

CHAPTER I

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

“[Truth is] the offspring of silence and unbroken meditation.”
(Newton, Keynes MS. 130, p. 7.)

“It is in Newton’s belief in the unity of Truth,” wrote the late Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, “guaranteed by the unity and majesty of God, that one may find a way to reunite his many brilliant facets, which however well polished, now remain incomplete fragments.”¹ Newton believed that the truth can be uncovered only by “a remnant, a few scattered persons which God has chosen, such as without being led by interest, education, or humane authorities can set themselves sincerely & earnestly to search after [it]”² Such a “Truth,” writes Newton, “is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things.”³ But what does this simple truth consist of for Newton?

¹ Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Janus Faces of Genius: The Role of Alchemy in Newton’s Thought*, (Cambridge, 1991), p. 18. See also, p. 247; idem, “Newton as Alchemist and Theologian,” N.J.W. Thrower (ed.), *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*, (Berkeley, 1990), pp. 129-140. On the unity of Newton’s thought, see also: J.E. McGuire and P.M. Rattansi, “Newton and the Pipes of Pan,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 21 (1966), pp. 108-143.

² Newton, “Treatise on the Apocalypse,” Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Yahuda MS. 1, fol. 1, cited in Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, (Oxford, 1974), p. 108, and also in James E. Force, “Newton’s ‘Sleeping Argument’ and the Newtonian Synthesis of Science and Religion,” *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*, pp. 118-19.

On Newton’s view on the chosen remnant, see also: Matania Z. Kochavi, “One Prophet Interprets Another: Sir Isaac Newton and Daniel,” J. Force and R. Popkin (eds.), *The Books of Nature and Scripture Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s Time and the British Isles of Newton’s Time*, (Dordrecht, 1994), pp. 105-122; Scott Mandelbrote, “Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet: Biblical Criticism and the Crisis of Late Seventeenth-Century England,” *The Books of Nature and Scripture*, pp. 149-178, 158; idem, “A Duty of the Greatest Moment’: Isaac Newton and the Writing of Biblical Criticism,” *The British Journal for History of Science*, vol 26 (1993), pp. 281-302, 289; Stephen D. Snobelen, “Isaac Newton, Heretic: the Strategies of a Nicodemite,” *The British Journal for History of Science*, vol. 32 (1999), pp. 381-419; idem, “‘God of gods, and Lord of lords’: the Theology of Isaac Newton’s General Scholium to the *Principia*,” *Osiris*, vol. 16 (2001), pp. 169-208; Robert Markley, “Newton, Corruption, and the Tradition of Universal History,” J.E. Force and R. Popkin (eds.), *Newton and Religion: Context, Nature and Influence*, (Dordrecht, 1999), pp. 121-145, 122, 128-9; Richard S. Westfall, *Never at Rest*, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 325.

³ Newton, *Rules for Methodizing the Apocalypse*, Yahuda MS. 1.1, reprinted in Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, p.120. On the deep implications of the notion of simplicity for his natural philosophy and interpretations of prophecy, see: James E. Force, “Newton’s God of Dominion: the

This book will argue that Newton's youthful method of fluxions, though dealing with abstract mathematics, had a definitive role in making clear to him his notion of the true simple designed order that God imprinted upon matter in creation and from then on has sustained from day to day. The mathematical method captures and exemplifies how God sustains the material designed order through his absolute space and time, which are a source of unlimited creative energy. It also elucidates the mechanism of the natural decline of all processes in nature. This simple method is thus analogous in structure to the simple creed, which God re-instilled throughout history in the religious founders and prophets who recall human beings to the true worship of God.

Scholars who have classified Newton's works in two separate categories, one scientific and one esoteric, miss the depth and richness of his pious search for the divine truth. "The theory of two Newtons," writes David Castillejo, "has to be discarded," because though Newton's "attention is multiple, [and] not linear, his system is absolutely unitary."⁴ Newton pursued the truth hidden in nature (physics and alchemy), in Scripture, prophecy, and in the actions of providence in human history. In all of these fields a common zeal and theme appeared - a quest for the simple machinery through which God creates, governs, sustains, and replenishes creation. This search was not undertaken for the sake of intellectual pleasure alone, but was an endeavor to reveal God's hidden work in creation and his ways of sustaining and replenishing the simple created harmonic order.

