

ESSAY 8

Lust, Pride, and Ambition: Isaac Newton and the Devil

STEPHEN DAVID SNOBELEN

University of King's College, Halifax

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 1 John 2:16

NEWTON IN AN AGE OF WONDERS

In his 1668 work *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*, Joseph Glanvill, Fellow of the Royal Society and ardent apologist for belief in witches, demons and ghosts, contended that the denial of the demonic was tantamount to atheism.¹ Those who rejected the literal existence of evil spirits, Glanvill asserted,² did

¹ Research for this paper was made possible by a Junior Research Fellowship at Clare College, Cambridge. I gratefully acknowledge the Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva; the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem; the Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge; the Warden and Fellows of New College, Oxford; and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library for permission to quote from manuscripts in their archives. In addition, I am grateful to Butterfields Auctioneers for allowing me to quote from the Newton manuscript they sold in Los Angeles on 10 May 2001. Thanks are also due to Ron Finucane, Scott Mandelbrote, Reiner Smolinski, Ian Stewart, Karin Verelst, and Gary Waite for their help and criticism. Surveys of Newton's writings were partly facilitated by the increasing number of transcriptions the Newton Project is making available in electronic format. Transcriptions from the Newton manuscripts represent deletions as strike-outs and insertions are enclosed within angle brackets.

² [Joseph Glanvill], *A Blow at Modern Sadducism in some Philosophical Considerations about Witchcraft. To which is added, the Relation of the Fam'd Disturbance by the Drummer, in the House of Mr. John Mompesson: with some Reflections on Drollery, and atheisme. By a member of the Royal Society* (London, 1668), sigs. A5r–v. See also Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus: or, full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions. In two parts. The first treating of their possibility, the second of their real existence. By Joseph Glanvil late Chaplain in ordinary to his Majesty, and Fellow of the Royal Society. With a letter of Dr. Henry More on the same subject* (London, 1681). For an overview of Glanvill's project, see Moody

so because they did not dare take the next putatively logical step and openly declare that there is no God:

[I]f any thing were to be much *admired* in an *Age of Wonders*, not only of *Nature* (which is a *constant Prodigy*) but of *Men and Manners*, it would be to me a matter of *Astonishment*, that *Men*, otherwise *witty* and *ingenious*, are fallen into the conceit that there's *no such thing* as a *Witch* or *Apparition*, but that these are the *creatures* of *Melancholly* and *superstition*, foster'd by *ignorance* and *design*.³

But this was not all. Glanvill went on to propose a sinister source for this wicked disbelief, suggesting that the very devil, “whose *influences* they will not allow in *Actions* ascribed to such *Causes*, hath a greater hand and interest in their *Proposition* than they are aware of.”⁴ For since the influence of the Prince of Darkness “is never more *dangerous* than when his *agency* is least *suspected*,” in order to accomplish “the *dark* and *hidden designs* he manageth against our *Happiness*, and our *Souls*, he cannot expect to advantage himself more, than by insinuating a belief, *That there is no such thing as himself*, but that *fear* and *fancy* make *Devils* now, as they did *Gods* of old.”⁵ In a few short years, Isaac Newton—then a little-known Cambridge scholar, but soon to be elected Fellow of the Royal Society and eventually rise to the presidency of that august institution—would come under the spell of this diabolical misapprehension.

Newton was not an orthodox theologian. It has long been known that he denied the doctrine of the Trinity, that central pillar of orthodox Christendom,⁶ and some of the papers in this volume treat aspects of Newton's anti-Trinitarianism. As long ago as 1728, it was revealed that he also rejected infant baptism in favour of believers' baptism.⁷ The recent availability of Newton's theological papers has not only confirmed these heresies, but has brought to light several others as well. In 1991, mortalism was added to the

E. Prior, “Joseph Glanvill, Witchcraft, and Seventeenth-Century Science,” *Modern Philology* 30 (1932), pp. 167–93. For general background on early modern belief in witches and demons, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997; orig. publ. 1971) and Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

³ [Glanvill], *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*, p. 2. Further examples of rhetoric that associates disbelief in witches to infidelity or atheism are noted in Prior, “Joseph Glanvill,” pp. 178–9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ On which, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), pp. 57–63; Richard S. Westfall, *Never at Rest: A Biography of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 310–20.

⁷ William Whiston, *A Collection of Authentick Records belonging to the Old and New Testament* (London, 1728), Part II, pp. 1074–5. This revelation is confirmed by Newton's private manuscripts. See Newton, King's College, Cambridge, Keynes MS 3, pp. 1, 3, 9–11, 23, 31, 43, 44; Keynes MS 6, fol. 1r; Newton, Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva, MS, 2, fols 20–22, 26, 34.

list of heresies when James Force demonstrated at a Clark Library conference that Newton denied the orthodox doctrine of the immortality of the soul.⁸ In 1996, in another paper given at the Clark Library, Reiner Smolinski backed up Force's work by showing how Newton's mortalism related systematically to other aspects of this theology and prophetic views.⁹ If there was one greater heresy than denial of the Trinity or the immortality soul, it was the rejection of the existence of the demonic hordes and the Archfiend himself. In an age when leading members of the Royal Society catalogued case histories of witches, demons and ghosts as evidence for the reality of spirits (in turn used as pivotal proof for the existence of God), denial of evil spirits (as opposed to mere scepticism about particular witchcraft cases) was viewed as beyond the pale of Christianity. Newton's Cambridge colleague Henry More was among those engaged in this project.¹⁰ Those who discounted the ontological reality of these malevolent beings did so against the powerful weight of tradition and the passionate rhetoric of orthodoxy. And yet this is exactly what Newton did. That this should be so of the hallowed icon of the Age of Reason many will find unremarkable. Despite the general drift of some recent historiography, however, this third great heresy of Isaac Newton had nothing to do with any contemporary secularizing trends or incipient rational, but everything to do with the general trajectory of his profoundly biblical faith.

SATAN

There are few areas of Newton's theology more difficult than his position on the devil. First, there are diachronic issues to be sorted out, for it is evident that his views on Satan changed over time. Second, because Newton rarely tagged references to the devil in his manuscripts with transparent explanations as to ontological status, when examining such references in isolation it

⁸ James E. Force, "The God of Abraham and Isaac (Newton)," *The Books of Nature and Scripture*, ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 179–200; see also, James E. Force, "'Children of the Resurrection' and 'Children of the Dust': Confronting Mortality and Immortality with Newton and Hume," in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin: Essays in his Honor*, ed. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 119–42.

⁹ Smolinski, "The Logic of Millennial Thought: Sir Isaac Newton Among his Contemporaries," in *Newton and Religion: Context, Nature, and Influence*, ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), pp. 259–90.

¹⁰ More, a leading member of the Cambridge Platonists, employed an inductive methodology to demonstrate the existence of evil spirits from the reports of witnesses as part of his programme to develop proofs for the existence of God. The results were published in his *Immortality of the Soul* (1659) and *Antidote to Atheism* (1653.) It is worth noting that More shared Glanvill's position on evil spirits and witchcraft and the editing of the latter's *Sadducismus triumphatus* (1681) is attributed to him. In any case, Glanvill was consciously continuing the project initiated by More. See the *DNB* and especially Sarah Hutton, "The Cambridge Platonists", in *The History of Science and Religion in the Western Tradition: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Gary B. Ferngren (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 155–7.

is often impossible to determine with absolute certainty if a particular example is meant in a literal or figurative manner. Newton presumably always or nearly always had a clear idea in his own mind what he meant when he employed the terms “the devil” and “Satan” in his private writings; not surprisingly, he rarely saw the need to qualify these terms with explicit markers or even indirect verbal cues. It is thus necessary first to identify the explicit references in his manuscripts and then to reconstruct Newton’s theological position on the devil—complete with a probable chronology—in order to infer belief at any given time in Newton’s religious career. Frank Manuel was the first to recognize Newton’s unorthodoxy on Satan and, in his 1973 Freemantle Lectures he provided a valuable two-paragraph outline of Newton’s views on the subject. After more than a decade studying most of the then-available theological manuscripts, Manuel concluded that while Newton as a youth believed in evil spirits, and continued to present a literal devil in his prophetic manuscripts of the 1670s and 1680s, by the conclusion of the seventeenth century and certainly in the early eighteenth century, with allowances for the occasional possible recrudescence of youthful superstitions, “the devil seems to have been metamorphosed into a symbol for lusts of the flesh and his reality becomes far more questionable.”¹¹ Using a manuscript corpus that is now larger than that available to Manuel, it is possible to expand upon this general schema.

