

# Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol* and Isaac Newton's 2060 A.D. manuscript

On 15 September 2009 the long-anticipated follow-up to Dan Brown's eighty-million best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) was released to great fanfare. With an initial print-run of five million copies, Brown's *The Lost Symbol* has gone on to be a best-seller in its own right. In addition to codes, symbols and conspiracy theories, the two books also share a fascination for the founder of modern physics: Isaac Newton. After a series of people asked me whether *The Da Vinci Code* represented Newton correctly, I finally read the novel a couple years after its original publication (no, Newton is not always represented accurately in the book).<sup>1</sup> As for Brown's new book, I had not so much as picked up a copy of *The Lost Symbol* when on 8 December 2009, Jean-Philippe Noël, a freelance journalist working for the French magazine *Science et Vie*, contacted me to ask about a reference to a certain "1704 manuscript" written by Newton that Brown mentions in his new novel. In his letter, M. Noël also noted that a similar claim appears in the Wikipedia entry "Isaac Newton's religious views". It is the purpose of this short article to reveal the source for Brown's "1704 manuscript" and to demonstrate that this reference to Newton's writings in *The Lost Symbol* not only perpetuates several myths about Newton but also may involve a borderline case of plagiarism.

Before progressing further, I do want to stress that I recognise that *The Lost Symbol* is a work of fiction and that I certainly do not begrudge an author the right to use fiction in fiction. The problem with this book and its immediate predecessor is the manner in which it mixes fact with fable. The common reader is not always able to discern the difference and many have accepted fable in Brown's books for fact. The unfortunate result is that a lot of mythology about the history of Christianity, art, culture, science and, well, mythology has been spread by *The Da Vinci Code* and now, inevitably, by this latest tome as undiscerning readers accept so much of these books as truth.

I'm a historian, not a paperback writer. Thus, just as some will want to excuse Mr Brown for peddling misinformation, I hope the reader will excuse me for engaging in an experiment and turning the historian's magnifying glass on a page's worth of text in Dan Brown's new book. This is, after all, what I have been trained to do. But there is more to this than someone's work of fantasy. There is a real Newton manuscript behind the semi-fictitious one to which Brown refers and, as I feel responsible for bringing this manuscript to the world's attention in both 2003 and 2007, I want to use this opportunity to help set the record straight.

The reference to Newton's "1704 manuscript" occurs in chapter 131 of *The Lost Symbol*. Some dialogue about supposed "dark sayings" in the Bible sets up this mention of Newton and his

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Newton's biography will know that he was most certainly not the Grand Master of the "Priory of Sion"—an institution that did not emerge until the 1950s and even then was not what it claimed to be. For a summary of evidence that the Priory of Sion is a twentieth-century hoax, see Amy Bernstein, "The French confection: trying to sort out fact and fiction in the strange tale of Rennes-le-Château", in *Secrets of the Code: the unauthorized guide to the mysteries behind The Da Vinci Code*, ed. Dan Burstein (New York: CDS Books, 2004), pp. 300-5.

work. I aim to discuss this material first. Those who want to skip to my treatment of Brown on Newton can safely move directly to the section after the one that follows below.

### **References to the Bible in chapter 131 of *The Lost Symbol***

As they descend the stone steps of the Washington Monument, Peter Solomon tries to convince a sceptical Robert Langdon that the Bible contains hidden secrets. He tells Langdon: “there exist powerful secrets hidden in the pages of this ancient book . . . a vast collection of untapped wisdom waiting to be unveiled” (489). After this, the novel has the following:

Langdon was no stranger to the theory that the Scriptures contained a hidden layer of meaning, a concealed message that was veiled in allegory, symbolism, and parable.

“The prophets warn us,” Peter continued, “ that the language used to share their secret mysteries is a cryptic one. The Gospel of Mark tells us, ‘Unto you is given to know the mystery . . . but it will be told in parable.’ Proverbs cautions that the sayings of the wise are ‘riddles,’ while Corinthians talks of ‘hidden wisdom.’ The Gospel of John forewarns: ‘I will speak to you in parable . . . and use dark sayings’” (489-90).

This all looks very impressive (aside from the awkward grammar in the second sentence), but there are some problems inherent in the second paragraph. The first quotation is from Mark 4:11, but Brown gives his readers a truncated and altered and thus misleading version of the quotation that, to make matters worse, also ignores its context. The quotation forms part of Mark’s account of the Parable of the Sower. When Jesus was alone with his twelve disciples after delivering the parable, the disciples asked him to explain the meaning:

And he said unto them, “Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them” (Mark 4:11-12 KJV).<sup>2</sup>

So, it is the disciples of Jesus who are given the mystery (which is qualified as the “mystery of the kingdom of God”—another detail Brown conveniently omits) and it is to those outside his spiritual circle that Jesus spoke in parables. Brown’s truncated quotation obscures the fact that the sentence in Mark actually refers to two separate classes of people. Jesus then quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10 in a manner that implies he is saying that the parables (Brown gives this word in the singular) are a kind of spiritual or moral challenge. Jesus then goes on to provide the disciples with the spiritual meaning of the parable. Far from being a deep secret that requires the penetrating mind of a scholar or the ecstasies of a mystic the interpretation is given in plain words in Mark’s account (Mark 4:12-20). The Parable of the Sower is a staple of Sunday School classes and certainly does not conform to the

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Matthew 13:10-17.

esoteric interpretation that Brown gives to parables.

