

Sir Isaac Newton: "Apocalypse not before 2060"



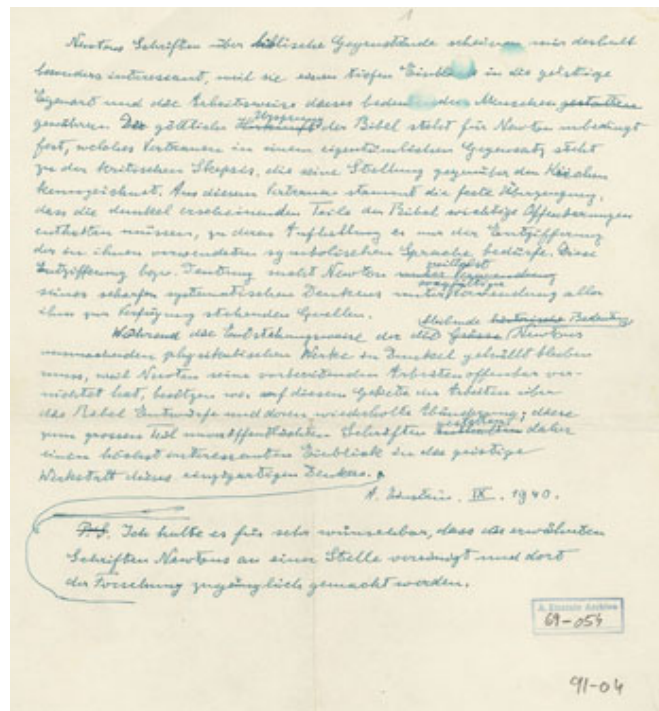
The Jewish National & University Library in Jerusalem has put on public display (for the first time) a collection of Isaac Newton's manuscripts on religion, including his calculations of the date of the end of the world and the dimensions of the temple at Jerusalem. According to Newton, the Apocalypse was not going to happen before 2060. But the most remarkable aspect of the collection is that it reveals Newton's interest in alchemy and a "bible code", two disciplines that have seldom been associated with the man who is seen as one of the founding fathers of empirical science.

When Isaac Newton's non-scientific papers were auctioned at Sotheby's in London in 1936, a window was opened wide on a side of the man that few could have imagined. Prior to this, only a few specialist scholars had been fully aware of the size and contents of the collection. Included among the bundles of manuscripts sold at this sale were close to one million words on alchemy and perhaps as much as three million words on theology and biblical prophecy. Although this sale, held in the depths of the Depression era, marked a turning point in the study of the non-canonical aspects of Newton's career, it would be years before these manuscripts would be made widely available for serious scholarly examination.

The bulk of the alchemical and theological manuscripts was eventually acquired by two altogether different men who nonetheless shared a passion for these as yet little-studied written legacies of Newton's considerable output. One was the British economist John Maynard Keynes, secular, worldly and liberal-minded. The other was the Jewish Oriental Studies scholar Abraham Shalom Yahuda, who devoted part of his career to proving the authenticity of the Pentateuch. When he died in 1946, Keynes' collection went to his alma mater King's College, Cambridge. Although Yahuda was not a Zionist, on his death in 1951 he left his impressive collection of Newton's

alchemical and theological writings to the newly-founded State of Israel. The collection eventually arrived at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem in 1969. Almost forty years later, they have been put on public display for the first time.

Yemima Ben-Menahem, one of the exhibit's curators, has said that the papers show Newton's conviction that important knowledge was hiding in ancient texts. 'He believed there was wisdom in the world that got lost. He thought it was coded, and that by studying things like the dimensions of the temple, he could decode it. The Newton papers, Ben-Menahem said, also complicate the idea that science is diametrically opposed to religion. "These documents show a scientist guided by religious fervour, by a desire to see God's actions in the world."



Newton studied of the Book of Daniel in an attempt to determine the time of the apocalypse. His conclusion was that the world would not end before 2060. According to Newton, 1260 years had to elapse between the re-establishment of the Holy Roman Empire by Charlemagne in 800 A.D. and the end of times.

"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 fanciful men who are frequently predicting the time of the end, and by doing so bring the sacred prophesies into discredit as often as their predictions fail."

Also included in the exhibit is a 1940 letter from Albert Einstein to Yahuda about the Newton papers. He writes: "While the process by which Newton's writings about the physical world

evolved must remain hidden, as Newton apparently destroyed the preliminary versions, in the realm of his biblical work, which is still mostly unpublished, we have a variety of sketches and ongoing changes that give us a most interesting look into the mental laboratory of this unique thinker."

Newton was one of the last great Renaissance men, a thinker who worked in mathematics, physics, optics, alchemy, history, theology and the interpretation of prophecy and saw connections between them all. We also see in Newton a Janus-faced figure who looked to the past for inspiration even as his innovations pointed toward the future. Finally, when added to his published writings on physics, mathematics and optics, the manuscripts displayed in this exhibition reveal a man in pursuit of all the multifarious the secrets of God and Nature.