Newton’s vast prophetic treatises, which include his expositions of such prophetic symbols as the Great Red Dragon of Revelation 12, provide a starting point. Because in seventeenth-century English Protestant prophetic interpretation the Dragon is represented as inspired by Satan, this symbol offers a convenient exegetical litmus test for belief in the devil. Is the Dragon emblematic of both pagan Rome and the devil who uses the empire as his instrument to oppress and corrupt the Church, or does the Dragon refer univocally to Rome and hence not at all to a supernatural fallen angel? In his earliest prophetic writings, Newton, like his Protestant contemporaries, appears to have taken the former view. In Newton’s long 1670s treatise on Revelation, the “old serpent” is the literal Satan. Citing an oriental source on dream symbolism, Newton concluded that “y^c Apocalyptic Dragon is a very proper emblem as well of y^c Roman Emperors & Empire w^{ch} was so great an enemy to y^c church as of y^c Devil that arch-enemy to mankind.”¹² The Great Red Dragon of Revelation 12, Newton wrote, “has a double signification: he is taken for y^c Devil y^t wth his worship Gen 3 & for a kingdome,” for he is not only referred to

¹¹ Manuel, *Religion of Newton*, pp. 63–4 (quotation from p. 64.) Manuel earlier wrote briefly about the banishment of demons from Newton’s theology in his *Isaac Newton, Historian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1963), pp. 149–50. Very little on this aspect of Newton’s beliefs has been published since.

¹² Newton, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Yahuda MS 1.1a, fol. 38r; Yahuda MS 1.1b, fol. 16r.

as “that old Serpent y^e Devil & Satan w^{ch} deceiveth y^e whole world,” but is also represented as having seven crowns upon his seven heads—symbols of rule and dominion.¹³ In another manuscript dating from the 1670s or early 1680s, Newton comments on the relatively low number of Gentile converts in the early centuries of Christianity and concludes: “On this the Devil plaid a cunning game in keeping y^e heathens from conversion whilst Christianity reteind it’s purity.”¹⁴ Once again, the language points to the literal, personal devil of traditional Catholicism and Protestantism.

In contrast, the symbol of the Dragon is given no such “double signification” of a heathen empire backed by Satan in Newton’s later writings on Revelation. In his “Language of the Prophets,” which dates from the latter half of the first decade of the eighteenth century, Newton glosses the relevant text from Revelation 12 in the following way:

And there appeared another wonder in heaven, & behold a great red Dragon [the Roman heathen Empire] having seven heads & ten horns & seven crowns upon his heads. This Dragon being the old serpent called the Devil & Satan, is that Devil who hath his seat in Pergamus, that is the Greek empire in the reign of the last horn of Daniel’s He Goat.¹⁵

In another place later in the same manuscript, Newton identifies “the Dragon that old Serpent called the Devil & Satan” straightforwardly as “the heathen Roman Empire in respect to its religion.”¹⁶ At the conclusion of this writing the Dragon is described as being “at p^{re}sent . . . y^e Turkish Empire” and then later in the same sentence simply as the “the Dragon or spirit of error.”¹⁷ That is to say, a “spirit of error” was at work within that empire.¹⁸ A literal devil does not now appear in Newton’s apocalyptic system.

The single signification Newton later gave to the Dragon of Revelation 12 can be compared with the commentary of Joseph Mede, who in the early seventeenth century wrote what became the archetypal historicist interpretation of Revelation. In his exposition, Mede clearly describes Satan and his

¹³ Newton, Yahuda MS 1.2, fol. 11r.

¹⁴ Newton, Yahuda MS 10.2, fol. 15v.

¹⁵ Newton, Keynes MS 5, fol. 19r.

¹⁶ Newton, Keynes MS 5, fol. 48r. Similarly, Newton identifies Lucifer in the prophetic dirge of Isaiah 14, another helpful litmus test for belief in the devil, not as Satan, or as Satan working through the King of Babylon, but simply as the King of Babylon (Newton, Keynes MS 5, fol. 98r.)

¹⁷ Newton, Keynes MS 5, fol. 138r. Newton also equates the Dragon with the spirit of error in Yahuda MS 6, another prophetic manuscript from the early eighteenth century (Newton, Yahuda MS 6, fol. 3r.).

¹⁸ Newton’s reduction of devil language in the Apocalypse to a single signification fits into of a broader interpretative trend in his writings of the reduction of the symbolic to the mundane. This feature of Newton’s hermeneutics was first noted by Manuel in his *Isaac Newton, Historian*, p. 149. Although mundane (human, political etc.) interpretations of apocalyptic symbols are also seen in the writings of other historicist commentators like Mede, Newton applied this method in a more thorough-going way by extending it to the language of Satan.

angels as *inspiring* the apocalyptic Dragon.¹⁹ Similarly, Newton's one-time disciple William Whiston sees behind the Dragon a literal devil, "who was the main Supporter and Upholder of that *Pagan* Empire in its ancient Idolatry and Persecution."²⁰ For both Mede and Whiston, along with the early Newton, a real, personal devil incites the pagan Roman Empire; in Newton's later writings, the terms "devil" and "Satan" are merely symbols for this same Empire. Comparisons of his statements on the devil in his prophetic manuscripts help suggest a loose chronology for Newton's movement away from a literal belief. Nevertheless, this prophetic material is extremely tricky to work through and on its own is not sufficient to establish Newton's position *vis-à-vis* the devil.

I will now therefore turn to evidence of a more straightforward nature. The first example of this kind comes from another prophetic manuscript, Yahuda MS 9, which dates from the mid-to late 1680s and thus helps establish a *terminus a quo* for Newton's departure from the orthodox view. In this manuscript Newton moves beyond mere description to conscious explication. The first reference to a serpent in the Bible is found in the account of the first human sin committed in the Garden of Eden, and it is to this account that Newton turns when tracing the origin of the serpentine imagery of the "spirit of error." Newton saw the serpent that tempted Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as symbolic of the fleshly lust for her husband that filled her heart. The forbidden fruit itself stands for both the temptation and the temptation acted upon, for Eve "lusted first & tempted Adam . . . & . . . this is represented by her eating & giving him to eat, the eating signifying as well the lust as the external act."²¹ The impulse to temptation, however, is represented by the serpent in the account. Thus, Newton goes on:

A Dragon or serpent, if called y^e old serpent or y^e Devil signifies the spirit of error delusion & inordinate affections reigning in the world. ffor spirits good or evil are sometimes put for the tempers dispositions & persuasions of mens minds (much after y^e manner that we often take death for a substance).²²

Then, after quoting the passage from 1 John 4 that speaks about the need to "try the spirits," Newton argues:

The spirits of God of fals Prophets & of Antichrist are [in 1 John 4] plainly taken not for any substantial Spirits but for y^e good or evil dispositions & true or fals persuasions of mens minds; & the spirits of all men who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is called in the singular number the spirit of Antichrist, & said to be come into the world as if it were an evil spirit w^{ch}

¹⁹ Mede, *The Key of the Revelation, Searched and Demonstrated out of the Naturall and Proper Charecters [sic] of the Visions* (London, 1643), Part 2, pp. 51–2.

²⁰ Whiston, *An Essay on the Revelation of St. John, so far as concerns the Past and Present Times* (London, 1744), p. 245.

²¹ Newton, Yahuda MS 9.1, fol. 19v.

²² *Ibid.*, fols 19v–20v.

was to reign therein & deceive all the followers of Antichrist. And such an evil spirit is the Dragon in the Apocalyps.²³

Thus, the Dragon of Revelation is a spirit of deception, not a spirit being. One of Newton's fundamental principles of biblical hermeneutics, set down in his 1670s treatise on Revelation, was that the meaning of scriptural images must be consistent.²⁴ It was possibly in large part on this basis then, that, referring to Revelation 20, he reasons that:

By this Devils being cast into the bottomless pit (& shut up) that he should deceive the nations no more for a thousand years you may know that he is the spirit of delusion reigning in the hearts of men & by his being there called the old Serpent you may know that he is that same Serpent w^{ch} deceived Eve.

And then, alluding to the proto-Evangelium of Genesis 3:15 and thus emphasizing the continuity of this theme in the Bible, he writes: "For that old serpent was to continue till y^e seed of the woman should bruise his head, that is till Christ should vanquish & stay him".²⁵ A few lines later he confidently concludes that:

the old Serpent was no more a real serpent then y^e Dragon in y^e Apocalyps is a real Dragon or then the Beasts in John & Daniel are real Beasts. Tis only a symbol of the spirit of delusion & therefore ~~must be the sentence~~ (y^e) curs of this serpent for deceiving Eve must be interpreted accordingly.²⁶

The symbol of the serpent was consistent from Genesis to Revelation.

Newton's eventual desire to avoid double significations applied also to his position on the imagery of the Edenic serpent. The orthodox position of a literal Satan behind a literal serpent made no sense to Newton because this would mean that the serpent was punished for the fault of the devil and "⟨to⟩ make y^e signe suffer in a litteral sense for the crime of the thing signified . . . is absurd & unagreeable to the nature & Designe of Parables." Instead, Newton continues:

When the ancient s(S)ages proposed (would have) one thing to be represented by another, they framed a Metamorphosis of the one into the other, & thence came all the ancient Metamorphoses recited by Ovid & others. This was their way of making Parables, & Moses in this Parable of the Serpent speaks in the language of y^e ancient sages wise men, being skilled in all the learning of the Egyptians.²⁷

The starting point for Newton's heterodox interpretation of the Dragon in Revelation, then, was his belief that the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden

²³ Ibid., fol. 20v.

²⁴ Newton, Yahuda MS 1.1a, fol. 12r.

²⁵ Newton, Yahuda MS 9.1, fol. 20v.

²⁶ Ibid., fol. 20v.

