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978-1-107-60004-1 - An Apology for the Bible: In a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine

Richard Watson

Excerpt

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## LETTER I.



SIR,

I HAVE lately met with a book of yours, entitled—“THE AGE OF REASON, part the second, being an investigation of true and fabulous theology;”—and I think it not inconsistent with my station, and the duty I owe to society, to trouble you and the world with some observations on so extraordinary a performance. Extraordinary I esteem it; not from any novelty in the objections which you have produced against revealed religion, (for I find little or no novelty in them,) but from the zeal with which you labour to disseminate your opinions, and from the confidence with which you esteem them true. You perceive, by this, that I give you credit for your sincerity, how much soever I may question your wisdom, in writing in such a manner on such a subject: and I have no reluctance in acknowledging that you possess a considerable share of energy of language, and acuteness of investigation; though I must be allowed to lament, that these talents have not been applied in a manner more useful to human kind, and more creditable to yourself.

I begin with your preface. You therein state—that you had long had an intention of publishing your thoughts upon religion, but that you had originally reserved it to a later period in life.—I hope there is no want of charity in saying, that it would have been fortunate for the christian world, had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention. In accomplishing your purpose you will have unsettled the faith of thousands; rooted from the minds of the unhappy virtuous all their comfort-

A

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[More information](#)

able assurance of future recompence; have annihilated in the minds of the flagitious all their fears of future punishment; you will have given the reins to the domination of every passion, and have thereby contributed to the introduction of the public insecurity, and of the private unhappiness, usually and almost necessarily accompanying a state of corrupted morals.

No one can think worse of confession to a priest and subsequent absolution, as practised in the church of Rome, than I do; but I cannot, with you, attribute the guillotine-massacres to that cause. Men's minds were not prepared, as you suppose, for the commission of all manner of crimes, by any doctrines of the church of Rome, corrupted as I esteem it, but by their not thoroughly believing even that religion. **What may not society expect from those who shall imbibe the principles of your book?**

A fever, which you and those about you expected would prove mortal, made you remember, with renewed satisfaction, that you had written the former part of your *Age of Reason*—and you know therefore, you say, by experience, the conscientious trial of your own principles. I admit this declaration to be a proof of the sincerity of your persuasion, but I cannot admit it to be any proof of the truth of your principles. **What is conscience?** Is it, as has been thought, an internal monitor implanted in us by the Supreme Being, and dictating to us on all occasions, what is right or wrong? Or is it merely our own judgment of the moral rectitude or turpitude of our own actions? I take the word (with Mr. Locke) in the latter, as in the only intelligible sense. **Now who fees not that our judgments of virtue and vice, right and wrong, are not always formed from an enlightened and dispassionate use of our reason, in the investigation of truth? They are more generally formed from the nature of the religion we profess; from the quality of the civil government under which we live; from the general manners of the age, or the particular manners of the persons with whom we associate; from the education we have had in our youth; from the books we have read at a more advanced period;**

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*An Apology for the Bible.*

3

and from other accidental causes. Who sees not that, on this account, conscience may be conformable or repugnant to the law of nature?—may be certain, or doubtful?—and that it can be no criterion of moral rectitude, even when it is certain, because the certainty of an opinion is no proof of its being a right opinion? A man may be certainly persuaded of an error in reasoning, or of an untruth in matters of fact. It is a maxim of every law, human and divine, that a man ought never to act in opposition to his conscience; but it will not from thence follow, that he will, in obeying the dictates of his conscience, on all occasions act right. An inquisitor who burns Jews and heretics: a Robespierre, who massacres innocent and harmless women; a robber, who thinks that all things ought to be in common, and that a state of property is an unjust infringement of natural liberty;—these, and a thousand perpetrators of different crimes, *may all follow* the dictates of conscience; and *may, at the real or supposed approach of death, remember* “with renewed satisfaction,” the worst of their transactions, and experience, without dismay, “a conscientious trial of their principles.” But this their conscientious composure can be no proof to others of the rectitude of their principles, and ought to be no pledge to themselves of their innocence, in adhering to them.