After the quotation from Mark 4:11, Peter's dialogue has: "Proverbs cautions that the sayings of the wise are 'riddles'". This is likely an allusion to Proverbs 1:5-6:

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings (KJV).

The text then adds: "while Corinthians talks of hidden wisdom". Whether due to the literary needs of compression or lack of familiarity with the New Testament, Brown writes simply "Corinthians", whereas the New Testament includes two letters of Paul to the Corinthians and these are always distinguished as 1 and 2 Corinthians. The verse in question is 1 Corinthians 2:7: "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory" (KJV). While Brown clearly wants to weave these verses into his narrative of occult mysteries and the like, once again it must be stressed that these verses do not do what Brown wants them to do.

Those familiar with the Pauline epistles will understand that when Paul speaks of "mysteries" he is not speaking about occult wisdom, but rather a secret about salvation that has now been revealed in Christ. A better translation of the Greek word *mystērion* is 'secret' (because a secret can be revealed and is not necessarily perpetually a 'mystery' or 'mysterious') and many modern translations of the New Testament often translate *mystērion* as 'secret' (as the ESV does in this verse). This is what *The International Bible Commentary* says about *mystērion* in 1 Corinthians 2:7:

Not unintelligible, or difficult to understand, but a secret hidden in the counsels of God, now made known by His Spirit; here, that age-long purpose of redemption, reconciliation and restoration through Christ, kept secret, but now revealed (cf. Rom. 16: 25, 26; Eph. 3: 3-10). However, this wisdom of God still remains hidden in a very real sense to those who are perishing (1: 18).<sup>3</sup>

So, for Paul the *mystērion* is a secret now revealed although still held from people outside the confines of the Gospel. But in Pauline teaching, even those outside the Gospel can have access to this 'secret' about salvation should they open their hearts and minds to its teachings.

The last sentence in the second paragraph from Brown quoted above reads: "The Gospel of John forewarns: 'I will speak to you in parable . . . and use dark sayings'". Brown either has not checked this reference or he is trying to have us on, for these words do not appear in the Gospel of John. In fact, the word *parabolē* (παράβολή) does not even occur in John.<sup>4</sup> The synonym *paroimia* (παροιμία; 'proverb' or 'figure of speech') does appear three times in the Gospel (10:6; 16:25, 29), but none of these passages matches the wording of the putative quotation from John given in *The*

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<sup>3</sup>*The International Bible Commentary with the New International Version*, ed. F.F. Bruce (Basingstoke and Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986), p. 1353.

<sup>4</sup>The word *parabolē* occurs fifty times in the New Testament, forty-eight times in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and twice in the Book of Hebrews. On this, see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967): 5: 751.

*Lost Symbol*. Neither do any of the Synoptic Gospels record a statement with Brown's wording. There is, however, a vaguely similar statement in the Gospel of Matthew:

All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:34-35 KJV).

The closest biblical parallel to the words "I will speak to you in parable . . . and use dark sayings" is in Psalm 78:2, which is quoted in the following paragraph of Brown's novel:

*Dark sayings*, Langdon mused, knowing this strange phrase made numerous odd appearances in Proverbs as well as in Psalm 78. *I will open my mouth in a parable and utter dark sayings of old*. The concept of a "dark saying," Langdon had learned, did not mean that the saying was "evil" but rather that its true meaning was shadowed or obscured from the light (490).

Langdon is not as knowing here as he thought, for "this strange phrase" does not make "numerous odd appearances in Proverbs as well as in Psalm 78". It appears once in Proverbs 1:6. The only other occurrence in the Bible is the one quoted in Psalm 78:2.

This is not all. The next paragraph in the novel offers another biblical allusion with yet another problem:

"And if you have any doubts," Peter added, "Corinthians overtly tells us that the parables have two layers of meaning: 'milk for babes and meat for men'—where the *milk* is a watered-down reading for infantile minds, and the *meat* is the true message, accessible only to mature minds" (490).

Brown is presumably referring here to *First Corinthians* 3:1-2:

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able (KJV).

But the Apostle Paul is not here writing about parables or secrets, as Brown's novel implies; instead, he is speaking about simple Christian teaching adapted for beginners (milk) and more involved teaching for those more advanced in their spiritual progress (meat). (As an aside, it should be noted that Brown's adjective "infantile" is wholly inappropriate in tone and meaning for a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 3:1-2). Because not all the information in Brown's allusion is found in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, it is possible that the allusion has been coloured by the fuller account of "milk for babes and meat for men" given in the Book of Hebrews:

Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of

hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil (Hebrews 5:11-14 KJV).

This account provides added detail about those who are mature that may be implicit in the reference from 1 Corinthians, but is only made explicit here.

