

Providential Perspective

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Thomas Jefferson and the Words of Jesus of Nazareth

By Mark Beliles

This essay is from the *Introduction* to a new printing of Thomas Jefferson's *Abridgement of the Words of Jesus of Nazareth compiled while President of the United States*. This compilation of scriptures has been published in the past under the inappropriate title of the *Jefferson Bible*. You will understand Jefferson's religious views more clearly after reading this article. You can order this book for \$5 plus \$1.50 shipping. (see form)

On April 13, two hundred and fifty years ago, one of the greatest men in history was born. Columnist George Will called Thomas Jefferson the "Person of the Millennium" because of the worldwide impact of his draft of the *Declaration of Independence*. Another significant and yet greatly misunderstood aspect of his life was his religion.

On Jefferson's birthday in 1809, he wrote a letter to a Baptist Church in his home area of Albemarle County, Virginia. He had just relocated back to the area after serving two terms as President of the United States. In Jefferson's letter he stated how the Baptists were his "friends" who he respected and esteemed greatly because they had "acted together" in the Revolution and the fight for religious freedom. He also stated that their praise of him

was valued more than all others because it was they who had "best known me."¹

This is a remarkable statement. Jefferson and the evangelicals of central Virginia were indeed the most intimate of friends and political partners. The Evangelicals looked at Jefferson as their hero, and yet, somehow, today's common representations of Jefferson and religion portray him as the enemy of Evangelicals and orthodox Christianity, and even the advocate of skeptics, deists and total secularists.

Jefferson's efforts at passage



"My views are very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed, opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian..." Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 1803

of the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* came primarily from the urging of his Evangelical friends.² He worshipped in their churches, studied their ecclesiastical government, and borrowed their terminology. Dickinson Adams writes that Jefferson "was ardently supported by the underprivileged and by the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Quakers and Mennonites."³ While the influence of Christian culture in central Virginia upon Thomas Jefferson has been greatly underestimated in modern scholarship and discussion of him, the non-Christian, deistic, and Unitarian perspectives and influences have been exaggerated in their relative impact. Joseph Martin Dawson in *Baptists and the American Republic* asserts convincingly: "It is...an error to assume, as some do, that the unique American principles [were] derived from deistic or skeptical leaders. On the contrary, we shall see that they stemmed more nearly from evangelical sources."⁴

It seems that this fact is never seriously discussed today. In a symposium of scholars convened at the University of Virginia in 1985 to discuss *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, J.G.A. Pocock seriously urged that any future symposiums or books be inclusive of evangelicals who

would be able to give a perspective on Jefferson that is usually missing. He said that "the historical study of the statute is incomplete if we do not take account of [the] variety of religious experience [of]...Baptist revivalists in Revolutionary Virginia, or born-again Christians in the twentieth-century United States."⁵

I have tried to restore in my introductory essay an understanding of how the Albemarle Baptists or other Evangelicals contemporary to Jefferson would have perceived him. I wish neither to defend all of Jefferson's religious beliefs nor to remake him into something he was not. I simply desire to explain him in the proper historical light that I feel has been lacking. Any correspondence in regard to errors of fact or analysis would be welcome.

I hope that Jefferson's support of much of Christianity and the church, as well as his great respect for Jesus and the Bible, may be remembered through this reprint of *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*.

Jefferson's Religious Life

William Gould, in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, said: "Thomas Jefferson...was probably the object of more unjust personal attacks than any other American statesman before or since his time. Pamphleteers misrepresented his religious opinions, and many of his enemies spread false accusations concerning his personal life. As a result, the belief became widespread that he was an infidel." However, Gould says that "despite his liberal leanings, Jefferson was a lifelong member of the Episcopal Church...[and] he was especially well pleased with the

religious situation which existed in Charlottesville, where Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists met together every Sunday in the courthouse."⁶

Jefferson's religious life can be divided into three periods with his time living in France as the first turning point in his thinking. Before going to France, his religious beliefs seemed to follow the orthodox Anglican faith. After his experience in France, he adopted more interdenominational or non-creedal Christian beliefs. Around 1813, approximately twenty-five years later, he became more of a Unitarian Christian.

