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**God and Reason: An Intellectual Religious Journey Through the Mind of
Thomas Paine**

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

IN

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

May 2022

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Kevin Hardwick for his guidance in my researching and writing this thesis. Dr. Hardwick gave me an ample amount of freedom during the process of working through this thesis, but it was his nudges and subtle suggestions that made all the difference on how certain themes turned out in the thesis. I am very grateful for what I have learned from Dr. Hardwick and I have come out of this a better reader, researcher, and writer. I would like to thank my committee- Dr. Robert Brown, Dr. Michael Gubser, and Dr. Andrew Witmer for taking time out of their busy schedule to read through my thesis and offer their constructive criticism and book recommendations.

It was quite an adventure moving from Florida to Virginia during a pandemic and I would like to thank my family and friends that I so much relied on during my time here at James Madison University. In writing this thesis I very often referred to Scripture. And it was Scripture that helped get me through not only the thesis, but some personal adversities as well that took place during this time. The experience as a whole has made my own faith much stronger.

I still question why I am so enthralled with Thomas Paine. Maybe because Paine was not a career politician, but an honest person who expressed his feelings through his writings. I have always been intrigued by controversial figures and Paine was certainly the contentious type, but all the while upholding a striking passion for humanity. So, I would like to give a nod to Paine. There is very good chance that without Paine's words there would be no United States of America.

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Abstract

Thomas Paine was one of the most prolific writers in the Age of Revolutions. His writings can be analyzed from a political, philosophical, humanitarian, or religious point of view. However, it was Paine's use of religious rhetoric that ultimately led to the demise of his character and reputation as a popular actor in the American Revolution. Most historiography on Paine focuses in on one of the mentioned perspectives, leaving out a much larger narrative or arch of Paine's life. This thesis will cover a series of Paine's writings beginning with his first, *The Case of the Officers of Excise* (1772), written in England before his arrival to the colonies and end with, *Age of Reason* (1794), written in France during the revolution. This thesis will also show how Paine's use of religious rhetoric changed over time, with the hope of giving more insight to Paine's thoughts. Paine's diary was his writings and the only way to examine Paine is by examining his writings and correspondences. To help accomplish this, an array of primary sources is used in this thesis, along with recent historiography where Paine makes appearances. By piecing these sources together, a much larger narrative on Paine and his religious thinking can be told.

Introduction

In September of 1782 George Washington received an encouraging letter from Thomas Paine, stating that it looked like the worst days of the Revolution were over. “The Spirit of the war, on the part of the enemy, is certainly on the decline,” wrote Paine. Just a year earlier the Continental Army along with French support defeated the British at the Battle of Yorktown, which turned the tide of the war in favor of the patriots. Paine wrote to Washington that the British always thought in terms of seven, “They acquire this partly by habit, by religion, by reason, and by superstition.” Paine went on to explain that the British had a seven-year apprenticeship, seven-year Parliament terms, “and they read that Jacob served seven years for one wife and seven years for another; and the same term, likewise, extinguishes all allegations of debt or matrimony.” And now the British “had seven years of war, and are not an inch farther on the Continent than when they began.”¹

Paine’s correspondence to Washington was heartfelt and triumphant, as both knew Independence was soon to won. However, exactly thirteen years later in September of 1795, Paine would be corresponding with Washington in a different tone, harshly accusing Washington of treachery for not inquiring on his imprisonment in Luxembourg relating to his involvement in the French Revolution. Paine at the time had made a radical shift in his religious rhetoric, attacking Christianity and ultimately leaving his character

¹ Thomas Paine, “To His Excellency General Washington,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. II*, ed. Philip S. Foner, (The Citadel Press, 1945), 1212.

in America in shambles. Consequently, Paine not only lost the comradeship of Washington in the following years after the Revolution, but most all of his peers.

Out of all the Founding Fathers of the United States none was more controversial than Thomas Paine. The Enlightenment ideas he shared flowed from his heart to mind, from mind to pen, from pen to paper. His words united the colonies and sparked a revolution against the British and helped shape the birth of the United States. Paine's revolutionary ideas and thoughts were without borders, reaching beyond just the American Revolution.

Religion was the medium that Paine used to express himself and his ideas for revolution and humanity. His words, easily understood, were for the masses and a reproach for the corrupt elite. Paine first contributed his penmanship in America for the abolition of slavery that eventually led to the 1780 Gradual Abolition Act in Pennsylvania. He then devoted his whole life to the American cause and the War for Independence, inspiring and motivating families and patriots. Once the revolution in America was won, Paine then involved himself in the French Revolution, siding with the Girondin faction in the National Convention. At this point in Paine's life his religious rhetoric that he had become known for would turn against him, leaving his character as a famed revolutionary controversial and left in the shadows of figures like Washington, Jefferson, and Adams.

In lieu of a conventional biographical approach that would focus on all aspects of Paine's life, this thesis will center on Paine's religious diction and why he chose to use the Bible as the focal point for his most of his arguments. For doing so, Paine left a trail of mixed emotions, from Teddy Roosevelt who referred to the pamphleteer as a "filthy

little atheist” to Andrew Jackson who stated that “Thomas Paine needs no monument made by hands; he has erected a monument in the hearts of all lovers of liberty.”²

The America that gave Paine a reputable reputation is also the same America that quickly cast him to the side. Whereas fathers like Jefferson danced around their religious beliefs to comfortably fit their political agenda, Paine, at heart, was not a politician or a philosopher, but instead, an honest revolutionary and in the truest sense advocated for the rights and liberty for all. The following pages aim to show that Paine’s ideas, based in biblical language, expanded beyond just the ideals of the American Revolution, and as Paine himself states, “I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good.”³

Thomas Paine was born on February 9th, 1737 in Thetford-on-Norfolk, a small country town 90 miles northeast of London. Paine’s father was a Quaker and his mother an Anglican. According to church records, young Paine was baptized in the Church of England, but spent most of his religious childhood attending Quaker meetings with his father. Due to hardships, in 1750 Paine dropped out of school to become an apprentice for his father, a corset maker. Not liking the trade as a stay-maker, Paine ran off to join a privateer during the Seven Years War. A year later though, Paine found himself back as a corset maker in London. While in London Paine became interested in science and philosophy and would attend lectures put on by the Royal Society, their motto, “Improving Natural Knowledge.”⁴

² Dixon Wechter, “Hero in Reverse,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 18 (Spring, 1942), 253.

³ Thomas Paine, “Rights of Man, 1791,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. I*, ed. Philip S. Foner, (The Citadel Press, 1945), 4.

⁴ Eric Foner. *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 2.

At this time, while he was attending Royal Society lectures, Paine was reinstated as an excise officer, a job he had been previously let go of. In between his government jobs as an excise officer, Paine tried teaching elementary school and opening up a tobacco and household goods store, all of which he fell short. By the time Paine was into his 30's he had been a failure at everything he attempted. Thus, it was with his reinstatement as an excise officer that things would start to change for Paine and by 1772 he would find himself involved in politics.

According to Paine he had no interests in entering the world of politics saying, "I had no disposition for what is called politics."⁵ But Paine, a natural polemicist, was moved by his coworkers attempt in seeking better wages and working conditions. With his coworkers recommendation, Paine made the effort to fulfill their grievances by writing his first pamphlet in 1772, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*. Although Paine's pamphlet did not lead to better wages or working conditions, it did express Paine's commitment to exposing the unfairness that Parliament was imposing on the officers and also debuted Paine's religious rhetoric.

There is not a lot known about Paine's origins in regards to his political and religious thinking, other than his father raising him as a Quaker and the Royal Society lectures he heard. Gordon S. Wood states about the vagueness of Paine's early life that, "By contrast, Paine was a free-floating individual who, as critics said, lacked social connections of any kind. He came from the ranks of the middling sorts, and, unlike, say Benjamin Franklin, he never really shed his obscure and lowly origins". Wood goes onto say that Paine, "spent the first half of his life jumping from one job to another", and that,

⁵ Thomas Paine, "Age of Reason, 1794," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. II* ed. Philip S. Foner, (The Citadel Press, 1945), 496.

“his temperament was fiery and passionate, and he loved his liquor and confrontations of all sorts.”⁶ However, we discover though from his first writing, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, that Paine was a contentious writer, an ardent polemicist, with religious rhetoric at the core of his arguments.

Later in life, Paine would later become known for deistic beliefs, a belief that relied on empirical reasoning and not superstition. Initially beginning in England in the seventeenth century as a byproduct of the English Enlightenment, deism would have a profound influence in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Based on John Locke’s empirical principles, English philosopher Mathew Tindall in 1730 released, *Christianity as old as the Creation*. Tindall’s book would become known as the deist bible, arguing divinity and placing nature and reason as proof for God’s existence.⁷ Tindall writes, “I shall attempt to show you that men, if they sincerely attempt to discover the will of God, will perceive that there is a “law of Nature, or Reason”. Deism became the religion of Paine, as well as other Founding Fathers like Thomas Jefferson. Tindall’s words of “law of Nature or Reason” would end up in founding documents such as Paine’s *Common Sense* and the *Declaration of Independence*.⁸ Paine writes in *Age of Reason* that deism, “teaches us, without the possibility of being deceived, all that is necessary or proper to be known. The creation is the Bible of the deist. He there reads, in the hand-writing of the Creator himself, the certainty of his existence, and the immutability of His power; and all other Bibles and Testaments are to him forgeries.”⁹

⁶ Gordon S. Wood, “The Radicalism of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine Considered”, from *Paine and Jefferson*, edited by Simon P. Newman and Peter S. Onuf (University of Virginia Press, 2013), 13.

⁷ Kerry Walters, *Revolutionary Deists: Early America’s Rational Infidels* (Prometheus Books, 2011), 27.

⁸ Mathew Tindall. *Christianity as Old as Creation*, 1730.

⁹ Foner, *The Complete Readings I*, 599.

Paine's appearance in the historiography of early American history is broad. Paine surfaces in places with a disposition that is unlike other Founding Fathers. For example, in recent historiography, Paine emerges as a fervid abolitionist in Paul J Polgar's *Standard Bearers of Equality* (2019). Polgar writes that Paine believed, "prejudice represented a ubiquitous presence threatening the promise of human betterment and social advancement", and that Paine's "African Slavery" in America published March 8th 1775, "captures the philosophy of the first movement abolitionism."¹⁰ In Manisha Sinha's *The Slaves Cause* (2016) she writes that Paine was "the most radical revolutionary of the Atlantic World" and that he "stood far above most American revolutionaries in his objections to slavery."¹¹ "African Slavery" in America was Paine's first writing after arriving to the colonies in November of 1774 and was covered with religious rhetoric, calling slaveowners "pretended Christians" and "how shameful are all attempts to color and excuse it!"¹²

Paine's religious rhetoric for the American cause is all throughout Carl J. Richard's *The Founders and the Bible* (2016). Commenting on *Common Sense* and the *American Crisis*, Richard states that, "Thomas Paine often proclaimed his confidence in divine assistance during the war, though he emphasized that the aid of Providence came through natural causes, not miracles."¹³ Richard also shows how *Age of Reason* was the demise of Paine and that "*Age of Reason* was a full-scale assault on the Bible. Paine denied that any written work could be the Word of God, since human languages were

¹⁰ Paul J. Polgar, *Standard Bears of Equality*, (The Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2019), 166-167.

¹¹ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*, (Yale University Press, 2016), 36.

¹² Thomas Paine, "African Slavery in America, 1775," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. II* ed. Philip S. Foner (The Citadel Press, 1945), 16.

¹³ Carl J Richard, *The Founders and the Bible*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 234.

imprecise vehicles that changed constantly.”¹⁴ Mark A Noll’s, *In the Beginning Was the Word* (2015) specifically focuses on Paine’s *Common Sense* and that it was a masterpiece that “sparked the most dramatic controversy over Scripture in the entire Revolutionary period.”¹⁵ Eric Nelson’s *The Royalist Revolution* (2014) presents a pamphlet war between loyalists and patriots and that *Common Sense* “provoked an unprecedented wave of antimonarchism throughout British America,” charging that, “God regarded the institution of kingship as sinful and illicit.”¹⁶

Naturally, Paine is mentioned in Enlightenment scholarship, most notably in the classic, *The American Enlightenment* (1976) by Henry F. May, that entails the “crusading deism of Paine.” A more recent scholarship is *American Enlightenments* (2016) by Caroline Winterer who argues in her book, that the “modern usage” of the term Age of Enlightenment “was popularized by the 1790s by Thomas Paine, who meant it to shock-and it did.”¹⁷

The most overall comprehensive biographical work on Paine is Eric Foner’s *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976). However, Foner’s work is just a detailed sketch of Paine’s life. While there is no denying that Foner’s work is a thorough useful source on Paine, he does not hone in on details about Paine like the aforementioned scholars, nor do those scholars approach Paine in a biographical way like Foner does. For example, Foner only briefly uses a quote from Paine’s “African Slavery in America”,

¹⁴ Ibid, 154.

¹⁵ Mark A Noll, *In The Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life 1492-1493*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 307.

¹⁶ Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*, (Harvard University Press, 2014), 112.

¹⁷ Caroline Whitener, *American Enlightenments: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason*, (Yale University, 2016), 171.

leaving out what subsequently happened afterwards and Paine's involvement in the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage in Philadelphia; whereas Sinha picks up what Foner left off, detailing Paine's role in the first abolition society in Philadelphia.

This thesis will focus on six of Paine's writings, beginning with *the Case of the Officers of Excise*, and attempt to show how Paine used religious rhetoric in the battles he was writing for, be it for the abolition of slavery or the separation between the colonists from Britain. By trying to reach a mass audience, Paine's writings were always intertwining between Christian and Enlightenment ideas.

