

THOMAS PAINE AND THE AGE OF REASON'S ATTACK ON THE BIBLE

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He was, in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, a "filthy little atheist."¹ In so branding Thomas Paine, Roosevelt reflected a sentiment shared by many Americans in the 1790s. While this epithet misrepresents Paine, it points to the fall from grace suffered by the "darling of the young Republic" in the theological firestorm created by *The Age of Reason*.² Contemporary reaction to Paine and *The Age of Reason* was remarkable, perhaps even unparalleled in American history, and this alone makes it worthy of careful examination. John Adams said in 1805: "I know not whether any Man in the World has had any more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine."³ The events surrounding the publication of *The Age of Reason*, however, are more than fascinating history. They provide a unique window into "late eighteenth-century attitudes toward scripture and religion as well as toward the place of religion in society and government."⁴

Pamphleteer, political scientist, religious thinker, and one of the first to issue a public call for American independence, Thomas Paine was born in Thetford, England, on 29 January 1737. After a checkered career as a corset maker, schoolmaster, shopkeeper, and customs inspector, he traveled to America, arriving in Philadelphia in November 1774. With a letter of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, he was soon employed as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*.⁵

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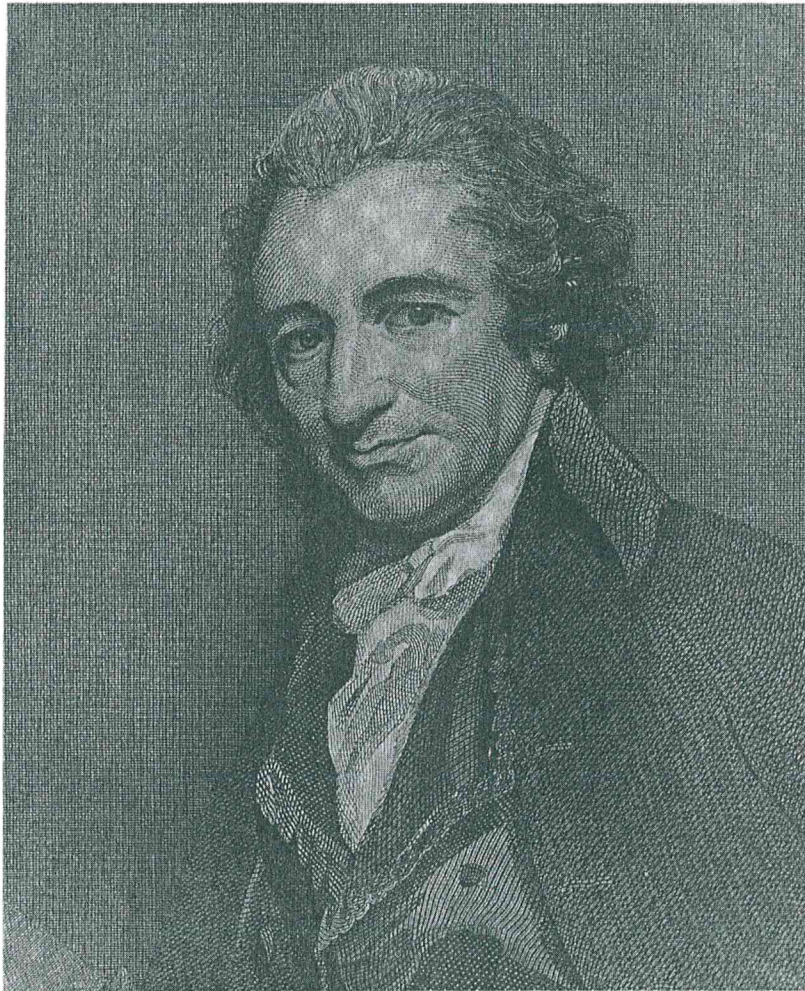
¹Theodore Roosevelt, *Gouverneur Morris* (Boston, 1888), 251.

²Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists* (Lawrence, Kan., 1992), 209.

³James B. Peabody, ed., *John Adams* (New York, 1973), 387.

⁴Edward H. Davidson and William J. Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority* (Bethlehem, 1994), 88.