He went to France in 1784 when he was 41 years old. For the first 44 years of his life, there is no clear evidence that Jefferson held to anything other than orthodox Anglican Christian tenets. He grew up in the Anglican Church and attended schools run by Anglican clergymen. As an adult he worshipped regularly and served on the vestry of his church.⁷ Beginning around 1773, Jefferson also regularly attended the services held in the courthouse that were led by other denominations. Jefferson's regular exposure to the diversity of Christian worship and religious awakening occurring at this time in the central Virginia piedmont helps us to understand his keen interest in leading the fight for religious freedom.

Jefferson put both his own children and a nephew in private Christian schools and commended other Christian schools as well.⁸ He consistently referred to God and His higher law in public settings, from the time of an early court case in 1767 to the end of his life. His personal motto on his seal ("Rebellion To

Tyrants Is Obedience To God"), was taken from the book, *Lex Rex*, written by the Scottish Presbyterian clergyman Samuel Rutherford.⁹ Two thirds of the paintings and sculptures in his home at Monticello were from Biblical or Christian history. Throughout his life Jefferson studied the Bible for his own personal benefit and also gave money to Bible societies to distribute them to others.¹⁰ William Curtis says that Jefferson wrote on Christianity in an early essay while a young lawyer (*The Evidences of Christianity From the Standpoint of a Lawyer*).¹¹

Although sections of Bolingbroke's writings that contain ideas contrary to orthodox Christianity were copied by Jefferson while a teenager, one cannot conclusively claim that Jefferson adopted these views. (In fact, he may have copied them in his Commonplace Book simply "for the sake of the stile". This is how he recommended the reading of Bolingbroke to another young lawyer.) A classical liberal education would have included such authors to be studied, even in orthodox schools run by the clergy. There are entirely orthodox statements that he copied in his *Notes On Religion* in 1776.¹² In fact, his active involvement in the Anglican church as a vestryman and his involvement with other evangelical churches during the first half of his life would seem to require unquestionable proof to the contrary in order to assert that he held to anything other than orthodox Biblical beliefs.

Jefferson's religious life underwent a critical change following the deaths of his wife, in 1782, and of his two year old daughter, in 1784. He had also lost his best friend in 1773 and his mother in 1776, but his wife and daughter's death left him com-

pletely devastated and emotionally despondent. This personal tragedy, coupled with the lack of congregational support and close pastoral advice that he was used to back home in America, begins a watershed period that perhaps determines the remainder of his religious life. There are very few references to attendance at church while in France. (However, instances of dialogue and friendship with Catholic clergy are evident in his letters.)

Jefferson's religious views were also likely affected by events occurring in France at this time. There was a strong anti-clerical feeling among the French people due to the strong support of the Catholic church for the politically corrupt and unpopular monarchs. This caused some thinkers in France to even become anti-Christian. Although Jefferson rejected this latter stance, the next 25 years of his life was marked by a period of sincere questioning and analysis of orthodox Christianity (1788-1812), followed by the avowal of unorthodox Unitarianism for his final 14 years (1813-1826).

In the spring of 1786, Jefferson had visited England and worshipped there at the church of Unitarian clergyman Richard Price. He also began to read Price's books. In a letter to his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, Jefferson urged him to read the Bible in order to decide for himself what his religious beliefs will be. This letter is sometimes misunderstood.¹³ Jefferson did not deny that Jesus is part of the Godhead, but simply presented to Carr both the orthodox and skeptical views of Jesus and the Bible, and then urged him to question everything before accepting it as true. Although Jefferson's personal beliefs are not expressed in the letter, it is clear that a period of questioning

and evaluating Christianity had begun.

In 1788, a letter of Jefferson to Mr. Derieux offered the first clear expression of his beginning to question a theological doctrine such as the Trinity (There is no repudiation of it in the letter, simply an acknowledgement that he did not understand it).¹⁴ A letter in 1790 to orthodox clergyman Matthew Maury back in Albemarle county shows Jefferson asking for a space in this Episcopalian Christian school for another relative, Dabney Carr (and also for information about a Bible).¹⁵ This seems to show that Jefferson's mode of thinking at this time is analytical rather than skeptical.

