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Founded in Revelation, and in Reason Too

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It is a famous story of a conversation that changed the world. As part of preparations for a July 2, 1776, vote on Richard Henry Lee's resolution declaring the American states "absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown," the Continental Congress created a committee consisting of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman to produce a document making the case for independence.[1] According to Adams's autobiography, Jefferson had urged Adams to write the first draft of the document. But Adams refused and urged Jefferson to take up his pen instead:

> This I declined and gave several reasons for declining. 1. That he was a Virginian and I a Massachusettensian. 2. that he was a southern Man and I a northern one. 3. That I had been so obnoxious for my early and constant Zeal in promoting the Measure, that any draught of mine, would undergo a more severe Scrutiny and Criticism in Congress, than one of his composition. 4thly and lastly and that would be reason enough if there were no other, I had a great Opinion of the Elegance of his pen and none at all of my own.[2]

This aspect of the tale is well-known, and Adams's faith in the elegance of Jefferson's pen has certainly been vindicated. Anyone else charged with a defense of the Lee Resolution might have made the Declaration of Independence entirely about the misdeeds of the British government. But Jefferson included in the Declaration not only an airing of grievances

but also, and much more enduringly, a statement of the American creed, which asserts, "All men are created equal." Abraham Lincoln would powerfully capture how Jefferson had fulfilled the task with which Adams had charged him:

> All honor to Jefferson—to 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 abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.[3]

In other words, Adams's positive "opinion" of Jefferson's pen would change the world.

Much less recounted, however, is a passage that occurs just a bit earlier in Adams's autobiography. There Adams describes his experience with Jefferson up to the point they were assigned to the Declaration committee:

> Mr. Jefferson had been now about a Year a Member of Congress, but had attended his Duty in the House but a very small part of the time and when there had never spoken in public: and during the whole Time I satt with him in Congress, I never heard him utter three Sentences together. *The most of a Speech he ever made in my hearing was a gross insult on Religion, in one or two Sentences, for which I gave him immediately the Reprehension, which he richly merited*.[4] (Emphasis added.)

Thus began one of the most interesting and important friendships in American history. Moreover, this one eminently believable anecdote gives us a framework within which to study the relationship between these two men and the meaning of John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence,* one of the most renowned paintings of the founding era.

Source: John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence,* 1818, oil on canvas, 12 × 8 ft., Capitol Rotunda, Washington, DC, https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence.

The image Trumbull gives us is often misunderstood. Many official descriptions of this scene assume it is depicting the day the Declaration was approved. But in truth, Trumbull gives us the events not of July 4, 1776, but rather of June 28, when Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, Livingston, and Sherman presented the Declaration to the Continental Congress. Trumbull did more than paint these five figures. He resolved to include all members of the Congress, provided he could draw their faces himself or find an accurate depiction of them. His aim was to memorialize the Declaration's unveiling for posterity. As his catalog ultimately described the artist's endeavor,

> Where any one was dead, he should be careful to copy the finest portrait that could be obtained; but . . . in case of death, where no portrait could be obtained, (and there were many such instances, for, anterior to the Revolution, the arts had

> been very little attended to, except in one or two of the cities,) he should by no means admit any ideal representation, lest, it being known that some such were to be found in the painting, a doubt of the truth of others should be excited in the minds of posterity; and that, in short, absolute authenticity should be attempted, as far as it could be obtained. . . .
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> . . . Mr. Adams was painted in London; Mr. Jefferson in Paris; Mr. Hancock and Samuel Adams in Boston; Mr. Edward Rutledge in Charleston, South Carolina; Mr. Wythe at Williamsburgh, in Virginia; Mr. Bartlett at Exeter, in New Hampshire, &c. &c. &c.[5]

Trumbull crisscrossed Europe and America, capturing forever the image of most of the Declaration's signers. What he put together is a small jewel of a painting that hangs today in Yale University's art museum. Due to the effort, research, and time put into it, it is utterly unlike any other painting from the founding era and perhaps in the history of art. It took some 35 years for Trumbull to fill in all the founders' faces. As he came close to completing the painting, following the War of 1812, he sought to create a larger version of the work that would be hung in the US Capitol rotunda along with other patriotic paintings, turning it into a shrine to the American idea. Lobbying Congress for the expenditure, he turned to the surviving founders to offer an endorsement for his effort.

