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**AN EXAMINATION & CRITIQUE OF
THOMAS PAINE'S
*AGE OF REASON***

by
Joseph P. Gudel

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Gudel is a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Christian apologetics at The Simon Greenleaf School of Law. On the basis of this essay, he was awarded the School's Martin Luther - John Calvin Award for excellence in the field of Jurisprudence at the Commencement exercises on May 10, 1981.

Thomas Paine was one of our country's greatest spokesman for independence and his contributions to the birth of our nation can hardly be minimized. As a writer he was unparalleled in his day. "He was extraordinarily fertile in ideas, and broad minded and progressive. He was in fact a genius."¹ He openly advocated complete freedom for the United States while the members of our Continental Congress were still hoping for a reconciliation with Great Britain.²

In January 1776 his work *Common Sense* was published and became an overnight "best seller". It immediately sold almost a half million copies and newspapers throughout the Colonies ran excerpts from it. This work, more than anything else, pushed the people and the Congress toward declaring independence.³

One of Paine's most inspirational and well known writings came early in the war, shortly after General Washington's army had been thoroughly defeated in the battle of Long Island, Washington's army was in retreat, the Continental Congress fled from Philadelphia to Baltimore, and morale was at its lowest ebb. The British forces appeared invincible.⁴ It was at this time that Paine wrote his *Crisis I* which begins as follows:

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 now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.⁵

Washington had Paine's pamphlet read to his men, and being greatly encouraged, they proceeded on the Christmas Eve of 1776 to cross the Delaware River and achieve their great victory at Trenton.⁶

Throughout his life Paine fought for the economic and political freedoms of the common man. In America he strove "... for reforms ranging from anti-slavery to the abolition of

dueling."⁷ Later on he attempted to instigate a revolution in Great Britain in order to procure economic liberty for the working class. He failed and fled to France where the revolution there was growing more violent every day. He tried to work for the people and yet restrain the excessive bloodshed. For his efforts he was rewarded with imprisonment.⁸

It was while in France that he wrote his famous (or perhaps infamous) work, *The Age of Reason*. It consists of two parts, the first being finished just before his imprisonment, the second part was written after he was released.⁹ This work is an excoriation of "revealed" religion in general, and Christianity in particular, and it is to this that we will now turn our attention.

Thomas Paine was a zealous Deist, which, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century came to be defined as "... belief in a God, or First Cause, who created the world and instituted immutable and universal laws that preclude any alteration as well as divine immanence -- in short, the concept of an 'absentee God.'"¹⁰ Paine, in referring to an earlier writing of his, stated that "... the only true religion is Deism, by which I then meant, and mean now, the belief of one God, and an imitation of His moral character, or the practice of what are called moral virtues."¹¹ At the conclusion of *The age of Reason* Paine states 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 handwriting 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."¹² Paine continues and says that for the Deist "... religion consists in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in His works, and in endeavoring to imitate Him in everything moral, scientific and mechanical."¹³

The Age of Reason went through seventeen editions in America and tens of thousands of copies were sold. Paine had succeeded in bringing Deistic ideas, which up until that time were generally held only by members of the upper classes, to the common people. None of his ideas were unique or novel, yet Paine's ability to reach the masses gave great impetus to Deism. Eric Foner, in his biography of Thomas Paine, states that "*The Age of Reason* became the 'Bible' of American deists, and Paine their hero."¹⁴

Besides promulgating his deistic beliefs in *The Age of Reason* Paine also did not hesitate to vilify Christianity and the Bible. In his conclusion he states that:

Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics. . . . so far as respects the good of man in general, it leads to nothing here or hereafter.¹⁵

To this he adds that "... the age of ignorance commenced with the Christian system."¹⁶

Concerning the Bible Paine says: "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the Word of God. . . for my part, I sincerely detest it."¹⁷ Later he states that "Great objects inspire great thoughts; great munificence excites great gratitude; but the groveling tales and doctrines of the Bible and the Testament are fit only to excite contempt."¹⁸

Paine, at various points in *The Age of Reason*, makes it clear that he is not attempting to attack or ridicule Jesus. "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 practiced . . . has not been exceeded by any."¹⁹ However, he rejects any notion that Jesus was divine: ". . . He was the Son of God in like manner that every other person is -- for the Creator is the Father of All."²⁰

Paine begins his assault against Christianity with some general arguments. First of all, he attempts to draw a parallel between ancient mythology and Christianity. He says that the belief in Jesus to be the Son of God is easily explained.