For most of the period of his life that he served as Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice-President, and President, Jefferson questioned and evaluated Christianity, but he never explicitly agreed with Unitarianism until 1813 (and even then only privately to a few friends).¹⁶ In 1803 he had even deliberately distributed to his family and closest friends a paper he called "my religious creed" in order to clearly affirm his Christian faith. It was entitled *A Syllabus of the Merits of the Doctrines of Jesus*.¹⁷

As a Unitarian Christian, he still worshipped in Trinitarian churches and faithfully supported orthodox ministers and Bible societies.¹⁸ (Even when Jefferson adopted Unitarian views, he believed that he was becoming a more purely Biblical believer, like the first-century Christians. Unitarianism at this point, as taught at Harvard's Divinity School, was still rooted in Scripture and the person of Jesus. It was not detached from these until after Jefferson's death when it merged with Universalist

thought. Unitarianism today, therefore, differs greatly from Jefferson's beliefs.)

It is his writings in these last 14 years that are most frequently cited and quoted by modern scholars as somehow indicative of his whole life. Letters to five Unitarian clergymen are quoted frequently, while the other 110 orthodox clergymen in his life and his more orthodox writings are ignored or down-played. At least 95% of Jefferson's clergy friends were orthodox Trinitarian leaders.¹⁹ The modern historians' bias toward the views Jefferson held when he was in his 70s and 80s tends to color their perception of his whole life. They view much that Jefferson said and did, including his efforts to pass his bill for religious freedom (40 to 50 years earlier), as being suspiciously insincere or politically utilitarian. Many of his religious actions are not taken seriously today, and too often are left out of the modern analyses of Jefferson (for example, ignoring Governor Jefferson's *Proclamation for a Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer*).²⁰ The result is a religious image of Jefferson that is often unbalanced, and therefore, in need of a scholarly reconsideration.

Common Misconceptions of Jefferson's Religious Life:

Let us look briefly now at the most common misconceptions of Jefferson's religious life.

1. Some people believe Jefferson was opposed to organized religion and certainly not a regular part of any church. In reality he worshipped regularly all his life and even served on the vestry of his church twice. He financially supported his Anglican/Episcopalian pastors as well as other clergy, churches,

Bible societies, and Christian schools and colleges.²¹ He was married in the church and had his family baptized, married and buried with its services.²² He arranged for organized chapel services and nondenominational religious instruction in schools and at his university in Virginia.²³ He made many statements in support of Christianity and expressed delight when he heard of churches growing in size.²⁴

When his Anglican church lost its financial and popular support during the Revolutionary War, he personally led in an effort to start a new church called the Calvinist Reformed Church.²⁵ He put forth his own money to secure as its pastor a man named Charles Clay who, significantly, was a notable evangelical.²⁶ Jefferson donated his architectural services to design a plan for the first Charlottesville Episcopal Church building (Christ Church).²⁷ His personal copy of the *Book of Common Prayer* used to be on display until stolen from the University of Virginia library in the 1940s.

He worshipped frequently with other denominations in the Albemarle County courthouse which he called the "common temple."²⁸ Jefferson also frequently attended Baptist church services at the Lewis Mountain Meeting house.²⁹ While President, Jefferson worshipped regularly with various denominations that began using the U.S. Capitol building for church services during his administration.³⁰ In 1774, he made a special effort to organize a worship service with Albemarle County citizens at the Old Forge Church on the Virginia Fast Day that he had drafted for the House of Burgesses.³¹ The *Day of Thanksgiving* he proclaimed while Governor in 1779, also shows that opposition

to organized religion is not an accurate description of Jefferson's beliefs.

2. Some people believe Jefferson and the clergy were antagonistic to each other. In reality, he admired, supported, commended and worked in partnership with well over 100 different Christian clergymen. They admired and supported him as well. This included the most prominent national leadership of the major denominations in America. He was personal friends and allies with two moderators of the Presbyterian General Assembly, three Presidents of Princeton University and other Presbyterian Divinity schools, John Leland and Luther Rice of the Baptists, Ezra Stiles—a leader of the Congregationalists and President of Yale, the Muhlenbergs of the Lutheran Church, the Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Virginia, and Catholic Archbishops in both America and France. He never personally met and corresponded with the national leaders of the Methodist Church and the Disciples of Christ (only some lesser-known of their clergy), but they publicly praised him as their champion. Many clergy gave Jefferson their political support, and he also gave them his support in various ways.