The oldest former president still living, and one of the men most at the center of the developments of 1776, was not sure he approved of the idea. The problem with art, Adams wrote Trumbull, is that it could capture only a specific scene, but the story of the Revolution was that of a complex layering of events and individuals. After all, Adams wrote, the origin of the Revolution lay with the Sons of Liberty, Sam Adams, and many acts and stands that had led up to independence. But if the painting was to be made, Trumbull should try as hard as he could to attain accuracy. "Let not our Posterity be deluded by fictions under pretence of poetical or graphical Licenses," Adams concluded.[6]

Meanwhile, another founder thought the project an excellent idea. If we did not allow for artistic license, Jefferson reflected, "the talent of imagination would be banished from the art, taste and judgment in composition would be of no value, and the mechanical copyist of matter of fact would be on a footing with the first painter."[7] Jefferson's attitude was unsurprising, as the original painting had been his suggestion when Trumbull visited him in Paris. While serving as the American ambassador to France, Jefferson became caught up in the ferment preceding the French Revolution. He concluded that the words he had written in the Declaration of Independence might have lasting import beyond America and was beginning to realize that his authoring a document declaring that all men are created equal might be the most important thing he would ever do. And so he urged Trumbull to paint the events of 1776 as not only a series of military battles but also a revolution in ideas, and to therefore mark the Declaration as a seminal event.

It is thus no surprise that Trumbull made Jefferson a star of the painting that resulted. Though all five members of the Declaration committee are depicted, Jefferson is at the center of the scrum. As the art historian Paul Staiti explains, Trumbull's painting would stress three facts: "That the document was the legislative and philosophic centerpiece of the Revolution, that Jefferson was its author, and that if a single Founder ought to be identified with the modern concept of inalienable human rights, that person also was Jefferson."[8] Trumbull gives us a painting wherein his inspiration, the author of the Declaration, stands out; resplendent in a red vest, Jefferson alone grasps the document presented to the Continental Congress. At first glance, the painting celebrates him as the author of America itself.

But does it? Is that really the message of this work of art? Most great works of art give us one focal point in a painting; this one has two. As the historian David McCullough noted, while Jefferson is prominent, Adams actually stands dead center in the painting.[9] While every other founder's physique is partially obscured, Adams's can be seen in its entirety. Jefferson is the center of the Committee of Five, but Adams

is the center of the canvas. Jefferson wrote the Declaration, Trumbull seems to be saying, but Adams stood at the center of what happened. Adams got the Congress to pass the all-important unanimous vote for the Declaration.

This is as it should be. For the truth is that Adams and Jefferson serve as embodiments of different perspectives on the metaphysical meaning of the events of the founding. Indeed, it is only when we recognize the nature of their differing but equally essential contributions to the American Revolution, shaped by their profound difference when it comes to faith, that we can begin to understand their profoundly divergent interpretations of the founding and of God's role in it. And it is only with this understanding that we can comprehend how the complexity of Trumbull's painting embodies the complexity of America itself.

A Portrait of Two Personalities

Let us begin by comparing the two individuals involved. Adams and Jefferson truly were, in Joseph J. Ellis's words, "the odd couple of the American Revolution." As "the highly combustible, ever combative, mile-a-minute talker," Adams stood in sharp contrast to "Jefferson, the always cool and self-contained enigma."[10] In *The Declaration of Independence*, Trumbull strikingly captures the essence of their opposing personalities. "Where Jefferson stands in an elegant écarté, his right heel picked up," Staiti notes, "Adams looks like a bulldog, feet flat and right arm akimbo."[11] It was Jefferson who composed the words of the Declaration that changed the world, but it was Adams who had, time and time again, made the case for independence and for breaking with Britain.

In their religious dogmas and doctrines they may have seemed similar, as they both called themselves Unitarians. But they were actually quite different. Jefferson was essentially a deist. In Jefferson's scheme, the historian Richard A. Samuelson explains, "God was the creator of the universe, . . . but the idea that God was an active presence in the world he

dismissed as mere superstition."[12] While also a great believer in human reason, Adams had been reared in the Congregationalist church and held strongly to the importance of religion in forming a moral life. This was especially true for democracies. If the power of the state was to be vested in the will of the people, then nothing prevented the populace from running morally amok except its own self-restraint, making religion necessary. In a letter as president, Adams wrote, "We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."[13] Jefferson, in contrast, once wrote that he believed the American mission to be "to shew by example the sufficiency of human reason for the care of human affairs."[14]

As Adams discovered to his great surprise at the Continental Congress, while Jefferson single-mindedly defended religious liberty, he nevertheless looked down on those who embraced a traditional faith. As a policy, Jefferson reflected, "I . . . rarely permit myself to speak on" religion. When he did, it was "never but in a reasonable society."[15] By this he meant, as Gordon S. Wood puts it, that he would say what he truly thought about faith only "among friends who shared his derisive view of organized religion." While Jefferson in private company would often "mock religious feelings," "Adams always retained a respect for the religiosity of people that Jefferson never had."[16]

Wood further notes that Jefferson differed from Adams in his attitude regarding religion's role in a democratic society. In the Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, which Jefferson drafted in the 1770s, he had insisted that "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."[17] Most Americans of Jefferson's time, Wood notes, rejected this view. On matters of religion, the America of the founding was the most tolerant nation on earth. Yet nearly all Americans "continued to believe that religion was essential for the maintenance of order and morality in society, which was especially important for a republic."[18]

