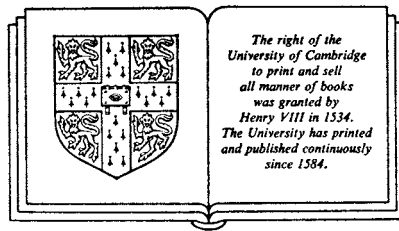


WILLIAM WHISTON

HONEST NEWTONIAN

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INTRODUCTION: *ERKENNEN* AND
VERSTEHEN IN THE
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY,
AND WILLIAM WHISTON'S
"NEWTONIANISM"

IN the Introduction to his *Philosophy as Social Expression*, Albert William Levi contrasts in detail two theoretical schools of the history of philosophy.¹ According to one school of theorists, the philosophically important aspect of a text is the text itself, which, it is maintained, is logically independent of, and intellectually autonomous from, any historical context. All that is relevant to the understanding of any philosophical text is carried timelessly in the text itself. Levi often refers to this school as semantic "atomism."

Contrasting to this assumption of a permanence of meaning that is outside of time, locked ahistorically in "atoms" of text, is an opposing theoretical school according to which terms and arguments in the history of philosophy must be interpreted within the special framework of concepts and distinctions specific to the thinker's cultural context. The history of philosophy, for this "contextualist" school, focuses on how a philosopher's works respond to the challenges of a particular historical milieu and the questions inherent within a specific social structure.

Contextualists assert that the atomistic doctrine of textual autonomy produces only a "mere understanding" (*Verstehen*) of philosophical works. "Full comprehension" (*Erkennen*), on the other hand, depends on contextual analysis. Contextualists argue that for a "fuller comprehension" of any philosophical work one must examine biographical details of the life of the writer, the predecessors to whom he is intellectually indebted and successors whom he influenced, how his works fit together and into the cultural ideals of the era, and the author's class affiliation and place in the social hierarchy of the age. Levi argues that "these questions are *not* philosophically irrelevant. They are the very vehicles which lead us from the lean subsistence of 'mere understanding' toward the more generous nourishment of a 'fuller comprehension' of the great philosophers and their classic texts."²

Levi notes that in the actual practice of writing the history of philosophy, both strict analysis of the text as a logically autonomous, semantically meaningful atom and analysis of it as an expression of a particular philosopher's

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individual makeup and social context are required but that the most important level of analysis, the level leading toward a “fuller comprehension” of philosophical writing, is the contextual.

I agree with Levi’s approach. The present work is an attempt to come to both an understanding and a fuller comprehension of the rapprochement between science and religion in the Newtonian context by focusing on the controversies concerning William Whiston. Frank Manuel is correct when he says that whereas Newton was cautious about expressing his heterodox religious views, his forthright disciple Whiston shrieked them out in the marketplace.³ More recently, an eminent biographer of Newton’s, Richard S. Westfall, suggested that in Whiston’s memoirs “one catches a glimpse – is it a true image or is it a mirage? – of one of the most advanced circles of free thought in England grouped about Newton and taking its inspiration from him.”⁴

Despite these suggestions of Whiston’s importance for understanding the Newtonian rapprochement between science and religion, Whiston’s work has not yet received a full-length analysis that focuses on the light it sheds on the concealed religious views of his great contemporary Isaac Newton. Maureen Farrell is the only writer who focuses exclusively on Whiston’s life and his contributions to such scientific subjects as cosmology, longitude, mathematics, and astronomy. Farrell does devote one forty-seven-page chapter to a summary of Whiston’s religious thought, but in general her theme is that Whiston “maintained concurrently an active interest as much in scientific as in religious studies.”⁵ Undoubtedly her substantial and important contribution in documenting the biographical details of Whiston’s life and scientific achievements marked a signal advance in Whiston studies. Most other scholars have mentioned Whiston only in passing and in connection with their own central concerns. Thus Robert H. Hurlbutt briefly treats Whiston’s essentially Newtonian version of the design argument.⁶ Hélène Metzger similarly discusses Whiston’s analysis of gravity as inessential to bodies within the context of the Newtonian design argument.⁷ Many scholars, most notably D. C. Kubrin, have traced Whiston’s views on the creation and dissolution of the world (see Chapter 2, note 4). Frank E. Manuel has touched upon Whiston’s views regarding biblical chronology in relation to those of Newton.⁸ Richard S. Westfall, in his prize-winning biography of Newton, has provided a significant sketch of Whiston’s relationship with Newton.⁹ Finally, Margaret C. Jacob has indicated Whiston’s significance in the Newtonian social and political program. Of all these scholars, Jacob is the one most interested in tracing the impact of Newton’s many-sided genius in the social and political life of

