

William Whiston's translation of Isaac Newton's
General Scholium to the *Principia* in
Three essays (1713)

A P P E N D I X.

SINCE it has pleased the most sagacious and successful Enquirer into the Works of God in the World that ever was; [and when I have said that, everybody knows I must mean Sir *Isaac Newton*] in the new and most accurate Edition of his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, just published, to give the World his most serious and inmost Thoughts, or, the result of all his wonderful Researches into Nature, as to the great Author of all Nature, God himself, and his Unity, Supremacy, Dominion, and other Attributes; nay, to state the proper Scripture Acceptation of the Word *God*, when apply'd to any other than the Supreme Being himself; the Mistake about which has long been of the most fatal Importance; I think it not at all disagreeable to my present Design, to conclude this Essay with the noble Passage entire in *English*, for the use of all, especially of all my truly Christian Readers. It is in these Words:

This most excellently contrived System of the Sun, and Planets, and Comets, could not have its Origin from any other than from the wise Conduct and Dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being. And in case the Fixed Stars be the Centres of the like Systems, they that are framed by the like wise Conduct, must all be subject to the Dominion of *One Being*; especially while it appears that the Light of the Fixed Stars is of the same Nature with the Light of the Sun; and that all these Systems do mutually impart their Light to one another.

This Being governs all things; not as a Mundane Soul, but as the Lord of all Creatures; who on account of his Dominion over them, is usually stiled the *Lord God*, παντοκράτωρ, or *Supreme Governour of the Universe*. For the Word *God* is relative, and has relation to subordinate Beings: And the Word *Deity* imports the Exercise of that Dominion, not over himself, but over those subordinate Beings. The *Supreme God* is an Eternal, Infinite, and Absolutely Perfect Being: But a Being that is never so Perfect, is not a *Lord God* without Dominion. For we say, *My God, Your God, The God of Israel*: But we don't say, *My Eternal, Your Eternal, The Eternal of Israel*; We don't say, *My Infinite, Your Infinite, The Infinite of Israel*; We don't say, *My Perfect, Your Perfect, The Perfect of Israel*: These Denominations of him having no relation to subordinate Beings. The Word *God* most frequently signifies *Lord*; but so that every Lord is not a God. The Exercise of Dominion in a Spiritual Being constitutes a God: If that Dominion be real, that Being is a real God; if it be Supreme, the Supreme God; if it be fictitious, a false God. And the Consequence of [30] the Exercise of real Dominion, by the true God, is this. That He is a Living, Intelligent, and Powerful Being; as it is the Consequence of the rest of his Perfections, that he is the highest or most perfect Being. He is *Eternal*, and *Infinite*, and *Omnipotent*, and *Omniscient*: that is he endures from Everlasting to Everlasting, and is present from Infinity to Infinity; He governs all Things, and knows all Things that are done, or can be known. He is not Eternity, or Infinity, but an Eternal, and an Infinite Being. He is not Duration, or Space, but he is a Being that endures, and

is present: He endures always, and is present every where; and by existing always and every where, he constitutes Duration and Space, Eternity and Infinity. Since every Particle of Space exists *always*, and every indivisible Moment of Duration exists *every where*, 'tis evident the Framer and Lord of all Things cannot exist *never* or *no where*. He is Omnipresent, not only by his *Power*, but also by his *Substance*: For Power cannot subsist without Substance. All Things are † contained and move in him, but without his suffering thereby. God suffers nothing by the Motions of Bodies, nor do they feel any resistance by the Omnipresence of God. 'Tis well known, That the Supreme God exists of Necessity; and by the same Necessity does he exist *always* and *every where*. Whence it is that he is entirely like himself, all Eye, all Ear, all Brain, all Arm, all Sensation, all Intelligence, all Action; but this in a way not at all like Men, in a way not at all like Bodies, in a way utterly unknown to us. As a blind Man has no Idea of Colours, so have not we any Idea of the *Modus*, whereby God most wise perceives and understands all Things. He is entirely void of all Body and bodily Figure; and therefore cannot be either seen, or heard, or felt; nor ought he to be worshipp'd under any bodily Shape. We have the Ideas of his Attributes, but do not at all know what the Substance of any Thing is. We see only the Figures and Colours of Bodies, we hear only their Sounds, we feel only their outward Surfaces, we smell only their Scents, and we taste only their Savours; but we don't know their inmost Substances by any Sensation, or internal Reflection; and much less have we any Idea of the Substance of God. We know him only by his Properties, and Attributes, and the most wise and excellent Structures of his Creatures, and by final Causes; while we adore and worship him on Account of his Dominion. For a God, without Dominion, Providence, and Final Causes, is nothing else but Fate and Nature. And thus much concerning God; To discourse of whom, from the Appearances of Nature, does certainly belong to *Experimental Philosophy*.