In fact, the differences between Adams and Jefferson may be best reflected in their very different descriptions of the Hebraic tradition. For Jefferson, biblical Judaism and its doctrine of hundreds of divinely inspired commandments was the epitome of all that was wrong with religion. "The whole religion of the Jew," Jefferson wrote in a letter in 1820, "was founded in the belief of divine inspiration. The fumes of the most disordered imaginations were recorded in their religious code, as special communications of the Deity." Echoing a sentiment publicly expressed by Thomas Paine in his *Age of Reason*, Jefferson privately reflected that Moses had presented to Israel as an object of worship "a Being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust." "Moses," he added, "had bound the Jews to many idle ceremonies, mummeries, and observances, of no effect towards producing the social utilities which constitute the essence of virtue."[19] He showed similar disdain regarding rabbinic texts. As part of their ongoing correspondence regarding religion at the end of their lives, Jefferson, citing an English abridgment of a German history of philosophy he had just read, incorrectly informed Adams that "ethics were so little studied among the Jews, that, in their whole compilation called the Talmud, there is only one treatise on moral subjects."[20]

In contrast, as Adams believed religion was essential to a moral society, in his view the people that should be most credited for providing the foundation of civilization was the one that first introduced biblical monotheism. In what is for Jews a justifiably famous letter to the Dutch immigrant and intellectual François Adriaan Van der Kemp, Adams revealed that

> in Spight of Bolingbroke and Voltaire I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation. If I were an Atheist and believed in blind eternal Fate, I should Still believe that Fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential Instrument for civilizing the Nations. If I were an Atheist of the other Sect, who believe or pretend to believe that all is ordered by Chance, I Should believe that Chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate, to all Mankind the

> Doctrine of a Supreme intelligent wise, almighty Sovereign of the Universe, which I believe to be the great essential Principle of all Morality and consequently of all Civilization.[21]

Responding to Jefferson's negative assessment of the rabbinic moral tradition, Adams similarly noted that he wished he had the time to actually engage with the entire Jewish Talmudic tradition:

> To examine the Mishna Gemara Kabbala Jezirah, Sohar Cosri and Talmud of the Hebrews would require the life of Methuselah. . . . 20 Cartloads of Hebrew Books were burnt in France; and how many times 20 Cartloads were destroyed in the other Kingdoms? The Talmud of Babylon and that of Jerusalem were composed from 120 to 500 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. . . . How many proofs of the Corruptions of Christianity might We find in the Passages burnt?[22]

For Adams, rabbinic works might illuminate errors made by Christian theologians. This may seem a small matter, but it is actually quite striking. Like Jefferson, Adams was not an orthodox Christian. Yet Adams believed it was precisely the *diversity* of faiths flourishing in America that would sustain society while allowing for the pursuit of truth.

We have, then, two famous founders, both accurately placed by Trumbull at the heart of the story of the Revolution, with very different approaches to faith itself. We can now study the different ways their divergent worldviews influenced their defenses of the revolutionary cause in the years leading up to independence.

A Journey of Faith and Freedom

Long before they joined a committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, Adams and Jefferson had each made the case for American liberty

and the cause against Britain. Yet the cases they made, and the worldviews they expressed, differed dramatically. Adams was the descendant of Puritans who had settled Massachusetts. While his embrace of Christian doctrine was much more limited than his ancestors', their example was a polestar in Adams's understanding of the unfolding of American liberty and of the role of the divine within it.

This religious influence can be seen in Adams's once well-known, and now largely forgotten, response to the passage of the 1765 Stamp Act, published originally in *The Boston Gazette* and later reprinted as "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law." In this work, Adams does not merely criticize a piece of legislation; he advances a philosophical and theological interpretation of American history from its early origins, with an emphasis on the men and women of faith who fled England for the New World. For Adams, this was quite personal, given his connection to the Puritans, whose valor and vision he championed in his composition. In his telling, the Reformation was the start of a series of providential events that included the resistance of religious dissenters in England to the Stuart dynasty. Europe, in Adams's view, was suffering under political and ecclesiastical tyranny

> till GOD, in his benign providence, raised up the champions, who began and conducted the *reformation*. From the time of the reformation, to the first settlement of *America*, knowledge gradually spread in Europe, but especially in *England*; and in proportion as *that* increased and spread among the people, *ecclesiastical* and *civil* tyranny, which I use as synonimous expressions, for the *cannon* and *feudal* laws, seem to have lost their strength and weight. The people grew more and more sensible of the wrong that was done them, by these systems; more and more impatient under it; and determined at all hazards to rid themselves of it; till, at last, under the *execrable* race of the *Steuarts*, the struggle between the people and the confederacy aforesaid of temporal and spiritual tyranny, became formidable, violent and bloody.[23]

Adams saw his ancestors as initiators in a story of liberty, a story that fused faith and freedom:

> IT was this great struggle, that peopled America. It was not religion *alone*, as is commonly supposed; but it was a love of *universal Liberty*, and an hatred, a dread, an horror of the infernal confederacy, before described, that projected, conducted, and accomplished the settlement of America.
>
> IT was a resolution formed, by a sensible people, I mean the *Puritans*, almost in despair. They had become intelligent in general, and many of them learned. . . . This people had been so vexed, and tortured by the powers of those days, for no other crime than their knowledge, and their freedom of enquiry and examination, and they had so much reason to despair of deliverance from those miseries, on that side the ocean; that they at last resolved to fly to the *wilderness* for refuge, from the temporal and spiritual principalities and powers, and plagues, and scourges, of their *native* country.[24] (Emphasis in original.)

