

FORMING AMERICA: IN THE NAME OF GOD,
THE HEBREW BIBLE AND LIBERTY

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Introduction

The Hebrew Bible's guiding principles and its underlying philosophy were shared by the Founding Fathers of the American Republic and these biblical tenets and mores permeate the essential documents that formed the American Republic, particularly the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers. I do not deny the influence of the Greeks, the Romans, and the philosophers of the Enlightenment on America's Founders, who were well-educated men, in no way myopic in their quest for knowledge and wisdom. These Founders—in particular Jefferson, Adams, Washington, Madison, Franklin, and Lincoln (though not of the founding generation)¹—were greatly influenced by the Hebrew Bible and subscribed to some of its core teachings. The Founders were not as biblically learned as the Jewish scholars, such as Philo or Rashi, who wrote great works of biblical exegesis. They did not understand the intricacies of the Hebrew language and they certainly were not as well schooled in the Hebrew Bible as rabbis of their generation. However, they did have a deep understanding of the meaning behind what they read (in Hebrew or in translation) and this paper will show this through their public and personal writings.

What the founders created has continued to the present day. As mandated by the Constitution, President Barack Obama's presidential oath of office was identical to George Washington's in scope and length. The President of the United States is almost always sworn into office on a bible (sometimes two bibles) and, while not mandated by the Constitution, American Presidents have also voluntarily added the words "So Help

¹ In this paper, although he is not a Founding Father, Lincoln is included because he had a significant influence on the shape of this country's ideals and mores, both with respect to equality (e.g., abolishing slavery) and the great effort to keep the United States unified.

Me God” to the end of their oath. But rather than a particular belief in God, what matters most is the wisdom contained in the great Book on which they swear. The wisdom that the founders interpreted and incorporated into the founding documents of the American Republic is based on the belief that we are all created by a God who has, as the Declaration of Independence states, “endowed us with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”²

Anthology

As an anthology, the Hebrew Bible brings together an assortment of historical accounts, moral principles, and legal (or ritual) requirements of the Jewish people and the Hebrew God. While it contains ancient sources and it embodies contradictions, the Bible also emphasizes influential principles that, while written and rooted thousands of years ago, are enduring in their wisdom. As Eran Shalev explains,

the Old Testament continued to provide Americans with invaluable venues for expressing and contemplating...the moral language of liberty...the Old Testament affirmed its position as an integral part of the United States’ moral language of liberty.³

The Bible provided the founders with a source of political structures, moral philosophy, and ideas of equality and freedom. Perhaps the most important principle in this country’s origins related to the hallmark phrase: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all

² “The Declaration Of Independence”, July 4, 1776 in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: College Press, 2012) 5.

³ Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (London, U.K: Yale University Press, 2013), 48.

men are created equal.”⁴ Oscar Straus traces the roots of this principle in the Bible, explaining: “In teaching that all men descended from one Adam and one Eve, the Bible proclaimed that all were free, equal, and brothers.”⁵ Yet America’s history of slavery shows that these principles were not always embraced.

Slavery and freedom are central to both the Hebrew Bible and the founding of America. In the biblical account, slavery is the central crucible through which the descendants of Jacob (the Hebrews) are forged into the free Israelites under the leadership of Moses, and later into the tribal confederation under the Israelite Monarchy. In American history, slavery is the core contradiction and offense of our founding. While the American founders demanded freedom, constitutionalizing its principle for themselves and their peers, they tolerated and institutionalized a system that enslaved millions and enriched themselves. It is precisely the biblical account of slavery and liberation that became a hidden language and central inspirational metaphor for enslaved African-Americans. The themes of slavery and freedom are spelled out in the Bible, most markedly when Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt and their bondage.⁶ As Shalev writes, “The metaphors of bondage, Exodus, liberation, and nationhood provided a full account of African-American slavery and eventual deliverance.”⁷ Shalev

⁴ “The Declaration Of Independence”, July 4, 1776 in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: College Press, 2012) 5.

⁵ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), pxi.

⁶ Not only did the Founding Fathers draw upon this important concept of equality, but so too did African American slaves in their many gospel hymns and Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King.

⁷ Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (London, U.K: Yale University Press, 2013), 182.

continues, “Exodus thus gave slaves hope of imminent deliverance from their bondage, but also proved that slavery was against God’s will.”⁸

Political Structure

The founders agreed that the God found in the Hebrew Bible gave human beings inalienable rights and provided the basis for a political structure. With respect to political structure, Eric Nelson writes that the Hebrew Bible came to be regarded as a political constitution, designed by God himself for the children of Israel. They [Christians] also came to see the full array of newly available rabbinic materials as authoritative guides to the institutions and practices of this perfect republic.⁹

Nelson continues, “Readers began to see in the five books of Moses not just political wisdom, but a political constitution.”¹⁰ Nelson turns the common understanding of the expansion of individual rights on its head. He argues that it was not primarily through the usually accepted route of secularization, but rather chiefly during European political theorists’ encounters with the Hebrew Bible—and rabbinic sources elucidating the Bible—that the course of European political thinking was dramatically altered. It was not a move away from the Bible, but one toward a biblical reading deepened by access to rabbinic literature, that resulted in a new understanding of the importance of democracy and religious liberty.

⁸ Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (London, U.K: Yale University Press, 2013), 183.

⁹ Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 16-17.

Nelson also notes that by the seventeenth century, the Talmudic and Midrashic debates about the legitimacy of a monarch were used to critique the monarchy in England. In the matter of criticizing monarchs, the American revolutionaries found important biblical and rabbinic forerunners. These Jewishly rooted critiques were among those that the American colonists used to argue for separation from Britain and the right to self-rule without guidance of any earthly monarch.

Critical to the line of argument put forth in the Declaration of Independence found in the Hebrew Bible, was the concept that no human being, including the monarch, is divine.¹¹ While the king is at times divinely selected, Deuteronomy (17:18-20) establishes that the Hebrew king has moral rules imposed by God that he too must obey. The king should not be “lifted up above his brethren.” (Deuteronomy 17:20) In particular, the stories of Saul and David gave the founders insight into human nature and political culture. 1 Samuel 8:4-9 describes the divine election of the first Hebrew King, Saul. In 1 Samuel (15:2-3), God gives Samuel a command to pass along to Saul: to destroy all that had belonged to the Amalekites. Instead, Saul disobeys God and he preserves the best of the spoils of war and loses God’s favor. A king that does not follow God’s order (either to destroy the Amalekites or to affirm God’s inalienable rights) loses favor. For the founders the king—George III—loses the right to rule in the colonies. The American grievances against the British monarchy, itemized by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, begin with an indictment of the king for “the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these states.” The indictment concludes that, “a Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the

¹¹ Even the word rabbi means teacher whereas a priest indicates a divine being.

ruler of a free people.”¹² When the character and actions of the king were judged to be tyrannical, the American revolutionaries made their move toward liberty.

King David is also provided as a model of human nature. The anointed successor to King Saul, King David, does well as king, but then he lets his desires get the better of him (II Samuel 11:2-4). David, governed by his desire, pursues another man’s wife, and that affair leads to disruption in his own family and his kingdom. In these stories of the biblical kings, we see some basic truths of human nature.¹³ The anti-monarchist lesson learned by the founders is expressed most clearly by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*, “That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the Scriptures are false.”¹⁴

Moral Philosophy

While creating a government separate from religious institutions and affiliations, the founders embraced religious principles of morality within liberty. I will demonstrate that in the Hebrew Bible, the founders discovered a moral philosophy that could be applied to America’s founding. In order to produce a moral society, the founders felt that society needs an ethical system of laws that hold individuals responsible for their actions. Additionally, the founders felt that a moral society needs to believe in God-based values. The Founding Fathers were able to use the Hebrew Bible as a model for achieving good

¹² “The Declaration Of Independence”, July 4, 1776 in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: College Press, 2012) 5.

¹³ Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)

¹⁴ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), pxxxvii.

governance, rather than viewing it as a sacred book to be used for a singular religious practice.

I have identified a number of important precepts that the Founding Fathers used to inform the creation of the new American government. These include the precepts of (a) Justice and the idea of a Supreme Judge, (b) Divine Providence, (c) Ethical Monotheism (d) Liberty, (e) Universal and Absolute Truths: Laws of Nature and Nature's God, and (f) Equality and Freedom. Each of these principles will be discussed in Chapter two.

These precepts guided the Founding Fathers in creating American government and they used the Hebrew Bible's teachings on these matters as a model or guide in creating the new America—not based on theology (religious beliefs, practices, and laws), but rather on the many examples the Bible offered for good government and moral living. In an 1809 letter, John Adams wrote, "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation."¹⁵ In fact, these precepts were also a uniting force, as the founders were neither all traditional Christians nor all deists, but rather had disparate ideas and beliefs about religion.¹⁶ Most did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, the virginity of Mary, or the trinity. (These beliefs will be explored in Chapter One through the founders' writings.) According to Thomas Kidd, "Nearing the end of his life, Franklin privately expressed doubts about Jesus's divinity, but he believed in Christ's ethical teachings and a God who answered human prayers."¹⁷ As with Franklin, most of

¹⁵ John Adams to François Adriaan Van Der Kemp, February 16, 1809, in *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 228.

¹⁶ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008) pxi.

¹⁷ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 213.

the founders discussed in this thesis did not believe that Jesus was resurrected as God on earth, nor did most believe that after God created the world he withdrew—the deist concept of the watchmaker who creates a mechanical masterpiece and then disappears. Most of the founders did, however, believe in the God of the Hebrew Bible: a Creator God, One who intervened in history, One who established moral guides and model governments. As Ben Franklin says, “God governs in the affairs of man...without his concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel.”¹⁸ They believed that God was the Creator of everything and revealed Himself to Moses and to the Jewish people. They believed that He would judge us here and hereafter, and they believed that the Hebrew Bible was the model upon which to build a successful republican form of government. Further, the founders fully embraced God as the guarantor of our fundamental human rights and the author of liberty: “God who gave us life gave us liberty.”¹⁹ They believed that the Creator God was also the source of our inalienable human rights.

To form a successful American society, the founders would seek compromise with one another and search for commonality—the Hebrew Bible proved to be the source of both. While they read and were influenced by the same books of enlightenment, philosophy, and politics, they also shared a biblical education and many had a grounding in Hebrew language. The founders’ speeches and letters (cited in Chapter Two of this thesis) are infused with verses and lessons from the Hebrew Bible and evidence that they

¹⁸ Benjamin Franklin, “Benjamin Franklin's Request for Prayers at the Constitutional Convention,” Belief.net, accessed on March 9, 2014, http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/21/Benjamin_Franklins_Request_for_Prayers_at_the_Constitutional__1.html

¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America, July 1774" in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 91.

believed in a morality rooted in the Mosaic Law and the Hebrew Prophets as viewed through the lens of Enlightenment philosophy.

Washington's "Earnest Prayer," sent at the close of the Revolutionary War (on the occasion of the disbanding of the Continental Army) to the governors of the thirteen newly free United States, famously captures the belief in a providential God and the importance of the moral teachings of the Hebrew prophets:

I now make it my earnest prayer that God would have you, and the State over which you preside, in his holy protection; that he would incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government, to entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another, for their fellow-citizens of the United States at large, and particularly for brethren who have served in the field; and finally that he would most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy nation.²⁰

It is not the intent here to engage in the current culture controversy over whether America was or is a Christian nation. However, this paper will show that the founders chose the Hebrew Bible as their authority and model. It suffices to say here that Reverend Marion G. (Pat) Robinson is incorrect in his assessment of the founding of America, when he describes the Constitution as "a marvelous document for self-government by a Christian people."²¹ This paper will show that the Founders' intent in writing the Constitution was to promote freedom of religion. President Washington made this clear in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island on August

²⁰ George Washington, "Circular Letter To The States, June 1783, in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 181.

²¹ Stephen J. Whitfield, "Separation Anxiety: From Founders to Fundamentalists.," Free Online Library, accessed June 28, 2013, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Separation%2Banxiety%253A%2Bfrom%2Bfounders%2Bto%2Bfundamentalists.-a017379706>.

18, 1790: “May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”²² (Micah 4:4)

Before one carelessly asserts that America is a Christian nation, one must consider why the original settlers left England and preferred the Hebrew Bible as the guidebook for creating a new society. Straus writes,

To refute this false theory of kingly power it was not only expedient but necessary to revert to the earliest times, to the most sacred records, the Old Testament, for illustrations and for argument, chiefly because the doctrine of ‘Divine Right,’ ‘King by the Grace of God,’ and its corollaries, ‘unlimited submission and non-resistance,’ were deduced, or rather distorted, from the New Testament.”²³

Then Straus adds as a footnote that it is “a historical fact, that in the great majority of instances the early Protestant defenders of civil liberty derived their political principals chiefly [although not entirely] from the Old Testament, and the defenders of despotism from the New.”²⁴ The founders were rejecting the lack of religious freedom in England. For example, Waldman notes: “New England was settled in part by people who thought the Church of England had become too Catholic.”²⁵ Goldman simply states that, “Old

²² George Washington, "Letter to Hebrew Congregation," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 137.

²³ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 18-19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 39.

Testament concepts of oppression and liberation had great appeal to the founders of the Republic.”²⁶

Why were the founders so reliant on the Hebrew Bible? In part, the colonists left Britain for America in pursuit of religious freedom and away from powerful, doctrinal churches that differentiated themselves around interpretations of New Testament doctrine. The early settlers, sharing a reading of the Old Testament, looked to the Hebrew Bible for guidance in their lives. From the first colonists onward, ministers and politicians alike often quoted from the Hebrew Bible. As Katsh tells us, “Biblical precepts [from the Hebrew Bible] became political maxims. Congressional proclamations are filled with Biblical phrases [from the Hebrew Bible].”²⁷

First European Settlers

The romance between America and the Hebrew Bible started with the pilgrims on board the Mayflower and continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Pilgrims saw America as their ‘Promised Land.’ The Puritans in 1629 saw themselves as establishing the ‘New Israel.’ The New World was their New Canaan. In fact, some of the earliest legislation of the colonies was based on the Hebrew Bible. At the first assembly of New Haven in 1639, John Davenport, co-founder of the colony, declared the “primacy of the Hebrew Bible as the legal and moral foundation, Scriptures (Hebrew

²⁶ Shalom Goldman, ed., *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries* (Hanover: Published [for] Brandeis University Press and Dartmouth College by University Press of New England, 1993), pxxii.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 122.

Bible) do hold forth a perfect rule...”²⁸ Over half of the statutes in the New Haven Code of 1655 contained references and citations from the Hebrew Bible, while only three percent referred to the New Testament. The Plymouth Colony and the Massachusetts assembly followed suit, basing their law codes on the Mosaic Law. Sivan notes, “The code adopted (The Body of Liberties), America’s first law book, contained a chapter entitled ‘Capital Laws’ and this, too, included marginal notes referring to the Pentateuch; of its 48 laws, all but two were taken directly from the Hebrew Bible.”²⁹ The first capital law: “If any man after legal conviction shall have or worship any other god, but the lord god, he shall be put to death” is noted “Deut. 13. 6, 10. Deut. 17. 2, 6. Ex. 22.20.”³⁰

The first design of the official seal of the United States proposed by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams “depicts God as the pillar of fire based on Exodus 14:24, and the Children of Israel standing on dry land while the pursuing Egyptian charioteers drown in the Red Sea as depicted in Exodus 14:28-29.”³¹ That Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams saw and felt the parallel between the American nation in 1776 and the Jewish flights from Egypt in Exodus is unmistakable.

Straus remarks that Ezra Stiles, President of Yale, explained how the Hebrew Commonwealth was the model for American government, saying that America is ‘God’s American Israel.’ In his speech before the Honorable General Assembly of the State of Connecticut, 1783, Stiles quoted Deuteronomy 26:19 and noted how “the United States

²⁸ Jonathan P. Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

²⁹ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 135.

³⁰ Nathaniel Ward, "The Massachusetts Body of Liberties," *Liberties*, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/masslib.html>.

