

Common Sense, Scripture, and January 1776

January 1776: The Historical Moment

By January 1776, the American colonies were already engaged in war:

- April–June 1775: Armed conflict at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill
- July 1775: The Olive Branch Petition appealed to King George III for peace
- August 1775: The King declared the colonies in rebellion
- Late 1775: Britain contracted German (Hessian) mercenaries
- January 1, 1776: British forces burned Norfolk, Virginia

Although fighting had begun, many colonists still hoped for reconciliation. ***Common Sense***, by Thomas Paine, appeared at this critical moment to explain why continued allegiance was no longer morally or historically defensible.

Scripture Themes for January

- Genesis 1–3 — Creation, order, and the entrance of human corruption
- The Book of Job — Innocent suffering, perseverance, and moral truth under trial
- The remainder of Genesis — Covenant, separation, bondage, and the rise of nations

These themes strongly shaped the moral vocabulary of 18th-century Americans.

***Common Sense* and Genesis 1–3**

Creation, Order, and Fallen Authority

Thomas Paine distinguished between God’s good design and human corruption:

“Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one.”

— *Common Sense*, Section I: *Of the Origin and Design of Government in General*

Paine’s argument reflects Genesis 1–3:

- God’s creation is good and orderly
- Domination and coercive authority arise after the Fall

- Government exists because humanity is no longer innocent

Paine further wrote:

“Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence.”

This echoes Genesis 3, where clothing symbolizes the loss of innocence after sin.

***Common Sense* and the Book of Job**

Innocent Suffering and Rejected Appeals

Job endures suffering not because of wrongdoing, but because injustice is imposed upon him. Paine framed America’s experience similarly:

“Every quiet method for peace hath been ineffectual. Our prayers have been rejected with disdain.”

— *Common Sense*, Section III: *Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs*

Colonists had:

- Petitioned respectfully
- Appealed to law and custom
- Endured hardship without redress

Like Job, Americans were urged by some to accept suffering for the sake of peace. Paine rejected that counsel, insisting that truth and justice could not be sacrificed for quiet submission.

***Common Sense* and the Later Chapters of Genesis**

Kingship, Covenant, and Separation

Paine made a direct biblical argument against monarchy:

“Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the Heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom.”

— *Common Sense*, Section II: *Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession*

This reflects themes found in Genesis:

- Nations arise after moral corruption (Genesis 10–11)
- God calls Abram out of an unjust system (Genesis 12)
- Covenant replaces inherited authority

Paine portrayed independence as a necessary separation, not a rebellion against God-ordained order.

Bondage and Moral Necessity

Paine described Britain's claim of authority in terms familiar to readers of Genesis:

"Britain... has declared that she has a right... to bind us in all cases whatsoever."

— *Common Sense*, Section III

Genesis ends with the rise of a ruler who "knew not Joseph." Paine warned that America was already living under such authority.

Why *Common Sense* Was Published in January 1776

Paine waited until events had made the argument unavoidable:

- The King had rejected reconciliation
- Towns had been burned
- War was already underway

He wrote:

"The time likewise is at hand which must probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves."

— *Common Sense*, Section III

January 1776 marked the moment when suffering demanded moral clarity.

Conclusion

Common Sense did not create rebellion. It interpreted reality using moral reasoning familiar to a Bible-reading people. By drawing upon themes found in Genesis and Job, Paine helped Americans understand their circumstances within a larger historical and ethical framework.

For Revolutionary-era Americans, Scripture was not cited to incite violence, but to explain why liberty had become a moral necessity.

1. *Common Sense* (January 1776): Explicit Biblical Quotation and Argument

In *Common Sense*, Paine does not merely allude to biblical ideas — he quotes Scripture directly and builds arguments from it, particularly when attacking monarchy.

A. Direct Use of 1 Samuel 8

Paine explicitly cites the biblical account where Israel demands a king.

He writes:

“Monarchy in every instance is the Popery of government...

As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of Scripture.”

He then summarizes and quotes the passage in 1 Samuel 8, where God warns Israel what a king will do:

“He will take your sons and appoint them for himself... and he will take your daughters... and ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen.”

Source:

Common Sense, Section II — “Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession”

This is not casual — Paine presents Scripture as evidence against hereditary monarchy.

B. Gideon (Judges 8:22–23)

Paine also references Gideon, who refused kingship:

“The children of Israel requested Gideon to rule over them... but Gideon said unto them, ‘I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you.’”

Source:

Common Sense, Section II

This is a direct biblical quotation, used to argue that:

- God did not intend hereditary monarchy
 - Kingship was a rejection of divine governance
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C. Why This Matters

In *Common Sense*:

- Scripture is treated as authoritative and persuasive
- Paine assumes his readers know the Bible
- He expects biblical arguments to carry moral weight

This places *Common Sense* squarely within the biblical-political tradition of colonial America, not outside it.

2. *The American Crisis Papers* (1776–1783): Biblical Language, Less Quotation

In *The American Crisis* (written during the war), Paine uses biblical language and imagery, though with fewer direct quotations.

Famous opening line:

“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

While not a direct quote, the cadence and moral framework echo:

- Job
- Psalms
- Prophetic literature

Throughout *The Crisis*, Paine speaks of:

- Providence
- Trial
- Moral testing
- Deliverance

This reflects biblical worldview assumptions, even when not quoting chapter and verse.

3. *Rights of Man* (1791–1792): Scripture Referenced, Not Central

In *Rights of Man*:

- Paine still references biblical history
- Scripture is treated more as moral literature than authority
- Biblical citation is secondary to natural rights philosophy

This reflects the post-Revolutionary intellectual shift, not Paine’s 1776 posture.

4. *The Age of Reason* (1794–1807): A Different Phase Entirely

For historical completeness (and transparency):

- In *The Age of Reason*, Paine critiques organized religion
- He quotes Scripture extensively, but critically
- This work was written:

- Years later
- After the Revolution
- After personal losses and political alienation

Important Context

- *The Age of Reason* did not influence the Revolution
- It was not representative of 1776
- Many Founders disagreed strongly with it
- Paine's earlier biblical arguments were still used and circulated independently

This distinction is essential and historically honest.