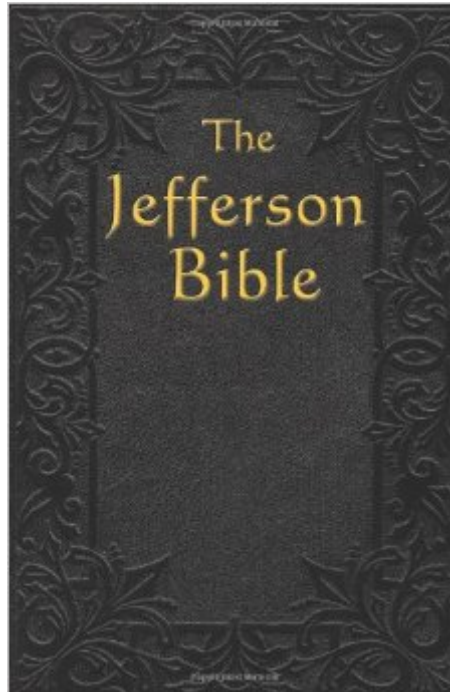


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The Jefferson Bible: The Life And Morals Of Jesus Of Nazareth



Synopsis

In 1804 Thomas Jefferson decided to study the gospels to see if he could distill the essence of Jesus' teachings into a concise book that could be quickly read and easily understood. This volume is the result, offering valuable insights into the teachings of Jesus Christ and into the mind and beliefs of Thomas Jefferson.

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Customer Reviews

"The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth; The Jefferson Bible" is Thomas Jefferson's Unitarian idea of what Jesus said and believed. Jefferson's idea was simple, but deeply meaningful. Unitarians believe there is one God and that the notion of a 'Trinity' is mistaken. As a Unitarian, Jefferson had the idea of taking the four Gospels, as they were, and cutting out all mention of miracles or of Jesus being God. Jefferson bought two copies of the four Gospels and cut out and pasted together only those passages that quoted Jesus and showed his life and he discarded any direct mention of Jesus as God or anything about miracles. There was no mention of virgin birth or of resurrection. Jefferson rearranged the passages, keeping similar themes together, in a logical fashion. What emerged was a book of sayings from a man, who was a philosopher and a teacher and who spoke to everyone about belief in God and moral behavior. If one reads this short book, one finds, as Jefferson did, the teachings of Jesus, stripped of most of the ideas of others. Jefferson's idea had been very simple. However, the book is a wonderful teaching tool, that focuses on Jesus, separate from all that was not important to Jesus, the philosopher and teacher. I strongly

recommend this book to anyone interested in what Jesus taught, rather than what the various Christian churches teach, today. If you are a Trinitarian Christian (Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christian, or Protestant), I believe that this book will not discourage your own faith, but will help you to understand Jesus and his own teachings.

Thomas Jefferson was no Christian. Like many of the most famous of the founding fathers, he was a Deist, and counted himself a Unitarian, but he often said he was the sole member of a sect including no one but himself. He had confidence in his own reason and conscience. He did admire Jesus, saying, "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." It was Jefferson's view that he himself could sort the truth from the imposture, for he felt that the real words applicable to Jesus were "as distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill." He thought about the process of doing so for many years, did a quick job around 1800 and did a thorough one in 1820. His purpose was to make his own version of the gospels, an extraction that would summarize Jesus's life and morals, for "I hold the precepts of Jesus, as delivered by himself, to be the most pure, benevolent, and sublime which have ever been preached to man. I adhere to the principles of the first age; and consider all subsequent innovations as corruptions of his religion, having no foundation in what came from him." It was not enough for the polyglot Jefferson to make such a distillation from the King James Version; he also bought a couple of Greek, French, and Latin versions to use, two volumes of each, for his plan was to cut and paste the parts that he found useful into one volume, but using all four languages. The resultant volume is called The Jefferson Bible, although his own handwritten title page gives "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, Extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English." He apparently studied the volume of his own manufacture nightly before going to bed, but he was horrified at the idea that it be published, feeling that his political enemies would use his ideas against him (his lofty Deism had produced against him charges of atheism) and that this product of his own conscience was his own comfort. His descendants did not know that the volume existed until after his death. The English extracts of the book were printed by the Government Printing Office in 1904 in a small booklet, and a tradition began of having the book be presented to newly sworn in congressmen. Currently in print is an edition from the Beacon Press in Boston, which is entirely fitting, as this is the printing house for the Unitarian Universalist Church. Naturally it is fascinating to go through the little volume and to