⁵Alfred O. Aldridge, *Man of Reason* (New York, 1959); Moncure D. Conway, *Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York, 1983); Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (London, 1976); Philip Foner, "Thomas Paine," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner (New York, 1945), vol. 1, ix-xlvi; David F. Hawke, *Paine* (New York, 1974); Mark Philip, *Paine* (Oxford, 1989); William M. Van der Weyde, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, vol. 1 (New Rochelle, 1925); Audrey Williamson, *Thomas Paine* (New York, 1973); Jerome Wilson and William Ricketson, *Thomas Paine*, rev. ed. (Boston, 1989).



Thomas Paine, engraving by William Sharp after a portrait by George Romney, 1792.

Paine took a strong interest in rising political tensions. At first he advocated reconciliation between Britain and the colonies, but after the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775 he changed his mind and pushed for independence. In January 1776, Paine published *Common Sense*, where he issued a public call for independence. Written in simple yet forceful language that was easily read and understood, *Common Sense* became a best-seller overnight, and soon became the most widely circulated pamphlet in America. By year's end as many as half a million copies had been sold, with some of its most incisive paragraphs reprinted in newspapers all over the colonies.⁶

The success of *Common Sense* was not limited to the colonies. On 12 March 1776, the London press reported that *Common Sense* "is read to all ranks; and as many as read, so many become converted . . ." ⁷ It was promptly translated into French and published in Paris on 4 May 1776, where it was also widely read. Silas Deane, American Commissioner to France, wrote on 18 August 1776 that *Common Sense* "has a greater run, if possible, here than in America."⁸

During the Revolution, Paine continued to aid the patriots' cause. His greatest contribution was a series of highly influential tracts entitled *The American Crisis* (1776-83), which bolstered the flagging morale of both the troops and the civilian population, further adding to his acclaim. Even Thomas Jefferson would later note, "No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style; in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language."⁹

Returning to England in 1787, Paine continued his work as a propagandist, encouraging both France and England to form republics. There he answered British statesman Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in his book *The Rights of Man* (1791-92), where he openly called upon the British to overthrow the monarchy. The circulation of this work was again phenomenal, both at home and abroad. William Pitt, fearing that Paine would incite the masses to a bloody revolution, had him indicted for treason. Paine, however, escaped to France before the trial and was convicted in absentia. In France he was hailed as a cham-

⁶Bernard Bailyn, "Common Sense," in *Fundamental Testaments of the American Revolution*, Library of Congress Symposia on the American Revolution (Washington, 1973), 8, 11, 19-21; Philip Foner, "Thomas Paine," in *Complete Writings*, vol. 1, xiv; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine*, 79; Kerry S. Walters, *Rational Infidels* (Durango, Col., 1992), 121-22; Adrian Brunel, "The Repercussions of Thomas Paine," *History Today* 2 (1952): 191.

⁷Quoted in Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 42.

⁸Silas Deane, *The Deane Papers: 1774-1790*, vol. 1 (New York, 1886-1890), 214.

⁹Thomas Jefferson, "To Francis Wayles Eppes," in *The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Edwin Betts and James Bear Jr. (Columbia, Mo., 1966), 438.

pion, granted French citizenship, and elected to the revolutionary French Convention in September 1792.¹⁰

In the Convention he aligned himself with the moderate Girondin faction, which was overthrown on 2 June 1793 by its radical rival, the "Mountain," a group led by Maximilien Robespierre. Purged from the Convention, most of the Girondins were either driven to suicide or executed during the Reign of Terror that followed. Paine was spared this fate, but thereafter rarely attended the Convention, itself a subordinate part of the tyrannical government of the Terror. Disillusioned by these events, Paine penned *The Age of Reason*, Part I.

Paine later explained his reasons for beginning his work in a letter to Samuel Adams:

I have said in the first page of the first part of that work that it had long been my intention to publish my thoughts upon religion, but that I had reserved it to a later time of life. I have now to inform you why I wrote it and published it at the time I did.

In the first place, I saw my life in continual danger. My friends were falling as fast as the guillotine could cut their heads off, and as I every day expected the same fate, I resolved to begin my work. I appeared to myself to be on my death-bed, for death was on every side of me, and I had no time to lose. This accounts for my writing it at the time I did . . .