† This was the Opinion of the Ancients: Aratus] *Let us begin with Jupiter: Let us Men never leave off discoursing of him: For every Concourse of People, every Assembly of Mankind, the Seas also, and the Havens [sic] are all full of Jupiter. We all enjoy the Blessings of Jupiter: For we are also his Offspring.* Phænom. at the begin[31]ning: Paul] *That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him and find him; though he be not far from every one of us. For in him we live, and move, and have our Being; as certain also of your own Poets have said; For we are also his Offspring,* Act. xvi. 27, 28. Moses] *Know therefore this Day, and consider it in thing Heart, That the Lord he is God in Heaven above, and in the Earth beneath; there is none else,* Deut. iv. 39. *Behold the Heaven, and the Heaven of Heavens is the Lords thy God; the Earth also, with all that therein is,* x. 14. David] *Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy Presence? If I ascend up into Heaven, thou art there. If I make my Bed in Hell, behold thou art there.* Psal. cxxxix. 7, 8. Solomon] *Will God indeed dwell on the Earth? Behold the Heaven, and Heaven of Heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this House that I have builded?* 1 King. viii. 27. Job] *Is not God in the height of Heaven? And behold the height of the Stars how high they are!* xxii. 12. Jeremiah the Prophet] *Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret Places, that I shall not see him, saith the Lord? Do not I fill Heaven and Earth, saith the Lord?* xxiii. 23, 24.

July 6, 1713.

Will. Whiston.



Bibliographic details

Whiston, *Three essays. I. The Council of Nice vindicated from the Athanasian heresy. II. A collection of ancient monuments relating to the Trinity and Incarnation, and to the history of the fourth century of the Church. III. The liturgy of the Church of England reduc'd nearer to the primitive standard. All humbly offer'd to publick consideration. By William Whiston, M.A.* (London: Printed for the Author, in Cross-street Hatton-garden; and are to be sold by the Booksellers of London and Westminster, 1713), pp. 29–31.

Commentary

This is the first translation into English of any portion of Newton's General Scholium. It is also hard to imagine that any English translation could have been produced earlier. Whiston was among those who in late June or early July 1713 received unbound copies of the second edition (it may be that this select few received their copies even before the author received his) (Bentley to Newton, 30 June 1713, *The correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton*, ed. H.W. Turnbull et al, 7 vols. [Cambridge, 1959–77], 5:413–14). Thus, if the date given at the end of the appendix is to be taken at face value, Whiston produced the translation within a few short days of receiving his copy of the new edition of the *Principia*. Given Whiston's interests in theology and physico-theology, it is not surprising that he chose to translate only the theological portion of the General Scholium. Part I of the *Three Essays, The Council of Nice vindicated from the Athanasian heresy*, bears the date 31 May 1713. As some extant copies of *The Council of Nice vindicated* lack the translation from the General Scholium, a first printing may have been released shortly after 31 May but before Whiston received his copy of the second edition of the *Principia*. Along with the evidence of the two separate dates, this would imply that the appendix is an addition to the original text. The three tracts in *The Three Essays* were apparently not published together under the common title until late 1713 (*Daily Courant*, 4 December 1713).

In his translation of the final sentence of the theological portion of the General Scholium, Whiston includes a mildly expansive gloss: “And thus much concerning God; To discourse of whom, from the Appearances of Nature, does certainly belong to *Experimental Philosophy*.” Whiston's words “the Appearances of Nature” translate the Latinised Greek word “phaenomenae”. This is transliterated as “*Phænomena*” in Maxwell's 1715 translation of the General Scholium and translated as “the appearances of things” in Motte's 1729 translation of the *Principia*. The Cohen-Whitman translation of 1999 uses “phenomena”. With his more specific wording, Whiston may have desired a reading that pointed more directly to natural theology.