

The Book of the Seer

Newtonian Eschatology

Newtonian Cosmological Interpretation of Bible Prophecy

Isaac Newton on Bible Prophecy

Part One: *Newton's Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel and St. John of the Apocalypse*, Full text of the 1733 edition with Latin translations

Part Two: Stivers Review of Whiston's Reflections

Part Three: Newton's Notes with Forensic Analyses of Unpublished Manuscripts

Part Two: A Review of Whiston's *Reflections*

This editor at first proposed to reproduce William Whiston's "Reflexions" into modern English, but found the task too daunting because of the archaic orthographical features and the limited quality of a facsimile reproduction.

Instead, the editor offers this review with the salient points of consideration and a facsimile copy as an Appendix for the reader's verification.

It must be appreciated that there is no other historical figure more qualified to review the works of Sir Isaac Newton than was William Whiston. At one point, he was Newton's personal assistant, and then upon Newton's recommendation, inherited his chair of professorship at Cambridge University. Even though the two men drifted apart from the demands of separate professional paths and then from the hazards associated with Whiston's heresy trial in which he was deposed from that position, Whiston's loyalty to the man remained fervent until the end.

The first point of consideration is Whiston's concern that Newton did not supply sufficient documentation to support some of his more heterodox opinions

and interpretations. However, Whiston did not have in his possession – nor did Newton’s publisher – the “rough drafts” and auxiliary studies which Newton produced before and after writing his *Observations*.

These uncollated manuscript collections, many of them in Latin, were to be found in an old chest sold at auction to John Maynard Keynes, who gives his account of the discovery in a commemorative speech which was posthumously given on his behalf by his brother Geoffrey at the Royal Society tercentenary celebrations in July 1946.

Thanks to the scholars of the Babson Institute and the online sourcing provided by “the Newton Project,” the reader will be satisfied that Newton had the support of ancient scholarship. These manuscripts were often unfinished and did not find their way into the final published commentary either because they were considered unnecessary, or they were views which Newton was satisfied would be vindicated in the course of time.

Second, it must be appreciated that Newton’s work was published posthumously, and while Whiston tried to accommodate for that fact, lacking intimate knowledge of some of these views, his complaints were left unanswered, because Newton, obviously, was not alive to defend them.

Third, the reader must appreciate that both men were intellectual giants, and while both men, in general, were in agreement on most points of interpretation, Whiston thinks Newton would have been spared the trouble in proving some positions, had he simply relied upon the Septuagint, Josephus, or other more reliable source, rather than to insist on using the Masoretic text. From both within the text and from these more recent publications of Newton’s Notes and dissertations, we know that he was acquainted with such sources. That he persisted in arguing some of his points from the Masoretes may be explained by a rule of debate: that the best argument is done by citing the sources upon which your opponent must rely.

And finally, other than perhaps two or three points of consequence in which Whiston might disagree with Newton, in the main, his disagreements are over points of triviality which might seem incomprehensible to the modern mind.

With this in way of introduction, let us proceed to summarize Whiston’s “Reflexions” as he goes – chapter by chapter – through Newton’s book.

Chapter I: Introduction; Concerning the Compilers of the Books of the Old Testament.

In this section, Whiston faults Newton for lending any credence to the Masoretes for the order and compilation of the Old Testament as we have come to know it. For example, Newton follows the Masoretes in declaring that the Samaritan Pentateuch was the work of a single priest (cf. 2 Kings 17:27-28) while Josephus affirms there were "several." We might wonder what bearing this should have on our understanding of the prophecies in Daniel, except that as we know, Whiston was a leading opponent of the Masoretes and opposed any tradition which relied upon it.

In agreement with the Masoretic and Talmudic writers, Newton believed the text of the Pentateuch was "lost" at the time when the Philistines had stolen the Ark, and only restored in the time of Ezra (reconstructing it from memory) while Whiston believed it was miraculously preserved throughout Israelite history.

As an example of Whiston's complaints would be his critique of Newton's treatment of 2 Chronicles 15:3-6. Here, the text tells us that "Israel" had lost its "Divine" presence and guidance, which Newton supposes is a reference to the two Tribes associated with the Kingdom of Judah, but which Whiston insists is a specific reference to the spiritual condition of the ten tribes associated with the northern Kingdom of Israel.

We are justified in questioning the importance of this distinction, except that it might later have bearing on Whiston's view of who constitutes the "Diaspora" and what is meant by the "gathering of the Exiles."