³¹ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 197.

will...eventually become this people.”³² Straus comments on Paine’s *Common Sense*; which also used the Hebrew Commonwealth as a model. Straus believes that the Republic of the United States was the direct heir of the Hebrew Commonwealth, writing that

the trials, sufferings and fortitude of the Children of Israel during their long and weary wanderings from the land of their oppressors until the organization of popular government on the banks of the Jordan, have served in no inconsiderable degree as a glorious example and inspiring incentive to the American people in their heroic struggle for the blessings of civil and religious liberty...and that pure, unselfish and righteous spirit of Moses, Joshua and Gideon should live again in the wisdom of a Franklin, the patriotism of a Washington and in the sound statesmanship of an Adams.³³

Many scholars have suggested that the early pilgrimage to the New World was to a second promised land for a second chosen people. Goldman writes,

The arduous journey of those who left English shores for the new world only strengthened English affinity for the Bible’s exhortations cadences and images. God had destined these pilgrims to pass through the wilderness to the new Promised Land so that they could create a new society based on biblical models. America’s English colonist saw themselves as a chosen people fleeing the pharaohs of Egypt and arriving in the Promised Land.³⁴

It is not surprising, then, that “in the minds of early American Protestant thinkers, ancient Israel served as both a model for structuring a conventional society and a warning of the consequences of failure to the divine covenant.”³⁵

³² Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 126.

³³ Ibid, 141-142.

³⁴ Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004), 29.

³⁵ Ibid, 29.

Education at the time of the founding

At the time of the founding of America, it was commonly believed by most educated men (at the universities of England and the New World) that the study of Hebrew was necessary for a complete education. The Hebrew language was considered, along with Greek and Latin, a classical language, in addition to being the language of the Jewish Bible, whose values and ideals formed the basis not just for religious beliefs and practices, but also for Western society and its principles for moral living and democratic governance. Goldman notes, “Hebrew was held in such high esteem by the founders of the American Republic that a story emerged at the time of the Revolution that Hebrew was being considered as a possible substitute for English as the American language.”³⁶

While apocryphal, the story indicates the high regard in which the language of the Hebrew Bible was held. The American theologian Lyman Abbott wrote:

I hope the time will come when the laws and literature of the ancient Hebrews will be studied in all of our schools as now are studied the laws and literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and when it will be universally recognized that no man who is ignorant of the laws and literature of the ancient Hebrews is a well-educated man.³⁷

A leading Congregationalist minister, an author and editor, Lyman Abbott’s publication the *Outlook* reached over 125,000 readers weekly and was described as “a prominent news source for Protestant ministers and laypeople all over the United States.”

³⁶ Shalom Goldman, ed., *Hebrew and the Bible in America: The First Two Centuries* (Hanover: Published [for] Brandeis University Press and Dartmouth College by University Press of New England, 1993), pxxii.

³⁷ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 111.

Abbott's was a prominent voice in the chorus of American religious leaders and thinkers and his opinions on the place for Hebrew were influential and well considered.³⁸

Hebrew and Biblical studies were required courses (or proficiencies) for students at most of the major universities in the United States during the formative years of the nation. Until the 1800s, one could not graduate from Harvard without knowing Hebrew. At Yale, William and Mary, Rutgers, Princeton, Brown, King's College (Columbia), Johns Hopkins, Dartmouth, and the University of Pennsylvania, Hebrew was required in order to qualify for a Master's Degree.

These colleges also gave speakers the option of delivering commencement addresses in Hebrew.³⁹

In addition to requiring Hebrew proficiency from its students, Hebrew words or phrases were adopted as official emblems or seals of leading universities. Yale's seal has the Hebrew phrase, *Urim V'Tumim*, words whose meaning is unclear but which were associated with the breastplate of the High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Columbia's seal has the *Tetragrammaton*, the proper Hebrew name of God (YHWH), at the top center and the Hebrew words for "God is my light" and a name for one of the angels toward the middle (*Ari'el*). Dartmouth's seal has the Hebrew words *El Shaddai*, "God Almighty," in a triangle in the upper center. Emmanuel College, Olivet College, Crozer Theological Seminary, Dropsie University (a Jewish institution), and Whitworth College also adopted Hebrew words or phrases in their official seals. Most of the founders were educated at one of these institutions where Hebrew was afforded a place of

³⁸ Ira V. Brown, *Lyman Abbott, Christian Evolutionist; a Study in Religious Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 117-119.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 51-72.

respect and integrated into the academic lives of students. One would anticipate that along with the study of and familiarity with the Hebrew language came a respect for and understanding of the Hebrew Bible and its values.

Hebrew held a distinctive place of honor among the languages of antiquity, as it was thought to be the language of God and the original language of human beings. There were two Hebraists among the men on the Mayflower, William Bradford and William Brewster, and many important figures in early American history were familiar or fluent readers of the language: Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island Colony, studied Hebrew; Henry Dunster, the first president of Harvard College, studied Hebrew; Isaac Norris, the speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, studied Hebrew, as did his father-in-law, James Logan, chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. In fact, Norris and Logan chose the text from Leviticus 25:10 to cast on the Liberty Bell – “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

Cotton Mather, an influential Puritan minister of the 17th and early 18th centuries, studied Hebrew. His commencement address upon graduating from Harvard was on the divine origin of the Hebrew vowels. He wrote “the conduct of magistrates should be *‘Beahavah Veyirah, cum mansuetudine ac Timore’* (“motivated by love and fear of God”).”⁴⁰ This was taken from the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 10:12: “what does the Lord ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him...” Cotton’s epitaph reveals himself as a member of a Puritan generation that saw itself to be the New Israel and America the Promised Land. It reads, “Though Moses be, yet Joshua is not dead...worthy he Successor to our Moses is to be. O happy Israel in America, In

⁴⁰ Gavri’el Sivan and Shalom M. Paul, *The Bible and Civilization* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), 175.

such a Moses, such a Joshua.”⁴¹ Mather’s father, New England Puritan minister Increase Mather, president of Harvard (1685-1701), dedicated himself to Hebrew scholarship as well.

The history of Hebrew at Yale was quite similar. Thomas Clap, first president of Yale, studied Hebrew. Ezra Stiles, Yale’s seventh President, studied and taught Hebrew, becoming Yale’s first professor of Semitics. Notably, Stiles studied Hebrew with the first rabbi known to have visited the American colonies, Rabbi Raphael Hayyim Isaac Carregal of Palestine, during the rabbi’s stay in Newport, Rhode Island from March to July of 1773. The two continued to correspond in Hebrew until the rabbi’s death in 1777 in Barbados. In his first commencement address at Yale in 1781, Stiles spoke in Hebrew about the wisdom of Israel in an address entitled “An Oration upon the Hebrew Literature.”⁴²

No Credit to the Jewish People

During America’s founding generations, those who placed significant importance on the Hebrew Bible nonetheless did not appear to wish to credit the Jewish people. Although the Hebrew Bible had enormous influence on the founders and the creation of American society, the Jews as a people or as a religious community were neither liked or appreciated. John Adams and Tomas Jefferson both hoped that the Jews would assimilate and become more ‘normal’ or more like the communities that surrounded

⁴¹ Benjamin Woodbridge, "A New England Saint," Bartleby.com: Great Books Online, section goes here, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/400/poem/129.html>.

⁴² Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 66.

them.⁴³ Throughout history, the Jewish people have received negative press and negative stereotyping.⁴⁴ My hope in this thesis is that every Jewish individual today can be proud of his or her heritage, knowing that historically Jews have had an influential affect on much that is good in American society; Jews carry the burden or the credit of helping to create that society.

Why not the New Testament?

It is also important to establish why the Founding Fathers did not use the New Testament as a model for governance or right action in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century America. Modern Christian scholars, such as Hermann Gunkel, translated and quoted in Sivan, note the difference between the Old and New Testaments as models for government, “When the gigantic Roman Empire was endeavoring to wean its provinces from all independent political action...the only message of the New Testament is subjection to the State...There is a different message in the Old Testament... a magnificent combination of piety and patriotism.”⁴⁵

Four principal points highlight why the founders preferred the Old Testament as a guide over the New Testament:

1. The Hebrew Bible was an accepted legalistic source

The founders felt that Americans could have different theological beliefs; however, a shared value system was essential, and this value system was founded on the

⁴³ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 75.

⁴⁴ Robert Michael and Philip Rosen, *Dictionary of Anti-Semitism: From the Earliest times to the Present* (Lanham: Md., 2007), 7.

⁴⁵ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 163.

accepted principles and share values set forth in the Hebrew Bible. For the Puritan early settlers, the legal structures and detailed “Thou shall” and “Thou shall not” of the Hebrew Bible pointed to clear community norms and those who crossed them found themselves outside of the community.

2. In the New Testament, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven were central teachings of Jesus, whereas in the Hebrew Bible, the focus was “heaven on earth.”

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight.” (Galatians 2:21) The Jews sought to create God’s perfect kingdom on earth, whereas most Christian faiths taught that this earth was not of God’s kingdom. The founders could believe the Hebrew Bible’s promise of a perfect world in the undetermined future. They believed that the world and humanity were far from perfect, but saw their political project as aligning more closely with a utopian (some might say “messianic”) future.

3. The nation was at war with Britain and the British crown, and the New Testament taught strict obedience to the civil authorities who represented divine authority on Earth. When resistance was sanctioned, it was non-violent resistance.⁴⁶

In the New Testament Paul says, “Every person must submit to the authorities in power... It follows that anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution, and those who resist have themselves to thank for the punishment they receive” (Romans 13:1-2). The Hebrew Bible was against tyranny and held that the only divine king was God--no human substituted for the divine. Jesus was not in favor of

⁴⁶ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 88-100.

armed action against tyrants--rather than violence to hasten their defeat, Jesus believed in non-violent resistance to evil (Matthew 5:38-39), loving your enemies (Matthew 5:44), and turning the other cheek: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Ephesians 4:31-32) and to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). Also some statements attributed to Jesus, such as “Resist not evil” (Matthew 5:39), “Pray for those who persecute you” (Luke 6:28), “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:43-44), and Jesus’ prayer on the cross for God to forgive his enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), may be interpreted as not fighting against evil.

By contrast in the Hebrew Bible, during war, God was invoked as the One who led Israelite resistance and could secure their victory; so too could God deliver the Americans from British tyranny. Benjamin Franklin’s statement, which became the motto on the American seal--“Resistance to Tyrants is Obedience to God”--was based on resistance to absolutism, a concept with no direct correlation to the New Testament. Katsh says that the motto is a loose quotation from the apocryphal Book of Maccabees.⁴⁷ The Maccabees’ revolt was the model: “Whosoever is zealous for the law, and maintaineth the covenant, let him come forth after me” (1 Maccabees 2.15-28). The Jews won their rebellion and, “tilled their land in peace... and they sat each man under his vine and fig tree, and there was none to make them afraid.” (1 Maccabees 14.4-15)⁴⁸ In contrast to the New Testament, war was a way of life in the Hebrew Bible: from the war

⁴⁷ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 159.

⁴⁸ The Book of Maccabees isn’t actually in the Hebrew Bible as the Jews know it.

under Joshua to the wars under the judges, to Saul and David, from the Philistine to the Edomites to the Arameans 1 Sam. 14:52, 30:1. The Hebrews felt that their wars were divinely sanctioned by God, all had a moral purpose, and peace was the desired end. In addition to tribal and national wars, the Hebrew Bible sanctions individual resistance to evil. It tells of Moses killing an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave to death and commands, “Do not stand by while your neighbor’s blood is shed.” (Leviticus 19:16)

The Hebrew Bible does not embrace the idea of the divinity of kings. Cecil Roth tells us, “The Bible, moreover, was in diametrical opposition to the idea of the Divine descent of kings, which was at the basis of primitive absolutism.”⁴⁹ Straus footnotes William Lecky, “It is, at least, an historical fact, that in the great majority of instances the early Protestant defenders of civil liberty derived their political principles chiefly from the Old Testament, and the defenders of despotism from the New.”⁵⁰ This bias can be seen in 1 Peter 2:13-14, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the Emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right”; and Romans 13:1-3, “Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those will incur judgment.” (Romans 13:1-3)

Deuteronomy 17:18-20 establishes that God imposes rules upon the Hebrew King, and that the king should not be “lifted up above his brethren.” (Deuteronomy 17:20) The Hebrew Bible says that the monarchy is not divine and there must be

⁴⁹ Cecil Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 9.

⁵⁰ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 19.

resistance to tyrannical rule. Jonathan Mayhew, when preaching about the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766, used Samuel's hesitancy to support a king as ruler: "God gave Israel a King in his anger, because they had not sense enough and virtue enough to live like a free commonwealth, to have Himself for their king."⁵¹ Men entrusted with power need to be subject to a higher law. From Moses to Samuel, the notion of a monarch was frowned upon. Thus, neither monarchy nor tyranny, oligarchy or hereditary, aristocracy was condoned. In fact, Moses was succeeded, not by a blood relative, but by Joshua. After Joshua, there was a line of popularly elected judges who were never given absolute power, but were accountable to a council of seventy elders.

Nahum Sarna explains how in Mesopotamia and Egypt the ruling monarch was described as the likeness or living image of God, in order to make the king greater than the men he ruled. In Genesis, Sarna says, this idea becomes "democratized; all human beings are created 'in the image of God'; each person bears the stamp of royalty, [no matter their religion, race, or creed]."⁵² This idea helped the founders resist the tyranny of the British monarch. By stating that all human beings are created in the image of God, the Hebrew Bible democratized human society. America was to be a new free society without fear of tyrannical rule, governed by consent of the community. No longer was divine absolutism acceptable.

4. The concept of good works, universal moral living and standards, what has become known as ethical monotheism, was more in line with the beliefs of the Founding Fathers and the needs of the new country than the concept that one could only be saved by faith

⁵¹ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 176.

⁵² Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 12.

in Jesus. The founders embraced the idea that all human beings, by virtue of their human nature, and because they were created by the same Maker, would embrace universal moral values and be the recipients of unalienable rights. Paul felt that if good behavior alone could lead to salvation then, “Christ would have died in vain.” (Galatians 2:21) According to Paul, “We conclude that a man is put right with God only through faith, and not by doing what the law commands.” (Romans 3:28) Christianity emphasized faith in Christ in order to attain salvation.

The founders embraced the Hebrew Bible’s notion that human behavior, and not religion or faith, determines if one has a “portion in the world to come.” The Hebrew God ruled by moral standards. In the biblical story of Noah, God sends the flood because people treat one another badly. The person (and family) that God chooses to save is Noah, specifically because he is “the most righteous person in his generation.” (Genesis 6:9) The idea that God rules the universe morally was new to the world when the biblical story was written. In an older flood story, the gods in the Babylonian tale saved Utnapishtim and his wife because the gods liked Utnapishtim; their decision had nothing to do with morality.⁵³

Organization of this Thesis

Chapter 1 will be devoted to the beliefs of the Founding Fathers. We have talked about how the Founding Fathers were united by their beliefs in the basic tenets of the Hebrew Bible, although they did not share the specific religious beliefs or follow the same religion as the Ancient Israelites or contemporary Jews. In this chapter, I will look

⁵³ The Epic of Gilgamesh is an epic poem from Mesopotamia and dates to the 18th century BC. It is the earliest surviving work of literature. In this story Utnapishtim was saved and given immortality and material goods were saved such as gold and silver.

at each Founding Father individually with respect to his beliefs and convictions. I will then show the clear influence of the Hebrew Bible on important documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist papers.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the source document, the Hebrew Bible, as it relates to the underlying philosophy of American government. I will talk about the nature of the Hebrew God, and I will discuss the importance of two of the basic narratives of the Bible: the Creation and the Exodus. As stated in the introduction, the main principles that the Founding Fathers took from the Hebrew Bible include its political structure and moral philosophy. These main principles will be discussed in detail here.

Chapter 3 will explore the return to biblical texts in the fight against slavery—one area in which the Founding Fathers did not live up to their ideals. The chapter will conclude with the civil rights movement of the 1960's and Martin Luther King, Jr. as the spokesman for that time and his use of the Hebrew Bible.

I will conclude with some remarks about today's concept of America as a Judeo-Christian nation and how we uphold, or do not uphold, the founding documents.

Chapter One

The Founding Fathers

The Founding Fathers were united by their beliefs both in the basic tenets of the Hebrew Bible and in its idea of the role of the God in history. David Gelernter says, “They [American Puritans] were also obsessed with their role as the ‘new chosen people’ in the ‘new promised land,’ and they were fascinated with the Hebrew Bible.”⁵⁴ Oscar Straus labels them, “Old Testamentarians.”⁵⁵ In this chapter, I look at each Founding Father individually with respect to his beliefs and convictions. I will then present two foundational documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers, and show the influence of the Hebrew Bible on each.

