

The Evolution of God

8. The Christology of Sir Isaac Newton

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Sir Isaac Newton is acknowledged as one of the most brilliant physicists, historians, and mathematicians of all time. Yet he has been scorned and maligned by Christian theologians for his unorthodox theological beliefs. As professor at Trinity College, Cambridge, Newton was required to be a member in good standing of the Church of England. There were heresy laws in England at the time by which Newton could easily have been brought up on charges causing him to lose his position, be imprisoned, or even executed if his views were made known publically. Teaching against the Trinity was considered one of the most serious offenses. Newton never openly published his theological views, and only hinted at them occasionally in his scientific publications. But a few of his closest friends were well aware of his “heresies.”

Newton is often blamed for the secularizing of science, due to his discovery of universal gravitation.¹ Many claimed that his theory (which explains how gravitational interaction between the heavenly bodies controls their orbits and motions – essentially how and why the solar system works as it does), effectively took God out of the equation when it comes to His interaction within the creation. Nothing could be further from the truth. While many wanted to relegate the motions of the heavenly bodies as the result of God’s direct hand, Newton showed that all things obey God’s universal laws. Newton did not envision a universe where God was not required. He saw the universe as absolute proof of God’s existence in its display of intelligent design. He also emphasized that the creation is winding down and wearing out, and that God has in the past and will again step in to renew the creation. Thus God designed the creation so that it is always dependent upon Him, and cannot go on indefinitely without His direct interaction.

Newton believed that there are “Two Books” of divine revelation, the book of “Nature” in which God can be discovered through objective and scientific examination of His

¹ Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation states that “any particle of matter in the universe attracts any other with a force varying directly as the product of the masses and inversely as the square of the distance between them. In symbols, the magnitude of the attractive force F is equal to G (the gravitational constant, a number the size of which depends on the system of units used and which is a universal constant) multiplied by the product of the masses (m_1 and m_2) and divided by the square of the distance R : $F = G(m_1m_2)/R^2$. Isaac Newton put forward the law in 1687 and used it to explain the observed motions of the planets and their moons, which had been reduced to mathematical form by Johannes Kepler early in the 17th century.” (<https://www.britannica.com/science/Newtons-law-of-gravitation>)

works,² and the Bible – the record of God’s direct revelation and personal interaction in human history. His approach to understanding both “books” was driven by the very same presuppositions and empirical scientific disciplines. Thus, there is a clear parallel between Newton’s work in mathematics, physics, and optics and in biblical exegesis.

Yet there is an unfortunate disconnect between the high praise and credit offered for Newton’s brilliance regarding his scientific pursuits and the scorn heaped upon him as a heretic in the field of theology. Yet Newton labored and excelled in his biblical studies just as much as in his scientific investigation of the creation. It is clear that Newton applied the very same presuppositions and objective reasoning skills to all of his fields of study, including the Bible. The fact that Newton saw the very same God in creation and in the Bible is the key to his success in both science and theology. His scientific presuppositions and methodology dictated his biblical exegesis, and his biblical exegesis dictated his scientific disciplines. This fact ought to bring pause to those who praise him for his unparalleled scientific discoveries, yet condemn him as a heretic concerning his theology. If his advances in mathematics, physics, and optics are valid, then his views regarding the Bible should not be so easily dismissed by modern theologians since they were derived from the very same mental processes attuned to objective discovery.

Newton’s “heresies” primarily concerned two areas of theology which are in some ways interrelated. First, Newton absolutely denied the immortality of the soul and eternal torment. The God he saw in creation was not a God who tortured people into infinity. Since Newton did not believe in ghosts, he saw the only hope of the Christian being the resurrection of the body and the inheritance of the Abrahamic promise, which was in his mind the foundation of both the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant.

“So highly did Newton regard the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant, that he goes so far as to say that the foundations of Judaism are laid on it. Speaking of ‘God’s covenant with Abraham when he promised that his seed should inherit the land of Canaan for ever,’ he claims 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’.”³

For Newton, the Christian hope is founded upon the Abrahamic land inheritance. And this absolutely required the renovation of this creation by God’s divine intervention.

² Rom. 1:20

³ Prof. Snobelen, ISAAC NEWTON ON THE RETURN OF THE JEWS, quoting Newton, Yahuda MS 6, f. 15r. Newton makes a similar assertion in Yahuda MS 10, f. 1r-v.