He helped to get clergy appointed as chaplains in the government and as professors at the College of William and Mary.³² He attempted to move the entire faculty of John Calvin's University of Geneva to Virginia to form the foundations of a state university (but was thwarted by the legislature).³³ He worked closely with clergy in government jobs throughout his life and even appointed some to posts while he was President. He secretly commissioned and donated funds to a Baptist minister to start anti-

slavery churches in Illinois.³⁴ He used his influence while President to get the Commissioners of the District of Columbia to allow land to be purchased by the Catholic Church.³⁵

There were a few clergymen who disliked Jefferson. Some were those who had lost their jobs when the Anglican church was disestablished after Jefferson's *Statute for Religious Freedom* was approved in 1786. Others were clergymen who favored the Federalist party when Jefferson was the Republican candidate for President. But there were many clergy who came to Jefferson's aid. Rev Samuel Knox wrote a well-known tract in 1800 entitled, *A Vindication of the Religion of Mr. Jefferson*.³⁶ The isolated cases of conflict between Jefferson and clergy were very minor compared to the vast majority of time when there was mutual support and respect. Indeed, Jefferson was considered the pre-eminent champion of the evangelicals in early America.³⁷

Eight clergymen ran for public office as overt Jeffersonians (all lived in central Virginia), and some did so as a result of his overt support and urging (Charles Clay, Charles Wingfield, William Woods, John Waller, Henry Fry, John Goss, Peter Muhlenberg, and John Leland).³⁸ His letter of 1779 publicly commending his pastor Rev. Charles Clay, or his multiple letters to churches while President, clearly show the way Jefferson felt about most clergymen and churches.³⁹

Only in a few letters, out of the 20,000 written during his long life, did Jefferson ever express animosity toward any clergy, and it was perfectly understandable when he did so. Some of the attacks made by clergy during the

campaign really were unfair and slanderous. When there was opposition to a Unitarian becoming professor at Jefferson's new University in Virginia, some of the attacks really were extreme. Besides, the University was Jefferson's primary project in his old age and he was hurt by the mess the controversy made. Sometimes people say or write things when in moments of hurt or anger that are not good indicators of how they normally think. Furthermore, if you read some of the writings of other Evangelicals in central Virginia at the time, you would see how strongly they attacked Calvinists, Presbyterians or other rival sects in language no less strong than Jefferson's.

3. Some people believe Jefferson was not only for separation of church and state, but also separation of all religion from public life, i.e. a completely secular state. He did support the separation of church and state, but this meant only that there be no single official state-favored denomination supported by tax dollars. In his famous 1802 letter to the Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut, Jefferson spoke of the "wall of separation" between the church and the state.⁴⁰ Jefferson was paraphrasing the words of the famous Baptist Roger Williams who spoke of a wall being needed to protect the church from government interference. Jefferson believed that the Constitution's First Amendment was a legal wall that prevented the national government from setting up a favored national church.

Another letter in 1802 said that he did not want a "government without religion".⁴¹ In his *Notes on Virginia*, he said that civil liberties could never be "secure" if divorced from a belief in God. His 1808 letter to Rev

Samuel Miller and his Second Inaugural Address in 1805 emphasized that under the Constitution, religious legislation was placed under the exclusive authority of the state governments.⁴² He believed that religious expression, even on the national level, was not prohibited in the public sector. He simply opposed compulsion and inequality among denominations, but supported government involvement in many aspects of public life.