The founders did not have a shared theology or common denominational affiliation. From reading the biblical stories, the founders learned what works in creating a successful society. Straus says,

The Bible was to them not only their guide in religion, but their text-book in politics. They studied the Old Testament and applied its teaching with a thoroughness and literal devotion that no people, excepting only the Jewish...had ever exemplified, for they seemed to recognize a striking similarity between their own hardships, history, and condition and those of the children of Israel under Moses and Joshua. They quoted its texts with a literal application.⁵⁶

I am not arguing that the Hebrew Bible was the only influence on the founders; but I am arguing that the Hebrew Bible was a significant unifying influence in the formation of America. Donald Lutz examined fifteen thousand political writings in eighteenth century and found that the Bible was quoted far more often than all

⁵⁴ David Hillel Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 32.

⁵⁵ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

Enlightenment authors combined.⁵⁷ This could have been for strategic purposes; the authors knew their audience, the notes that rang true to them and played those notes and tropes repeatedly, but this strategic use does not discount the Bible as a unifying influence; if anything, it strengthens the argument. Were the Bible not a unifying influence, whether or not the authors themselves subscribed to particular biblical beliefs, they would not have used the text so often. A most significant project in which the Bible was repeatedly referenced and which clearly demonstrates the authors' intentions to delve into biblical meaning, were the private letters, spanning half a century, exchanged between Tomas Jefferson and John Adams. The American enterprise, the Bible, God and government were the primary themes of this famous correspondence that filled more than six hundred pages⁵⁸

The founders were united under the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who created all human beings. Sivan says, "Implicit in the Biblical doctrine of one God is the belief that the human race which He created is also one. At the beginning of Genesis, God creates man 'in His own image'—not white, black, or yellow men, not Semites or Aryans, but Man."⁵⁹ As written in the Declaration of Independence, we are united as a nation under "the Supreme Judge of the world" who "created" us "equal," endowed man with "unalienable rights", and we hold a firm reliance on His

⁵⁷ Donald Lutz, "The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth Century American Political Thought," in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 78 (American Political Science Association, 1984), 189-197.

⁵⁸ David Hillel Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 88.

⁵⁹ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 100.

“divine Providence.”⁶⁰ Gelernter writes, “Lincoln attributes the founding fathers’ belief that ‘all men are created equal’ to their...awareness that all men of every race are ‘stamped with the Divine image.’”⁶¹

In a literary allusion, Lincoln borrows from the Bible in his Fragment on the Constitution and the Union, “The assertion of that principle, at that time, was the word, ‘fitly spoken’ which has proven an ‘apple of gold’ to us. The Union, and the Constitution, are the picture of silver, subsequently framed around it.”⁶² Proverbs 25:11 reads, “Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a ruling rightly given.” Lincoln is describing the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; in the first we find the purpose and the principles of America, and in the latter we find the method and the frame around it that gives it structure. Again here, the biblical text is used as a meaningful, unifying — if literary — reference.

The French explorer, political thinker, and historian Alexis de Tocqueville saw a unique partnership of God and liberty at the heart of what the founders created in America. “I am sure that they think it [religious precepts] necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions...[religion] and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of the one without the other.”⁶³ God and liberty were central to the American value system. Not one of the Founders was an

⁶⁰ “The Declaration of Independence,” *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 5.

⁶¹ David Hillel Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 99.

⁶² Abraham Lincoln, “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 67.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 290-293.

atheist; all believed that God was important in forming America and that religion and a Bible-based morality was important in order to keep its citizenry decent human beings.

The General Beliefs of the Founding Fathers

In this chapter I intend to show that the founders placed the Hebrew Bible at the center of their American enterprise. Most were not traditional Christians; they did not have a conviction as to the divinity of Jesus, or the virginity of Mary, or the trinity. Thus, they did not believe that Jesus was resurrected as God on earth.⁶⁴ The Enlightenment period with its emphasis on reason and science ruled out, for many, a belief in biblical miracles. As you will see, they did, however, value the God of the Hebrew Bible; they concluded that He was Creator of everything. Further, the founders fully embraced this creator, God, as the guarantor of our fundamental human rights and the author of liberty. In short, they believed that God was the source of human rights—not Christ and not man.

The founders swam in the intellectual currents of their times, including the broad range of beliefs known as Deism. Emerging from the period of European Enlightenment, Deism challenged the traditionally accepted order of things, positioning the activities of the human mind — and therefore the human individual, his rights and liberties— at the center. One of the most fervent advocates of Deism during the late eighteenth century, the writer and revolutionary, Thomas Paine, provides this definition:

It believes in God, and there it rests. It honours Reason as the choicest gift of God to man and the faculty by which he is enabled to contemplate the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator displayed in the creation; And reposing itself on his

⁶⁴ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008) David Gelenter, *God of Liberty*, 193

protection, both here and hereafter, it avoids all presumptuous beliefs and rejects, as the fabulous inventions of men, all books pretending to revelation.⁶⁵

Paine's definition provides many of the essential elements of deism at the time of the founders: God-centered, reason-preferenced, creation-focused, with no dogma. Yet Deism, by definition, had no uniform orthodoxy and the founders accepted or rejected its various tenets according to their individual philosophies. Most Deists held that:

A rational 'Supreme Architect'—one of a variety of terms Deists used for the deity—created the earth and human life. This omnipotent and unchangeable creator then withdrew to let events take their course on earth without further interference. Just as a ticking watch presupposes a watchmaker, so Deists thought that the rational, mechanistic harmony of nature revealed a deity.⁶⁶

Deism, rather than pointing away from a belief in God, led some to confirm their belief in the God of creation. That Deism could live alongside traditional religious affiliation is also clear. Francis Bacon and John Locke, two of the English thinkers whose philosophical work laid the ground for both Deism and the political convictions of the American founders, remained members of the Anglican church throughout their lives.⁶⁷

As noted earlier, the founders did not consider the United States to be the new Israel, but the *second Israel*, founded by a second chosen people. For example, Franklin and Jefferson wanted an image of Moses leading the Israelites toward the Promised Land to freedom to be the image for the nation's Great Seal. In his second inaugural address, Jefferson again invokes the Israelites being led into a promising land, "I shall need... the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and

⁶⁵ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) Kindle edition, 605.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, Kindle edition, 690.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, Kindle edition, 643.

comforts of life.” In the same inaugural address, Jefferson says that America is “A chosen country.”⁶⁸

The founders knew that creating a government necessarily entailed compromises to liberty, with government having power over the general population. Further, there would need to be a limit on any individual person’s liberty and there would need to be judges, administrators, lawyers, and law enforcement to ensure that the population was safe and individual freedoms protected. The founders were familiar with Algernon Sidney’s book, *Discourses Concerning Government* (1698). In it, Sidney writes about the government of the Hebrew commonwealth. Straus quotes Sidney, “Having seen what government God did not ordain, it may be reasonable to examine the nature of government he did ordain...They had a Chief Magistrate, who was called Judge or Captain, as Joshua, Gideon, and others; a Council of seventy chosen men, and the General Assembly of the people.”⁶⁹ The founders needed to secure the consent of the governed: to create a government by the people for the people and a government that was accountable to the people. Straus writes, “the children of Israel on the banks of the Jordan, who had emerged from centuries of bondage, not only recognized the guiding principles of civil and religious liberty that ‘all men are created equal,’ that God and the law are the only kings, but also established a free commonwealth, a pure democratic-republic under a written constitution, ‘a government of the people, by the people, and for

⁶⁸ Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson's Second Inaugural Address", accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres17.html>

⁶⁹ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 113.

the people.”⁷⁰ It is easy to see how the founders used the Hebrew Bible as a guide when creating the American republic, drawing on ideas regarding the denial of absolutism and the affirmation of democracy.

The founders believed in the Hebrew biblical concept that people were inherently flawed, and that humans were neither basically good nor basically bad, in contrast to the belief in original sin as taught in the New Testament (Romans 5:12, 18-19). Thomas Kidd writes, “In promoting this God-centered idea of virtue [leading writers of the Great Awakening were] fighting against the tide of most eighteenth-century philosophy associated with the Enlightenment, which asserted that people were naturally good, or at least could cultivate virtue without God’s direct intervention.”⁷¹ We are governed by our human nature bestowed upon us by our Creator; the founders all agreed that this led to certain permanent truths about the human condition. We have passions that may be a danger to us. However, we also have the ability to reason, ergo our capacity for self-government. The founders took this to heart when creating America’s system of checks and balances. Madison believed that ‘the causes of factions are sewn in the nature of man.’⁷² Even if the government is made up of virtuous and altruistic people, at any moment, less enlightened citizens could replace them. Checks and balances help to ensure the stability and integrity of government.

To the founders, if there was no transcendent source to whom or to which we must be morally accountable, then man would only be accountable to himself and not to

⁷⁰ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 117.

⁷¹ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 100.

⁷² James Madison, "Federalist 10," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 231.

the society at large. Liberty must be tempered not only with reason but also by the belief in God as the supreme judge. As John Adams said, “Religion was the only thing that could tame our savage natures.”⁷³ Steven Waldman summarizes the views of the founders: “Each felt that religion was extremely important, at a minimum to encourage moral behavior and make the land safe for republican government.”⁷⁴ To the founders a transcendent source was necessary for a successful republic: “If men are so wicked as we now see them with Religion what would they be without it?”⁷⁵

We know that the people asked Washington to be king, and that he refused, thinking the idea absurd.⁷⁶ Too much power in the hands of one man was never good. Madison cogently argued against the monarch or single ruler in Federalist 10 wherein he wrote, “no man is allowed to be a judge in his own right because his interest would blast his judgment, competency, and integrity.”⁷⁷ The theological conviction of the founders was that all human beings are fallible. Thus, with the cultivation of the soul through religion, the awareness of one’s passions, and the seeking of reason and wisdom, man could be virtuous.

In short, the founders did not subscribe to Aristotle’s God: the unmoved mover, who created and then retired. Nor did they believe in Jesus as the Son of God who alone could save humanity. They were also not atheists. Rather, the founders discussed in this paper, although they departed from parts of Christian theology, each supported a God-

⁷³ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 37.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁶ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 76.

⁷⁷ James Madison, "Federalist 10," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 233.

based religion and were grounded in the Mosaic Bible-based moral beliefs of the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁸

The Founding Fathers

George Washington

*God raised Washington up at just the right time, a Moses of the New World, to win the nation's freedom from political bondage.*⁷⁹

George Washington, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army (1775-1783), Chair of the Constitutional Convention (1787) and first President of the United States (1789-1797), was baptized into the Church of England, the state religion of his birthplace, the colony of Virginia. Washington did not write at length on his personally held religious beliefs, however the clearest theme evoked in his writings is that of a providential God, guiding the course of the new nation. A few key texts, including his first inaugural address in 1789, clearly acknowledge this providential God,

It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States... In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own; nor those of my fellow-citizens at large, less than either. No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 192-194

⁷⁹ Luther Richardson, *An Oration*, (Pronounced July 4, 1800), as quoted in Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 251.

⁸⁰ "George Washington: First Inaugural Address. U.S. Inaugural Addresses. 1789, April 30, 1789, George Washington: First Inaugural Address. U.S. Inaugural Addresses, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres13.html>.

This quote appears to reveal much about Washington's beliefs. During the historic occasion of his first address as President, his "first official Act," he admits the need in to ask the "Almighty Being" to bless "the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States." Washington, the first general to command a successful war of independence against an empire, implores that God secure the people of the newly independent nation (with their consent) and affirms the ubiquity of belief within the nation, as his thoughts "expresses your sentiments not less than my own; nor those of my fellow-citizens at large, less than either."

Not uncommon in the language of the time, Washington employs powerful and proximate metaphors for a God who intervenes in human history. In Washington's inaugural, the traditional God who is "the Almighty Being who rules over the universe" also "presides in the Councils of Nations" and is the "Great Author of every public and private good." The traditional Ruler of the Universe, the God of the Cosmos, is also involved in the large affairs of state and the smaller, private arrangements of human goodness.

The theme of an active providential God, involved in the successes of the new United States, is also expressed in a letter to the U.S. Senate written just a month after Washington's inauguration. On May 18, 1789, Washington wrote that he was "inexpressibly happy in a belief that Heaven, which has done so much for our infant nation, will not withdraw its providential influence before our political felicity shall have

been completed... supported by a firm trust in the Great Arbiter of the Universe.”⁸¹ This letter echoes the ideas expressed in the inaugural address, that God, the “Great Arbiter of the Universe,” has a hand in the unfolding affairs of the United States of America.

Washington again invokes God in A New Year’s Proclamation on January 1, 1795:

... the unexampled prosperity of all acknowledge our many and great obligations to Almighty God and to implore Him to continue and confirm the blessings we experience...their sincere and hearty thanks to the Great Ruler of Nations for the manifold and signal mercies which distinguish our lot as a nation...beseech the kind Author of these blessings graciously to prolong them to us; to imprint in our hearts a deep and solemn sense of our obligations to Him for them; to teach us rightly to estimate their immense value; to preserve us from the arrogance of prosperity, and from hazarding the advantages we enjoy by delusive pursuits; to dispose us to merit the continuance of His favors by not abusing them.⁸²

At this time, well into his second term as President, Washington includes his earlier cited theme of God conferring continued blessings on the American project, but concludes the proclamation with requests to shape the moral character of individuals, guarding against “the arrogance of prosperity” and “delusive pursuits.” Washington points to the importance of a God who influences the affairs not just of history, but also of individuals. As Washington said in his 1796 Farewell Address, “religion and morality were indispensable supports to our republic.”⁸³

In a letter to John Jay, Washington reiterates his feelings on human nature and the need for and usefulness of religion to tame human nature:

⁸¹ "George Washington: Reply of the President to the Senate," Read The Constitution, Stupid, accessed August 22, 2013,

http://readtheconstitutionstupid.com/index.php?option=com_arttimeline.

⁸² "George Washington Proclamation of January 1, 1795," Avalon Project - 18th Century Documents: 1700 - 1799, accessed August 22, 2013,

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/18th.asp.

⁸³ George Washington, "Farewell Address," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 139.

we have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation. Experience has taught us that men will not adopt and carry into execution, measures the best calculated for their own good without the intervention of a coercive power...we must take human nature as we find it. Perfection falls not to the share of mortals...”⁸⁴

What keeps men in line? What keeps men moral? Washington believed that religion helped to tame and discipline human nature and would “improve morale and discourage gambling, swearing, and drunkenness.”⁸⁵

As Commander of the Continental Army, Washington believed that God watched over him and his army in times of war, “By all the powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation.”⁸⁶ On November 2, 1783, while giving his Farewell orders to the army, he thanked the “God of the armies.”⁸⁷ Focusing on a God who intervenes in history, Thomas Kidd writes that George Washington “believed that God, through acts of providence, would judge wicked nations, so he remained especially vigilant about maintaining morality and religious devotion in the Continental Army.”⁸⁸ Recognizing the usefulness of belief within the corps, Washington noted that religion “will reflect great credit on the army in general, tend to improve the morals, and at the same time, to increase the happiness of the soldiery.”⁸⁹

⁸⁴ George Washington, "George Washington to John Jay," *The Papers of George Washington*, August 15, 1786, accessed May 4, 2013, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/>.

⁸⁵ George Washington's letter to Governor Dinwiddie, (June 12, 1757), as quoted in Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 68.

⁸⁶ Washington to the Inhabitants of Princeton, (August 25, 1783), quoted in Paul F. Boller, *George Washington & Religion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 58.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 60.

⁸⁸ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 117.

⁸⁹ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008) 68.

For the most, Washington's addresses and writings omit references to Jesus and Waldman writes that his "voluminous writings never seemed to speak of Jesus as divine."⁹⁰ An unnamed mention of Jesus may be found at the close of Washington's final official statement as Commander of the Continental Army. The Circular Letter to the States in 1783 concludes quoting Micah 6:8, asking God to aid the new citizenry to

do justice, to love mercy and to demean ourselves with charity, humility, and pacific temper of mind, which were Characteristic of the Divine Author of our blessed religion and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.⁹¹

The "Divine Author of our blessed religion" whose "humble imitation" is encouraged could be a reference to Jesus, but if it is, it is a "humble" one. Waldman tells us that "subsequent reproductions of the letter mysteriously added the phrase 'through Jesus Christ Our Lord'."⁹² The overt reference to Jesus, by name and Divine, is likely to have been added during the course of one of the Great Awakenings of Protestant churches that significantly influenced the American populace through the course of the 19th century.

Washington also used the Hebrew Bible as a source of literary flourish. In 1790, in a letter to the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, the oldest synagogue in the United States, Washington writing to reassure the congregation, famously penned that the government of the United States would give "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no

⁹⁰ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 193.

⁹¹ *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 181, Circular Letter to the States, George Washington, June 8, 1783.

