Interpretive Strategies in Newton’s *Theologiae gentilis origines philosophiae*

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“What is it that Newton really thought he was doing? Is it all the usual stuff and nonsense?” The question posed by John Maynard Keynes in a letter to A.S. Yahuda in 1938 may still stand as an appropriate query regarding the puzzlement that accompanies an initial examination of Newton’s *Theologiae gentilis origines philosophiae*. From the earliest descriptions in David Castillejo’s eccentric Cambridge dissertation, to Richard Westfall’s work that presented it to a wider group of scholars; from Frank Manuel’s early English transcriptions of related Yahuda manuscripts to Betty Jo Dobbs’ presentation of the manuscript in her own work on alchemy, Newton scholars have received orientation and a multitude of intriguing quotations of what surely seemed to be another side of Newton. Certainly anyone who has looked at the *Origines* appreciates even more the preliminary accounts

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1 Letter from J. M. Keynes to A. S. Yahuda (April 3, 1938), Box I [Yahuda letters] in the Archive of the Hebrew National Library, Jerusalem. Quoted by permission.

which at times may strike us as probes to some other planet. The manuscript tests our Latin, paleographic skills, patience, and eyesight—all our seventeenth-century interpretive strategies. Through the oral and written matter that accompanies the manuscript, one learns that it carries other stories or myths as well, stories that touch twentieth-century science and religion (Einstein and Yahuda), the early orthodoxy of the history of science (George Sarton refused to consider the manuscript as part of the history of science), and even moments in the foundation of the State of Israel. Indeed, in the account of Castellojo’s unpacking and cataloging of the Yahuda manuscripts after the Six Day War, there is even a bit of Indiana Jones. My objective is not to consider such twentieth-century mythologies, but rather to ask how Newton deals with the voluminous narratives he gathers in his own work. After describing the manuscript, I will turn my attention to what I have referred to as Newton’s interpretive strategies. In particular, I will make several comments on Newton’s synchronisms and the changing status of allegory and hermeneutics registered in the *Origines*.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE *ORIGINES*

*Theologiae gentilis originis philosophiae* is an unfinished Latin manuscript book by Isaac Newton currently located in the Department of Archives in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. As planned the book was to include at least eleven chapters devoted to showing how ancient religious practice could reveal physical truths about the universe. In its current state, the manuscript exists in some five chapters including numerous fragments that probably represent research for other chapters. Entitled by Newton and identified since 1969 as Yahuda MS Var. 1, Newton MS 16, the work consists of 79 folio pages. Considering the arbitrary classification and presentation of the manuscripts in the Portsmouth Collection, it is apparent to anyone who has worked with these manuscripts

that the *Origines* project extended well beyond Yahuda MS Var. 1, Newton MS 16. However, as a consequence of the chapter headings and given Humphrey Newton’s transcription of some 57 folio pages, it remains appropriate to view Yahuda MS 16 as the most significant departure point for all of Newton’s work on mythography. Given Richard Westfall’s preliminary research on the manuscript, we know that Newton was working on the project in the 1680s when he was also working on the *Principia* and that part of it still occupied him when he was working on *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (1728) at the end of his life.

Since the chapter titles provided by Newton give us an idea of the book, we may look at them briefly before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of the material that we find in them (all references are to Yahuda MS. 16):

Cap. 1: Quod Theologia Gentilis Philosophiae erat, et ad scientiam Astronomicam & Physicam systematis mundani: appra spectabat: quodque Dies duodecim maioram gentilis erat Planeta septem cent quatuor elementos et quintessentia terrae. (incipit f.1 r.)

[Cap. 1: That the theology of the Gentiles was philosophical and pertains to the knowledge of astronomy and the physics of the world system; how the twelve major gentile gods are the seven planets, the four elements and the earthly quintessence.]

Cap. 2: Quod Hominem post Diluvianum primum memoria in astres et elementis celebatur; quoque hominis illa aetabis tribus primis et quaris. (incipit f. 7v.)

[Cap. 2: That after the flood humans retained their earliest memories in the stars and elements; and how there were first three and then four ages.]  

Cap. 3: Quod Noachus sit Saturnus et Janus, quodque Charnus sit Jupiter Hannon et quod Chani filii certa nepotibus sint et Dii religi et Gigantes qui cum Dis aetati tertia in Aegypto dimicarunt: et quoniam Charnus cum suis in Aegyptum descrivit et regionem intra filias divisit. (incipit f.53r.)

[Cap. 3: That Noah is Saturn and Janus, and that Chaim is Jupiter Hannam and that the sons of Chama are his children and how the remaining gods and giants fought in Aegypt with his family and divided the region between his daughters.]

Cap. 4: Quod Chus sit Hercules, Mars, Moloc, et Belus primus (ff. 65t.-72r.)

[Cap. 4: That Chus is Hercules, Mars, Moloc, the the first Belas]  

3 I am indebted to the Eidelberg Center for the History and Philosophy of Science at the Hebrew University for a 1989 fellowship that allowed me to complete a preliminary transcription of the *Origines* and other manuscripts in the Yahuda collection of the Hebrew National Library. All references to manuscripts in the Yahuda collection of Newton manuscripts are quoted by permission.

4 The Yahuda Collection in the Hebrew National Library in Jerusalem contains a detailed collection of correspondence regarding the acquisition of the Newton manuscripts. See for example, the correspondence between A. S. Yahuda and Albert Einstein in Yahuda Var. 1: Newton MS. 43. Interviews with Mendela Nadv, former Head of the Archive, who participated in unpacking the Newton manuscripts provided a range of anecdotal information.

5 My work on the *Origines* began in 1988 in Cambridge where I first studied the manuscript on microfilm. It continued the following year in Jerusalem where I spent some four months completing a preliminary transcription. My work has been repeatedly interrupted by my administrative responsibilities as school chair and associate dean.

6 From here on references to the Newton manuscripts in the Yahuda collection will be designated simplified as Yahuda MS 16 rather than including the variarum listing. It should be emphasized, however, that the variarum listing is important considering the extensive collection of oriental manuscripts that make up the large part of the Yahuda collection. I have followed the solution included in the manuscript.
Cap. 5: Quod Mirvaim sit Osiris et Serapis et Menaeius & Dis vel Pluto quoque Mirvaimo nati sint filius Orus seu Apollo et filia Bubaste seu Diana et filius nothus Thoth seu Mercurius primus (ff. 73r.-79v.)