²⁷ Ibid., fol. 21v.

of Eden was itself a graphic emblem of the “spirit of delusion.” The same spirit has been at work in mankind’s affairs—at both the personal and collective levels—since the beginning of human history. And so, by sometime in the 1680s, Satan for Newton had been transformed from an angel of darkness into a symbol for the spirit of error.

DEMONS

Newton’s views on demons follow a similar pattern. The traditional Christian conception of demons holds that they are fallen angels subordinate to the chief fallen angel, Satan. Not so with Newton. As with his view on the devil, Newton began to dismiss the reality of demons beginning in the 1680s. Yahuda MS 9, the same document in which Newton treats the devil as a symbol of the “spirit of error,” demonstrates this:

From this figure of putting serpents for spirits & spirits or Daemons for distempers of y^e mind, came y^e vulgar opinion of y^e Jews & other eastern nations that mad men & lunaticks were possessed with evil spirits or Daemons. Whence Christ seems to have used this language not only as Prophet but also in compliance wth y^e Jews way of speaking: so y^t when he is said to cast out Devils ~~it cannot be known by this phra~~ those Devils may be ~~nothing~~ but diseases unles it can be proved by the circumstances that they are ~~sp~~ substantial spirits.²⁸

In a 1692 letter to John Locke (which helps date his move to an accommodationist approach), Newton wrote that the language of casting out demons “was ye language of ye ancients for curing Lunatics.”²⁹ For Newton, therefore, demons were figures for disordered psychotic states.³⁰

The cases of demon-possession in the Synoptic Gospels do not describe the activity of literal devils, but instead reflect the (mistaken) beliefs of first-century Jews. Newton presents a similar argument in his manuscript ecclesiastical history “Of the Church”:

If Moses saith: There shall be not be found among you any one that useth divination, or an observer of times, [that is, of days lucky & unlucky,] or an enchanter, or a witch, or a consulter wth familiar spirits, or a wizzard, or a necromancer: for because of these things the Lord thy God doth drive the nations out (from) before thee: ??? (superstitious people) are apt here to understand (by these names) such men & weomen as have a metaphysical power of divining, enchanting, bewitching, conversing with spirits, conjuring, & raising up the souls of the dead: whereas these names are to be understood only in a

²⁸ Ibid., fol. 21v.

²⁹ Newton to Locke, 3 May 1692, *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, ed. H. W. Turnbull (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 3:214.

³⁰ Newton’s reduction of demon language from that of demons afflicting madmen to a single sense that leaves only a human with a diseased mind reveals a structural hermeneutic affinity to his reduction of the devil in the Apocalypse and elsewhere to a single signification.

moral sense for seducers (deceivers), such as falsely pretend to a power of doing these things and thereby delude the people & seduce them to put their trust in (divinations by) imaginary spirits ghosts & dæmons w^{ch} is a superstition tending to idolatry.³¹

Newton goes on to say that:

to beleive that men or weomen can really divine, charm, inchant, bewitch or converse with spirits is a superstition of the same nature wth beleiving [sic] that the idols of the gentils were not vanities but had spirits really seated in them.³²

We have already seen that Newton believed that forsaking the devil was synonymous with rejecting false gods and “all manner of idolatry.” The above passage shows that he also made an association between demons and idols, albeit of a different nature. Newton’s study of demonology was a subset of his larger project on idolatry. For Newton belief in activity by evil spirits is equivalent to the conviction that the false gods or idols of the pagans were real, independent beings; both positions are equally untrue. There is no ambiguity in Newton’s position on the reality of idols; in one manuscript he declares flatly: “An Idol is nothing in the world, a vanity, (a lye) a fictitious power.”³³ Newton shared with traditional exegesis the identification of the false gods of the Old Testament with demons.³⁴ He departed radically from the traditional view in concluding that neither demons nor pagan idols exist.

GHOSTS

A long line of Christian tradition with roots in Jewish intertestamental pseud-epigraphal literature solved the problem of the origin of New Testament demons by contending that they, like Satan himself, were fallen angels. Newton, on the other hand, adhered to a minority position that associated demons with departed spirits—one of the ways the Greek term *δαίμόνιον* (*daimonion*) was used in antiquity. It is likely that the starting point for the development of Newton’s view on demons *qua* departed spirits was Joseph Mede’s posthumous *Apostasy of the Latter Times*, a full-length study in which the Cambridge polymath identified one of the chief apostasies of the Roman Church as the invocation of saints.³⁵ Interpreting the genitive in the phrase “doctrines of devils” in 1 Timothy 4:1 as objective rather than subjective, Mede argued that

³¹ Newton, Bodmer MS, 5A, fol. 8v.

³² Ibid.

³³ Newton, Keynes MS 7, p. 2. The first two of the four descriptions of idols Newton gives here are from the Bible: 1 Corinthians 8:4 (cf. Isaiah 41:24); Jeremiah 8:19, 10:15, 14:22, 18:15, 51:18.

³⁴ A memorable example of this tradition is seen in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, in which the seventeenth-century poet writes at length of Satan’s demonic minions masquerading as such Old Testament era pagan deities as Baal, Beelzebub and Ashteroth (e.g. *Paradise Lost*, 1.75–81).

³⁵ Mede, *The Apostasy of the Latter Times* (London, 1641.) Newton owned a copy of Mede’s works, which contained the *Apostasy*. See John Harrison, *The Library of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), item 1053.

in this important prophecy about the rise of Christian apostasy the Apostle Paul was referring to doctrines *about* demons rather than doctrines *originating from* demons.³⁶ Marshalling historical and philological evidence from classical antiquity, Mede demonstrated that the *daimonia* (lesser deities) of the Gentiles were the false gods of the Bible.³⁷ These *daimonia* were, by origin, “the deified soules of men after death.”³⁸ The importation of the pagan notion of demons into Christian (read Catholic) theology led to the development of the doctrine of saintly intermediaries, who, after all, are meant to be glorified departed spirits. For Mede, and those who followed his interpretation, “doctrines of demons” meant false teachings about ghosts.

That Newton accepted this view is made plain by his occasional use of the expression “doctrines of ghosts” in place of “doctrines of demons” or “doctrines of devils,”³⁹ along with his use of ghost as a synonym for demon.⁴⁰ As he wrote in one manuscript from his later years, “Devils signified the imaginary Ghosts of dead men whom the heathens worshipped as Gods.”⁴¹ Once again, however, Newton’s use of this orthodox conception involved a heretical corollary, as these ghosts too are merely “imaginary.” In contrast, while it is clear that Mede rejected the Catholic doctrine of intermeditation, at no time does he explicitly deny that demons, correctly understood, are real, spiritual beings. Newton laid the blame for the rise of the pagan doctrines about demons in the Church at the door of his ecclesiastical nemesis Athanasius, whom he also saw as responsible for introducing Trinitarianism and the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. In his “Paradoxical questions concerning Athanasius,” Newton contends that Athanasius advanced the notion of a conscious existence of the soul in the intermediate state between death and resurrection. This was directly linked to false teachings about demons:

Athanasius by y making (Antony see) y^c soule of Ammon ascend into up to heaven, laid the foundation for introducing among (into y^e Greek churches) the Demonology of y^e heathens into Christianity & the Doctrine into y^e greek Churches [?] this heathen Philose doctrine of Dæmons, [?] together wth that Popish one of Purgatory.⁴²

Thus Newton’s conclusions about the soul and demons tempered his reading of Mede’s writings on “doctrines of demons.” Moreover, as Reiner Smolinski

³⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 9–14.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁹ See, for example, Newton, Yahuda MS 9.2, fol. 103r; Newton, Bodmer MS, 2, fol. 21r.

⁴⁰ One example of this is found in William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, UCLA, Newton, “Paradoxical Questions concerning y^e morals & actions of Athanasius & his followers” (**N563M3 P222), fol. 55r.

⁴¹ Newton, New College Oxford MS 361.2, fol. 133r. For other examples, see Newton, Yahuda MS 7.1n, fol. 22r; Newton, Bodmer MS, 5A, fol. 8v; Newton, Keynes MS 3, p. 43; Newton, *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms amended* (London, 1728), p. 160.

⁴² Newton, Clark MS, fol. 55r.

has recently shown, the absence of disembodied evil spirits directly impacted on the contours of Newton's interpretation of the Apocalypse.⁴³ Thus, unlike many other contemporary interpreters, Newton did not characterize the latter-day Gog and Magog as constituting evil spirits or the souls of the damned. Instead, the Gogian host is an army of mortal humans.

Evidence that Newton's disbelief in ghosts had practical outworkings in his daily life, and hence was more than merely an exercise in exegesis, comes from an anecdote recorded by Abraham de la Pryme. In this account, De la Pryme (then a recently-graduated scholar at Cambridge) records an incident he witnessed in May 1694 in which Newton encountered a group of scholars mulling around the door of a house in Cambridge purported to be haunted. On seeing them there assembled, Newton is said to have exclaimed: "Oh! yee fools . . . will you never have any witt, know yee not that all such things are meer cheats and impostures?"⁴⁴ Although an off-the-cuff utterance, this pithy reprimand (if genuine) neatly and accurately epitomizes Newton's opinion of all devil belief: the gullible and undiscerning took evil spirits to be real entities; by unspoken implication, wise and considering men understood them to be counterfeits and fictions.⁴⁵

THE DEMONS OF TEMPTATION

The logical corollary to Newton's views on evil spirits is that those who claim to be tempted by a personal devil are deluded and provoked by their own fleshly imagination. Newton's "Paradoxical questions concerning Athanasius," an important manuscript held at the Clark Library dating from the early 1690s, makes this clear. In a portion of this manuscript where Newton rails against the abuses of the incipient Catholic monastic system,⁴⁶ he writes the following:

Some are of opinion that the Monks of this age were most holy men: but this is a great prejudice & such a prejudice as judicious men who have read & considered [?] their lives can scarce fall into. ffor they seeme to me to have

⁴³ Smolinski, "The Logic of Millennial Thought," pp. 287–9.

