

FRANCIS BACON'S ALTERNATIVE TO MORE'S *UTOPIA*

CURRICULUM UNIT © CTMS

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Thomas More's *Utopia* vs. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*

In his *New Atlantis*, Bacon presents the first model society based on empirical science and on Machiavelli's critique of classical utopias. As such, he does not present a utopia ("no place") as More did, but Bacon sets forth what he considers to be a realizable city of peace and prosperity founded on a scientifically inductive study of nature and of "humanity."

To appreciate the issues at stake in the difference between Thomas More's *Utopia* and Bacon's *New Atlantis*, you might consider books three and four of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as well as Swift's "Battle of the Books." In this battle between the "ancients" and the "moderns," Swift sides with Thomas More while satirizing such enterprises as Bacon's *New Atlantis* in the voyage to Laputa and in the "pure reason" of the Houyhnhnms. In book three, Swift also praises More as one of the six great defenders of freedom of all time.

What is the difference between an "ancient" utopia and a "modern" model of society? To help reflection on this issue, see the questions that follow as well as CTMS Study Questions on *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels*. A download of the text of the *New Atlantis*, as well as PDF versions of the questions and outline are available here:

<https://thomasmorestudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bacon-New-Atlantis-2020-Edition-7-6-2020.pdf>

FRANCIS BACON'S *NEW ATLANTIS*

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STUDY QUESTIONS

Introduction (pages 3-6)

1. Upon what is our attention focused as we and the travelers are introduced to Bensalem?
2. What contrast is presented between paragraph one and the six that follow? What is the significance of Bensalem's name (which is Hebrew for "son of peace")?

Part 1: The Strangers' House and the History of Bensalem (pages 6-23)

1. What characterizes the Strangers' House and how do the European strangers respond to it? What advice does the European leader give to his fellow travelers?
2. What are the most striking attributes of the Governor of the Strangers' House?
3. What is the first question asked by the strangers and how does the Governor receive that question (11)?
4. Why would Bacon choose *Renfusa* ("sheep-natured"; "sheeplike") for the name of this city on page 12?
5. What is your reaction to the Governor's answer? What do you find most surprising about this account?
6. What is the strangers' second question and why do you think the Governor says they "did well to ask pardon" for phrasing that question as they did (15)?
7. Given the Governor's answer, what lessons does he want to impart about Bensalem? Why would he volunteer to give the information in his "digression" (20-22)?
8. How do the strangers react to the Governor's suggestion that they could remain in Bensalem?
9. Why do you think the Governor does not let the strangers kiss his tippet (22), yet the Father of Salomon's House does (32)?

Part 2: Marriage Laws and Customs in Bensalem (pages 23-30)

1. What effect is achieved by having the narrator and Joabin describe Bensalem's marriage laws and customs?
2. What does this society seem to value most highly, as seen in these laws and customs? How does it compare and contrast with the Utopian practices?

Part 3: On the House of Salomon (pages 31-45)

1. What distinguishes this Father of the House of Salomon?
2. What is the subject of his private conference with the narrator?
3. What does this account reveal about life in Bensalem? What do the "hermits" do (33)? Who are honored with statues (42)?
4. Why end this story with the Father's giving a very large "tip" or largess (43) when such gifts offered by the strangers were repeatedly refused?

Overall

1. Who is the narrator, and what effect has his stay in Bensalem had upon him?
2. What is most valued in Bensalem by the rulers, the priests, and the people?
3. Why the title "New Atlantis" when that term is never used in the story, since the island is called "Bensalem"?

Compare and Contrast with Thomas More's Utopia

1. How does Bacon's *New Atlantis* differ from More's *Utopia*? How do the objectives of each differ?
2. Would you prefer to live in Bensalem or in Utopia? Why?

Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* – Study Outline

Approaching New Atlantis	3	<i>Introduction – 4 pages</i>
Message delivered	4	
Official questions	5	
Concerns and an oath	6	
Strangers' House	7	<i>Strangers' House & History of Bensalem ("son of peace") – 16 pages</i>
Narrator calls for reform	9	
The governor/priest visits	10	
How Christianity came to Bensalem	12	
The Ark (1570 years ago)	13	
Bartholomew's Letter	14	
How they know, not being known	15	
Brief history:	16	
Age of Atlantis (3000 years ago)	17	
Great Atlantis destroyed	18	
King Solamona (1900 years ago)	19	
New laws	20	
Salomon's House	21	
Two voyages every twelve years	22	
The strangers are eager to stay	23	
Feast of the Family	24	<i>Marriage Laws and Customs in Bensalem – 8 pages</i>
The Governor's role	24	
The Tirsan and his Son of the Vine	24	
King's Charter and grapes of gold	25	
Dinner celebration	26	
Blessing of each child	27	
Joabin, a Jewish merchant	27	
Marriage customs and laws	28	
Irrationality of European ways	28	
Superiority of Bensalem to Europe	30	
Superiority of Bensalem to Utopia	30	
Father of Salomon's House visits	31	<i>House of Salomon – 13 pages (plus pages 12–13, 21–23)</i>
Private conference with strangers	32	
Salomon's Foundation explained	33	
1. The end	33	
2. Preparations and Instruments	33	
Lower, Upper, Middle Region	33	
Works of hermits	34	
Works for health	35	
Poisons; biology experiments	35	
Breweries, kitchens, wineries	36	
Medical dispensaries; furnaces	37	
Perspective-houses	38	
Sound-houses	39	
Perfume and engine houses	39	
Math and deceit houses	40	
3. Employments and Functions	40	
4. Ordinances and Rites	41	
The Wonderful Works of Nature	44	<i>Appended List of Salomon House's "Wonderful Works"</i>