Newton's second and arguably more serious heresy was his absolute rejection of the concept of the Trinity found in the Roman Catholic creeds, the view also held by the Church of England. Newton's theological views have been previously portrayed by second-hand accounts, often by his theological antagonists. He has been portrayed as holding Arian beliefs by some and Unitarian beliefs by others. But the typical portrayal of Newton's alleged heresies are usually caricatures of his views by his opponents, and hardly precise.

Newton hand-wrote many thousands of pages of his own Biblical studies which were never published due to the constant threat from the Church of England and the civil authorities. Upon his death, Newton's family kept most of his unpublished works private. Thus the myths surrounding Newton's heretical views continued to be perpetuated by hear-say until fairly recently.

In the 20th century, Newton's private papers were finally sold at auction. Some made their way to Israel, and others to a private collection. By the 1960s, scholars were able to begin objectively pouring over his papers and reconstructing Newton's thinking. More recently, 'THE NEWTON PROJECT'⁴ has made Newton's papers, published and unpublished, available online for scholarly research. Today there are a handful of men who are true scholarly experts on Newton's life, work, and thinking. One of these men is Steven David Snobelen, professor of the history of science and technology at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Professor Snobelen has written a great deal about Newton, much of which concerns his scientific pursuits. However, he has also provided very insightful analysis of his theological mind, and provided a record of his interactions with other alleged heretical groups and individuals, and even examined many of the books in Newton's personal library. A lengthy portion of one of Snobelen's published papers has been reproduced below. It deals with Newton's interactions with early Unitarians (called 'Socinians,' or 'Polish Brethren'). While Newton has been portrayed as a Unitarian by some and as an Arian by others, Snobelen shows that Newton was neither Arian nor Unitarian. While he believed that Jesus Christ as Man was fully human, not sharing in the uniquely divine impersonal qualities of God, he also believed in the preexistence of Christ as the Logos, God's agent in creation. Newton was at times a harsh critic of both the Arians (who introduced erroneous and unbiblical arguments concerning the Son's nature) and a critic of Unitarians (who denied His preexistence). In the following extensive quotation, all bold and underlining is mine.

⁴ <http://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/>

ISAAC NEWTON, SOCINIANISM AND “THE ONE SUPREME GOD”⁵

Stephen David Snobelen⁶

“It is clear that the most important source for Newton’s theology was the Bible. This biblicism was shared with the Socinians. Newton also rejected the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, while accepting the earlier Apostles’ Creed, the language of which conforms closely to that of the Bible. The same is true of the Polish Brethren. Newton’s exhaustive study of the biblical texts yielded many results that veered from received theology. The shared biblicism of Newton and the Socinians poses a challenge for the historian of Newton’s theology, as allowances must be made for the possibility that some of the evident parallels may be the result of similar exegetical itineraries. For the moment I will put this possibility to one side and begin to examine the parallels. One of the most important set of these lies in the domain of Christology. These examples range from the general to the specific. Despite the fact that Newton, unlike the Socinians, believed in the premundane existence of Christ, on many other points there is agreement. One constant theme that reverberates throughout the writings of both Newton and the Polish Brethren is the argument that only the Father is truly and uniquely God—based on such pivotal loci biblici as 1 Corinthians 8:4–6. Early on, in the 1670s, the biblically-minded Newton had come to this conclusion, including as the second statement in a series of twelve statements on God and Christ the following:

‘The word God <put absolutely> without particular restriction to ye Son or Holy ghost doth always signify the Father from one end of the scriptures to ye other’.

“Statement ten amplifies this understanding of the Father as supreme God:

‘It is a proper epithete of ye father to be called almighty. For by God almighty we always understand ye Father. ~~Not that we hereby~~ <Yet this is not to> limit the power of ye Son, For he doth what soever he seeth ye Father do; but to <acknowledge> yt all power is originally in ye Father & that ye son hath no power in him but wt derives from ye father for <he professes that> of himself he can do nothing’.⁷

⁵ <https://isaacnewtonstheology.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/newton-and-socinianism.pdf>

⁶ Professor of the history of science and technology at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia,

⁷ Newton, Yahuda MS 1.4, f. 158r; Newton, Yahuda MS 15.3, f. 66v; Newton, Keynes MS 3, p. 45; Newton, Bodmer MS, 5 and 5A. The extensive discussion of the preexistence in the latter manuscript shows that Newton was exercised by the subject—possibly as a result of his exposure to Socinian Christology.