Jefferson supported government being involved in:

- Legislative and Military Chaplains⁴³
- Establishing a national seal using religious symbols⁴⁴
- Establishing official religious mottoes on coins, etc.⁴⁵
- Official Days of Fasting and Prayer (but only on the state level)⁴⁶
- Punishing Sabbath breakers⁴⁷
- Punishing marriages contrary to Biblical law⁴⁸
- Punishing Irreverent soldiers⁴⁹
- Protecting the Property of the Church⁵⁰
- Requiring oaths saying, "So Help Me God," taken on the Bible⁵¹
- Granting land to Christian schools⁵²
- Allowing Government property and facilities be used for worship⁵³
- Using the Bible and non-denominational religious instruction in the public schools⁵⁴
- Allowing clergymen to hold public office or be school teachers⁵⁵
- Purchasing and stocking religious books for public libraries⁵⁶
- Funding of salaries of clergymen in Indian mission schools⁵⁷
- Funding for construction of church buildings for Indians⁵⁸
- Exempting churches from taxation⁵⁹
- Establishing professional schools

of theology⁶⁰

- Treaties requiring other nations to guarantee religious freedom
- Including religious speeches & prayers in official ceremonies⁶¹

All of these connections between religion and government would not necessarily be good for today, but invoking Jefferson's name to prohibit the government from any accommodation of religion ignores the historical record. People who advocate a secular state using Jefferson as an authority are promoting a revisionist history of him. These people sometimes cite an early U.S. treaty with Tripoli which said America "is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion". What they fail to remember is that this very phrase was deleted in a new treaty with Tripoli in 1805 negotiated notably during President Jefferson's administration.⁶²

Jefferson's Abridgement of the Gospels

The abridgement of the Gospels which Jefferson compiled in 1803-04 while President of the United States was one of the most misunderstood of Jefferson's religious activities. He did not call it the *Jefferson Bible*, but rather *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted From the New Testament For the Use of the Indians [at] The Level of Their Comprehension*. Later, in 1819 and 1820, he modified this version slightly and renamed it *The Life and Morals of Jesus*. This latter version was printed for the public for the first time in 1904. The people who published this and subsequent printings have, through their introductions to the book, promoted the idea that Jefferson was skeptical of the parts of the New Testament he

left out of his abridgment. While this may have been true for his later version, there is no clear evidence that this was the motivation for his 1804 version. *The Philosophy of Jesus* was never made available until 1983 when Dickinson Adams included it in his book along with the 1820 version. It has never been published by itself until this edition.

Jefferson did not state that he disbelieved anything in Scripture anytime before or during the period when he compiled his first abridgment. The man with whom Jefferson discussed his religious beliefs more intimately and extensively than anyone else in the seven years before his abridgment was Benjamin Rush. Rush, who later became one of the leaders of the American Bible Society, wrote that Jefferson assured him of his belief in Jesus as "the Saviour of the World," and "in the resurrection and a future state of rewards and punishments." Jefferson sent to Rush in 1803 his *Syllabus* on Jesus' doctrines stating that "the question of his being a member of the godhead" was omitted because the *Syllabus* was "merely an estimate of the intrinsic merit of his doctrines".⁶⁴ Due to the scope or focus of the paper, Jesus' divinity was not discussed, but **nothing** in this document denied it. In the cover letter to Rush, Jefferson made the **only** reference prior to 1813 that comes close to denying Jesus' divinity. He says that Jesus "never claimed [anything but] human excellence". Rush, who was one of the most respected trinitarian Bible advocates of his time, did not think this was too "heterodox". Jesus indeed made but a few overt statements claiming his place in the Godhead. He rather showed it more by his actions, especially his resurrection. For this reason Rush would not recommend Jefferson's abridg-

ment of the Gospels if it failed to include the resurrection. That Jefferson failed to include it is certainly disappointing, but any trinitarian believer today can enjoy the words of Christ that were included along with a few miracles and references to divine powers. Jefferson can be faulted for a lack of thoroughness in his first abridgment, but certainly not infidelity.

The historic context of Jefferson's compilation in 1804 is crucial to understanding his motives. His motive was not primarily skepticism of Scripture but rather the evangelization and education of native Americans. One of the most significant events in Jefferson's presidency took place in that year, the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. In April of 1803, a man named Edward Dowse sent President Jefferson a copy of a sermon by Rev. William Bennet called *The Excellence Of Christian Morality* which spoke about the importance of promoting "extension of civilization and christian knowledge among the Aborigines of North America." Dowse wrote Jefferson: "It seemed to me to have a claim to your attention: at any rate, the idea, hath struck me that you will find it of use; and, perhaps, may see fit, to cause some copies of it to be reprinted, at your own charge, to distribute among our Indian Missionaries."⁶⁵

