

# 1609 to 2009: Galileo and Kepler

## Another significant anniversary

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**M**UCH HAS been made of the fact that 2009 is the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the sesquicentenary of the publication of his book *On the Origin of Species*. 2009 is the anniversary of another very significant date in science that also has had an influence on the debate about science and the Word of God: 2009 marks four hundred years since 1609, when Galileo Galilei demonstrated his newly constructed telescope to Venetian merchants.

With his telescope Galileo explored the solar system, and, building on the work of earlier scholars such as Aristotle (fourth century B.C.), Claudius Ptolemaeus (second century B.C.) and Dante (fourteenth century), as well as contemporaries like Copernicus, he proved that the moons of Jupiter orbited that planet, and that Venus orbited the Sun. He also observed sunspots, thus proving that the Sun was not a perfect orb. These observations were in direct conflict with the teaching of the Church of Rome.

1609 was also the year when the German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler published his book *Astronomia Nova*, which explained how the planets orbit the Sun. Kepler's treatise corrected an error in Copernicus' description of how the solar system worked, and, having coined the term 'orbit', he laid down the laws for planetary motion that underpinned much of the later scientific work of Sir Isaac Newton.

### Conventional thinking overturned

Commenting on the anniversary of Galileo's work, the *Economist* (15 Aug. 2009, p. 10) remarked that Galileo's theory "along with Darwin's discovery of evolution by natural selection [were] the biggest revolution in self-knowledge that mankind has undergone".

While much of the theory of evolution remains a challenge to Bible believers, we do not find

anything challenging about the concept that the Earth is just one of several planets orbiting the Sun. Yet in 1609 this was revolutionary teaching. There is nothing in the Bible that is at odds with that view, but the Church reacted violently against the concept. Brother C. C. Walker observed that "It is to be presumed that the Roman Catholic Church is now ashamed of its persecution of Galileo in the seventeenth century, but the historical fact remains. All the time the misinterpretation of scripture was with 'the Church', while the word of God plainly declared that 'He hangeth the world upon nothing'".<sup>1</sup>

Why was the Church so challenged by the views of Galileo and Kepler? Because it subscribed to a completely erroneous view, which it had borrowed from Greek philosophy rather than devised from the Word of God. In 1609 the Church was committed to a view that owes its origin to Aristotle, who asserted that the Earth was the centre of the universe, and that it was circled by the moon, the Sun, the planets and the stars beyond. This theory had the effect of flattering its followers by allowing them to imagine that the universe had been created with humanity in mind and for the benefit of man. The observations of Galileo and Kepler demolished that approach. Instead of reviewing their misconceptions, however, the Church hierarchy persecuted those who dared to challenge its erroneous view. In contrast, the theory of evolution pandered to self-conceit, and, not surprisingly, the churches found it much easier to accommodate this teaching.

### God's glory paramount

There is a lesson in this for modern believers. We live in a world which increasingly places man at



Galileo

1. *The Word of God*, pp. 37,38.

the centre. The cult of the individual is strongly promoted in society, and elements of it are evident even in the ecclesia. This approach reflects the views of ancient Greek philosophers rather than the teaching of the Bible, which makes it clear that God rather than man is at the centre. The Bible calls for denial of self (Mt. 16:24), with a view to the believer becoming one with Christ and with God (Jno. 17:21), and looking forward to the day when "all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD" (Num. 14:21) and "God [will] be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Brother Thomas famously observed that "Men were not ushered into being for the purpose of being saved or lost. God-manifestation, not human salvation, was the grand purpose of the Eternal Spirit. The salvation of a multitude

is incidental to the manifestation, but it was not the end proposed. The Eternal Spirit intended to enthrone himself on the earth, and, in so doing, to develop a Divine Family from among men, every one of whom shall be spirit because born of the Spirit, and that this family shall be large enough to fill the earth, when perfected, to the entire exclusion of flesh and blood".<sup>2</sup>

The Church lost sight of this vital Bible teaching, and this error drove it to reject scientifically sound observations that confirmed the wonder of creation. Let us be careful not to allow theories that owe more to Greek philosophy than to the Bible to blind us to the wonder of God's plan as revealed in creation.



**Kepler**

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2. *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, 1858, p. 84.