He was born at a time when the heathen mythology had still some fashion and repute in the world, and that mythology had prepared the people for the belief of such a story . . . it was conformable to the opinions that then prevailed among the people called Gentiles, or Mythologists, and it was those people only that believed it. The Jews, who had kept strictly to the belief of one God, and no more, and who had always rejected the heathen mythology, never credited the story.²¹

Paine believed that most of the New Testament and much of the Old Testament was derived from Greek and Roman mythology. Elsewhere he states that ". . . the Christian mythology is made up partly from the ancient mythology and partly from the Jewish traditions."²²

Another area Paine assaults is the reliability and authenticity of the Biblical documents, the books of the Old and the New Testaments. He says that the first question we must ask is if these books are genuine.²³ He then tries to show that they are not.

Concerning the Gospels he states that they were written ". . . many years after the things they pretend to relate . . ." and that

". . . they have been manufactured, as the books of the Old Testament have been, by other persons that those whose names they bear."²⁴ He believed that all of the New Testament documents were written two or three hundred years after Jesus' death,²⁵ thus, he asserts, we cannot trust anything in them.

In the second part of *The Age of Reason* Paine begins a book by book critique of the Old and New Testaments. It is not possible within the purview of this paper to look at and answer all of his objections. We will, however, examine some of his foremost arguments to see what kind of "problems" and "contradictions" led him to say that ". . . the stupid Bible of the Church . . . teacheth man nothing."²⁶

One of Paine's main fusillades against the Old Testament centers on the authorship of the Pentateuch. He says that:

. . . there is no affirmative evidence that Moses is the author of those books . . . In Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers (for everything in Genesis is prior to the time of Moses, and not the least allusion is made to him therein), the whole, I say, of these books is in the third person; it is always, 'the Lord said unto Moses,' or 'Moses said unto the Lord', or 'Moses said unto the people' or 'the people said unto Moses'; and this is the style and manner that historians use in speaking of the persons whose lives and actions they are writing.²⁷

Paine cites Numbers 12:3 as additional proof that Moses did not write the Pentateuch. "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth." Paine states that ". . . it cannot be admitted as a fact in those books that it is Moses who speaks, without rendering Moses truly ridiculous and absurd."²⁸

Another reference Paine quotes is Genesis 36:31. The verses immediately prior to this give a genealogy of the sons and descendants of Esau and a list of the kings of Edom. Verse 31 says,

"And these are the kings that reigned in Edom, before there reigned any king over the children of Israel." Paine deduces that this passage "... could only have been written after the first king began to reign over them; and, consequently, that book of Genesis, so far from having been written by Moses, could not have been written till the time of Saul at least.²⁹

One final point Paine makes here is that if the accounts recorded in the Pentateuch are true then Moses is one of the most despicable men in all of history. To prove this he points to Numbers 31:13 and following.³⁰ The Israelites had just returned victoriously from battling the Midianites and Moses goes out to meet them.

And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.³¹

Paine states that "among the detestable villains that in any period of the world have disgraced the name of man, it is impossible to find a greater than Moses, if this account is true. Here is an order to butcher the boys, to massacre the mothers and debauch the daughters."³²

Paine's attempts to pillory and repudiate the New Testament center around what he sees as contradictions in the text. A few of these should suffice to show his general thrust.

One apparent contradiction, Paine says, is the different genealogies of Jesus given by Matthew and Luke.

The book of Matthew gives a genealogy by name from David up through Joseph, the husband of Mary, to Christ; and makes there to be twenty-eight generations. The book of Luke gives also a genealogy by name from Christ, through Joseph, the husband of Mary, down to David, and makes these to be forty-three generations; besides which, there are only two names of David and Joseph that are alike in the two lists.³³

Another discrepancy for Paine is the different inscriptions on the cross. Matthew's account states, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."³⁴ Mark's states, "The Kind of the Jews."³⁵ Luke's reads, "This is the King of the Jews."³⁶ And finally, John's says, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."³⁷ From this Paine concludes that the facts here are irreconcilable.³⁸