Thus, an exodus—a biblical image that would so profoundly influence America—began, for Adams, with the Puritan journey. Although Adams's own doctrinal beliefs were different from those of his ancestors, he viewed the revolutionary events that were unfolding as part of a providential, divinely directed drama:

> Religious to some degree of enthusiasm it may be admitted they were; but this can be no peculiar derogation from their character . . . the ends to which it was directed, far from being a reproach to them, was greatly to their honour: for I believe it will be found universally true, that no great enterprize, for the honour or happiness of mankind, was ever achieved, without a large mixture of that noble infirmity. . . . *It was founded in revelation, and in reason too; It was consistent with the principles, of the*

> *best, and greatest, and wisest legislators of antiquity*.[25] (Emphasis added.)

For Adams, the liberties that Americans sought in the mid-18th century were those that his ancestors had already established in the 17th, rights that the earliest Americans had taken for granted as gifts from God:

> Be it remembred, however, that liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker. But if we had not, our fathers have earned, and bought it for us, at the expence of their ease, their estates, their pleasure, and their blood. And liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right from the frame of their nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator who does nothing in vain, has given them understandings, and a desire to know. . . . Rulers are no more than attorneys, agents and trustees for the people; and if the cause, the interest and trust is insidiously betray'd, or wantonly trifled away, the people have a right to revoke the authority, that they themselves have deputed, and to constitute abler and better agents, attorneys and trustees.[26]

Also for Adams, the Puritans' journey for faith and freedom, grounded "in revelation, and in reason too," was the beginning of America. Moreover, the root of America's tradition of religious resistance was grounded in rights that were "derived from our Maker." The burgeoning Revolution taking place a century later was itself a continuation of America's original settlement. Adams and his compatriots were the political and spiritual successors to the Pilgrims and Puritans, playing their role in the sacred drama that the previous generations had set in motion. Adams would later state this interpretation even more explicitly in a passage from his diary in 1765 that was added to a later published version of the "Dissertation": "I always consider the settlement of America with

Reverence and Wonder—as the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of the Ignorant and the Emancipation of the slavish Part of Mankind all over the Earth."[27] The arrival of religious pilgrims in America was itself providential, and, for Adams, it set the stage for the providential events in which he was to play so important a part.

Adams's "Puritan" perspective on American history permeates his description of a profoundly religious moment in the lead-up to independence that, in his view, set the stage for the unity of the American cause. In a letter to his wife, Abigail, Adams described how as the First Continental Congress gathered in September 1774, it was proposed that those assembled begin their deliberations with a prayer. Adams reported that several members opposed this motion, including John Jay, who argued that those attending were "so divided in religious Sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Aanabaptists, some Presbyterians and some Congregationalists, so that We could not join in the same Act of Worship." To this, Sam Adams stood up and declared that "he was no Bigot, and could hear a Prayer from a Gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same Time a Friend to his Country." Accordingly, an Anglican priest by the name of Jacob Duché was summoned, who appended a personal prayer to a reading of Psalm 35: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me." Adams described to Abigail the impact that the psalm and prayer had:

> You must remember this was the next Morning after we heard the horrible Rumour, of the Cannonade of Boston.—I never saw a greater Effect upon an Audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning.
>
> After this Mr. Duche, unexpected to every Body struck out into an extemporary Prayer, which filled the Bosom of every Man present. I must confess I never heard a better Prayer or one, so well pronounced. Episcopalian as he is,

> Dr. Cooper himself never prayed with such fervour, such Ardor, such Earnestness and Pathos, and in Language so elegant and sublime—for America, for the Congress, for The Province of Massachusetts Bay, and especially the Town of Boston. It has had an excellent Effect upon every Body here.
>
> I must beg you to read that Psalm.[28]

We can overlook the irony that Duché would eventually embrace the Loyalist cause. Several important lessons can be gleaned from the episode Adams describes in his letter. First, there is the way a passage from the Hebrew Bible, describing a divine defense from one's enemies, served to unite the members of the Congress who, to some, seemed so doctrinally divided. For the philosopher Michael Novak, this small story reflects the role that Jewish scripture played in the images invoked during the Revolution:

> Practically all American Christians erected their main arguments about political life from materials in the Jewish Testament. . . . In national debates, lest their speech be taken as partisan, Christian leaders usually avoided the idioms of rival denominations—Puritan, Quaker, Congregationalist, Episcopal, Unitarian, Methodist, and Universalist. The idiom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a religious *lingua franca* for the founding generation. . . . The language of Judaism came to be the central language of the American metaphysic—the unspoken background to a special American vision of nature, history and the destiny of the human race.[29]

Of all the themes from the Hebrew Bible that sustained the founders, perhaps most central was the notion of providence as made manifest in political events. Whereas pagan antiquity saw time as cyclical, the Jews introduced the notion of history as linear, providential, and purposeful. "History," Novak adds, "in this sense—open, purposive, contingent in

liberty—is not a Greek or Roman idea. It is Hebraic; its source springs from the Biblical historians and prophets." Without Hebraic scriptural insistence on providence, Novak argues, "the founding generation of Americans would have had little heart for the War of Independence. They would have had no ground for believing that their seemingly unlawful rebellion actually fulfilled the will of God—and suited the laws of nature and nature's God."[30]

All this is eloquent, important, and true, but Adams's tale of the first Congress is instructive in another powerful way: The manner in which this prayerful moment formed a unified group despite its members' differences reflected the elements of the biblical compact known as a covenant. As the theologian Richard Niebuhr noted, what sets the covenantal compact apart from the standard notion of the social contract is that the application of biblical language to a polity allows it to understand itself in a way that is "neither purely natural nor merely contractual, based on common interest." Covenant, Niebuhr explains, allows for "the binding together in one body politic of persons who assumed through unlimited promise responsibility to and for each other and for the common laws, under God." Covenantal moments allow for members of a polity to embrace not only unity but also destiny, because "in the covenant conception the essence of freedom does not lie in the liberty of choice among goods, but in the ability to commit oneself for the future to a cause."[31]

The scene in Adams's letter to Abigail, then, sets the stage for what was to come. "It was in America," Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks noted, "that covenantal politics received its most complete expression."[32] Congress's gathering in prayer as Psalm 35 was read aloud was, as Novak notes, a sign of the singular nature of the American founding. With this in mind, we can turn to that very different founder and study how the document he wrote became the covenantal document that we call the Declaration of Independence today.

Composing the Declaration

Like Adams in Massachusetts, Jefferson had given his fellow Virginians his own written reflections following the 1774 Intolerable Acts. He originally intended for his moral and political case for resistance to parliamentary excesses to serve as instructions for Virginia's delegates to the First Continental Congress. These notes were later published (without Jefferson's consent) as *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*. But as Wood notes, these reflections were utterly unlike anything Adams would have composed. Jefferson, Wood writes,

> invoked the myth that represented the most alienated strain of Whig or anti-establishment thinking in the eighteenth century—the idea of a golden Anglo-Saxon age of pure liberty and equality that existed before the imposition of the Norman yoke in 1066.[33]

For Jefferson, the original colonists in America were political parallels to these ancient Englishmen, and they had retained their natural rights over which Parliament had no power:

> Our ancestors, before their emigration to America, were the free inhabitants of the British dominions in Europe, and possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness. That their Saxon ancestors had, under this universal law, in like manner left their native wilds and woods in the north of Europe, had possessed themselves of the island of Britain, then less charged with inhabitants, and had established there that system of laws which has so long been the glory and protection of that

> country. Nor was ever any claim of superiority or dependence asserted over them by that mother country from which they had migrated; and were such a claim made, it is believed that his majesty's subjects in Great Britain have too firm a feeling of the rights derived to them from their ancestors, to bow down the sovereignty of their state before such visionary pretensions.[34]

"Just as the Saxons held their lands free of any feudal obligations before the Norman Conquest of 1066," Wood explains, "and owed no allegiance to the German mother country from which they had migrated, so too, Jefferson suggested, did the American colonists own their lands outright and exist free of any allegiance to England."[35] This argument put forward by Jefferson made no mention of providence, faith, or the Bible. It is Lockean in nature, without any political or religious reference to the early Puritan settlers of the continent.

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke famously referred to America as an example of the state of nature that lay at the heart of his social contract theory: "In the beginning all the world was America, and more so than that is now."[36] Jefferson similarly argued that in the beginning, America was America, and its inhabitants retained rights over which Parliament had no power. Unlike Adams, Jefferson makes no mention of providence, ignoring all notion of the American story as a divinely directed drama. But like Adams's, Jefferson's early writings during the Revolution foreshadowed what was to come.

