

**The Jefferson Bible**  
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**Part 1 (Herb)**

**“A little patience and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people, recovering their true sight, restore their government to its true principles. It is true that in the meantime we are suffering deeply in spirit, and incurring the horrors of a war and long oppressions of enormous public debt....If the game runs sometimes against us at home we must have patience till luck turns, and then we shall have an opportunity of winning back the principles we have lost, for this is a game where principles are at stake.”**

**So writes the great American Thomas Jefferson. As we begin 2005, we can take some comfort from these words Jefferson wrote in 1798, after the passage of the Sedition Act.**

**A number of years earlier, in 1787, Jefferson wrote the following to his nephew:**

**“Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear. ... Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you.”**

**Although we UUs love to claim Jefferson as one of our forebears, and although he was clearly Unitarian in his theology, he never joined a Unitarian congregation. He was, however, heavily influenced by Dr. Joseph Priestly, a Unitarian minister who is more famous for discovering oxygen. In 1796 in Philadelphia, Priestly founded the first permanently established church in the United States to take the Unitarian name, a church which Jefferson attended whenever he was in Philadelphia.**

**Stephen Prothero, in his book American Jesus, writes, “Surely Jefferson was closer to Deism than he was to atheism, but he was closer still to Unitarianism. If Jefferson were to wander today into a Unitarian Universalist church ... he would no doubt be greeted with open arms, though he would likely be one of the most theologically conservative people in the pews.” In letters in 1822 and 1825 to Benjamin Waterhouse, a Unitarian physics professor, Jefferson said, “I trust that there is not a young man now living who will not die a Unitarian,” and, “The population of my neighborhood is too slender and too much divided into other sects to maintain any one preacher well. I must therefore be contented to be a Unitarian by myself.” It’s too bad the Church of the Larger Fellowship wasn’t around 180 years ago for Jefferson, as it was for me in 1976!**

**Jefferson himself wanted to be remembered, not as the third President of the United States, but, as his self-penned epitaph says, as the author of the Declaration of Independence, the author of the Virginia statute of religious freedom, and as the father of the University of Virginia.**

**Thomas Jefferson was a genius. He was famous for his garden, for his study of plants, for his inventions, and, as an architect, for his home in Monticello and several of the early buildings at the University of Virginia. He was an avid reader and a student of many subjects and, in particular, he loved to discuss and study religion. One of Jefferson’s more interesting projects was the work we now refer to as “the Jefferson Bible.”**

**How and why did Thomas Jefferson compile this work?**

Let's go back to 1798. Jefferson was President John Adams' vice-president, at a time when the presidential candidate who came in second became the vice-president! (That certainly would be interesting today!!) At that time, Jefferson conversed frequently with Dr. Benjamin Rush, a doctor from Philadelphia who was a Universalist and also a well-respected scientist. Jefferson and Rush sometimes discussed Christianity, and Jefferson promised Rush on several occasions that one day he would write down his views on the matter.

During the same period, Jefferson met Joseph Priestly who had immigrated to the United States from England where he had been attacked for his Unitarian beliefs. In his preface to the Beacon Press edition of *The Jefferson Bible*, contemporary UU minister, the Rev. Forrest Church, writes, "Men like Benjamin Rush and Joseph Priestly helped to reestablish Christianity as a viable option for 'reasonable' and 'enlightened' republicans [small "r"] such as Thomas Jefferson." Church goes on to say, "If Rush, a political ally and trusted friend, prompted Jefferson to consider incorporating a constructive Christian philosophy into his thought, Priestly suggested the means by which he might do it."

It took Jefferson four years to begin to fulfill his promise to Benjamin Rush. In 1803, he drew up an outline of his task which he called a Syllabus of an estimate of the merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, compared with those of others. He then asked his friend, Joseph Priestly, to undertake the more exhaustive study of Jesus' doctrines as outlined in Jefferson's Syllabus. After all, Jefferson was at the time in his first term as President, and he felt that Priestly could do this easier and better than anyone else. Priestly agreed to the task, but, unfortunately, died a few months later.

After the death of his friend, Jefferson decided he would finish the task he had hoped Priestly would. So, in 1804, over the course of a few late nights after he had concluded his presidential duties and correspondence for the day, Jefferson took two English copies of the Bible (i.e., King James Version), literally cut out from the gospels what he felt were the actual words of Jesus, and compiled what he titled *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. Jefferson wrote, "I have performed this operation for my own use."

It seems clear to historians and students of Thomas Jefferson that he actually intended at the time to undertake a more exhaustive study, since along with the two English versions of the Bible, he had purchased Greek, Latin, and French texts. Remember that Jefferson was fluent in a number of languages. But, with Priestly dead and not around to prompt him any more, Jefferson soon lost interest.

Interestingly, it was the Unitarian John Adams, a former political opponent who later became a good friend, who provided the impetus for finishing this project. Correspondence between Adams and Jefferson began in 1813. While reading in the memoirs of a British Unitarian minister, Adams came across a letter from Jefferson to Priestly in which Jefferson outlined his promise to Rush and asking Priestly to undertake Jefferson's outlined study of Jesus' doctrines. Adams assumed Jefferson had not fulfilled his promise to Rush, who had died a couple of years earlier, and so he sought to convince Jefferson to complete the project.