Similarly, Paine says that the different accounts of the angel's visit to Mary and Joseph are another contradiction. "The story of the angel announcing what the Church calls the 'immaculate conception' is not so much as mentioned in the books ascribed to Mark and John; and is differently related in Matthew and Luke. The former says the angel appeared to Joseph; the latter says it was to Mary."³⁹

One final example of what Paine thought were irreconcilable differences pertain to the resurrection accounts. There are differences in each one, for example, Matthew states that the Jews asked Pilate for a guard to be placed, they sealed the tomb and set a watch. The other Gospel narratives omit these facts. Matthew also says that there was an earthquake, that an angel rolled back the stone and then sat upon it. Again, the other accounts omit this. "Mark says the angel was within the sepulchre, sitting on the right side. Luke says there were two, and they were both standing up; and John says they were both sitting down, one at the head and the other at the feet."⁴⁰

Paine continues and shows some other alleged contradictions

and then concludes that "... if the writers of those four books had gone into a court of justice ... and had they given their evidence in the same contradictory manner as it is here given, they would have been in danger of having their ears cropped for perjury, and would have justly deserved it."⁴¹

Paine, who was not the meekest man "upon the face of the earth," proudly stated, "... I have produced a work that no Bible believer, though writing at his ease, and with a library of Church books about him, can refute."⁴² To this he adds, "And now ... what have ye to say?"⁴³

Perhaps in beginning our critique of Paine's work we may slightly alter Dante's immortal line to read "Abandon all REASON ye who enter here,"⁴⁴ for *The Age of Reason* is neither reasonable nor logical. In fact, the author really had little comprehension or understanding of what Christianity actually is.

There are numerous places within Paine's work where he either deliberately misrepresents Christian beliefs or misunderstands them. For instance, Paine declares that only eight or nine persons allegedly saw Jesus after His resurrection.⁴⁵ But the Scriptures show that all of the apostles, except Judas, saw the risen Lord, at least four or five women saw Him, and Paul asserts that Jesus appeared to over five hundred at one time.⁴⁶

Paine also states that Jesus probably contemplated delivering the Jewish nation from the Romans.⁴⁷ At various times though, Jesus specifically denied this. At one time the people tried to take Him and forcefully make Him their king, but He refused and left them.⁴⁸ At His trial before Pilate He plainly declared that His kingdom was not of this world.⁴⁹ Instead of being a political savior Jesus said that He came to give His life as a ransom for our sins.⁵⁰

Elsewhere Paine commented that the amount of time between Jesus' crucifixion and His "so called" ascension was "but a few days."⁵¹ But the New Testament says that forty days transpired.⁵²

There are many other instances of Paine's ignorance. He said that Moses was not an Israelite,⁵³ that Jesus was not really well known in Israel,⁵⁴ that the only Apostle near the crucifixion was Peter,⁵⁵ and he thought that Luke was supposed to have been one of the apostles and an eyewitness.⁵⁶ Thus, even a precursory reading of *The Age of Reason* would show that Paine was either vastly ignorant of what he was talking about or a deliberate deceiver.

But we must move on in our critique. Throughout his diatribe against Christianity Paine continually asserted that he was not attacking Jesus, rather, he thought Jesus was a virtuous man whose moral teachings have never been surpassed.⁵⁷ And yet Paine still denied the Deity of Christ. But if he would have thought of the consequences of what he was saying he would have seen that this position is logically inconsistent. Jesus could not have been a simply a man, with great moral teachings, and yet have made the claims that He did. The great Catholic apologist G. K. Chesterton illustrates this in his book *The Everlasting Man*.

Normally speaking, the greater a man is, the less likely he is to make the very greatest claim. Outside the unique case we are considering, the only kind of man who ever does make that kind of claim is a very small man; a secretive or self-centered monomaniac It is possible to find here and there human beings who make this supremely super-human claim. It is possible to find them in a lunatic asylums; in padded cells; possibly in straight waistcoats. But . . . nobody supposes that Jesus of Nazareth was that sort of person. No modern critic in his five wits thinks that the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount was a horrible half-witted imbecile that might be scrawling stars on the walls of a cell. No atheist or blasphemer believes

that the author of the Parable of the Prodigal Son was a monster with one mad idea like a cyclops with one eye. . . . Yet by all analogy we have really to put him there or else in the highest place of all.