I have thought fit to make this remark, with a view of suggesting to you a consideration of great importance—whether you have examined calmly, and according to the best of your ability, the arguments by which the truth of revealed religion may, in the judgment of learned and impartial men, be established?—You will allow, that thousands of learned and impartial men, (I speak not of priests, who, however, are, I trust, as learned and impartial as yourself, but of laymen of the most splendid talents,)—you will allow that thousands of these, in all ages, have embraced revealed religion as true. Whether these men have all been in an error, enveloped in the darkness of ignorance, shackled by the chains of superstition, whilst

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[More information](#)

you and a few others have enjoyed light and liberty, is a question I submit to the decision of your readers.

If you have made the best examination you can, and yet reject revealed religion as an imposture, I pray that God may pardon what I esteem your error. And whether you have made this examination or not, does not become me or any man to determine. That Gospel, which you despise, has taught me this moderation; it has said to me—"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth."—I think that you are in an error; but whether that error be to you a vincible or an invincible error, I presume not to determine. I know indeed where it is said—"that the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness,—and that if the gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost." The consequence of your unbelief must be left to the just and merciful judgment of Him, who alone knoweth the mechanism and the liberty of our understandings; the origin of our opinions; the strength of our prejudices; the excellencies and defects of our reasoning faculties.

I shall, designedly, write this and the following letters in a popular manner; hoping that thereby they may stand a chance of being perused by that class of readers, for whom your work seems to be particularly calculated, and who are the most likely to be injured by it. The really learned are in no danger of being infected by the poison of infidelity: they will excuse me, therefore, for having entered, as little as possible, into deep disquisitions concerning the authenticity of the Bible. The subject has been so learnedly, and so frequently handled by other writers, that it does not want (I had almost said, it does not admit) any farther proof. And it is the more necessary to adopt this mode of answering your book, because you disclaim all learned appeals to other books, and undertake to prove, from the Bible itself, that it is unworthy of credit. I hope to shew, from the Bible itself, the direct contrary. But in case any of your readers should think that you had not put forth all your strength, by not referring for proof of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*An Apology for the Bible.*

5

your opinion to ancient authors; lest they should suspect that all ancient authors are in your favour; I will venture to affirm, that had you made a learned appeal to all the ancient books in the world, sacred or profane, Christian, Jewish, or Pagan, instead of lessening, they would have established, the credit and authority of the Bible as the Word of God.

Quitting your preface, let us proceed to the work itself; in which there is much repetition, and a defect of proper arrangement. I will follow your tract, however, as nearly as I can. The first question you propose for consideration is—"Whether there is sufficient authority for believing the Bible to be the Word of God, or whether there is not?"—You determine this question in the negative, upon what you are pleased to call moral evidence. You hold it impossible that the Bible can be the Word of God, because it is therein said, that the Israelites destroyed the Canaanites by the express command of God: and to believe the Bible to be true, we must, you affirm, unbelieve all our belief of the moral justice of God; for wherein, you ask, could crying or smiling infants offend?—I am astonished that so acute a reasoner should attempt to disparage the Bible, by bringing forward this exploded and frequently refuted objection of Morgan, Tindal, and Bolingbroke. You profess yourself to be a deist, and to believe that there is a God, who created the universe, and established the laws of nature, by which it is sustained in existence. You profess that from the contemplation of the works of God, you derive a knowledge of his attributes; and you reject the Bible, because it ascribes to God things inconsistent (as you suppose) with the attributes which you have discovered to belong to him; in particular, you think it repugnant to his moral justice, that he should doom to destruction the crying or smiling infants of the Canaanites.—Why do you not maintain it to be repugnant to his moral justice, that he should suffer crying or smiling infants to be swallowed up by an earthquake, drowned by an inundation, consumed by a fire, starved by a famine, or destroyed by a pestilence? The Word of God is in perfect