⁹² Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 59.

assistance.”⁹³ He went on to reference Micah 4:4 prophesying the Messianic age: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in the land continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other inhabitants. While everyone shall sit safely under his own vine and fig-tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”⁹⁴ As a Virginia planter, Washington valued the pastoral and again quotes Micah 4:4 when he describes his retirement desire to sit “under his vine and under his fig tree”—in other words, to retire to Mount Vernon and the peace and quiet of country life.⁹⁵

John Adams

The Atlas of Independence

John Adams, first Vice President of the United States (1789-1797) and second President of the United States (1797-1801), was raised in the Congregational Church (his father sending him to Harvard College to become a minister), but veered toward the “left-wing” as the Unitarian denomination was emerging from the traditional church of New England. Unitarianism emerged from a conflict about the nature of God that can be traced to the earliest centuries of Christianity. After the church councils of the fourth century, Christianity adopted what came to be known as the Nicene Creed, an affirmation of the Trinitarian nature of God, confirming belief in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This became orthodox Christian belief from the fifth century. By the late eighteenth century, anti-Trinitarians, in the New England context known as Unitarians,

⁹³ George Washington, " Letter to the Hebrew Congregation," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 137.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 138.

⁹⁵ David Hillel. Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 94.

had emerged from Congregational churches and had become an integral part of the Protestant landscape. According to David Holmes, “In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a form of supernaturalist Christianity that taught that God was one—a unit—and not three—a tri-unit. In doing so, Unitarians asserted that they had restored the original Christian belief that Jesus was in some way commissioned or sent by God but that he remained subordinate to him.”⁹⁶

Adams was, perhaps, the most traditionally religious of the founders discussed in this paper. While Washington, according to his personal journal, attended church about once a month, John (and Abigail) Adams attended each Sunday, usually twice. (As a rural planter, Washington often lived a distance from the nearest church, while Adams, a small town or city dweller all of his life, had easier access to church.) “He believed in a personal God, in a guiding Providence, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in life after death.”⁹⁷ But he “discard[ed] such beliefs as the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, total depravity, and predestination.”⁹⁸ Adams also believed in the application of reason to revelation. In a diary entry dated August 1, 1761, Adams wrote, “We know it to be our Duty, to read, examine and judge for ourselves, even of ourselves what is right. No Priest nor Pope has any Right to say what I shall believe, and I will not believe one Word they say, if I think it is not founded in Reason and in Revelation.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) Kindle edition, 1058.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Kindle edition, 1127.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, Kindle edition, 1141.

⁹⁹ John Adams diary 7, 21 March - 18 October 1761 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/> as cited in Butterfield, L.H., ed. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1961.

Informed by Deism, Adams believed “that since God created the laws of the universe, the scientific study of nature would help us understand His mind and conform to His wishes.”¹⁰⁰ At times, applying reason to revelation made him at odds with Christianity. Adams thought that the “Trinity was illogical” and that faith and salvation in religion should not take precedent over good works. Waldman writes, “most of all...he was repulsed by the fundamental Protestant doctrine that salvation was determined by only faith—acceptance of Christ as personal savior—rather than deeds.”¹⁰¹ In contrast to believing in the ultimate power of faith, in Judaism, people’s actions and deeds are more important than belief, “All the commandments which I command you this day shall you observe to do, that you may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers.” (Deuteronomy 8:1, NJPS) Adams did believe that human nature unchecked could lead to evil, and thus that humans needed religion in order to be tamed: “when men are given up to the rule of their passion, they murder like weasels.”¹⁰²

Waldman writes that Adams praised “the eternal, self-existent, independent, benevolent, all powerful and all merciful creator, preserver and father of the universe, the first good, first perfect, and first fair.” Adams also believed that God worked through human history, that the European settlement of America was divinely orchestrated, and that God had chosen him for his political career and the presidency.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 34.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 34.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 36-38.

An example of how strongly Adams believed in God acting in history was his actions in 1798 when the young American nation was on the verge of war with France. In addition to pursuing diplomatic approaches to solving the nation's conflict with France, Adams delivered a Proclamation recommending a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer. It began:

As the safety and prosperity of nations ultimately and essentially depend on the protection and the blessing of Almighty God, and the national acknowledgment of this truth is not only an indispensable duty which the people owe to Him, but a duty whose natural influence is favorable to the promotion of that morality and piety without which social happiness can not exist nor the blessings of a free government be enjoyed; and as this duty, at all times incumbent, is so especially in seasons of difficulty or of danger, when existing or threatening calamities, the just judgments of God against prevalent iniquity, are a loud call to repentance and reformation.¹⁰⁴

Asserting his belief that the country relied on God's protection and that Americans should acknowledge this truth, Adams encouraged the citizenry to fast. The fast itself, Adams believed, would lead to morality and piety, the guarantors of social happiness. "Repentance and reformation" were necessary at a time of crises. Adams model of the course of action to follow during crisis might well have come from the Book of Joel (2:12), "Now, therefore, says the Lord, Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." The same 1798 proclamation concludes:

And finally I recommend, that on the said day; the duties of humiliation and prayer be accompanied by fervent Thanksgiving to the bestower of every good gift, not only for having hitherto protected and preserved the people of these United States in the independent enjoyment of their religious and civil freedom, but also for having prospered them in a wonderful progress of population, and for conferring on them many and great favours conducive to the happiness and prosperity of a nation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ John Adams, "John Adams Proclamation," WallBuilders | Presenting America's Forgotten History and Heroes, with an Emphasis on Our Moral, Religious, and Constitutional Heritage., March 23, 1798, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.wallbuilders.com/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, accessed March 9, 2014.

Thanksgiving is owed to God for His protection and preservation, and for the freedoms, both religious and civil, enjoyed by the young country. God bestows “every good gift,” the nation’s growth, its happiness and prosperity. God acts in history; God favors a nation. It is the story of the Hebrew Bible.

Adams did not shy away from his affinity for the God of the Hebrew Bible or its central stories in his famous correspondence with Thomas Jefferson. In a letter Adams wrote to Jefferson dated September 14, 1818, he professed his beliefs about the God of the Hebrew Bible: “Had you and I been forty days with Moses on Mount Sinai, and admitted to behold the divine Shechinah, and there told that one was three and three one, we might not have had courage to deny it, but we could not have believed it...God has infinite wisdom, goodness, and power; he created the universe; his duration is eternal, a parte ante and a parte post.”¹⁰⁶

A diary entry written sixty-two years prior to the letter to Jefferson clearly indicates that Adams was a life-long believer in the central importance of the Bible.

Dated February 22, 1756, the entry reads:

Suppose a nation in some distant Region, should take the Bible for their only law Book, and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited. Every member would be obliged in conscience to temperance and frugality and industry, to justice and kindness and Charity towards his fellow men, and to Piety and Love, and reverence towards almighty God. In this Commonwealth, no man would impair his health by Gluttony, drunkenness, or Lust -- no man would sacrifice his most precious time to cards, or any other trifling and mean amusement--no man would steal or lie or any way defraud his neighbour, but would live in peace and good will with all men--no man would blaspheme his maker or propane his Worship, but a rational and manly, a sincere and

¹⁰⁶ John Adams, "John Adams' Letter to Thomas Jefferson," Inspiration, Spirituality, Faith – Beliefnet.com, September 14, 1818, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.beliefnet.com/>.

unaffected Piety and devotion, would reign in all hearts. What a Eutopa, what a Paradise would this region be.¹⁰⁷

While the extensive diary entry of 1756 refers simply to “the Bible,” Adams is clearly referencing the Bible as a source of laws and values, advocating “temperance and frugality and industry,” “justice and kindness and Charity,” “Piety and Love, and reverence towards almighty God.” Clearly the “Eutopa” that Adams describes has values drawn from both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Just as clearly, he sees the Bible not only as *a* worthy source of guidance and instruction for everyday life, but as *the* most important source for such guidance. Adams’ belief that religion (and God) were necessary for a successful society are confirmed in a letter to Benjamin Franklin where, displaying his sense of humor, he writes, “without religion this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite society, I mean hell.”¹⁰⁸

It would not be fitting to leave a discussion of John Adams without citing the other great correspondence of his life. Over the span of forty years, John and Abigail Adams exchanged more than 1,160 letters. They were letters of substance and of love, an exchange of ideas and ideals. They also chronicled the often time historic events that the two experienced and witnessed while apart. This letter from John to Abigail was dated May 17, 1776:

I have this Morning heard Mr. Duffil upon the Signs of the Times. He run a Parrallell between the Case of Israel and that of America, and between the

¹⁰⁷ John Adams, "John Adams Diary 1, 18 November 1755 - 29 August 1756," Adams Family Papers, section goes here, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc%3Fid%3DD1%26hi%2520%2520%2520accessed%25203%2F9%2F2014>, as cited in Butterfield, L.H., ed. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961.

¹⁰⁸ John Adams, "John Adams Letter to Thomas Jefferson," Apr. 19, 1817, as quoted in Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 36.

Conduct of Pharaoh and that of George. Jealousy that the Israelites would throw off the Government of Egypt made him issue his Edict that the Midwives should cast the Children into the River, and the other Edict that the Men should make a large Revenue of Brick without Straw. He concluded that the Course of Events, indicated strongly the Design of Providence that we should be separated from G. Britain.¹⁰⁹

Two months prior to the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, John reports to Abigail about a sermon he had heard comparing the colonies under George III to the enslaved Israelites under Pharaoh. The conclusion for America, modeled on the Israelites need for freedom, is separation from Great Britain. The Hebrew Bible serves here, in an utterly natural way, as both inspiration and playbook for the American colonies.

Abigail wrote to John in the summer of 1775, during the midst of the siege of Boston:

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people. Trust in him at all times, ye people pour out your hearts before him. God is a refuge for us. -- Charlestown is laid in ashes. The Battle began upon our intrenchments upon Bunkers Hill.¹¹⁰

As Charlestown is destroyed and Bunker Hill under attack, Abigail Adams pens a prayer to the God of Israel, first quoting Ecclesiastes 9:11, then Psalm 29:11 and Psalm 62:8. Here, Abigail Adams has offered a personal prayer stitched from the wisdom and songs of the Hebrew Bible, poetic and heartfelt. She has become an eighteenth century biblical redactor and John Adams is her Israel.

¹⁰⁹ Abigail Adams, "Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams," *The Decisive Day Is Come*, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.masshist.org/bh/adamp1text.html>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, accessed March 9, 2014.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was a giant of a man: a leader, well read and brilliant, an intellectual and deep thinker. He penned the Declaration of Independence. He was the first United States Secretary of State (1790-1793), the second Vice President of the United States (1797-1801) and third President of the United States (1801-1809). He was an accomplished architect and the founder of the University of Virginia. In 1801, Jefferson was the first to appoint a Jew, Reuben Etting of Baltimore, to a federal post as United States Marshall for Maryland.

As a writer with a philosophical orientation, Jefferson wrote more frequently and at times more emphatically about his beliefs than the other founders discussed in this paper. Beginning in his own lifetime, his religious beliefs served as a lightning rod (an invention of Franklin's). To this day, people with conflicting points of view on Jefferson's beliefs all claim him as their own — or accuse him of being someone else's. Because of this, I will look closely at Jefferson's own words, the key descriptions of his own religious outlook found in his extensive public and private writings.

Jefferson believed that, “our spiritual journeys must be led by reason, not faith.”¹¹¹ God created the human mind unbounded and unrestricted, fully capable, in fact the only thing capable, of leading humanity to religious truths. The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted in 1779 by Jefferson, states,

Almighty God hath created the mind free; That all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and therefore are a departure from the plan of

¹¹¹ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 83.

the holy author of our religion, who being Lord, both of body and mind yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone...¹¹²

Jefferson writes that God, the “holy author of our religion,” in whose power it was to have created humanity with another nature, rather created the human mind unencumbered by “coercions.” The statute was passed by the Virginia legislature in 1785, without the concluding line of the paragraph, “but to extend it by its influence on reason alone.” In his emphasis on the exclusive power of reason, Jefferson had gone too far for the legislative body of Virginians.

For Jefferson, belief in God was the logical conclusion of a scientific mind freely observing the workings of the universe. Waldman writes that “he applied reason and critical scientific thought to the world and concluded that God does exist.”¹¹³ Jefferson wrote John Adams,

I hold (without appeal to revelation) that when we take a view of the Universe, in its parts general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition...It is impossible for the human mind not to believe that there is, in all this, design, cause and effect, up to an ultimate cause, a fabricator of all things from matter and motion...So irresistible are these evidences of an intelligent and powerful Agent.”¹¹⁴

Jefferson observed the world around him, its simplicity and its complexity, and the world led him inextricably back to the Creator God.

¹¹² Thomas Jefferson, " Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 135.

¹¹³ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 84.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson Letter to John Adams, April 11, 1823

<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl271.php>, accessed March 11, 2014

In an 1822 letter to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, Jefferson, writing simply, professed his personal creed, “That there is only one God, and he is all perfect. That there is a future state of rewards and punishments. That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion.”¹¹⁵ Consistent with his creed, Jefferson often expressed his own independence from religious institutions and his view that the individual maintained a direct relationship to God:

But I have ever thought religion a concern purely between our God and our consciences, for which we were accountable to him, and not to the priests. I never told my own religion, nor scrutinized that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another's creed. I have ever judged of the religion of others by their lives...For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read. By the same test the world must judge me.¹¹⁶

Jefferson did not trust professions of faith, only demonstrations in the way people lived their lives were convincing of a moral and religious character. By 1816, the year this letter was written, Jefferson had himself become the target of repeated attacks on his moral character because of his religious beliefs. In fact, Jefferson's personal religious beliefs were as controversial in his day as they are today.¹¹⁷ A particular vicious condemnation was penned during the presidential campaign of 1800 when,

Federalist papers such as the Palladium editorialized: Should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the seal of death is that moment set on our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous 'prostitute', under

¹¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "The Founding Faith Archives," Beliefnet: Inspiration. Spirituality. Faith., Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, accessed June 13, 2013, http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/58/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_Dr_Benjamin_Waterhouse_1.html.

¹¹⁶ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Mrs. Samuel H. Smith, August 6, 1816, accessed March 13, 2014, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl247.php>,

¹¹⁷ Jefferson's Religious Beliefs, <http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-religious-beliefs>, accessed March 13, 2014

the title of goddess of reason, will preside in the sanctuaries now devoted to the worship of the most High.¹¹⁸

Jefferson believed that God, in addition to giving human beings the gift (or goddess) of reason, created human beings with natural rights. This led to one of the core beliefs of his political philosophy: since God bestows natural rights, unalienable rights, only God can take them away. Thus, in his Notes on the State of Virginia he writes, “Our rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them... The rights of conscience we never submitted... we are answerable for them to our God.”¹¹⁹

Though he attended church throughout his life, Jefferson thought that most organized religion, dictating the content of an individual’s beliefs and private Judgements, opposed liberty.¹²⁰ However, he believed that God granted human liberty, “The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time: the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them.”¹²¹ Life and liberty, each animated the other and were inseparably and uniquely joined in Jefferson’s philosophy. The usefulness of tracing the right of liberty back to God and convincing the citizenry of this was also underscored by Jefferson, “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed

¹¹⁸ Cathryn J. Prince, *A Professor, A President, and A Meteor: The Birth of American Science* (New York, Prometheus Books) 2011, 95

¹¹⁹ "Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVII 1784," The Founders Constitution, Amendment I (Religion), accessed June 13, 2013, http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions40.html.

¹²⁰ Jefferson’s Religious Beliefs, <http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/jeffersons-religious-beliefs>, accessed March 13, 2014

¹²¹ Thomas Jefferson, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 91.

their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God?"¹²²

In addition to being the ultimate source of liberty, Jefferson believed that God was active in the lives of individuals and nations in other ways. In his first Inaugural Address he affirmed, "acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter."¹²³ Jefferson believed God intervened in American history and aided in the nation's prosperity. In his second Inaugural Address, Jefferson acknowledged "the favor of the Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life."¹²⁴ In addition to affirming a role for God in history, Jefferson powerfully compared the new American nation to "Israel of old." For another example of God's acting in history, Jefferson expressed his opinion on the defeat of Napoleon, a leader about whom he had strong views, in a letter to George Ticknor, "It proves that we have a god in heaven. That he is just, and not careless of what passes in the world."¹²⁵

¹²² Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 404.

¹²³ Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address," accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres16.html>, as cited in Paul Johnson, *George Washington: The Founding Father* (New York: Atlas Books/HarperCollins, 2005), 79.

¹²⁴ Thomas Jefferson, "Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address," accessed June 13, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres16.html>, as cited in Paul Johnson, *George Washington: The Founding Father* (New York: Atlas Books/HarperCollins, 2005), 82.