Cap. 5: That Mirvaim is Osiris and Serapis and Menoeicus and Dis or Pluto and that to Mirvaim were born a son Horus or Apollo and a daughter Bubaste or Diana and a son, the well-known Thoth or first Mercury.

Cap. 5 (another version): Quod Mirvaim sit Osiris et Serapis et Menaeius & Dis vel Pluto quoque Mirvaimis filius Pathros sit Orus vel Apollo et quod filiam habuit Bubastem seu Dianaem et filiam nothus Thoth seu Mercurium primum (incipit f. 68v.)

Cap. 5 (another version): That Mirvaim is Osiris and Serapis and Menoeicus and Dis or Pluto and that Pathros, the son of Mirvaim was Horus or Apollo and that he had a daughter Bubaste or Diana and a daughter and a son, the well-known Thoth or first Mercury.

The following chapters headings appear on f.45r and remain undeveloped.

Cap. 6: Quod Phut sit Typho et Antaeus et Atlas et Neptunus (f. 45r.)

Cap. 6: That Phut was Typho and Antaeus and Atlas and Neptune

Cap. 7: Quod Canaan sit Vulcanus et Prometheus et quod elius exor et soror Venus fuit Astyr seu Astyrages (f. 45r.)

Cap. 7: That Canaan was Vulcan and Prometheus and that his wife and daughter was Venus Astyr or Astyrage

Cap. 8: De aliis Deorum praedictorum nominibus (f. 45r.)

Cap. 8: Concerning the original names of other gods

Cap. 9: Quomodo nomina praedictorum hominum sideribus imposita sunt & quales fuit Astronomia veterum Aegyptiorum (f. 45r.)

Cap. 9: In what ways the names of the first humans were transferred to the stars and the nature of the oldest Egyptian astronomy

Cap. 10: Quomodo animae hominum instellaris translata sunt & stellaris sic animata per Dis intereligentibus haberis cepentur, dequod origine et progressu in idololatria et artium magicam (f. 45r.)

Cap. 10: In what ways the souls of humans were transferred to the stars and how the stars began to be understood as containing animated spirits, and concerning the origin and progression of idolatry and the art of magic

Cap. 11: Qualis fuit religio vera Noachidarum religio antequam perolum falsorum deorum corrupti coepit, et quod religio Christiana non vera fuit se exempta sunt (f. 45r.)

Cap. 11: What was the true religion of the ancient Noachides before it began to be corrupted through the veneration of false gods, and how the Christian religion is not exempted from such corruption

Although the book begins with a detailed account of the Egyptian synthesis of stars and elements, it proceeds in subsequent chapters to establish the manner in which human events become associated with astronomical events. According to Newton, Noah's children and grandchildren become absorbed within other mytho-histories, or pre-histories, of antiquity through a process in which they first become localized as historical figures and then memorialized as stars and planets. (In the Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Emended [1728], Newton explains diffusion through trade and technology transfer.) Consequently, while a proliferation of gods and goddesses appears in antiquity, the multiple pantheons are structurally related. Through his extensive historiographic research Newton factors out redundant figures until he has reduced a multitude of genealogies to rudimentary formulae. As the chapter headings show, Newton's method involves 1) formulating linkages between astronomical objects and a limited number of historical figures; and 2) establishing equivalencies between figures belonging to major mythographic pantheons. We should think of Newton as creating a translation table not only between a plethora of histories and mythographies but between eastern and western Mediterranean mythologies. Works in Newton's library show that he was hardly alone in seeking equivalencies through a process of historical classification or taxonomy. Rather gathering up lists of gods and goddesses according to moral interpretations, Newton seeks to establish a genealogical study of multiple pantheons (Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Hebrew) in order to understand the observations they share on natural philosophy. Following seventeenth-century precedents set by Gerardus Vossius, Samuel Bochart, and John Marsham, Newton's project becomes distinctly orientalist. Inherent in such a project is an effort to situate the study of universal history away from the scholarly assumptions of the Latin west. In contrast to approaching the Old Testament through the New Testament and then viewing both through the Roman Empire, Newton's research inscribes a religious anthropology of the eastern Mediterranean. However, his objective in the Origins, extends well beyond the study of eastern religious practice that one would expect from


Robert Morden, Geography Rectified: or, a Description of the World (London, 1700), [N.Q 9.29].

Introductio ad chronologiam sive chronologica in epitomen reducita (Oxford, 1704) [N.Q 7.2]; and Christian Helvetius, Theatrum historiarum (Oxford, 1662) [N.Q 10.57].
Biblical archaeology. By seeking to establish an intellectual foundation for universal history that entails Biblical history, Newton not only challenges simplistic Christian typology that would authorize the New Testament but indicates that his effort to rework historical patterns is accompanied by an expectation that they may be interpreted to confirm divine revelations that not only extend beyond Biblical history but include Newton himself. From a practical vantage point, Newton’s sights are set far beyond the vulgar moral readings of classical fabulae established for use in school texts or iconographic lexicons. Newton’s work is distant from the scholarly traditions explored by the early iconographic work of the Courtauld and Warburg Institute. In fact, Newton’s research reminds us how often twentieth-century mythographic research occurs in a Greek and Roman register. A useful snapshot of differences in the application of classical authors appears in a comparisons between Milton’s rhetorical and psychological use of Ovidian poetry and the physico-historical purposes ascribed to Ovid by Newton. Where Ovid provides John Milton with psychological detail for Biblical figures, he supplies Newton with a scholarly source for universal history and alchemy. At a time that seventeenth-century classical scholarship was challenging prolix and even facile Latin of Ovid, Newton approaches Ovid far less as a Roman poet than a Latin mythographer whose verses could provide testimony to anthropological information on ancient religious practice.9

More than anyone else, it is Gerhardus Vossius who provides Newton with a significant seventeenth-century framework for his examination of natural philosophy and its bearing on religion. The extensive dog-eared and marginal marks and notes in Newton’s hand in his copy of Vossius in the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge indicates its extensive use as a resource in his research.10 More than anything else it is Vossius’s extended discussion of the sun and its assimilation into religious practice that provides an orientation for Newton’s research. A juxtaposition of chapters that make up Vossius’ discussion entitled Quae est de cultu corporis caelestis [The use of celestial bodies within religious cults] (vol. 2: chapters 1-17) and Newton’s subjects shows how Vossius marks out a structure that could facilitate Newton’s research.