Charged by Adams with producing a "draught" of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Jefferson's first attempt referenced the Lockean "laws of nature & of nature's god" but made no mention of even the Creator of the world:

> We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independant, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness.[37]

As a result of Franklin or Adams's suggestion or Jefferson's own initiative, the draft of the Declaration that the Committee of Five presented to the Continental Congress referenced rights endowed by the "Creator." But the document's conclusion made no reference to God at all:

> We therefore the Representatives of the United states of America in General Congress assembled, do, in the name & by authority of the good people of these states, reject and renounce all allegiance & subjection to the kings of Great Britain, & all others who may hereafter claim by, through, or under them. . . . And for the support of this declaration, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, & our sacred honor.[38]

This passage went through several revisions, and the most important were made by the members of the Congress. The men assembled at what would become Independence Hall, whom Trumbull would later immortalize, insisted on adding a biblically inspired reference to the conclusion of the Declaration:

> We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, *appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions*, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States. . . . And for the support of this Declaration, *with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence,* we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor. (Emphasis added.)

For those assembled, these additions were not mere rhetoric. They had the effect of transforming the document into one of covenantal nature, enabling the sacred binding of the American people as Niebuhr described.

Jefferson was famously in agony at every edit made to his draft, but as the historian Pauline Maier reflects, these edits captured the very feelings of the American populace. Congress, she writes,

> added two references to God, which were conspicuously missing in Jefferson's draft, where God appeared only as the author of nature's laws and the endower of natural rights, and honor alone was "sacred." At the start of the final paragraph Congress inserted an appeal "to the supreme judge of the world" to affirm "the rectitude of our intentions," which echoed similar provisions in several state and local resolutions on Independence, and nearer the end of the document it also referred to the delegates' "firm reliance on the protection of divine providence." Americans held strong religious beliefs in 1776, and the Declaration was meant to state the convictions of the country's "good people." The delegates retained, however, Jefferson's concluding sentences, including its memorable mutual pledge of "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."[39]

As for Adams, while it may not have been he who insisted on placing a reference to providence in the text of the Declaration, there is no question that this edit expressed his own devout feelings at the moment. On July 3, 1776, he wrote of God and providence to the woman who knew him best and to whom he could bare his soul:

> It is the Will of Heaven, that the two Countries should be sundered forever. It may be the Will of Heaven that America shall suffer Calamities still more wasting and Distresses yet more dreadfull. If this is to be the Case, it will have this good Effect, at least: it will inspire Us with many Virtues, which We have not, and correct many Errors, Follies, and Vices, which threaten to disturb, dishonour, and destroy Us. . . . The People will have unbounded Power. And the People are extreamly addicted to

> Corruption and Venality, as well as the Great.—I am not without Apprehensions from this Quarter. *But I must submit all my Hopes and Fears, to an overruling Providence, in which, unfashionable as the Faith may be, I firmly believe.*[40] (Emphasis added.)

Whether the painter so intended, we can rightly see Adams's profile in Trumbull's painting as an avatar of a perspective on the founding that balanced and added to that of Jefferson. It is also significant that Trumbull went out of his way to ensure that the faces of all the signatories appear on a painting depicting the presentation of the Declaration. In having the courage to place their names on the parchment, they were, as is often said, signing their own death warrant. But the presence of their profiles on the painting is more than a mere tribute to the idea that those assembled had to hang together, lest they otherwise all hang separately. The truth is that the Continental Congress belongs on a masterwork celebrating the Declaration because without its members' edits, the Declaration would not be the covenantal document that we know it to be and would therefore not be an expression of how faith drove the unfolding of the Revolution.

The Vindication of John Adams

Adams's and Jefferson's very different approaches to American independence were later made manifest in their responses to another revolution, which was much more secular in nature. Jefferson saw the French Revolution as the natural successor to the American. Adams, in contrast, was the closest in America to embodying Edmund Burke, emphasizing that France unmoored from religion would devolve to anarchy and mob violence.

Adams believed in the universality of human rights and celebrated their application beyond the United States. However, France had overthrown not only its king but its entire religious system and installed a strict secularism lacking the notion of human beings created in the image of God. Adams argued that what would result was lawlessness, the suffering of

the innocent, and ultimately tyranny. This he expressed in his own 1791 reflections on the French Revolution, known as the *Discourses on Davila*. "Is there a possibility," he wrote,

> that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this *all* is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect? Or is it to make murder itself as indifferent as . . . the swallowing of mites on a morsel of cheese?[41]

Meanwhile, Jefferson praised the revolution and said that "rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated."[42] He added to James Monroe that "all the old spirit of 1776[] is rekindling."[43] But Adams's fears about France were realized and vindicated following the Reign of Terror.

Writing about his Puritan ancestors as a young man, Adams had argued that New England was "founded in revelation, and in reason too." With the hindsight of history, it is the union of religion and reason that marks the American Revolution and sets it apart from other significant revolutions in modernity. Rabbi Sacks put it this way:

> There have been four revolutions in modern times: the British and the American, and the French and the Russian. In Britain and America the source of inspiration was the Hebrew Bible. In France and Russia it was the great alternative to the Bible, namely philosophy. The theorist of the French Revolution was Jean-Jacques Rousseau; of the Russian, Karl Marx. The contrast between them is vivid. Britain and America succeeded in creating a free society, not without civil war, but at least without tyranny and terror. The French and Russian revolutions began with a dream of utopia and ended with a nightmare of bloodshed and the suppression of human rights. . . .