¹²⁵ Albert Ellery Bergh, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Thomas Jefferson and Andrew A. Lipscomb, vol. 10 (Washington, D.C.: Issued under the Auspices of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903), as cited in Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 84.

While comparing America to biblical Israel, Jefferson, in a letter from October 12, 1813 in his correspondence with Adams, posts negative views of the Jewish tradition. The letter also describes Jefferson's motivation to create what became known as *The Jefferson Bible* (formally titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*), his reaction of the gospels to what he believed to be the essence of Christianity: the core moral teachings of Jesus.

After acknowledging receipt of several letters from both John and Abigail Adams and recommending the Enfield book quoted later, Jefferson begins,

To compare the morals of the old, with those of the new testament, would require an attentive study of the former, a search thro' all it's books for it's precepts, and through all it's history for its ractices, and the principles they prove. As commentaries too on these, the philosophy of the Hebrews must be enquired into, their Mishna, their Gemara, Cabbala, Jezirah, Sohar, Cosri, and their Talmud must be examined and understood, in order to do them full justice.¹²⁶

Jefferson acknowledges that the task of comparing the moral teachings of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles is a significant one and would first require an exhaustive study of a wealth of Jewish texts to properly understand Jewish "precepts," "practices," and "principles," as well as "philosophy." His task, he states, would be "to do them full justice."¹²⁷

Then Jefferson takes a regrettable turn. He indicates that he will rely on the work of Johann Jakob Brucker and his translator William Enfield as authoritative sources on Judaism. In 1791, Enfield, a British Unitarian minister, translated Brucker's *Historia*

¹²⁶ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_John_Adams_October_12_1813, accessed March 11, 2014.

¹²⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 404.

Critica Philosophiae, which had been published in six volumes in 1767. It is Enfield's translation of Bruckner that, it seems, forms the basis for Jefferson's wrongheaded views on Judaism and Jewish belief. Jefferson quotes Enfield in his letter to Adams, "Ethics were so little studied among the Jews, that, in their whole compilation called the Talmud, there is only one treatise on moral subjects. Their books of Morals chiefly consisted in a minute enumeration of duties."¹²⁸ Enfield goes on to outline the number of commandments, positive and negative, and erroneously concludes that:

in order to obtain salvation, it was judged sufficient to fulfill any one single law in the hour of death; the observance of the rest being deemed necessary, only to increase the felicity of the future life. What a wretched depravity of sentiment and manners must have prevailed before such corrupt maxims could have obtained credit! It is impossible to collect from these writings a consistent series of moral Doctrine.¹²⁹

That ends the quote from Enfield. It is impossible to know if Jefferson chose this quote because it confirmed his bias regarding the Jews, that the religion lacks moral guidance, or if he believed that the text was a fair, scholarly assessment of the whole of the Jewish tradition. In either case, Jefferson continues:

It was the reformation of this 'wretched depravity' of morals which Jesus undertook. In extracting the pure principles which he taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to them. We must dismiss the Platonists and Plotinists, the Stagyrites and Gamalielites, the Eclectics the Gnostics and Scholastics, their essences and

¹²⁸ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_John_Adams_October_12_1813, accessed March 11, 2014.

¹²⁹ Ibid, accessed March 11, 2014.

emanations, their Logos and Demi-urgos, Aeons and Daemons male and female, with a long train of Etc. Etc. Etc. or, shall I say at once, of Nonsense.¹³⁰

Relying on Brucker and Enfield, Jefferson sadly sees the content of Jewish tradition as a “wretched depravity’ of morals” that Jesus came to reform. Conforming to the anti-semitic stereotypes of their time, Brucker and Enfield wrongly identify Judaism as devoid of moral teachings. Had they not done so, or had Jefferson done his own research into Jewish texts “in order to do them full justice,”¹³¹ he certainly would have drawn different conclusions. Jefferson fails to see the great moral content contained in many Jewish texts. But it is not just the Jewish tradition that Jefferson maligns. He also targets Christian priests (a term he used for both Roman Catholic and Calvinist clergy) of all stripes for enriching and empowering themselves and he rejects a litany of religious and philosophical approaches to religion that, he believes, have resulted in “Nonsense.”

Jefferson identifies himself with the school of Christian Primitivism or Restorationism, seeking the truth of Christianity within the earliest, essential teachings of Jesus and the practices of the early church — teachings now understood by many Christians to be those of a Jewish Jesus practiced by, in significant part, a Jewish church.

Jefferson then describes the project of *The Jefferson Bible*, “We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus.”¹³² Jefferson’s Bible is gleaned solely from the gospels, and edited even further to include only “the very words only of Jesus” without interpretation or explanation by the gospel authors. As a result, Jefferson’s Bible excludes accounts of miracles attributed to

¹³⁰ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_John_Adams_October_12_1813, accessed March 11, 2014.

¹³¹ Ibid, accessed March 11, 2014.

¹³² Ibid, accessed March 11, 2014.

Jesus, mentions of supernatural acts—including the resurrection—and verses indicating that Jesus was divine. Jefferson continues:

There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.¹³³

No founder was more influenced by Deism or wrote more about non-orthodox religious views than Jefferson, yet he remained affiliated with the Anglican or Episcopal Church throughout his life, contributing to his local Episcopal parish as well as Baptist and Presbyterian churches. Perhaps even more tellingly, Jefferson had his children instructed in the Episcopal Church and at his death, an Episcopal minister served at his funeral.¹³⁴ While anti-clerical, Jefferson was not anti-institutional regarding the need for religion, “for he firmly believed that morality was rooted in religion...For Jefferson, true worship consisted of love and tolerance for human beings.”¹³⁵

Benjamin Franklin

Born a Puritan in 1706, Benjamin Franklin was a generation older than Washington (born 1732), Adams (born 1735), and Jefferson (born 1743). Franklin was a renaissance man of the Enlightenment: an inventor, author, publisher, printer, postmaster, scientist and statesman. He was an indispensable leader of the revolutionary generation.

¹³³ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_John_Adams_October_12_1813, accessed March 11, 2014.

¹³⁴ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), Kindle edition, 1167.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, Kindle edition, 1250.

Walter Isaacson describes Franklin as, “the most accomplished American of his age and the most influential in inventing the type of society America would become.”¹³⁶

Franklin believed in the existence and intervention of a providential God. He reported in his autobiography that, having lost many of his papers in the Revolutionary War, he found notes on the establishment of a secret society for “young and single men.”¹³⁷ One note contained

the substance of an intended creed, containing, as I thought, the essentials of every known religion, and being free of anything that might shock the professors of any religion. It is express'd in these words, ‘That there is one God, who made all things. That he governs the world by his providence. That he ought to be worshiped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving. But that the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man. That the soul is immortal. And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter.’¹³⁸

Franklin believed in the God of the Hebrew Bible, One God, the Creator who cares for His creation, and is due praise. He affirmed that God rewards the good and punishes the bad, “either here or hereafter.” And, as with the other founders discussed, he believed, “that morality was the essence of true religion, not correct doctrine.”¹³⁹ Franklin was a clear ethical monotheist, affirming the one God introduced to him in Genesis who demands ethical conduct.

Also consistent with the views of the other founders discussed in this paper, Franklin was skeptical about orthodox Christian belief and specifically about the divinity of Jesus. On March 9, 1790, less than a month before his death on April 17, Franklin,

¹³⁶ Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 492

¹³⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York), 74.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 169.

with his usual profound wit, wrote to Ezra Stiles that he had, “with most of the present dissenter in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity, tho’ it is a question I do not Dogmatize upon, having never studied it, & think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble.”¹⁴⁰

By adult affiliation, Franklin was a Presbyterian, but he felt that some of the church’s doctrine was “unintelligible,” “doubtful” and he “early absented [him]self from the public assemblies of the sect.”¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, Franklin wrote, “Tho’ I seldom attended any public worship, I had still an opinion of its propriety, and of its utility when rightly conducted, and I regularly paid my annual subscription for the support of the only Presbyterian minister or meeting we had in Philadelphia.”¹⁴² Franklin held out hope that the minister would preach on moral lessons, but was often disappointed when the content of the teaching regarded church doctrine and observances.¹⁴³ According to Holmes, “Franklin perceived that organized religion could benefit society by encouraging public virtue as well as by promoting social order. . . Prudent and tolerant, he contributed to the construction budgets not only of every church in Philadelphia but also of the city’s one synagogue.”¹⁴⁴

For Franklin, religion had a purely utilitarian function and was necessary to keep human beings on the straight and narrow. In a letter to Thomas Paine, Franklin wrote,

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, March 9, 1790

<http://www.constitution.org/primarysources/franklin-stiles.html>, accessed March 14, 2014

¹⁴¹ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York), 62.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴³ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York), 63.

¹⁴⁴ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) Kindle location, 833.

You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life without the assistance afforded by religion...but think how great a proportion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes habitual...if men are so wicked as we now see them with religion, what would they be if without it.¹⁴⁵

Franklin thought that the role of religion was to encourage virtue and emphasize the moral path. This was in line with Franklin's understanding of the teachings of Jesus, "I think the system of morals, and his religion as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw, or it is likely to see."¹⁴⁶ Emphasizing good works and moral action over faith, Franklin believed, "Serving God is doing good to man."¹⁴⁷ In a June 6, 1753, letter to George Whitefield he said, "The faith you mention has certainly its use in the world...but I wish it were more productive of good works than I have generally seen: I mean real good works; works of kindness, charity, mercy."¹⁴⁸ Franklin's paraphrases Micah 6:8: "He has shown to you oh man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Franklin believed that God intervenes in history and had answered human prayers for divine protection during the revolution.¹⁴⁹ Waldman writes,

¹⁴⁵ Benjamin Franklin, "Letter to Unknown Recipient | Teaching American History," Teaching American History, December 13, 1757, "Reasons Against Satirizing Religion, accessed June 14, 2013, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/reasons-against-satirizing-religion/>.

¹⁴⁶ Benjamin Franklin, "Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles," Beliefnet: Inspiration. Spirituality. Faith, accessed June 13, 2013, http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/44/Letter_from_Benjamin_Franklin_to_Ezra_Stiles_1.html.

¹⁴⁷ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 20.

¹⁴⁸ Benjamin Franklin, "Lost Episode for June 6 - Watchmen on the Wall," Watchmen on the Wall RSS, June 7, 2012, Benjamin Franklin letter to George Whitefield, June 6, 1753, accessed June 16, 2013, <http://www.watchmenpastors.org/lost-episode-for-june-6/>.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 213.

he embraced a very non-deistic view that God intervened in the lives of human beings...at the Constitutional convention [Franklin said] ‘God governs in the affairs of men.’ Acknowledgments of God’s power were routinely inserted in his letters as subordinate clauses, as in ‘if it please God that I live long enough’ or ‘thanks to God, who has preserved all our family in perfect health.’¹⁵⁰

In his private letters, Franklin did not need to play the role of Poor Richard or of an American diplomat, but could write freely and truly the content of his heart and mind. Within the context of correspondence, references to God’s power, requests for God’s protection and thanksgiving for His preservation are persuasive indications that Franklin’s belief horizon reached to the traditional religious view of God working in the lives of men and women.

Franklin believed that God acts in the lives of individuals and in the affairs of the American nation. On June 28, 1787, at the Constitutional Convention, Franklin said, “I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth— that God governs in the affairs of men.”¹⁵¹ According to Kidd, “He reminded the convention that Americans had prayed persistently for divine protection during the Revolution and God had responded.”¹⁵² God not only heard the prayers of the revolutionaries, Franklin voiced the belief that God responded because the Americans were in the right. In a letter to William Strahan, Franklin wrote, “If it had not been for

¹⁵⁰ Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 23.

¹⁵¹ Marion Smith, "The Foundry," The Heritage Network, June 28, 2010, America, Under God?, accessed June 13, 2013, <http://blog.heritage.org/2010/06/28/america-under-god/>.

¹⁵² Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 213.

the justice of our cause, and the consequent interposition of providence... we must have been ruined.”¹⁵³

A biblical story of near ruin had particular hold on Franklin’s imagination. God aiding Moses and the Israelite nation at the edge of the parted sea with Pharaoh’s army fast approaching was biblical imagery that Franklin proposed for the official Seal of the United States.¹⁵⁴ Even Franklin’s maternal grandfather, Peter Folger, utilized scriptural imagery when he wrote the poem “Looking Glass of the Times:

New England they are like the Jews, as like, as they can be
They made large promises to God, at home and at the sea
They did proclaim free Liberty.

James Madison

James Madison, Secretary of State (1801-1809) and fourth President of the United States (1809-1817), was considered the Father of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, he authored the Federalist Papers, important articles serialized from 1787-1788 that advocated for passage of the Constitution. He attended the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). Then headed by Reverend John Witherspoon, the college was known to be less influenced by Deism than other colonial-era institutions and was the main institution for the preparation of American Presbyterian clergy. Madison remained in Princeton for a year after graduation

¹⁵³ Benjamin Franklin to William Strahan, (August 19, 1784), quoted in Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 250.

¹⁵⁴ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 197.

to continue a course of study in Hebrew (in which he became fluent) and ethics with Witherspoon.¹⁵⁵

Madison was raised in an Anglican household. For the most part, as an adult he kept his personal religious views very private. His many volumes of personal writings contain only a few, unspecific references to his beliefs. He limited religious references in letters and did not speak publicly on religious subjects. In almost all cases, executive proclamations issued during his terms as president do not use religious language or make any religious references. Because of this, fewer sources remain regarding Madison's personal beliefs. He seems to have intentionally left a difficult trail.

An early advocate against state subsidies for religious institutions and for a strict separation of church and state, Madison even opposed the appointment of chaplains for Congress and the armed forces. Having witnessed religious persecution, he tried to guard against all state involvement. In Culpeper County, Virginia, he stumbled upon a number of Baptist preachers who had been jailed merely for being Baptist and preaching in Anglican Virginia. Madison wrote to his friend William Bradford of his anger at the

diabolical Hell conceived principle of persecution [that] rages among some; and to their eternal infamy, the clergy can furnish their quota of imps for such business. This vexes me the worst of anything whatever. There are at this time in the adjacent county not less than five or six well-meaning men in close jail for publishing their religious sentiments, which in the main are very orthodox. I have neither patience to hear, talk, or think of anything relative to this matter; for I have squabbled and scolded, abused and ridiculed, so long about it to little purpose, that I am without common patience. So I must beg you to pity me, and pray for liberty of conscience to revive among us."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) Kindle edition, 1352.

¹⁵⁶ James Madison, "Letter from James Madison to William Bradford," Beliefnet: Inspiration. Spirituality. Faith, January 24, 1774, accessed June 14, 2013, http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/12/Letter_from_James_Madison_to_William_Bradford_1p.html.

In contrast to the persecution of the Baptists, Madison felt that the “liberty of conscience,” “the free exercise of religion,” and God were necessary in order to secure a good and virtuous society. He believed that human nature needed to be tamed in order to establish good government. This utilitarian use of religion is clearly stated in Federalist 51: “What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”¹⁵⁷ But men are not angels; they need government and religion to tame them. In order to be a free people, Madison believed that Americans needed to be a virtuous people. With a firm reliance upon “Divine Providence” and religious and moral cultivation of the soul, human beings could govern themselves. In Federalist 55, Madison writes, “As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these [good] qualities in a higher degree than any other form.”¹⁵⁸ Good government, free and representative, relies on people acting rightly. When Madison appeals “to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions,”¹⁵⁹ it is an appeal to a God who guides our sense of responsibility to one another.

In a response to Rev. Frederick Beasley, who had set Madison a paper on the nature of God, Madison writes, “The belief in a God All Powerful wise and good is so essential to the moral order of the World & to the happiness of man, that arguments

¹⁵⁷ James Madison “Federalist 51,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 287.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 323.

¹⁵⁹ James Madison “Declarations,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 8.

which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources.”¹⁶⁰ Madison firmly believed that God is a necessary feature of morality and that humanity needs a God-based morality. Madison concluded his first presidential inaugural with these words,

We have all been encouraged to feel in the guardianship and guidance of that Almighty Being, whose power regulates the destiny of nations, whose blessings have been so conspicuously dispensed to this rising Republic, and to whom we are bound to address out devout gratitude for the past, as well as our fervent supplications and best hopes for the future.”¹⁶¹

Whatever his personal views, Madison knew that the American people believed that God was active here on earth and that they expected their President to assure them of that, especially in times of war, God was on their side. At the outset of the War of 1812, Congress passed a resolution calling for “a day of public humiliation and prayer.” The proclamation designating the day was one of the few instances when Madison invoked significant religious sentiment and language in public discourse. He asked for the nation to seek,

His merciful forgiveness and His assistance in the great duties of repentance and amendment, and especially of offering fervent supplications that in the present season of calamity and war He would take the American people under His peculiar care and protection; that He would guide their public councils, animate their patriotism, and bestow His blessing on their arms; that He would inspire all nations with a love of justice and a concord with a reverence for the unerring precept of our holy religion to do to others as they would require that others should do to them; and, finally, that, turning the hearts of our enemies from the violence and injustice which sway their councils against us, He would hasten a restoration of the blessings of peace.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006) Kindle location 1427

¹⁶¹ James Madison, "James Madison: First Inaugural Address," Encyclopedia Britannica Profiles, March 4, 1809, The American Presidency, <http://www.britannica.com/presidents/article-9116935>.