9 Newton’s personal copy of Metamorphoses ed. G. Bemmannus (London 1655) remains in the Trinity College Library, Cambridge (DQ.9.168). Marginal notes indicate that Newton read the Metamorphoses with the Pari. See John Harris, The Library of Isaac Newton (Cambridge University Press, 1978), entry 1221. Ovid is also used in the Origins to confirm historical epochs or ages (§52r. and §53r).

At the same time that Vossius provides Newton with a massive collection of detail, he supplies a taxonomic structure and multiple precedents for integrating contemporary natural philosophy into his work with ancient mythology. Beyond gathering examples regarding solar worship (2:3:21f), he gathers detail regarding ancient observations on the sun's characteristics from the vantage point of natural philosophy. His subsequent discussion includes reference to Copernicus (2:3:12), a mathematical confirmation of the sun's velocity (2:3:13), and to the way the sun continues to be celebrated in the Christian church (2:3:20f). (He shows how Jesus is associated with the sun and notices how the chandeliers of Christian churches face toward the east and the rising sun.) Newton's reference to Galileo in the *Origines* (which I return to below) finds multiple precedents in Vossius' discussion of seventeenth-century natural philosophy. However, even though there are similarities between the mythographic work of Vossius and Newton, the *Origines* does not imitate De *theologia gentilium* but simplifies and systematizes Vossius' rendition of mythographic material.

It is helpful to think of Newton as combining two interpretive strategies: one a euhemeristic hermeneutic and another found in physical allegory. Such strategy dismisses the layered tradition of moral interpretations linked with education and indoctrination and fixes attention on physical evidence drawn either from history or from nature. With little exaggeration, Newton's interpretive strategies may be compared to even earlier use of mythography to examine natural phenomena.11 Even a cursory review of Newton's major sources in the *Origines* indicate that he is seeking out sources that show how serious discussion of natural phenomena could be modulated through mythological narrative.12 For Newton, an interpretive strategy strongly linked to physical allegory is much less associated with university programs in Greek than with his own extensive alchemical research. For Newton, alchemy represents not simply a collection of arcane techniques for approaching matter but also embodies an alternative means for understanding history.13 Newton's alchemical work was inherently historical in the sense that he was seeking to establish what amounts to a stemma for alchemical practice. The construction of such a stemma inevitably involves an integration of textual study and physical experimentation with the expectation that their intersection will be confirmed by mutual confirmation.

Although Newton's methodology might be thought to be a blatant form of *prisca theologia* or *prisca scientia*, we must use such characterizations carefully. Newton's method is by no means identical to established Renaissance understanding of *prisca scientia*. Unlike commonly espoused hermetic teaching that situated a *prisca scientia* with Moses and even more importantly in a setting of lapsed theology, Newton's *prisca scientia* emerges from his conviction that religious practice is related to natural phenomena and that just as natural phenomena experienced by human beings has remained relatively constant in the course of human history so has human proclivity to practice religion in certain ways. Rather than being occupied by occult practice *per se*, something characteristic of much Renaissance discourse, Newton's method works by expecting to find patterns in all natural phenomena. For Newton, meaning is not concealed in written historical texts but enacted through a correlation between the understanding of the text and the understanding of experience.

Newton's description and analysis of a sacred Egyptian procession at the beginning of the work provides a useful example for approaching Newton's strategy. Immediately at the outset, he notices that ancient philosophy was divided into practices that were either sacred or mundane. While sacred philosophy was conveyed to adherents through types and enigmas, vulgar philosophy was conveyed in an accessible, popular style: "Philosophiam antiquas duplicem colocam, sacram et vulgarem, sacram Philosophos per typos et enigmata discipulis fuit traditum; vulgarem oratorem aperit et stylo populari scripserunt." [The ancients practiced philosophy in two ways, one sacred and the other vulgar; they communicated sacred philosophy to their students through types and enigmas; orators wrote vulgar philosophy in an open manner with a popular style.] (Yahuda MS. 16, f. 1r.) Newton underscores the distinction by noticing that sacred philosophy flourished in Egypt where it originated in a knowledge of the stars. ["Philosophia sacra in


12 Newton refers to at least 50 different authors in the five chapters that make up the *Origines*. A tentative list of authors includes the following: Chapter 1: Clement of Alexandria, Macrobius, Plato, Cicero, Diodorus, Xenucus, Polybius (cited from Eusebius); Eusebius, Herodotus, Lucian, Philostratus, Eratosthenes, Augustine, Virgil, Plutarch, Servius, Ovid. Chapter 2: Galileo, Philo of Byzantium, Philo of Saphnephathes (cited from Eusebius); Proclus (cited from Plotinus) Homer, Hippocrates, Menander, Josephus, Eustathius, Heidrich, Chapter 3: Thales, Archimedes, Plotinus, Tertullus, Strabo, Erastus, Celsus, Chapter 4: Ptolemy, Isagoge, Athens, Eusebius, Apollodorus, Kircher, Pausanias, Cyril, Xenophon, Ptolemy, Heide. Chapter 5: Apollonius Rhodos, Stephanus Byzantius, Apollonius. Although many of the authors are cited multiple times, I have listed them only once in this preliminary list.

13 The work of Michael Maier and others suggests that a form of alchemical historiography becomes more developed in the seventeenth century. Newman notes Maier and, as his notes show, used him. "In hoc enim, omnibus aliis ignominibus exclusis concordant ornamenti sacramento, etiam antiquissimi philosophi, & in praecipuis suis allegorii & fictionibus prompitas, ornamenti rationem populi differentes ingenios, linguis, moribus, religiosa, legibus atque viae instituit, in orationibus, sacrae, orationibus, non solum tot regnumur europae, sed & Africae & Asiaticae. (2. Afr.) Michael Maier, *Symbolus sive versio alchimicorum ramanum* (Frankfort, 1617) I have used Newton's personal copy of the book located in the Edelin Library in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.
The ekphrastic description shows Newton engaged in presenting the details of an allegorical problem presented by a hieroglyphic emblem. Newton follows a widespread practice found in many ancient neo-platonic texts and which would receive even broader dissemination at the beginning of the eighteenth century through Vico's famous allegory at the beginning of Scienza nova. The fact that it occurs at the very beginning of his book is surely not a coincidence for it sets forth an expectation that the study undertaken in the pages that follow will engage the "types and enigmas" of sacred philosophy. In the emendations that follow Newton amplifies the interpretation already implicit in the iconography of the procession.

