapter of Romans. The apostle Paul points out that everyone in the world is responsible to worship God, not idols, even though they may not have the Bible. For "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" ([Romans 1:20 NIV](#)). In summary, our own personal experience, the witness of the church throughout the centuries, and both parts of Scripture teach us that nature is God's first book, even as we know that the Bible is his second book.

Let me conclude with a tribute to my mother. One of my strongest childhood memories was of my mother waking up us children at 3:00 am on a cold winter day in March, when the temperature had plunged to 15° F (–10° C), to go outside "to see a red moon." After reluctantly putting on our coats, hats, and mitts, we stood out on the street, watching the full moon high in the sky, slowly turn red as it moved into eclipse. Sixty years later, I still remember what I learned from that episode. Although Mother loved God's Word and taught us many truths from it, she also loved God's creation, and didn't want us to miss a thing. She was truly a woman who delighted in God and in both of his books! May we also be people of God's two books!

Please see the next essay, *How we read God's Books*.