⁴⁴ De la Pryme, entry for 19 May 1694, *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme, the Yorkshire Antiquary* (London, 1870), p. 42. The ghostly disturbances emanating from this house were later discovered to have been caused by a malicious prankster (pp. 39–42).

⁴⁵ Although in other contexts the language used by Newton could be mistaken for that of some curmudgeonly proto-Enlightenment sceptic who rejected all belief, the words credited to Newton ring true and are consistent with the vocabulary of this man of deep faith who abhorred religious fraud. In his private writings, Newton applies the term "cheats" to enchanters, magicians, sorcerers, necromancers and witches who used deception to create the illusion of supernatural powers (Newton, New College, Oxford MS 361.2, fol. 133r.) The expression "imposture," Manuel has noted, was "a strongly pejorative word in [Newton's] religious vocabulary—akin to false prophecy" (Manuel, *Religion of Newton*, p. 45).

⁴⁶ On this, see Rob Iliffe, "Those 'Whose Business it is to Cavill': Newton's Anti-Catholicism," in *Newton and Religion*, ed. Force and Popkin, pp. 97–119, esp. 109–12.

been y^e most unchast & superstitious part of mankind as well in this first age as in all following ages. For it was a general *maxim* (notion) amongst them that after any man became a Monk he found himself more tempted by the Devil to lust then before & those who went furthest into y^e wilderness & profest Monkery most stricktly were most tempted, (the Devil (as they imagined) tempting them (most when it was) to divert them from the best purpose).⁴⁷

Newton thus finds it necessary to make a qualification when describing the beliefs of others on the devil: experiences of Satanic influence were merely products of the fallible and self-deceptive human imagination.

Newton goes on to note immediately afterward the irony, “that to turn a Monk was to run into such temptation as Christ has taught us to pray that God would not lead us into. For lust by a *violent prohibition* (being forcibly resisted restrained restrained) & by struggling wth it is always inflamed.” But Newton, whose bookish, celibate, cloistered existence in Cambridge was, after all, not altogether unlike that experienced in the fourth-century monasteries, had also carefully worked through the psychology of temptation:

The way to be chaste is *to* (not to contend & struggle with unchast thoughts but to decline them [?]) keep the mind employed about other things: for he that’s always thinking of chastity will be always thinking of weomen & *to-struggle* (every contest) wth unchast thoughts *is-to* (will) leave such *deep* impressions upon the mind as (shall) make those thoughts (apt to) return more frequently.⁴⁸

It is instructive that in these words, which he all but admits are laden with connotations of reflexivity, Newton tackles the problem of lust without any reference to a literal, external tempter. Newton well knew the source of sin from his own contests with the demons of his soul. It was not the devil who made him do it. Unlike the monks of old, Newton’s own battles with the devil were with himself.

Newton’s strong aversion to “Monkery” may have helped stimulate or reinforce his denial of the devil in a second way. When criticizing Athanasius’ *Vita S. Antoni* (*Life of St. Antony*) for its excessive recourse to fanciful miracles and gratuitous accounts of demonic activity, Newton comments that this work “set all the Monks upon an humour of of [sic] pretending to miracles . . . so that y^e whole world presently rang wth stories of this kind. And (hence) it came to passe that y^e lives of (almost) all y^e first monk & most eminent Monks were filled wth apparitions: of Devils . . . miraculous cures of diseases (prophesies) & other prodigious relations.”⁴⁹ In a related manuscript, Newton writes further about Athanasius’ attempt to secure Trinitarianism by contending that demons had cried out that they were afflicted with torments when they denied the doctrine. In this document, Newton records the testimony of Ambrose, who confirmed that “y^e Arians opposed &

⁴⁷ Newton, Clark MS, fol. 67Ar.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., fol. 66r.

derided these miracles,” flatly rejecting this putative demonic activity as “not true torments of Devils but feigned & contrived simulations mockeries.” What is more, Newton records that Paulinus in his *Life of Ambrose* testifies to the Arian party’s claim “that men were hired wth money to counterfeit Demoniacks. & that one of y^e multitude being thereupon seized wth a(n) Devil unclean spirit cried out: let them be so tortured as I am was, who should deny the martyrs or who should not believe in y^e truth of the Trinity w^{ch} Ambrose confesses.” Such stories, Newton believed, “sufficiently show (open) the meaning (design) of Athanasius & his party in propagating setting on foot this humor of pretending miracles.”⁵⁰ Newton, who took the side of the Arians in the fourth-century Trinitarian controversies, would have been predisposed to accept the Arian point-of-view on these demonic apparitions as well. Although the Arians did not reject the existence of demons *per se*, it is possible that in much the same way as Protestant arguments for rejecting Catholic miracles were extended by some radical Protestants to question even some miracles affirmed by Protestants, Newton’s acceptance of the Arian scepticism towards the devils conjured up by Trinitarians took root and expanded to embrace a wider scale of doubt in these matters.

Whatever its origins, Newton appears to have held to this position of a non-literal devil for the rest of his long life. In his later writings, the devil became an emblem of sin and opposition to the true God. At the beginning of his “Irenicum,” probably composed sometime after 1710, Newton writes that believers “are to forsake the Devil, that is, all fals Gods, & all manner of idolatry.” The meaning here is plain. Closely associated with the requirement to abandon idolatry is the need to forsake the “flesh” and the “lust of the flesh.”⁵¹ Newton’s aetiology of sin is human centred. Several times in the series of drafts that make up the “Irenicum,” Newton both reiterates his claim that the devil is idolatry and links this equation with a statement on the lusts of the flesh.⁵² In another example from late in the manuscript, Newton conflates the two statements when he writes that ancient Christians “were to forsake the Devil, the lusts of the flesh the lust of the eye & the pride of life”—the three lusts of 1 John 2:16. His repeated attention to these lusts and

⁵⁰ Newton, Butterfields Lot 3089, recto. Unlike Newton, when mentioning “the spurious Miracles so current under *Athanasianism* and *Popery*”, Whiston had no trouble suggesting that “there have frequently been *Dæmoniacal Operations* and *Illusions* intermixed with them: and that from the very days of *Anthony the Monk*, to our own Age” (Whiston, *Reflexions on an anonymous pamphlet, entitled, a Discourse of free thinking* (London, 1713), p. 26). Given Newton’s animus towards Athanasianism and Catholicism, it is all but certain that he would have attributed their teachings to demons had he believed such were ontologically real. As Newton records from another historical account in this same manuscript fragment, the Arians went further in their scepticism of these accounts than did Eunomius, the founder of the Anhomioans (neo-Arians), who attributed the deception to the “juggling tricks” of real demons, who “did not truly cry out but counterfeit their torments” (Butterfields Lot 3089, recto).

⁵¹ Newton, Keynes MS 3, p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 23, 25, 31, 39, 43; Newton, Keynes MS 6, fol. 1r (“We are to forsake the Devil & his works that is fals gods & idols”).

their ill effects helps demonstrate that for Newton there was not necessarily any significant reduction in the potency of the devil, only an interiorization of this very real power in the heart of man. Newton then continues to delimit the meaning of forsaking the devil in a most revealing way: “To forsake the Devil is to forsake the worship of Demons or Ghosts & of all fals Gods whatsoever collectively called the Devil.”⁵³ The “Devil”, then, is a symbol of lust and a vivid hypostatization of idolatry in aggregate. This language cannot be reconciled with the orthodox position.

This language does, however, have some of its roots in orthodoxy. In a section of the 1639 Anglican Book of Common Prayer entitled “The ministration of Baptisme to be used in the Church,” the priest is instructed to inform the Godfathers and Godmothers of their responsibility to guarantee that the baptised infant would “forsake the devill and all his works, and constantly beleeve Gods holy word, and obediently keep his commandments.” Further to this, the Godparents were to be asked:

Doest thou forsake the devill and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, the carnall desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow, nor be led by them?⁵⁴

Newton owned this edition of the prayerbook,⁵⁵ which embodied the rites of the Church of England, its soiled pages mute testimony to his use of the book in Anglican liturgy. That Newton was familiar with the last-quoted words is made plain by his quotation of them *in extenso* and almost verbatim at a point in his “Irenicum” where he lists “[t]he fundamentals requisite to communion in the Church of England.”⁵⁶ As should now be apparent from other places in this manuscript just quoted, however, Newton also altered and embroidered the language of the prayerbook to suit his heterodox doctrinal position. In one of the fuller examples, he writes:

We are to forsake the Devil, that is all fals Gods & all manner of idolatry this being a breach of the first & great commandment. And we are to forsake the flesh & the World, or as the Apostle John expresseth it, the lust of the flesh the lust of the eye & the pride of life, that is, unchastity, (intemperance, injustice,) covetuousness, pride, & ambition, these things being a breach of the second of the two great commandments.⁵⁷

There is in Newton’s formulation no double signification as in the Anglican statement. Absent from Newton’s own text are the words “and all his works.” These are replaced with a statement of equivalence (“all fals Gods & all manner of idolatry” being Newton’s own gloss) and the resultant diabolology

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer: and Administration of the Sacraments: and other Rites and Ceremonies in the Church of England* (London, 1639), sig. C5v.