¹⁶² James Madison, "James Madison: Proclamation - Recommending a Day of Prayer," The American Presidency Project, July 9, 1812, A Proclamation, accessed June 14, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65944>.

Madison, who was a champion of religious liberty throughout his political career, often worked with Jefferson, his co-statesman in Virginia, to secure passage of statutes and amendments that protected freedom of conscience. In defense of religious liberty and against Virginia state subsidies of “Teachers of the Christian Religion,” Madison wrote the “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments.” In it he writes,

that religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction not by force or violence. The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man...It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator...Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe.¹⁶³

Although we are unsure of Madison’s personal relationship with God, we do know that God was important to the civil society Madison wanted to build. Religious freedom and tolerance were of the utmost importance to Madison, who firmly believed that religion was best when freely chosen.

Thomas Paine

Call it then the Age of Paine.

~John Adams

Thomas Paine was a revolutionary, journalist, political theorist and author of *Common Sense* (1776), *The American Crisis* (1776-83), and *The Age of Reason* (1793-94). Born in England, he emigrated to America in 1774, just a year before the start of the revolution, with a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin: “The bearer Mr.

¹⁶³ "To the Honorable the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, James Madison, accessed June 14, 2013, http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/madison_m&r_1785.html.

Thomas Paine is very well recommended to me as an ingenious worthy young man.”¹⁶⁴

While the most vocally committed deist of the revolutionaries profiled here, his writings were filled with biblical references.

Paine’s *Common Sense*, published anonymously at the beginning of the American Revolution, was an instant best seller and, at a time of low literacy, was read aloud throughout the colonies. Relative to the population size, it is (but for the Bible) the best selling publication in United States history. *Common Sense*, “the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era,” unified and catalyzed the pro-independence movement; One cannot underestimate its importance to the revolutionary cause.¹⁶⁵

Based on a story from the Hebrew Bible in which Samuel warns of, and the Bible discredits, monarchical rule, Paine writes,

for the will of the Almighty as declared by Gideon, and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings...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...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...should disapprove a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of heaven.¹⁶⁶

Contesting absolute monarchy and referring to First Samuel, chapter 8, Paine explains,

“These portions of the Scriptures are direct and positive. They admit no equivocal construction. That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical

¹⁶⁴ Jill Lepore, “The Sharpened Quill,” *The New Yorker*, October 16, 2006, n. pag. accessed March 15, 2014

¹⁶⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002) 55

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Paine, “Common Sense,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 104-155.

government is true, or the Scriptures are false.”¹⁶⁷ Israel is intended to have only God as king, able to rule absolutely. But God, with Samuel warning that the future king will take the best of all that the Israelites have, gives them the monarch they demanded and Saul becomes king.

Paine again utilizes the Hebrew Bible when he reiterates the Genesis idea of equality by creation and questions the notion of human kingship. Paine writes,

Mankind being originally equals in the order of creation...But there is another and greater distinction for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is, the distinction of men into kings and subjects. Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished is worth enquiring into.¹⁶⁸

Paine used biblical language frequently to justify the revolution. He wrote about America beginning anew and likened America’s fresh start to Genesis after the flood, saying, “The birthday of a new world is at hand...A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.”¹⁶⁹ Of his personal beliefs, Paine, echoing Micah 6:8 (without the final clause) said:

I believe in one God, and no more: and I hope for happiness beyond this life. 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. But . . . 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.¹⁷⁰

While Paine is thought to be the least traditionally religious of the founders, it is interesting to note that he believed in an afterlife, “I trouble not myself about the manner

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 105.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 104-155.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom, Jack Fruchtman, Grove Press New York NY, 64

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 232.

of future existence. I content myself with believing, even to positive conviction, that the power that gave me existence is able to continue it, in any form and manner he pleases, either with or without this body.”¹⁷¹

II. Declaration of Independence

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress, composed of fifty-six delegates from twelve of the thirteen American colonies, Georgia being missing, adopted the United States Declaration of Independence. Drafted by Thomas Jefferson, with edits from John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Congress, the document declared the American colonies independent from Great Britain, providing a detailed philosophical and political argument to support the revolutionary action. The core principles on which this nation was established are expressed in our founding documents: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights. Many of these principles found their earliest expression in the Hebrew Bible. Sivan writes,

The spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures also found a resounding echo in the American Declaration of Independence, which affirmed the duty of the government to uphold the Right, as ordained by Divine Law. The preamble to Thomas Jefferson’s original draft, though slightly modified in the definitive Declaration, thus proclaimed that ‘We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable’...The U.S. Constitution quoting the Declaration of Independence, stresses that ‘governments are not laws unto themselves, that they can not create right, that they are accountable to a Higher Power,’ and that men ‘are endowed by their Creator’ with ‘unalienable rights.’ So it was that the U.S. Bill of Rights (1789) had its roots in the old Puritan idea of a ‘solemn agreement of the

¹⁷¹ Thomas Paine, "The Age of Reason: Part I: Recapitulation," *The Age of Reason: Part I: Recapitulation*, 1794, *Recapitulation*, accessed August 12, 2013, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/aor/paine/aor/aor20.htm>.

people,' which was in turn based on the ancient Biblical notion of Covenant.¹⁷²

While the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, particularly those from England and Scotland, and most notably Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Francis Hutcheson and David Hume, had great influence on the Founding Fathers, there is an even older lens through which America's founding documents come into focus: it is the Hebrew Bible.

Revolutionary era readers, seeking sources that affirmed their ideals of liberty, equality, justice, and right government, found the sacred and cherished books of the Hebrew Bible. Reading the Hebrew Bible, with an eye toward the values of the enlightenment, the founders had a text, both familiar and authoritative, that resonated with the themes they sought.

The Declaration of Independence is a treasured symbol of liberty and equality, principles that are rooted in the Hebrew Bible and the Mosaic Law.¹⁷³ Christian clergyman Henry W. Field states, "the natural equality of men—is fundamental both to the Mosaic law and to the Declaration of Independence."¹⁷⁴ We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life Liberty and the pursuit of

¹⁷² Gavri'el Sivan and Shalom M. Paul, *The Bible and Civilization* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), 176-177.

¹⁷³ "The Rabbinic concept of a 'Natural Law' was subsequently adopted by the Church Fathers, who made the 'Noachide' commandments the standard norm of Christian morality. Tertullian spoke of the pre-Mosaic 'law of nature' honored by the Hebrew Patriarchs...Independent thinkers like Jean Bodin (1530-1596) began to promote a new respect for the Hebrew Bible's universal moral code." Gavri'el Sivan and Shalom M. Paul, *The Bible and Civilization* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), 138.

¹⁷⁴ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 116.

Happiness.¹⁷⁵ So God created humankind in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. (Genesis 1:27)

Equality as expressed in the Declaration was and is an ideal—when the Declaration was adopted and today. Slavery would not end in the United States for almost a hundred years after the Declaration. Married women could still be treated as chattel. But the Declaration anticipated a nation and a national process that would, over time, enable the United States to orient itself by and make progress toward the ideal of equality.

In Genesis, all of humanity descends from the creation of humankind on the sixth day, the first expression of human equality in the Hebrew Bible. Since the time of the rabbis, the Jewish tradition has interpreted this as a sign of equality. In the *talmud* (Sanhedrin 37a), the rabbis teach: “Therefore, humans were created singly [from one Adam]... for the sake of peace among people, that one should not say to his fellow, ‘My father is greater than your father.’” This equality of human worth is also expressed where God created all human beings in His image. Sivan writes, “In one final respect the Mosaic Code again differed from...other legal systems of antiquity: in its zealous concern for the equality of all men before the law.”¹⁷⁶

Elliot Dorff writes that equality is pursued in America and by the Jewish people in the commitment to bettering society through law,

It is clearly not ‘self-evident’ that all men are created equal...[or] that all human beings enjoy the ‘unalienable’ rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; many are ruled by despots, who can deprive them of their liberty

¹⁷⁵ “Declaration of Independence,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁷⁶ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 115.

and their very lives on a whim, and many others lives under inherently miserable conditions. Jefferson knew this, but he inserted these lines in the Declaration of Independence to articulate the ideals for which this new nation would strive. The Jewish people also have such statements...that is part of the reason for the emphasis on law in both societies; law is understood as one instrument to achieve an ideal society.¹⁷⁷

Both the United States and the Jewish people developed their societies through law.

Rabbi Simon Greenberg likens the Declaration of Independence to the *aggadah*, writing, “The Declaration of Independence is to the Constitution very much as the *aggadah* (Jewish lore) is to the *halakhah* (Jewish law); in both cases the first element is the ideal that the second endeavors to articulate in real terms.”¹⁷⁸ It is good to have an ideal, but it must be supported by practical means, with realistic eyes. Laws are practical expressions of the ideal; the authors of the Hebrew Bible and the founders both knew this.

The Hebrew Bible contains universal values pertaining to all people for all time. The Declaration begins with the words “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them.” This opening is written in the broadest way in order to hold true for all peoples in any time.¹⁷⁹ Sivan writes that the Mosaic Law is “ageless and sublime...[and these Commandments] epitomize both the essential creed of Judaism and the ‘Natural Law’ of all civilized men.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Elliot N. Dorff, *To Do the Right and the Good: A Jewish Approach to Modern Social Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 29-30.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁷⁹ “Declaration of Independence,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁸⁰ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 7.

The Declaration addresses the need for the colonies to separate from Britain and create a new nation by the consent of the governed. The founders itemized their grievances against King George and the British Parliament, their violations of the “laws of nature and of nature’s God.” Thus, they took it upon themselves to declare their independence and create a government to secure the people’s inalienable right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The founders appealed to the “Supreme Judge of the world” and held a “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence.” The guarantor of the principles behind the Declaration of Independence (and subsequently the Constitution) is the God of the Hebrew Bible, the Creator of nature and the laws by which it is governed. The Declaration, affirming Divine Law and Divine Providence, relied on God as the guiding author of liberty. Katsh writes, “The phrase ‘laws of nature and of nature’s God,’ of course, reflects superficially the preoccupation of the Age of Reason.” But Katsh explains that a deeper meaning and higher purpose is based on a profound sympathy with the Scriptures and an intimate acquaintance with the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸¹

The basic principles of the Declaration of Independence, guided by the “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” are enduring, just as the Hebrew Bible’s basic principles apply to us today. In honoring Jefferson, Lincoln referred to him as “the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an

¹⁸¹ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 116.

abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.”¹⁸² It is quite remarkable that this document continues to be relevant today. Lincoln spoke about the Declaration in his debate with Steven Douglass in Chicago in 1858, noting that it was the time of year, near the Fourth of July, that the people come together to celebrate the birth of a “remarkable nation” that he characterized as strong and enduring. Lincoln held great admiration for the Founding Fathers: “We find a race of men living in that day whom we claim as our fathers and grandfathers; they were iron men; they fought for the principle that they were contending for...and we understood that by what they then did it has followed that the degree of prosperity which we now enjoy has come to us.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² "Lincoln's Letter to Henry Pierce," Abraham Lincoln to Henry Pierce, April 6, 1859, accessed March 11, 2013, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/ratification/libby/>.

¹⁸³ Abraham Lincoln, "Political Debates Between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas," Bartleby, 2000, Abraham Lincoln, accessed June 14, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/251/>.

Chapter Two

Original Source Document: The Hebrew Bible

America was created as a nation informed by the Hebrew Bible, its language, imagery, law and message. This holy book constituted an important part of the founders shared heritage and belief system. Katsh asserts that the founding of America was a response to a “biblical impulse,”¹⁸⁴ stating, “It is precisely in their [the founders] legislative system that this impulse coalesces with the legal portions of the Old Testament to form a Biblical superstructure for the newly founded society.”¹⁸⁵

The biblical history and the moral codes of the Israelites were part of the Founding Fathers’ culture, and the Hebrew Bible became the most influential guidebook for creating a society and government in America. Katsh writes,

The development of the American polity...the evolution of the political system of America, its fundamental principles of government, its Constitution, and the spirit behind the formal framework of its society...the full impact of the Hebrew Bible, the Judaic spirit, and the ancient ideal of the Israelite commonwealth on American life is manifest in all its ramifications from colonial times to the present.¹⁸⁶

No doubt, the founders learned much about political theory from the Greeks and the Enlightenment philosophers; however, the idea of national independence and liberty for all was also gleaned from the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸⁷ The founders were not interested in the ethnic origins of the Jews, but they were interested in creating a society based on ideals that first found expression in the Hebrew Bible. Sivan writes,

¹⁸⁴ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 95.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

¹⁸⁷ Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government in the United States of America*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 101-102.

In the wake of the Reformation, independent thinkers turned their attention to the legislative and social organization of ancient Israel and also came to appreciate the Biblical concept of justice and morality as expounded by the Rabbi's after the time of Jesus. The Old Testament thus became the model for the concepts and ideals of a world feeling its way toward democratic government...¹⁸⁸

He asserts that, "The central role of the ethical imperative in Biblical religion has no parallel elsewhere and, transmitted through the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, it penetrated Christian thought, influencing Western culture as a whole."¹⁸⁹ Cecil Roth holds that if Europe and America did not have a Hebraic heritage, the world would be much different and not for the better: "the fathers of the American revolution... were inspired at every turn by the ideas, teachings and language of the Bible, as well as by the theory and practice of their Bible-intoxicated precursors on both sides of the Atlantic 150 years before."¹⁹⁰

Justice: The Supreme Judge and Codes of Law

A "Supreme Judge" models the idea of justice for all. The Hebrew Bible calls God judge, *shofet*. The Hebrew word for judge is *shofet* or *dayyan*, the latter being used since Talmudic times for God as Judge. The idea that justice cannot be separated from equality comes from the Hebrew Bible where justice is to be administered equally to all people, the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong. Leviticus 19:15 says, "You shall not commit a perversion of justice; you shall not favor the poor and you shall not honor the

¹⁸⁸ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 57

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁹⁰ Cecil Roth, *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940), 10.

mighty; with righteousness you shall judge your neighbor.” Deuteronomy 1:17 says, “Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great.” Informed by these verses, the Oath of Office for Justices of the United States Supreme Court reads in part, “I will administer justice without respect to persons, and do equal right to the poor and to the rich.”¹⁹¹ The Supreme Court Justices swear to administer justice without respect to who a defendant is, in accordance with biblical principle.

The word “Justice” is repeated one hundred twenty times in the Hebrew Bible. It is the only noun that is repeated twice in immediate succession in the same sentence. We are told, “Justice, justice you shall pursue.”(Deuteronomy 16:20) Katsh tells us, “The high standard of justice and equity, the care with which Moses chose his leaders (without forcing them upon the people of Israel), were carefully studied by the leaders of New Haven,¹⁹² so that these hallowed examples might serve as a pattern for their own actions.”¹⁹³ In addition to the important selection of community leaders, who also served as judges, the founders of New Haven followed many dictates of the Hebrew Bible when dealing with issues of crime and punishment: “In matters of crime and the administration of justice, a prisoner was always reminded, ‘he that hideth his sins shall not prosper, but he that confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy’.(Prov. 28:13)”¹⁹⁴ Katsh explains that, “The fundamental thesis of New Haven’s legislative principle was that ‘the

¹⁹¹ "Oaths of Office," MS, Supreme Court of the United States, accessed May 12, 2013, <http://www.supremecourt.gov/about/oath/textoftheoathsofoffice2009.aspx>.

