

THE BIBLE AND THE FOUNDERS—PART 1

The role of the Bible in the American founding remains a highly debated topic. Unfortunately, many who comment on this issue do so without having plumbed the depths of the Founders' writings themselves. What they would find is that the Bible exerted a profound and ubiquitous influence on the founding generation, even on those who were not particularly religious.

A brief look at the words of our first two Presidents will make that clear.

After the United States won victory in the Revolutionary War, George Washington reflected on the momentous event, and the unique historical circumstances surrounding the birth of the United States. Although many not familiar with 18th-century-speak would not recognize it, Washington actually ascribed the singularity of the event to the Bible more than anything else:

The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at an Epocha where the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined...and above all, *the pure and benign light of Revelation* [the Bible], have had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of Society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.¹

“Revelation” in the 18th century was a term of art for revealed religion—in other words, religion that came from a revelation from God, rather than what could only be obtained from reason. More often than not, “revelation” was a word used for the Bible itself, as being the written medium of God’s revelation to man. Thus, when Washington ascribes the unique historical moment the founding generation was beholding, it is highly significant that he ascribed it to, “above all, the pure and benign light of *Revelation* . . .”

What of our next President, John Adams? Throughout his life, he exhibited a profound respect for the Bible, and references it frequently throughout his writings.

For example, as a young man, he envisioned what a society would look like if its citizens followed the precepts of the Bible:

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

¹Circular to the State Governments (June 8, 1783); George Washington, John Rhodehamel, ed., *Washington: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 517.

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. . . no man would steal or rife or any way defraud his neighbor, but would live in peace and good will with all men . . . What a utopia, what a paradise would this region be.²

And as an old man, he declared that “the Bible is the best book in the world.”³

The words of both men are replete with additional references to the Bible, which we will unpack in future posts.

²From the Diary (February 22, 1756); John Adams, Gordon Wood, ed., *John Adams: Revolutionary Writings 1755-1775* (New York: The Library of America, 2011), 7.

³Letter to Thomas Jefferson (December 25, 1813); Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail & John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 412.