

## Book Reviews

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### *THE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE*

Jeremy Brown, *New Heavens and a New Earth: The Jewish Reception of Copernican Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2013. £45.00. pp. xvii + 394. ISBN: 978-0-19-975479-3).

The ‘science-religion debate’ is often better named the ‘science-Christianity debate’: other religions rarely feature in depth, and detailed scholarly studies of their particular contributions are notable by their general absence. Jeremy Brown’s book, *New Heavens and a New Earth*, is a very welcome exception, presenting a major historical study of the engagement between Judaism and the natural sciences, charted through the Jewish reaction to Copernicanism.

That Christianity did not unanimously welcome Copernicus’ model of heliocentricity is well illustrated by the infamous trial of Galileo. The Jewish reception of Copernicanism is also marked by formidable opposition, and on similar grounds (namely that scripture teaches that the earth stands still, and that it is the sun that moves), but while Christianity had largely come to terms with Copernicus by the eighteenth century or so, substantial Jewish opposition rumbled on into the twentieth (and in some ultra-Orthodox circles to the present day).

It would be a mistake, though, to read from this that Jewish opposition to Copernicus was uniform. Brown tells the stories of the many and varied Jewish commentators on the heavens since the time of Copernicus, some of whom were strongly in favour of his system while some were staunchly against, and some of whom just seem to have been rather confused. There is a great deal of humour and human interest in these stories, and one of the great points about Brown’s book is its sheer readability on these grounds, not forgetting that it also tells a major but largely overlooked narrative in the story of religious reactions to the development

of modern science. That most of Judaism eventually came to terms with Copernicus provides a nice illustration of the complex ways in which religious traditions evolve in response to cultural and intellectual trends, often varying their accounts of authority and religious truth along the way so that harmonisation is eventually achieved.

Clearly, where authority and religious truth are to be located, and how they are to be interpreted, are central issues at stake in this discussion, but Brown treats them rather patchily in comparison to the historical biographies. Given that the Jewish (and Christian) reservations concerning Copernicus revolve to a large degree around the interpretation of certain key biblical texts, it would have been good to have seen a detailed discussion of these texts and their wider historical reception, together with the various critical and hermeneutical issues that arise. But, notwithstanding this point, Brown has provided a major work of historical scholarship which is sure to provide a vital point of reference in the science-religion debate for years to come.

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### *EXPOSING MYTHICIST MYTHS*

Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. £19.99. pp. viii + 272. ISBN: 978-0-567-44762-3).

Maurice Casey has written a book that critiques the idea that Jesus never existed. The book consists of eight chapters. The first chapter introduces readers to people who question Jesus’ historicity. Those who insist Jesus did not exist are called *mythicists*.