"We wonder how they dared call themselves enlightened when they left so much misery and injustice in the world", writes Caroline Winterer on Enlightenment thinkers. This statement might ring true of American thinkers like Jefferson, but not so with Paine. As we will see in the following pages, Paine was always advocating for progression and promotion of humanitarianism. He despised the slave trade and the corrupt religious institutions. In the preamble for the Pennsylvania Gradual Abolition Act 1780, Paine wrote, "It is not for us to enquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of the Almighty Hand."¹⁸

This thesis is divided up into three parts following an epilogue. Part one will focus on Paine when he lived in England and was writing *The Case of the Officers of Excise*. It is important that we start here because it is the genesis of Paine's religious eloquence as a pamphleteer. Part two will cover Paine's arrival to Philadelphia in

¹⁸ Thomas Paine, "Preamble to the Act Passed by the Pennsylvania Assembly, March 1, 1780."

November of 1774 and cover his first published essay, “African Slavery in America.” Here, Paine denounces Christians who were in support of the slave trade saying that, “The past treatment of Africans must naturally fill them with abhorrence of Christians; lead them to think our religion would make them more inhuman savages, if they embraced it.”¹⁹ “African Slavery in America” ultimately led to his involvement in the start of the first abolition movement in America. Part three will focus on the monumental *Common Sense* where Paine unleashes Old Testament rhetoric attacking the monarchy. This part will also examine the supporters and critics of Paine’s pamphlet and why it was controversial.

The epilogue focuses on three of Paine’s writings. First, the *American Crisis* pamphlet series, that was distributed throughout the revolution. Philip S. Foner states about the series that, “At every critical point during the war, a new article came from his pen, written in language the plain people in the Continental Army and on the home-front could understand, to bolster Patriot forces.”²⁰ Second, *The Rights of Man*, a retaliation against Edmund Burke’s, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, an essay condemning the revolution taking place in France. Lastly, is *Age of Reason*, the work that damaged Paine’s reputation beyond repair. Writing from a Luxembourg prison to an audience in support of de-Christianization in the French Revolution, Paine criticizes both Old and New Testaments, stating that the Abrahamic religions “accuses the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all.”²¹

¹⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 19.

²⁰ Foner, *The Complete Writing I*, 48.

²¹ *Ibid*, 465.

Regardless of one's religious beliefs, Paine undoubtedly molded the colonies and shaped the foundation of America. Why Paine has never resurfaced and rested amongst his better-known peers is in many ways blasphemous to the liberties that America enjoys so much today. In 1916 early biographer of Paine, John E. Remsburg, gave a speech in Chicago titled, "Thomas Paine, The Apostle of Liberty," in which he states "Go to the grave of Thomas Paine, my Christian friend. Stand beside the tomb where rest the ashes of this unappreciated genius. Take up his little volume 'Common Sense.' Open its pages and peruse its burning words. When done, unfold the map upon which are delineated 'The Free and Independent States of America.' Contemplate the inspiring picture wrought thereon- wrought by the author-hero's magic pen-then refuse the simple tribute of a tear or flower!"²² Paine's religious rhetoric changed overtime and it was not until *Age of Reason* that his rhetoric started to have a negative impact on his character. Unfortunately, it was the aftermath of Paine's time in France that has left him in the shadows as one of the most important figures in the birth of the United States.

²² John E. Remsburg, "Thomas Paine the Apostle of Liberty," An Address Delivered in Chicago, January 29, 1916 (New York, The Truth Seeker Company, 1917) 215-216.

The Great Divide

Most historiography on Thomas Paine breezes by his years in England prior to his arrival in Philadelphia in 1774 and often begins Paine's career as a pamphleteer with *Common Sense*, written in January of 1776. The reason for this is that there is not much known about Paine's early years with everything being "tentative and speculative" upon Paine's arrival in America.²³ The following pages will examine Paine's first writing, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, and argue that Paine was well engaged in his religious and revolutionary rhetoric prior to his arrival in America, using the Bible to point out the unfairness of the British Parliament on English citizens. Since Paine did not leave a pool of sources on his early life and influences, we must therefore look into the context of Paine's life in England to help provide answers. This will include looking into Paine's socio-cultural environment in England, Paine becoming an excise officer, and how Quakerism might have been influential on Paine's life. By examining this era of Paine's life, we can make speculation become more concrete.

Rift in English Society

All the towns Paine lived in impacted and influenced his political thinking in some way. In London as well as the small southeastern towns of Thetford, Dover, Sandwich, Margate, Alford, and Lewes, Paine saw the separation growing between the rich and poor in English society. Paine would later state about this growing societal gap

²³ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 4.

that “To the wealthy and humane it is a matter worthy of concern that their affluence should become the misfortune of others.”²⁴

The two periods that Paine lived in London, 1757 and 1768, he witnessed the injustices occurring by the powerful elite. The growing poor population in Eighteenth-century London saw the collapse of old housing and building structures. Many structures were unlivable and patched together and were used as “tenement houses, common-lodging housing or brothels”. Many new structures were left unfinished because of rising taxes and prices of building materials and were also unsafe with many collapsing.²⁵

Witnessing this growing distress in English society had a lasting effect on Paine’s future penmanship. Years later after Paine was a well-established revolutionary he was still concerned for the well-being of the people from where he was from. In 1792 Paine expressed his concern for the people of Lewes in a letter to the sheriff who was giving a town hall meeting, writing that, “And as I conceive that a certain publication of mine, entitled ‘Rights of Man’, in which, among other things, the enormous increase in taxes, placemen, and pensioners, is shown to be unnecessary and oppressive”, and that, “It is now upwards of eighteen years since I was a resident inhabitant of the town of Lewes. My situation among you, as an officer of revenue, for more than six years, enabled me to see into the numerous and various distresses which the weight of taxes even at the time of my day occasioned.”²⁶

²⁴ Thomas Paine, “The Case of the Officers of Excise, 1772,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. II* ed. Philip S. Foner, (The Citadel Press, 1945), 5.

²⁵ Dorothy M. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, (Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1925), 82.

²⁶ Thomas Paine, “TO THE SHERIFF OF THE COUNTY OF SUSSEX, 1792,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine Vol. II* ed. Philip S. Foner, (The Citadel Press, 1945), 463.

These experiences of a divided society mirrored Paine's personal life. At 37 years old Paine had endured a number of hardships up until his departure for America. Paine had changed careers four times, including attempts as a stay-maker, teaching, dismissed twice as an excise officer, and an attempt at owning a retail dry-goods store which went into bankruptcy. Up until Paine's move to the American colonies, Paine was largely unsuccessful and a direct reflection of the society in which he lived. Paine is unequivocal and candid to point out in *The Case of the Officers of Excise* that, "The rich in ease and affluence, may think that I have drawn an unnatural portrait; but could they descend to the cold regions of want, the circle of polar poverty, they would find their opinions changing with the climate."²⁷

The Excise Officer

The Excise Service began in 1643 by Parliament to raise funds for the English Civil War.²⁸ After the war the Excise Service continued, and was handed off to the elite who acquired the rights to collect taxes for the King. In return a substantial profit was made on collecting taxes. In 1683 the Board of Commissioners of Excise was created to control and overlook the service. Items that were levied included English products such as alcohol, meat, salt, leather, linen, tobacco, paper, starch, and hats. Every year the list grew longer, along with the prices of imported goods increasing as well.

²⁷ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 9.

²⁸ The English Civil War took place between 1643-1651 between King Charles I and Parliament led by Oliver Cromwell. The war began because of Charles I not involving Parliament in decisions such as raising taxes. The war was also a battle of religious freedom between Puritans and Catholics.

The job of an excise officer was often dangerous, with a number of officers confronted by smugglers. Smugglers and gangs would often run officers out of town because of the rising taxes on common goods such as meat, salt, and ale. Parliament reacted by increasing the number of excise officers with hopes of extinguishing the hostilities. These hostilities came from a distressed society burdened by rising prices on common goods, something Paine would have witnessed in both his times as an officer.

The application for becoming an excise officer was intricate, involving rigorous steps for employment. Health and hygiene were evaluated, along with intelligence and handwriting skills. Examinations were given on mathematics and the use of measurements, weights, and scales. The applicant also had to be baptized and a member of the Church of England and proved his loyalty to the Crown. Paine passed all these tests to become an officer and was employed in December 1762 and was appointed to work in Grantham, Lincolnshire measuring brewers' casks.²⁹

After three years as an officer Paine was dishonorably discharged for being accused of not properly examining products being imported. Paine then moved to London and taught elementary English for a yearly wage of twenty-five pounds, half the salary of his excise pay.³⁰ In 1768 Paine decided to reapply as an officer. After writing a letter apologizing for his previous actions, he was reappointed in the town of Lewes, where he rented a room from a prominent town citizen, Samuel Ollive. Ollive owned a tobacco store in Lewes and also had been a town constable. After Ollive died in 1771 Paine

²⁹ John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, (Little, Brown & Company, New York), 53-54.

³⁰ The wage, after taxes, for an excise officer was around forty-six pounds, which was already at poverty level pay.; Thomas Paine, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*. 1772; Ed. Philip S. Fone, 4.

married his daughter Elizabeth Ollive and took over the tobacco store while also fulfilling his excise duties.³¹

Paine would have had to read and take several oaths from the excise officer's handbook, *The Royal Gauger; or Gauging made Perfectly Easy, As it is actually practiced by the Officers of his Majesty's Revenue in Excise*, before beginning his career as an officer. The handbook gives all the arithmetic, product descriptions, and standards that the officer must adhere to when dealing with commodities. Interestingly, the handbook also entailed what Paine would soon become a revolutionary against. The preface of the handbook explains how important the officer's job is in the kingdom and the authority to collect duties and taxes came directly from God. Paine would have read in the preface...

{...} That tho' by the *Law of Nature* all things were originally common, and all Persons equal, there being neither *King nor Subject*; yet when the *Law of Nature* came to be limited, and *Property* came to be claimed, and *Kings* or *Rulers* became absolutely necessary to maintain and defend such *Property*, (by which I mean *Life, Liberty, and Estate*) In order to support those *Kings* or *Rulers* in their Government {...} which they must inevitably be at, in protecting the Public, and administering Justice to every Member, *Taxes and Duties* were granted by the *People*. And to the *Reasonableness and Justice* of such Demands and *Duties or Taxes* by the *Prince*, and the *Obligation* to a ready and cheerful Obedience and Compliance in the Payment thereof by the *Subject*, there is no less *Testimony and Authority* than the *Holy Scriptures*.³²

Paine would have also taken several oaths from the handbook, one being the Oath of Abjuration, in which Paine would have to have signed in stating his loyalty to the Crown and to God. It would have read...

³¹ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 3.

³² Charles Leadbetter, *The Royal Gauger; or Gauging made Perfectly Easy, As it is actually practiced by the Officers of his Majesty's Revenue in Excise*. (London, 1750), vi.

“I, {Thomas Paine}, do truly and sincerely acknowledge, profess, testify, and declare in my Conscience before God and the World, that our Sovereign Lord King George is lawful and rightful King of this Realm, and all other his Majesty’s Dominions thereunto belonging {...} And I do swear, that I will bear Faith and true Allegiance to His Majesty King George {...} defend to the utmost of my Power against all traitorous Conspiracies and Attempts whatsoever, which shall be made against his Person, Crown or Dignity {...} And I do make this Recognition, Acknowledgment, Abjuration, Renunciation, and Promise heartily, willingly and truly, upon the true Faith of a Christian.”³³

Surely, Paine was later bitter for having taken such an oath, being that it held everything Paine would become against as a revolutionary. Paine would eventually break his oath and allegiance in a mission to dismantle the monarchy.

Quakerism and Anglicanism

Paine grew up in a bi-religious household; Paine’s mother, an Anglican, and his father, a Quaker. As a young boy Paine would have known about religious diversity; on one side Paine was exposed to the state ruling Church of England; the other side, a dissenting Protestant faction, the Quakers. From a religious-political perspective Paine would have witnessed the confrontations at the time between the Church of England, Catholic Church, and the Protestant sects like the Quakers. Paine’s father, Joseph Paine, was expelled from Thetford’s Society of Friends because of his marriage to Paine's mother, Francis Cocke, because she was Anglican.³⁴ Paine would have seen early on that

³³ *Ibid*, 218-219.

³⁴ The Society of Friends was an early name for the Quakers, founded by George Fox in 1650. Early on the Society met in homes or buildings called meeting houses. In Thetford during the eighteenth-century, the Society more than likely held their meetings in a home.

civil and religious freedoms were important for families and communities to coexist with one another.³⁵

Although Paine was baptized into the Church of England, it was Quakerism that influenced him the most. The Quakers did not believe in the doctrines and creeds that the Church of England implemented into their worship. Nineteenth-century Quaker, J. R. Greer wrote that “Edicts or canons are thus too contemptible in their meaning”, and that a, “Pope or Bishop is too scornful and appellation for the Friend who claims equality with God.”³⁶ The Quakers did not believe in mixing political issues with religious acts, which is exactly what the monarchy did. The Quakers were also the first leaders in the abolishment of slavery, the topic of Paine's first writings in America. Eric Foner states that, “We can be certain that Paine’s father’s Quakerism influenced his son’s rejection of hierarchies in church and state. It was also natural that the son of a Quaker always criticized the laws excluding Protestant Dissenters from public office, the universities, and many professions and favored the separation of church and state.”³⁷

Societies and Clubs

Newtonian science also had a profound effect on Paine. While attending lectures at the Royal Society in London, Paine was exposed to Newtonian ideas that aimed at freeing the minds of people that were being controlled by government institutions and the church. The society was founded in 1660. British Historian, Adrian Tinniswood writes

³⁵ Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, 17-20.

³⁶ J.R. Greer, *The Society of Friends: a domestic narrative illustrating the peculiar doctrines held by the disciples of George Fox*, (M.W. Dodd, New York, 1853), viii.