*“This is just the beginning. Newton’s understanding of the Father as a God of absolute dominion is also a feature of Socinian doctrine. Newton shares with the Socinians a powerfully voluntarist conception of God, a corollary of the God of dominion. Newton’s conclusion that Christ is God by virtue of role and office, but not by nature, is identical to Socinianism. In holding that the unity between the Father and the Son was of a moral quality, rather than a metaphysical quality of essence, Newton also agrees with the Socinians. Related to this, a conception of the relationship between God and Christ being one of shared monarchical dominion, as opposed to shared essence, can be found in both the writings of Newton and the Socinians. The same is true of the characterisation of the doctrine of the Trinity as polytheism. In contending that the term “Son of God” is semantically equivalent to the title “Messiah”, thus connoting no metaphysical or ontological import (as in consubstantiality with the Father), also Newton echoes an argument made before his birth by Johann Crell. Even Newton’s portrayal of the Holy Spirit as the spirit of prophecy may reveal Socinian affinities, as may his use of the term Deus Optimus Maximus for the supreme God (a title of Ciceronian origin much used by the Polish Brethren). **When not touching on the preexistence specifically, Newton’s Christology could easily be mistaken for Socinianism.** Since Newton seldom raises the matter of the preexistence in his discussions of God and Christ, this means that most of what he writes on these topics is compatible with Socinianism.*

*“But there is need for caution. While it is true that most of what Newton says about God and Christ apart from the preexistence is compatible with Socinianism, **most of Newton’s Christology apart from the preexistence is also compatible with fourth-century Arianism.** For example, Arians believed that only the Father is God is (sic) the absolute sense. They also commonly deployed 1 Corinthians 8:6 to support this subordinationistic stance. One of Newton’s contemporaries associates the view that Christ was God by office not nature with both the fourth century Arians and the modern Socinians. Moreover, in the case of the Arians, there is unambiguous evidence from a range of Newton’s manuscripts to demonstrate that he had researched their doctrines. From this it is possible to conclude with a reasonable degree of certainty that, in addition to his own scriptural exegesis, Arianism played a role in shaping his theology.*

*“**Nevertheless, several factors suggest that it would be wrong to conclude that Newton’s Christology and Arianism are completely isomorphic.** First, although Newton sometimes defends the Arians as an unjustly persecuted group in his historical writings, Newton never explicitly aligns himself with that party. Second, Newton’s animus against the employment of metaphysical language in theology was directed towards Arians as well as Athanasians, as is made clear by the passage found among his drafts for his Church history:*

*'In these disputes Arius & Athanasius had both of them perplexed the Church with metaphysical opinions & expressed their opinions in novel language not warranted by Scripture. The Greek Church had to preserve the Church from these innovations & metaphysical perplexitys had innovat anathematized the novel & restore to her that peace wh anathematized & put an end to the troubles occasioned by them anathematized the <novel> language of Arius in several of their Councils, & so soon as they were able repealed the novel language of the homousians, & contended that the language of the scripture was to be adhered unto. The Homousians rejected made the father & son one God by a metaphysical unity of substance: the Greek Churches rejected all metaphysical divinity as well that of Arius as that of Athanasius & Homo the Homousians & made the father & Son one God by a Monarchical unity, an unity of Dominion, the Son being subject to ye father receiving all things from the father, being subject to him, & executing his will & sitting in his throne & calling him his God, ffor & so is but one God wth the ffather as a king & his viceroy are but one king. **ffor the word God relates not to the metaphysical nature of God but to his dominion.**'⁸*

"In this passage, Newton not only condemns both Arius and Athanasius for "perplexing" the Church with metaphysics and novel language but, using the example of the ancient Greek Church, he contrasts the notions of "a Monarchical unity" and "a unity of Dominion" of God and Christ (which he views positively) with the formulations of both the Arians and the Athanasians.⁹ Unlike many fourth-century Arians, Newton refused to speak of Christ's nature as being of similar (homoiosios) nature to his Father. In his positive affirmations of belief, Newton completely rejects ontological descriptions of the relationship between the Son and God the Father. Newton did not believe it appropriate to discuss the substance of God and Christ; Arians ultimately did. Although the earliest Arians, at least, characterised the relationship between the Father and Son as one primarily of will, while the Athanasians characterised the relationship as one of essence, so that the early debate was between voluntary and ontological Christologies, it is instructive that Newton himself viewed the Arians as having sullied their theology with ontology. In his deontologisation of God talk, Newton is closer to the seventeenth-century Socinians than the fourth century Arians.

"There is a third reason for caution. Evidence has already been cited to suggest that Newton believed the matter of the preexistence (or not) of Christ to be an adiaphoron.

⁸ Newton, Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 154r.