see what was important to the genius of Jefferson and what was not. He left out all the Old Testament, of course, and all of Paul's additions (he felt that Paul was the "first corruptor of the doctrines of Jesus"); the Apocalypse, upon which so much of current prophetic beliefs are founded, he said was "merely the ravings of a maniac." He must have felt that only the life of Jesus was worthy of study. But even the life does not start out in the way in which we are familiar. The first sentences of Jefferson's Bible have to do with Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem to be taxed. There is no Annunciation, indeed, no implication that Jesus had any sort of miraculous birth; Jefferson distrusted miracles. Having seen the beginning, I turned to the final pages; I knew how the story turned out, you see, so I did not really risk ruining it for myself. The end is just as worldly; "They rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed." (Matthew 27:60) There is no magical resurrection in this version. The life and teachings were apparently enough. There is a similar lack of miracles throughout. The story in the ninth chapter of John is cut short, when being presented with a blind man and asked who had sinned, he or his parents, to bring on the blindness, Jesus only gives the comment, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." This sounds a bit enigmatic to me, and although the blind man may have taken comfort that his condition was not the product of sin..., I cannot think he would be happy at being a display for the works of God. A sighted man would be a better display. Anyway, the episode does not climax with Jesus making mud with his spittle and putting it on the blind man's eyes to bring him vision. One looks in vain in this volume for healed lepers, risen corpses, strolls on the waters, or renewed wine cellars. Such stories were not important to Jefferson; only the life and teachings were. And those teachings, though familiar, are magnificent. Jesus causing the mob self-examination when it was about to stone an adulteress is one of my favorites, and of course it is here. There are higher values than obedience to old laws, he makes plain. The widow still gives everything she has, thus giving more than the large sums from the rich. Jesus encouraged love of others, as much as we love ourselves; the love extended to those who have no love for us. The beseechings to do good make me painfully aware that I fall short of the sort of ideal Jesus would want: "When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors; lest they also bid thee again and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." Surely he was being hyperbolic, but even so, I don't come close. I think the exaggeration does not serve him in many cases. "Take no thought for tomorrow" I think of as exceedingly bad advice. I hold that there is much to be said for thinking about the here and now, but only a fool never plans for the future. Similarly, the enjoinders to abandon one's family or to give away everything one has to the poor are so far

removed from the way my world works (and surely from the way the Nazarene's did, as well) that such exhortation is not only futile but argues against itself. Jefferson has eliminated some of the verses that gave me ammunition against Biblical literalists. He includes the story about Peter denying Christ three times before the cock crows, but omits the pesky Mark 14:66-68 which shows Peter got only one denial in before the crowing. He leaves out the Holy Spirit or any verse that would show Jesus to be divine. He does not include any verses that show Jesus speaking with a short temper to his mother, as at Cana. Jesus certainly does not invite anyone to eat his flesh. I was disappointed at some of the inclusions. It is surprising that the naturalist Jefferson allowed Jesus to go on saying that the mustard seed is the biggest of all seeds and that it grows into a plant bigger than all other herbs. Jefferson had no misgivings over having Jesus speak of a literal Noah: "Noah entered the ark and the flood came and destroyed them all." Not only does this seem to countenance a holocaust worse than any subsequent one (and against a world of poor animals, too), it makes clear that Jesus took the Old Testament myths literally. The biggest disappointment is that although Jefferson saw fit to cut the story before any ascendancy of Jesus into heaven, he retains many of Jesus's parables of what the afterlife is like. This is not so bad in the descriptions of heaven, but also included are Jesus's warnings about hell... It is indeed a shame that Jefferson's admiration for the ethical system proposed by Jesus includes all of his verses that warn about being burned or tortured forever. Jesus's words make clear he countenances such a system. That's not morals, it's monstrosity. I did like the Jefferson Bible, though, for its brief summation of the stories that have changed the world. I like most of all the idea of Thomas Jefferson with scissors and paste finding what was meaningful for himself in the gospels and cutting out his own version. This was the Jefferson who encouraged, "Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because if there be one he must approve of the homage of reason more than that of blindfolded fear." His Bible was an act of audacious redaction: he refused to accept the book as divinely inspired holy writ, and determined that he would examine it carefully to see in it what his own conscience and reason showed was good, and follow that good, and ignore the rest. Would that others would do the same.

Did you ever wonder what the Gospels would be like without all that supernatural stuff? Thomas Jefferson did, and he found out [in around 1820] by using multiple copies of the Bible and a razor blade. The result was *The Life and Morals Of Jesus of Nazareth* in four languages. The Jefferson Bible reprints the english version of *The Life And Morals* along with an excellent introductory essay by Forrest Church, Unitarian minister and son of Senator Frank Church, and a decent closing essay by Jaroslav Pelikan. I have known about the Jefferson Bible for years, but finally read it this year on

Easter [it seemed like a good thing for an atheist and rationalist to do]. Jesus said some pretty cool things [and some pretty spacey things], and the force of the teachings come out more when divorced from everything else that appears with them in the New Testament. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the teachings of Jesus, or the mind and the religion of the writer of the Declaration of Independence. And if your neighbor starts telling you that the public schools should start teaching the religion of the Founding Fathers, you can give them a copy of the Jefferson Bible.

How many of us have read the Bible in its entirety? I dare say, not many of us. Imagine how serious a thinker Jefferson must have been for him to make the effort to do that. On the other hand, imagine how objective a thinker he must have been to fashion, straight from the Bible, the world's first ever bible of morals, ethics, and character. That is one of his little known, most important contributions to humanity. No less than that, my dear fellow Americans, is the true enormity of his Biblical analysis and editing. The only other book I have ever found that recognizes Jefferson as the first to "write" a book on morals, ethics, and character, and in that sense a pioneer itself, is "West Point" by Norman Thomas Remick. To gain more insight into the religious/philosophical side of Jefferson, I recommend you go on to reading that book after reading the "Jefferson Bible".

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