Other than this difference, Whiston expresses his admiration of Newton's handling of the provenance of Old Testament revelation and his treatment of the doctrine of the Covenant, in which, as we have recited numerous times:

The Authority of Councils, Synods, Bishops and Presbyters is Human. The Authority of the Prophets is Divine, and comprehends the Sum of Religion; reckoning Moses and the Apostles among the Prophets. . . Their Writings contain the Covenant between God and his People, with Instructions for keeping this

Covenant, instances of God's Judgments upon them that break it; and Predictions of Things to come: While the People of God keep the Covenant, they continue to be his People. When they break it, they cease to be his People or Church, and become the Synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews, and are not. And no Power on Earth is authoriz'd to alter this Covenant. (Whiston, p. 283)

Chapter II – Of the Prophetic Language. (Newton p. 16-23)

While Whiston agrees in general with Newton's assertion that the symbolic language of biblical prophecies, he disagrees with some of Newton's particular applications, namely, that the prophecies were written in code and that the symbols refer to a specific lexicon of interpretation, rather than as a "general" metaphors which may change.

Whiston is still influenced by Classical Christianity which sees these symbols as describing the spiritual realm. "The Old Serpent" Whiston wants to believe refers to a supernatural being known as "Satan" while Newton applies the term to refer to human actors.

Expressions, such as the "lake of fire," Newton believes refers to the temporal results of total warfare, while Whiston wants to still embrace these symbols as proving Classical doctrines pertaining to the eternal judgment and Hell.

Whiston complains that if there was any consistency in the application of these symbols, as if they represent a code book, then once the code was deciphered, there would no longer remain any mystery to biblical prophecy and it would become a straightforward task of applying the cipher.

As the reader will discover from reading this author's other reviews, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has had the effect of vindicating Newton's method.

Chapters III and IV and V, Of the Vision of the Image composed of four Metals and the Vision of the four Beasts, and Of the Kingdoms represented by the Feet of the Image . . .

Whiston generally remains in agreement with Newton in what has become the standard interpretation of the Four Ancient Kingdoms of the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and the Romans. He considers these as questions relating to

history which only requires the application of correct geographical and chronological descriptions.

Chapters VI. Of the ten Kingdoms, represented by the ten Horns of the fourth Beast.

Whiston agrees that these Ten Kingdoms are known to history as the barbarian tribes which became heirs and successors to the Western Roman Empire.

He disagrees with Newton on some of the particulars of the catalogue and the chronologies. Since Whiston had published his own commentary prior to the publication of Newton's, he felt compelled to defend it. Principally, Whiston includes the three Kingdoms of the Ostrogoths in Pannonia, the Saxons in Britain, and the "Heruli" in Italy.

This distinction might not at first seem consequential, but Newton's inclusion of the Celtic kingdoms of Vortigern and Arthur seem to make them a part of the "Ten Kingdom" motif, while the Saxons would replace them in Whiston's catalogue. This disagreement might lend itself to a partisan argument as to whether one tribe or the other should be included in this "apostate" confederation descending from the Roman Empire.

Chapter VII, Of the eleventh Horn of Daniel's fourth Beast

Whiston agrees with Newton that this kingdom represents the temporal power of the Papacy

Chapter VIII, Of the Power of the eleventh Horn of Daniel's fourth Beast to change Times and Laws

Whiston agrees with Newton except for the date for the beginning of this kingdom, which while Newton sets it at 794 AD, Whiston favors 606 AD. The reader should appreciate that Whiston felt the fulfillment of the "time, times, and half a time" was nearer than Newton's, a result which would have ended the period presumably in 1866 AD for Whiston, and 2054 AD for Newton. For a full treatment of Newton's "date-setting" the reader is referred to this author's "Forensic Analysis of Newton's Notes" available in Appendix B.

Chapter IX, Of the Kingdoms represented in Daniel by the Ram, and the He-Goat

Since Whiston favors an earlier fulfillment of these prophecies, he takes to task Newton's assignation of the fulfillment of the 2300 days (years) to far off dates of 2370 (from the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD), 2432 (from the Bar Kochba rebellion in 132 AD), and the erection of a pagan temple on the old temple site in 136 AD which finishes in 2436 AD.

Chapter X, Of the Prophecy of the seventy Weeks

Although rejecting Newton's calculations, Whiston does agree with "the double return of the Jews," except that such a return results in the building of Jerusalem and the Temple in a "glorious" "figurative" sense, not a literal one, as does Newton.

This being the first of what Whiston calls Newton's "three true and valuable Paragraphs," the second being his use of the Luni-solar calendar (that the Jews since Moses started their months at the New Moon) and the third being Newton's efforts to make the Crucifixion to fall on a sabbatical year in AD 34.