³⁷ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 3-4.

that the society’s founders, “came from different backgrounds and had different political outlooks. Some were royalists, some republicans. Some were career scientists and academics, while others were dabblers. What united them was a commitment to a Baconian conception of how to arrive at knowledge—by experiment, by investigating things for oneself rather than accepting ancient authority.”³⁸

Newtonian science opened up ideas on natural law and went against the material elucidations that invoked superstition. The Newtonian way of thinking made God alive in nature and was universally active in science. Paine reflects back in *Age of Reason* that, “My father being of the Quaker profession, it was my good fortune to have an exceedingly good moral education, and tolerable stack of useful learning.” Paine however goes on to say that, “The natural bent of my mind was to science.”³⁹

In *Age of Reason* Paine specifically mentions two people he attended Royal Society lectures on, Benjamin Martin and James Ferguson.⁴⁰ Martin called himself ‘a teacher of mathematics’ and was largely self-taught on his knowledge of math and natural philosophy.⁴¹ Ferguson was also self-educated, in astronomy and scientific instrument making. Both Martin and Ferguson were lecturers at the Royal Society and were well known at the time for their publications on scientific ideas. Paine was probably drawn to the two men because of the fact, like himself, they were both self-educated.

³⁸ Adrian Tinniswood, *The Royal Society & The Invention of Modern Science*. (Hachette Book Group, New York, 2019), 133.

³⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 496.

⁴⁰ In *Age of Reason* Paine specifically references Martin and Ferguson while attending Royal Society lectures. Paine also mentions buying a pair of globes which more than likely would have been Ferguson’s globes; Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 496.

⁴¹ John R. Millburn, “Benjamin Martin and the Royal Society”, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 28, no. 1 (June 1973), 15-23.

Martin and Ferguson were both acquaintances of Benjamin Franklin, and although speculative, it is very likely that all four men engaged in conversation together.⁴²

The origin of Paine's deistic beliefs likely began with him attending lectures. The people who attended these meetings were mostly dissenters of the church and were curious to know more about science and reason. The Royal Society became a learning place for ideas; a gathering of people from all levels of society that shared ideas, research, and inventions. At the heart of the society were common people like Martin and Ferguson. The society had to have a great effect on Paine, leading him to question superstition, and to entertain more scientific thoughts and ideas instead.

The Royal Society and others organizations like it pushed the idea that God did create the world but "meddled no further in its affairs, natural or political". Many scientific thoughts at this time compared God to a watchmaker and that as something as intricate as a watch had to have a maker, as well as the maker winding the watch to set it in motion, but nothing more. This idea of God deemed to be a threat to government and religious institutions that had perverted the meaning and existence of God. However, the idea of comparing a watchmaker to God did not leave God completely out of worldly affairs, but "allowed scope for God's intermittent exercise of divine *will* in the world as well as encouraging recognition of his creative *wisdom*."⁴³

In regards to political thinking, we do not know Paine's influences or what exactly he read. It is known that British Whig politician, James Burgh, a notable member

⁴² Patricia Rothman, "By The Light of His Own Mind': The Story of James Ferguson, Astronomer." *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*. 54, no. 1 (January 2000): 33-45.

⁴³ Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 149.

of Benjamin Franklin's "Club of Honest Whigs" was influential on Paine.⁴⁴ Whether the two met in person is unknown. Paine thought enough of Burgh though to cite him in *Common Sense*, encouraging the reader to entertain Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* (1774) in which he states "Power to the *people* is like light in the sun...unlimited by anything human. In governors, it may be compared to the reflected light of the moon; for it is only borrowed, delegated, and limited by the intention of the people...while the people are answerable only to God, themselves being the losers, if they pursue a false scheme of politics."⁴⁵

The Case of the Officers of Excise

After being reinstated as an excise officer in 1768, Paine was appointed to the town of Lewes, about sixty miles south of London. In Lewes Paine became involved in politics when he joined the Society of Twelve. From a town tavern called the White Hart Inn, the society managed affairs of the four thousand residents of Lewes. They oversaw the duties of appointed public and civil servants, and saw that their work was carried out without corruption. The society would have debates on these political issues. Paine became well known for his polemical debating style and attitudes on government.

Noticing Paine's polemic nature, his colleagues nominated him to craft a petition to

⁴⁴ "Franklin's favorite coterie during his years as colonial agent in London was a supper club meeting fortnightly, on Thursdays, at St. Paul's Coffeehouse, and after 1772 at the London Coffeehouse: The name implies a political club, and it is true that over the years this circle acquired significant overtones of libertarian politics." Verner W. Crane, "The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty." *The William and Mary Quarterly*. 23, no. 2 (April 1966), 210.

⁴⁵ In the decade before the American Revolution, James Burgh was one the leading propagandists in Great Britain advocating for extreme reform in Parliament.; Carla H. Hay, "The Making of a Radical: The Case of James Burgh." *Journal of British Studies* 18, no. 2 (1979): 90–117; James Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, 1774.

Parliament for a wage increase for excise officers. At 35 years of age, Paine along with his petition, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, was sent to London in the winter of 1772-1773 to appeal to Parliament.⁴⁶

The four thousand copies of *The Case of the Officers of Excise* that were printed contained the nucleus of all of Paine's ideas. The writing touched on the unfairness by the government and exposed political corruptness. Although very held back compared to Paine's future writings, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, itself was revolutionary. It was easily readable without all the jargon that came with other such writings at the time. Jack Fruchtman Jr. states that, "*The Case of the Officers of Excise* was a radical, though exceedingly polite work", and that it was, "filled with facts and figures of the meager working and living conditions of the tax collectors."⁴⁷ Paine had no problem exposing grievances brought on by government corruption and the Crown's expanding revenues that enabled the rich to become richer. Paine insisted that "If the increase of money in the kingdom is one cause of the high price of provisions, the case of the excise officers is peculiarly pitiable. No increase of income comes to them- they are shut out from the general blessing."⁴⁸

The Case of the Officers of Excise petitioned to Parliament the hardships that excise officers endured because of their poverty wages. Paine writes that, "Most poor mechanics, or even common laborers, have some relations or friends, who, either out of benevolence or pride, keep their children from nakedness, supply them occasionally with

⁴⁶ Jack Fruchtman, Jr. "Thomas Paine's Early Radicalism, 1768-1783" Ed. Simon P. Newman and Peter S. Onuff.

Paine and Jefferson in the Age of Revolutions. (University of Virginia Press, 2013), 53.

⁴⁷ Fruchtman, Jr., "Thomas Paine's Early Radicalism, 53.

⁴⁸ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 5.

perhaps half a hog, a load of wood, a chaldron of coals, or something or other which abates the severity of their distress; and yet those men thus relieved will frequently earn more than the daily pay of an excise officer.”⁴⁹ Paine argues that these poverty wages lead officers into temptation to steal and cheat in their job just to acquire necessities for daily living. Paine states that, “Not to be led into temptation is the prayer of Divinity itself; and to guard against, or rather to prevent, such insnaring situations is one of the greatest heights of human prudence: in private life it is partly religious; and in a revenue sense it is truly political.”⁵⁰ What Paine is asserting here is that the preface in “The Royal Gauger” had become corrupt. The separation between the king and citizens has become far wide, causing great suffering in English society.

The Dives and Lazarus

His words sharp like a sword, Paine uses Scripture to argue against the very same body of government that composed the “The Royal Gauger.” In comparing widening between Parliament and poverty Paine writes that, “**The answer of Abraham to Dives is somewhat applicable to them. ‘There is a great gulf fixed’.**”⁵¹ This short biblical reference calling out Parliament is the debut of Paine and his religious eloquence in opposition to tyranny. The two short sentences have largely been left out of the historiography on Paine. The short biblical passage however, shows Paine’s origin and character that made him a revolutionary name.

⁴⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 5.

To understand Paine's acute attack, we must go to the Bible to understand exactly what is being said in these two sentences. Paine is referencing the New Testament parable, written by the Apostle Luke, of Jesus telling the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16: 19-26.

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’”

The first interesting mark to take note of is Paine's use of the word “dives”. Dives is Latin for ‘rich man’ and it is found in the Vulgate. The Vulgate is the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, translated into Latin from Greek by St. Jerome in the late fourth-century. Parliament, would have used the King James Bible, and have read the ‘rich man’, not dives. Paine himself would have read the King James Bible as well, since the only language he knew was English. It is only speculative why he chose to use the Latin word ‘dives’ instead of ‘rich man’. Ironically, in *Age of Reason*, Paine states that, “I did not learn Latin, not only because I had no inclination to learn languages, but because of the objection the Quakers have against the books in which the language is taught. But this did not prevent me from being acquainted with the subjects of all Latin books used in the

school.”⁵² However, during Paine’s time the word dives would have been common in verbally telling the story of Lazarus, as the word was passed down through medieval art and into religious folklore. By using ‘dives’ though, Paine presented the story in a subtle and clever way to grab the attention of Parliament.

The author, Luke, writes that Jesus is using this parable was not to teach the concept of heaven and hell, but, it is a parable on morals and how the rich should help the poor. To the dives, Lazarus has little human value. Lazarus lays at the gate of the rich man’s house- the dogs licking his bodily sores; while the dives lavishly, continues to eat, disregarding Lazarus. In death Lazarus is in Abraham’s bosom in Heaven, while the rich man is in Hades begging for just a drop of water from Lazarus’s finger. Paine’s use of this parable is blunt; Parliament is the dives, and the excise officer is Lazarus. Paine is attempting to make members of Parliament conscious of their afterlife according to their earthly deeds and morals.

A Great Gulf Fixed

At the end of the parable Luke writes that Jesus says that a chasm has been created in the afterlife between the dives and Lazarus. Again, the parable is not so much about eternal separation, but about people’s earthly morals. This is what Paine is trying to convey to Parliament throughout the whole petition. By Parliament keeping the wages of an officer at poverty level it leads to temptation, and temptation leads to “*Corruption, Collusion, and Neglect*” and when revenue is flourishing in the kingdom there should be

⁵² Foner, *the Complete Writings I*, 496.

no need for poverty wages.⁵³ Paine states on this that, “There is a striking difference between dishonesty arising from want of food, and want of principle. The first is worthy of compassion, the other of punishment. Nature never produced a man who would starve in a well-stored larder, because the provisions were not his own: but he who robs it from luxury of appetite deserves a gibbet.”⁵⁴ What Paine was trying to get across to Parliament was that the government was creating an irreparable rift between the Crown and society. This religious language of Paine actually created an irrevocable ‘great gulf’ four years later in January 1776 when he united the thirteen American Colonies to rebel against the Crown with *Common Sense*.

Outcome of The Case

Unfortunately, *The Case of the Officers of Excise* was not a success. It was largely overlooked by Parliament, while at the same time the King’s revenue continued to grow. On April 8, 1774 Paine received a letter stating that he had been discharged as an excise officer. Although Paine had tried to help fight for better wages on the behalf of all excise officers, the Board of Commissioners thought that it would be too risky to keep Paine on board. A few weeks later the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* listed that, “all the household furniture, stock in trade, and other effects of Thomas Paine,” had been sold at the Lewes auction.⁵⁵ Paine’s marriage to Elizabeth also ended at this time as well. What Paine felt at the time is unknown, maybe he was down on his luck or impassioned after writing the petition, or perhaps ambivalent in his emotions. What *The Case of the Officers of Excise*

⁵³ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 12.

⁵⁴ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 11.

⁵⁵ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 15.

did do was create an inception that defined Paine's future writings; creating a strong revolutionary identity and religious rhetoric that the world had not seen before. The *Case of the Officers of Excise* was a strike, for the first time, of a group of government workers unionizing and petitioning against the government for better wages.

In the fall of 1774 and just living off thirty-five pounds from his divorce settlement, Paine's life would change forever. Details on Paine and Benjamin Franklin meeting for the first time are blurry. It is known that Royal Society Fellow and Excise Commissioner, George Lewis Scott, in the fall of 1774 introduced both men. At the time, Franklin's *Causes of the American Discontents before 1768* had been reprinted by the *London Chronicle*. Very likely Paine was familiar with Franklin's essay and the rhetoric against the Crown from the Townshend Acts six years earlier. Franklin's essay, regarded as one of the most famous propagandas against the Crown and instigators for the American cause, was along the same rhetoric of Paine's petition in Parliament, only on a bigger scale. Franklin states on the unfair taxation on the colonies that this, "new system of politics tends to dissolve those bands of unions, and to sever us forever", and that, "These are the wild ravings of the at present half distracted Americans."⁵⁶

That fall Franklin recommended to Paine that he should start a new life in the American colonies. Franklin wrote from London to his son-in-law in Philadelphia, Richard Bache, about Paine's arrival. Franklin informed his son-in-law that, "Mr. Thomas Paine, is very well recommended to me, as an ingenious, worthy young man. He

⁵⁶ "Verner W. Crane has called this essay 'perhaps the most famous contribution by Franklin, after the *Examination*, to the propaganda of the American Revolution.'" The colonial reaction to the Townshend Acts, particularly in Massachusetts, was provoking such anger in England that Franklin felt the need to explain the American position.; *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 15, *January 1 through December 31, 1768*, ed. William B. Willcox. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 3–13.

goes to Pennsylvania with a view of settling there. I request that you give him your best advice and countenance there, as he is quite a stranger there.”⁵⁷ Paine set out for the colonies that October, arriving in Philadelphia November 30, 1774.

⁵⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin: Collected and Edited with a Life and Introduction*, vol. VI, 1773-1776, ed. Albert Henry Smyth, (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1906), 248-249.

