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Isaac Newton, the Cosmos and the Apocalypse

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Popular conceptions notwithstanding, Isaac Newton believed in neither a static cosmos nor a clockwork universe. Newton's cosmos was governed by entropic forces that led to increasing irregularities and decline. These forces necessitated periodic "reformations" of the planetary and cometary systems through divine intervention, which set the universe back on course. Hints of this thinking appear in the *Principia* and *Opticks*, but it is only in his private manuscripts and private conversations that the specifically *apocalyptic* nature of Newton's cosmology becomes apparent. This paper examines the parallels between ideas put forward in his prophetic manuscripts and his understanding of a cosmos that goes through successive periods of decline and renewal. A dominant theme in Newton's prophetic writings is that of apostasy and reformation, that is, the tendency for religion to become debased and ineffective over time, which in turn requires the intervention of God to restore religion to its ideal state through the work of prophets. In his cosmology, Newton likewise believed that the accumulation of irregularities in the planetary system could be corrected through such physical agencies as comets. These parallels in turn reveal a profound association in Newton's mind between the human and cosmic spheres. Newton's proto-catastrophism and cyclical cosmos have been known in general terms since David Kubrin's celebrated paper of 1967, but this study aims to go deeper into Newton's writings on biblical prophecy and the Apocalypse (now more readily available) to identify possible sources for Newton's dynamic cosmology, which is only obliquely presented in the pages of his masterwork, the *Principia*.

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