⁵⁵ Harrison, *Library of Newton*, item 240.

⁵⁶ Newton, Keynes MS 3, p. 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

has only one layer of temptation (the tempted), rather than two (tempter and tempted).

Newton's departure from orthodoxy can therefore also be measured by his desire and need to adapt and modify the familiar language of Anglican ritual to conform to his own sensibilities.

THE DEVIL (NOT) IN THE DETAILS: THE HERMENEUTICS OF ACCOMMODATION

It would be misleading, however, to frame Newton's conclusions about the devil and demons as rationalizing allegory. Instead, he believed he was stripping off the metaphysical layers of meaning that had been erroneously added by the apostate Church. The origins of these new meanings were to be found in Gentile, that is to say, pagan, theology. It was the apostate Church, not he, that had engaged in corrupt hermeneutics. Nevertheless, Newton does utilize an interpretative strategy to underpin his conclusions about evil spirits. Newton's method is revealed in a passage quoted above in which he explains that when the vivid language of demon-possession is used in the Bible, "Christ seems to have used this language not only as Prophet but also in compliance wth y^e Jews way of speaking."⁵⁸ This is the hermeneutics of accommodation, in which it is argued that the Bible is written in the language of the vulgar, but that behind this accommodating idiom lies the reality that the philosophic mind can discern. It is the same hermeneutic that Newton, like Galileo before him, used to reconcile apparently geocentric language in the Scriptures with his commitment to a heliocentric, geokinetic solar system. Newton believed that the Scriptures do not speak "in the language of Astronomers . . . but in that of y^e common people to whom they were written."⁵⁹ And so it was with demon possession.

An early hint at how accommodation could explain the cases of demon-possession mentioned in the Gospel accounts can be found in Joseph Mede's posthumously published *Diatribæ* (1642), which contains a short essay on the demon language of the New Testament. While not denying the literalness of demons himself, Mede opened the door to Newton's view (and possibly the sceptical position as well) when he argued that the designation of someone demon-possessed in the New Testament was equivalent to labelling them as "mad-men" or "Lunaticks" in the parlance of his own day.⁶⁰ Newton himself was convinced that contemporary labels could not always be

⁵⁸ Newton, Yahuda MS 9.1, fol. 21v.

⁵⁹ Newton, CUL MS Add. 4005, Sec. 7, published in I. Bernard Cohen, "Isaac Newton's *Principia*, the Scriptures, and the Divine Providence," in *Philosophy, Science, and Method*, ed. Sidney Morgenbesser et al. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), p. 544.

⁶⁰ Mede, *Diatribæ. Discovrses on Divers Texts of Scripture* (London, 1642), pp. 120–31 (quotations from p. 123).

read straightforwardly, in part because of diachronic shifts in the meaning of names. In one manuscript he writes:

We are also to allow for the changes that have been made in the signification of words. So Cherubim were originally nothing more than hieroglyphical symbols or armies & other bodies politick. Spirits frequently signified the tempers & dispositions of the mind; & evil spirits the diseases & distempers thereof as when Saul was troubled with an evil spirit from the Lord; Devils signified the imaginary Ghosts of dead men whom the heathens worshipped as Gods; Inchanters, Magicians, Sorcerers, Necromancers & Witches signified deceivers & cheats who by certain forms of words & ceremonies & other juggling tricks pretended to supernatural powers & arts of prognosticating for magnifying themselves among the people.⁶¹

Thus evil spirits reduce to diseased states of mind, devils to imaginary ghosts and witches to conjurers.

Newton believed that the need to retrieve the true meanings of such designations was demanded not only by the implied corruption in language, but because biblical idiom is often couched in expressions directed to the sensibilities of the vulgar. The superstitious among the vulgar are prone to misread this accommodating language in a literal way and thus mistake evil spirits for real substances, just as the idolaters took the pagan gods to be real substances. Newton thus held that in 1 John 4 the “spirits of God of fals Prophets & of Antichrist are . . . plainly taken not for any substantial Spirits but for y^c good or evil dispositions & true or fals perswasions of mens minds.”⁶² Similarly Moses’ descriptions of divination, enchantment, witchcraft, wizardry and necromancy were never meant to be taken in a “metaphysical” sense for actual spiritual operation, but rather in a “moral” sense for the deceptions, delusions and conjurations that masqueraded such activity as real.⁶³ Finally, Newton also believed that due care must be taken to allow for the penchant of the ancient “eastern & Egyptian nations” to employ the language of personification:

The eastern & Egyptian nations were very much addicted to speake by figures in their language to introduce the qualities and substances of things under the character of intelligent beings or persons. So things often represented death & the grave & time & fortune & health & wealth & love & flame & the elements & planets by persons; the Jews gave the names of evil spirits to diseases & to vices and amorous opinions & so Solomon spoke of wisdom as a person & Orpheus, Plato & Philo & some of the gnosticks gave the name λογος to the wisdom of God, considered as a person . . . And the Idea of the Platonists, sephiroths of the Cabbalists, & Aeons of the Gnosticks are nothing else than the thoughts notions

⁶¹ Newton, New College, Oxford MS 361.2, fol. 133r, cited in Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian*, p. 149.

⁶² Newton, Yahuda MS 9.1, fol. 20v.

⁶³ Newton, Bodmer MS, 5A, fol. 8v.

actions previous names attributes or parts of the deity turned into persons & sometimes into the souls of men.⁶⁴

Here Newton's references to Solomon, Plato and Philo imply that he believed that the learned also personified qualities and substances. And, as the above excerpt demonstrates, Newton maintained that the hypostatization of diseases as demons was one example of the language of personification. But to take this personification literally instead of figures of speech was to commit the sin of idolatry.

THE DOCTRINAL ``CHAIN OF CONNEXION''

Joseph Glanvill asserted that "he that thinks there is no *Witch*, believes a *Devil gratis* . . . And when men are arrived to this degree of *diffidence* and *infidelity*, we are beholden to them if they believe either *Angel*, or *Spirit*, *Resurrection* of the *Body*, or *Immortality* of *Souls*. These things," Glanvill argued, "hang together in a *Chain of connexion*, at least in these mens *Hypothesis*; and 'tis but an happy chance if he that hath lost *one link*, holds another."⁶⁵ While Newton by no means repudiated good angels or a bodily resurrection, Glanvill nevertheless hit upon an important insight. Both the orthodox system and Newton's heterodox scheme hang together in a doctrinal "chain of connection."

First, Newton's non-literal demonology impacted on his prophetic exegesis, and we have already seen how his view on the devil affected his later writings on the Apocalypse. Second, Newton's denial of demons and his characterization of them as departed spirits dovetails neatly with his rejection of the immortality of the soul. In his mortalist system, there was no place for ghosts, whether good or evil. The orthodox position, conversely, accepted both demons and immortal souls. Also, Newton's understanding of the "doctrines of demons" helped him conclude that Catholic saintly intermediaries were ontologically, as well as doctrinally, false. The same can be said for his views on idolatry. Newton's mortalism is not the only aspect of his doctrine that relates well to his rejection of evil spirits. His rejection of infant baptism in favour of adult believers' baptism is made possible partly through his denial of demons, since one chief motivation for Christians to baptise infant children was to protect them from demonic influence. Newton's powerful monotheism, sharpened by his antitrinitarian view that centralized the powers of Deity in the Father alone and combined with his profound, over-arching sense of God's absolute dominion and unchallenged sovereignty,⁶⁶ probably also played an

⁶⁴ Newton, Yahuda MS 8.1, 2r, cited in Kenneth Knoespel, "Interpretive Strategies in Newton's *Theologiae gentilis origines philosophiae*," in *Newton and Religion*, ed. Force and Popkin, p. 190. I have replaced "sephizoths" with "sephiroths" in this transcription.

⁶⁵ [Glanvill], *A Blow at Modern Sadducism*, 4.

⁶⁶ On which, see James E. Force, "Newton's God of Dominion: The Unity of Newton's Theological, Scientific, and Political Thought," in James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin, *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), pp. 75–102.

important role in Newton's banishment of demons and that chief opponent of the Deity, Satan himself. As in the original Hebraic theistic monism, God kills and makes alive, He wounds and heals, He forms light and creates darkness, He makes peace and creates evil: Newton's God does all these things.⁶⁷ In Newton's system, the One true God stood unchallenged by either pagan gods or fallen angels. In sum, while undoubtedly related to his renunciation of unscriptural superstition, Newton's rejection of evil spirits is consistent with both the general thrust of his biblical hermeneutics and the contours of his theological system.