Paine and the Abolition of Slavery

Paine arrived in Philadelphia in November of 1774 in the middle of much political upheaval and commotion between the colonies and Great Britain. The colonies were still reeling from the effects of the Stamps Act of 1764 and the Townshend Acts of 1768, in which the latter resulted in the Boston Massacre in 1770.⁵⁸ A few months before Paine's arrival, the British passed the Coercive Acts, resulting in the British closing the port at Boston and mandating housing for British troops. These unfolding events would become the American Revolution, a revolution in which Paine would help spark with *Common Sense*.

However, Paine's first writing in America was not about British tyranny and the absurdity of divine kingship. It was for the abolishment of slavery and the hypocrisy of the many Christians that were involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Simply titled, "African Slavery in America", Paine's first publication in America was on March 8, 1775 and appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal and The Weekly Advertiser*. With so many colonists being fearful of British oppression, Paine argued on the issue of slavery that, "they complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery; and annually enslave many thousands more, without any pretense of authority, or claim upon them?"⁵⁹ Upon his arrival to Philadelphia, Paine joined with

⁵⁸ The Stamp Act, 1764, was a direct tax from the Crown on documents, newspapers, pamphlets, playing cards, etc. to help pay for the Seven Years War. The Townshend Acts, 1768, were taxes imposed on the colonies on goods such as paint, tea, lead, paper, etc. British troops arrived in Boston to secure the Townshend Acts. In March of 1770 a confrontation between British troops and a mob left five colonists dead.

⁵⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 18.

the Quakers, who had already initiated and were “sustaining the first antislavery movements.”⁶⁰

Paine in Philadelphia

The Philadelphia that Paine witnessed was the most populous city in the colonies with some 30,000 people and growing. Philadelphia also was very diverse in its religious culture hosting Anglicans, Lutherans, Mennonites, Presbyterians, and Quakers. The First Continental Congress was set up on September 5, 1774 in Philadelphia as a retaliation against the Coercive Acts. Philadelphia was a huge market for artisan culture and was the busiest port in America at the time of Paine’s arrival.⁶¹ Scottish army officer, Lord Adam Gord, said of his visit to Philadelphia that it, “is perhaps one of the wonders of the World, if you consider its Size, Number of Inhabitants, the regularity of its Streets, their great breadth and length their cutting one another all at right Angles, their Spacious publick and private buildings, Quays and Docks, the Magnificence and diversity of places of Worship . . . the plenty of provisions brought to Market, and the Industry of all its inhabitants, one will not hesitate to Call it the first Town in America.”⁶²

Philadelphia was a city of people who came from all different social classes. “Impoverished immigrants and the four-wheeled coaches of wealthy merchants driven by liveried slaves, passed each other daily on streets.”⁶³ The First Continental Congress led without example, recognizing political authority by the people. Congress petitioned the

⁶⁰ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution- 1770-1823*, (Cornell University Press, 1975), 215.

⁶¹ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 21.

⁶² Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., “Some Aspects of the Social History of Pennsylvania, 1760-1790”, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 62, no. 3 (July 1938), 283.

⁶³ *Ibid*, *Tom Paine*, 68.

Crown for peace, liberty, and safety. The political composition of Philadelphia was far more advanced than that of the other colonies. From the mid to latter part of the eighteenth-century artisans began entering the political arena challenging the wealthy merchants who had been politically gripping the city. The Philadelphia that Paine saw was transitioning from an Old World city, to a more modern city in terms of economics, culture, and politics.⁶⁴ What grabbed Paine's attention however, was not the politics and economics of Philadelphia, but it was the debate over slavery. It was the buying and selling of other human beings that prompted Paine to write his first essay in the colonies.

Paine took up residence in a building that overlooked the London Coffee House on Front and High Streets where auctioning of slaves took place. Here, Paine witnessed first-hand the bargaining and selling of humans. From their long horrific journey across the Atlantic, shiploads of Africans were brought into the Delaware bay, up the Delaware River, landing at the port of Philadelphia. Paine would have seen the signs and "entries showing the expenses incurred in 'going after Negroes' or 'taking up Negroes'", signs showing how desperate Africans were to escape bondage. Newspapers overflowed with advertisements for slaves for sale and descriptions of runaway slaves. The business of the slave merchants was one of the biggest sources of revenue for newspapers in Philadelphia.⁶⁵ Material culture gives much insight into what Paine would have seen and experienced from his residence. For example, many Africans who were being sold were

⁶⁴ "The emergence of banks, corporations, and other modern financial institutions, the commercialization of an important segment of the artisan community and the extension of the market in free labor, would all propel the city along the path of capitalist development. And Philadelphia's political life would be transformed by the politicization of the mass of its citizens and the overthrow of the provincial system of government." Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 68-69.

⁶⁵ Gary B. Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*, (University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 50-51.

shackled and made to wear a head harnesses made of iron and copper with a bell that would help prevent a successful escape. Paine would have seen at the auction blocks and these horrific devices that were crafted by Philadelphian blacksmiths. Gary B. Nash states on these apparatuses that, “If Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell is our national icon for celebrating freedom, this rare item reminds us that other bells were cast to *prevent* freedom.”⁶⁶

Anti-Slavery (Pro-Slavery) and Christianity

Religion was the underlining drive that challenged chattel slavery. Between 1710 and 1780, Philadelphia saw a rapid growth in the anti-slavery movement and one sect that took the charge was the Quakers. Manisha Sinha writes that, “Quaker abolitionism was a reaction to emergent capitalism and the commercialization of the faith rather than an expression of it.”⁶⁷ Founder of the Society of Friends, George Fox (1624-1691), structuralized the foundation for Christian abolitionism “arguing that God was no ‘*Respecter of Persons*’” and that “He hath made all *Nations of One Blood*.”⁶⁸ In simpler terms, Fox’s statement meant that God’s plan of salvation was for everyone, not certain *Persons*. The religious rhetoric established by Fox would drip from the pens of future Quaker abolitionists, and Thomas Paine, in battling pro-slavery advocates.

It is worth taking a look at early Quaker reformers that took part in the abolishment of slavery in Pennsylvania. First, is Friend William Southeby who was originally from Maryland but relocated to Pennsylvania. Southeby, a political lobbyist

⁶⁶ Nash, *First City*, 41.

⁶⁷ Sinha, *the Slave’s Cause*, 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

and pamphleteer, was one of the earliest writers against slavery in the Pennsylvania colony, writing *To Friends and All Whom it May Concern* in 1696.⁶⁹ Southeby used Scripture to back up his beliefs and reasons why slavery should be abolished referencing Mathew 7:12 as the Golden Rule, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the law of the Prophets”.⁷⁰ Southeby begins his essay saying:

“I having had and kept men Servants above twenty years, that is White men, such as bound themselves for term of years, but now at this place not having that conveniency to have such, have oftentimes been considering the purchase of these negroes, but upon serious consideration, it appears to me to Contradict our Great Law-giver’s holy precepts and self-denying doctrine, where he saith, whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you even so do ye unto them—Mat: 7:12.”⁷¹

Southeby ends his essay stating that God would seek vengeance on the institution of chattel slavery, hearing the cry of people in bondage...

I really believe if there be not some remedy for them, to ease them, God will hear their Cry, and also avenge it on their Oppressors; Let us honestly work ourselves with Such Servants as we have & our Children when able; I hope if this be accepted as most agreeable to Christianity, there may be a Law made against bringing any more of Slaves into this country, for I desire these may, both as a Friend to Christianity, the Country, and the good Government thereof.⁷²

⁶⁹ Jean R. Soderland and Nicholas P. Wood, “‘To Friends and All Whom it May Concern’: William Southeby’s Rediscovered 1696 Antislavery Protest”, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 141, no. 2, (April 2017): 177.

⁷⁰ Soderland and Wood, “William Southeby’s Rediscovered 1696 Antislavery Protest,” 182.

⁷¹ “The fate of Southeby’s original manuscript from 1696 remains a mystery, but a handwritten copy made in 1791 by James Pemberton, another Quaker abolitionist, has been recently identified at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. With this text of Southeby’s 1696 address, “To Friends and All whom it may Concern” (doc. 1), we can now appreciate the complexity of the arguments he contributed to early antislavery discourse.” Ibid, “William Southeby’s Rediscovered 1696 Antislavery Protest”, 178;192. “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the Prophets.” Mathew 7:12 King James Bible.

⁷² Ibid, “William Southeby’s Rediscovered 1696 Antislavery Protest”, 195.

Southeby's words were strong in arguing the immoral exercise of chattel slavery.

Southeby continued to push and voice his beliefs in the abolishment of slavery until his death in 1720.

Friend Ralph Sandiford (1693-1733), a migrant from England, was a successful commercial businessman from Philadelphia. After traveling to the West Indies and other areas of America he became aware of the evils of the slave trade. Early on after witnessing these horrors, Sandiford stated, "the holding of negroes in slavery is inconsistent with the rights of man, and contrary to the precepts of the Author of Christianity."⁷³ In 1730 Sandiford augmented his voice on the abolishment of slavery by publishing *The Mystery of Iniquity: in a Brief Examination of the practice of the Times* in which a "copy of it reached the hand of the chief justice of the province, who threatened him with severe penalties."⁷⁴ Sandiford did not let the threat discourage him from publishing and "distributed it graciously, wherever he believed it would be of use."⁷⁵ Two biblical passages he references in his argument are by the Apostle Paul in Hebrews 13:3, "Remember the prisoners as if chained with them-those who are mistreated-since you yourselves are in the same body also", and John in Revelation 13:10, "He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity". Sandiford firmly writes...

"Therefore, Friendly Reader, if thou art of Lover of Christ, or common Justice, destroy not this Testimony, nor hinder its going forth, whether for Reproof or Caution, but rather with it add thine own Abilities, as a farther Testimonial against the Seamen and Merchants of Babylon, who have by this Trade corrupted this New World."⁷⁶

⁷³ Roberts Vaux, *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford: two of the earliest public advocates for the emancipation of the enslaved Africans*, (Philadelphia, 1815), 60.

⁷⁴ Vaux, *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford*, 64.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 64.

⁷⁶ Ralph Sandiford, *The Mystery of Iniquity: in a Brief Examination of the practice of the Times*, (Philadelphia, 1730), 107-108.

Early nineteenth-century, Quaker, lawyer and abolitionist from Philadelphia, Robert Vaux wrote about Sandiford saying, “But whether neglect or veneration be the lot of the mouldering frame of the pious and enlightened Sandiford, it is precious consolation to believe, that the great principles which he avowed and advocated, are rising into dominion among mankind in proportion to the rapidly diffusing light of Christianity, and promise, like the holy precepts of that religion, to be indestructible and eternal.”⁷⁷

John Woolman (1720-1772) was one of the biggest voices against slavery by the Quakers. As a young man Woolman worked as an accountant, but quit his job due to some of his transactions that dealt in slavery. Woolman spent the rest of his life traveling throughout the colonies preaching against slavery.⁷⁸ Woolman’s essay “Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes” was published in 1754 and asks questions on Christian morality and how Christians involved in chattel slavery have selfishly taken advantage of their own “Higher” favors and blessings. Woolman writes about the selfishness of slavery...

“And, no less true, that they, who in the Midst of high Favours, remain ungrateful, and under all the Advantages that a Christian can desire, are selfish, earthly, and sensual, do miss the true Fountain of Happiness, and wander in a Maze of dark Anxiety, where all their Treasures are insufficient to quiet their Minds: Hence, from an insatiable Craving, they neglect doing Good with what they have acquired, and too often add Oppression to Vanity, that they may compass more.”⁷⁹

Becoming very self-conscious the older he became, Woolman’s life gained a lot attention due to the way he lived. Woolman practiced what he preached and he became more known more for his way of living than his writings. He refused to eat anything that had

⁷⁷ Ibid, *Memoirs of the Lives of Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford*, 73.

⁷⁸ Geoffrey Plank, “The First Person in Antislavery Literature: John Woolman and his Journal”, *Slavery and Abolition*, 30, no.3 (March 2009), 69.

⁷⁹ John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1754).

sugar in it because of the fact that sugar was produced by slave labor. Woolman was very aware of the Atlantic economy and tried to stray away from anything that was produced by the slave labor, including the clothes he wore.⁸⁰

Each one of these Quaker reformers were able to build upon each another making the argument for the abolishment of slavery stronger. Early twentieth-century historian, Edward Raymond Turner states that the Quaker movement against slavery was not, “delayed until slavery had become unprofitable, nor was it forced through any violent hostility. It was a result attained merely by calm, steady persuasion, and a disposition to obey the dictates of conscience unflinchingly,” and that, “It may well be doubted whether any body of men and women other than the Friends were capable of such conduct at the time.”⁸¹

Defenders of slavery used religious rhetoric as well, along with early theological arguments on human bondage. Ancient religious and theological thoughts on slavery lasted well into the nineteenth century, with many slaveholders still abiding by these ideas. Ancient thoughts on slavery symbolized “meanings connected with the condition and destiny of men.” In Greek thought slavery was connected to a cosmic hierarchy. For Hebrews. It was divine punishment for those who acted against God’s word. Hellenistic and early Christian writings on human bondage meant being a slave to one’s own sins and freedom relied totally on a person’s acceptance of God.⁸² Arguing against George

⁸⁰ “By the end of his life he believed that the clothes he wore, his manner of speaking, the gifts he accepted and refused, the way he traveled, where he slept, the food he ate and his choice of spoons were freighted with moral significance. It seemed that he wanted to be noticed in every detail of his life.” Ibid, “The First Person in Antislavery Literature: John Woolman and his Journal”, 70.

⁸¹ Edward Raymond Turner, *The Negro in Pennsylvania: Slavery, Servitude, Freedom, 1639-1861*, (Washington: The American Historical Association, 1911), 76-77.

⁸² Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 42.