In this procession the hymns of the first priest are associated with the harmony of the heavenly spheres. Next comes the astronomer with the holy books concerning the study of the stars. Next comes the sacred scribe who understands the planets, stars, and the sacred things. Finally the priest and chief appear, who know all things as a consequence of studying the sacred rites and theology, and who close the entire procession. By bringing together a knowledge of the stars and the earth with the study of that which was the most important, the Egyptians indicated that their theology concerned the study of the stars. (Indeed?) the gods of the Egyptians were stars and elements. (Yahuda MS. 16. 2r.)

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Further emendations show Newton seeking sources that provide additional information about the physics inherent in ancient accounts. An addition on the reverse folio page includes consideration of the nine muses and their relation to planetary orbits as a consequence of music theory. The notes show that even the strophic and antistrophic structure of Greek meter may be related to the movement of the stars. Although I cannot expand on the relation between poetic and cosmic structure at present, it is important to recall that it is precisely such links that are explored by Richard Bentley, the eminent Greek scholar in Cambridge who was also Newton's friend, in the Boyle lectures in 1692. Similar comments are found in other related manuscripts.

14 For the Egyptians pursue a philosophy of their own. This is principally shown by their sacred ceremonial. For first amongst the Sages, bearing some one of the symbols of music. For they say that he must have two of the books of Hermes, the one of which contains the hymns of the gods, the second the regulations of the king's life. And after the Sages advances the Astrologer, with a horoscope in his hand, and a plan, the symbols of astrology. He must have the astronomical books of Hermes, which are four in number, always in his mouth. Of these, one is about the order of the fixed stars that are visible, and another about the conjunctions and harmless appearances of the sun and moon, and the rest respecting their influence on the earth. Next is the sacred Scribe, with his book and in his hand a book and nile, which are written in ink and the reed, with which they write. And he must be acquainted with what are called hieroglyphics, and know about cosmography and geography, the position of the sun and moon, and about the five planets; also the descriptions of Egypt, and the chart of the Nile, and the description of the equipment of the priest and of the places consecrated to them, and about the measures and the things in use in the sacred rites. Then the Stole-keeper follows them, previously mentioned, with the cubit of justice and the cup for libations. He is equipped with all points called Paeudeute (relating to training) and Mesobolaktike (sacrificial) there are also ten books which relate to the honours paid by them in their gods, containing the Egyptians worship as that relates to sacrifices, first-fruits, hymns, prayers, processions, festivals, and the like. And behind all walk the Prophet, with the vases carried openly in his arms, who is followed by those who carry the issue of grapes. He as the highest of the temple, learns the ten books called "Hymns" and they contain all about the laws, and the gods, and the whole of the training of the priests. For the Prophet is, among the Egyptians, also over the distribution of the revenues. There are then forty-two books of Hermes indispensably necessary of which the six-and-thirty containing the whole philosophy of the Egyptians are learned by the sacerdotes, and the other six, which are medical, by the Psephophoi (image-bearers).—tracking of the structure of the body, and of diseases, and instruments, and medicines, and about the eyes, and the last about women. Such are the customs of the Egyptians, to speak briefly. Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata, or Miscellanea in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), p. 485.

15 We have formerly demonstrated that the body of a man, which consists of an incomprehensible variety of parts, all admirably fitted to their peculiar functions and the conservation of the whole, could no more
The eastern & Egyptian nations were very much addicted to speaking 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 gnostics gave the name λόγος to the wisdom of God, considered as a person... And the Idea of the Platonicists, sophists of the Caballists, & Aeons of the Gnostics are nothing else than the thoughts motions actions previous names attributes or parts of the deity turned into persons & sometimes into the souls of men.” [Yahuda MS 8.1 f. 2r.]

The fact that the foregoing passage appears in Newton’s manuscript commentary on the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation reminds us how the mythographic and Biblical commentaries need to be regarded as part of the same project. In a practical sense, this means that the “Rules for interpreting ye words & languages in Scripture” included in Yahuda MS 1 should be regarded as compatible with the interpretive strategies demonstrated in the Origines. The repeated admonishments in the Rules to approach allegory with caution and to “those interpretations which are most according to ye literal meaning of ye scriptures unless where the known circumstances of ye place plainly require an Allegory.” (Yahuda MS 1 f. 12v.) actually confirms the practice of the Origines and reminds us that Newton practices physical interpretation or allegory in his Biblical and mythological work.

The importance which Newton attributes to scholars such as Clement of Alexandria indicates the extent to which he seeks out commentaries that aspire toward an extensive integrative structure. In scholars like Clement, Newton found extensive hortenomeric projects that repeatedly asked how one could integrate the learning of the Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks with the message of the New Testament. For Newton, however, the question was not accommodation between ancient wisdom and Christian revelation but the extent to which natural philosophy provided the fundamental structure for natural religion to such a degree that in the end all religious practice could be shown to be an expression of natural philosophy. Commentators like Clement, who sought to bundle massive amounts of material into patterned structures, provide models for seventeenth-century scholars such as Gerardus Vossius.