A 3

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

harmony with his work ; crying or smiling infants are subjected to death in both. We believe that the earth, at the express command of God, opened her mouth, and swallowed up Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, with their wives, their sons, and their little ones. This you esteem so repugnant to God's moral justice, that you spurn, as spurious, the book in which the circumstance is related. When Catania, Lima, and Lisbon, were severally destroyed by earthquakes, men with their wives, their sons, and their little ones, were swallowed up alive—why do you not spurn, as spurious, the book of nature, in which this fact is certainly written, and from the perusal of which you infer the moral justice of God? You will, probably, reply, that the evils which the Canaanites suffered from the express command of God, were different from those which are brought on mankind by the operation of the laws of nature.—Different! in what?—Not in the magnitude of the evil—not in the subjects of sufferance—not in the author of it—for my philosophy, at least, instructs me to believe, that God not only primarily formed, but that he hath, through all ages, executed, the laws of nature ; and that he will, through all eternity, administer them, for the general happiness of his creatures, whether we can, on every occasion, discern that end or not.

I am far from being guilty of the impiety of questioning the existence of the moral justice of God, as proved either by natural or revealed religion ; what I contend for is shortly this—that you have no right, in fairness of reasoning, to urge any apparent deviation from moral justice, as an argument against revealed religion, because you do not urge an equally apparent deviation from it, as an argument against natural religion : you reject the former, and admit the latter, without considering that, as to your objection, they must stand or fall together.

As to the Canaanites, it is needless to enter into any proof of the depraved state of their morals ; they were a wicked people in the time of Abraham, and they, even then, were devoted to destruction by God ; but their iniquity was not then full. In the time of Moses, they were

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*An Apology for the Bible.*

7

idolaters, sacrificers of their own crying or smiling infants; devourers of human flesh; addicted to unnatural lust; immersed in the filthiness of all manner of vice. Now, I think, it will be impossible to prove, that it was a proceeding contrary to God's moral justice to exterminate so wicked a people. He made the Israelites the executors of his vengeance; and in doing this, he gave such an evident and terrible proof of his abomination of vice, as could not fail to strike the surrounding nations with astonishment and terror, and to impress on the minds of the Israelites, what they were to expect, if they followed the example of the nations whom he commanded them to cut off. "Ye shall not commit any of these abominations—that the land spew not you out also, as it spewed out the nations that were before you." How strong and descriptive this language! the vices of the inhabitants were so abominable, that the very land was sick of them, and forced vomit them forth, as the stomach disgorges a deadly poison.

I have often wondered what could be the reason that men, not destitute of talents, should be desirous of undermining the authority of revealed religion, and studious in exposing, with a malignant and illiberal exultation, every little difficulty attending the Scriptures, to popular animadversion and contempt. I am not willing to attribute this strange propensity to what Plato attributed the atheism of his time—to profligacy of manners—to affectation of singularity—to gross ignorance, assuming the semblance of deep research and superior sagacity;—I had rather refer it to an impropriety of judgment, respecting the manners, and mental acquirements, of human kind in the first ages of the world. Most unbelievers argue as if they thought that man, in remote and rude antiquity, in the very birth and infancy of our species, had the same distinct conceptions of one, eternal, invisible, incorporeal, infinitely wise, powerful, and good God, which they themselves have now. This I look upon as a great mistake, and a pregnant source of infidelity. Human kind, by a long experience; by the institutions of civil society; by the cultivation of arts and sciences; by, as I believe, divine instruction actually given

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[More information](#)

to some, and traditionally communicated to all; is in a far more distinguished situation, as to the powers of the mind, than it was in the childhood of the world. The history of man, is the history of the providence of God; who, willing the supreme felicity of all his creatures, has adapted his government to the capacity of those, who in different ages were the subjects of it. The history of any one nation throughout all ages, and that of all nations in the same age, are but separate parts of one great plan, which God is carrying on for the moral melioration of mankind. But who can comprehend the whole of this immense design? The shortness of life, the weakness of our faculties, the inadequacy of our means of information, conspire to make it impossible for us, worms of the earth! insects of an hour! completely to understand any one of its parts. No man, who well weighs the subject, ought to be surpris'd, that in the histories of ancient times many things should occur foreign to our manners, the propriety and necessity of which we cannot clearly apprehend.