WITCH-HUNTERS, SCEPTICS AND THE THEOLOGICAL LOCATION OF NEWTON'S DEMONOLOGY

Newton developed his non-literal demonology against a backdrop of works like those by Glanvill, who openly deplored any attempts to downplay the reality of witches and demons. And Glanvill was by no means the only one to take this stance. Many of Newton's colleagues at the Royal Society, including the highly-esteemed Robert Boyle, saw the collection of case studies of witches and demons as forming an important part of the polemic against unbelief.⁶⁸ Proof of the reality of evil spirits helped confirm the existence of God, who is the greatest Spirit. For this reason, the doctrinally conservative viewed with great horror those who were not merely sceptical about the veracity of particular witchcraft cases, but denied demons outright. Thus it was for commentators such as the Calvinist heresy-hunter John Edwards who wrote in 1695 that:

among the Opinions which lead to Atheism, the denial of *Dæmons* and *Witches*, which of late hath so much prevail'd, is none of the least. For besides that this is an open defiance to unquestionable History, Experience and matter of Fact, and so introduces the worst sort of Scepticism (which is the high-way to Atheism) it is evident that this supplants the belief of *Spiritual Beings* or *Substances*: for Witchcraft and all Diabolick Transactions are disbeliev'd on the account of the improbability, if not impossibility of *Spirits*. So that it is plain the rejecting of the being and commerce of *Dæmons* or *Infernal Spirits* opens a door to the denial of the Deity, of which we can no otherwise conceive than that it is an *Eternal Spirit*.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 45:7.

⁶⁸ On this, see Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 75–103.

⁶⁹ John Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism, especially in the Present Age* (London, 1695), pp. 100–1. Already in 1669, John Wagstaffe, who expressed doubt in the reality of witchcraft, complained that “[t]he zealous affirmers of Witchcraft, think it no slander, to charge those who deny it with Atheism. As if forsooth the denial of Spirits and of God did necessarily follow the denial of *Witches*: An error so gross, that it doth not deserve a confutation.” See, Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated; or a Discourse against their Opinion that Affirm Witches* (London, 1669), sigs. A3r–v.

Others, such as the Lutheran theologian August Pfeiffer, were convinced that loss of belief in the devil would lead to moral degeneration in society. As Jonathan Israel summarizes, Pfeiffer maintained in a 1694 work that “if temptation is natural, and not satanically induced, then in principle extramarital fornication, whoring, and every form of promiscuity is permissible, as are lewd thoughts and words.”⁷⁰ The antiquary Ralph Thoresby FRS records an evening in 1712 in which he sparred verbally until late with a group of London “freethinkers,” who, he wrote, denied “the existence of spirits, downright affirming those [expressions] in Scripture, the works of the flesh, and the works of the Devil are [synonymous], there being no such thing as a Devil in their opinion.” Thoresby writes of being “troubled” at their views, and concludes his account with the prayer: “The Lord enlighten their dark minds, and let not much learning make them mad!”⁷¹ Although Newton fully accepted the existence of good angels, it is clear from these examples that many of Newton’s more orthodox contemporaries would have viewed Newton’s position on the devil and demons as a dangerous example of scepticism verging on materialism and atheism with potentially immoral consequences.⁷² Such a characterization of his demonology, however, would have been gravely mistaken. Newton was a thorough-going biblicist who was himself violently opposed to the perceived rise in unbelief. Newton had no truck with scepticism or infidelity and always expressed his position in scriptural language.

How, then, are we to position Newton’s demonology? The right place to look for analogies to Newton’s view is not among the works of radical sceptics, but within biblicist religious traditions that lay beyond the pale of mainstream Catholic and Protestant doctrinal standards. The first relevant analogy is the pre-modern theology of rabbinic Judaism. The notion of Satan as an evil, fallen angel—a commonplace of orthodox Christian theology—is absent from the Talmud and Midrash.⁷³ The Adversary (*hassatan*) is not an angel

On Wagstaffe’s work, in which he depowered but did not deny the devil, see Michael Hunter, “The Witchcraft Controversy and the Nature of Free-thought in Restoration England: John Wagstaffe’s *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1669),” in Michael Hunter, *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-century Britain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1995), pp. 286–307.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 395.

⁷¹ Entry for 21 August 1712, *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby*, ed. J. Hunter (London, 1830), 2:159. For the reaction of a contemporary American puritan to Sadducism, see Reiner Smolinski, “Salem Witchcraft and the Hermeneutical Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Cotton Mather’s Response to Thomas Hobbes and the ‘Modern Sadducees,’” in *Die Salemer Hexenverfolgungen: Perspektiven, Kontexte, Repräsentationem/ The Salem Witchcraft Persecutions: Perspectives, Contexts, Representations* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1994), pp. 143–83.

⁷² Cf. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 573; Andrew Fix, “Angels, Devils, and Evil Spirits in Seventeenth-Century Thought: Balthasar Bekker and the Collegiants,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989), pp. 536–7.

⁷³ A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud* (London: J. M. Dent, 1949), p. 55.

who fell from heaven but is seen according to an influential school of thought as a hypostasization or personification of *yetzer ha-ra*, the “evil inclination” within the heart of man.⁷⁴ According to one strand of rabbinic theology,⁷⁵ there were before the purging of idolatry from Israel two evil *yetzerim*, one acting as an impulse to idolatry and the other to unchastity—the same two main focuses in Newton’s writing on outworkings of the devil’s influence. Newton’s later expressions about the nature of Satan are for practical purposes indistinguishable from the Jewish “evil yetzer.”⁷⁶

A second parallel comes from the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁷ Newton’s views on the devil and demons bear a marked resemblance to positions arrived at by Radical Reforming theologians dating back to the early years of the Reformation. One particularly notable analogy is the antitrinitarian Anabaptist Hans Denck (1495–1527), who appears to have come to deny the literal existence of a personal devil. His biographer affirms that for Denck “there was nothing real in the world but God, and therefore anything opposed to God was essentially nothingness.”⁷⁸ Denck’s powerful emphasis on an absolute monotheism, which inclined to the exclusion of the reality of opposing forces, may have helped shape his thought on the devil. It is possible to be much more certain about the Radical Reformer David Joris (c. 1501–1556), who came to view Satan as a symbol for human desires.⁷⁹ A strong tendency to downplay the role of the demonic in human

⁷⁴ On the doctrine of the *yetzer ha-ra*, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 28–9, 32, 41–3, 49, 137–8, and 182; idem, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 176, 213, and 236; Roy A. Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology: An Introductory Study* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), pp. 81–5, and 88; Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, pp. 54–5, 88–93. It is significant that both the vocabulary and underlying conceptualization of the Jewish *yetzer ha-ra* derive from the Bible, in particular, Genesis 6:5, which thus summarizes the wickedness of antediluvian humanity: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination [*yetzer*] of the thoughts of his heart was only evil [*ra*] continually” (see also Genesis 8:21.) For a full study of Newton’s engagement with Jewish theology, see Matt Goldish, *Judaism in the Theology of Sir Isaac Newton* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998).

⁷⁵ Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology*, p. 81.

⁷⁶ The superficial resemblance of Newton’s view to modern, liberal interpretations of the devil as a psychic (rather than personal) force notwithstanding, we must resist the Whiggish temptation to cast this position as somehow proto-modernist in tone. The analogy of the Jewish *yetzer ha-ra*, a product of *ancient* thought, is a helpful corrective to this sort of mistaken conclusion. Newton’s biblicism also distances him from modern, liberal exegesis, as does the fact that modernist interpretations are inspired by a constellation of presuppositional ideologies (such as twentieth-century psychology) to which Newton was not privy.

⁷⁷ I elsewhere illustrate other points of contact between Newton’s theology and that of the Polish Brethren (particularly in the areas of baptism, mortalism, and antitrinitarianism) in Snobelen, “Isaac Newton, Heretic: The Strategies of a Nicodemite,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 32 (1999), pp. 384–7; and Snobelen, “‘God of Gods, and Lord of Lords’: The Theology of Isaac Newton’s General Scholium to the *Principia*,” *Osiris* 16 (2001), pp. 191–6.

⁷⁸ Alfred Coutts, *Hans Denck 1495–1527: Humanist & Heretic* (Edinburgh: MacNiven & Wallace, 1927), p. 165.

