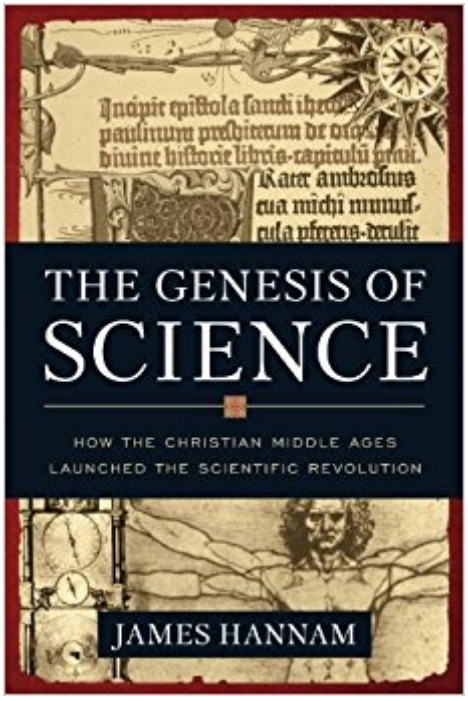
The Genesis Of Science: How The Christian Middle Ages Launched The Scientific Revolution



Synopsis

Maybe the Dark Ages Weren’t So Dark After All...Here are some facts you probably didn’t learn in school: People in the Middle Ages did not think the world was flat--in fact, medieval scholars could prove it wasn’t;The Inquisition never executed anyone because of their scientific ideas or discoveries (actually, the Church was the chief sponsor of scientific research and several popes were celebrated for their knowledge of the subject);It was medieval scientific discoveries, methods, and principles that made possible western civilization’s "Scientific Revolution".If you were taught that the Middle Ages were a time of intellectual stagnation, superstition, and ignorance, you were taught a myth that has been utterly refuted by modern scholarship.As a physicist and historian of science James Hannam shows in his brilliant new book, The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution, without the scholarship of the "barbaric" Middle Ages, modern science simply would not exist.The Middle Ages were a time of one intellectual triumph after another. As Dr. Hannam writes, "The people of medieval Europe invented spectacles, the mechanical clock, the windmill, and the blast furnace by themselves. Lenses and cameras, almost all kinds of machinery, and the industrial revolution itself all owe their origins to the forgotten inventors of the Middle Ages."In The Genesis of Science you will discover:Why the scientific accomplishments of the Middle Ages far surpassed those of the classical world;How medieval craftsmen and scientists not only made discoveries of their own, but seized upon Eastern inventions--printing, gunpowder, and the compass--and improved them beyond the dreams of their originators;How Galileo’s notorious trial before the Inquisition was about politics, not science; andWhy the theology of the Catholic Church, far from being an impediment, led directly to the development of modern science.Provocative, engaging, and a terrific read, James Hannam’s The Genesis of Science will change the way you think about our past--and our future.

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Customer Reviews

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caricature.Ã¢â ¬Â• —Sunday Telegraph“Hannam, the liveliest of guides, makes enjoyable reading out of some seriously dusty history and difficult ideas.Ã¢â ¬Â• —Scotsman“Here, in short, is a readable book, aimed at an intelligent but igno-rant layman. YouÃ¢â ¬â„¢ll enjoy it.Ã¢â ¬Â• —Daniel Hannan MEP, Daily Telegraph“A very useful general survey of a difficult topic, and a robust defence of an unfairly maligned age.Ã¢â ¬Â• —Spectator

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The author shows where often-repeated myths about Medieval times are false. The over-arching myth he debunks is that Christianity was antagonistic to proto-scientists. In fact "natural philosophy" was nurtured at the Church sponsored universities. The scholars were religious men who considered themselves to be investigating God's creation. Many of them were even members of the clergy. Hannam points out that science did not spring into being with men of the Renaissance. They were building on the work that had been done before them. The Middle ages were not a time of stagnation, but of deep thought and progress. I enjoyed reading this book. I found it interesting to learn how scholars used one concept to build on and discover the next concept. They were having to figure out from scratch many things that we just take for granted. It was not easy to distinguish truth from error. I admire how they were able to accomplish so much in the difficult circumstances in which they lived.