Fox's view of God as no *Respecter of Persons*, the advocates of slavery saw this as a "negative equalitarianism" promulgating that all men were, "equally subject to His wrath and forgiveness" and that the lowliest slave could look forward to emancipation, but only in another life."⁸³

Pro-slavery writers used biblical literature to justify the institution of slavery, but were "unwilling or unable or afraid to challenge the philosophy of equal rights."⁸⁴ One of the arguments that pro-slavery advocates gave was that the slave's ancestors were directly coming from an environment of heathenism and that they were a people living without God and law. Some went as far to think that Africans were "Devils incarnate" and that, "the Devil... has infused prodigious Idolatry into their hearts."⁸⁵ Instead of unifying mankind, the slave-trade, obstructed unity. Slaveowners saw African heathens as a "separate category of men."⁸⁶

The story of God's curse on Ham in Genesis 9-10 was widely used in pro-slavery rhetoric. After the flood, as Noah fell asleep drunk, his son Ham looked at his father's nakedness; Noah's other two sons Shem and Japheth turned away covering their faces. When Noah awoke and discovered what happened he cursed Ham's son, Canaan, saying that his future offspring will be the "servant of servants". The story of Ham was used by pro-slavery advocates arguing that Africans were from the same genealogy of Canaan.⁸⁷

⁸³ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* 43.

⁸⁴ Winthrop, Jordon D. *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 304.

⁸⁵ Jordan, *White Over Black*, 24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 23.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 17.; Genesis 9-10, KJV.

A vast number of New Testament passages were used as well to back up pro-slavery...

Ephesians 6:5-8 states...

“Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether *he is* a slave or free.”

Titus 2: 9-10

“*Exhort* bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all *things*, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.”

According to the advocates of pro-slavery, verses like the ones mentioned was to be viewed as slaves should be thankful even in their harsh circumstances. One group of pro-slavery writers conveyed...

“The Freedom promised to his Followers, is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men’s Lusts and Passions; but as to their Outward Condition, whatever that was before they embraced the Religion of Jesus, whether Bond or Free, it remained the same afterwards.”⁸⁸

Defenders of slavery consistently argued that since slavery was recognized by God through the Holy Scripture, then slavery should not be looked at as unethical. The pro-slavery writers did not want to confront or take in account the context of the contrasting social environments in biblical literature versus the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Just a year before Paine’s arrival in Philadelphia a pamphlet war ensued between pro-slavery activist Richard Nisbet, a young Philadelphia physician named Benjamin

⁸⁸ Larry R. Morrison, “The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 37, no. 2 (1981), 25

Rush, and anti-slavery activist and Quaker, Anthony Benezet. Nisbet, a new resident to Philadelphia from the West Indies responded to a pamphlet penned by Rush titled *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in, on the Slavery of Negroes in America*. In his pamphlet Rush points out slavery's "incompatibility with Christianity" and the "inhumanity of holding people as chattel."⁸⁹ Rush states that, "There are some who gone too so far as to say that Slavery is not repugnant to the Genius of Christianity, and that it is not forbidden in any part of the Scripture", and that slavery amongst the Jews like it is seen in Old Testament Scripture such as Leviticus 25: 44-46 was that, "The design of providence in permitting this evil, was probably to prevent the Jews from marrying amongst strangers, to which their intercourse with them upon any other footing than that of slaves, would naturally incline them".

Strongly backing his argument from the story of the good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke 10: 25-37, Rush argues that, "Christ commands us to look upon all mankind even our Enemies as our neighbors and brethren..." Rush concludes by writing, "Remember that national crimes require national punishments, and without declaring what punishment awaits this evil, you may venture to assure them, that it cannot pass with impunity, unless God shall cease to be just and merciful."⁹⁰

Nisbet immediately fired back at Rush with his pamphlet, *Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture, Or a Defense of the West Indian Planter*, where he defends slavery using

⁸⁹ Polgar, *Standard Bearers of Equality*, 40.

⁹⁰ Howard L. Lubert, Kevin R. Hardwick, and Scott J. Hammond, *The American Debate Over Slavery, 1760-1865, An Anthology of Sources*, (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2016), 9.; Leviticus 25: 44-46, ⁴⁴ "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. ⁴⁵ You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. ⁴⁶ You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly."

the same Old Testament passages like Leviticus 25: 44-46 and Exodus 21:20 that Rush argued was now voided through Christ. Nisbet argued that Moses and the Jewish people, in regards to slavery, did not have any instruction or divine guidance and that “they did not think it worthwhile to give any laws concerning them, and left it in the will of the master, to treat them as he thought proper.” Nisbet argues that Scripture does not directly address slavery and that if slavery had been seen as an evil “Christ and his disciples would have, no doubt, have preached against it in direct terms.” Nisbet does not argue against Rush’s argument that Christ and the writers of the New Testament negate slavery in such passages as the story of the good Samaritan found in the Gospel of Luke and the Golden Rule, found in the Gospel of Matthew.⁹¹

To counterargue Nisbet and backup Rush, Anthony Benezet put out a series of pamphlets, in a specific highlighted one titled, *A Short Account of That Part of Africa, Inhabited by Negroes*, Benezet builds upon the Golden Rule, but argues further that the institution of slavery curtails spreading the Gospel to Africans, undermining Jesus’ New Testament command in Mathew 28:19 to, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Benezet writes that it is observed by the Africans that Christianity does not teach the Golden Rule and that, “wherever Christianity comes, there comes with it a Sword, a Gun, Powder and Ball” and that slavery was, “a Necessity laid on worldly Men by their hard Task-master the Devil.” Benezet also argued against Nisbet that Africans were not inferior to whites and that they were being stripped of basic human rights and that

⁹¹ *ibid*, *The American Debate Over Slavery*, 12

Africans were, “of a sober, industrious, and honest people, capable of being self-governed.”⁹²

Defenders of slavery thought that Africans were unfit and “imperiled the experiment in American Republicanism.”⁹³ Writers of pro-slavery like Nisbet would try to defend slavery by using ancient Old Testament literature that was not applicable or comparable to the modern Transatlantic slave trade. A year later in his first writing in America, Paine would address this preposterous idea writing...

“As much in vain, perhaps, will they search ancient history for examples of the modern slave-trade. Too many nations enslaved the prisoners they took in war. But to go to nations with whom there is no war, who have no way provoked, without farther design of conquest, purely to catch inoffensive people, like wild beasts, for slaves, is an height of outrage against humanity and justice, that seems left by heathen nations to be practised by pretended Christians. How shameful are all attempts to color and excuse it!”⁹⁴

“African Slavery in America”

Paine certainly had read Southeby, Sandiford, Woolman, and other anti-slavery writers, and heard about the Nisbet, Rush, and Benezet pamphlet war upon his arrival in Philadelphia. And Paine himself had already shown how he felt about human equality and fairness in *The Case of the Officers of Excise*. If the unfair wages on government workers inflamed Paine, then seeing humans being sold into slavery from his window from where he lived and hearing people like Nisbet is what provoked him to speak out against chattel slavery.

⁹² Anthony Benezet, *A Short Account of That Part of Africa, Inhabited by Negroes*, (Philadelphia, 1762).

⁹³ Polgar, *Standard Bearers of Equality*, 40.

⁹⁴ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 17-18.

Paine wrote “African Slavery in America” in mid-December 1774 just weeks after arriving in Philadelphia, but it was not published until March 8, 1775, appearing in the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser*.⁹⁵ Paine’s words were blunt and direct, calling out the hypocrisy of Christians involved in the slave trade. The brusqueness of Paine’s words could have been related to his deistic way of thinking at the time and not having much kindness towards organized religion that involved enslaving other men. Paine had the heart of a Quaker and thought like a humanist, as he was always on the side of advancing fairness and equality among people in society, and for that he stood by the Quakers on exposing the atrocities of chattel slavery.

It was very daring of Paine to write such an essay so soon upon his arrival in America, for the simple fact he was in a new land, a new world, that mostly embraced human bondage. However, “African Slavery in America” would turn out to be classic Paine rhetoric, his pen sharp as a sword. The new migrant to America opens his essay saying...

TO Americans: That some desperate wretches should be willing to steal and enslave men by violence and murder for gain, is rather lamentable than strange. But that many civilized, nay, Christianized people should approve, and be concerned in the savage practice, is surprising; and still persist, though it has been so often proved contrary to the light of nature, to every principle of justice and humanity, and even good policy, by a succession of eminent men, and several late publications.⁹⁶

Paine goes on to compare slave-trade to men worshipping a golden idol, evoking Exodus 32 when Moses comes down from Mount Sinai to find that the Israelites had ignored divine reason and instead erected a golden calf to worship. Paine argues that reason does not fall into place with enslaving others and that committing such an act

⁹⁵ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 15.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 16.

should weigh heavy on one's mind and is comparable to giving up one's self to a golden idol. Paine writes, "Our traders in MEN {an unnatural commodity!} must know the wickedness of that SLAVE-TRADE, if they attend to reasoning, or the dictates of their own hearts; and such as shun and stifle all these, willfully sacrifice conscience, and the character of integrity to that golden idol."⁹⁷ Referencing the Reformation, Paine asks the question on how slavery compares with *divine precepts*, specifically citing the Gospel of Matthew 22:37-39⁹⁸

Such arguments ill become us, *since the time of reformation came*, under gospel light. All distinctions of nations, and privileges of one above others, are ceased; Christians are taught to *account all men their neighbors; and love their neighbors as themselves; and do. to all men as they would be done by; to do good to all men; and man-stealing is ranked with enormous crimes*. Is the barbarous enslaving our inoffensive neighbors, and treating them like wild beasts subdued by force, reconcilable with all these *divine precepts*?⁹⁹

Paine ends his essay arguing for the mending and reparations of what many Christians have done in perverting their religion. Paine makes a comparison, saying that Christians should be more like the early Christians who courageously spread the gospel in hostile places...

The past treatment of Africans must naturally fill them with abhorrence of Christians; lead them to think our religion would make them more inhuman savages, if they embraced it; thus the gain of that trade has been pursued in opposition to the Redeemer's cause, and the happiness of men. Are we not, therefore, bound in duty to him and to them to repair these

⁹⁷ Ibid, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine II*, 16.

⁹⁸ The 16th-century movement for reform of the doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, ending in the establishment of Protestant churches. The starting point of the Reformation is often given as 1517, when the German theologian Martin Luther launched his protest against the corruption of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church, although he was breaking no new controversial ground. In fact, most of the Reformation movements laid stress, not on innovation, but on return to a primitive simplicity. Luther's theological reading led him to attack the central Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, and papal supremacy. He also called for radical reform of the religious orders; Oxford Reference, "Reformation", referenced January 24, 2022, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100410548>

⁹⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 17.

injuries, as far as possible, by taking some proper measures to instruct, not only the slaves here, but the Africans in their own countries? Primitive Christians labored always to spread their divine religion; and this is equally our duty while there is an heathen nation. But what singular obligations are we under to these injured people!¹⁰⁰

Paine signs his pamphlet, *JUSTICE and HUMANITY* and on April 14th, 1775, just a few weeks after his publication, Paine joined the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, the first anti-slavery organization in America, founded by Friend Anthony Benezet.

Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage

Anthony Benezet (1713-1784) was born in France to Huguenot parents. While Anthony was still an infant his father, John Stephen Benezet, had to move the family to Holland to escape persecution from the “Romish bigotry during the reign of Louis XIV”. After a short stay in Rotterdam, John Benezet moved his family to London. As Anthony Benezet grew older and became interested in the Society of Friends and became a Quaker at the age fourteen. Finally, at age eighteen Anthony and his family permanently moved to call Philadelphia home.¹⁰¹

While in Philadelphia, Benezet became a staunch abolitionist. Through donations from like-minded folks, Benezet established a school for the education of blacks. Benezet stated on his admiration for blacks that, “I can with truth and sincerity declare, that I have found amongst the negroes as great variety of talents, as amongst like number of whites”,

¹⁰⁰ Foner, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine II*, 19.

¹⁰¹ Wilson Armistead, *Anthony Benezet-From the Original Memoir: Revised with Additions*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Co., 1859) 1-4.

and that the beliefs by some, “that the blacks are inferior in their capacities, is a vulgar prejudice.”¹⁰²

In early spring of 1775, Anthony Benezet along with other activists such as Dr. Benjamin Rush and James Pemberton, met on second-street in Philadelphia at the Sun Tavern and formed an organization called the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, later shortened to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Although there are no correspondences between Benezet and Paine, it is without a doubt the two knew each other, as Paine became a prominent figure in the organization.¹⁰³ Close acquaintances of Paine in the society was Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Rush. Rush would push Paine the following year to write a pamphlet that would unite the colonies to separate from England.¹⁰⁴ In the constitutional handbook for the society Paine is listed as Clerk of the General Assembly, signing off on the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, which took steps to abolish slavery in Pennsylvania and was a model for other states and societies seeking to abolish the slave trade ¹⁰⁵. Paine is also credited with writing the preamble to the act, expressing in the opening that all men are equal from the work one universal creator...

¹⁰² Armistead, *Anthony Benezet*, 17-18.

¹⁰³ Wilson Armistead, *Anthony Benezet-From the Original Memoir: Revised with Additions*, 45.

¹⁰⁴ In 1787 Franklin would become president of the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage.

¹⁰⁵ “On March 1, 1780... the Pennsylvania legislature became the first legislature in history to take steps to abolish slavery. Pennsylvania’s Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery is both idealistic and practical. It tries to balance the idea of liberty, which was at the heart of the Revolution, with the founding generation’s deep respect for private property. The law also recognizes the significance of race in both the creation of slavery and the perpetuation of discrimination against former slaves. Eventually four other states and a Canadian province—Connecticut (1784), Rhode Island (1784), New York (1799), New Jersey (1804), and Upper Canada (present-day Ontario; 1794)—adopted similar laws to end slavery. Thus the Pennsylvania law became a model for how places with slavery ended the institution. These places accomplished what no other societies before them had: the peaceful eradication of slavery.” Paul Finkelman, “Pennsylvania: An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery: Document Analysis”, *Milestone Documents in African American History*, Salem Press (2010).