This brings us back to Isaac Newton. Whether by accident or design (on the part of Brown), the New Testament teaching about milk and meat is relevant to the succeeding discussion about Newton, for this distinction was also of great interest to him. He discusses the passage from Hebrews in his early eighteenth-century manuscript “Irenicum”:

Here the Apostle under the name of milk for babes comprehends all that was taught before baptism and admission into communion, and under the name of strong meats he comprehends all that was to be learnt afterwards by men of riper years in studying the scriptures or otherwise. And since strong meats are not fit for babes, but are to be given only to men of riper years they were not to be imposed on all men but only to be learnt by such as after admission into communion were able to learn them.<sup>5</sup>

The distinction Newton is making here is one that would have been familiar to most of his theologically-informed contemporaries. To use Erasmian vocabulary, for Newton the *fundamenta* (fundamentals) were the small number of essential doctrines that catechumens in the early Church were required to learn prior to being baptised and accepted as communicant Christians. The *adiaphora* (indifferent things) were those things one learned when one matured in the faith. On the other hand, Newton certainly did believe that in the study of the Scriptures only a small number of spiritually-astute individuals—a pure remnant of the Church—would understand the higher truths of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> With this brief excursus we can return to Brown’s novel and our main theme: its treatment of Isaac Newton.

### **Newton’s “1704 manuscript” and “hidden *scientific* information from the Bible”**

Having dazzled Langdon’s mind with his smoke and mirrors exposition (or pseudo-exposition) of Scripture, Peter Solomon shifts his dialogue to the Royal Society of London and its one-time president Isaac Newton:

Peter raised the flashlight, again illuminating the carving of the cloaked figure

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<sup>5</sup>Newton, King’s College, Cambridge, Keynes MS 3, p. 3 (normalised transcription).

<sup>6</sup>Rob Iliffe, ““Making a shew’: apocalyptic hermeneutics and the sociology of Christian idolatry in the work of Isaac Newton and Henry More”, in *The Books of Nature and Scripture: recent essays on natural philosophy, theology, and biblical criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s time and the British Isles of Newton’s time*, ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 79-81; Stephen D. Snobelen, “Isaac Newton, heretic: the strategies of a Nicodemite”, *The British Journal for the History of Science* 32 (1999): 389-91.

pointing intently at the Bible. “I know you are a skeptic, Robert, but consider this. If the Bible does *not* contain hidden meaning, then why have so many of history’s finest minds—including brilliant scientists at the Royal Society—become so obsessed with studying it? Sir Isaac Newton wrote more than a *million* words attempting to decipher the true meaning of the Scripture, including a 1704 manuscript that claimed he had extracted hidden *scientific* information from the Bible!” (490)

This paragraph contains surprising lapses of logic, grating historical anachronisms and outright errors.

I will begin with the lapses of logic. In his sensationalistic dialogue, Langdon’s interlocutor argues that the fact that “many of history’s finest minds” have looked into the Bible for hidden meaning proves that the Bible really must contain hidden meaning. But of course on its own such a fact confirms nothing of the sort. These brilliant minds could have been just plain wrong. If the dedicated and sustained application of “many of history’s finest minds” to a particular book is evidence per se for that book containing hidden meaning, then a number of other notable books from history must also contain esoteric truths. But intent, motivation and belief do not necessarily shape the way the world is as opposed to how some people would like it to be.

Peter also uses the authority of the “brilliant scientists at the Royal Society” as added evidence for the existence of esoteric layers of meaning in the Bible. But why would “scientists” have any special insight into the Scriptures? Peter appears to be in awe of their standing as great luminaries of this August institution, yet apparently does not ponder whether they are qualified to be experts on the study of the Bible. This is an argument from authority and status and says nothing about the intrinsic nature of the Scriptures. And if so many of the great minds of history have been engaged in an obsessive study of esoteric meaning in the Bible, why is Peter only able to name one individual? Surely, he should be able to provide a rich panoply of examples.

Next, a historical anachronism must be corrected. If Dan Brown is speaking about the Royal Society of London during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (when Newton was a Fellow of the Society) then there were no “scientists” at the institution, “brilliant” or otherwise. The term ‘scientist’ was not coined until 1833 and to apply this term and its associated roles backwards on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to assume that something like the modern lab-coated specialists existed in that period when they did not.

Now, what of the sentence about Newton and the “1704 manuscript”? First, although it is clear that Brown is trying to surprise or shock his readers with the revelation that Newton wrote “more than a *million* words attempting to decipher the true meaning of the Scripture”, in this case Brown has undersold himself. Although we do not yet have a definitive word-count of Newton’s theological output, our best estimates suggest that Newton wrote over two-and-a-half million words on biblical studies, prophecy, theology and ecclesiastical history. Now, strictly speaking, Peter’s statement that Newton wrote more than a million words on Scripture is correct. Two-and-a-half million is more than a million. But if Brown had done a bit more research, he would have been able to make his case with an even more striking statistic (with or without his infamous italics).