Although the manuscript chapters include frequent euhemeristic readings, Newton’s primary objective is to establish a means to interpret astronomical phenomena. At the beginning of his second chapter, Newton notices how the practice of commemorating humans by turning them into the names of stars or deities has continued into his own age: “The names of the gods are taken from human beings. Even recently we have seen that Galileo named the moons of Jupiter to honor and memorialize his Medicean benefactor; we have also seen the names of famous persons used to identify features on the moon.” [“Deorum vero nominia ab hominibus decumpata sunt. Videmus enim nuper quod admodum Galilaeus sidera circum-Jovialia in homonem et memoriam benefactorum suorum Medicea nominavit, et alii nominia Clarissimorum hominum transluterunt in Lunam.”] (Yahuda MS 16, f. 11r.) The passage indicates Newton’s expectation that euhemeristic habits identified in antiquity continued to be practiced within European society. As Newton continues, it becomes apparent that euhemerism is not used simply as a strategy to demythologize traditional narratives and integrate them into historical record but also functions as a screening mechanism that permits him to discern narrative elements that pertain to physics. By surveying a multitude of religious practices, Newton shows how the worship of God in all periods has become replaced by anthropomorphic ideas of divinity. “They are accustomed to think of Osiris and Isis as the world or the elements of the earth, or the Nile river or the land of Egypt, or even the sun and the moon because the superstition of all people always seeks to exalt humans into spirits, spirits into gods, and lesser gods into greater gods.” [“Osiris et Isis quandoque de Tellura et Elemento terrae quandoque de Nilo et terra Aegypti, quandoque etiam de sole et Luna exponi solent quippe ea est gentium omnium superstitionis ut nominem in Divos, Divos in Deos & Deos minores in Deos maximos referre et exaltare semper conantur.”] (Yahuda MS 16, f. 44r.) “The name of the eternal and supreme God is Jehovah which in Greek is Iaw and in Latin is Jao-pater or Jupiter. Nevertheless, people who always have a propensity toward superstition transform humans who have died into living souls, and the souls into powerful spirits and celestial gods. From these celestial gods they always make up in time an immense and omnipotent spirit. It is a fact that each and every people cultivates that god which seems greatest of the heavens and the entire universe and calls that god Jove.” [“Cum enim Jehovah quem Graci (Iaw), Latinis Jao-pater seu Jupiter dixere, nomen esset Dei aeterni et supremi; gentes autem in superstitiones semper propensae, ex mortuis hominibus genios vivos, ex genitis divos potentes ac Deos coelestes, ex his Deos semper coelestes et in horum maximo animam mundi totius ac tandem Numan immemium et omnipotens gradatim confingere; factum est ut gens...
stars and the elements and that from the Egyptians such knowledge was disseminated to all men in antiquity. The collection of ominous prophecies

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In hac Processione per Hymnos praefationis a harmonia sphaerarum coelestium significatur. Deinde procedit Astrologus cum libris sacrarum ad scientiam Syderum spectantibus. Nec sequitur scriba sacrarum qui descriptiones Coeli Terrae Stellaturum et rerum sacrarum intelligit. Ultimo Sacerdos et Praefactus Sacrarum, ea calendales qua ad muros sacros et Theologian spectant, Processionem totam claudit. Conjugando solsticium Stellarum et Mundi cum Theologia et scientiam illam primo loco ponendo insinuant Austeplogianorum suum ad astra respondere. [Nilinum?] Dii Aegyptiorum erant astra, et elementa. (Yahuda MS. 16, f. 2r.)

Further emendations show Newton seeking sources that provide additional information about the physics inherent in ancient accounts. An addition on the reverse folio page includes consideration of the nine muses and their relation to planetary orbits as a consequence of music theory. The notes show that even the strophic and antistrophic structure of Greek meter may be related to the movement of the stars. Although I cannot expand on the relation between poetic and cosmic structure at present, it is important to recall that it is precisely such links that are explored by Richard Bentley, the eminent Greek scholar in Cambridge who was also Newton's friend, in the Boyle lectures in 1692. Similar comments are found in other related

14 For the Egyptians pursue a philosophy of their own. This is principally shown by their sacred ceremonial. For first advances the Singer, bearing some one of the symbols of music. For they say that he must learn two of the books of Hermes, the one of which contains the hymns of the gods, the second the regulations of the king's life. And after the Singer advances the Astrologer, with a horoscope in his hand, and a plan, the symbols of astrology. He must have the astrological books of Hermes, which are four in number, always in his mouth. Of these, one is about the order of the fixed stars that are visible, and another about the conjunctions and luminous appearances of the sun and moon; and the rest respecting their risings. Next in order advances the sacred Scribe, with wings on his head, and in his hand a book and rule, which were writing ink and the reed, with which they write. And he must be acquainted with what are called hieroglyphics, and know about cosmography and geography, the position of the sun and moon, and about the five planets; also the descriptions of Egypt, and the chart of the Nile; and the description of the equipment of the priest and of the places consecrated to them, and about the measures and the things in use in the sacred rites. Then the Stoic-keeper follows those previously mentioned, with the cubit of justice and the cup for libations. He is acquainted with all points called Paediatricus (relating to training) and Mesopotamian (sacrificial). There are also ten books which relate to the honour paid by them to their gods, and containing the Egyptians worship, as that relating to sacrifices, first-fruits, hymns, prayers, processions, festivities, and the like. And behind all walks the Prophet, with the water-carried openly in his arms, who is followed by those who carry the issue of leaves. He, as being the governor of the temple, learns the ten books called "liturgical," and they contain all about the laws, and the gods, and the whole of the training of the priests. For the Prophet is, among the Egyptians, also over the distribution of the revenues. These are then forty-two books of Hermes indispensably necessary; of which the six-and-thirty containing the whole philosophy of the Egyptians are leaned by the

Aegypto apprima floriit et in scientia syderum fundata fit. ["Sacred philosophy obviously flourished in Egypt and was founded on the science of the stars."] (Yahuda MS. 16, f. 1r.) To support his observation, he describes an ordered procession of Egyptian priests described in The Stromata by Clement of Alexandria. Each figure in the procession carries a symbol representative of his function. The Cantor who leads the procession carries two books, one containing hymns to the gods and the other regulations for governing life. He is followed by a Seer who carries a clock in the palm of his hand which is a symbol of astrology. In front of him, he has four astrological books of Mercury. The first book contains the location of the fixed stars, the second the conjunction of the sun and the moon, the third and the fourth contain the rising and the setting of the sun and moon. Next comes the Scribe who carries a pen in his head, a book and a ruler in his hands. There are ten books associated with the scribe pertaining to 1) hieroglyphics, 2) cosmography, 3) geography, 4) the location of the sun and moon, 5) the location of the five planets, 6) Egyptian chorography or topography, 7) the description of the Nile, 8) the description of the equipment of the priest and its location, 9) measurement, and 10) other essentials. The Prophet follows carrying the rod of justice and a cup for drinking. He too has ten books that deal with the Egyptian religion. After all the others comes the prophet who holds a serpent in his lap.
experimental text that permits Newton to discover the significance of the pryaneum not as a structure in itself but as an architectural synchronism. The mytho-historical project envisioned in Yahuda 16 finally comes to be controlled when it is recast, in English rather than Latin, around the Prytanum fire.\textsuperscript{18}