“...It is not for us to enquire why, in the creation of mankind, the inhabitants of the several parts of the earth were distinguished by a difference in feature or complexion. It is sufficient to know that all are the work of an Almighty Hand. We find in the distribution of the human species, that the most fertile as well as the most barren parts of the earth are inhabited by men of complexions different...; from whence we may reasonably, as well as religiously, infer, that He who placed them in their various situations, hath extended equally his care and protection to all, and that it becometh not us to counteract his mercies. We esteem it a peculiar blessing granted to us, that we are enabled this day to add one more step to universal civilization, by removing as much as possible the sorrows of those who have lived in undeserved bondage, and from which, by the assumed authority... no effectual, legal relief could be obtained...”¹⁰⁶

Paine however would soon be facing two battles. On April 19, 1775, just five days after the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage was organized, the tensions between the colonists and the British came to an eruption with the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Paine, a stalwart supporter in the American cause, would now have to convince his pacifist Quaker allies, who he stood by in the fight against slavery, to now pick up arms to fight the British. For Paine, it was not only a movement to abolish slavery, but to also eradicate tyranny.

¹⁰⁶ “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery”, preamble, (March 1, 1780).

A Call for Revolution

On October, 26th 1775 King George III gave a speech to Parliament about the “The present Situation in America” that addressed the colonists “subordinate Relation to *Great Britain*, who now openly avow their Revolt, Hostility, and Rebellion”.¹⁰⁷ The following month the Second Continental Congress called for the colonies to reform their constitutions that would give “a full and free representation of the people.” The Thirteen Colonies gradually pulled together, with a sense of unity.¹⁰⁸ In January of 1776, out of Philadelphia, a pamphlet began to circulate throughout the colonies with vigorous words attacking the monarchy.

Written in late 1775, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* inspired and united the colonies to fight against the British. No other document from the American Revolution impacted the American people the way *Common Sense* did. Henry F. May states that, “*Common Sense* is a radical masterpiece; it is full of the excitement of a moment” and “was read from Calvinist pulpits as well as in army camps.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, *Common Sense* was the spark, the motivator, the inspiration of the American Revolution.

Before *Common Sense*, Paine was just one of the many new migrants to Philadelphia trying to find his place in the New World. He first had written about and been an advocate against the horrors of chattel slavery, but after Lexington and Concord, the call for revolution took front and center. *Common Sense* turned Paine into a renown revolutionary and it was his religious rhetoric that took him there. Other Founding

¹⁰⁷ His Majesty’s Most Gracious Speech to Both Houses of Parliament, October 26th, 1775 printed in New York and London, (Library of Congress).

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Israel, *The Expanding Blaze: How the American Revolution Ignited the World, 1775-1848* (Princeton University Press, 2017.), 48.

¹⁰⁹ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 162.

Fathers used Scripture, but they used it to back up the cause for independence, they did not dismantle religion the way Paine did. However, Paine's use of Scripture sparked suspicion from people like John Adams, who expressed in his diary the ambivalent feelings he had upon first reading *Common Sense*. "The Arguments in favour of Independence I liked very well: but one third of the Book was filled with Arguments from the Old Testament, to prove the Unlawfulness of Monarchy," wrote Adams. Adams confronted Paine about his denouncing of the Old Testament stating, "I told him further, that his Reasoning from the Old Testament was ridiculous, and I could hardly think him sincere."¹¹⁰

The third edition of *Common Sense* was printed in February of 1776 and in its appendix contained Paine's, *Epistle to the Quakers*, an appeal to his Friends to support the American cause. At the time, the Quakers, who were faithful pacifists, were treading thin between being on the side of the patriots or being "squarely on the Tory side." On January 20th, 1776 a document claiming British sovereignty was endorsed at a general meeting of Pennsylvania and New Jersey Quakers that addressed the colonists on their feelings of going to war. In his *Epistle*, Paine does not attack the whole body of Quakers but only accuses the "Factional and fractional part" who Paine thought were being deserters of their own beliefs.¹¹¹

Not only was *Common Sense* the most widely read pamphlet in the Revolution, its biblical tone was novel. Paine argued that it was the monarchy that was abusing Scripture in exchange for power. Mark Noll writes that *Common Sense* "illuminates how deeply a

¹¹⁰ John Adams, *Diary 1782-1800*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 330-335.

¹¹¹ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 55.

contest over biblical interpretation entered into the national founding.”¹¹² Paine used Scripture to support his attack on the monarchy. Regardless of contest, *Common Sense* prevailed at being the most inspiring document for the Revolution. Paine writes, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present has not happened since the days of Noah.”¹¹³ *Common Sense* was the blueprint for the Revolution, a compass pointing towards liberty, full of inspiration for patriot soldiers and their families.

A Background of Common Sense

It was Paine’s friend from the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, Dr. Benjamin Rush, who encouraged Paine to draft a pamphlet that conveyed the frustrations that had surfaced in the colonies. Rush, one of the principle thinkers in the American Enlightenment and Physician General of the Continental Army, sided with Paine and the colonists yearning for independence from Britain. Paine originally wanted to title the pamphlet *Plain Truth* but Rush encouraged Paine to change the title. The pamphlet was then examined by Benjamin Franklin and with his approval the pursuit was on to find *Common Sense* a “republican-minded publisher willing to print it”. They found Robert Bell (1730-1784) who was from Glasgow and one of the largest importers in Philadelphia of Scottish Enlightenment literature and publisher of American prints of Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire and Rousseau.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 108.

¹¹³ Foner, *The Complete writings I*, 45.

¹¹⁴ Israel, *The Expanding Blaze*, 47-48.

Franklin, Rush, and Bell endorsed *Common Sense* and it appeared anonymously in January of 1776 in Philadelphia. Subsequently, editions appeared all over the colonies and then made its way across the Atlantic, where it circulated heavily in Britain, Ireland, France, Holland, and Germany. In Europe *Common Sense* was seen as the “chief manifesto” for the Revolution and an *avant-garde* in “rhetorical and intellectual intervention.”¹¹⁵ In words that were easy to understand and communicated with the common people, Paine’s pamphlet ignited a firestorm in people’s hearts that burned passionately with ideas of freedom and liberty.

As the Revolution began *Common Sense* was widely read amongst the soldiers in the Continental Army for motivation and encouragement. George Washington wrote in a letter to Colonel Joseph Reed in March of 1776, “By private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find that ‘Common Sense’ is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men.”¹¹⁶ Eric Foner writes that, “In *Common Sense*, Paine literally transformed the political language” and in terms of republicanism, Paine made it a living political issue and a utopian ideal of government¹¹⁷ The most beloved British Monarchy was under attack by *Common Sense*; while British society was becoming sapped, thus proving from Paine’s eyes, that the monarchy was a failure, and never was legitimate to begin with.

Paine lays out the origin of England in *Common Sense* with the story of William the Conqueror, some seven centuries earlier.¹¹⁸ Paine writes, “A French bastard landing with an armed-banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 49.

¹¹⁶ Foner, *The Complete writings I*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Foner, *Tom Paine in Revolutionary America*, 74.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 76.

the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it...if there are any so weak as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the ass and the lion, and welcome.”¹¹⁹ What Paine did here, and throughout *Common Sense*, was “clear the air of the ‘ancient prejudices’ that supported...patriarchy and family government.”¹²⁰ Paine detested the King calling him a “royal brute” and expressed to the people of America that they should seize the moment to fight and gain their liberty.

The Gospel of Common Sense

One of the reasons *Common Sense* was so efficacious was because it did not read like a pamphlet, but more like a sermon. Paine filled *Common Sense* with Scripture that was in a “common style” and not filled with “Latin quotations and classical form.”¹²¹ It was Paine’s sermon to the people, a call for independence. Historian Benard Bailyn stated that *Common Sense* had a certain “dominant tone” and “rage” to it and “It was written by an enraged man.”¹²² Paine, who was 38 at the time and had been unsuccessful most of his life, had nothing to lose by writing *Common Sense*. *Common Sense* showed that Paine’s heart and mind never gave up on humanity and fairness for all people, and that he was itching to tell the world how delusional and unbiblical the monarchy was.

Paine was clever in his religious rhetoric, and *Common Sense* was the pinnacle of his revolutionary life. He skillfully used Scripture to advance the agenda of the

¹¹⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings*, 76.

¹²⁰ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (Vintage Books, 1991), 168.

¹²¹ James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution*, (Oxford, 2013), 16.

¹²² Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 82–83.

Revolution and fought fire with fire, using biblical literature to attack the largest empire in the world. Under the subtitle “Of the Monarchy and Hereditary Succession” in *Common Sense*, Paine masterfully proses the absurdity of kingship in the Old Testament, stating that it was a misapprehension that the Jewish people needed a king...

“Near three thousand years passed away, from the Mosaic account of the creation, till the Jews under a national delusion requested a king. Till then their form of government (except in extraordinary cases where the Almighty interposed) was a kind of Republic, administered by a judge and the elders of the tribes. Kings they had none, and it was held sinful to acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of Hosts. And when a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of kings, he need not wonder that the Almighty, ever jealous of his honor, should disapprove a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of heaven.”¹²³

However, in passages like this Paine was seen as asserting himself over God’s word, as if the Author made some kind of mistake. Many Anglicans refuted Paine’s rhetoric and took great offense in it. One opponent of *Common Sense* was Charles Inglis from the Trinity Church in New York City who stated Paine clearly violated Scripture and that he would need to “renounce my Bible if I believed this republican.”¹²⁴ As if he knew there was going to be backlash from people like Inglis, Paine debunked this type of criticism of *Common Sense* by writing about when the Israelites went against God’s will asking for a king in 1 Samuel 8...¹²⁵

¹²³ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 10.

¹²⁴ Noll, *In the beginning Was the Word*, 313.

¹²⁵ 1 Samuel 8: 4-22 ⁴ So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. ⁵ They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead [us](#), such as all the other nations have.” ⁶ But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.” ¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and

“These portions of scripture are direct and positive. They admit of no equivocal construction. That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture is false. And a man hath good reason to believe that there is as much of kingcraft as priestcraft in withholding the scripture from the public in popish countries. For monarchy in every instance is the popery of government.”¹²⁶

Paine’s own understanding and presentation of 1 Samuel 8 was critical in getting the people to advance towards independence. *Common Sense* de-conditioned colonists, who had been taught from birth to recognize and admire the king as the divine head of society. To break this mindset and ecclesiological ideology, *Common Sense* read in a way that said “God himself was a Republican.”¹²⁷

The Bible was used for centuries to orchestrate power over the people, start wars, and advance nations all in the name of the monarchy. Paine argues on this that “the thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy” and that, “The state of the king shuts himself from the world, yet the business of the king requires him to know it thoroughly...proven the whole character to be absurd and useless.”¹²⁸ Paine goes onto to argue and ask that if such a divine position is given then, “ how came the king by a power

make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹²Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. ¹⁵He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. ²⁰Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²²The LORD answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.” Then Samuel said to the Israelites, “Everyone go back to your own town.” KJV Bible

¹²⁶ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 12.

¹²⁷ Richard, *The Founders and the Bible*, 93.

¹²⁸ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 7-8.

which the people are afraid to trust and always obliged to check? Such a power could not be the gift of wise people, neither can any power, *which needs checking*, be from God.” Paine states that it is worth investigating such men that hold absolute power and, “how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth inquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind.”¹²⁹

One of the most famous passages from *Common Sense* that argues against opponents of Paine is a direct “antimonarchical interpretation” of Scripture.¹³⁰ In 1 Samuel 8 “the elders of Israel” came to ask the great Judge and Prophet, Samuel, who was living in his last days, for a king like their neighboring nations had, to rule Israel. The Israelites chose to ignore the message by God given to Samuel on what earthly kingship would entail, which resembled the European monarchies. Paine’s interpretation of 1 Samuel 8...

“Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry. The heathens paid divine honors to their deceased kings, and the Christian world has improved on the plan by doing the same to their living ones. How impious is the title of sacred majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust!”¹³¹

Paine argues that Old Testament kings such as David and Solomon did not validate divine monarchy and that “the high encomium given of David takes no notice of him *officially as a King*, but only as a *Man* after God’s own heart.”¹³² Paine contended with his critics that God favored such men as David and Solomon, but that it was not for

¹²⁹ Ibid, 8-9.

¹³⁰ Richard, *the Founders and the Bible*, 93.

¹³¹ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 10.

¹³² Ibid, 12.

the intent of monarchical rule and tyranny. In the end, the powerful rhetoric of *Common Sense* reversed the idea of divine kingship, replacing it for the “divine favor of republics.”¹³³

Criticism of Common Sense

Not everyone accepted *Common Sense*. Some critics like Charles Inglis thought the pamphlet was just downright blasphemous, others like John Adams had mixed emotions and thought Paine went overboard with biblical references. On no account was *Common Sense* universally accepted or accoladed. Both Loyalists and even some patriots found Paine’s biblical argument extremely disturbing. One article that came out in the *Pennsylvania Ledger* just weeks after *Common Sense* was published charged Paine of attacking the English Constitution. The article discarded Paine’s biblical argument against kingship and that the only hope for American contentment was a resolution with the British Monarchy.¹³⁴ However, most of Paine’s harshest critics came from clergy.

Anglican, William Smith, the first provost of the University of Pennsylvania and founder of Washington College, thought Paine’s view of David to be illogical and absurd. To argue against Paine, Smith quotes 1 Samuel 13:14 that says, “The Lord has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him ruler over His people.” Smith goes on to use New Testament Scripture and Paul’s account of the history of the Israelites in Acts 13:22, “He raised up for them David as their king.”¹³⁵ Through

¹³³ Richard, *The Founders and the Bible*, 94.

