

An Exposé of Thomas Paine’s “Age of Reason” by Rev. James Muir, D.D., George Washington’s Pastor

Rev. James Muir, D.D., pastor of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria, Virginia, where George Washington frequently worshipped, authored a refutation on Thomas Paine’s “Age of Reason,” which was published in 1794, the second year of the French Republic, and during George Washington’s second term as President of the United States.

Frequently asked questions about Thomas Paine:

- 1. Adullam Films’ 2010 production states that “The American Revolution begins with Thomas Paine. The pen of Paine brought about the American Revolution. What kind of spirit was it? The founders based their thinking on Thomas Paine. Paine attacked the Bible, openly contending against the gospel.” Is this statement based upon fact?**

Thomas Paine, a Quaker by affiliation, was Secretary to the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the Continental Congress from April 17, 1777 to January, 1779, leaving for France in 1781. Paine’s “Common Sense,” published in January, 1776, made him the best known and most influential writer in America at the time. To “Common Sense” is ascribed the turning point in favor of independence. However, “Common Sense” is a Scriptural document, Paine’s powerful arguments against monarchial rule and tyranny deriving their source from the Bible, as follows:

“COMMON SENSE

Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession

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. Heathens paid divine honours to their deceased kings and the Christian World hath 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!

As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of Scripture; for the will of the Almighty as declared by Gideon, and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by Kings. All anti-monarchical parts of Scripture, have been very smoothly glossed over in monarchial governments, but they undoubtedly merit the attention of countries which have their governments yet to form. Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's,* is the Scripture doctrine of courts, yet it is no support of monarchical government, for the Jews at that time were without a king, and in a state of vassalage to the Romans.

Monarchy is ranked in Scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reserve is denounced against them. The history of that transaction is worth attending to. The children of Israel being oppressed by the Midianites, Gideon marched against them with a small army, and victory thro' the Divine interposition decided in his favour. The Jews, elated with success, and attributing it to the generalship of Gideon, proposed making him a king, saying, Rule thou over us, thou and thy son, and thy son's son. Here was temptation in its fullest extent; not a kingdom only, but an hereditary one; but Gideon in the piety of his soul replied, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. **THE LORD SHALL RULE OVER YOU.**** Words need not be more explicit; Gideon doth not decline the honour, but denieth their right to give it; neither doth he compliment them with invented declarations of his thanks, but in the positive stile of a prophet, charges them with disaffection to their proper Sovereign, the King of Heaven.

About one hundred and thirty years after this, they fell again into the same error. The hankering which the Jews had for the idolatrous customs of the heathens, is something exceedingly unaccountable; but so it was, that laying hold of the misconduct of Samuel's two sons, who were entrusted with some secular concerns, they came in an abrupt and clamorous manner to Samuel, saying, "Behold thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways, now make us a king to judge us like all the other nations." And here we cannot but observe that their motives were bad, viz. that they might be like unto other nations, i.e. the Heathens, whereas their true glory lay in being as much unlike them as possible. But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, give us a King to judge us; *and Samuel prayed unto the Lord, and the Lord said unto Samuel, hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee, for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, THAT I SHOULD NOT REIGN OVER THEM.* According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken Me, and served other gods: so do they also unto thee. Now therefore hearken unto their voice, howbeit, protest solemnly unto them and show them the manner of the King that shall reign over them,*** i.e.,

* Matthew 22:21

** Judges 8:22,23

*** 1 Samuel 8:6,7,8,9

not of any particular King, but the general manner of the Kings of the earth whom Israel was so eagerly copying after. And notwithstanding the great distance of time and difference of manners, the character is still in fashion...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.*

To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second, claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and imposition on posterity. For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever, and tho' himself might deserve some decent degree of honours of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them. One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in Kings, is that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule, by giving mankind an Ass for a Lion..."¹³²

2. Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," based upon Scriptural arguments, was published in 1776. How is it that in 1794, eighteen years later, Paine's "Age of Reason" was based upon Atheism, and condemned as blasphemy?