In The Genesis of Science, Dr. Hannam seems to have two main purposes. First, he wants to demonstrate that the so-called "Dark Ages" were not so dark; that, in fact, the groundwork for modern science was laid during this time. And, second, that the Catholic Church was not the enemy of science; that, in fact, it was the Church that supported science in its birth. Dr. Hannam is

moderately successful in achieving both of these purposes.The fact that modern science did not spring like Athena from the minds of men like Kepler and Galileo around 1600 is not really a surprise. And Dr. Hannam does a nice job discussing some of the important precursors like the rise of universities and the translations into Latin of classical texts during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He takes us through an entire series of important men and their discoveries of the period from about 1200 - 1600, which is very well done and fascinating. But he seems to overreach a bit. Despite his claim that important things were going on from 476 - 1200, apart from a few scattered names and small achievements, the Dark Ages still seem pretty dark for about 700 years.As for the Church, Dr. Hannam tries his best to make the medieval institution the incubator of knowledge that will bring modern science to life. In this he is less successful. That the Church often played a positive role in the development of universities and the recovery of classical knowledge is true. On the other hand, his argument that the Inquisition wasn't as bad is it is made out to be or that men like Bruno and Galileo brought many of their problems on themselves while true to a certain extent, doesn't really exonerate the Church.Overall, however, Dr. Hannam has done a yeoman's service to the history of science by putting the advances of the late middle ages back in the spotlight. I was a bit surprised that James J. Walsh's wonderful book The Thirteenth: Greatest of Centuries wasn't cited in Dr. Hannam's bibliography. Though Walsh's book covers the wider cultural milieu, they tread a lot of the same ground. Still, Walsh's 1907 book is a bit hard to read for modern audiences. After 100+ years, it's nice to see a solid work on this interesting subject.

The popular idea of the Middle Ages in Europe is that it was a thousand year period of ignorance and barbarism between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, a time of nearly complete intellectual stagnation. Everyone is supposed to have been illiterate with the exception of a few clergymen and the Catholic Church kept a tight rein on all learning, burning any scholar who dared to have an independent thought or challenge the authority of Scripture. Historians have recognized for some time that this stereotype is entirely false. The Middle Ages, or "Dark Ages" were, in fact, a time of extraordinary fertility and progress. Many of the concepts and institutions that came to distinguish Western Civilization were developed in this era, especially the beginnings of the intellectual enterprise we call science. In his book "The Genesis of Science", James Hannam traces the development of science, or natural philosophy as it was then known, through the Middle Ages, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the trial of Galileo. He begins in the very depths the Dark Age, the chaotic 5th to 7th centuries, where even then the Europeans were beginning to pull ahead in practical technology with such useful tools as the moldboard plow and the horse collar, which

revolutionized agriculture. The discovery of ancient Latin and Greek manuscripts from the Arabs and Byzantines led to the rise of the Scholastic theologians of the 11th to 13 centuries. The Scholastics, under the influence of Aristotle, established reason as the method for learning about God and His creation. There was some controversy in the Catholic Church about pagan learning but the Scholastics, especially Thomas Aquinas showed that faith and reason could be reconciled and the Church accepted the ancient learning to the extent that it did not contradict Christian doctrine. With the acceptance of reason as an adjunct to faith, the philosophers of the Middle Ages were prepared to see the natural world around them as the rational creation of a rational God, forming the foundation for later scientific thinking. The Scholastics did not slavishly follow Aristotle, however. They were capable of observing that he was wrong in some instances and were willing to move beyond him. In fact, some of their ideas about motion and forces were surprisingly modern. Some, especially Roger Bacon stressed the importance of careful observation of the natural world. With the increased knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome during the Renaissance of the 13th to 15 centuries, much of this learning was disregarded and forgotten. The Renaissance Humanists venerated the ancients and so were inclined to denigrate the achievements of their immediate predecessors. The authority of Aristotle and others was more respected than the thoughts of more recent philosophers. The Protestant Reformation did not help matters, as the Protestants were not eager to give the Catholic Church any credit. Still, progress continued and in the last section of his book, Hannam explores the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. He closes with an account of Galileo. Although Galileo was a brilliant scientist who practically invented physics, he owed far more to his medieval predecessors than he was ever willing to admit. As for his troubles with the Inquisition, they had less to do with any Catholic opposition to science and were more due to politics and the folly of implying that the Pope was a simpleton. The Genesis of Science is worth five stars. The perhaps over long summary that I have given above is only the merest foretaste to this brilliant work. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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