In the second place, the people of France were running headlong into atheism, and I had the work translated and published in their own language to stop them in that career, and fix them to the first article (as I have before said) of every man's creed who has any creed at all, *I believe in God*.¹¹

The downfall of the Girondins and the ensuing Reign of Terror were harbingers of what awaited Paine. On 27 December 1793, following recent passage of a motion to exclude foreigners from the Convention, the Committee of General Surety ordered Paine's arrest. Early the next morning he was taken to the prison of Luxembourg. On the way, he managed to place Part I of *The Age of Reason* into the hands of Joel Barlow, an American friend. Paine felt that the manuscript was "in his hands . . . more safe than in my possession in prison; and, not knowing what might be the fate in France either of the writer

¹⁰Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 45; Philip Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 1, 345; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine*, 219.

¹¹Thomas Paine, "To Samuel Adams," in *Complete Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, vol. 2, 1436; cf. Harry H. Clark, "Thomas Paine," in *Thomas Paine*, rev. ed., ed. Harry H. Clark (New York, 1961), xxiv-xxv; Herbert Morais, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York, 1934), 122.

or the work, I addressed it to the protection of the citizens of the United States."¹² Paine languished in prison until the American ambassador, James Monroe, claimed him as an American citizen and obtained his release ten months later. Paine, near death, convalesced at Monroe's home until April 1796.¹³

During Paine's imprisonment, Part I of *The Age of Reason* began to receive widespread circulation. Although written to prevent the French from "running headlong into atheism," only a minor part of the work is directed against the extreme rationalism of the Jacobins. Instead, Paine advocated deistic religion and loosed a savage attack on Christianity. Arguing that Christianity failed to conform to the dictates of reason, he compared it to Greek mythology and suggested that it was nothing more than a collection of fables. He rejected the idea of biblical revelation and warned against the three modes of superstition in Christianity: mystery, miracle, and prophecy. In their place he offered reason and scientific observation.¹⁴

The theological community reacted immediately, and while convalescing in Monroe's home, Paine learned of several responses to his work. In his preface to Part II he recorded:

I have seen, since I have been at liberty, several publications written, some in America and some in England, as answers to the former part of "The Age of Reason." If the authors of these can amuse themselves by so doing, I shall not interrupt them. They may write against the work, and against me, as much as they please; they do me more service than they intend, and I can have no objection that they write on. They will find, however, by this second part, without its being written as an answer to them, that they must return to their work, and spin their cobweb over again. The first is brushed away by accident.

They will now find that I have furnished myself with a Bible and a Testament; and I can say also that I have found them to be much worse books than I had conceived. If I have erred in anything in the former part of "The Age of Reason," it has been by speaking better of some parts of those books than they have deserved.

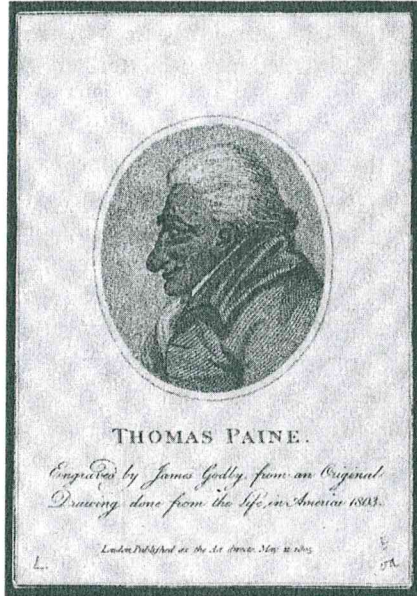
I observe that all my opponents resort, more or less, to what they call Scripture evidence and Bible authority to help them out . . . I will, however, put them right, that if they should be disposed to write anymore, they may know how to begin.¹⁵

¹²Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Complete Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, vol. 1, 515.

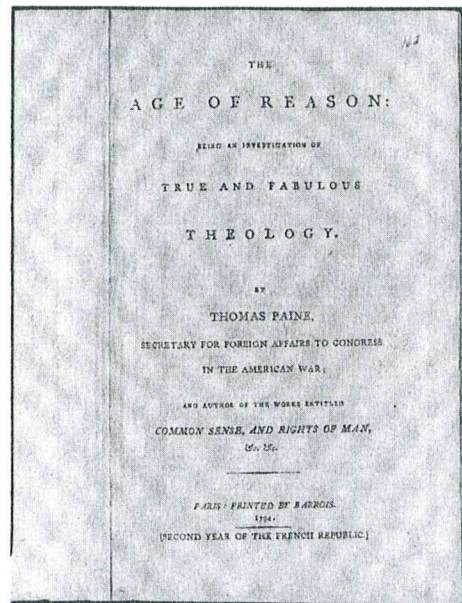
¹³Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 230; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 105-6; Hesketh Pearson, *Tom Paine* (New York, 1937), 226.