¹⁹² such as John Davenport

¹⁹³ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 98.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid 98.

judicial laws of God, as they were delivered by Moses...[and expounded in other parts of scripture] shall be accounted of moral equity, and generally bind all offenders.”¹⁹⁵

What is known as the “first written constitution of modern democracy,” The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut of May 31, 1638, quotes Deuteronomy 1:13, “Take ye wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you.”¹⁹⁶ Thomas Hooker, along with other leaders of Connecticut, used the Hebrew Bible to draft the legislative codes and laws contained in the Connecticut Code of 1650. Likewise, the Massachusetts settlers modeled their administration on the Hebrew Bible. Katsh writes, “In Massachusetts, as in New Haven, English common law was largely neglected and textual rulings from the Hebrew Bible substituted.”¹⁹⁷

Divine Providence

Louis Jacobs tells us that, “The Hebrew term for divine providence, *hashgahah*, was first used by the medieval Jewish theologians...But the idea that God controls and guides the world He has created permeates the Bible and the post-biblical literature. The very term *hashgahah* is based on the verse in Psalm (34:14): From the place of His habitation He looketh intently [hishgiah] upon all the inhabitants of the earth.”¹⁹⁸ The Talmud states that God’s providence extends to all His creatures; God “feeds the whole

¹⁹⁵ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 97.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 101.

¹⁹⁸ Jacobs, Rabbi Louis. "Divine Providence." Divine Providence - My Jewish Learning. Accessed February 16, 2013.

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Free_Will/The_Problem/Divine_Providence.shtml.

world from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin. (BT Avodah Zarah, 3b)¹⁹⁹ A unifying truth, affirmed by the founders, was a strong belief in the protection of Divine Providence.

Ethical Monotheism: One God, One Morality, and One People

There is One God from whom a single moral code proceeds, applicable to all humanity. The primary requirement of God is that we follow His moral code. This God-given binding law is for all mankind; only through a higher entity can the law be applicable to all and non-rescindable by anyone. Laws may be bound by time, but the moral code on which they are based is forever and unchanging. This is known as ethical monotheism. In his 1974 essay "The Hebrews," William A. Irwin writes: "Israel's great achievement, so apparent that mention of it is almost trite, was monotheism. It was an achievement that transformed subsequent history."²⁰⁰ Ethical monotheism is defined in this way: "There is one God from whom emanates one morality for all humanity. God's primary demand of people is that they act decently toward one another."²⁰¹ Dennis Prager continues by pointing out the consequence of ethical monotheism: "If all people subscribed to this simple belief—which does not entail leaving or joining any specific religion, or giving up any national identity—the world would experience far less evil."²⁰² Sivan says, "the Bible primarily stresses righteous living in the context of society as a

¹⁹⁹ Jacobs, Rabbi Louis. "Divine Providence." Divine Providence - My Jewish Learning. Accessed February 16, 2013. http://www.myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Free_Will/The_Problem/Divine_Providence.shtml.

²⁰⁰ Dennis Prager, *Think a Second Time* (New York: Regan Books, 1996), 213.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 202.

²⁰² Ibid, 202.

whole—man’s duty toward his fellow—and lays down a comprehensive series of rules governing social behavior.”²⁰³ The founders believed in the idea that all people, by virtue of their humanity and creation by the same Maker, should embrace universal moral values.

The Ten Commandments were believed to be a fixed set of God-given moral laws. Katsh writes that there is a “universal acceptance in the West of the Mosaic Decalogue as the basic moral code of society.”²⁰⁴ John Quincy Adams said that “The law given from Sinai was a civil and municipal as well as a moral and religious code; it contained many statutes...of universal application—laws essential to the existence of men in society.”²⁰⁵ The theme of a universal morality is central to the making of America. The Jefferson Memorial states, “I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively.”

Liberty and Freedom tied to God

Pennsylvania provincial authorities ordered the Liberty Bell, cast in 1752 with a verse from the Hebrew Bible: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” (Leviticus 25:10). It hung in the bell tower of the Pennsylvania State House, now Independence Hall, and summoned lawmakers to the Continental Congresses.

²⁰³ Gabriel Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book, 1974), 8.

²⁰⁴ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 2.

²⁰⁵ John Quincy Adams, *Letters of John Quincy Adams to His Son, on the Bible and Its Teachings*. (Auburn: J.M. Alden, 1850), 61.

The sermon celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act, delivered by Jonathan Mayhew in Boston, refers to the Hebrew Bible and reveals its hold on the revolutionary imagination and the power of rooting the revolutionary impulse in the biblical text,

Having learnt from the Holy Scriptures that wise, brave and virtuous men were always friends to liberty; that God gave the Israelites a king in his anger, because they had not sense and virtue enough to like a free commonwealth, and to have himself for a king and that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' - this made me conclude that freedom was a great blessing."²⁰⁶

The founders believed the risk to liberty was anarchy; they relied on both reason and religion to temper liberty. Waldman summarized Alexis de Tocqueville's observations this way: "The partnership of religion and liberty lay at the heart of America's political success...Freedom by itself would inexorably degenerate into rabid selfishness, but religion nurtured the purposefulness of freedom."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 132.

²⁰⁷ Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 245-246.

Chapter 3

The most fundamental principle expressed in the Declaration of Independence that, “all men are created equal” also points directly to the founders’ and America’s greatest failing: the willingness to personally and politically abide the institution of slavery. Of the founders profiled in this paper, Washington owned more than three hundred slaves, Jefferson owned more than a hundred slaves, Madison about one hundred and thirty slaves. John Adams, Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin never owned slaves. Washington was the only one to free the slaves he owned or will set them free after his and Martha Washington’s death. In all, twelve presidents were slave owners, nine owning slaves while serving as president.²⁰⁸ How can we reconcile—or not—the fact that the founders believed in and committed their lives to the cause of liberty and equality—risking their lives for this cause—yet still tolerated the institution of slavery?

The founders profiled in this thesis, even the slave owners, spoke against slavery. Washington wrote, “I can only say, that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it.”²⁰⁹ Jefferson wrote, “[Mankind] has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.”²¹⁰ Madison said, “We have seen the mere distinction of color made, in the most enlightened period of time, a

²⁰⁸ Rob Lopresti, “Which U.S. Presidents Owned Slaves?,” *Which U.S. Presidents Owned Slaves?*, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://home.nas.com/lopresti/ps.htm>.

²⁰⁹ Vernellia R. Randall, ed., “Opinions of Early Presidents about Slavery,” *Opinions of Early Presidents about Slavery*, January 31, 1998, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://academic.udayton.edu/race/02rights/slave05.htm#Washington%5C>.

²¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 109-110.

ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.”²¹¹ Yet they were also “men of their time” and in 1776 approximately twenty percent of the population of the United States was enslaved, the slave population constituting sixty percent of the population of South Carolina and forty percent of the population of Virginia. In New England, slaves were two to three percent of the population, but in the large cities of the North, such as Boston, up to twenty percent of the population was enslaved.²¹² Early in American history, spurred by religious arguments, slaves were emancipated in a few states, in fact, “The Anglo-American antislavery movement was overwhelmingly religious in character...and in 1777 Vermont adopted a constitution that outlawed slavery—the first place in the New World to do so.”²¹³ In 1808, the international slave trade was outlawed in the United States.

America inherited the institution of slavery from the British colonial period and the founders contended that the abolition of slavery would be best handled as evolution, not revolution. That is, they envisioned slavery slowly evolving into a more humane institution that, over time, would become obsolete. Jefferson wanted to defuse slavery and peacefully abolish it. By the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, America united both slave and non-slave states. In order to adopt the Constitution, creating a national political structure from the thirteen original states and implementing the ideals of the Declaration, political compromises and accommodations were made. Issues that

²¹¹ Rob Lopresti, "Which U.S. Presidents Owned Slaves?," Which U.S. Presidents Owned Slaves?, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://home.nas.com/lopresti/ps.htm>.

²¹² Rosemarie Zagari, "Teaching History.org, Home of the National History Education Clearinghouse," Slavery in Colonial British North America, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/25577>.

²¹³ David B. Davis, "The Slave Trade and the Jews," *The New York Review of Books*, December 22, 1994, accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1994/dec/22/the-slave-trade-and-the-jews/?pagination=false>.

directly affected slavery were addressed in the Constitution. First, because of the significant number of slaves in the South, the southern states wanted slaves to count fully in the census that apportioned representation in Congress. States with fewer slaves, the northern states, did not want slaves counted at all. The compromise resulted in each slave being counted as three-fifths of a person. In addition, the Fugitive Slave Clause of the Constitution required that a slave who escaped to another state be returned, even if the person had escaped to a state that outlawed slavery. How can these accommodations be reconciled with the ideals of the founders?

The Fugitive Slave Clause was also central to the Dred Scott case. In 1857, Chief Justice Taney, the fifth Chief Justice of the United States, ruled that the constitution denies citizenship to any person descended from Africa, whether a slave or free. As a result, no African-American had legal standing to bring suit in United States courts. All were property and the Constitution protected the slaveholder's right to property. Taney argued that since the founders had not abolished slavery, this was proof that people of African descent were not intended to be included in the meaning of "all men are created equal."²¹⁴

Lincoln argued that the Dred Scott opinion violated the founding principles of America. In response to Chief Justice Taney, Lincoln said that, "the founders were not trying to equalize all men at once in all aspects of life, but that the founders were trying to set a standard of moral rights for all men."²¹⁵ The principle of equality was intended for all, even if it was not originally applied to everyone.

²¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 507-510.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 507-510.

John Calhoun, among other prominent statesmen from the South, read the Constitution as a pro-slavery document. He believed that liberty and equality were not a natural birthright and were not meant for all. Calhoun believed that some people were naturally inferior and needed to be ruled over.²¹⁶ In addition, he argued that slavery was a good thing for the enslaved. Calhoun said, "Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually."²¹⁷ Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States, also rejected the principle of equality laid out in the Declaration. He believed that the God of Genesis created Africans inferior to others, "We recognize the fact of the inferiority stamped upon that race of men by the Creator."²¹⁸ Davis argued that, "the institution of slavery...[was] for a class of people not fit to govern themselves."²¹⁹ And according to Davis that unfit class of people included not only African-Americans, but also "convicts, lunatics, [and] minors."²²⁰

In addition to focusing on the founders' understanding of equality as expressed in the Declaration and the Constitution, both supporters of slavery and abolitionists debated their cause with arguments rooted in the Bible. Those who spoke and wrote in favor of slavery pointed out that within the Hebrew Bible, Abraham had slaves. They pointed to the Ten Commandments, specifically the Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17-18) that

²¹⁶ John C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Oregon Bill," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 419-425.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 419-425.

²¹⁸ Jefferson Davis, "Reply in the Senate to William Seward," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 566.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 565.

²²⁰ Ibid, 566.

states, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house...nor his manservant, nor his maidservant." Defenders of slavery argued that the institution was divinely sanctioned.

In 1861, Rev. James Thornwell, a leading Presbyterian minister, addressed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America positioning his pro-slavery stance solidly in line with biblical teachings:

It will not do to say that the Scriptures have treated it [slavery] only in a general, incidental way, without any clear implication as to its moral character. Moses surely made it the subject of express and positive legislation, and the apostles are equally explicit in inculcating the duties which spring from both sides of the relation. They treat slaves as bound to obey and inculcate obedience as an office of religion, a thing wholly self-contradictory if the authority exercised over them were unlawful and iniquitous... Shall our names be cast out as evil and the finger of scorn pointed at us because we utterly refuse to break our communion with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses, David and Isaiah, with apostles, prophets, and martyrs, with all who have gone to glory from slaveholding countries and from a slaveholding church, without ever having dreamed that they were living in mortal sin by conniving at slavery in the midst of them?²²¹

Thornwell's position, to indict the slaveholding South is akin to indicting the greatest biblical figures with the commission of a mortal sin, resonated with his audience of church leaders and the congregations to whom they preached. The ferocity of the disputations over slavery and a quote that pulls this debate from the "ancient past", was revealed by Thornwell when he wrote, "The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and slaveholders, they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins on the one side and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other."²²²

²²¹ James Thornwell, A Southern Christian View of Slavery, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/a-southern-christian-view-of-slavery/> accessed March 16, 2014.

²²² George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2010) 13.

Similar biblically based arguments were made by Albert Bledsoe in 1856, “We point to slavery among the Hebrews, and say, there is an instance in which it was not wrong, because there it received the sanction of the Almighty.”²²³ Bledsoe used the example of Abraham to argue his case:

Of all the good men of old, Abraham was the most eminent. That Abraham himself, ‘the friend of God’ and the ‘father of the faithful,’ was the owner and holder of more than a thousand slaves. How, then, could these professing Christians proceed to condemn and excommunicate a poor brother for having merely approved what Abraham had practiced?²²⁴

Perhaps the most pernicious biblical argument made to support slavery was based on Genesis 9:20-27, the account of the Curse of Ham imposed by Noah, though Ham himself is never cursed (Canaan, Ham’s son is) and skin color is never mentioned. The pertinent verses, Genesis 9:25-27 state, “And he [Noah] said, cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.” These verses, infused with a racial meaning, were used by pro-slavery voices to justify the enslavement of Africans. Rev. E.W. Warren explained them in this way; “The curse pronounced by God, through Noah, upon Ham and his descendants, is subject to no such restrictions and limitations as governed enslaved Hebrews. It was to extend from generation to generation, to be perpetual.”²²⁵ Later in the same book Warren writes, “God has forged the chains of slavery, and riveted them upon the descendants of Ham and Canaan. He has formed the

²²³ Albert Taylor Bledsoe, *An Essay on Liberty and Slavery* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1856) 139.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

²²⁵ Rev. E.W. Warren, *Nellie Norton or Southern Slavery and the Bible* (Macon, Ga., Burke, Boykin & Co., 1864) 14.

relations of master and slave, and united them together now. What God hath joined together let not man put asunder.”²²⁶

Biblical scholars such as Nahum Sarna and Robert Alter have pointed out the inconsistencies and difficulties found in these verses of the biblical text. For instance, the curse originates with Noah, not with God, so why does it possess such unusual authority? And historians of slavery such as David M. Goldenberg and David Brion Davis have argued that in European Christianity, “blackness” was never related to slavery and to the curse until the fifteenth century, when proponents of the European slave trade in African people found a racialized interpretation of the Genesis text, one that first appeared in Arabia in the seventh century, to justify their economic interest in exploiting Africa and its people.²²⁷

Just as some read the Bible as a pro-slavery book, others learned from the Bible that God abhorred slavery. The first North American attack on slavery, published in 1700 and rooted in the Hebrew Bible, was written by the leading Massachusetts jurist of his time, Samuel Sewall. One surviving copy of the three-page, inspiring pamphlet, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* exists at the Massachusetts Historical Society. It reads, in part:

It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life. GOD hath given the Earth [with all its Commodities] unto the Sons of Adam. And hath made of One Blood, all Nations of Men, for to dwell on all the face of the Earth... So that Originally, and Naturally, there is no such thing as Slavery. Joseph was

²²⁶ Rev. E.W. Warren, *Nellie Norton or Southern Slavery and the Bible* (Macon, Ga., Burke, Boykin & Co., 1864), 206.

²²⁷ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 175.

rightfully no more a Slave to his Brethren, then they were to him: and they had no more Authority to Sell him, than they had to Slay him.²²⁸

Sewall continues his objections to slavery with an argument drawn from the Book of

Exodus:

And seeing GOD hath said, He that Stealeth a Man and Selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to Death. Exod. 12.16. This Law being of Everlasting Equity, wherein Man Stealing is ranked amongst the most atrocious of Capital Crimes: What louder Cry can there be made of the Celebrated Warning, Caveat Emptor! [Let the buyer beware!].

Making clear some of its horrors, Sewall offers moral arguments against slavery using a biblical allusion:

It is likewise most lamentable to think, how in taking Negroes out of Africa, and Selling of them here, That which GOD ha's joined together men do boldly rend asunder; Men from their Country, Husbands from their Wives, Parents from their Children. How horrible is the Uncleaness, Mortality, if not Murder, that the Ships are guilty of that bring great Crouds of these miserable Men, and Women.

Another example of abolitionist literature rooted in biblical argumentation is *The Bible Against Slavery: an Inquiry into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights*, published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1838:

First, the moral law. Just after the Israelites were emancipated from their bondage in Egypt, while they stood before Sinai to receive the law, as the trumpet waxed louder, and the mount quaked and blazed, God spake the ten commandments from the midst of clouds and thunderings. Two of those commandments deal death to slavery. "Thou shalt not steal," or, "Thou shalt not take from another what belongs to him'...The eighth commandment forbids the taking of any part of that which belongs to another. Slavery takes the whole. Does the same Bible which prohibits the taking of any thing from him, sanction the taking of every thing? Does it thunder wrath against him who robs his neighbor of a cent, yet bid God speed to him who robs his neighbor of himself? Slaveholding is the highest possible violation of the eighth commandment.²²⁹

²²⁸ Samuel Sewall, "The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial," (Boston, Bartholomew, Green & John Allen, 1700) http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?old=1&item_id=57, accessed March 16, 2014.