But what about the “1704 manuscript” that supposedly shows that Newton tried to distil “*scientific*” (again, the italics ...) information from the Bible? Is there such a manuscript from 1704? No. Is there a manuscript in which Newton attempts to extract “scientific” meaning from the Bible?

No. Are these claims made by any serious Newton scholar? No. Believe me, I should know—but more on that later. For the moment, we need to trace Brown’s source of information for this putative “1704 manuscript”. He made up some of the details, but not all of them.

Jean-Philippe Noël has done part of the work for us by linking Brown’s statement with the Wikipedia entry “Isaac Newton’s religious views”. We can extend M. Noël’s Internet archaeology further. When one navigates to this site one finds the following statement under the heading “Biblical Studies”:

Though he is better known for his love of science, the Bible was Sir Isaac Newton’s greatest passion. He devoted more time to the study of Scripture than to science, and he said, “I have a fundamental belief in the Bible as the Word of God, written by those who were inspired. I study the Bible daily.”[8] He spent a great deal of time trying to discover hidden messages within the Bible. After 1690, Newton wrote a number of religious tracts dealing with the literal interpretation of the Bible. In a manuscript Newton wrote in 1704 in which he describes his attempts to extract scientific information from the Bible, he estimated that the world would end no earlier than 2060. In predicting this he said, “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 prophecies into discredit as often as their predictions fail.”[9]<sup>7</sup>

This paragraph is an amalgam of truth, error and misrepresentation. The first sentence is probably true. The statement that Newton “devoted more time to the study of Scripture than to science” is also probably true (based on the record of his manuscripts), but it must be stressed that Newton also devoted a considerable amount of time to mathematics, chemistry, optics and physics. However, the quotation that comes next, “I have a fundamental belief in the Bible as the Word of God, written by those who were inspired. I study the Bible daily”, is bogus. One can find it floating freely around the Internet disassociated from any secure source. Reference 8 in the above quotation is to a popular biography of Newton by John H. Tiner. This could be one source for the many examples of the quotation on the Internet. The quotation may have been well meant and it may in a general sense reflect Newton’s own beliefs and habits, but Newton never uttered these words.<sup>8</sup> The anachronistic use of the loaded term “fundamental” is a dead give-away that the text emerged in the twentieth century. One of the morals here is that Wikipedia cannot be trusted to provide valid quotations. But the discerning Internet user already knows this.

How about the claim that Newton “spent a great deal of time trying to discover hidden messages within the Bible”? This is a misrepresentation. Newton studied the Bible carefully and worked hard to determine the meanings of the various symbols of the Books of Daniel and Revelation, but he was not looking for secret codes in the Bible after the manner of gematria or Michael Drosnin’s “Bible Code”.

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<sup>7</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Newton's\\_religious\\_views](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton's_religious_views) (retrieved 13 December 2009).

<sup>8</sup>It is possible that the quotation began life with third-person pronouns that were at some point changed to the first person.

The next sentence reads: “After 1690, Newton wrote a number of religious tracts dealing with the literal interpretation of the Bible”. There is nothing particularly significant about the date 1690 (Newton’s *Principia* was published in 1687) and in any case Newton wrote hundreds of thousands of words on theology and prophecy before he composed the *Principia*—as much as a decade and a half before, in fact.

We now come to the sentence that is the source of Dan Brown’s own sentence about the “1704 manuscript”. It will be instructive to compare the sentence from Wikipedia and the sentence from the novel side-by-side:

“Isaac Newton’s religious views” (2009)

Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol* (2009), p. 490

In a manuscript Newton wrote in 1704 in which he describes his attempts to extract scientific information from the Bible, he estimated that the world would end no earlier than 2060.

“Sir Isaac Newton wrote more than a *million* words attempting to decipher the true meaning of the Scripture, including a 1704 manuscript that claimed he had extracted hidden *scientific* information from the Bible!”

The underlined portions in both quotations reveal what is common to both and thus demonstrate that Brown lifted words from Wikipedia.<sup>9</sup> The comparison also demonstrates that Brown saw fit to avoid all reference to the prophetic content of the manuscript in question (even though the Wikipedia source clearly mentions the 2060 date). At the same time, Brown added the detail about Newton deciphering “the true meaning the Scriptures” and inserted the qualifier “hidden”. Brown had already set up the theme of hidden meaning in the Bible in the previous paragraphs, so from a thematic point-of-view this is not unexpected. This does not alter the fact that Brown added this to the information provided by Wikipedia.

A few years ago I attended a plagiarism hearing for an undergraduate student I had caught lifting words from the Internet. Unfortunately for this student, that particular year an expert on copyright law was a faculty representative on the disciplinary committee. He told the student that using eight words or more *in sequentia* from a source without acknowledgment constituted plagiarism. They threw the book at him. Brown lifted eight words from Wikipedia, with five in sequence. If the expert in copyright law is right, the novelist veers very close to plagiarism. But of course it may well be an accidental case, since it is possible that Brown picked up the words and information from another Internet source. Either way, it seems clear that the material ultimately derives from Wikipedia.