The well known modern apologist C. S. Lewis further expounds on this:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁵⁹

One of Paine's first attacks in his book was in trying to equate the Bible with ancient heathen mythology. This was thoroughly refuted in the 1960's by Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon. Dr. Gordon, who was not a Christian and thus cannot be attacked as being partial, showed in his book *Before the Bible: the common background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* that ancient mythology was derived from Hebrew sources and not vice versa. For example Hercules came from the story of Samson and the fall of the Titans came from the fall of the angels.⁶⁰

Likewise Paine's assertion, that the New Testament Gospels were not written until two or three hundred years after Jesus, does not correspond with any facts. By A. D. 160 there already was a harmony of the four Gospels done by Tatian. One of the earliest

New Testament manuscripts in existence is the Bodmer Papyrus II which is dated about A. D. 150-200 and contains nearly all of the Gospel according to John. Another earlier manuscript, the John Rylands Manuscript, is dated about A. D. 100-130. This manuscript was found in Egypt and contains a portion of John's Gospel.⁶¹ In addition to this we have numerous writings of the Church Fathers, who quote extensively from the Gospels as well as the rest of the New Testament, all of which dates from A. D. 100 to A. D. 200.⁶²

Dr. William F. Albright, probably the world's greatest Biblical archaeologist stated in an interview for *Christianity Today*: "In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D. (very probably sometimes between about A.D. 50 and 75)."⁶³ Like Dr. Gordon, Dr. Albright also was (apparently) not a Christian. Thus we can see that Paine's assertions regarding the Gospel documents are fallacious.

As we look at the various arguments Paine raises against the Old Testament we will see that they too are as erroneous as his previous objections. In attacking the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, Paine says the Moses could not have written the books because they are written in the third person, a style more fitting for historical writing. The answer to this is twofold. First of all, it is very possible that Moses may have dictated his work to scribes. This was a common practice back then for eminent men. And secondly, Moses may have actually written in the third person. There are certainly precedents for this in that other writers of antiquity, such as Josephus, Xenophon, and Julius Caesar, all wrote their works in this style.

Paine continuing his argument, states that Moses would be "truly ridiculous and absurd"⁶⁴ if he were the author because of the verse in Numbers saying that Moses "... was very meek, above

all the men which were upon the face of the earth."⁶⁵ There are several legitimate answers to this. John W. Haley, in his classic book *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, states:

Moses, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, was writing history "objectively." Hence he speaks of himself as freely as he would of any other person, It is also to be observed that he records his own faults and sins with the same fidelity and impartiality. It is remarked by Calmet: "As he praises himself here without pride, so he will blame himself elsewhere with humility."⁶⁶

It is also possible that the word "meek" may not be the best translation. "It may be observed, further, that the word 'anav', meek, is frequently interchanged with the cognate word 'ani', and that the meaning may be 'bowed down', or 'oppressed.'"⁶⁷

Paine assumes in his next argument that the reference to kings reigning in Israel, in Genesis 36:31, proves that this verse could not have been written until the time of Saul at the earliest. The fallacy in Paine's argument lies in his presupposing that predictive prophecy is impossible. Shortly before this God had promised Jacob that "... a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins."⁶⁸ Thus all Moses was doing was reaffirming God's promise that there would indeed be kings reigning over Israel.

Finally, in his tirade against the Old Testament Paine cites the destruction of the Midianites by Israel and Moses' order to preserve the "keep alive for yourselves" all the female Midianites who were virgins.⁶⁹ Paine says that it is impossible that "... an order to butcher the boys, to massacre the mothers and debauch the daughters" could have come from God.⁷⁰ There are two points we must examine here; first, the order to destroy the Midianite nation, and secondly, the order to keep the young Midianite women alive.

Bishop Richard Watson, who was a contemporary of Paine's, wrote *An Apology For the Bible* in reply to *The Age of Reason*. The Bishop asks:

... is it repugnant to reason that God, should, by an express act of his providence, destroy a wicked nation? I am fond of considering the goodness of God as the leading principle of his conduct towards mankind, of considering his justice as subservient to his mercy. He punishes individuals and nations with the rod of his wrath; but I am persuaded that all his punishments originate in his abhorrence of sin; are calculated to lessen its influence; and are proofs of his goodness; inasmuch as it may not be possible for Omnipotence itself to communicate supreme happiness to the human race, whilst they continue servants of sin.⁷¹