the time as it is revealed in the thought of his followers.¹⁰ By studying the Newtonians who expounded, extrapolated, developed, and promulgated Newton's ideas in the sociopolitical arena, she indeed moves toward a fuller comprehension of Newtonianism.

Just as Jacob attempts to widen the meaning of "Newtonianism" by examining this largely ignored sociopolitical aspect of Newton's impact on his own era, I, too, attempt to show how Newtonianism in the social, political, and theological arenas includes much more than the overfamiliar Newtonian version of the design argument. What Jacob does with the Newtonian movement as a whole, I attempt to do in microcosm by examining in detail the writings of one of the most important but least studied members of the Newtonian circle, William Whiston, within the context of the intellectual concerns eddying around the Newtonian movement at the turn of the seventeenth century. Many of the most controversial social, theological, and political aspects of Whiston's theory of the relationship of science and religion were also subscribed to by Newton.

In Chapter 1, I trace the temper and times of the Newtonian controversialist who served, in all probability, as the model for that eighteenth-century caricature of comic integrity, the Rev. Dr. Primrose in Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*. Relying primarily on Whiston's own accounts of his life and times, I seek to establish the sort of society in which Whiston lived and for which he wrote. Whiston's autobiography also reveals the temperament of an extraordinary individual bent on following his own "Primrose" path by hewing to religious principles that he felt to be an extremely important corollary to Newton's natural philosophy. Newton apparently agreed, and took an active part in bringing Whiston back to Cambridge from his country vicarage, first as Newton's substitute and then as his successor in the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics. In his own age, Whiston's eccentricity appeared to turn on his self-martyrdom over the touchy political and religious issue of Arianism, or antitrinitarianism. Because he honestly stated his religious convictions, Whiston lost his job at Cambridge in 1710. If his contemporaries found him overeager to sacrifice his career for the sake of principle, Whiston found his contemporaries far too ready to sacrifice any and all principle for the sake of preferment. When he once chided Sir Richard Steele for knuckling under to government pressure by speaking in the House in favor of the directors of the South Sea Bubble just after he had denounced them in his newspaper, Steele replied, "Mr. Whiston, you can walk on foot [do without a carriage], and I cannot."¹¹

In Chapters 2 and 3 I examine the vocabulary of terms and distinctions that Whiston used in formulating his theories and the level of certainty

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that he believed it was possible to attain with his methodology. The upshot of these two chapters is to widen considerably the meaning of the term *Newtonianism*.

Chapter 2 includes an analysis of Whiston's *New Theory of the Earth* (1696), a theory of the origin of the earth that is also a detailed refutation of Thomas Burnet's earlier *Sacred Theory of the Earth*. Whiston's methodological approach to geocosmology is introduced by a separately paginated ninety-five-page introduction entitled "A Large Introductory Discourse Concerning the genuine Nature, Stile, and Extent of the Mosaick History of the Creation." In this introduction to his *New Theory*, Whiston aims to correct Burnet's assertion that the Mosaic account of creation is a "meer Popular, Parabolick, or Mythological relation," in a fashion reminiscent of Newton's own methodology regarding the proper method of interpreting Genesis that Newton had outlined to Burnet in a series of letters in 1681.