2. SYNCHRONISM

Throughout his research, Newton directs his interpretive strategy away from isolated narratives and towards clusters or bundles of narratives that suggest possible synchronisms.\textsuperscript{19} Whether he seeks to comprehend the parables of Jesus, alchemical texts, evidence from poetry, or recorded historical events his standard practice involves an exhaustive effort to list evidence so that it may be reduced to a few fundamental principles. Often his impulse to classify leads to the formulation of tables or charts. From the vantage point of logic, Newton’s approach to mythography, history, alchemy, and prophecy is similar to a mathematical operation in which complex algebraic equations are infolded into simpler symbolic notation. In each of the areas cited above it is possible to identify a particular synchronism that permits Newton to collect and then factor information. His mythographic work is structured initially by the Noachids; his mature alchemical work concentrates on the star of regulus or antimony, his work on prophecy focused on an iterative hermeneutic process that involves ever evolving temporal confirmation. A focus on the pryaneum lies at the center of his mytho-historiographic research.

The most developed discussion of the pryaneum is found in Yahuda 41 where Newton underscores its significance from the outset:

The religion most ancient & most generally received by the nations in the first ages was that of the Prytanea or Vestal temples, This was spread over all nations before the first memory of things. Cercops began his reign over Attica about 60 years before ye Israelites came out of Egypt & before his reign the Greeks had Prytanea in all their cities as you may understand by ye passages newly cited out of Thucydides. There was one Prytaneum in every city placed in ye principal part of ye city. And in the Prytaneum was ye Court where the Council of Senate of ye City met as the Sanedrin did in the Temple of the Jews. For the performance of holy rites belonged to ye chief Magistrates of ye City, the king was Ponifex maximus as appears by the instances of Melchizedech, Abraham, Nirus, the Kings of Egypt & Athens & ye Roman Emperors. (Yahuda MS 41 f. 1r.)

Newton’s interest in the pryaneum permits him to think that even an English antiquity such as Stonehenge may be viewed as a pryaneum. For Newton, the universal appearance of such structures becomes an argument for what is, if not perfectly understood, a universally shared impulse toward religion. The focal point of the such religion is not the pryaneum itself but the sacred fire that it contained.

And by this means I conceive it came to pass yet the sacred fire at ye first plantation of ye earth was to be found in every City, as an essential part of the government. For in ye first ages when ye whole world was distinguished into as many kingdoms as cities, I understand not how one & the same religion could as soon spread into them all had it not been propagated with mankind in ye beginning. (Yahuda MS 41 f. 4r.)

After reviewing the use of sacred fire in Egyptian, Hebraic, Greek, and Roman settings, Newton considers how sacred fires were kept in ancient temples and how the temples and sacred fires together could reflect the nature of the universe. Newton’s discussion in the Original of Religions (Yahuda MS 41) is reinforced by a similar discussion in Yahuda MS 17:3. “It becomes evident that all this pertains to significant rituals. The Prytaneum with its fire in the center was an emblem of the earth’s system and was believed by everyone. Here alone they perceived that they could designate the sun and the earth by the fire (Yahuda MS 17:3 f. 10r.).” “[Nam ad spectacula tam magna habes visus est. Prytaneum cum igne in medio emilibia fuisse systematis mundanis concordant omnes, et in eo solo discrepant quod aliquis Solem aliis Terram per igne illum designari volunt (Yahuda MS 17:3 f. 10r.).]” Newton shows that altar fires and the rituals associated with them may be interpreted as representations of cosmological systems.\textsuperscript{20}

In its most developed form, the location of the Prytaneum fire become a manifestation of the original religion embedded both within all religions including Judaism and Christianity.

The placing ye fire in the common center of the Priestes court & of ye outward court or court of ye people in the Tabernacle & in Solon Temple [& the framing ye Tabernacle & Temple so as to make it a symbol of the world] is part also of ye religion web ye nations received from Noah. For they placed ye fire in ye middle of ye Prytanea. The paying of tith to the Priestes was also

\textsuperscript{18} Although I had completed my own transcription of The Original of Religions (Yahuda MS 41) in Jerusalem, I am indebted to Rob Titel for permitting me to review his transcription which he is currently preparing for publication by Oxford University Press.


\textsuperscript{20} Gerarius Vossius provides ample material on use of sacred fire in religious ceremony and must be regarded as a source for the Original of Religions just as he was for the Origins.
ye religion of the nations before the days of Moses. For Abraham did it to Malchizadek & Jacob did it at Bethel & there are instances of its being done by ye Heathens to Jupiter, Apollo & Hercules. And lastly as the Tabernacle was continu'd by Moses to be a symbol of ye Heavens (as St. Paul & Josephus teach), so were ye Prytaneion amongst ye nations.] And as the Tabernacle was a symbol of the heavens, so were the Prytaneion amongst ye nations. The whole heavens recen'd to be ye true & real temple of God & therefore that a Prytaneum might deserve ye name of his Temple they framed it so in the fullest manner to represent the whole systeme of the heavens. A point of religion then wch nothing can be more rational. (Yahuda MS 41 f. 6r.)

Using proof texts from Macrobius, Dionysius Halicarnassaus, Plutarch, Pythagoras, and Pliny, Newton elaborates his idea by suggesting that the movement of the priests symbolizes the movement of the planets. "He who worships, by turning about, becomes a symbol of ye earth. Whence the Greeks called a man microcosmus." (Yahuda MS 41 f. 7r.)

So then was one design of ye first institution of ye true religion to propose to mankind by ye frame of ye ancient Temples, the study of the frame of the world as the true Temple of ye great God they worshipped. And thence it was yt ye Priests anciety were above other men well skilled in ye knowledge of ye true frame of Nature & accounted it a great part of their Theology. (Yahuda MS 41 f. 7r.)