There are further problems. As I mentioned above, there is no “1704 manuscript” in which Newton was attempting to extract “hidden *scientific* information from the Bible”. So, what was the author or authors of the relevant sentence from Wikipedia on about? Reference 9 from the Wikipedia

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<sup>9</sup>As this sentence also appears in the Wikipedia entries “Isaac Newton” and “Isaac Newton’s occult studies” it is not possible to determine which site Brown used even though it is clear that his source here is Wikipedia.



entry is to a 19 June 2007 Associated Press news report by Matti Friedman entitled, “Papers Show Isaac Newton’s Religion Side, Predict Date of Apocalypse”.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, this report does not provide all the information that appears in the relevant sentence from Wikipedia. This is how the AP report describes the manuscript: “In one manuscript from the early 1700s, Newton used the cryptic Book of Daniel to calculate the date for the apocalypse, reaching the conclusion that the world would end no earlier than 2060”.<sup>11</sup> The article also includes a colour scan of the 2060 manuscript. What is missing from the article and the accompanying caption for the image is a reference to a 1704 date of composition. The author or authors of the Wikipedia statement about the 2060 manuscript likely obtained the date from one of the other news stories emanating from the June 2007 “Newton’s Secrets” exhibition at the Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) in Jerusalem that do speak of the manuscript as having been written in 1704.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that first broke the story about the JNUL Newton exhibition states that the 2060 manuscript “is a letter from 1704”.<sup>13</sup> A report by Fiona McCrae entitled “The world will end in 2060, according to Newton” and released on *The Daily Mail* website on 19 June 2007 also speaks of the manuscript as “a letter from 1704”.<sup>14</sup> So despite the fact that there is no source given for this detail, the Wikipedia statement about the manuscript is likely dependent on one of these other news sources.

It is not possible to determine when Brown (or one of his researchers) accessed the Wikipedia statement about the 2060 manuscript, but it is worth noting that it first appeared on the site shortly after the story about the JNUL conference broke on 17 June 2007. A much shorter edition (which I retrieved on 12 September 2007) of the Wikipedia entry “Isaac Newton’s religious views” includes the statement about the 2060 manuscript in a different context and without any direct reference—to the news media or otherwise. Immediately after a sentence that claims Newton’s view of God’s involvement in the cosmos is “close to deism”,<sup>15</sup> the entry includes the following paragraph:

On the other hand, latitudinarian and Newtonian ideas taken too far resulted in the millenarians, a religious faction dedicated to the concept of a mechanical universe, but finding in it the same enthusiasm and mysticism that the Enlightenment had fought so hard to extinguish.[15] Newton himself may have had some interest in

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<sup>10</sup>The Wikipedia reference to this AP report directs the reader to [www.christianpost.com](http://www.christianpost.com), but the report appears on other news websites. I have examples of the report from the CNN and *USA Today* websites that I saved on my hard-drive on 19 June 2007, the date of the original publication of the news release. The same article appeared in the 19 June 2007 print edition of *The Jerusalem Post* with the title: “On display in Jerusalem: Newton’s Temple drawings”.

<sup>11</sup>[www.usatoday.com/tech/science/discoveries/2007-06-19-newton-religious-papers\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/discoveries/2007-06-19-newton-religious-papers_N.htm) (retrieved 19 June 2007).

<sup>12</sup>The name of this library was recently changed to National Library of Israel (NLI).

<sup>13</sup>For the full report, see Ofri Illani, “Father of modern science calculated: world to end in 2060”, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/871575.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/871575.html) (dated 18 June 2007; retrieved 18 June 2007). A longer version of the article originally appeared in the Hebrew print edition of *Haaretz* on 17 June 2007, the same day the shorter English version appeared in the English print edition of *Haaretz*.

<sup>14</sup>[www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-462880/The-world-end-2060-according-Newton.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-462880/The-world-end-2060-according-Newton.html) (retrieved 28 June 2007).

<sup>15</sup>This is a mistaken but unfortunately common conclusion; Newton was no deist, but rather had a thoroughly biblical view of God’s providence. For a useful rebuttal of the thesis that Newton was a deist or proto-deist, see James E. Force, “Newton and deism”, in *Science and religion / Wissenschaft und Religion*, ed. Anne Bäumer and Manfred Büttner. Büchum: Brockmeyer, 1989, pp. 120-32.

millenarianism as he wrote about both the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation in his *Observations Upon the Prophecies*. In a manuscript he wrote in 1704 in which he describes his attempts to extract scientific information from the Bible, he estimated that the world would end no earlier than 2060. In predicting this he said, “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.”[16]<sup>16</sup>

Reference 15 is to pages 100-1 of Margaret C. Jacob’s classic work *The Newtonians and the English Revolution, 1689-1720* (1976), which, while relevant, should not be blamed for the Wikipedia entry’s erroneous association of millenarians with “the concept of a mechanical universe”. Reference 16 is to page 61 of Jacob’s book, but this is a mistake for there is no reference to the 2060 date on this page or indeed anywhere in Jacob’s book. Even without a reference to a news story, it is certain that the Wikipedia entry—reference or no reference—is dependent on one of the June 2007 Internet reports.