"It is clear," writes Richard H. Popkin, "that Newton held that God was the creator, designer and sustainer of the world." Newton believed that the Bible was "the way God has communicated [truth] to us in words, just as Nature is God's communication in things." Yet both the "natural and verbal messages require tremendous effort, insight, and pious attention to understand [them]."⁵ Or, as Richard S. Westfall has put it, "the correspondence of prophecy with fact demonstrated [for Newton] the dominion of God, a dominion exercised over human history even as it [was] exercised over the natural world."⁶ The Bible was "not a revelation of mysteries beyond human reason, . . . but an historical account of God's dominion, [which was] meant to demonstrate his omnipotent power to men, as Nature demonstrates his infinite

Unity of Newton's Theological, Scientific, and Political Thought," J. Force and Richard H. Popkin (eds.), *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (Dordrecht, 1990), pp. 75-102; and Snobelen, "God of gods."

⁴ David Castillejo, *The Expanding Force in Newton's Cosmos*, (Madrid, 1981), pp. 15, 78.

⁵ Richard H. Popkin, "Newton's Biblical Theology and his Theological Physics," P.B. Scheurer & G. Debrock (eds.), *Newton's Scientific and Philosophical Legacy*, (Dordrecht, 1988), p. 91.

⁶ Westfall, *Never at Rest*, p. 329; on the connection between Newton's theology and natural philosophy see also: Richard S. Westfall, "Newton's Theological Manuscripts," Z. Bechler (ed.), *Contemporary Newtonian Research*, (Reidel, 1982), pp. 129-143.

wisdom.”⁷

James E. Force adds to this dual aspect of truth, expressed in Nature and in Scripture, that “Newton’s thought as a whole presents a systematic unity of startling coherence, [and] the key to understanding its uniquely integrated quality, is his conception of the nature of the Lord God of Dominion.” Indeed, Newton’s “extremely voluntaristic notion of the Lord God of Israel, a God of total power and absolute ‘dominion’ affects every aspect of his metaphysics including his approach to a scientific understanding of Nature.”⁸ All of Newton’s studies contribute to the same concept regarding the dominion of the “Lord and Master” over all aspects of creation, because “truly for Newton, natural philosophy and religion are indeed synthesized in a most ‘holy alliance.’”⁹ The idea which lies behind all secrets of creation, writes Newton, is that “God, the wisest of beings require[s] of us to be celebrated not so much for his essence as for his actions the *creating, preserving, and governing* of all things according to his good will and pleasure.”¹⁰ This God of Dominion creates the world and then continuously preserves creation through secondary mechanical causes or through “extraordinary, direct voluntary interposition of his will.” God first created matter, and then “install[ed] the laws which regulate it, continually supervis[ing] the maintenance and repair of those laws, and occasionally suspend[ing] them.”¹¹ As time passes the state of the world continues to deteriorate due to material interactions and the indulgence of human beings in idolatry. God then periodically repairs and restores the original pure and divine state of creation with the assistance of material agents, like comets,¹² and messenger souls (as will be discussed below). This process of the deterioration of the order of the world is better exemplified in world history than in nature though the same process occurs in both spheres.

⁷ Westfall, “Newton’s Theological Manuscripts,” p. 138.

⁸ James E. Force, “Newton, the Lord God of Israel and Knowledge of Nature,” Richard H. Popkin and G.M. Weiner (eds.), *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht, 1994), pp. 131-58, 133, 132. See also: idem, “Newton’s God of Dominion”, pp. 75-102; idem, “Samuel Clarke’s Four Categories of Deism, Isaac Newton and the Bible,” R. Popkin (ed.), *Skepticism in the History of Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 1996), pp. 53-74; idem, “The Nature of Newton’s ‘Holy Alliance’ between Science and Religion: From the Scientific Revolution to Newton (and back again),” Margaret J. Osler (ed.), *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 247-70.

⁹ Force, “Newton’s God of Dominion”, p. 151.

¹⁰ Newton, Yahuda MS. 21, fol. 1 recto, cited in Force, “Newton’s God of Dominion,” p. 85.

¹¹ Force, “Newton’s God of Dominion”, pp. 87, 91.

¹² On this issue, see: Sara Schechner Genuth, “Newton and the Ongoing Teleological Role of Comets,” *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*, pp. 299-311; idem, *Comets, Popular Culture and the Birth of Modern Cosmology* (Princeton, 1997); Simon Schaffer, “Comets & Idols: Newton’s Cosmology and Political Theology,” P. Theerman and A. Seeff (eds.), *Action and Reaction: Proceedings of a Symposium to Commemorate the Tercentenary of Newton’s Principia* (London, 1992), pp. 206-231.



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