¹⁴Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 70-87; Philip, *Paine*, 94-113; Walters, *Rational Infidels*, 128-50; Wilson and Ricketson, *Paine*, 84-94.

¹⁵Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 516-17.



Thomas Paine, engraving by James Godby, 1805, from an original drawing by Edward Stacey. A rather unflattering image—the product, no doubt, of Paine's tarnished reputation.



The Age of Reason, Part I, 1794. An early title page.

Since the writers who had attacked Part I had relied on "Scripture evidence and Bible authority," Paine designed Part II as a proof that the Bible is not the word of God. Although he had written Part I without access to the Scriptures, Paine now examined the Old and New Testaments, and found them full of "glaring absurdities, contradictions and falsehoods."¹⁶ If Part I disputed the tenets of Christianity in general, Part II was a book-by-book refutation of the Scriptures written in a tone of outrage and ridicule. At times Paine was sarcastic:

I come to the book of Ruth, an idle, bungling story, foolishly told, nobody knows by whom, about a strolling country-girl, creeping slyly to bed with her cousin Boaz. Pretty stuff indeed, to be called the Word of God!¹⁷

More typically his language was angry, slashing, violent:

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.¹⁸

In short, Paine wrote not to probe, explain, or convince but to overwhelm and destroy. He finished his work in October 1795, and *The Age of Reason*, Part II was off the presses before year's end.¹⁹

Ironically, Paine had used the Scriptures to attack the monarchy twenty years earlier in *Common Sense*, implying that the Bible was God's authoritative word:

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.²⁰

The final clause, "or the scripture is false," is particularly revealing, for it suggests that to think the Scriptures could be untrue, contradictory, or irrational, would be absurd.

¹⁶Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 582.

¹⁷Morais, *Deism*, 122-23; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 535.

¹⁸Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 597.

¹⁹Bailyn, "Common Sense," 21.

²⁰Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in *Complete Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, vol. 1, 12.

While Paine could have changed his views on Scripture since the publication of *Common Sense*, a brief notation in John Adams' autobiography concerning a meeting with Paine early in 1776 suggests otherwise:

I told him [Paine] further, that his Reasoning from the Old Testament was ridiculous, and I could hardly think him sincere. At this he laughed, and said he had taken his Ideas in that part from Milton: and then expressed a Contempt of the Old Testament and indeed of the Bible at large, which surprized me. He saw that I did not relish this, and soon check'd himself, with these Words "However I have some thoughts of publishing my Thoughts on Religion, but I believe it will be best to postpone it, to the latter part of Life."²¹

It is likely, then, that Paine's appeal to scriptural authority in *Common Sense* was purely pragmatic. He understood clearly the Bible's appeal to his Protestant audience as well as the need to strip the monarchy of its scriptural foundation. He was happy to use the Bible, regardless of his own personal opinion of it, to accomplish his ends.

By the 1790s there was nothing novel about attacking the Scriptures. Most critics, however, had shown restraint, making only partial or subtle attacks. Moreover, their assaults were often addressed to the educated and social elite. The English deist Thomas Chubb (1679-1747) had tried to cross these barriers and write for a general audience a generation earlier but had only limited success. Part II of *The Age of Reason* became, for all practical purposes, the first work to assert—in clear, forthright language the common person could understand and appreciate—that the Bible is not the word of God. That the common person was Paine's intended audience was clear to Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, Paine's chief antagonist: "I shall, designedly, write this and the following letters in a popular manner; hoping that, thereby, they may stand a chance of being perused by that class of readers, for whom your work seems to be particularly calculated, and who are most likely to be injured by it."²² With Paine's attack on the Bible, the debate moved out of the parlor and into the street.

²¹*Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, vol. 3, *Autobiography to October 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 333.

²²John Orr, *English Deism* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1934), 152-55, 218; John M. Robertson, *A Short History of Freethought* (London, 1899), 314; Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791* (Oxford, 1986), 277; Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 234; Morais, *Deism*, 120-22; W. Neil, "The Criticism and the Theological Use of the Bible, 1700-1950," in *The Cambridge History of The Bible*, vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge, 1963), 250; James H. Smylie, "Clerical Perspectives on Deism," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6 (1972-73): 209; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 96-97, 100-2; Edward Royle, *The Infidel Tradition from Paine to Bradlaugh* (London, 1976), 3; Richard Watson, *An Apology for the Bible* (Nashville, 1910), 16-17.