It is true that Thomas Paine's change of reasoning from his celebrated "Common Sense," to his denounced and condemned – both in England and the United States – "Age of Reason," made a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn-around. The former 1776 publication motivated America's founders to declare independence from the Crown of Great Britain, while the latter 1794 publication occurred after the conclusion of the American Revolution in 1783; the signing of the U.S. Constitution in 1787; and during George Washington's second term as U.S. President.

In France, Thomas Paine was on the Committee which drafted the new Constitution for France, after the 1789 French Revolution. Seeking persistently and skillfully to save the King of France, he incurred the hostility of Robespierre and other Terrorist leaders. On December 27, 1793, Paine was arrested and confined in Luxembourg prison until November, 1794. "Age of Reason" was condemned, a number of publishers, both in England and America, being tried in court on a charge of "blasphemy" for publishing this book, to include Richard Carlile and Thomas Williams (June 24, 1797), the latter being sentenced to one year's imprisonment. It was "Age of Reason," which caused Thomas Paine to be branded as an atheist.¹³³

However, this 1794 publication had no influence whatever upon the founding fathers of the American Republic, being published seven years after the U.S.

Constitution had been signed and adopted. Moreover, in George Washington's personal Library of books at Mount Vernon, inventoried after his death in 1799, there is a refutation of "Age of Reason." The entry is as follows: "Fisher, Miers. Lawyer. (1748-1819). A Reply to the false reasoning in the "Age of Reason" to which are added, some thoughts on idolatry; on the devil; and on the origin of moral evil; on educating young men for the Gospel Ministry."

Rev. Dr. James Muir's Refutation of Thomas Paine's "Age of Reason:"

"To the Members of the PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
residing at ALEXANDRIA.

My dear Friends and Brethren,

Discourses, immediately for your use, naturally claim your protection. Any publication in the form of Sermons may be laid aside by many without examination. With the name, something forbidding is connected. My sentiments on this interesting subject might have been conveyed under another form. This is the most familiar. It also admits great variety. Sober minds do not reject a dress which is decent, and fit for the season, because it is not altogether fashionable.

The propriety of discussing a subject which has already been fully, repeatedly, and in the most masterly manner discussed may be doubted. The season seemed to require it. If infidelity triumph, the triumph must be stopped. I offer nothing entirely new; neither do I offer a compilation. I have examined the subject carefully. You have my own reflections on it nor have I refused the reflections of others. Assistance from any quarter was cheerfully received.

"The Age of Reason" discovers great ignorance of the subject which it pretends to illustrate, and *an utter contempt for Revelation*, and for all its advocates. It would be very easy to take the book page by page, and to establish fully all these charges. A disputatious spirit had led to such a tract. For disputation I have no taste: my only wish is to promote the truth. To oppose scorn to scorn, appears to me very improper on so serious a subject. I lay down certain principles, and show how these may be applied. Either this vain book is full of groundless assertions and blasphemous boasting, or the principles which I have attempted to establish are entirely false. I can, for my own part, as soon doubt my own existence as these principles. I am not singular in this: many to whom I address myself have the same conviction, and few can bring themselves to believe that, that conviction is illusive. If the faith of the one be confirmed, and the doubts of the other removed, I shall not think my labour has been lost.

Inelegancies might have been avoided by omitting observations suggested by the state of my immediate charge, and the occurrences of the moment; but as my aim is usefulness rather than elegance, I have ventured the following discourses abroad in their native dress, without any attempt to modernize them.

I offer them to my pastoral charge as an evidence of my concern for their welfare.

Should some copies of these discourses find their way among those, in the island of Bermuda, for whom I once labored, let my old friends know the tender desire which I still entertain for their welfare, and the satisfaction which I should feel in being still able to promote that in any way.

I think myself entitled to the prayers of my people, that this work, thro' the Divine blessing, may be accepted by the public, and useful to the Christian cause.

Christianity proceeding from God must stand. No weapon formed for its destruction shall prosper. Boldly therefore I leave my own charge, and the Christian church in general, in the guardian care and the enriching blessing of our Divine Redeemer.

Your servant,
In the gospel of Jesus Christ,
JAMES MUIR.

Alexandria, November 24th, 1794.

(Excerpted from, *The Truth about the Founding Fathers of the American Republic*, © 2013 by Dr. Catherine Millard.)