

The Faith of Isaac Newton



In this article, we explore the faith of Isaac Newton – the man many consider to be the father of modern science. A great deal has been written about him over the centuries since his death, but more recently, scholars have been able to publish a fascinating insight into his personal beliefs.

It was only relatively recently that the majority of his private manuscripts became available for study. As a consequence, major strides in our understanding of Newton's beliefs have been made over the last 20 years.

Incredibly, Newton understood from the Bible that the Jews would be restored to Israel. This was hundreds of years before the re-establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and despite the land being firmly under Ottoman rule for the whole of Newton's life. For Newton, this was to

be a sign that soon his beloved Lord Jesus Christ would return to set up God's kingdom.

A Man of Faith

One of Cambridge University's best-known scholars, Isaac Newton is revered by many for his prodigious contributions to the study and understanding of maths and science. Indeed some 374 years after his birth, his theories remain essential knowledge for High School and University students alike. His best-known contributions are perhaps his gravitational theory and the three laws of motion that bear his name to this day. In addition, he discovered important geometric formulae; set the cornerstone for modern differential calculus; is said to have given birth to the field of optics; and made great strides in astronomy by providing mathematical explanations for the circuits of the planets and making key contributions to the invention of the reflecting telescope.



Far less well known is the fact that Newton wrote significantly more about matters of faith than on science – although he is unlikely to have made that distinction himself. Instead, he would have included both topics under “*Natural Philosophy*”, dedicating *The Principia* (pictured overleaf, regarded as his greatest work, and perhaps the greatest single work of the Scientific Revolution) to faith in God:

When I wrote my treatise about our System I had an eye upon such Principles as might work with considering men for the belief of a Deity and nothing can rejoice me more than to find it useful for that purpose.

At his death on 20 March 1727, Newton left behind a treasure trove of manuscript material, including three million words on theology, church history and biblical prophecy. So why are Newton’s thoughts on matters of faith not more widely known?

Beliefs Held Privately

The answers lie in the non-mainstream beliefs Newton embraced, the age of intolerance in which he lived, and the fact that his unpublished manuscripts were not available for study until very recent times. Since his death many unfounded assertions have been made about Newton’s beliefs, by orthodox and atheist alike. These can now be examined by careful review of these manuscripts, which reveal Newton’s true faith.

For example, from his study of the Bible, Newton wrote down what he understood to be its true teaching. He concluded that, despite Church history and orthodox Church teachings, the following are true:

- ❖ The Father alone is the one true God, and Jesus Christ is His son
- ❖ Man is mortal, with hope of an afterlife resting only in bodily resurrection
- ❖ Christ will return to the earth to establish a global kingdom of peace for one thousand years
- ❖ Christ’s return will be preceded by the return of the Jews to historic Israel
- ❖ Believers are to be baptized as believing adults.

Had he proclaimed these things publicly Newton would certainly have been branded a heretic. He was rejecting orthodox Church teachings on the Trinity, the immortality of the soul, heaven as the place of man’s reward, the rejection of the Jews as God’s people, and infant baptism.

Newton was known to have been averse to disputes, and he understood from the Bible that only a few would believe the truth. He therefore chose to preach his Bible-based beliefs only quietly through a trusted network of friends.

Hence proper study of his beliefs depends on Newton’s unpublished manuscripts – with these having fallen into private collections and been dispersed around the world via auction, after his death. Happily, in recent decades the majority have found their way into libraries and public collections (one of the most important being the Keynes collection at King’s College, Cambridge). Then in 1991 the majority of Newton’s manuscripts were released on microfilm, and in 1998 the Newton Project brought about unprecedented access to Newton’s private manuscripts through online publication. All of these are

leading a scholarly revolution, which is changing the way we view Isaac Newton and his beliefs.

The Restoration of the Jews

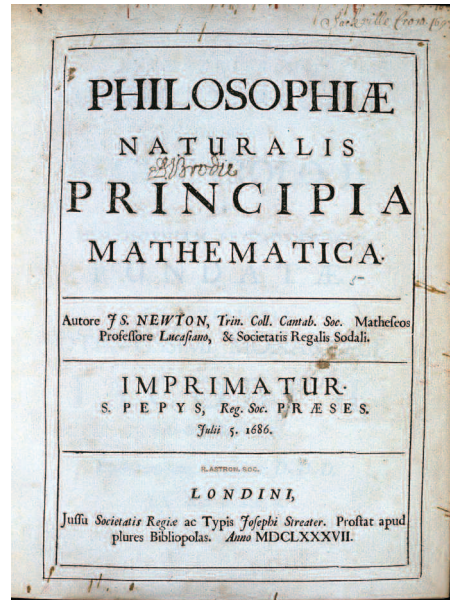
One of the most remarkable points of Newton's beliefs was his confident prediction of the restoration of the Jews to the land of Israel. This was based on his keen reading of Bible prophecy, and is worthy of a more detailed exploration.

Newton was incredibly interested in prophecy and he recognised the Jews as "God's people the Jews". In a time when the Jews were scattered across the world, and the land of Israel (or Palestine) was firmly in the grip of the Ottoman Empire, Newton believed the Jews would be restored to their own land of Israel.

In a late 17th Century paper, he comments that the conversion and the return of the Jews are described in "almost all ye Prophets" as well as recognising the promises made to Abraham. We find these promises in Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

The LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are - northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you



and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, [then] your descendants also could be numbered. Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you" (Genesis 13:14-17).

Newton strongly believed that the foundations of the Jewish and Christian religions were upon the Abrahamic covenant: "God's covenant with Abraham when he promised that his seed should inherit the land of Canaan for ever."

He claimed that "on this promise covenant was founded the Jewish religion as on that is founded the Christian; and therefore this point is of so great moment that it ought to be considered and understood by all men who pretend to the name of Christians."

Newton recognised the importance of a permanent return of the Jews to

their land, not just the temporary one following their return from captivity in Babylon in round 500 BC. He wrote the following as a commentary on this:

'Tis in ye last days that this is to be fulfilled & then ye captivity shall return & become a strong nation & reign over strong nations afar off, & ye Lord shall reign in mount Zion from thenceforth for ever, & many nations shall receive ye law of righteousness from Jerusalem, & they shall beat their sword into plow-shares & their spears into pruning hooks & nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; all which never yet came to pass.

We can read the Old Testament for ourselves and see that Newton was using the prophet Micah as a basis for his conclusions. In fact he was to a large extent quoting from this prophet and similar words which we can find in Isaiah:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Micah 4:1–3).

Prophecy Fulfilled

It's incredible to think how the Bible revealed these events to Newton before they happened, just because he read it with a mind which was keen to understand it. It is no different for us, although we may lack his genius, because God has preserved His word so that we can all read and learn from it.

The Allied Forces under General Allenby freed the land from the grip of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, and the Jews were driven back to the land following the terrible events of the Second World War – leading to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The Bible tells us that this is a sign that the return of Jesus is near, and this is what Newton believed too. We can look forward to this with hope and confidence if we too read our Bible and respond to God's invitation.

In the meantime, we do well to heed Newton's warning advice. He warned his readers not to rely on *"the judgment of ye multitude, for so thou shalt certainly be deceived. But search the scriptures thy self."*

Mel and Matt Brady

For more insight into Newton's beliefs, please refer to the following:

Isaac Newton: His Science and Religion, Stephen D. Snobelen

Isaac Newton, heretic: the strategies of a Nicodemite, Stephen D. Snobelen

"The mystery of this restitution of all things:" Isaac Newton on the return of the Jews, Stephen D. Snobelen

<https://isaacnewton.ca>