After a few more years of correspondence with Adams, in which he was probably the most open about his beliefs, Jefferson decided to expand on his *Philosophy of Jesus* which he, in a letter to another friend in 1816 had written "was too hastily done, ... being the work of one or two evenings only, while I lived at Washington, overwhelmed with other business, and it is my intention to go over it again at more leisure." It took a few more years before, as the Rev. Forrest Church writes, "Jefferson had occasion to review the Syllabus, and consequently to assess its inadequacy as a guide for his present thoughts. He then determined to revise the *Philosophy* [his 1804 work], partly to clarify in his own mind which of the sayings extracted before from the Gospels would survive a more deliberate scrutiny."

The result, in 1819 or 1820, was the compilation of what Jefferson titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English, what we today call

**“The Jefferson Bible.” Forrest Church writes, “In 1820, at seventy-seven years of age, Thomas Jefferson removed the six testaments from his shelf, where they had been sitting for a decade and a half, and carved out a Gospel for himself, one whose witness he could respect and whose message he could understand.”**

## **Part 2 (Myrna)**

**And so at last Jefferson finished the work he had outlined earlier, a work far ahead of its time by a man far ahead of his time. Some two centuries later in what we know as the Jesus Seminar, hundreds of researchers would work for nearly a decade to reach some of the same conclusions Jefferson reached alone and in a much shorter period of time.**

**In The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, Jefferson presented one continuous narrative of the events of Jesus’ life. He included only those words and actions of Jesus that he believed to be authentic. Taking scissors in hand, he literally cut away anything that was, in his words, “of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticisms, and fabrications.” What was left he pasted into a blank book, aligning side by side the King James English version with the Greek, Latin, and French translations. In correspondence with Charles Thomson, Jefferson declared the work to be “a paradigm of [Jesus’] doctrines....” And concluded: “A more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen.” To John Adams he asserted that in “the very words only of Jesus, there will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”**

**In The Jefferson Bible, there is no announcement by the angel to Mary that she will have a son, no virgin birth, no angels singing to “shepherds abiding in the fields.” There is merely the decree by Caesar Augustus that “all the world should be taxed,” and Joseph’s journey with his pregnant wife Mary to Bethlehem. There the child is born and laid in a manger. At twelve years of age, Jesus does astonish both his parents and the teachers in the temple with his “understanding and answers,” but Jesus does not say that he must “be about his father’s business.”**

**In Jefferson’s narrative, after Jesus “increased in wisdom and stature,” he began his public ministry by seeking out and being baptized by John the Baptist; however, no mention is made of any familial relationship between the two and no dove descends from heaven to declare “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” Following his baptism Jesus cleanses the temple in Jerusalem of the merchants and moneychangers and then leads his disciples into Judea and Galilee and Capernaum, baptizing and teaching and astonishing the populace, “for he taught as one that had authority.” In the process, of course, he angers the Pharisees because he does not obey the letter of their laws. Jefferson left intact most of the Sermon on the Mount, incorporating Luke’s version into Matthew’s version, but omitting the miracle of the loaves and fishes.**

**In fact, as you might expect, Jefferson omitted all of the miracles and claims of divine Sonship. As David Padfield of the nondenominational Church of Christ in Zion, Illinois, points out, “According to Jefferson, when Jesus left the man who had been blind since birth (John 9) the man was still blind, Malchus [whose ear Peter cut off with a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus,] was left with his ear cut off and Lazarus was left rotting in the tomb.” Furthermore, Padfield notes, “In The Jefferson Bible you will find no reference to Christ fulfilling prophecy, or the Spirit of the Lord being upon Him. Nor will you find the victory of Christ over the temptations which Satan placed in His way.”**

**What you will find in The Jefferson Bible is what Stephen Prothero describes in his book American Jesus,---that is, “a great moral teacher who spread the gospel of liberty, fraternity, and equality across ancient Palestine.” Prothero goes on to say that**

**To Jefferson, Jesus was a man rather than a god, and he was a man after Jefferson’s own heart. “Fear God and love thy neighbor,” Jefferson wrote in an 1816 letter, is the “sum of all religion.” And so**

**[Prothero notes, Jefferson's] Jesus was first and foremost an ethical guide. He was not sent by God to die on a cross and atone for humanity's sins. He came not to save, but to teach. Or, he came to save by teaching. Jefferson's Jesus, in short was an enlightened sage. His moral philosophy was "more pure, correct and sublime than those of the ancient philosophers. And nothing in that philosophy contradicted either religion or science."**

**Jefferson found Jesus' moral philosophy alive and well in the parables. Most of those he included in his volume, but only after he had cut away the corruptions that he believed had come from "the most unlettered, and ignorant of men"—the men who had, years after Jesus' death, compiled the various gospels and other books, particularly those of Paul, into what later was canonized as the New Testament. Jefferson noted that Jesus himself had written nothing and that what had come down to us was "mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible." Therefore, Forrest Church, in his Preface to the 1989 Beacon Press edition of The Jefferson Bible, asserts that "Jefferson's was a search not so much for the historical as for the intelligible Jesus." Likewise, Stephen Prothero notes that Jefferson "refuses to equate Jesus with the Christian tradition." Prothero reports Jefferson's assertion that "the religion of Jesus is not the same as the religion about Jesus; and what really matters is what Jesus did and taught."**

**The Jefferson Bible ends as simply as it began:**

**Now, in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed.**

**Marilyn Mellowes, in an online article entitled "Jesus' Many Faces," describes Jefferson's Jesus as A great Teacher of Common Sense. His message was the morality of absolute love and service. Its authenticity was not dependent upon the dogma of the Trinity or even the claim that Jesus was uniquely inspired by God. . . . In short, [Ms. Mellowes continues,] Mr. Jefferson's Jesus, modeled on the ideals of the Enlightenment thinkers of his day, bore a striking resemblance to Jefferson himself.**