Mr. Dowse apparently understood Jefferson's interest in Christian missions to the native Americans in a way that many modern scholars have dismissed as irrelevant. This dismissal has led to the misunderstanding of Jefferson's motives for his compilation of Christ's teachings. Jefferson had a deep, genuine commitment to missionary efforts among the Indians. His account books show that he con-

sistently donated his own money to missionaries and to societies that distributed Bibles to both Americans and Indians. But Dowse's letter was not the first to Jefferson on this matter. Rev. William Linn of New York wrote him at least three letters between 1797 and 1798 urging Jefferson as Vice-President to get behind missions to Indians. Rev. Samuel Miller did likewise in a letter to Jefferson in 1800, and in 1804 other government officials urged him in a letter "to adopt...a plan by which the blessings of Christianity might be propagated among the heathen."⁶⁶

On April 26, 1802, Jefferson signed into law the Act of Congress which assisted the Society of the United Brethren "for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen" in the Northwest territory. This Act, which helped churches, clergy, missionary teachers and Christian schools, was signed and approved by Jefferson when it came up again in March of 1803 and 1804. With his Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson doubled the size of western territory and multiplied the number of unreached Indian tribes in America's jurisdiction. His treaties and other subsequent actions show a continued support of missions. He proposed two treaties with Indian tribes (ratified in 1803 and 1806) which included federal money for constructing churches and paying salaries of missionaries and clergymen. After Jefferson met with Rev. Gideon Blackburn in July of 1803, he directed his Secretary of War to give \$300 to the Presbyterian school which Blackburn had established for Cherokees in Tennessee.⁶⁷ Then in an 1804 letter to the Ursuline nuns in New Orleans, he personally promised his government would help their Catholic school.⁶⁸ An 1807 letter to Mr. Thomas and

other Quakers spoke warmly of their cooperation with his administration in providing education "preparatory to religious instruction."⁶⁹

In the light of these events, Jefferson's motivations for making an abridgement of the Gospels come more clearly into focus. In late 1803 and early 1804, He took the time while in the White House to cut from two New Testaments the teachings and sayings of Jesus Christ with very little of the accompanying narration. Henry Randall's biography of Jefferson states that he "conferred with friends on the expediency of having it published in the different Indian dialects as the most appropriate book for the Indians to be instructed to read in."⁷⁰ Jefferson felt that a smaller book would more easily translate into the multitude of Indian dialects and be printed in larger quantities at less cost than whole Bibles. Jefferson's motivation for making his abridgment was primarily to provide a teaching resource for the Christian schools on the frontier.

In the title of Jefferson's compilation he said that it was for "the use of the Indians, unembarrassed with matters of fact or faith beyond the level of their comprehensions." Some have taken this sentence out of its context and have asserted that Jefferson's motivation was that he didn't believe that the rest of the Bible was Divinely inspired or trustworthy.

There are a couple of faults in this assertion. First, it ignores other evidence. In his 1776 *Notes On Religion* he said that the writers of the New Testament epistles were "inspired" and their teachings were valuable "for edification indeed and explaining to us matters in worship and morality." (There is no proof

that he changed this view by 1804.) Second, Jefferson made personal donations to Bible societies in 1804, as well as in other times of his life, so that they could distribute whole Bibles to those who wanted them. In 1814 he sent money to a Bible Society saying: "I had not supposed there was a family in this State not possessing a Bible ...The Society, I presume, have evidence of the fact. I, therefore, enclose you cheerfully, an order...for fifty dollars, for the purposes of the Society."⁷¹ It also ignores the fact that he promoted the teaching of the whole Bible in his plans for the public schools of Washington, D.C. which he drafted at that same time period. (He served as the chairman of the D.C. school board from 1805-1807 while U.S. President.) His educational proposals for Virginia were based on a similar plan.

Another inaccurate belief about Jefferson's motivation for making an abridgment of the *New Testament* was that he wanted to cut out all of the miracles and evidences of Christ's divinity. This seems convincing at first, however, a close examination reveals that there were some references to these things in Jefferson's first compilation.