Earlier in Israel's history a similar situation arose when God had the Israelites destroy the Canaanites. The two incidents are parallel and the comments Bishop Watson makes concerning the Canaanites apply equally to the case of the Midianites. Watson states:

As to the Canaanites . . . they were idolaters, sacrificers of their own crying or smiling infants; devourers of human flesh; addicted to unnatural lust; immersed in the filthiness of all manner of vice. Now, I think, it will be impossible to prove, that it was a proceeding contrary to God's moral justice to exterminate so wicked a people. He made the Israelites the executors of his vengeance; and in doing this, he gave such an evident and terrible proof of his abomination of vice, as could not fail to strike the surrounding nations with astonishment and terror, and to impress on the minds of the Israelites, what they were to expect, if they followed the example of the nations whom he commanded them to cut off.⁷²

But what of the order to keep the young female virgins alive, was it to debauch them as Paine asserts? If this were the case then it would contradict everything God had previously told them for

in Exodus 20:14 and in scores of other passages God forbids sexual immorality. William F. Arndt, preeminent New Testament Greek scholar and American Editor of Bauer's *Lexicon*, comments on this. ". . . [T]he women mentioned in Numbers 31:18 had not been active in seducing the Israelites to participation in the immoral worship of Peor, hence they were permitted to live, although they had to become the slaves of the Israelites. That it was an impure, wicked motive to which they owed their preservation is an assumption of scoffers which is not in keeping with the trend of the whole narrative and may safely be discarded as dictated by blind prejudice and hate."⁷³

When we turn to the New Testament Paine resorts to showing alleged contradictions, beginning with the different genealogies given in Matthew and Luke. Paine's argument here is not new and has been answered as long ago at the time of the Church fathers. One of the answers given to this is that Matthew is giving us the family line of Joseph while Luke is giving the genealogy of Mary. Mary's name is not given in Luke 3 because she was already mentioned several times in the first two chapters as being Jesus' mother. Besides, the usual way the Jewish genealogies were given was by listing the father, grandfather, etc. . . . Luke does this and gives the name of the legal father, Joseph, however he asserts that Joseph was not really Jesus' father but was only "supposed" to be so (because Jesus was virgin born).⁷⁴

"A literal translation of Luke 3:23 would be, 'Jesus, when He began, was about thirty years old, being the son of Joseph, as it was thought, of Heli . . .' This does not at all mean that Jesus was the son of Heli, but that Jesus was a descendant, on His mother's side, of Heli. The word son has this wider meaning."⁷⁵

Besides this, no problem with the genealogies was ever put forth by the early enemies of Christianity. They never considered these genealogies as being contradictory. Albert Barnes in his

commentary on Matthew states that ". . . the Jews were fully competent to show that these tables were incorrect, if they were really so; and it is clear that they were fully disposed, if possible to do it. The fact, therefore, that it is not done, is clear evidence that they thought it to be correct."⁷⁶

Another so called discrepancy for Paine is that none of the Gospel writers recite the inscription on Jesus' cross in exactly the same words. But we are also told that the inscription was written in three different languages; Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.⁷⁷ So how do we know that there was not a slight verbal difference in the inscriptions themselves. We do not and thus the differences can easily be explained. Though all the inscriptions had the same meaning" . . . it is probable, that, if two men had translated the Hebrew and the Latin into Greek, there would have been a verbal difference between their translations."⁷⁸

A similar type of "contradiction" for Paine is in the different accounts of the angel appearing to Mary and Joseph to announce the immaculate conception. The answer, is in most cases of alleged discrepancies, is simple. The angel appeared twice, once to Mary and then later to Joseph.

Finally, Paine notes the differences in the resurrection accounts and cites them as irrefutable proof that the Gospel stories are spurious. In fact, Paine says, a court of law would find the Gospel accounts so different that the writers of them would be found guilty of perjury.

