

THE JEFFERSON BIBLE: THE LIFE AND MORALS OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

(Note: I have borrowed liberally from the insightful Introduction by Forest Church and the scholarly Afterward by Jaroslav Pelikan)

JEFFERSON'S PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND REASON

I am a long-time admirer of Thomas Jefferson. Few lives have been more intently studied, analyzed, and criticized. As a founding father his words are used and misused to justify policy and values from many sides. Many Jefferson personas have been created from the complex man he was.

But my admiration of Jefferson is centered on his living a life that was unbounded in his pursuit of knowledge and experience. He devoured the information that was available at the time, from the ancient philosophers to the philosophers and scientists of his own day. He used all of the knowledge and observation he could acquire to skeptically arrive at deeply held views and values. He was willing to hold and espouse such views even if they would undermine his popularity. And he was willing to change his mind when he acquired new information or observations to the contrary.

Jefferson's pursuit of knowledge and information extended into every realm that he encountered. He mastered the national and international politics of his day, languages, world geography, literature, architecture, farming, medicine, and of course, he was known for his exquisite taste in fine foods and wines. Of all his pursuits, he did not neglect the pursuit of philosophy and religion. While not a man who practiced religious rituals or expounded religious beliefs, he was diligent from early in his life until the end, in studying and refining his understanding of religion – as a private pursuit, not as part of his public persona.

Jefferson had been raised in a family which had a high respect for education. Although his father, a member of the House of Burgesses, had not gone to college he was well read. His son Thomas was educated in church schools by Anglican clergymen. Young Thomas' father died when Thomas was fourteen and he was sent to live with a guardian. At sixteen he told his guardian it would save money if he could be sent off to college because his presence at home drew a constant swarm of visitors which tended to stay for dinner. This convinced his guardian and he was off to Williamsburg.

At the College of William and Mary, Jefferson was strongly impressed by one of his professors, William Small, who introduced Jefferson to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Jefferson later said that Professor Small had “probably fixed the destinies of my life.” William Small introduced Jefferson to the works of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke who became Jefferson's heroes. He read voraciously in English, Greek, Latin, and French, pursuing works in philosophy, history, and science. He acquired and applied the Enlightenment paradigm that the answers to life's questions

came not by mystical revelation or inherited opinions but through application of reason, testing, and observation. Jefferson wrote, "Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blind fear."

HOW DID THE "JEFFERSON BIBLE" COME ABOUT?

For many years, religion had been of interest to Jefferson, but he had found little time to research the subject. While he was Vice President under John Adams during the period 1798-1799 he spent many evenings in conversation with Dr. Benjamin Rush, a doctor from Philadelphia, a well-respected scientist, and an outspoken Universalist. Sometimes their far-ranging discussions turned to religion. Jefferson told Dr. Rush that he had, through his studies, developed views on Christianity, especially on the person of Jesus. Jefferson apologized that he had not had the time to write down the conclusions he had come to, but he promised Dr. Rush that he would do so. For the moment he could only say, "I have a view of the subject which ought to displease neither the rational Christian nor Deist, and would reconcile many to a character [Jesus] they have too hastily rejected."

Another of Jefferson's confidants in such matters was Dr. Joseph Priestly, the renowned scientist, discoverer of Oxygen, and committed Unitarian. Dr. Priestly wrote a treatise which he sent to Jefferson entitled, "Socrates and Jesus Compared." This triggered Jefferson to reconsider the project he had promised Dr. Rush. In his reply to Priestly he disclosed the nature of the project he was considering.

I should proceed to a view of the life, character, and doctrines of Jesus, who sensible of the incorrectness of his forbears' ideas of the Deity, and of morality, endeavored to bring them to the principles of a pure deism, and juster notions of the attributes of God, to reform their moral doctrines to the standard of reason, justice, and philanthropy, and to inculcate the belief of a future state. This view would purposely omit the question of his [Jesus] divinity, and even his inspiration. To do him justice, it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines had to encounter, not having been committed to writing by himself, but by the most unlettered of men, by memory, long after they had heard them from him, when much was forgotten, much misunderstood, and presented in every paradoxical shape. Yet such are the fragments remaining as to show a master workman, and that his system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime probably that has been ever taught, and consequently more perfect than those of any of the ancient philosophers. His character and doctrines have received still greater injury from those who pretend to be his special disciples... .

Jefferson continued to refine what he called his *Syllabus of an estimate of the merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, compared with others*. Four years passed and Jefferson lamented to his correspondents that duties of leadership of the new republic had consumed his time

and he had not had time to put down his more complete views in writing. He did, then, send to Dr. Rush some additional elaboration on his *Syllabus*. He continued to see the problem in Christianity as the corruption of Jesus message – that the fragments of what Jesus “did deliver have come to us mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible. They have been still more disfigured by the corruptions of the schismatising followers, who have found an interest in sophisticating and perverting the simple doctrines he taught by engrafting on them the mysticism of a Grecian sophist, frittering them into subtleties, and obscuring them with jargon... .”

Soon after, Jefferson wrote to a Philadelphia bookseller for duplicate copies of both the English and Greek New Testaments. When the books arrived, he noted that one also contained a Latin version. A year later, perhaps for symmetry, he also ordered duplicate copies in the French language.