Whiston takes issue with Newton's methods and again argues that all of the confusion in calculations could have been resolved had he merely discarded the Masoretic texts in favor of other sources, such as Josephus:

"Upon the correction whereof this most important Prophecy is now become one of the easiest to be understood, and its Completion one of the exactest of any in the Old Testament. . . The principal Fault has not here been in the weak Reasonings of the modern Expositors, but in the Falsehood of their Copies, which rendered a Thing very easy in it self absolutely impossible to be cleared, till the Errors of these Copies were detected, and the true original Readings restored." P. 307

The reader must also appreciate Whiston's quarrel with the Masoretes as Jewish partisans who wanted to obscure Daniel's prophecy of the 70 Weeks as to make it impossible to find its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Chapter XI, Of the Times of the Birth and Passion of Christ

Whiston calls this “a very remarkable Chapter” or a “Kind of short Harmony of the Gospels.” Although he disagrees with Newton’s calculations, he nevertheless conceded correction as he says.

“Sir Isaac Newton himself was pleased to examine the several Sections of my ‘Harmony of the four Evangelists’” when I shewed it him about twenty two Years ago. . . And I now suspect I have there placed it wrong . . . p. 313

Chapter XII, Of the Prophecy of the Scripture of Truth

We can surmise that all of this chronology serves the purpose as an apologetic to show that the Bible can be trusted as a reliable account of the past, such that we might be assured of its value for predicting the future.

Whiston comments on a lost biblical book called the “Scripture of Truth” to which Newton alludes and never clearly states whether he agrees with Newton that such a text exists. Newton thinks that the Prophet Daniel 10:21 and which according to 11:2, could not be re-written as a citation in Daniel’s record. Whiston only says, “I am by no means satisfied” of the contrary view. We are left with the balance of his review of this chapter to focus on the prophecy of the “He-Goat,” in which Whiston holds to refer to Constantine’s Eastern Empire which became Byzantium and does not agree with Newton’s supposition that it is outside of the prophetic framework of the Roman monarchy.

Chapter XIII, Of the King who did according to his Will, and magnified himself above every God, and honoured Mahuzzims, and regarded not the Desire of Women

While Whiston declares agreement with Newton, yet again, he takes issue with what we might suppose to be the object of Newton’s principal attack: the monastic and pagan compromises. I can only quote Whiston and let the reader decide:

I cannot but agree . . . But with these Reserves, that the Order of Virgins, and the Order of Widows which had married but once, and the Orders of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, which also married but once, after their Baptism, and the solemn Fast of Passion Week, with Abstinence from Flesh and Wine during that Time, and the half Fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, with the annual Celebration of the Feasts of

Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, and the Memorials of the Martyrs, etc. which were all evidently derived from the Apostles and their Companions in the first Century, be intirely excepted from all Sir Isaac Newton's Imputation. Nor ought he to have refer'd . . . the Asceticks and Virgins . . . to the Superstitions of the Monks. P. 318

Although Newton never married, he nevertheless, not only stood with his Puritan contemporaries in the affirmation of marriage, but further embraced the Ebionite position that virginity and continence were sins for rejecting the procreative mandate. It is difficult to know why Newton should not have married, considering his extreme views on this topic, except to suppose that perhaps he felt himself to have been somehow incapacitated during his youth from the plague which closed down the nation and delayed his education.

Regardless, whatever the reason, he did not subscribe to Whiston's equivocations as stated above.

As for the various feast days and veneration of the saints, Whiston embraced other early Christian writings, such as the "Apostolic Constitutions" as authentic expressions of Apostolic Christianity. Newton did not. Whiston followed the rogation of days while Newton, like the Ebionites, found them to be veiled extensions of pagan traditions.

Chapter XIV, Of the Mahuzzims honoured by the King who doth according to his Will

Again, Whiston agrees with Newton's discovery of the origins of "Popery among the first Athanasians." This is the closest that Newton ever comes to attacking the Creeds, although it has become known that Newton opposed the Trinitarian formula, as did Whiston.

Even though Whiston paid dearly for his Arian tendencies in losing his position at Cambridge, it is remarkable, that he did not take occasion to discuss the controversy here, even though he surely must have known of Newton's heterodoxies.

Calling them "Antichristian Hereticks" both men see the Athanasians as the instigators of what became the "worship of the saints," although, yet again, Whiston tempers Newton by excusing the partaking of Holy Communion and the offering of prayers at the "Sepulchers of Martyrs."

The heresy spread from the East to the West.

Of Newton's Part 2

Chapter I, Introduction; Concerning the Time when the Apocalypse was written [In the Days of Nero]

The reader must appreciate that Whiston had already published his own works on Bible prophecy prior to this posthumous edition of Newton's *Observations*. On those points which Whiston differs, he felt compelled to defend his position, as noted above.