The Age of Reason, Part II is a masterpiece of economy, clarity, and detail—the result of Paine's literary skill and his methodical book-by-book criticism of the Bible. Despite its detailed analysis, his attack on the Bible can be reduced to two major arguments, both complementary to the rational argument of Part I. The first is textual; the second is moral.²³

In the textual argument, Paine carefully analyzed the biblical text to highlight its alleged errors and contradictions. The large portion of *The Age of Reason*, Part II devoted to this task makes it clear that these innumerable “errors” constitute Paine's most important argument for rejecting the Bible as the word of God. He writes,

It is, I believe, impossible to find in any story upon record so many and such glaring absurdities, contradictions and falsehoods as are in those books. They are more numerous and striking than I had any expectation of finding when I began this examination, and far more so than I had any idea of when I wrote the former part of “*The Age of Reason*.”²⁴

The logic behind Paine's argument is best represented by a syllogism:

Major Premise: The word of God cannot contain errors or contradictions.

Minor Premise: The Bible contains errors and contradictions.

Conclusion: The Bible cannot be the word of God.

The conclusion in this syllogism represents Paine's thesis. He writes that “I will in the progress of this work produce such other evidence as even a priest cannot deny, and show from that evidence, that the Bible is not entitled to credit as being the Word of God.”²⁵ The burden of the book was to demonstrate the minor premise, which Paine attempted to do on nearly every page. Paine considered his major premise self-evident, as shown in his discussion of the relationship between divine inspiration and truthfulness.

According to Paine, since “God is true,”²⁶ divine inspiration is totally incompatible with contradiction or falsehood: “Truth is a uniform thing; and as to inspiration

²³Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 232.

²⁴Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 582.

²⁵Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 519.

²⁶Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 555.



"Mad Tom in a Rage," by unknown artist, ca. 1801, depicts Paine trying to destroy the foundations of America with the help of his old friend Satan.

Satan: "Pull away. Pull away my son. Don't fear. I'll give you all my assistance."

Paine: "Oh! I fear it is stronger rooted than I expected, but with the assistance of my Old Friend and a little more brandy I will bring it down."

and revelation, were we to admit it, it is impossible to suppose it can be contradictory."²⁷ A few pages later he reiterates his view: "As to inspiration, it is altogether out of the question; we may as well attempt to unite truth and falsehood as inspiration and contradiction."²⁸ The Bible could not err even in "nonreligious" matters such as history or science, and yet be infallible in matters of faith and practice. Either it was God's infallible word or it was an impious and blundering fraud; there was no middle ground. That Paine ascribed to such an all-or-nothing principle is clear:

Now, if these men, Matthew and Luke, set out with a falsehood between them (as these two accounts show they do) in the very commencement of their history of Jesus Christ, and of whom and what he was, what authority (as I have before asked) is there left for believing the strange things they tell us afterward? If they cannot be believed in their account of his natural genealogy, how are we to believe them when they tell us he was the Son of God begotten by a ghost, and that an angel announced this in secret to his mother? If they lied in one genealogy, why are we to believe them in the other?²⁹

The contradictory impossibilities contained in the Old Testament and the New put them in the case of a man who swears for and against. Either evidence convicts him of perjury, and equally destroys reputation.³⁰

There are, however, some glaring contradictions, which, exclusive of the fallacy of the pretended prophecies, are sufficient to show the story of Jesus Christ to be false.³¹

The Bible, for Paine, was like a house of cards. If he could remove but a single card, the entire structure would topple.

Paine's second argument for rejecting the Bible as God's word was his claim that the Bible is inconsistent with or impugns the character of God. Many of the actions of the Israelites, said to have been carried out by God's express command, were horrible crimes, shocking to humanity and contrary to God's moral justice:

We read in the books ascribed to Moses, Joshua, etc., that they (the Israelites) came by stealth upon whole nations of people, who, as history itself shows, had given them

²⁷Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 236; cf. Thomas Paine, "A Letter to Mr. Erskine," in *Complete Writings*, ed. Philip Foner, vol. 2, 737, 743-44; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 572.

²⁸Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 583.

²⁹Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 572.

³⁰Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 594.