What about the claim in Dan Brown’s book that Newton was attempting to extract “hidden *scientific* information from the Bible”? First, while it is certainly the case that Newton was “attempting to decipher the true meaning of the Scripture”, it must be stressed that he looked to the Bible for spiritual, not scientific information. Second, the manuscript in question is purely prophetic in nature, although it does contain some simple arithmetic. As the June 2007 news stories about Newton’s prophetic beliefs and the 2060 ‘prediction’ ultimately refer (knowingly or not) to the description that accompanied the 2060 manuscript on display in June 2007 at the JNUL (which was also published in the exhibition catalogue) it will be useful to provide some background on it and to quote it in full.

When Mordechai Feingold (a historian of science at CalTech) and I discussed what manuscripts to include in the Jerusalem “Newton’s Secrets” exhibition, we decided that given the public interest in the 2060 manuscript, it would make sense to include it in the displays. (We also decided to include another sheet on which Newton mentions 2060 AD as a possible date for the end of the 1260-year period of the Book of Daniel.) I agreed to write the description and also capitalised on the opportunity to correct the distortions about this manuscript that had been perpetuated when it was first revealed to the world in the news story of 2003. Unfortunately, history repeated itself and despite my careful qualifications, in June 2007 the media once again sensationalised the story and tended to speak in terms of Newton predicting the end of world in 2060.

Here is my description of the manuscript from the exhibition catalogue:

**Newton on the date 2060 (early 18th century)**  
**The Jewish National and University Library, Yahuda MS 7.3o, f. 8r**

The famous 2060 manuscript. This piece of manuscript jottings, never meant for the public eye, made headlines around the world in 2003 when it was featured in the

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<sup>16</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Newton's\\_religious\\_views](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton's_religious_views) (retrieved 12 September 2007).

BBC documentary *Newton: the dark heretic*. While the runaway news story tended to portray Newton as a prophetic date-setter, the reverse is true. Newton saw the time of the end arriving no less than two centuries after his lifetime and did not believe it was possible to set a definite date for the end. In these notes, written on a letter slip that dates from after 1704 and that still bears the remnants of its red wax seal, Newton has written out some calculations based on the time periods of the Book of Daniel. As with other Protestant exegetes of his era, Newton took the “time, times and half a time”, three and a half years or 1260 days of Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 (the time period also appears in Revelation 11:3, 12:6 and 13:5) to refer to 1260 years. For him, this was the period of the apostate church’s deepest corruption. The end of this period for Newton is associated generally with the fall of the Trinitarian Church and other apocalyptic events.

On this manuscript, Newton argues that this period “did not commence before the year 800 in which the Pope’s supremacy commenced”. It was perhaps noteworthy for Newton that this was the year in which Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor. If 800 C.E. is used at the starting point, it is a matter of simple arithmetic that the end of the period is 2060 C.E., a date that resonated with the public in 2003 precisely because it will occur within the current century.

The date 2060 is written amidst the following lines of Newton’s handwriting:

Therefore the 2300 years do not end before the year 2132 nor after 2370.  
The time, times and half time do not end before 2060 nor after  
The 1290 days do not begin before 2090 nor after 1374 [sic]<sup>17</sup>

The 2060 manuscript thus consists simply of prophetic calculations based on the Book of Daniel; it does not reveal any evidence of Newton trying to extract “scientific” meaning from the Scriptures.

To remove any doubt about this, here is a transcription of the entire manuscript (minus the address on the other side and with my editorial interventions and corrections inserted in square brackets):

- Prop. 1. The 2300 prophetick days did not commence before the rise of the little horn of the He Goat.
- 2 Those day [sic] did not commence a[f]ter the destruction of Jerusalem & ye Temple by the Romans A.[D.] 70.
- 3 The time times & half a time did not commence before the year 800 in wch the Popes supremacy commenced
- 4 They did not commence after the re[ig]ne of Gregory the 7th. 1084

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<sup>17</sup>Stephen D. Snobelen in Yemima Ben-Menahem, Mordechai Feingold and Stephen Snobelen, *Newton’s secrets: Newtonian manuscripts from the collections of the National Library* / יד של ניוטון מאוצרות בית הספרים / סודותיו של ניוטון תערוכת כתבי (Jerusalem: The Jewish National and University Library and The Einstein Center at the Hebrew University, 2007) [Hebrew and English], p. 52-3. This catalogue entry, along with a high-resolution colour scan of the 2060 manuscript, can be viewed at: [http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/newton/item\\_eng.html?pageId=ms09](http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/newton/item_eng.html?pageId=ms09)

5 The 1290 days did not commence b[e]fore the year 842.  
 6 They did not commence after the reign of Pope Greg. 7th. 1084  
 7 The diffence [sic] between the 1290 & 1335 days are a parts of the seven weeks.