On the dating of the Book of Revelation, Whiston took the position popular among Futurists of our day that it was composed in 96 AD, twenty-six years after the fall of Jerusalem. This was during the reign of Emperor Diocletian. Newton's position that it was written during the time of Nero, Whiston considered "almost intirely groundless." P. 323

Whiston supported his position by citing the usual Patristic writings. But he also offered two primary objections to Newton's early date:

- 1) The disciples could not have believed that the 1000 year reign and Last Judgment were set to occur during their lifetimes, and
- 2) There are no New Testament books or 1st Century Patristic writings (e.g. the Apostolic Constitutions) which either cite or acknowledge the existence of the Book of Revelation.

However, with the hindsight of the Dead Sea Scrolls and their "Qumran Peshers" which were discovered long after both men, we feel that Newton has been vindicated. Revelation has 1st Century human actors in mind.

Whiston represents a strict Historicist position, while Newton was a *proto-Preterist*. The reader should appreciate that Newton himself addresses the "language" of Revelation as it was used in other New Testament books, sufficiently allowing for the possibility that most of the New Testament, including the Gospel of John, were written during the mid-60s AD, late enough to still be among the last books of the New Testament canon.

As for the Apostolic Constitutions, their early date is purely the contrivance of Whiston, who, while their core doctrines might reflect 1st Century teachings

(e.g. the Didache), they suffer from too many interpolations to believe they can reflect anything earlier than a late-2nd Century composition.

He defends his position from the counter argument of Ignatius, that *John's banishment to an island happened at the time that James was slain by Herod, Peter crucify'd, Paul beheaded* by a deflection that Ignatius nowhere intimates *when* these "barbarities occurred." This seems disingenuous. A common listing does not imply nor deny a proximity of time

Newton's use of the Arethas' introduction to the Syriac version of the Apocalypse, in which it is plainly stated that the work was composed during the persecution of Nero, Whiston dismisses as "much too late," to be considered authoritative, coming "four hundred years later than Irenaeus." P. 326

Elsewhere, we have offered our own internal arguments, in which other Syriac sources tell us that John was martyred at the time that his brother James was slain by Herod – both sharing the same natal day in the Syrian Church – and note that after this event in Acts 8, John is never mentioned again. The narrative immediately replaces him with John Mark, who becomes the only John for the remainder of the book. Peter now works alone, while before, John was his colleague at every turn.

So, not only do Whiston's patristic supporters have the wrong date, they may even have the wrong man. We have argued that John Mark is the real author of the Apocalypse and that Lazarus/Barnabas was the author of the Fourth Gospel. So, like his brother, John the son of Zebedee writes no books.

After Newton argues his case for the dating of Revelation, he then segues into a discussion on the role of prophecy to teach doctrine and is not meant to risk the hazards of "date-setting." Whiston understandably reveals his sensitivity on this subject, as he was some years before the subject of embarrassment when he predicted the Millennium. He may have sensed Newton's personal disfavor.

Whiston complains that Newton's calculations create a "date-setting" scenario by inference as he lays out the timelines of Daniel's various prophetic periods (2300 days, 1260 days, et al). He suggests that the 1260 days (years) calculated from Papal ascendancy in 794 AD should result in a closure or consummation in 2054 AD, and that *Sir Isaac Newton may be almost as well accused of pretending to be a Prophet by his Exposition of Daniels LXX Weeks, or other obscure Numbers in other Prophets . . .* p. 330

Chapter II, Of the Relation which the Apocalypse of John hath to the Book of the Law of Moses, and to the Worship of God in the Temple

Whiston thinks that Newton relies too much on “Talmudical or Rabbinical Writers, which are of very little authority” and makes too much of Revelation’s allusions to the Temple service. But this chapter is too short and lacks any concrete examples by which this argument should be allowed to carry any weight.

Chapter III, Of the Relation which the Prophecy of John hath to those of Daniel, and of the Subject of the Prophecy

In this short section, he regards a number of Newton’s typological allusions to be problematic, as for example, his assigning the epistles to the Seven Churches as representing church ages, the Dragon and the Beast to the Byzantine Empire, the Sixth Trumpet to the Saracen kingdoms with the period which resulted in the taking of Constantinople in 1453 AD, and when he supposes that the Church which fled to the Wilderness become the Great Whore of Babylon. Whiston calls these interpretations “strange” which “without any Proofs offered for the same, I can no way give my assent to them.”

Whiston closes on a positive note, quoting the closing paragraphs of the first chapter of this second Part, which although cited elsewhere, can be found on pages ...

JWS