³¹Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 571.

no offense; that they put all those nations to the sword; that they spared neither age nor infancy; that they utterly destroyed men, women and children; that they left not a soul to breathe.³²

The logic behind Paine's moral argument can also be represented by a syllogism:

Major Premise: God cannot be morally unjust.
 Minor Premise: The Bible attributes moral injustice to God.
 Conclusion: The Bible cannot be the word of God.

The conclusion is again Paine's thesis in Part II of *The Age of Reason*. The major premise, although foundational, was again considered self-evident:

To believe, therefore, the Bible to be true, we must *unbelieve* all our belief in the moral justice of God; . . . It is a duty incumbent on every true Deist, that he vindicate the moral justice of God against the calumnies of the Bible.³³

The minor premise needed demonstration, and this Paine sought to do through the Old Testament narrative:

There are matters in that book, [the Bible, primarily the Pentateuch and Joshua] said to be done by the *express command* of God, that are as shocking to humanity and to every idea we have of moral justice as anything done by Robespierre, by Carrier, by Joseph le Bon, in France, by the English Government in the East Indies, or by any other assassin in modern times.³⁴

As to the character of the book, [Joshua] it is horrid; it is a military history of rapine and murder, as savage and brutal as those recorded of his predecessor in villainy and hypocrisy, Moses; and the blasphemy consists, as in the former books, in ascribing those deeds to the orders of the Almighty.³⁵

Thus, to show that the Bible attributed immoral actions to God was to demonstrate that the Bible is not God's word.

³²Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 232; Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 518.

³³Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 518, 523.

³⁴Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 518.

³⁵Paine, *The Age of Reason*, vol. 1, 531-32

Anything written by one as well-known as Paine was sure to attract attention, and as usual the reception of his work was sensational. In America alone, *The Age of Reason* went through seventeen editions and sold tens of thousands of copies between 1794 and 1796. So popular was the work that it was said that *The Age of Reason* could be found in nearly every village in America. Lyman Beecher, a student at Yale from 1793-97, in later years recalled: "That was the day of the infidelity of the Tom Paine school. Boys that dressed flax in the barn, as I used to, read Tom Paine and believed him; I read, and fought him all the way."³⁶ A Massachusetts circuit rider between 1797 and 1799 found that the book, "was highly thought of by many who knew neither what the age they lived in, or [what] reason, was."³⁷ Some expressed concern about the effect of *The Age of Reason* on the general populace. One Massachusetts newspaper complained, "Thomas Paine, that infidel in religion . . . seduces many of you, my countrymen. You read his 'Age of reason,' [sic] and think the Bible a last year's Almanack."³⁸ In a letter from Pennsylvania dated 16 October 1794, Joseph Priestley reported being alarmed that *The Age of Reason* was "much read" and had "made [a] great impression here."³⁹ Cause for alarm did not soon abate. As late as 1799 Moses Hoge reported that he "was credibly informed when in Philadelphia that there have been as many as 100,000 copies of that scurrilous & blasphemous production, *The Age of Reason* disposed of in our country in the space of the last year."⁴⁰

The Age of Reason also generated a great deal of excitement in both England and France. English clergyman Richard Watson felt constrained to respond to Paine because he would have "unsettled the faith of thousands."⁴¹ Ironically, it was the Crown that became unsettled. In fact, government officials became so alarmed at

³⁶Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 19; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine*, 247; Russel B. Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830* (New York, 1960), 214; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), 226; Morais, *Deism*, 121; Barbara M. Cross, ed., *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1961), 27.

³⁷J. E. A. Smith, *The History of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, from the Year 1800 to the Year 1876* (Springfield, Mass., 1876), 146.

³⁸*Thomas's Massachusetts Spy*, 18 November 1795, quoted in Anson Ely Morse, *The Federalist Party in Massachusetts to the Year 1800* (Princeton, 1909), 109.

³⁹*The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. John T. Rutt, vol. 1, part 2, *Life and Correspondence* (London, 1832), 276.

⁴⁰John Blair Hoge, *Life of Moses Hoge*, ed. Henry M. Brimm (Richmond, 1964), 97-98.