It appears incredible to many, that God Almighty should have had colloquial intercourse with our first parents; that he should have contracted a kind of friendship for the patriarchs, and entered into covenants with them; that he should have suspended the laws of nature in Egypt; should have been so apparently partial as to become the God and governor of one particular nation; and should have so far demeaned himself as to give to that people a burthenfome ritual of worship, statutes and ordinances, many of which seem to be beneath the dignity of his attention, unimportant and impolitic. I have conversed with many deists, and have always found that the strangeness of these things was the only reason for their disbelief of them: nothing similar has happened in their time; they will not, therefore, admit, that these events have really taken place at any time. As well might a child, when arrived at a state of manhood, contend that he had never either stood in need or experienced the fostering care of a mother's kindness, the wearisome attention of his nurse, or the instruction and discipline of his schoolmaster. The Supreme



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*An Apology for the Bible.*

9

Being selected one family from an idolatrous world ; nursed it up, by various acts of his providence, into a great nation ; communicated to that nation a knowledge of his holiness, justice, mercy, power, and wisdom ; diffeminated them at various times, through every part of the earth, that they might be a “ leaven to leaven the whole lump,” that they might assure all other nations of the existence of one supreme God, the creator and preserver of the world, the only proper object of adoration. With what reason can we expect, that what was done to one nation, not out of any partiality to them, but for the general good, should be done to all ? that the mode of instruction, which was suited to the infancy of the world, should be extended to the maturity of its manhood, or to the imbecility of its old age ? I own to you, that when I consider how nearly man, in a savage state, approaches to the brute creation, as to intellectual excellence ; and when I contemplate his miserable attainments as to the knowledge of God, in a civilized state, when he has had no divine instruction on the subject, or when that instruction has been forgotten, (for all men have known something of God from tradition,) I cannot but admire the wisdom and goodness of the Supreme Being, in having let himself down to our apprehensions ; in having given to mankind, in the earliest ages, sensible and extraordinary proofs of his existence and attributes ; in having made the Jewish and Christian dispensations mediums to convey to all men, through all ages, that knowledge concerning himself, which he had vouchsafed to give immediately to the first. I own it is strange, very strange, that he should have made an immediate manifestation of himself in the first ages of the world ; but what is there that is not strange ? It is strange that you and I are here—that there is water, and earth, and air, and fire—that there is a sun, and moon, and stars—that there is generation, corruption, reproduction. I can account ultimately for none of these things, without recurring to him who made every thing. I also am his workmanship, and look up to him with hope of preservation through all eternity ; I adore him for his word as well as for his work ; his

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work I cannot comprehend, but his word hath assured me of all that I am concerned to know—that he hath prepared everlasting happiness for those who love and obey him. This you will call preaching:—I will have done with it; but the subject is so vast, and the plan of Providence, in my opinion, so obviously wise and good, that I can never think of it without having my mind filled with piety, admiration, and gratitude.

In addition to the moral evidence (as you are pleased to think it) against the Bible, you threaten in the progress of your work, to produce such other evidence as even a priest cannot deny. A philosopher in search of truth forfeits with me all claim to candour and impartiality, when he introduces railing for reasoning, vulgar and illiberal farcafms in the room of argument. I will not imitate the example you set me: but examine what you shall produce, with as much coolness and respect, as if you had given the priests no provocation; as if you were a man of the most unblemished character, subject to no prejudices, actuated by no bad designs, not liable to have abuse retorted upon you with success.

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## LETTER II.

**B**EFORE you commence your grand attack upon the Bible, you wish to establish a difference between the evidence necessary to prove the authenticity of the Bible, and that of any other ancient book. I am not surpris'd at your anxiety on this head; for all writers on the subject have agreed in thinking that St. Austin reason'd well, when, in vindicating the genuineness of the Bible, he ask'd—“What proofs have we that the works of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Varro, and other profane authors, were written by those whose names they bear; unless it be that this has been an opinion generally received at all times, and by all