Unfortunately, there is no surviving copy of Jefferson's first compilation of 1804. What has survived is a copy of the front page, an initial table of Scripture texts that he planned to use, and most importantly, the two *New Testaments* from which Jefferson clipped out the verses for his work. Dickinson Adams made a valuable reconstruction of Jefferson's work in 1983 using two *New Testaments* identical to those that Jefferson used. This reconstruction showed there were sixteen passages that Jeffer-

son clipped from the two *New Testaments* but did not include in the beginning table of texts. In his edition, Adams included eleven and one half of these passages. Some were not included based on his own assumptions about Jefferson's beliefs, including two significant texts referring to the miracles of Christ.⁷² Others were left out because they were difficult to fit into the flow of the text. My edition partially rectifies this by including one text - Matthew 11:2-9, under my own heading: "Miracles Authenticate Christ's Claims." (Charles Sanford in his *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson*, goes further and claims that all of Matthew 9:18-34 was in Jefferson's first compilation. This would have included the resurrection of Jairus' daughter, the healing of the bleeding woman, and the healing of two blind men, in addition to the casting out of a demon.)⁷³

The *Table of Texts* that survives shows a few accounts of healings performed by Christ, as well as other supernatural evidences of Divine knowledge and powers that Jesus possessed. Jefferson included the healing on the Sabbath, in Luke 14:1-6, and the commission of Jesus to his disciples to heal the sick and raise the dead, in Matthew 10. Jefferson's selections also show Jesus teaching about the resurrection of the dead, about his own second coming, about his future role as judge of all men at the end of time, and about his place as the Son of God and Lord of a heavenly kingdom. A passage showing Jesus forgiving the sins of men in a manner reserved for God alone is also included.

Because of Jefferson's intention to compile primarily what Jesus taught, rather than what he did, many of the miracles and other events included in the Gospels concerning Jesus were

naturally deleted. This fact, in itself, does not lead one to the conclusion normally made, that Jefferson's motivations were rationalist, anti-miraculous, and anti-Trinitarian. Since Jefferson included Jesus' teaching on the resurrection of the dead, it would not be accurate to conclude that Jefferson denied Jesus' resurrection simply because his abridgment left it out. It may have been simply excluded on the basis that it was not something that Jesus said, only something he did. And remember that Jefferson wanted to keep this abridgment simple enough for the Indians to comprehend. It is also possible, of course, that Jefferson was undecided in his own mind about the resurrection in 1804 and, therefore, avoided any inclusion of it. By his 1820 version, he was certainly not a believer in Christ's divinity and he did edit out more than in this first version, but still his primary motive was not to exclude things, but rather to compile the extremely valuable words of Jesus by themselves.⁷⁴ Some of his comments to this effect about his abridgement are included in this book.

Conclusion

Jefferson compiled in his first abridgment a substantial, though incomplete, record of Christ's words. Jefferson's desire to focus upon Jesus' words predated the modern, popular practice of

printing Bibles with them in red. Jefferson, perhaps more than any other American President, studied these words regularly and devotedly every night before retiring to bed.

While Jefferson read from the *King James Version of the Bible*, I have used the modern *New Revised Standard Version* for the sake of readability. All subtitles, and scripture choices are Jefferson's original from the 1804 edition (except for Dickinson Adams' and my own insertions which are indicated in this edition by brackets).

It is a marvel how Jefferson's religious image today has become one of a total secularist with religious beliefs in antagonism to Biblical Christianity. This was exactly the image that his political enemies promoted about him 200 years ago. Ironically, it is the image now promoted most by Jefferson's modern advocates and scholarly supporters. His statements late in life are used by many who feel that orthodox Christianity is contrary to freedom and intellectual advancement. But Jefferson himself stated: "My views are very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions... I am a Christian." He asserted that, "The Christian religion...is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science and the freest expressions of the human mind."⁷⁵ Evangelicals

used to be Jefferson's greatest supporters. Unfortunately, evangelicals today, tend to also believe the old political charges, and so withhold from him the gratitude and support that early evangelicals once gave him.

It is time for a re-appraisal of Jefferson and his religious views. If he said that the Baptists were the ones who understood him best, then perhaps more concentration should be given to seriously examining him from the contemporary evangelical's perspective once again.

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