⁴¹Conway, *Paine*, 2:254; Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, 12; cf. Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place*, 3d ed. (New York, 1919), 28-29.

the effect of Paine's book on the masses that its publisher, Thomas Williams, was found guilty of blasphemy and imprisoned in 1797. Furthermore, the British ministry persecuted anyone who distributed, discussed, or even read *The Age of Reason*. Some were arrested for merely displaying Paine's portrait.⁴²

The clearest testimony to the influence of *The Age of Reason* is seen in the number of responses attacking the work. During Paine's lifetime, Christian pamphleteers produced nearly 70 answers to *The Age of Reason*, and these critics in turn became the target of several rejoinders, including an anonymous pamphlet attributed to Paine's friend, Elihu Palmer. In a further rebuttal, Palmer's work was immediately answered by Newport clergyman William Patten.⁴³

The Age of Reason was also attacked in periodicals. As Herbert Morais notes:

Paine was described in newspapers as vain, ignorant, bold, superficial and unoriginal, while his opponents received favorable consideration. Magazines likewise ridiculed the advocate of deism and warned their readers not to peruse his work.⁴⁴

The clergy also used the pulpit to counter *The Age of Reason*, denouncing deistic principles in general and Paine in particular.⁴⁵

⁴²Conway, *Paine*, 260-69; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 106; Neil, "The Criticism and the Theological Use of the Bible," 251; Franklyn Prochaska, "Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* Revisited," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (1972): 571, 574; Philip Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 1, 462.

⁴³Michael Lasser, "In Response to *The Age of Reason*, 1794-1799," *Bulletin of Bibliography* 25 (1967): 41-43; Galye T. Pendleton, "Thirty Additional Titles Relating to the *Age of Reason*," *British Studies Monitor* 10 (1980): 36-45; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 108-16; Morse, *The Federalist Party in Massachusetts*, 217-19; Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York, 1918), 75-76; Abraham Binns, *Remarks on a Publication, Entitled, "A Serious Admonition to the Disciples of Thomas Paine, and All Other Infidels"* (Stockport, 1797); John Coward, *Thomas Paine Vindicated, Being a Short Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff's Reply to Thomas Paine's Age of Reason . . . by a Deist* (London, 1796); Thomas Dutton, *A Vindication of "The Age of Reason," by Thomas Paine* (London, 1795); Benjamin Kingsbury, *An Answer to an Address to the People of Great Britain, by the Bishop of Llandaff, in Another Address to the People* (London, 1798); Allan Macleod, *The Bishop of Llandaff's "Apology for the Bible" Examined* (London, 1796); Elihu Palmer, *The Examiners Examined* (New York, 1794); William Patten, *Christianity the True Theology, and Only Perfect Moral System, in Answer to "The Age of Reason"* (Warren, R.I., 1795).

⁴⁴Morse, *The Federalist Party in Massachusetts*, 217-19; Jerry Knudson, "The Rage Around Tom Paine," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 53 (1969): 34-63; Morais, *Deism*, 168-69.

⁴⁵Morais, *Deism*, 172-73; Michael Haykin, "'The Oracles of God,'" *Churchman* 103 (1989): 63-65.

The most serious and distinguished response to *The Age of Reason* was *An Apology for the Bible* (1796) by Bishop Richard Watson, which most theologians and apologists accepted as the standard answer. Even Princeton's Archibald Alexander considered it "far better than any thing I could produce."⁴⁶ Perhaps William Meade's description of an encounter with Mason (Parson) Weems (1759-1825) best summarizes the importance of Bishop Watson's *Apology*:

On an election or court-day at Fairfax Courthouse, I once, in passing to or from the upper country, found Mr. Weems, with a bookcaseful for sale, in the portico of the tavern. On looking at them I saw Paine's "Age of Reason," and, taking it into my hand, turned to him, and asked if it was possible that he could sell such a book. He immediately took out the Bishop of Llandaff's answer, and said, "Behold the antidote. The bane and the antidote are both for you"⁴⁷

Watson's comprehensive *Apology* was soon widely circulated both in England and America. English industrialist David Dale distributed over 3,000 copies to his workmen by 1799. At Harvard University, school officials presented a copy to every student in 1796. It was reprinted many times and translated into French in 1829. *An Apology for the Bible* was so popular that Paine himself was obliged to respond. In a letter addressed to Thomas Jefferson dated 1 October 1800, Paine wrote, "I suppose you have seen, or have heard of the Bishop of Llandaff's answer to my second part of *The Age of Reason*. As soon as I got a copy of it I began a third part, which served also as an answer to the Bishop."⁴⁸ Paine apparently finished this work sometime around 1800, but by then he had fallen into such disfavor in America that the work

⁴⁶Aldridge, *Man of Reason*, 234; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 90; Prochaska, "The Age of Reason Revisited," 567; Van der Weyde, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, vol. 1, 399; James Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D.D.* (New York, 1854), 177.

