

Thesis: Gould, Galileo, and Plantinga are all wrong about Biblical interpretation. Interpreting the meaning of a text is mostly a matter of hermeneutical principles involving the text itself, and the intentions and knowledge of the authors. These principles dictate that the Bible very often makes descriptive assertions about the nature of the world (so Gould is wrong) and our scientific knowledge of the world tells us that these assertions are sometimes false (so Galileo and Plantinga are wrong).

Gould's view:

Gould's NOMA view dictates that religious doctrines are only about meaning and values and never descriptive claims about the world. The natural consequence is that the Bible (such as the creation story in Genesis) can't be read as a literal, descriptive assertion about the history of the world. As a claim about Genesis, this is plausible. However, this is because of the nature of the text itself. Augustine in the 5th century argued that the creation story should not be taken literally. This was on the basis of theological and hermeneutical principles and not based on scientific knowledge. However, if we look at a different passage, for example, talking about the children of Jacob or the birthplace of Jesus, the text tells us that these are meant as descriptive assertions about the world.

Galileo and Plantinga:

Both Galileo and Plantinga believe that the Bible makes descriptive assertions about the world and also that these assertions are always true. When we read the text we can sometimes tell what assertions the text is actually making but of course sometimes we get it wrong. Galileo thinks that if we have scientific evidence that the world is one way, that evidence trumps what we thought the interpretation of the Bible was. Plantinga thinks that we are sometimes wrong about the interpretation and that science can provide evidence that we are wrong. But when the interpretation is clear (or we have alternate evidence through prayer or divine revelation) this evidence might actually trump scientific evidence.

The mistake:

The idea that science can inform the proper interpretation of the Bible is a mistake. If clear textual principles dictate that the Bible is asserting that Jesus was born in Bethlehem then that is how we should interpret the text (and it is). If we later discovered that in fact, Jesus was born in Nazareth (or in Jerusalem or that there was no Jesus or ...), we should conclude that the authors of the Bible were simply mistaken rather than trying to figure out how to twist the meaning of "born in Bethlehem" (Matthew 2) to mean something other than what it plainly says.

Plantinga's response:

Plantinga would undoubtedly respond that in principle, a question like "What does 'born in Bethlehem' mean in this context?" should be approached using all you know and all the evidence you have about everything – literary, historical, and scientific. Thus if we had strong enough evidence that the Bible does not assert any falsehoods

and we also had strong enough evidence that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, then we should conclude that the proper interpretation of the text is something other than what it seems. As a matter of logic and method, this is correct. You should look at the strength of the evidence. However, there are clear cases where the evidence for a particular interpretation is very strong and it is just not true that we have evidence of any kind of comparable strength that what it asserts **MUST** be true independent of what we discover about the world. Plantinga's own epistemological principles dictate that you can't simply hold on to your favored view (in this case, that the Bible never says anything false) no matter what else you discover.