²²⁹ Theodore Dwight *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 8.

The book also addresses the pro-slavery argument based on the Curse of Ham:

‘Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.’ Gen. ix. 25. This prophecy of Noah is the *vade mecum* [lit. “go with me,” a manual] of slaveholders, and they never venture abroad without it; it is a pocket-piece for sudden occasion, a keepsake to dote over, a charm to spell-bind opposition, and a magnet to draw around their standard ‘whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie.’ But ‘cursed be Canaan’ is a poor drug to ease a throbbing conscience — a mocking lullaby, to unquiet tossings, and vainly crying ‘peace be still’ where God wakes war and breaks his thunders.²³⁰

From 1700 on, abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates in North America argued their positions, frequently rooting their assertions (and counter-arguments) in the Bible. These texts speak to one another across time, posing interpretations of verses and reactions to those interpretations. As a sacred, authoritative text containing a moral code that believers expected to live by, what the Bible had to say on the subject of slavery was critically important; each side had a vested interest in winning—and each side was certain they had won.

Slavery was not fully abolished in the United States until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in December 1865, nearly a century after the Declaration of Independence proclaimed “all men are created equal.” Slavery is America’s greatest shame, a glaring abrogation of our founding principles and a lasting stain on our history. In spite of being believers in equality, the founding fathers created a nation where twenty percent of the population lived as slaves and where a civil war—and the death of 750,000 soldiers—was needed to end it.

²³⁰ *The Bible Against Slavery*, (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 46.

Abraham Lincoln - Our Nineteenth Century Founding Father

Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth President of the United States (1861-1865). Lincoln came to the presidency when the long simmering issue of slavery had begun to boil over. Following his election in November 1860, the first seven southern slave states seceded from the United States, forming the Confederate States of America in February 1861. Lincoln took office in March and the Civil War broke out in April. The Civil War lasted until 1865 when the Confederacy fell, the Union was restored, and slavery was outlawed throughout United States.

Because of his role in preserving the United States, Lincoln is indeed entitled to be considered among the founders of the nation. His views on the Declaration of Independence are indispensable and point to the timelessness of the message of liberty and equality. Many of Lincoln's great speeches were grounded in biblical quotations, both from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. It is interesting to note that, as was more common in the later half of the nineteenth century, Lincoln's references to the Bible include many more quotations from the Christian Bible than did the founders. This is due to his personal convictions, the declining influence of Deism and, following the Third Great Awakening beginning in the 1850s, the growing importance of traditional Christian churches within the United States.

An analysis of part of Lincoln's speech during one of the famous debates with Douglas is enlightening, displaying many of the themes of this paper: the founders' commitment to liberty and equality, the timelessness of that message, the power of biblical quotes to support the message and the belief that the ideals can be traced back to

God. Lincoln believed that the power of the message of liberty and equality contained within the Declaration of Independence united the nation as it grew through immigration, enabling even new Americans to see their relationship to the founders. Referencing Genesis 2:23, new Americans were “blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh” of the Founding Fathers:

If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence, they find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal;’ and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration; and so they are.²³¹

Lincoln believed that the power of the founders’ message, the “electric cord in that Declaration” (which must have been a new metaphor in 1858), connects the generations who share in its message: “That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”²³² Then Lincoln comes to the issue of equality among all men. Does the Declaration really mean “all”? “I should like to know if, taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it, where

²³¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech of Hon. Abraham Lincoln in Reply to Senator Douglas. Lincoln, Abraham. 1858. Political Debates Between Lincoln and Douglas," 1858, accessed August 01, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/251/1003.html>.

²³² Ibid, accessed August 01, 2013.

will it stop? If one man says it does not mean a negro, why not another say it does not mean some other man?"²³³

Specifically addressing the political and moral compromises made by the founding generation that enabled slavery to continue in the United States, Lincoln affirmed the ideals represented in the founding documents:

When we established this Government, we had slavery among us, we could not get our Constitution unless we permitted them to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did secure if we grasped for more; and having by necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties. Let that charter stand as our standard.²³⁴

Continuing by quoting Jesus (Matthew 5:48) encouraging his followers toward perfection, Lincoln encouraged his audience to approximate as closely as possible the founders' ideal of equality, "let it be as nearly reached as we can:"

'As your Father in Heaven is perfect, be ye also perfect.' He set that up as a standard; and he who did most toward reaching that standard, attained the highest degree of moral perfection. So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature.²³⁵

In another speech, given in Peoria in 1854, Lincoln contended that equality and slavery were inconsistent realities, one cannot hold onto both of them at the same time. He also holds that to be on God's side is to be against slavery. He confirms this position by referencing Matthew 6:24:

Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a 'sacred right of self-government.' These principles

²³³ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech of Hon. Abraham Lincoln in Reply to Senator Douglas. Lincoln, Abraham. 1858. Political Debates Between Lincoln and Douglas," 1858, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://www.bartleby.com/251/1003.html>.

²³⁴ Ibid, accessed August 1, 2013.

²³⁵ Ibid, accessed August 1, 2013.

cannot stand together. They are as opposite as God and mammon; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other.²³⁶

Lincoln believed that the founders' grounded the rights granted in the Declaration of Independence in God and in "the economy of the Universe," a clear reference to the "laws of nature and of nature's God."

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' This was their majestic interpretation of the economy of the Universe. This was their lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures. [Applause.]²³⁷

After the applause died down Lincoln continued with an affirmation that equality was meant to extend to all men and that, by virtue of humankind being created in the image of God, slavery was untenable: "Yes, gentlemen, to *all* His creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief, nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows."²³⁸

Lincoln's belief in a providential God seems to have grown through the course of the Civil War. An example of this belief was the timing of his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation:

As Lincoln explained to his Cabinet on September 22, 1862, his Emancipation Proclamation was a "direct consequence of a vow, a covenant he had made that if God gave us the victory in the battle that resulted at Antietam on September 17th he would consider it an indication of divine will and that it was his duty to move

²³⁶ Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Volume 2, Speech at Peoria, Il, October 16, 1854 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idc=lincoln;cc=lincoln;type=simple;rgn=div1;q1=speech%20at%20peoria;view=text;subview=detail;sort=occur;idno=lincoln2;node=lincoln2%3A282>, accessed March 17, 2014

²³⁷ Ibid, accessed March 17, 2014.

²³⁸ Ibid, accessed March 17, 2014.

forward in the cause of emancipation. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves.²³⁹

The Gettysburg Address is perhaps the most famous speech in American history. Delivered during the Civil War on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the soldiers' national cemetery, the brief speech includes biblical citations, allusions and phrases drawn from the King James Version of the Bible: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."²⁴⁰ Robert Alter asks, "Why did Lincoln begin by saying, "Four score and seven years ago," rather than just "eighty-seven years ago?" By measuring time in this formal, archaic fashion, Lincoln raises American history to the same level as sacred or biblical history. This is a literary use of the Bible. Alter writes that "it also has something to do with the archaic character of the phrase...[and] was assumed to be the vehicle for expressing matters of high import and grand spiritual scope. Thus, 'four score and seven years ago,' a biblicizing phrase that is not an actual quotation, sounds a strong note of biblical authority at the beginning of the Gettysburg Address."²⁴¹ Lincoln concludes his Gettysburg Address; "This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth."²⁴² At the end of the Address,

²³⁹ Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln As a Man of Ideas* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 189.

²⁴⁰ Abraham Lincoln, " *Gettysburg Address*," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 611.

²⁴¹ Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 13-14.

²⁴² The Gettysburg Address was delivered by President Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the Civil War cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

Lincoln turns to God and when he promises that American democracy “shall not perish from the earth,” he is echoing a phrase from Job and Jeremiah.

In his Second Inaugural Address, at the very end of the Civil War, Lincoln exhorts the nation: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.”²⁴³ It is in this spirit that I refer to Lincoln as The Nineteenth Century Founding Father; it had fallen upon him to “finish the work” of the founders.

²⁴³ Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 614.

Conclusion

Today, it seems that one would rather be caught on the subway reading an erotic novel than reading the Hebrew Bible. Yet, the Hebrew Bible is one of the greatest and most influential books in history, and the wisdom within it can show people and governments, atheist and believer, how to build a better society, a united society. The Hebrew Bible shows how ritual unites a society. Ritual is a sacred dedication of time spent together that binds us, making connections to one another and to God. If people would simply live by the Ten Commandments, society would be a far better place.

Will Herberg describes the religious roots of Western civilization in this way:

The foundations of morality in the West are religious. Though a moral individual may be irreligious, he acquired his morals values from his ancestors who in all likelihood were religious, and /or from Western civilization which adhere (or at least pays lip service) to moral values formulated by Judaism and communicated by Christianity. The ethical secularist is essentially living by moral values inherited from thousands of year of religion.²⁴⁴

Will Herberg calls this concept the “cut flower culture.”²⁴⁵ That is, a person who knows nothing about flowers and sees a cut flower doesn’t understand that the flower needed the rich soil to nurture it. Eventually, without that nurturing soil, the flower will die. It is the same for western moral principles, because they were rooted and nourished in religious soil. Once those roots dry up, so will the moral foundations of our civilization. “Morality ungrounded in God is indeed a house built upon sand, unable to

²⁴⁴ Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *The Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 73-74.

²⁴⁵ Will Herberg is credited with coining this phrase to describe the religious roots of Western civilization.

stand up against the vagaries of impulse and the brutal pressures of power and self-interest.”²⁴⁶

History of Using the Hebrew Bible

There should be greater appreciation of the history of the Hebrew Bible in America and for the contributions it has made from the beginning of the colonial period. This paper recognizes the Hebrew Bible’s contributions to the foundation of America so that Jewish children can hold their heads up high and feel blessed by the wisdom of their heritage. Even before the Founding Fathers, the Puritans had a strong attachment to the Hebrew Bible, referring to the Hebrew Bible in sermons and basing America’s earliest law codes on the Hebrew Bible. These early colonists saw themselves as a chosen people, but rather than fleeing the pharaoh in Egypt and escaping to the Promised Land, they fled the English monarch and religious intolerance and persecution for the promise of religious freedom in America. The first colleges in the colonies were established to prepare young men for the ministry, teaching the Hebrew Bible, its language and its lessons.

The earliest settlers in the colonies of New England modeled their laws on the laws in the Hebrew Bible. In the New Haven colony in 1639, John Davenport asserted, “Scriptures do hold forth a perfect rule for the direction and government of all men in all duties which they are to perform to God and men as well in the government of families and commonwealth as in matters of the church... The Word of God shall be the only rule

²⁴⁶ Will Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1970), 91-92.

to be attended unto in organizing the affairs of government in this plantation.”²⁴⁷ Further evidence lies in The New Haven code of 1655, in which half of the laws contained references to the Hebrew Bible. The Plymouth Colony Code and the Massachusetts Code followed in the same vein, both using the Hebrew Bible as their model.

The Jewish notion of being chosen to be a light unto the nations was adopted in America. Ezra Stiles spoke of the United States as God’s American Israel. Goldman writes, “The New World was a Promised Land in which the Europeans had arrived after much wandering and travail. Their leaders were seen in the mold of Moses and Aaron—intrepid spiritual figures and able spokesmen.”²⁴⁸

The Hebrew Bible provided the text and the founders applied it to the making of America. Our founders knew that the Hebrew Scriptures together with the Enlightenment ideas of religious liberty and tolerance would produce a uniquely American system. The founders knew that the Hebrew Bible was a repository of wisdom, including the many truths and tenets—as delineated in the earlier chapters—that have enabled this country’s government to survive for nearly two hundred and fifty years. Why then is the average American citizen surprised by the notion that the Jews and the Hebrew Bible contributed to the founding of American society?

²⁴⁷ Abraham Isaac Katsh, *The Biblical Heritage of American Democracy* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1977), 97.

²⁴⁸ Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004), 22.

Tenets of the Hebrew Bible

The tenets of the Hebrew Bible embraced by the founders include the concept of permanency. That is, the principles that they embraced to create a just government were based on the unchanging and unchangeable laws of nature and of nature's God. They believed that these laws hold true for all people and for all time. Therefore, although civic laws may change with time, moral values and ethics do not. Hamilton wrote, "The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments, or musty records. They are written as with a sun beam in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of divinity itself."²⁴⁹ The Declaration states, "All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."²⁵⁰ By "created equal" the founders understood that humans are all equal in the eyes of God. Calvin Coolidge wrote definitively: "If all men are created equal, that is final. If they are endowed with inalienable rights, that is final. If governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed that is final. No advance, no progress can be made beyond these propositions."²⁵¹

In President Obama's second Inaugural Address he affirms that, "We learned that no Union founded on the principles of liberty and equality could survive half-slave and half-free. We made ourselves anew, and vowed to move forward together."²⁵² To some

²⁴⁹ Alexander Hamilton, "The Farmer Refuted," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 97.

²⁵⁰ "The Declaration of Independence," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 5.

²⁵¹ Calvin Coolidge, "The Inspiration of the Declaration," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 712.

²⁵² President Barack Obama, "Second Inaugural Address" (speech, Inauguration 2013, January 21, 2013), accessed August 3, 2013,

who listened the operative word was “anew” and “anew” does not hold onto the founding principles, but reframes the founding. This is the opposite idea expressed by Calvin Coolidge who wrote, “Every American can turn for solace and consolation to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States with the assurance and confidence that those two great charters... remain firm and unshaken.”²⁵³ Through the process of constitutional amendments and the civil rights movement, the United States was able to move forward, leaving slavery behind, and affirming the principles of liberty and equality. The fundamental values brought forth in the Bible and the Declaration are for all people and for all time.

Some thinkers have contended that the Declaration is old and no longer relevant, that the world as it stood in 1776 is vastly different from now. Progress and advancements have taken place. Our historical circumstances have changed and we must change along with the times. This idea was espoused by John Dewey who in 1935 wrote, “They [the founders] put forward their ideas as immutable truths good at all times and places, they had no idea of historic relativity, either in general or in its application to themselves.”²⁵⁴

Some scholars have suggested that our rights are not endowed by the Creator, but by society. Woodrow Wilson contended that the standard of right and wrong is up to us and not written indelibly in the laws of nature and nature’s God. In his presidential

<http://www.npr.org/2013/01/21/169903155/transcript-barack-obamas-second-inaugural-address>.

²⁵³ Calvin Coolidge, July 5, 1926, on the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

²⁵⁴ John Dewey, "Liberalism and Social Action," in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 626.

campaign speech in 1912, Wilson said, “government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by the environment.”²⁵⁵ In a speech to the Commonwealth Club on September 23, 1932, during his first run for the White House, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “The task of statesmanship has always been the redefinition of these rights in terms of a changing and growing social order.”²⁵⁶ If things shift with time and rights are redefined is the Declaration of Independence false? In essence should we be moving beyond the principles of the American founding? In a similar vein, American legal scholar Frank Goodnow explains a changing approach to rights based on Rousseau’s social contract this way:

The rights which he [a human being] possesses are, it is believed, conferred upon him, not by his Creator, but rather by the society to which he belongs. What they are is to be determined by the legislative authority in view of the needs of that society. Social expediency, rather than natural right, is thus to determine the sphere of individual freedom of action.²⁵⁷

Is America founded on a value system that is universal and unchanging or relative to conditions in which we live? America has not always lived up to its value system, but is that because the values are flawed or is it that people are fallible? Should we be moving beyond the principles of the American founding?

On the wall outside the United Nations headquarters in New York City are the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares

²⁵⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “What is Progress?,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 640-642.

²⁵⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Commonwealth Club Address,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 727.

²⁵⁷ Frank Goodnow, “The American Conception of Liberty,” in *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader* (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2012), 630-631.

and their spears into pruning hooks, nations shall not lift up sword against nations. Neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4) Later, Isaiah continues, “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the beast of prey shall feed together with a little child to herd them.” (Isaiah 11:6) It is a vision of a peaceful future. A citation isn’t an argument and reading the Hebrew Bible is not magical. There is no guarantee that it will make us wiser or better people, or that we will be motivated to adhere to its principles. But with it as a vehicle of moral values, we can fulfill our desire to be better people and build a better society. We need to reaffirm that there is one Creator of the world whose primary goal is for His creations to be good to one another. This concept, according to the Bible, is as old as Abraham, almost four thousand years old.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Historians consider the story of Abraham proto-history, legend or myth. We do not have historical evidence for his existence, unlike, say, King David.

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