The discussion of the cosmic significance of sacred ritual found here is related to the account of the Egyptian priests at the beginning of the Origines. Indeed, the iconographic opening of the Origines not only anticipates his explanation of the Prytaneion fire but his study of Solomon's Temple. I noted above that the emblematic quality of the sacred Egyptian procession; Newton's drawing of the temple (published in his Observations on the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation) is certainly linked to the earlier procession and functions even more starkly as an enigmatic emblem that invites interpretation of different levels. While Newton gathers copious detail about many ancient structures, his research ultimately concentrates on the Temple of Solomon. Sacred ritual, liturgical practice, architectural description, iconographic detail—all contribute to the prythanken structure that most embodies the Nochahen religion. "[W]hen the priests ascended to the altar, they moved in a circle about the fire and then descended. This fire in the center of the darkness was brought out from the interior and from the center was lifted up to seven lamps (which were symbols of the planets) and it was placed in the holy of holies, in the highest heaven where God is seated among the Cherubim (Yahuda MS 17:3 f. 11r.)"["Per conversionem illum nos hominum circa ignarum centralem in vero mundi systemate revolvi insinuabat Hierosol ymnanum ad imaginem mundi constructum esse

Josephus cecet ibique sacerdotas quoties in altare ascendebat, ibant in gyroem circa ignem antequam discendebat. Ignis ille i comuni centro aticorum duorem ricis et exterioris extrabatur, et a centro illo undo ascendebat, per lampades septem, (quae Planetarum erant symbola), in sanctum sanctorum tanquam in coelu allissimum ubi Deus inter Cherubinum sedebat." (Yahuda MS 17:3 f. 11r.)] One glimpses in these passages, Newton thinking about the ways religious ritual and religious worship enacts what is simultaneously the study and worship of the universe. Understood from such a perspective, Newton's mythographic work untangles the corrupting influence of anthropomorphism at the same time that it explores the relation between religion and physics.

It is useful to compare Newton's work on prythanken and the Temple with similar projects at the end of the seventeenth century. Olof Rudbeck's Atlantica, which resulted in his election to the English Royal Society, continues to be approached with a combination of embarrassment and curiosity for arguing that Sweden evolved from the ancient Atlantis and that ancient Swedish culture concealed many links to the classical world of the eastern Mediterranean. Rudbeck's work, which challenged contemporary readers to view universal history from northern or Baltic vantage point rather than from a southern or Mediterranean perspective, in effect sought to turn European historiography upside down. Especially in his efforts to focus attention on the relation between written records and physical remains, Rudbeck's work invites comparison to Newton's mythohistorical project.21 (There is an autograph letter by Newton, in Carolina Redivia, the University of Upsala library, in which he requests a copy of Rudbeck's research.)22 But while they also share an interest in measurement and technology transfer, they resonate above all in the way each provides a context for their other work. Just as the Origines provides a historico-religious grounding for Newton's Principia (and for his alchemical experimentation), Atlantica


supplies an historical explanation for the industry not only of Rudbeck himself but also for his Swedish contemporaries. Each author establishes historical-scientific parameters for ongoing physical experimentation. Even more importantly, it is possible to see how each author also locates their research in a diligent study of practical arts. There is no better sign of this than the sites that are central for their research. Both Newton and Rudbeck sought to establish foundational narratives based on studies that directed their attention to artifacts and architecture. For Rudbeck, the mounds of Old Uppsala and the physical remains of Viking history provided a means to reorient the study of written record. For Newton, the study of mythology lead to the conviction that the Temple in Jerusalem held within its record of ritual and within its architecture, information about the structure of the universe.

Although the *Origines* is not an alchemical text, it also provides a setting for understanding Newton’s alchemical study. That there is a constancy of matter and that it can be confirmed through natural and human history constitutes a fundamental thesis for all of Newton’s research. Such a thesis, however, is by no means self-evident but requires Newton to interpret continually the relationships between multiple representations of matter that occur in history and the universal principles used to explain them. The interpretation of the representation of matter is absolutely central to Newton’s alchemical work and reminds us that the significance Newton gives to the pythian fire should not be limited to its symbolic function as a sacramental representation of the universe. Inherent in his research is the likelihood that the sacred fire is also connected to the transforming fire of the alchemist. Newton’s extensive work with alchemical texts cannot be imagined to involve the study of matter alone but needs to be viewed as a study of the narrative forms that enable him to approach matter. For Newton the study of these narrative forms encompasses an historical project that surveys centuries of chemical research. The *Origines* challenges us to see that alchemical texts are also a manifestation of sacred ritual and liturgical practice. His efforts to understand the “types and analogies” of the Egyptian procession are linked closely to his efforts to interpret and practice alchemical texts. Similarly, his efforts to justify and understand prophetic texts resonate with his work to comprehend the systematic nature of matter through interpretive intervention and manipulation. We must expect to find Newton working simultaneously on multiple levels. The configuration of fabulae form an equation which supports or guides the application which involves repeated experiments. The experiments in turn, are controlled on another level by the patterns which emerge and which in turn are explained not by the fabulae but by the relationship which they are seen to embody.

3. READING AND WRITING UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Allegory’s importance as an interpretive strategy lies in its capacity to permit multiple levels of understanding to exist simultaneously. Since the time of the earliest Homeric commentary, it has also been recognized as a practice that is most effective in systems that are closed and in which meaning can be shared by a community. Newton approaches allegory with caution both because it could be hermeneutically confining and because it reinforced the communal structure of meaning. It is even more to the point to say that Newton found allegory an instrument that could be used to mislead.

But the world loves to be deceived, they will not understand, they never consider equally, but are wholly led by prejudice, interest, the praise of men, & authority of the church they live in: as is plain because all parties keep close to the religion they have been brought up in, & yet in all parties there are wise & learned as well as fools & ignorant. There are but few that seek to understand the religion they profess, & those that study for understanding there in, do it rather for worldly ends, or that they may defend it, than to examine whether it be true with a resolution to choose & profess that religion which in their judgment appears the truest. (A Treatise on the Apocalypse [Yahuda MS 1 f. 5r.])