When we actually look at the differences though they pertain to the minute details, not to anything major, and they can be explained or harmonized. For instance, Matthew mentions some things that the others omit, but this does not mean that they did not occur. "It is quite clear that all of the Gospels relate their portraits of Jesus differently. This is what we should expect. No four witnesses (or news reporters), all of whom witness a series of

events, will write them up in exactly the same way, detail for detail. If they did, there would be obvious collusion."⁷⁹

Simon Greenleaf was one of the greatest legal minds of our country during the 19th century. "Greenleaf's famous work, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, the first volume of which appeared in 1842, was 'regarded as the foremost American authority,' passing through edition after edition, is still considered the greatest single authority on evidence in the entire literature of legal procedure. Greenleaf, trained in weighing evidence, while still professor of Law at Harvard, wrote in 1842. . . *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*."⁸⁰ I shall quote Greenleaf at length in regard to the so-called discrepancies in the Gospel accounts:

There is enough of discrepancy to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same great transaction, as the events occurred The discrepancies between the narratives of the several evangelists, when carefully examined, will not be found sufficient to invalidate their testimony. Many seeming contradictions will prove, upon closer scrutiny, to be in substantial agreement; and it may be confidently asserted that there are none that will not yield, under fair and just criticism. If these different accounts of the same transactions were in strict verbal conformity with each other, the argument against their credibility would be much stronger.⁸¹

Thus we have seen that all of Mr. Paine's arguments, though emotional and sometimes eloquent, are in reality specious. But why, one might ask, would someone of such obvious intellectual capacities be found guilty of such shallow reasoning? From whence does his hatred of Christianity spring?

Undoubtedly part of it stems from his upbringing. 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."⁸²

Another influence on Paine was the rise of Newtonian science, which emphasized a universe of order and harmony which was guided by natural laws.⁸³ Paine's Deistic beliefs would be in complete agreement with this.

But perhaps the one factor that, more than any other, prevented Paine from seriously considering the Christian claims was his own pride. We have already seen several instances of this in *The Age of Reason*. Another example of it can be seen from a letter wrote to Benjamin Franklin in Paris in 1778, in which he said: "I have the pleasure of being respected and I feel a little of that satisfactory kind of pride that tells me I have some right to it."⁸⁴ *The New-Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* states: "Comparison of the contemporary biographies, both of friends and foes, seems to show these facts; Paine was through life a harsh, unfeeling, vain, conceited, and disagreeable man."⁸⁵

Paine even admitted in *The Age of Reason* that no amount of evidence would induce him to accept the Bible as the Word of God. After stating why he rejected the Bible Paine said: "Did the book called the Bible excel in purity of ideas and expression all the books that are now extant in the world, I would not take it for my rule of faith, as being the Word of God, because the POSSIBILITY would nevertheless exist of my being imposed upon."⁸⁶

The problem with Paine's statement is that everything we do

in life is based on PROBABILITY, not POSSIBILITY or absolute CERTAINTY. We do not deal with possibilities because, in a contingent universe, anything is possible. Likewise, when judging evidence we look for the probability of something being true or false “. . . since absolute certainty lies only in the realms of pure logic and mathematics, where, by definition, one encounters no matters of fact at all.”⁸⁷

In conclusion one final critique needs to be mentioned. Paine, as a Deist, rejected any possibility of revealed religion or a written Word of God. Paine believed “that the creation we behold is the real and ever-existing Word of God, in which we cannot be deceived. It proclaims His power, it demonstrates His wisdom, it manifests His goodness and beneficence.”⁸⁸

The question is, how in the world, apart from a direct revelation by God, can man know that God is a loving and beneficent being? How can a Deist tell people who are born into poverty, sickness, disease, etc., that God loves them? In 1863 a man was born with “. . . an incurable infestation of bone, skin and nerve tumors known as multiple neurofibromatosis.”⁸⁹ The following is a description of him as he grew into adulthood:

His head is enormous, a grotesquely swollen tuber. His right eye is squashed beneath a protruding mass of bone, as if his skull had partially melted, and a similar bony stump juts from his mouth, distending his upper lip to create a drooling, unclosable hole. His short, cruelly twisted body is festooned with cauliflower-like clumps of skin, and a large putrid sac of flesh hangs from his back. His feet are rooted like knobs, his right arm little more than a club.⁹⁰

This man's name was John Merrick and he was popularly known as the Elephant Man.

Deism offers the John Merricks and the other unfortunates of

the world nothing. To them God can be seen as nothing but a capricious and pernicious being who delights in mankind's misery.