⁹ In stressing a "monarchical" unity between the Father and Son, Newton is not only rejecting the ontological theory of the Constantinopolitan and Athanasian Creeds, he also appears to be aligning himself with early Christian dynamic monarchianism, as exemplified by Tertullian. Here is it important to note that Tertullian is a pre-Arian theologian.

These statements hint at a reflexive element, suggesting that Newton himself was not sufficiently certain about the scriptural grounds of Christ's preexistence to include it among the fundamenta. In the same series of passages where he discusses the charity of early Christians in tolerating both views, Newton also acknowledges that the Bible directly treats Christ's human birth and physical resurrection rather than any premundane existence:

'And Justin supposes according to the doctrine of Orpheus, that this generation was not from all eternity but only before the world began, & that wth respect to this antemundane generation Christ is called the Son of God: whereas in scripture he is called the Son of God with respect to his miraculous birth of a Virgin & his resurrection from the dead, & there is no mention in scripture of any other generation of the Son of God. John tells is, In the beginning was the Word, but he doth not tell us that he was begotten before or in the beginning. This opinion came partly from the Theology of the heathens words of John by deduction & partly from the theology of the heathens & whether it be true or false we cannot know without an express revelation, nor is it material to the Christian religion. Sacred history begins with the creation, and what was done before the beginning we are not told in scripture, unless <perhaps> he was called the first born of every creature¹⁰ to denote the antemundane generation of his spiritual body.'¹¹

"In both declaring that there is no explicit biblical avowal of a premundane generation of the Son, and that the doctrine cannot be determined true or false without the backing of the Word of God, Newton affirms that the doctrine should not be pressed as a fundamentum. His lack of a firm commitment to one view over another may help explain why two of his theological intimates left behind contradictory characterisations of this belief on this point."

At this point, we should note that Newton's own words and Prof. Snobelen's analysis of his theology is consistent with the theology of 4Winds Fellowships & Bereans Bible Institute on the following points:

¹⁰ Col. 1:15

¹¹ Newton, Bodmer MS, 5, f. 4r. This passage seems to suggest that Newton believed the biblical support for the preexistence of Christ to be tenuous.

1. The term “God” in the Bible is not an ontological statement, but is a relational one, referring to sovereignty over the creation and mankind. Thus the Father is “God” (sole Sovereign) in the ultimate sense, since He is the originator of everything and source of all life, and thus sovereign over all. Christ is occasionally called “God” in the Bible, but again the term is always relational to dominion. The Son is God’s viceroy or agent whose authority is the Father’s. Thus in certain passages Christ is called “God” because He is the one who exercises delegated sovereignty over the subjects and dominion in that context. The perfect example of this is Psalm 45:6-7, “*Your throne, **O God**, is forever and ever; A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; Therefore **God, Your God**, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions.*” In Hebrews 1:8-9, Paul quoted this passage, stating that it was spoken “to the Son.” Thus, the Son is called “God” because (as this very verse indicates) He has a “throne,” a “scepter,” and a “Kingdom,” the very same Kingdom and rule prophesied in Psalm 2. Here the Son is called “God” because of the role He will play in His exercise of God’s dominion when His Kingdom arrives. Yet the same passage makes it quite clear that the ultimate authority is from the one who is His “God.”

As Prof. Snobelen pointed out, Newton would not side with either the Arians or the Trinitarians on **the nature of the Son** (as being the SAME of DIFFERENT from the Father) because both groups insisted on incorrectly applying the term “God” in specific passages to non-personal substance or nature rather than its correct meaning, that of sole Sovereign, referring to ultimate authority and dominion as Scripture universally uses this term.

2. Newton’s belief in the preexistence of the Son of God obviously involved an origin from His Father. Newton expressly rejected the illogical Trinitarian concept of “eternal generation” while simultaneously holding to preexistence. Newton saw preexistence as a very important biblical doctrine, as Prof. Snobelen indicates in footnote #7, “*The extensive discussion of the preexistence in the latter manuscript shows that Newton was exercised by the subject—possibly as a result of his exposure to Socinian Christology.*” Yet, Newton thought that biblical references to exactly how the Son originated from His Father to be somewhat lacking in Scripture. He writes, “*Sacred history begins with the creation, and what was done before the beginning we are not told in scripture, unless <perhaps> he was called the first born of every creature to denote the antemundane generation of his spiritual body.*” While the term “perhaps” betrays some uncertainty regarding Paul’s reference to Christ being “*first-produced of all creation,*” Newton personally accepted the concept completely.

3. Newton’s characterizations of Jesus Christ as fully Man, as having no divine powers of His own but only as the conduit for the Father working through Him, always

concerned His post-incarnation state, never referring to His preincarnate state which was obviously not “human.”