> Why did Britain and America succeed where France and Russia failed? The explanation is surely complex but much—perhaps all—turns on how a society answers the question: who is the ultimate sovereign, God or man? The British and Americans gave the first answer, the French and Russian revolutionaries the second. For the British and American architects of liberty, God was the supreme power. All authority was therefore subject to the transcendental demands of the moral law. . . . When human beings arrogate supreme power to themselves, politics loses its sole secure defense of freedom. . . . Societies that exile God lead to the eclipse of man.[44]

We can therefore see in the complexity of Trumbull's painting a reminder of Jefferson's impact on America but also the importance of Adams's perspective. Interestingly, the complexity on the canvas reflects Trumbull's own experiences. As a young artist in England in the 1780s, he had spent a great deal of time in the home of the American ambassador in Grosvenor Square. He loved Abigail Adams, and he loved the Adams children. But John Adams he thought an insufferable bore. For this young man in the prime of life, Adams appeared too serious. He was never jocular and never ready to relax and have a good time. "There is too much constraint, too much of the great and the wise to admit anything sporting," Trumbull wrote. "'Tis well enough when business presses, but even business should be confined as much as possible within the Closet & there is a time when 'tis ridiculous to be wise."[45]

Yet later, Trumbull was turned off at the way Jefferson's circle derided religion and came to see the wisdom of Adams's view. As the Federalists began to disappear and the Jeffersonians conquered the country, and as France devolved into anarchy and tyranny, the older, more mature Trumbull began to understand and appreciate the wisdom of the man he once snidely dismissed. "It has been seen, that in Europe I had been on terms of confidence with Mr. Jefferson; this continued for some time," Trumbull noted in his memoir. But after 1789, "my whole soul revolted from the

atrocities of France, while he approved or apologized for all. He opposed Washington—I revered him—and a coldness gradually succeeded, until in 1793, he invited me to dine."[46] This dinner set the stage for a falling out forever between Trumbull and Jefferson.

This episode is fascinating for those interested in the story of American religion, for it reflects, in a small way, the unusual diversity of the religious and intellectual makeup of the early republic. In 1793, Jefferson was George Washington's secretary of state, but he was about to resign and head home to Virginia, where he could lay the groundwork for his own political party. Two other important guests joined Trumbull for dinner at Jefferson's Philadelphia home. One was David Salisbury Franks, the highest-ranking Jew to have served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. The other was William Branch Giles, a Virginia senator whom Trumbull had once taken to task for insulting comments about Adams's essays.[47]

Now, in Jefferson's home, Giles decided to take revenge. According to Trumbull's recollections, in the discussion before dinner Giles began to attack "the puritanical ancestry and character of New England." By this, Trumbull meant that he was attacking the religion and traditional beliefs with which New Englanders at the time were associated. As a Connecticut-born descendant of Puritans himself, Trumbull hoped that with dinner the subject would change, but alas,

> the company was hardly seated at table, when he renewed his attack with increased asperity, and proceeded so far at last, as to ridicule the character, conduct, and doctrines of the divine founder of our religion—Jefferson in the mean time, smiling and nodding approbation on Mr. Giles, while the rest of the company silently left me and my defense to our fate; until at length my friend, David Franks, (first cashier of the bank of the United States,) took up the argument on my side.[48]

We thus have the strange scenario in which a senator from Virginia, with the smiling approval of the secretary of state, is engaging in an attack

on Christianity, and the only one who joins Trumbull in its defense is a Jew named David Franks. This impressed Trumbull, who described the scene:

> Thinking this a fair opportunity for evading further conversation on this subject, I turned to Mr. Jefferson and said, "Sir, this is a strange situation in which I find myself; in a country professing Christianity, and at a table with Christians, as I supposed, I find my religion and myself attacked with severe and almost irresistible wit and raillery, and not a person to aid me in my defense, but my friend Mr. Franks, *who is himself a Jew*." For a moment, this attempt to parry the discussion appeared to have some effect; but Giles soon returned to the attack, with renewed virulence, and burst out with—"It is all a miserable delusion and priestcraft; I do not believe one word of all they say about a future state of existence, and retribution for actions done here. I do not believe one word of a Supreme Being who takes cognizance of the paltry affairs of this world, and to whom we are responsible for what we do."[49] (Emphasis in original.)