Newton's letters to Burnet and Whiston's introduction to his *New Theory* show their agreement that the scriptural narrative of creation, although historically accurate in a sense, is not a "Nice and Philosophical Account of the Origin of All Things." As Whiston echoes and elaborates Newton's remarks to Burnet, it becomes evident that what would count for both as a "Nice and Philosophical Account" of the creation of the world would be a "mechanical" description, consistent with natural law, of the secondary causes in the natural world that occasioned the gradual transformations of the world that occurred in the period from the first moment of creation through the time of the Flood. Whiston strives mightily to thread his way between the "wildness and unreasonableness" of simplistically literal interpreters and those such as Burnet who provide ammunition for deistic ridicule of revelation by asserting the Bible to be a "mythological relation." For Whiston, the thread of Ariadne in providing a "Nice and Philosophical Account" of the historically accurate Mosaic narrative is the sure and certain natural philosophy of his great mentor, Isaac Newton. Whiston says:

Since it has now pleased God, as we have seen, to discover many noble and important Truths to us, by the Light of Nature, and the System of the World; as also, he has long discovered many more noble and important Truths by Revelation, in the Sacred Books; It cannot be now improper, to compare these two Divine Volumes, as I may well call them, together; in such Cases, I mean, of Revelation, as relate to the Natural World, and wherein we may be assisted the better to judge, by the Knowledge of the System of the Universe about us. For if those things contained in Scripture be true, and really deriv'd from the Author of Nature, we

shall find them, in proper Cases, confirm'd by the System of the World; and the Frame of Nature will in some Degree, bear Witness to the Revelation.¹²

There is no evidence that Whiston saw Newton's letters to Burnet or that he was even aware of them. Nevertheless, I believe that I am justified in arguing, as I do in Chapter 2, that Whiston's method of interpreting Genesis is Newtonian in a strong sense. Without doubt, if the argument that Whiston represents or follows Newton's own method were based solely on the inner consistency of these two approaches to reconciling Scripture with science, that would be a long way from establishing any specifically Newtonian connection between them. Furthermore, one of their basic points of agreement – the idea that Genesis is an account of what an observer present at the creation would literally have seen – is a commonplace throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, when Lady Percival queried George Berkeley about the Mosaic account of creation within the context of the last sections of Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley answered that “to agree with the Mosaic account of the creation it is sufficient if we suppose that a man, in case he was then created and existing at the time of the chaos, might have perceived all things formed out of it in the very order set down in Scripture which is in no ways repugnant to our principles.”¹³ In short, if there were no other evidence of a connection between Whiston's and Newton's methods than that basic similarity, the most I could claim is that Whiston's method is Newtonian only in the sense of its being shared by Newton and many other people as well.

My argument that Whiston's views of interpreting Genesis – and, indeed, Scripture as a whole – reflect Newton's views is based on historical evidence. The well-documented fact that Newton played an active role in bringing Whiston (his former pupil) back to teach at Cambridge, first as Newton's own substitute, with the full profits of the Lucasian Chair, and then as his successor, seems at least to suggest that Newton shared Whiston's views. We also have Whiston's statement that his *New Theory of the Earth* was “chiefly laid before Sir Isaac Newton himself, on whose Principles it depended, and who well approved of it.”¹⁴ It is quite probable that the “principles” Whiston is referring to are his principles (“postulata”) for interpreting Scripture, which are listed at the end of the long “Introductory Discourse” on “the Mosaick History of the Creation.” The first two of these postulates had been expressed in germ in the letters to Burnet by Newton fifteen years before. In Whiston's hands they become the basis for his interpretation of fulfilled historical prophecies and unfulfilled future prophecies of the Apocalypse, and also the basis for his radical Arianism

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and Whiggish theorizing. All of Whiston's strident controversies are rooted in these "postulata":

- I. The Obvious or Literal Sense of Scripture is the True and Real one, where no evident Reason can be given to the contrary.
- II. That which is clearly accountable in a natural way, is not without reason to be ascrib'd to a Miraculous Power.
- III. What Ancient Tradition asserts of the constitution of Nature, or of the Origin and Primitive States of the World, is to be allow'd for True, where 'tis fully agreeable to Scripture, Reason, and Philosophy.¹⁵