There are minor theological points with which we would disagree with Newton, which this author believes to be a mistake on his part. Like both Trinitarians and Unitarians, Newton mistook the meaning of Luke 1:35. Newton noted that *“Justin supposes according to the doctrine of Orpheus, that this generation was not from all eternity but only before the world began, & that with respect to this antemundane generation Christ is called the Son of God.”* But then Newton claims that Justin’s understanding is contradicted by Luke 1:35 which reads: *“And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.’”* For this reason, Newton accepted the notion that the title “Son of God” refers to the incarnation itself, that it is merely metaphorical and has no ontological meaning or direct reference to begetting of like kind (as this terminology does everywhere else in Scripture). Yet, he should have read Justin more extensively, as he went on to explain Luke 1:35 in a way that agrees with Newton’s view of both preexistence, Jesus as fully man, and interprets the language of “begetting” literally and consistent with all biblical usage.

“This, then, ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive,’ signifies that a virgin should conceive without intercourse. For if she had had intercourse with any one whatever, she was no longer a virgin; but the Power of God having come upon the virgin, overshadowed her, and caused her while yet a virgin to conceive. And the angel of God who was sent to the same virgin at that time brought her good news, saying, ‘Behold, thou shalt conceive of the Holy Spirit, and shalt bear a Son, and He shall be called the Son of the Highest, and thou shalt call His name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins,’ — as they who have recorded all that concerns our Savior Jesus Christ have taught, whom we believed, since by Isaiah also, whom we have now adduced, the Spirit of prophecy declared that He should be born as we intimated before. It is wrong, therefore, to understand the Spirit and the Power of God as anything else than the Word, who is also the first-born of God, as the foresaid prophet Moses declared; and it was this which, when it came upon the virgin and overshadowed her, caused her to conceive, not by intercourse, but by Power.”¹²

Elsewhere Justin proves that the preincarnate Logos was “Spirit” and “Power.” He concludes that the statement in Luke 1:35 does not indicate that the term “Son of God” derives from the incarnation itself, but rather that the “Son of God,” Logos who was both “Spirit” and “Power” of God, was the one who came upon Mary, becoming

¹² Justin Martyr, First Apology, ch. xxxiii

human through Mary's womb. It was not a "third Person" nor was it the Father Himself. In this way the Man Jesus is more than merely Man. Yes, He was ontologically and completely a Man, since He "emptied Himself" in the incarnation. But the title "Son of God" refers to the fact that He was God's divine Son by "begetting" before He became Man. His calling God His "Father" throughout the Gospels always points back to His origin in the Father, never to His incarnation. Newton missed this critical point. Newton also missed Paul's "*the first-produced of all creation*"¹³ statement and "*who is the Beginning*,"¹⁴ statement as quoted right out of Proverbs 8:22-25 (LXX). Solomon's riddle about the "begetting" of Wisdom just before God created anything, and His statement, "*The Lord made Me the Beginning*," is the whole point of his statement concerning the "Son" of God in Proverbs 30:2-4. Solomon was following his father, David, who spoke of Christ in Psalm 2, "*You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.*" Neither David's Psalm or Solomon's riddles refer to the incarnation. Because of this oversight, Newton failed to understand the term "Son of God" literally. And this simple mistake caused him to hold the preexistence of Christ more loosely than he should have.

Newton apparently did not discover the real "fly in the ointment" of early Christology, the early adoption of 'The Incarnation 2.0.' Late second century theologians adopted the presuppositions of Celsus regarding the impossibility of "change" in the divine nature, thanks initially to Melito of Sardis. Based on a Greek presupposition, they redefined the incarnation from genuine transmutation of the Son of God from "Spirit" to "flesh," substituting a Platonic version. Newton absolutely rejected the Platonic version of the human Christ found in Trinitarianism. But he also rejected the purely human Christ of Unitarianism (Socianism), and he rejected the ontological arguments of the Arians (which concerned the preincarnate Christ's being created of a different substance or essence from the Father so as to make His nature "mutable" in order to accommodate the change to become human). Newton's primary failure was in solving the problem of "change" regarding the Son's divine nature which He inherited from the Father. Because of this, Newton avoided speaking of ontological issues related to the preincarnate Son of God.

We therefore agree completely with Newton's overall view of God and Christ. Our disagreement with him only involves his not finishing his search for truth, his failure to pinpoint the real culprit that led to Trinitarianism, Arianism, and Unitarianism, his misunderstanding of the title "Son of God" and its full significance.

¹³ Col. 1:15

¹⁴ Col. 1:18