¹³⁴ Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution*, 143.

¹³⁵ Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 308-309.

these passages of Scripture and Solomon being the son of David, Smith contended that the Bible does recognize divine monarchy.

One biblical argument made by Paine that people like Iglis and Smith did not argue against was that of original sin. Paine writes that the, “choice not only of a king but of a family of kings forever, hath no parallel in or out of scripture but the doctrine of original sin, which supposes the free will of all men lost in Adam; and from such comparison, and it will admit no other, hereditary succession can derive no glory.”¹³⁶ Paine is stating that original sin and divine hereditary succession cannot correlate with each other and that Adam’s fall affected all of mankind. Anglicans like Iglis and Smith had no argument against Paine’s statement on original sin in an “era dominated by reasonable latitudinarian theology”. With forms of worship and creeds changing in eighteenth-century, Anglicans and other conservative Christian critics of Paine had a difficult time backing up the belief of original sin correlating with divine hereditary succession.¹³⁷

Critics of Paine meticulously combed through the Bible looking to prove that *Common Sense* was a detestable piece of work written by a madman. Iglis wrote that *Common Sense* was “shocking to the ears of Americans” and that the pamphlet was the “most artful, insidious and pernicious pamphlets” to ever be circulated. To argue further against *Common Sense*, Iglis goes on to reference the Apostle Peter’s words, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man, for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the King, as supreme; or unto Governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well. As free, and not using your liberty for a

¹³⁶ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 14.

¹³⁷ Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 313.

cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the King.”¹³⁸

However, as Eric Nelson states, “None of these critics succeeded in blunting the impact of Paine’s pamphlet.”¹³⁹ The burning and hunger for freedom from the colonists could not be overshadowed with cold theological discourse. For Paine the biblical debate was simple, that with the fall of Adam, there could be no perfect form of government and that, “government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one.”¹⁴⁰ For Paine the worst state a society to be under was a hereditary divine kingship.

Epistle to the Quakers

Eighteenth-century America fell into “two main clusters of ideas”. One being the Protestant movement that swept through the colonies during the First Great Awakening and the other being the Enlightenment ideas coming out of Europe that began in the seventeenth-century. To better understand America and its foundations both of these ideas must be considered.¹⁴¹ As a new arrival to the colonies Paine had to take in account both of these ideas that were circulating throughout the colonies. Paine never directly claimed to be a Christian, maybe in *Common Sense* or the *American Crisis* pamphlets, his religious rhetoric favored that Providence guiding the side of the patriots, but perhaps was written more so to inspire the patriots.

¹³⁸ Charles Inglis, *The True Interest of America Impartially Stated, In Certain Strictures On A Pamphlet Intituled Common Sense*, 1776; I Peter 2:13-17.

¹³⁹ Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution*, 136.

¹⁴⁰ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 4.

¹⁴¹ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, xii.

Paine sided with the Quakers in the abolition of slavery for the simple fact that he despised the hypocrisy of the many Christians that were involved in the slave-trade and he knew that Quaker principles supported abolition. However, when Paine published *Common Sense* on January 10, 1776, it would be only ten days later that he would be pleading to the pacifist Quakers in an epistle for their support in the revolution.

In some ways Quaker ideals were very much in tune with Enlightenment ideals. Voltaire praised the Quakers, especially the Pennsylvania sect. In his letters *Essai sur les Moeurs* (1756) and *Traité sur la Tolérance* (1763), Voltaire praised the Quakers in Pennsylvania and the idealism that they stood for “which is given as the model of tolerance and good government.”¹⁴² However, when the bells of revolution began to ring, many Quakers looked within for guidance, and war was not an option. On January 20th, 1776 a Quaker document was adopted and given at a general meeting of Pennsylvania and New Jersey Friends that would place the Quakers in line with the Loyalists. This put Paine in a difficult position with the Quakers since war with Britain was now inevitable.

The document the Quakers presented was “The Ancient Testimony and Principles of the People called Quakers, renewed with respect to the King and Government: and Touching the Commotions Now Prevailing in these and other parts of *America*, Addressed to the People in General”. The testimony in the document proclaimed:

“It hath ever been our judgment and principle, since we were called to profess the light of Christ Jesus, manifested in our consciences unto this day, that the setting up and putting down kings and governments, is God’s peculiar prerogative...And it is not our business to plot and contrive the ruin, or overturn of any of them, but to pray for the king and safety of our nation, and good of all men: That we may live a quiet and peaceable life,

¹⁴² Edith Philips, “Pensylvanie: L’Age D’or”, *The American Historical Review* 36, no. 1 (October, 1930), 3.

in all godliness and honesty: under the government which God is pleased to set over us.”¹⁴³

Clearly, the testimony states, that the Quakers who backed this document did not intend to go to war with Britain and more so they were praying for the safety of the king and the preservation of the empire. For the revolutionaries this was not just an act of a certain people wanting to live peacefully, but an act of supporting the Crown, in their eye’s was treason.

The *Epistle to the Quakers* found in the appendix of the third edition of *Common Sense* was Paine’s sharp reaction to the very people he stood by in supporting the abolishment of slavery. He immediately accused the “factional and fractional part” and “the whole body of Quakers which had published the address, as being traitors to their own principles...”¹⁴⁴

“O ye partial ministers of your own acknowledged principles he writes... if ye really preach from conscience, and mean not to make a political hobby-horse of your religion, convince the world thereof, by proclaiming your doctrine to our enemies, *for they likewise bear arms.*”¹⁴⁵

Paine emphasizes that he is addressing the Quakers not as a “*religious*, but as a *political* body, dabbling in matters which the professed quietude of your principles instruct you not to meddle with.”¹⁴⁶ Paine ends his epistle with a call of duty for the Quakers, who are not in favor for taking up arms to fight the British, to realize that they are jeopardizing

¹⁴³ “The Ancient Testimony and Principles OF THE PEOPLE CALLED Quakers RENEWED, WITH RESPECT TO THE King AND Government, AND TOUCHING THE Commotions NOW PREVAILING IN THESE AND OTHER PARTS OF America, ADDRESSED TO THE People in General.” Philadelphia, 1776.

¹⁴⁴ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 55.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 57. It should be noted that Paine recognized that not all Quakers condemned the American cause and many were on the side of the revolutionaries.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 56

not only their freedoms and civil liberties, but the freedom of others and that these liberties must be secured...

And here, without anger or resentment, I bid you farewell. Sincerely wishing, that as men and Christians, ye may always fully and uninterruptedly enjoy every civil and religious right, and be, in your turn, the means of securing it to others; but that the example which ye have unwisely set, of mingling religion with politics, may be disavowed and reprobated by every inhabitant of AMERICA.

This inward turning by some Quakers to not bear arms against the British created a schism amongst Quakers. Although Paine continued to stay involved with the Quakers and the anti-slavery movement, he would call out the Quakers in future letters and pamphlets. In 1777 Friend John Pemberton, Quaker leader in Pennsylvania, set forth a testimony, “declaring their attachment to the British government”. Paine responded to this in the *American Crisis III*.¹⁴⁷

“Were the Quakers really impressed and influenced by the quiet principles they profess to hold, they would, however they might disapprove the means, be the first of all men to approve of independence... O! ye fallen, cringing, priest-and-Pemberton-ridden people! What more can we say of ye than that a religious Quaker is a valuable character, and a political Quaker a real Jesuit.”¹⁴⁸

The conclusion between Paine and his relationship with the Quakers is that he supported the Quakers that were willing to pick up arms and fight the British, but he had very little respect towards the Quakers that were siding with the British and he had no qualms in letting the public know how he felt.

¹⁴⁷ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 307.

¹⁴⁸ Foner, *The Complete Writing I* 83. It should be noted that John Pemberton and his brother James Pemberton were exiled from Pennsylvania to Winchester, Virginia in September 1777 due to their loyalty to the Crown. The brothers were able to return “the following April without charges ever being brought against them and returned to a suspicious Philadelphia.” Jessica Kross, Pemberton, John, *American National Biography* (1999).

Conclusion of *Common Sense*

In an 1806 letter to the mayor of Philadelphia, John Inskeep, Paine explained his writing by saying, “My motive and object in all my political works, beginning with *Common Sense*... to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and principles of government, and enable him to be free, and establish government himself.”¹⁴⁹ *Common Sense* was not only a direct attack on British government but an admonition about all the evils of hereditary and divine monarchical rule. In a sense, what Martin Luther did in 1517 with his *Ninety-Five Theses* against the Catholic Church, Paine did with *Common Sense* against the corrupt monarchy. The pamphlet was not just for the American colonists, but a call for independence wherever the people wanted it. *Common Sense* had no geographical boundaries.

The most important and unique idea throughout *Common Sense* is its use of biblical references that invoked a political call for freedom and showed the incompatibility of “true Christianity and the word of God” with the monarchy. The biblical tonality of *Common Sense* is what attracted common readers, whether they agreed or not, they read it. Years later Paine wrote, “As it is in my design to make those who can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament, and put it in language as plain as the alphabet.”¹⁵⁰ Paine, being very aware of his choice of words, developed a writing style contrary to his contemporaries, that reached a massive audience on both sides of the Atlantic.

The profound effect of *Common Sense* cannot just be tied to a work of genius. The environment in which it fell into was just as important as its author. It gave a voice to

¹⁴⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings II*, 1480.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 111.

a yearning for freedom that was already in the hearts many Americans. *Common Sense* broke down and encouraged on how people thought about government. The pamphlet captured the minds of thousands, calling for swift action and to take advantage of such remarkable times. Paine tells his readers that...

“The present time... is that peculiar time which never happens to a nation but once, viz. the time of forming itself into a government. Most nations have let slip the opportunity, and by that means have been compelled to receive laws from their conquerors, instead of making laws for themselves. First, they had a king, and then a form of government; whereas the articles or charter, of government should be formed first, and men delegated to execute them afterwards: but from the errors of other nations let us learn wisdom, and lay hold of the present opportunity—to begin government at the right end.”¹⁵¹

To form this government, Paine called for a unity of all Christian sects to come together for guidance in establishing a new nation. “Christians-Ye, whose office is to watch the morals of a nation, of whatsoever sect or denomination ye are of, as well as ye who are more immediately the guardians of the public liberty, if ye wish to preserve your native country uncontaminated by European corruption, ye must...wish a separation”¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 36.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 41.

Epilogue

Regardless of criticism, *Common Sense* catapulted Thomas Paine into the spotlight as a revolutionary and humanitarian, and it was his religious rhetoric that put him there. To further the American cause, Paine released a series of fifteen pamphlets between 1776 and 1783 called *The American Crisis*. Paine signed off each one with the pseudonym, “Common Sense”. Like *Common Sense*, Paine wrote the *American Crisis* series in a way that every American could relate to and inspired Americans to stay in the fight. George Washington ordered the first pamphlet to be read to all the troops who were about to cross the Delaware on Christmas Eve 1776. In the opening paragraph of the first pamphlet Paine writes, “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph”.¹⁵³

The pamphlets “appealed to both to the passions and the cool deliberation of his readers, to love of country and rage against Great Britain.”¹⁵⁴ Paine’s religious rhetoric in *American Crisis* focuses on divine intervention in favor of republicanism. Paine’s ink intensifies on the idea that Providence is guiding the patriot’s cause writing...

“I have as little superstition in me as any man living, but my secret opinion has ever been, and still is, that God Almighty will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupportedly to perish, who have so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war, by every decent method which wisdom could invent.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 50.

¹⁵⁴ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 139.

¹⁵⁵ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 50.

Instead of long drawn out interpretations of Scripture like 1 Samuel 8 that is seen in *Common Sense*, Paine writes *American Crisis* with a sense of urgency, patriotism, and that with God's guidance America will prevail over British tyranny. Paine states that, "I wish with all the devotion of a Christian, that the names of Whig and Tory may never more be mentioned." Paine argues throughout *American Crisis* that pacifism leads to tyranny and mentions his former Quaker ally in the abolition movement, John Pemberton, who sided with the Tory faction. Paine rails on Pemberton and other dissenting Quakers writing, "O! Ye fallen, cringing, priest-and-Pemberton-ridden people! What more can we say of ye than that of religious Quaker is a valuable character, and a political Quaker and real Jesuit."¹⁵⁶

As though it was under God's providential care, *American Crisis* was a literarily indestructible force with the sharpest sword on the battlefield. Paine was a hero for the series of pamphlets that inspired soldiers and their families. In *American Crisis II*, Paine writes about a conversation that he had with a Tory in January of 1777 on the progress of the patriots, Paine states, "that it appeared clear to me, by the late providential turn of affairs, that God Almighty was visibly on our side."¹⁵⁷ However, *American Crisis* would be the last body of work that Paine would produce that acknowledged God or any other biblical validity. After America's victory, Paine became involved in another revolution in France. During this time Paine released two works, with the latter negatively altering his character and reputation in America. First was, *Rights of Man* that was written in retaliation against British statesman, Edmund Burke, and his *Reflections on the*

¹⁵⁶ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 83.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 66.

Revolution in France. Second, was *Age of Reason*, which Paine wrote from a Luxembourg prison cell in which he condemns and denounces all aspects of Christianity.

Rights of Man

At fifty years of age and approaching the last decade of the eighteenth-century, Paine felt that he had done his part in America's fight for independence and could now concentrate on some personal endeavors. From 1787-1790 Paine spent much of his time between England and France seeking financial help for his design of an iron bridge. But, due to Paine's nature, he could not leave politics all behind and politics could not leave him. While pursuing being a bridge designer, Paine became an "honorary member of the Society for Constitutional Information" and created relationships with some of his admirers like Whig statesman and historian James Mackintosh and Mary Wollstonecraft, an early advocate of women's rights. With the revolution in France about to ignite, supporters like Wollstonecraft and Fox welcomed Paine to express his ideas about the unfolding revolution.¹⁵⁸

The breakout of the French Revolution in 1789 created a discord in English society between those who supported the revolution and those who did not. In November of 1790, Irish economist and philosopher, Edmund Burke, published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he attacked the burgeoning situation in France and the whole idea of equality and human rights that the revolution was promoting. Burke, a criticizer of deism and the Enlightenment believed that Christianity was the only answer to progression in society. Burke thought that the de-Christianization spreading throughout

¹⁵⁸ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 213.