⁴⁷William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1861), 235.

⁴⁸Morais, *Deism*, 166; Alexander Gordon, "Richard Watson," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee, vol. 60 (New York, 1899), 26; Conway, *Paine*, vol. 2, 252-53; G. S. Boulger, "David Dale," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen, vol. 13 (New York, 1888), 384-85; William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Hicksville, N.Y., 1975), 31; Richard H. Popkin, "The Age of Reason versus The Age of Revelation," in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 158; Davidson and Scheick, *Paine, Scripture, and Authority*, 91; Thomas Paine, "To Thomas Jefferson," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner, vol. 2, 1412.

was not published until 1810, a year after his death, and then only in a mutilated form as *Extracts from a Reply to the Bishop of Llandaff*.⁴⁹

Paine remained in France for a period following the publication of Parts I and II of *The Age of Reason*. In 1802, at the invitation of Jefferson, he returned to the United States. His return, however, was anything but a hero's welcome. His reputation had been destroyed, and he was made the object of repeated and merciless attacks. Representative of these assaults was *The Mercury and New-England Palladium*: "What! Invite to the United States that lying, drunken, brutal infidel, who rejoiced in the opportunity of basking and wallowing in the confusion, devastation, bloodshed, rapine, and murder in which his soul delights?"⁵⁰ Still worse was John Adams's assessment of Paine as "a mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar on a Bitch wolf."⁵¹ Scorned and vilified, Paine had become, in the words of Dixon Wecter, a "hero in reverse."⁵²

Several factors rendered Paine's reputation beyond repair. First, *The Age of Reason's* attack on orthodox Christianity outraged the nation and forever branded him an apostle of atheism. Paine's service to the patriots' cause became a distant memory as his name grew synonymous with treachery and infidelity. Second, Paine's *Letter to George Washington* (1796) had severely criticized Washington for failing to use official channels to secure his release from the Luxembourg prison. Such expressions of bitter contempt further turned public opinion against Paine. Finally, in *Agrarian Justice* (1797) he proposed using inheritance taxes as a means of eliminating economic inequalities. This challenge to the political and economic status quo further eroded what little remained of his reputation. In short, Paine repeatedly played the vitriolic iconoclast, and this, coupled with the excesses of the French Revolution, the partisan politics of the Federalists, and the smothering of deism by revivalism, alienated Paine from mainstream America.

Paine's final years were plagued by failing health, poverty, and social ostracism. He was denied the right to vote, and an attempt was even made on his life. In 1807 he published *Examination of the Prophecies*, a critique of the prophecies concerning

⁴⁹Moncure D. Conway, "An Unpublished Letter of Thomas Paine," *Nation* 62 (1896): 118; Philip Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 2, 764; Van der Weyde, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, vol. 1, 404, vol. 9, 33; Hawke, *Paine*, 345; Lasser, "In Response to *The Age of Reason*," 41; Thomas Paine, "The Will of Thomas Paine," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner, vol. 2, 1498-99.

⁵⁰Knudson, "The Rage Around Tom Paine," 40-63; quoted in Dixon Wecter, "Hero in Reverse," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 18 (1942): 249.

⁵¹Peabody, *John Adams*, 387.

⁵²Wecter, "Hero in Reverse," 243.

the coming of Christ, but it was not well received. Finally, on 8 June 1809, in New York City, the career that began with such promise came to a close. In the end, the one whom Adams had described as the most influential man in the world had become the object of a cruel nursery rhyme:

Poor Tom Paine! There he lies:
Nobody laughs and nobody cries.
Where he has gone or how he fares
Nobody knows and nobody cares.⁵³

⁵³Philip Foner, *Complete Writings*, vol. 2, 848; Frank Smith, *Thomas Paine* (New York, 1938) 326; Wecter, "Hero in Reverse," 243, 251; cf. Thomas Summers, "A Refutation of the Theological Works of Thomas Paine, Not Noticed by Bishop Watson in His 'Apology for the Bible'" in Watson, *An Apology for the Bible*, 14.