Therefore the 2300 years do not end before ye year 2132 nor after 2370.  
 The time times & half time do n[o]t end before 2060 nor after [2344]  
 The 1290 days do not begin [this should read: end] before 2090 nor after 1374 [sic;  
 Newton probably means 2374]<sup>18</sup>

The informal nature of this manuscript fragment is revealed by the missing sum (2344) in the penultimate line and the two errors (including a calculation error!) in the final line. What Newton was doing is attempting to discern when the 1260-year period during which (according to his interpretation) the period of the apostate Church's worst corruption would begin and end.

How do we know, as I state above, that the manuscript dates from *after* 1704? Because the letter slip on which these jottings were scribbled gives Newton's name (as addressee) in the form "Sir Isaac Newton". Newton became Sir Isaac in 1705. We can be even more specific: Newton was knighted in Cambridge by Queen Anne on 16 April of that year.

Here, in ten steps, is how the information about Newton's 2060 manuscript moved from the artefact to Dan Brown's book:

1. Sometime after 16 April 1705 Newton jots down some informal calculations about the Apocalypse on a letter slip.
2. This small piece of paper is among the manuscripts Newton leaves behind at his death on 20 March 1727.
3. Newton's manuscripts descend to the Portsmouth family in England and the 2060 manuscript along with another page that presents the same date (buried among thousands of other sheets from Newton's theological and alchemical papers) is sold at Sotheby's in London in July 1936; a good number of these papers—including both 2060 manuscripts—are ultimately acquired by the Jewish Oriental studies scholar A. S. Yahuda.
4. Yahuda wills his collection of Newton manuscripts to the State of Israel; these manuscripts, including both 2060 manuscripts, make their way to the JNUL in Jerusalem in 1969.
5. Newton's jottings about the 2060 date are referred to in print by Westfall (1980), Castellejo (1981) and Snobelen (1999).<sup>19</sup>
6. The 2060 manuscript is shown being handled and discussed by Snobelen at the JNUL in the 1 March 2003 BBC 2 documentary *Newton: the dark heretic*; a

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<sup>18</sup>Jewish National and University Library, Yahuda MS 7.3o, f. 8r.

<sup>19</sup>Richard S. Westfall, *Never at rest: a biography of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 816-17; David Castillejo, *The expanding force in Newton's cosmos as shown in his unpublished papers* (Madrid: Ediciones de Arte y Bibliofilia, 1981), p. 55; Snobelen, "Isaac Newton, heretic" (cited in full in footnote 5 above), pp. 391-2.

few days before, on 22 February 2003, *The Daily Telegraph* published a front-page story about the 2060 manuscript that includes details from a telephone interview with Snobelen; many derivative news stories spread these details around the world—albeit not always accurately.<sup>20</sup>

7. Both 2060 manuscripts are put on public display in the June 2007 exhibition “Newton’s Secrets” at the JNUL in Jerusalem, with Snobelen writing the catalogue entries for both 2060 manuscripts.

8. Media attend the opening of the exhibition on 17 June and show interest in the 2060 letter slip manuscript; once again, news stories about Newton’s 2060 “prediction” circle the globe (even being featured on television’s *The Colbert Report*).

9. Shortly after the June 2007 news stories about Newton’s 2060 “prediction”, a reference to it appears in the Wikipedia entry “Isaac Newton’s religious views” (originally without any supporting reference to a news story; eventually a reference is added on the site to the 19 June 2007 Associated Press story about the JNUL exhibition and the 2060 date).

10. The Wikipedia reference is used and further distorted (with the date 2060 dropping out and the idea of “hiddenness” being added) in Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*, released on 15 September 2009.

It is truly fascinating (and somewhat worrying) to see how a historical fact can be so thoroughly mishandled and distorted.

And all of this was unnecessary. If Dan Brown (or his researchers) had read the Wikipedia entry “Isaac Newton’s religious views” carefully, he would have noticed a section on the 2060 AD “prediction”. This section of the entry is not without its problems, but it is on the whole a fair summary of Newton’s views on the 2060 date. More importantly, the section twice refers to an article I published in 2003 that both deconstructs the 2003 news story about the 2060 date and explains what Newton was actually doing in the 2060 manuscript in part by placing it in the larger context of Newton’s prophetic corpus.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere in the same Wikipedia entry reference is made to a paper I published in 1999 that offers details about Newton’s heretical (antitrinitarian) theology and his prophetic views (including a reference to the 2060 date).<sup>22</sup> Finally, at the bottom of the Wikipedia entry there is a link to my personal website on Newton’s theology, which contains further details about Newton’s theology.<sup>23</sup> This information is not hard to find. Even more importantly, the scholarly

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<sup>20</sup>Although both the BBC 2 documentary *Newton: the dark heretic* and some of the media reports tended to imply that the 2060 manuscript had just been discovered in the archives of the JNUL, as the previous footnote demonstrates, the manuscript was already known to scholars and had even been mentioned in one of my own publications. The real story was not the ‘discovery’ of a manuscript, but that the world was discovering Newton the prophetic exegete.