In contrast to the deception, self-interest, and authority that reinforces the interpretive community described here, Newton’s strategy seeks an interpretive mode that would allow his contemporaries “to understand the religion they profess.” As demonstrated through the research inherent in the *Origines* and its surrounding manuscripts, Newton practices strategies associated with emetism and physical allegory to reconfigure the way that he approaches history. There is more to Newton’s practice, however, than the stellification of heroes and the formulation of a set of correspondences between words and physical phenomena.

One consequence of spending a long time working with Newton’s manuscripts is a growing awareness that he watches his own writing as a natural phenomenon that can be surveyed for evidence. As we follow his literal inscriptions of multiple versions of a paragraph in the *Origines*, it is finally not the single text alone which carries the most importance but the expectancy that meaning will continue to evolve among the emended sentences, crossed-out lines, and marginal additions. Of course, such hermeneutical surveillance may be compared to the process invoked by Newton’s alchemical experimentation. The continually rereading or recalculation comprises an interpretive mode that is itself experimental.

From such a vantage point, there is an affinity between the experimental mode that accompanies Newton’s natural philosophy and the deductive space of synchronisms. With Newton the study of myth becomes another way to understand the study of science. In his book *The Kabbalah in a New Perspective*, Moshe Idel refers to the combinatorial hermeneutics of the cabbala. Although it would be misleading to seek a detailed understanding of the Jewish cabbala in Newton’s work, I find Idel’s term useful because it helps define Newton’s strategy as a means to excite or provoke meanings that extend beyond closed interpretive systems. In effect, the power of magic comes not simply from the manipulation of natural phenomena but in challenging or opening fixed orthodox meanings. For the seventeenth century, where reading was conducted in a field of socially accepted meaning, the exfoliation and infloration of multiple mythographic pantheons offered a license to broader speculation. Newton seeks to negotiate meaning by engendering disruptions that are hermeneutically controlled through a process of reading that are continually under surveillance.

The question of interpretive strategies and the coherence of interpretation is fundamental to Newton’s undertaking. For him the Bible is affirmed not through external commentary but by its own internal cogency. Newton found demonstration of such cogency not in the church’s interpretation of the New Testament but in the way that Jesus came to understand his own relation to the Old Testament. “[T]he prophecies of the old testament remained in obscurity till Christ’s final coming & then were interpreted by Christ & the interpretation became the religion of the Christians: so the prophecies of both testaments relating to Christ’s second coming may remain in obscurity till that coming & then be interpreted by divine authority & the interpretations become the religion of God’s people for the future (my emphasis).” (Draios on Daniel and the Apocalypse [Yahuda MS 7.2 f. 1r].) As the passage indicates, for Newton interpretation is the very ground of religion. His position inevitably raises questions about his own hermeneutical activity for just as the interpretive work of Jesus confirms the meaning of the Old Testament, so it ultimately falls to interpreters beyond the New Testament to confirm its prophecies. Is it possible that Newton found in his own work the creation of a new interpretive instauration that would lay a foundation for a reformed religion integrating the moral teachings of Jesus with a knowledge of the coherence of creation? Such questions surely occur to Newton:

And if natural philosophy in all its parts, by pursuing this method shall at length be perfected, the bounds of moral philosophy will be also enlarged so far as we know by Natural Philosophy what power the first cause has over us.

& what benefits we receive or may expect from him; so far our duty toward him as well as that towards one another will appear to us by the light of nature. And no doubt, if the worship of false Gods had not blinded the Hebeans, their Moral Philosophy would have gone further than to the four Cardinal Virtues, & indeed instead of teaching us to worship the sun & moon & dead men’s souls, they would have taught us to worship ye true Benefactor. (ULC Add MS. 3970 f. 244v. Quoted by permission)

The *Origines* establishes experimental grounds for understanding how religious practice may reveal physical truths about the universe. As we have seen, the project involves the collection of a vast amount of historical and mythographic information with the expectation that they will reveal patterns that may be discerned through his own interpretive intervention. In the work surrounding the *Origines*, it is ultimately the pyranean fire that provides the common denominator for his mythographic research by confirming the continuity of religious practice across millennia. For Newton such constancy becomes a sign that natural philosophy lies at the very basis of religious revelation. Even more, the pyranean fire provides a basis for Newton’s belief that an original religion was grounded on a physical understanding of the universe that had become corrupted through the vulgar practice of all religions. Viewed with the *Principia*, the *Origines* provides historical justification for Newton’s own momentous discoveries. From such a vantage point, Newton’s discoveries in the *Principia* may even be regarded as rediscoveries of ancient revelations. The linkage between ancient religion and his own discoveries has considerable bearing on his status as an interpreter as well. While it is all too common to separate Newton’s interpretive work as a natural philosopher from his interpretive work in history and religion, we gain much drawing them together. Finally, such integration affirms Newton’s status as an interpreter/prophet. The *Principia* is not only a book about natural philosophy but, seen together with the *Origines*, is work of prophecy because of the ways it confirms God’s patterned presence in history. It is entirely appropriate to compare Newton’s role as such an interpretive juncture to Jesus for just as the cogency of Jesus’ interpretation established a new religion, so the cogency of Newton’s work could ground religion on renewed physical truths.

Although Newton never answers questions about the personal status of his own interpretive revelations, there is ample reason to see in the instauration of a Newtonian science a practice thoroughly antithetical to his own envisioned union of science and religion. Considering Newton’s own abiding interest in detecting the human propensity to deify its own accomplishments in a false religion, it is possible to view the subsequent glorification of Newton as a manifestation of the very human inclination he sought to criticize. If Newton ever truly wondered whether his work in natural philosophy could be seen as a divine relation, the subsequent...

reception of his work would surely make him conclude that his was a truly failed messianic science. At the beginning of my comments I noticed how the Origines continues to touch foundational narratives of the twentieth century. In conclusion, I would like to notice how the Origines touches our own work. As we integrate Newton's ignored manuscripts with the heroic legends so established by his published works, we participate in a process of demythologizing that restores his vision of the fusion of science and religion. In the vocabulary of the philosophy of science, manuscripts such as the Origines challenge the positivistic presentation of Newton and reveal him, as a demythologized figure, far closer to our own late twentieth-century discussions of realism and constructionism.