

**Isaac Newton and Apocalypse Now:
a response to Tom Harpur's "Newton's strange bedfellows"**
A longer version of the letter published in the 26 February 2004 *Toronto Star*

It was with a sense of *deja vu* that I read Tom Harpur's article "Newton's strange bedfellows" (22 February 2004). Mr. Harpur opens his piece with a paraphrase of a report on Isaac Newton's "prediction" for the end of the world in 2060 that appeared on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* on 22 February 2003, one year to the day before his own opinion piece. The *Daily Telegraph* report, which summarised some of my archival research on Newton's theology and mentioned the BBC2 documentary *Newton: the dark heretic*, initiated a week-long media frenzy surrounding the revelation that, of all people, Isaac Newton was an apocalyptic thinker.

But the documentary and much of the media coverage distorted and sensationalised the facts provided by myself and my colleagues to make Newton look much more like a doomsday date-setter than he actually was. If Mr. Harpur based his thoughts about Newton's prophetic ideas on these media reports, it is small wonder that he came to the conclusions he did. In fact, Newton was *against* setting dates for the time of the end, but not because he didn't believe in the literal fulfilment of biblical prophecy, because he surely did, but because he was concerned that such date-setting would bring Christianity into disrepute. The manuscript jotting on which Newton scribbled the date 2060 was just that: a manuscript jotting that was never meant to be published.

A related manuscript that also includes the 2060 date makes Newton's animus against the foolishness of date-setting clear. After mentioning the 2060 date, he writes:

It may end later, but I see no reason for its ending sooner. This I mention not to assert when the time of the end shall be, but to put a stop to the rash conjectures of fancifull men who are frequently predicting the time of the end, & by doing so bring the sacred propheties into discredit as often as their predictions fail. Christ comes as a thief in the night, & it is not for us to know the times & seasons wch God hath put into his own breast. (Yahuda MS 7.3g, f. 13v)

In his final sentence, Newton is supporting his case with allusions to 1 Thessalonians 5:2 (which speaks of the sudden and unannounced nature of Christ's return) and Matthew 24:36 (which says that no human or angel knows the time of the end, but only the Father). The New Testament also warns against date-setting in Acts 1:6-7. Exposing the dangerous and unbiblical nature of prophetic date-setting is a noble cause. Harpur is right to censure the setting of dates, as are the majority of premillenarians, who have little trouble recognising in it an irresponsible, rash and arrogant activity. But on this matter, Newton and Mr. Harpur are on the same side. If Newton is to be used as an example, far better that he be used as an exemplar of a sober and quiescent millenarian rather than as a whipping boy of date-setting.

Nevertheless, it is true that Newton wrote some four million words on theology and prophecy and that, although he did not believe the world would end in a fiery cataclysm in 2060, he certainly did believe that biblical prophecy predicted the return of the Jews to Israel, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, the return of Christ, the battle of Armageddon and a 1000-year peaceful Kingdom of God on earth. Newton's God was a God of prophecy.

That such an icon of rationality should be engaged in something so putatively "irrational" as the literal interpretation of biblical prophecy, and that he shares so much theological territory with the contemporary premillenarian Protestants that Mr. Harpur is so keen to censure, has placed many observers in a quandary. Some modern scientists and secularists who see in Newton the beginning of the Age of Reason have come up with two responses to the reality of Newton's theology: that it came after his great works in science, or that the crazy theological and prophetic

nonsense was somehow kept separate from his “rational” thought. Mr. Harpur’s account hints at the second of these two strategies.

Both responses are ahistorical and philosophically problematic. Like it or not, Newton’s own science and this theology (including his apocalyptic thought) can’t be disentangled from each other. What’s more, historians of science are now demonstrating that Newton’s theological and prophetic thought helped to shape elements of his natural philosophy in a profound way. For example, Newton’s concepts of absolute space and time, so important in physics until the time of Einstein, are directly underpinned by his belief in an omnipresent and omnitemporal God.

It is common for learned types to distance themselves smugly from apocalyptic thought as a great “other” of unenlightened and superstitious thought. What is less often recognised or acknowledged is that apocalyptic thinking is an extremely widespread phenomenon, existing even within the hallowed halls of science. Last year Sir Martin Rees, Britain’s Astronomer Royal, published a book entitled *Our final hour: a scientist’s warning: how terror, error, and environmental disaster threaten humankind’s future in this century—on earth and beyond*. In this book, Rees, no fundamentalist, prophesies that we only have a 50/50 chance of surviving the present century as a species. Newton never predicted anything near as dire as this. Instead, he looked to an age of peace and spiritual prosperity in a Kingdom of God—a heaven on earth, if you will. So, who is the more apocalyptic thinker? Religious apocalypticists don’t have a corner on the market of doom, gloom and devastation. (I’m not decrying warnings about the abuse of the earth; these are needed, and should be heeded).

It also seems that Mr. Harpur is perpetuating a common stereotype that millenarian thinkers are both irrational and prone to irrational acts. Mr. Harpur suggests that the antidote to this is the eschatological uniformitarianism that he espouses. But in fact the bulk of premillenarian Christians live their lives pretty much like everyone else: pursuing careers, buying real estate, having children, setting down roots. Like Newton, their apocalypticism quietly informs their religious hopes, but, also like Newton, they don’t generally stand wild-eyed on street corners with signs predicting the end of the world. To paraphrase Mr. Harpur, Newton certainly didn’t sit around waiting for the end, but rather got on with earning a living. This included discovering calculus, founding modern physics, writing the *Principia* and the *Opticks* (two of the most revolutionary books in the history of science), and serving as an M.P., Master of the Royal Mint and President of the Royal Society—all despite his fervent premillenarian beliefs.

As an aside, I find it curious that although Mr. Harpur wants to water down the apocalyptic fervour of many biblical texts and contend that less-than-literal interpretations are more natural (and this, clearly, is sometimes the case), he at the same time claims near the end of his piece that the Bible “does speak of a winding up of this aeon or age but in context that always means this current cycle of existence that began with the Big Bang and will not close for untold millions or billions of years yet to come”. Is Mr. Harpur here agreeing with (old earth) scientific creationists that the Bible accurately (and literally) outlines modern science? Strange bedfellows indeed!

The neat, Manichean division between the “evil” millenarians and the “good” eschatological uniformitarians set out by Mr. Harpur masks one of the paradoxes historians have revealed in the past few decades about the emergence of modern science. It is this: several early modern natural philosophers, including Francis Bacon and Newton, were either motivated to innovation in natural philosophy in part because they thought the Millennium was fast approaching, and wanted to help establish the conditions for this through their pious study of nature, or because they thought that the flourishing of science would prove to be one of the “signs of the times” and hence help bring on the Millennium. For example, Bacon believed that

the quickening of natural philosophical understanding we now call the Scientific Revolution was a fulfilment of the apocalyptic text Daniel 12:4.

Here is a final paradox. Recent work on early modern science has demonstrated a direct (and positive) relationship between the resurgence of the Hebraic, literal exegesis of the Bible in the Protestant Reformation, and the rise of the empirical method in modern science. I'm not referring to wooden literalism, but the sophisticated literal-historical hermeneutics that Martin Luther and others (including Newton) championed. It was, in part, when this method was transferred to science, when students of nature moved on from studying nature as symbols, allegories and metaphors to observing nature directly in an inductive and empirical way, that modern science was born. In this, Newton also played a pivotal role. As strange as it may sound, science will forever be in the debt of millenarians and biblical literalists.

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