France was a, “drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which France is now so furiously boiling” and that by, “throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us and amongst many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it.”¹⁵⁹

Paine denounced *Reflections* and fired back at Burke in February 1791 with *Rights of Man*, which he dedicated to George Washington. In *Rights of Man* Paine defended the events of the French Revolution, including the storming of the Bastille and the March on Versailles. Similar to *Common Sense*, Paine wrote in *Rights of Man* showing the inanity of “hereditary legislators is as inconsistent as that of hereditary judges, or hereditary juries; and as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man; and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet-laureate.”¹⁶⁰ Burke believed in traditional hereditary government stating that the English people, “look upon the legal hereditary succession of their crown as among their *rights*, not among their wrongs; as a benefit, not as a grievance; as a security for their liberty, not as badge of servitude.”¹⁶¹ Paine further argues against Burke that, “I am contending for the *rights* of the of the

¹⁵⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790.; Burke’s passage did foreshadow what would be the answer to dechristianization in France, and the “void” that would replace it. The “degrading superstition” that took Christianity’s place would be the cult of the Supreme Being. This idea of a centralized super-fictional entity came from the mastermind behind the Reign of Terror, Maximilien Robespierre, proclaiming that the French people now “recognized the existence of a Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul.” See, William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 2nd edition, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 276.

¹⁶⁰ Foner, *Complete Writings I*, 289.

¹⁶¹ Burke, *Reflections*.

living, and against their being willed away by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead.”¹⁶²

In *Reflections* Burke also defends the notion of divine influence in English government writing that, “We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility.”¹⁶³ Paine states that these noble accolades that Burke believes is not biblical and believed there was a problem with conservatives like Burke who put people of nobility on a pious pedestal. Paine argued against Burke “who distinguished kings, aristocrats, and clergymen from ordinary folk and recognized the former’s inherited privileges and prerogatives” that God established equality and unity in the Creation.¹⁶⁴ Paine states on this that...

“The Mosaic account of the Creation, whether taken as divine authority or merely historical, is full to this point the unity or equality of man. The expressions admit of no controversy. "And God said, let us make man in our own image. In the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." The distinction of sexes is pointed out, but no other distinction is even implied. If this be not divine authority, it is at least historical authority, and shows that the equality of man, so far from being a modern doctrine, is the oldest upon record.”¹⁶⁵

Paine continued to argue that natural rights are given at birth by the Creator and that there are no intercessors or mediators between God and man, therefore debunking the idea of divine kingship. Paine writes that, “every child born into this world must be considered as

¹⁶² Foner, *Complete Writings*, 252.

¹⁶³ Burke, *Reflections*.

¹⁶⁴ Richard, *The Founders and the Bible*, 201.

¹⁶⁵ Foner, *Complete Writings I*, 274.

deriving its existence from God. The world is as new to him as it was to the first man that existed, and his natural right in it is of the same kind.”¹⁶⁶

With *Rights of Man* Paine again captured people’s attention with some 200,000 copies sold and many given away for free. By 1793 the pamphlet was scattered all over the British Isles, and like *Common Sense* it was read by the common people, especially those in manufacturing towns sprawling up around the isles. *Rights of Man* of course did not sit well with British authorities, especially coming from the same revolutionary who wrote *Common Sense* fifteen years earlier that ripped the British monarchy.

In fear of influence from the French Revolution spreading to Britain, prime minister William Pitt suppressed any kind of revolutionary or anti-government propaganda, including *Rights of Man*. Due to the pamphlet’s defamation of the monarchy and ideas on government reform, Paine was convicted for seditious libel in the summer of 1792; while at the same time officials motivated “loyalist clubs” that dispensed anti-Paine rhetoric and burnt effigies of Paine.¹⁶⁷

After fleeing to France in August of 1792, Paine was made honorary citizen of France along with George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Polish revolutionary Patriot, Thaddeus Kosciusko. Subsequently, Paine was chosen as one of two foreigners to be elected to the National Convention. *Rights of Man* was widely distributed in France, instantly making Paine a hero in the revolution, while also beginning what would be the most perplexed and confusing part of Paine’s life.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 274.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, *Tom Paine*, 230.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 238-239.; National Convention- The revolutionary assembly formed by members of the Third Estate on 17 June 1789 when they failed to gain the support of the whole of the French States-General. Three days later the members signed the Tennis Court Oath. The Assembly was accepted by Louis XVI the following month, having added “Constituent” to its title. In August it agreed upon the

Luxembourg Prison

“I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church,” Paine wrote while imprisoned in Luxembourg.¹⁶⁹ In the National Convention Paine had sided with Girondin faction who was against the execution of Louis XVI. Do to his Quaker upbringing and not a believer in capital punishment, Paine thought that the king should be exiled, not taken to the guillotine. The Jacobins however, led by Maximilien Robespierre, opposed the Girondins view on Louis XVI’s fate. Paine had not originally joined any faction in the revolution, but ended up in the Girondin circle mainly because of their opposition to executing the king, but also their leaning towards a constitutional republic and laissez-faire economic environment; whereas the Jacobins were headed towards a more autocratical government.

The trial of Louis XVI’s was won by the Jacobin side and the king was beheaded on February of 1793. That summer members of the Girondins were being rounded up arrested, jailed, and many sent to the guillotine. Because of his connection to the now broken Girondin party and the Jacobins now becoming very paranoid of foreigners taking

influential declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and two years later its constitution was accepted by the king. Its reorganization of local government into departments, although long lasting, had less immediate success. Renamed the Legislative Assembly (1791) and the National Convention (1792), it was dominated by the Girondins and the Jacobins before being replaced by the Directory in 1795; Oxford Reference, *A Dictionary of World History*, 2nd ed., edited by Edmund Wright, (Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁶⁹ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 464.

part in the revolution, Paine was arrested in December of 1793 and sent to prison in Luxembourg.¹⁷⁰

During his ten months in prison Paine began to write the first part of *Age of Reason*, in which he denounced the Abrahamic religions, specifically Christianity. With de-Christianization running rampant in France, Paine finally had an audience to show how he really viewed institutionalized religion. *Age of Reason* “fascinated and shocked Americans more than any work of Voltaire” and was the most controversial religious text seen in the Age of Enlightenment.¹⁷¹

Paine begins *Age of Reason* in a soft appealing tone writing, “I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.” And writing on his thoughts of Jesus, Paine states...

Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the real character of Jesus Christ. He was a virtuous and an amiable man. The morality that he preached and practised was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any.”¹⁷²

Paine’s mood swiftly changes stating that the history of Jesus, “is altogether the work of other people.” In regards to Jesus’ birth and resurrection Paine writes that, “His historians, having brought him into the world in a supernatural manner, were obliged to take him out again in the same manner, or the first part of the story must have fallen to the ground.”¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 244.

¹⁷¹ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 174.

¹⁷² Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 466-467.

¹⁷³ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 468.

It is in the second half of *Age of Reason* written soon after his release from prison, Paine continues to scold Christianity. Paine attempts to show that if Christianity is just another myth amongst myths in religion, then “Christianity itself might not be *the* truth but rather *a* truth.”¹⁷⁴ One myth that Paine questions is in 1 Corinthians 15:16 is where the Apostle Paul states that after the resurrection Christ appeared to more than five hundred people. Paine argues that Paul is the only one who accounts for this story, none of the five hundred or the other apostles write about it and that Paul, before his conversion, was, “a man who did not, according to the same account, believed a word of the matter himself at the time it is said to have happened.”¹⁷⁵

Paine goes onto argue how Christianity has its roots in violence and war and it is not so much the benevolent religion it lends itself to be. Paine writes that...

“Christianity founds itself originally upon the Bible, and the Bible was established altogether by the sword, and that in the worst use of it—not to terrify, but to extirpate. The Jews made no converts; they butchered all. The Bible is the sire of the Testament, and both are called the Word of God. The Christians read both books; the ministers preach from both books; and this thing called Christianity is made up of both. It is then false to say that Christianity was not established by the sword.”¹⁷⁶

Paine believed that Christian mythology was far more dangerous than that of the ancient pagan religions found in Egypt, Rome, and Greece. *Age of Reason* gives notion that Christianity had “built a despotic system of religious and political control atop the

¹⁷⁴ Winterer, *American Enlightenment*, 172.

¹⁷⁵ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 581.; “After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remaining to the present, but some have fallen asleep.”, 1 Corinthians 15:6.; Paul himself was still a persecutor of Christians at the time Jesus showed himself to the five hundred people. At the time Paul’s name was Saul and changed his name after being confronted and temporarily blinded by witnessing the resurrected Jesus while on the road to Damascus. See Acts 9: 1-19.

¹⁷⁶ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 596-597.

foundation of ancient mythology.”¹⁷⁷ And as for the foundation of what is supposed to be a loving religion, Paine asks, “What is it the Bible teaches us? – rapine, cruelty and murder. What is it the Testament teaches us? – To believe that the Almighty committed debauchery with a woman engaged to be married, and the belief of this debauchery is called faith.”¹⁷⁸

Paine’s Return to America

With the aid of the new ambassador to France, James Monroe, Paine was released from prison in November of 1794. Paine did not immediately return to America, and instead rejoined the National Convention, but remained relatively quiet during the remaining years of the revolution. Paine returned to America in 1802 at the age of sixty-five and his long-time friend, Thomas Jefferson, was now President of the United States.

Age of Reason was denounced by every Christian denomination in America, including the Quakers. Congressman and founder of the American Bible Society, Elias Boudinot published two works *The Age of Revelation* (1801) and *The Second Advent* (1815) in which both “were aimed to counter secularism and Enlightened skepticism advertised by Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*.”¹⁷⁹ With the 1804 election approaching, Jefferson had to sever his relationship with Paine. Most of Jefferson’s backing was from Christian evangelicals and “his supporters hastened to separate their candidate from too close an association with Paine.” To make matters worse for himself, Paine published a series of letters about his hostility towards Washington for not inquiring about his

¹⁷⁷ Winterer, *American Enlightenment*, 181.

¹⁷⁸ Foner, *The Complete Writings I*, 597.

¹⁷⁹ Shalev, Eran, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Test from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Yale University Press, 1996), 127.

imprisonment and not responding to letters asking for Washington's help. Paine's friend, William Duane, urged him not to publish these letters and that *Age of Reason* had already done enough damage to his character.¹⁸⁰ Unfortunately, Paine did not take his friends advice and published the letters anyway, with one letter to Washington saying, "your silence in not enquiring into the Cause of my imprisonment and reclaiming me against it was tacitly giving me up. I ought not to have suspected you of Treachery, but whether I recover from the illness I now suffer or not I must continue to think you treacherous till you give me Cause to think otherwise."¹⁸¹ Paine's close friends Samuel Adams and Benjamin Rush also refused to engage with Paine when he returned to America and many taverns and innkeepers turned Paine away.¹⁸²

There were Paine supporters that argued that *Age of Reason* was more an attack on organized religion and nothing in it pointed to Paine being an atheist, but instead supported Paine's deistic beliefs. One of these supporters was Elihu Palmer, a Connecticut preacher who gradually began rejecting Christian beliefs and after losing his eyesight to yellow fever in 1793, became a "full-time deist orator."¹⁸³ Published anonymously in 1794, Palmer wrote "the most extensive apology for *The Age of Reason*", titled *The Examiners Examined: Being a Defense of the Age of Reason*. Palmer argued that man should have no fear in curiosity and the "investigation of knowledge."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 256-257.

¹⁸¹ "To George Washington from Thomas Paine, 20 September 1795," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-18-02-0463>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 18, 1 April–30 September 1795, ed. Carol S. Ebel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015, pp. 712–714.]

¹⁸² Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 258.

¹⁸³ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 231.

¹⁸⁴ Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 96.

In *The Examiners*, Palmer echoes Paine's thoughts on superstitions and myths in Christianity writing, "If the gospel system was so clear, so reasonable, and so powerful, as its advocates assert, what necessity could there have been for miracles to support it? If it had any foundation in reason and nature, there would have been no occasion for mystery, miracle or revelation, to confirm it."¹⁸⁵

For his participation in the American Revolution, Paine was granted land in New Rochelle, New York just north of New York City where he spent the last few years of his life. Old friends had abandoned him and he began to drink in excess. Thomas Paine passed away on June 8, 1809. Only six people were present at Paine's funeral- Madame Bonneville, who Paine knew in France, her two sons, a Quaker friend, and two freed black slaves.

No statues or memorials of Thomas Paine are to be found around Washington D.C., nor does he share the fame of his peers like Washington, Jefferson, or Adams. However, it is questionable if the Revolution would have even unfolded without the words of *Common Sense*, or if the successful victory over the British would have ever happened without the inspiration of *The American Crisis* series. Although Paine and Adams bickered with one another, after his presidency Adams wrote that, "Without the pen of the author of Common Sense, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain." Paine was the apostle to the freethinkers; as what "George Fox was to the Quakers." Paine's writings helped dismantle Old-World thinking, religious institutions, and monarchies; while advancing modernization and humanitarianism. Regardless of

¹⁸⁵ Elihu Palmer, *The Examiners Examined: Being a Defence of the Age of Reason*, 1794 (Evan Early American Imprint Collection).

religious beliefs, Pain's works deserves a "rest on the bookshelf of any patriotic American".¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*, 195.

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