⁷⁹ There is a growing literature on this theological trend. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 375–405; Auke Jelsma, *Frontiers of the Reformation: Dissidence and Orthodoxy in Sixteenth-Century Europe*

illness can also be found in the works of certain Spiritualist and Anabaptist writers.⁸⁰ English parallels exist also among the radical religious sects of the Commonwealth.⁸¹ The Ranter Jacob Bauthumley contended in 1650 that the real devil was within human nature, not without. “Men fear a Devill without them,” Bauthumley writes, “and so fancy him to be terrible in their apprehensions, never considering that he is in them.”⁸² Similarly, in 1669 Lodowick Muggleton argued—against both orthodox and popular tradition—that the familiar spirit the Old Testament Witch of Endor conjured up was nothing other to the witches than “the imagination or reason, the devil in themselves; that is, they set themselves apart with the thoughts of the imaginations of their hearts.”⁸³ Strong parallels to Newton’s demonology and diabolology also appear in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* of 1651, even if the latter’s overall agenda differed than that of the former.⁸⁴ Hobbes appeals to the hermeneutics of accommodation and concludes: “I see nothing at all in the Scripture, that requireth a beliefe, that Daemoniacks were any other thing but Mad-men.”⁸⁵ For Hobbes demons “are but Idols, or Phantasms of the braine, without any reall nature of their own, distinct from humane fancy; such as are dead mens Ghosts, and Fairies, and other matter of old Wives tales.”⁸⁶ Biblical references to Satan are treated in a similar fashion. Thus, the description in Luke 22:3 of Satan entering into Judas refers to “the hostile and traitorous intention of selling his Lord and Master.”⁸⁷ Returning to the Continent, the works of two contemporary Dutch theologians offer further parallels. In his 1683 *De oraculis ethnicorum dissertationes duae*, the Dutch Mennonite Anthonie van Dale radically restricted the power and influence of the devil in worldly affairs to the temptation of the human heart.⁸⁸ Finally, another parallel can be seen in the Dutch Calvinist Balthasar Bekker’s *Betoverde Weereld (The World*

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 25–39; Gary K. Waite, “From David Joris to Balthasar Bekker?: The Radical Reformation and Scepticism Towards the Devil in the Early Modern Netherlands (1540–1700),” *Fides et Historia* 28 (1996), pp. 5–26; idem, “‘Man is a Devil to Himself’: David Joris and the Rise of a Sceptical Tradition Towards the Devil in the Early Modern Netherlands, 1540–1600,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis / Dutch Review of Church History* 75 (1995), pp. 1–30.

⁸⁰ Gary K. Waite, “Demonic Affliction or Divine Chastisement? Conceptions of Illness and Healing Among Spiritualists and Mennonites in Holland, c.1530–c.1630,” in *Illness and Healing Alternatives in Western Europe*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, Hilary Marland, and Hans de Waardt (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 59–79.

⁸¹ For this, see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 571.

⁸² Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (London, 1650), p. 30.

⁸³ Muggleton, *A True Interpretation of the Witch of Endor* (London, 1669), p. 3.

⁸⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 56–8, 269–79, 288, 417–18, 440–57.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁸⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 443.

⁸⁸ On Van Dale, see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 361–73. Newton does not appear to have owned this work, although he did possess a copy of van Dale’s *Dissertationes de origine ac progressu idolatriæ et superstitionum* (Amsterdam, 1696). See Harrison, *Library of Newton*, item 483.

Bewitched), published first in Dutch in 1691–94 and then in French (1694) and in partial English translation (1695).⁸⁹ Bekker contended that belief in a personal devil and ontologically literal demons was a pagan infiltration into Christianity. He devotes much space in his book to developing scriptural arguments subverting the popular interpretation of biblical texts mentioning the devil and, employing both Scripture and reason, attempts “to prove the Empire of the Devil is but a Chimera, and that he has neither such a Power, nor such an Administration as is ordinarily ascribed to him.”⁹⁰ Although there is in Newton’s writings nothing remotely like Bekker’s use of Cartesianism to underpin some of his extra-biblical arguments—and Newton was by this time virulently anti-Cartesian—he would have agreed with Bekker’s argument that the devil had no physical reality and was instead a symbol for evil within the human heart. It is also hardly possible that Newton would not have been aware of the enormous controversy that erupted in Europe at the publication of Bekker’s book.⁹¹ It may even be significant that Newton’s own move away from the orthodox teaching on Satan occurred around the time of the publication of the works of Van Dale and Bekker.

Another hint at Newton’s position comes near the end of the third chapter of his church history. At a point where he itemises a revealing series of *adiaphora* (“strong meats” in his biblically-derived terminology), he writes that “besides the first principles & fundamentals of religion . . . w^{ch} all men are to learn before baptism . . . there are (in the scriptures) many truths of great importance but more difficult to be understood & not (so) absolutely necessary to salvation.”⁹² Included among this list of strong meats are “what Christ did before his incarnation & between his death & resurrection, what he doth now in heaven & (how the saints shall reign with him as . . . Kings & Priests in the day of judgment & rule the nations with a rod of iron &) what he or they shall do after the day of judgment,” along with:

all disputable questions about Providence, Predestination, free Will, Grace, the origin of evil, the (nature of the) satisfaction made by Christ, the nature of angels, the state of the dead between death & the resurrection, the bodies wth

⁸⁹ On Bekker, see Andrew Fix, “Balthasar Bekker and the Crisis of Cartesianism,” *History of European Ideas* 17 (1993), pp. 577–88; idem, “Angels, Devils, and Evil Spirits,” pp. 527–47; Robin Attfield, “Balthasar Bekker and the Decline of the Witch-craze: The Old Demonology and the New Philosophy,” *Annals of Science* 42 (1985), pp. 383–95. Newton does not appear to have owned any of the editions of Bekker’s work, but his theological interlocutor John Locke owned the French translation of *Betoverde Weereld*. See John Harrison and Peter Laslett, eds., *The Library of John Locke*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), item 254.

⁹⁰ Bekker, *The World Bewitch’d; or, an Examination of the Common Opinions Concerning Spirits: their Nature, Power, Administration, and Operations* ([London], 1695), sigs. c11v–c12r.

⁹¹ On which, see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, pp. 382–405.

⁹² Newton, Bodmer MS, 3, fol. 22r.

which the dead shall arise, the power of keys, forms of Church government, the keeping of Easter & other holy days . . . & the like.⁹³

That Newton should include the origin of evil in a list consisting of doctrines about which he either had not come to a settled opinion or had dissenting views, hints at a degree of reflexivity in his selection criteria and in turn suggests an awareness on his part of the radical departure he had made in his demonology.

But the nature of Newton's radicalism needs careful clarification. His was a retreat from orthodoxy, not belief. When Newton sought to define the devil he appealed to the scriptural language of idolatry and lust, not to arguments of philosophical or rationalistic provenance. And, unlike Spinoza and the author of *Leviathan*, Newton did not reject the existence of spirits—only the evil kind. Thus Newton was neither a materialist nor a denier of good angels and, hence, not a Sadducee in the biblical sense. His position instead occupied territory within the middle ground between the witch-hunters who saw demons around every corner, and the outright sceptics who flatly denied the existence of any spirits whatsoever. For Newton, this middle ground represented the unadulterated biblical truth.

ISAAC NEWTON AND THE DEVIL

As the years wore on the views of men like Joseph Glanvill and Robert Boyle on witchcraft and physical manifestations of demons and ghosts became less and less acceptable in learned circles. This does not mean that Newton's rejection of evil spirits would have been viewed benignly by educated observers. Far from it. For while the growth in scepticism towards witchcraft and demonic activity helped lead to the repeal of the Jacobean Witchcraft Act in 1736,⁹⁴ even most of the intelligentsia continued to believe in the reality of demons and their chief diabolical overlord.⁹⁵ Denial of the devil was viewed with horror by most well into the nineteenth-century.

Some may instinctively desire to use Newton's non-literal demonology as an indication of incipient rationalism in his thought. This would be a mistake. It would be the same sort of mistake some scholars make when they misidentify Newton's denial of the Trinity as evidence of proto-deist tendencies. And the Bible-reading, prophecy-believing Newton was no deist.⁹⁶ Richard Westfall,

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ On which, see Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations c.1650–c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 180–202, and idem, "Witchcraft Repealed," in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester, and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 309–34.

⁹⁵ Cf. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 475, 573.

⁹⁶ James E. Force exorcized this historiographical demon in a brilliant and incisive reply to Richard Westfall's ill-founded attempt to situate Newton on the slippery slope towards deism. See James E. Force,

who knew Newton's theological manuscripts well, nevertheless saw Newton's religion—particularly his heterodox Arianism—as evidence of “the influence of science on his religion”, presumably deploying the term “science” here in a way that implies a rationalist tinge. “The central thrust of Newton's life-long religious quest,” Westfall contended, “was the effort to save Christianity by purging it of irrationalities.”⁹⁷ This is an unhappy choice of words. The picture Westfall paints is one of a man helplessly engulfed by a rising tide of reason and proto-positivistic science. Even Frank Manuel, the scholar who first brought Newton's position on the devil to light, concluded that it was a sign that “[s]cience was taking its toll” on the author of the *Principia Mathematica*.⁹⁸ Quite apart from the fact that Newton's demonology should be located firmly within the sphere of biblicist theology, it is hard to see what Manuel's vague assessment could mean. His use of the term “science” here would now be viewed as anachronistic and in any case Newton, unlike Bekker, did not subscribe to any rationalist form of natural philosophy. Indeed, Newton's own natural philosophy was heavily infused with providentialist convictions,⁹⁹ and for him theology and natural philosophy were aspects of the same grand project. Newton's beliefs must be interpreted through the legacies to which he was heir, not through the lens of what natural philosophy became.