Trumbull forever remembered this moment, he wrote, "as helping to elucidate the character of Mr. Jefferson," who "in nodding and smiling assent to all the virulence of his friend, Mr. Giles, . . . appeared to me to avow most distinctly, his entire approbation. From this time my acquaintance with Mr. Jefferson became cold and distant."[50]

This story stands today as a metaphor of sorts, proving that it is not only Jefferson's draft of the Declaration that embodies the making of America. Central to the story is what Novak calls the "Hebrew metaphysic" and the founders' embrace of providence, without which the Revolution would have had a very different character, without which the Declaration would have had a very different character, and without which America would have had a very different character.[51]

Adams, Jefferson, and the DNA of the United States

Trumbull's lack of love for Jefferson became known, and when he came to Congress proposing to produce a larger version of *The Declaration of Independence*, there were those who were concerned that Trumbull would make Jefferson less prominent than he was in the original. But they needn't have worried. Jefferson is, of course, celebrated in the larger painting that now hangs in the Capitol rotunda, and rightly so. For as Lincoln noted, it was he who enshrined in the Declaration the concept of equality at the heart of the American idea, transforming "a merely revolutionary document" into "a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."[52]

But Adams's warning to Trumbull that the American Revolution was more than Jefferson's drafting of the Declaration is worth bearing in mind as well. It is a lesson overlooked even by the most distinguished of scholars, who tend to celebrate Jefferson to the detriment of Adams. Wood concludes his description of Adams and Jefferson's friendship by invoking Lincoln's famous speech from July 10, 1858, wherein he described how those who did not descend from the generation of the founding can still become Americans:

> If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, . . . 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. 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.[53]

From this, Wood derives the following conclusion:

> As Lincoln grasped better than anyone, Jefferson offered Americans a set of beliefs that through the generations have supplied a bond that holds together the most diverse nation that history has ever known. Since now the whole world is in the United States, nothing but Jefferson's ideals can turn such an assortment of different individuals into the "one people" that the Declaration says we are. To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something. And that something is what Jefferson declared. That's why we honor Jefferson and not Adams.[54]

But surely that we ought not to honor Adams is not the conclusion we should draw. Jefferson's Declaration is indeed worthy of celebration, but the Continental Congress's faith in providence, a faith that lay at the heart of Adams's vision for America, remains bound up with the American story.

Indeed, Wood's own invocation of the 16th president allows us to see why this is so. If we wish to see how the Puritans' biblically inspired, providential faith lived on in American public life, if we search for an eloquent statement of the American story as a drama directed by what the Congress called, in its revision of the Declaration, the "Supreme Judge of the world," we need look no further than Lincoln's second inaugural address. This greatest speech in American history is less an inaugural than a sermon, illustrating the unique way religion and politics intersected in America. "It is impossible to imagine Lincoln's European contemporaries Napoleon III, Bismarck, Gambetta, Thiers, Garibaldi, Cavour, Marx, or Disraeli thinking in these terms," the historian Paul Johnson noted, while "Lincoln did so in the certainty that most of his countrymen and women could and did think along similar lines."[55] Adams believed that America

would be founded "in revelation, and in reason too," and Lincoln above all reflected this in American public life.

It is therefore gratifying that after Adams came to see the massive version of Trumbull's masterwork, he liked it and said his own picture "bore a general resemblance, but was not sufficiently corpulent." One relative of Adams's recalled that Adams

> seemed carried back to his prime of manhood, and to the most famous scene of his life, and he gave his warm approval to the picture as a correct representation of the Convention. "There is the door," said he, "through which Washington escaped when I nominated him as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army!"[56]

The two heroes of the painting capture the double helix of America's political DNA: Jefferson's embrace of the Enlightenment and Adams's emphasis on not only reason but also religion and tradition. These are elements that at times complement each other and at times are in tension with one another, but they make America what it always has been. For all the license in Trumbull's creation, it perfectly captures the complexity of the founding.

The American Revolution was a multifaceted event, combining faith and reason, enlightenment and tradition, noble ideals and tragic failures. Jefferson was a slaveholder who failed to uphold the very democratic ideals of equality that he gave the world; his own life is an embodiment of America's original failing. And yet he gave us words through which America changed the world, helping to define what it means to be an American. But many Americans came to understand that in their nation, there was an entire group of human beings whose equality had been cruelly denied. It was a *religious* awakening that led the abolitionist movement to take central stage in the years before the Civil War, just as religion and a faith in the providential unfolding of the American story played a central role in the fight for civil rights in the 20th century.

Adams's writings on America and France remind us that in the laudable and necessary pursuit of liberty and equality, it is religion that can sustain a movement for justice while also staving off lawlessness and anarchy. And so it has been at America's best moments. A hundred years after Gettysburg, Martin Luther King Jr. invoked not only Jefferson's words that all men are created equal but the biblical themes of a traditional spiritual: "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God almighty, we are free at last."[57] As the legal scholar Stephen Carter explains,

> The religious convictions of the marchers, King often argued, gave them the courage and the power to remain civil, to remain focused, to shun immoral means in the quest for moral end. . . .
>
> A life without faith is a life without the most powerful language of sacrifice and aspiration the human race has ever known. . . . In the Western religious traditions, faith in God provides a *justification* for the equality that liberal philosophy assumes and cherishes but is often unable to defend.[58] (Emphasis in original.)

Or, to put it slightly differently, for America to endure, we need to remember not only Jefferson but also Adams—not only reason but also revelation.

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