

# Christians Who Dared to Differ

## Sir Isaac Newton (1643 – 1727)

By Anthony Buzzard<sup>1</sup>



One of the most distinguished scientists of all time, Sir Isaac Newton (1642 – 1727) was a passionate opponent of the Church’s understanding of the One God as triune. Because of his prominent public position his theological writings, which were immense, were guarded in their criticism of “orthodoxy.” Nevertheless, Newton was familiar with the anti-Trinitarian writings of his time and he argued as did Arians and Socinians (anti-Trinitarians) of the seventeenth century that the word “God” in the Bible should be understood of the Father of Jesus and that the very occasional use of “God” for Jesus does not make him part of a co-eternal Godhead. Even Moses, Sir Isaac pointed out, was called God in an honorary sense.

Karen Armstrong explains Sir Isaac’s dislike for the imaginative concept of God in Trinitarianism:

His total immersion [was] in the world of logos...In his view, mythology and mystery was primitive and barbaric ways of thought. “’Tis temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion ever to be fond of mysteries and for that reason to like best what they understand least.” Newton became almost obsessed with the desire to purge Christianity of its mythical doctrines. He became convinced that the a-rational dogmas of the Trinity and the incarnation were the result of conspiracy, forgery and chicanery... The spurious doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity had been added to the creed by unscrupulous theologians in the fourth century. Indeed, the Book of Revelation had prophesied the rise of Trinitarianism- “this strange religion of the West,” “the cult of three equal Gods.”<sup>2</sup>

In his *Two Notable Corruptions* (1690) Newton anticipated the work of many later scholars who have shown that the Greek manuscripts of our New Testament have been tampered with in certain verses with the intention of promoting the “Deity” of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Newton was an advocate of simplicity: “In disputable places of Scripture” he loved “to take up what I can best understand.”<sup>4</sup> Newton contended for simplicity against a backdrop of corrupting and complicating influences from philosophy and metaphysics. Newton believed that Scripture is reasonable and composed in the tongue of the vulgar. Thus there is an expectation that the Bible is written in plain and lucid language. Newton’s professed desire to avoid suspicion about infusing metaphysics into Scripture. He argued also that one should “prefer those interpretations which are most according to the literal meaning of the Scriptures.”<sup>5</sup>

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1 Excerpted from: *Jesus Was Not A Trinitarian: A Call to Return to the Creed of Jesus*, pp. 66 – 68, by Anthony Buzzard.

2 Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, Ballantine Books, 2001, 69.

3 See for example Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

4 Stephen Snobelen, “‘God of gods and Lord of lords’: The Theology of Isaac Newton’s General Scholium to the Principia,” *Osiris*, 16, 2001, 198.

5 *Ibid.*, 199.