This is not to say that Newton's mature position on the devil and demons did not interpenetrate with his study of Nature. In this regard, it is worth recalling that the hermeneutics of accommodation was used by Newton to explain apparent geocentric language in the Bible as well as his position on the devil and demons. Not only is there symmetry between his denial of substantial interpretations of evil spirits and his rejection of the introduction of substance into discussions of God's nature, but this suspicion of substance is also evident in the physics of his *Principia*. Likewise, Newton's rejection of falsely-interpreted “metaphysical” readings of spirits in favour of the true “moral” meanings fits into a general pattern evident in both Newton's theology and his natural philosophy. Newton once wrote that “[t]he grand occasion of errors in the faith has been the turning of the scriptures from a moral to a (& monarchical to a physical &) metaphysical (& ~~physical~~) sense & this has been done chiefly by men bred up in the (metaphysical) theology of

“Newton and Deism,” *Science and Religion / Wissenschaft und Religion*, ed. Änne Bäumer and Manfred Büttner (Büchum: Brockmeyer, 1989), pp. 120–32.

⁹⁷ Richard S. Westfall, “Newton and Christianity,” *Facets of Faith and Science, Volume 3: The Role of Beliefs in the Natural Sciences*, ed. Jitse M. van der Meer (Ancaster, Ontario: The Pascal Centre/ Lanham, MD: The Univ. Press of America, 1996), p. 73.

⁹⁸ Manuel, *Religion of Newton*, p. 64.

⁹⁹ A pioneering study in this regard is Simon Schaffer, “Comets & Idols: Newton's Cosmology and Political Theology,” *Action and Reaction: Proceedings of a Symposium to Commemorate the Tercentenary of Newton's Principia*, ed. Paul Theerman and Adele F. Seeff (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993), pp. 206–31.

the heathens Philosophers . . . (the Cabbalists & (y^e) Schoolmen).”¹⁰⁰ This in turn conforms to a broad trend in his thought that led him to distinguish between exoteric (open) and esoteric (closed) levels of knowledge, seen in his distinction between absolute and relative space and time, along with open and closed meanings in theology. A reading of the New Testament that yields demons, then, would fall into the esoteric category, while a reading that interprets as distempers would fall into the closed category y.¹⁰¹ Newton’s demonology would have had direct repercussions for his natural philosophy as well. The banishment of evil spirits would have allowed him to avoid the natural philosophical anxieties caused by Descartes’ demon, who for Newton did not exist to deceive human perception in fields such as optics. Finally, in contrast to his disciple, William Whiston, there could be for Newton no recourse to evil spirits to explain spectacular meteorological phenomena like the *aurora borealis*. Suggestively, Whiston even publicly lamented Newton’s reticence to appeal to demons for this purpose.¹⁰²

There are some remaining puzzles. It is a curious fact that two men in Newton’s circle published works after the great man’s death in which they openly argued for a view on biblical demons that differed not at all from that of Newton. First, Arthur Ashley Sykes, a clerical friend of Samuel Clarke’s whom Newton helped appoint to an afternoon preachingship at Golden Square in London, published a controversial work on the meaning of demoniacs in the New Testament in 1737, the year after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act.¹⁰³ In this treatise Sykes, who was given some of Newton’s theological papers in the 1750s to prepare for publication,¹⁰⁴ presents a sophisticated and learned

¹⁰⁰ Newton, Yahuda MS 15.5, fol. 97r. For more on this, see Snobelen, “‘God of Gods, and Lord of Lords.’”

¹⁰¹ For more on Newton’s epistemological dualism, see Snobelen, “‘God of gods, and Lord of lords,’” pp. 205–6.

¹⁰² Whiston, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Whiston*, 2 vols (London, 1753), 2:195–7. On this, see Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton*, pp. 98–9. Whiston also had little difficulty in attributing charismatic revelation to demonic influence. When Whiston met with the French Prophets in or about 1713, he gave them his reasons “why, upon supposition of their agitations and impulses being *supernatural*, [he] thought they were *evil* and not *good* spirits that were the authors of those agitations and impulses,” and affirmed that “Wild agitations are rather signs of dæmonical possessions, than of a prophetic afflatus.” See Whiston, *Memoirs*, 1:119–20.

¹⁰³ Sykes, *An Enquiry into the Meaning of Demoniacs in the New Testament* (London, 1737). See also, *idem*, *A Further Enquiry into the Meaning of Demoniacs in the New Testament* (London, 1737).

¹⁰⁴ After the 23 May 1737 death of her husband John Conduitt, in whose possession the Newton manuscripts lay, Newton’s half-niece Catherine Conduitt (née Barton) added a codicil to her will on 26 June 1737 in which she stipulated that her executor was to entrust Sykes with Newton’s theological tracts with the intent that the former should prepare them for publication (New College, Oxford MS 361.4, fol. 139r.) In fact, the manuscripts (and even then only a fraction of them) do not appear to have been transferred to Sykes’ care until 1755. Sykes died shortly afterward and therefore was not able to accomplish the task (British Library Add. MS 4319, fol. 91.) Although firm evidence of Sykes’ access to Newton’s manuscripts only exists for a date long after 1737, the naming of Sykes in Catherine Conduitt’s will in the very year of the publication of his works on demons is striking. It is possible that sometime before John Conduitt’s death, Sykes was given preliminary access to Newton’s papers—a scenario that would

argument to show that the New Testament demons were not ontologically real spiritual entities, but were rather distempers of the mind and are depicted in the Gospels as devils using accommodationist language. Also, as with Newton, demons are equated with ghosts. Furthermore, employing his knowledge of Hebrew, Sykes defines the word Satan as “nothing else but *Adversary*,” and contends that it should be “understood according to the subject to which it is applied.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, when in the Gospel accounts a woman is characterized as being “*bound of Satan*,” this, “when applied to an *Infirmity*, means no more than that which was an Adversary to Health.”¹⁰⁶ To support his contention, Sykes goes on to list scriptural examples of human adversaries designated as satans.¹⁰⁷ As for those who arrogate to themselves the power of casting out demons (such as the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13–17), they are nothing more than cheats.¹⁰⁸ In both the general tenor of his position, and the specifics of his arguments, Sykes’ demonology displays a haunting similarity to that of Newton.¹⁰⁹

Second, Richard Mead, one of the doctors who cared for Newton in his final illness and one of the last to see him alive, published in a work on biblical diseases a briefer version of the argument that demon-possession is but another name for madness.¹¹⁰ Mead, a Fellow of the Royal Society who had in Newton’s lifetime published a study of lunacy, cites both the 1642 essay of his namesake and Sykes’ full-length study of 1737, so it is possible that his main incentive came from others. Nevertheless, the association with Newton is striking. Did Newton’s ideas play a formative role in the thought of either of these two men? The lack of direct evidence allows no confirmation of this possibility, although Newton did reveal aspects of his heresy to others.¹¹¹ What is certain is that these men articulated positions on demons that were indistinguishable from those of Newton. Finally, it may be worth noting that the MP who in 1736 first presented to the House of Commons and then delivered to the House of Lords the bill to repeal the Jacobean Witchcraft Act was none other than John Conduitt, Newton’s nephew-in-law,

help explain why Catherine named him for the work of editing them after her death (which occurred in 1740.)

¹⁰⁵ Sykes, *Enquiry into Demoniacks*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–6.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁹ Among the responses to Sykes’ work advocating the orthodox literal demonology, was William Whiston’s tract *An Account of the Demoniacks, and of the Power of Casting out Demons, both in the New Testament, and in the Four First Centuries* (London, 1737.)

¹¹⁰ Mead, *Medica sacra; or, a Commentary on the Most Remarkable Diseases, Mentioned in the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1755; orig. publ. in Latin in 1749.)

¹¹¹ On this, see Snobelen, “Isaac Newton, Heretic,” pp. 401–8.

successor at the Royal Mint, and custodian of Newton's unpublished papers.¹¹²

In this study, I have shown that there was more than one way for an early modern believer to orient biblical demonology. In Newton's case, it meant the denial of the existence of evil spirits. A corollary to this was a shift from an ontology of Satan to a psychology of temptation, a reorientation from the external to the internal. But instead of looking for possible affinities with his view in sceptical thought or suggesting a source in some putatively rational or 'modernist' strain of natural philosophy, I have argued that Newton's demonology formed an integral part of his grand religious project and that the most relevant analogies lie in theology—ancient and heterodox. It is likely that it owed much to the massive religiously-motivated study of pagan idolatry in which Newton became immersed during the late 1680s and early 1690s—a study revealed in his surviving manuscripts on the origin of Gentile theology. His view may also have been partly motivated by empathy for the fourth-century Arian party, who rejected Athanasius's testimony of demon-plagued monks as a Machiavellian attempt to legitimate the Trinitarian cause when terms from reason failed. Newton articulated his own position in biblical terminology and above all, as with so many other aspects of his theological and natural philosophical thought, his views on the devil were reinforced by an engagement with older traditions. The apparent 'modernity' of his stance turns out to be a mirage. Newton's demonology was an *exegetical* option, not a sign of the encroaching Enlightenment. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that Newton's denial of evil spirits was well outside the theological mainstream in his own day and for a long time afterward. His position would have been viewed as a runway to infidelity, a capitulation to cold, dark atheism, a disturbing disenchantment of the world or even a delusion inspired by Beelzebub himself. If only his witching-hunting colleagues at the Royal Society had known.

¹¹² Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations*, pp. 182–3; idem, "Witchcraft Repealed," in Barry, Hester, and Roberts, Editors, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, p. 319.