The historical thesis that Newton shared at least two of these principles of biblical interpretation, which go well beyond the common conviction that the divine volumes of nature and Scripture are harmonious, is further strengthened in Chapter 3, where I reveal evidence that Newton continued to act behind the scenes to promote Whiston's career by suggesting the topic of Whiston's 1707 Boyle Lectures, *The Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecy*. The proper interpretation of fulfilled historical prophecies such as those regarding the messiahship of Jesus may seem to be a different problem from that of interpreting the nature of the prophetic history of Genesis in a manner harmonious to science, but in fact for Whiston, and probably for Newton, it was not. Both depend on the postulates, especially Postulate I, according to which "the Obvious or Literal Sense of Scripture is the True and Real one, where no evident Reason can be given to the contrary." The prophetic language of Moses is a literal prediction of determinate historical events. So, too, the language of later biblical prophets uttering their predictions of the future may appear "peculiar and enigmatical" in style, but each prophetic prediction nevertheless points to one, and only one, determinate historical event as its fulfillment. To interpret prophecies in terms of allegorical double meanings is unreasonable, as Whiston argues in his Boyle Lectures:

If Prophecies are allow'd to have more than one event in view at the same time, we can never be satisfy'd but they may have as many as any Visionary pleases; and so instead of being capable of a direct and plain Exposition to the satisfaction of the judicious, will be still liable to foolish application of fanciful and enthusiastick Men.¹⁶

Because this entire approach to prophecy interpretation was apparently suggested to Whiston by Newton; and because it is based on Postulates I and II from Whiston's introduction to his *New Theory*, which Whiston claimed that Newton "well approved"; and because of Newton's subsequent and decisive intervention in Whiston's academic career, I believe

that I am justified in my claim that these principles of interpretation were shared by Newton and Whiston.

Chapter 3 is designed to buttress my thesis that Newtonianism properly contains an overlooked facet – biblical interpretation – and that William Whiston's many works illustrate this neglected facet of Newtonianism. At the conclusion of the chapter I trace the implications of this thesis for the work of Margaret Jacob. Jacob's main point is that young Newtonian scientist-theologians such as Richard Bentley, Samuel Clarke, and William Whiston united with moderate, Low Church bishops such as William Lloyd, Simon Patrick, and William Wake to adapt the Newtonian model of the universe – which conceives of it as being designed by a generally provident grand architect greatly skilled in mathematics – as a model for society, following the civil and religious chaos of the Glorious Revolution.¹⁷ As far as she goes, Jacob is correct. The design argument is certainly emphasized as a model of order and stability for social purposes by Whiston, who sees the deists, with their mockery of Scripture, as a great threat to the moral fabric of society. I seek to supplement Jacob's thesis, however, by showing how much more Newtonianism encompasses than the design argument. It contains a whole program of biblical interpretation and criticism, part of which uses the design argument to confirm the verisimilitude of Scripture. Second, Jacob's assertion that the Boyle Lectures were a primary platform for the public dissemination of this more widely focused Newtonianism is buttressed by Whiston's claim that his own Boyle Lectures on *The Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecy* were originally suggested to him by Newton.

In Chapter 4, I examine Whiston's application of his Newtonian method of biblical interpretation to three raging controversies of the time, concerning the nature of royal authority, antitrinitarianism, and millennialism. Whiston argues, in his *Scripture Politicks*, that a king's right to rule is bestowed providentially by God through the mechanism of the choice and recognition of the people. Whiston also applies his Newtonian historical method of textual interpretation to the development of an antitrinitarian theology, arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity is a cruel hoax perpetrated by Athanasius. The Clark Library at the University of California at Los Angeles possesses a variant of one of Newton's manuscripts detailing the history of the church in the first centuries. This manuscript, and Whiston's book entitled simply *Athanasius Convicted of Forgery*, document that Newton and Whiston shared the view that Athanasius was a forger. Finally, I trace Whiston's millennial expectations, which arise from his Newtonian method of biblical interpretation. For Whiston, as well as for Newton, contractarian (and providential) Whig political theory and re-

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formed church doctrine that culminate in antitrinitarianism and the expectation of an apocalyptic Second Coming of the Messiah are all connected by Whiston's distinctively Newtonian method of biblical interpretation, even though Whiston and Newton differed significantly regarding the imminence of the Apocalypse.