As the next step on the way to the Jefferson Bible, he produced a small book, *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which Jefferson extracted what he determined to be the actual words and teachings of Jesus. Jefferson found the New Testament, as written, to be contradictory and full of doctrinal interpretation added by later scribes and interpreters. Jefferson believed that one could recognize these contractions and the added dogma. He described this work to John Adams in 1813 noting that finding and arranging the matter which is evidently Jesus’ is “as distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.”

But this book was only a partial fulfillment of the original dream that he had promised Dr. Rush long ago. The multiple versions of the New Testament he had ordered for this purpose had been lying on the shelf. It was another decade later, in his correspondence with John Adams, that Adams prodded Jefferson repeatedly to accomplish his Bible project. In a few evenings, about 1820 at the age of seventy-seven, he finally compiled his “Bible” – *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

THE JEFFERSON BIBLE

What is this little Bible of Jefferson’s? First, he finished his compilation of the story of Jesus as taken from the four traditional gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As we know, there are major discrepancies among those four books regarding many of the events and the sequence of events of Jesus’ life. Like most of today’s biblical scholars, Jefferson was able to use very little in the mystical book of John. As a result of his research, he eliminated those events and statements that he believed had been changed or added by later scribes and interpreters. He eliminated scenes of the miraculous and the supernatural that he believed were added later. The result was what he called the Table of Texts where he arranged the whole gospel story, drawn selectively from the four books, into one logical sequence. For example, the Table of Texts starts as follows:

[1] Luke 2: 1-7 Joseph & Mary go to Bethlehem where Jesus is born.
21. 39. he is circumcised & named & they return to Nazareth.
40. 42-48. 51. 52. at 12 years of age he accompanies his parents to
Jerusalem and returns.

[2] L.3:1.2. Mk 1:4 Mt 3:4.5.6 John baptises in Jordan.
Mt 3:13 Jesus is baptized. L 3:23 at 30 years of age.

Using the Table of Texts, Jefferson literally cut the pages from his Bibles in four languages and pasted the texts side by side so that one could read and compare the corresponding scriptures in English, Greek, Latin, and French.

By this time Jefferson's research had led to a further refinement of his views on Christianity. He saw Jesus in the historical context as a great reformer of the Jewish religion. Jefferson rejects the idea of Jesus divinity, that concept being added later as Christian dogma. Jefferson deeply admired the core of Jesus' message, but wrote that

it is not to be understood that I am with Him in all His doctrines. I am a materialist: He takes the side of Spiritualism. He preaches the efficacy of repentance towards forgiveness of sin: I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it, etc. etc. It is the innocence of His character, the purity and sublimity of His moral precepts, the eloquence of His inculcations, the beauty of the apologues in which He conveys them, that I so much admire... . Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Him by His biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others, again, of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being. I separate, therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to Him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and the roguery of others of His disciples.

And in a later letter,

We find in the writings of [Jesus'] biographers matter of two distinct descriptions. First, a groundwork of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticism, and fabrications. Intermixed with these, again, are sublime ideas of the Supreme Being, aphorisms, and precepts of the purist morality and benevolence, sanctioned by a life of humility, innocence, and simplicity of manners, neglect of riches, absence of worldly ambition and honors, with an eloquence and persuasiveness which have not been surpassed. These could not be the intentions of the groveling authors who related them. They are far beyond the powers of their feeble minds. They show there was a character, a subject of their history, whose splendid conceptions were above suspicion as being interpolations from their hands. ... The difference is obvious to the eye and to the understanding, ... and I will venture to affirm that he who, as I have done, will undertake to winnow this grain from the chaff, will find it not to require a moment's consideration. The parts fall asunder of themselves, as would those of an image of metal and clay.

What was Jefferson trying to do with this lifelong pursuit of religious truth as a backdrop to his life as a national leader, a diplomat, and a farmer?

First, he was a seeker of reason and truth in all aspects of life. With his extensive knowledge of the world at that time, he was not going to ignore an elemental force like religion. Any subject that Jefferson looked into, he looked into deeply.

Secondly, Jefferson had a powerful aversion to falsehood and hypocrisy which abounded in the religious world then just as it does now. He was not about to profess religion to enhance his political appeal. Neither was he content to let assertions go unchallenged. He saw the rituals of the Christian church as being far removed from the simplicity of Jesus' teachings. Like Albert Schweitzer a century later, Jefferson began a quest to find the real historical Jesus. According to Jaroslov Pelikan's commentary in this book, Jefferson

wanted to find the essence of true religion in the Gospels, an essence whose basic content he had already formulated for himself with considerable simplicity and clarity. Like other Enlightenment rationalists, Jefferson was convinced that the real villain in the Christian story was the apostle Paul, who had corrupted the religion of Jesus into a religion about Jesus, which ... produced the monstrosities of dogma, superstition, and priestcraft, which were the essence of Christian orthodoxy. The essence of authentic religion, and therefore of the only kind of Christianity in which Jefferson was interested, needed to be rescued from these distortions, so that the true person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth might rise from the dead page – the only kind of resurrection Jefferson was prepared to accept.

Bob Weekley