<sup>21</sup>Stephen D. Snobelen, “‘A time and times and the dividing of time’: Isaac Newton, the Apocalypse and 2060 A.D.”, *The Canadian Journal of History* 38 (December 2003): 537-51. See also my “Statement on the date 2060” at: [www.isaac-newton.org/update.html](http://www.isaac-newton.org/update.html)

<sup>22</sup>Snobelen, “Isaac Newton, heretic” (cited in full in footnote 5 above).

<sup>23</sup>[www.isaac-newton.ca](http://www.isaac-newton.ca).

website of the Newton Project (with its overviews of Newton's prophetic and theological views and its fund of transcriptions from Newton's original writings) is only a quick search engine search away.<sup>24</sup> If care had been taken to venture beyond Wikipedia to consult these scholarly resources the errors could have been avoided. That is, if Brown is interested in avoiding error—for all the evidence suggests that he revels in it.

### **It's only fiction, after all**

It is true that *The Lost Symbol* is a work of fiction; unfortunately, a disturbing number of people take the background details of Brown's works seriously. Because I do not like to see my scholarship misused to perpetrate false information about history and because I do not like to see people fall for codswallop, I have attempted in this article to set the record straight.<sup>25</sup>

So, what have we seen? In summary, we have seen that Dan Brown managed to weave into a single sentence no less than three errors: that there is a particular Newton manuscript dated to 1704; that Newton made claims in this manuscript about extracting hidden information from the Bible; and that this information was "scientific" in nature. The sentence also includes a glaring anachronism (the modern use of the term 'scientific'). Finally, the sentence has a silly *non sequitur*: if the manuscript is by Newton, why would it claim in the third person that Newton had done something? The sentence also reveals two facts about Dan Brown's research methods that some will find troubling: it would seem that (at least in this case) he used Wikipedia as a first and (here is the more serious problem) last source. And, it would appear that he does not check his facts—something one must always do when using Wikipedia or any other source for something that will appear in print.

If there is such a large number of errors and misrepresentations on a single page in *The Lost Symbol* (page 490), what does this say about the rest of the book? It is hard to imagine how Brown could have packed more misinformation into one page. Actually, there is another example. After his 'revelations' about Newton, Peter offers another chestnut (I *beg* the reader's indulgence for subjecting them to *more* of Brown's italics): King James "hired" Francis Bacon "to literally *create* the authorized King James Bible [and Bacon] became so utterly convinced that the Bible contained cryptic meaning that he wrote in his *own* codes, which are still studied today!"

Really? How odd. I have in my possession two fine books on the making of the King James Bible of 1611,<sup>26</sup> and neither of them so much as hints that Francis Bacon (who was in any case not a biblical scholar) was involved in the production of this momentous translation. Instead, the King James Bible was heavily based on the Tyndale, Coverdale, Great and Bishops' Bibles that went before it. What is more, the names of the illustrious members of its six companies of revisers is a matter of public record. But perhaps the evidence for this is buried on Oak Island in Mahone Bay,

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<sup>24</sup>[www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk](http://www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk); see also [www.isaacnewton.ca](http://www.isaacnewton.ca).

<sup>25</sup>A brief (but very sensible) article on the exaggerated claims made about Newton in Brown's *The Lost Symbol* can be found in "Isaac Newton: physics, alchemy, and the search to understand the 'Mind of God'", in *Secrets of The Lost Symbol: the unauthorized guide to the mysteries behind The Da Vinci Code sequel*, ed. Dan Burstein and Arne de Keijzer (New York: William Morrow, 2009), pp. 113-16 (this chapter is based on an interview with Thomas Levensen). I am grateful to Dan Burstein for sending me a copy of this chapter after my own article was complete.

<sup>26</sup>Alister McGrath, *In the beginning: the story of the King James Bible and how it changed a nation, a language and a culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Adam Nicolson, *God's secretaries: the making of the King James Bible* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

Nova Scotia, along with pirate treasure of Spanish bullion and documentation (as some claim) that proves Bacon to be the author of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>27</sup> The suggestion that Bacon wrote codes into the King James Bible might have made good fiction if Brown had not added the detail that these codes are still studied today. Fiction asks a reader to suspend belief—but to this extent? Brown must enjoy making this stuff up just as much as I enjoy reminding people that he is making this stuff up.

Enough of that. Immediately before the gratuitous reference to Bacon and immediately after Peter Solomon's wild and bogus claim about Newton's "1704 manuscript" Brown adds the terse line: "Langdon knew this was true". Really? Poor chap. Those who have read *The Da Vinci Code* and now *The Lost Symbol* will know that this is hardly the first time Brown's hero has fallen for half-baked pseudo-knowledge while simultaneously maintaining the serious demeanour of an academic. Not that the blame lies with the fictional character.

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<sup>27</sup>It is in fact possible that there is pirate treasure from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries buried in tunnels and shafts under the surface of Oak Island, a half-hour drive from my home on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. However, as with the fantasy that Bacon "created" the KJV, the claim that Bacon's original manuscripts for Shakespeare's many plays are also buried there stretches credulity beyond reasonable limits.