It was not Deism that touched John Merrick's heart; rather it was the 23rd Psalm which revealed a loving compassionate God. Deism and Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* only lead men into utter darkness and despair. In Christianity, we have God, loving His creation so much that He comes down to reach us, to give us an abundant life here as well as when we die. Jesus declared: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”⁹¹

The importance of this paper is that “. . . deism did not die; it did not even fade away, and it still exists in fact, though perhaps not in name.”⁹² Likewise, Paine's “. . . *Age of Reason* is still circulated and read. The replies written at the time are not.”⁹³

NOTES

- ¹*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, s.v. "Paine, Thomas."
- ²Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 135, in "The Fate of Thomas Paine," written in 1934.
- ³Thomas Paine, *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), pp. XIII - XIV.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, pp. XV - XVI.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 50, in "The American Crisis I."
- ⁶*Ibid.*, p. XVI.
- ⁷Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 3.
- ⁸Paine, *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine*, *op. cit.*, pp. XXVII - XXXV.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, p. XXXVI.
- ¹⁰*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1972 ed., s.v. "Deism," by Ernest Campbell Mossner.
- ¹¹Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1974), p. 168.
- ¹²*Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, p. 84.
- ¹⁴Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, *op.cit.*, p. 256.
- ¹⁵Paine, *The Age of Reason.*, *op.cit.*, p. 186.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 188.
- ¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
- ²²*Ibid.*, p. 56.
- ²³*Ibid.*, p. 158.

- ²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 160.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 171, 174.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 189.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ³¹Num. 31:15-18
- ³²Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, pp. 114-115.
- ³³*Ibid.*, p. 158.
- ³⁴Mt. 27:37.
- ³⁵Mk. 15:26.
- ³⁶Lk. 23:38.
- ³⁷Jn. 19:19.
- ³⁸Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, pp. 160-161.
- ³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 160.
- ⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*
- ⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ⁴⁴Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, Canto III:9
- ⁴⁵Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, p. 54.
- ⁴⁶I Cor. 15:4-8.
- ⁴⁷Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, p. 55.
- ⁴⁸Jn. 6:15.
- ⁴⁹Jn. 18:36.
- ⁵⁰Mt. 20:28.
- ⁵¹Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, p. 168.
- ⁵²Jn. 20:1, 15, 26; 21:1; Acts 1:3.

- ⁵³Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, p. 60.
- ⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 161.
- ⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 162, 169.
- ⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ⁵⁸G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Garden City: Image Books, 1955), pp. 201-202.
- ⁵⁹C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan 1975), pp. 55-56.
- ⁶⁰Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before the Bible: The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilisations* (New York: Harper, 1962).
- ⁶¹Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), pp. 48-49.
- ⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.
- ⁶³William F. Albright, quoted in *Christianity Today*, VII, (Jan. 18, 1963), 3.
- ⁶⁴Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, p. 107.
- ⁶⁵Num. 12:3.
- ⁶⁶John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), pp. 248-249.
- ⁶⁷C. J. Ellicott, *The 'Layman's Handy Commentary' Series: Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), p. 90.
- ⁶⁸Gen. 35:11.
- ⁶⁹Num. 31:15-18.
- ⁷⁰Paine, *The Age of Reason, op.cit.*, pp. 114-115.
- ⁷¹Richard Watson, *An Apology For The Bible* (London, 1818), pp. 210-211.
- ⁷²*Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.
- ⁷³W. Arndt, *Does The Bible Contradict Itself?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 21.
- ⁷⁴Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Answers To Tough Questions* (San Bernadino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 60.
- ⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Matthew and Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), pp. 2-3.

⁷⁷Jn. 19:20.

⁷⁸Watson, *An Apology For The Bible*, *op.cit.*, p. 308.

⁷⁹McDowell and Stewart, *Answers To Tough Questions*, *op.cit.*, pp. 52-53.

⁸⁰Wilbur M. Smith, *Therefore Stand* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1945), pp. 423-424.

⁸¹Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*, pp. 122-123, in John Warwick Montgomery, *The Law Above The Law* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975).

⁸²Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-4.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁴Paine, *The Age of Reason*, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

⁸⁵*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, *loc.cit.*

⁸⁶Paine, *The Age of Reason*, p. 63. Capitalization used by the author for emphasis.

⁸⁷John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove, ILL: Inter Varsity Press, 1976), p. 79.

⁸⁸Paine, *The Age of Reason*, *op.cit.*, p. 98.

⁸⁹"The Elephant Man," *Rolling Stone*, No. 330 (November 13, 1980), p. 10.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹¹Jn. 10:10.

⁹²*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *loc.cit.*

⁹³*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, *loc.cit.*