Whiston's use of the Newtonian method of scriptural exegesis forces a modification of Jacob's view that by 1720 Newtonianism had triumphed as a social philosophy. For Jacob, Newtonianism as a social and political force means the Newtonian design argument with its stable universe, providentially designed by God, operating by natural laws as the model for church and state. By identifying Newtonianism exclusively with the design argument, Jacob ignores the specifically Newtonian scriptural basis for legitimizing the Glorious Revolution, Arianism, and millennialism. Jacob's sanitized, design-oriented, social Newtonianism does emerge, with some qualifications, as triumphant in the social and political arenas by 1720, but this version of Newtonianism is not the entire story. When the excised portions of the Newtonian social, theological, and political program are restored, Newtonianism emerges as a richer, more complex social and political force in the political context of the first decades of the eighteenth century. However, it cannot in any way be considered triumphant. After 1710, Whiston's application of his Newtonian method of biblical interpretation to such theologically sensitive issues as the doctrine of the Trinity and the imminence of the Second Coming of the Messiah led to the collapse of Whiston's academic career and the beginning of his reputation as a learned crackpot. Newton retreated further into his zone of silence, trusting that the wise would understand. The fact that so astute an interpreter as Jacob can identify the sociopolitical program of Newtonianism entirely with the design argument, leaving entirely out of account the Newtonian scriptural interpretations that profoundly affected society and politics, shows just how unsuccessful this aspect of Newtonianism was. Even by the middle of the eighteenth century, however, this aspect of Newtonianism had been eliminated.

In the preceding chapters, I argue that Whiston shares a distinctive basic approach to interpreting Scripture with Newton and that he elaborates this Newtonian approach to Mosaic history, fulfilled historical prophecies, the created and hence inferior nature of Jesus in comparison to God the Father, and the coming Apocalypse of unfulfilled future prophecies in a manner generally in accord with Newton's private thoughts on these subjects. In Chapter 5, I seek to show their most basic disagreement about the Bible by clarifying their respective positions with regard to deism. Many of Whiston's controversies, such as that concerning the proper method of in-

terpreting Genesis and fulfilled prophecies, grow out of his opposition to such prominent deists as Charles Blount and Anthony Collins. Whiston strives always to prevent the mocking spirit of such men from demoting the primary status of the revealed word even while they accept the God of the design argument. Whiston's work, intended to illustrate through the design argument the generally provident architect-creator God and through his analysis of biblical prophecies the continuing, specially provident, miracle-working, prophecy-fulfilling God of revelation (properly interpreted), is aimed primarily at the deists and also fits into the wider context of similar efforts by certain members of the early Royal Society. Whiston is always guided in his controversies with the deists by his third postulate: "What Ancient Tradition asserts of the constitution of Nature, or of the Origin and Primitive States of the World, is to be allow'd for True, where 'tis fully agreeable to Scripture, Reason, and Philosophy." Newton, on the other hand, is less convinced than Whiston that the Bible must be the criterion by which one measures other ancient documents and, as Westfall has shown, in his manuscript "Theologiae Gentilis Origines Philosophicae" Newton places Egyptian records on an equal footing with the Bible. This attitude toward Scripture ultimately leads Newton to revise standard chronology, an action for which he is attacked by Whiston with great success. Because of Newton's attitude toward Scripture, Westfall has read Newton as a kind of deist.¹⁸ On this one point – that is, Newton's equating the Bible with other ancient records – Westfall is correct. Nevertheless, Newton agrees that when properly interpreted the Bible accurately reveals both general creative divine providence and a specially provident God still directly active in creation and revealed through accounts in Scripture of fulfilled historical prophecies and accomplished miracles.

By examining Whiston's controversial works in the context of the historical circumstances of their origin, a much less paradoxical and more interesting figure emerges. A much firmer "comprehension" (*Erkennen*) and not merely an "understanding" is achieved, as Whiston, the man who lived through one of England's most turbulent periods (1667 to 1752), who was a renowned academic and Newtonian disciple before 1710 and often a laughingstock after that date, and who made a sustained attempt in all his writings to achieve a synthesis of Newtonian science, natural religion, revealed religion, Whiggish politics, Arian theology, and radical millennialism, marches forth from the bewildering array of his works to greet us. Without such an attempt to understand Whiston's controversies with orthodox Anglicans, coffeehouse deists, and even his former mentor, the great Newton, we are condemned to a truncated understanding of Newtonianism.