

## PART I. REWRITTEN BIBLES, ALTERNATIVE CHRISTS

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### *Revolution by Other Means: Jefferson, the Jefferson Bible, and Jesus*

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It would be difficult to dispute that Thomas Jefferson was, at times, a ruthless, amoral, and unscrupulous politician. While secretary of state, he secretly helped create a newspaper to attack his boss, President Washington, he supported the paper (and its editor) with funds drawn from State Department accounts; and he leaked secret information taken from State Department files so that the paper (the *National Gazette*) could publicize Jefferson's views without Jefferson actually having to confront Washington (Burns; see, however, Malone, 423–427). Once he had assumed the presidency, himself, Jefferson pushed his followers to find ways to impeach politically inconvenient judges (Bernstein). Later, despite having won the presidency, in part, by charging President Adams and his followers with violating the press's liberties, he urged his followers to use local and state laws to harass newspapers that opposed him with a few “wholesome punishments” (Levy; Jefferson, “Second Inaugural,” [avalon.law.yale.edu](http://avalon.law.yale.edu)).

While acknowledging Jefferson's duplicity and ruthlessness in politics, most historians have been willing to accept at face value his protestations regarding religion. He, after all, had placed on his tombstone “HERE WAS BURIED THOMAS JEFFERSON [—] AUTHOR OF THE DECLARATION OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE[;] OF THE STATUTE OF VIRGINIA FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM[;] AND FATHER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA....”

His tolerance, his deism, his belief in a rational approach to religion are writ large in accepted history — and this essay will not challenge the broad outline of this dogma. There are, however, devils in the details of Jefferson's

religious beliefs and the accepted texts of his beliefs must, in some instances, be tinted and footnoted.

We need to turn first to the religious shades cast by many American leaders during the time of the American Revolution and the Early Republic. As Gordon Wood has noted, “most of the founding fathers had not put much emotional stock in religion.... As enlightened gentlemen, they abhorred ‘great gloomy superstition disseminated by ignorant illiberal preachers’ and looked forward to the day when ‘the phantom of darkness will be dispelled by the rays of science, and the bright charms of rising civilization’” (Wood, 330).

The leading founders embodied their views in their actions. On June 7, 1797, for instance, the Senate of the United States unanimously passed a “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” with the pasha of Tripoli, a so-called “Barbary pirate” who had been raiding American ships and holding American sailors hostage. The eleventh article of this treaty has, deservedly, attracted attention over the years. It reads:

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion, — as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen, — and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries [avalon.law.yale.edu].

Article 11 did not, at the time, excite consternation. The treaty was widely available in newspapers and it had been read on the floor of the Senate. The vote, outside of its unanimity, was not exceptional in any way and the Senate moved onto other business. Retrospectively, its implications regarding the founding generation’s “original intent” are, here in the early twenty-first century, significant. Within less than a decade of the writing of the United States Constitution, the Senate, in very humdrum fashion, put the government on record as not being “in any sense” a Christian nation (Gould, stephenjay-gould.org).

Seven years earlier, George Washington had undertaken a tour of New England as a “goodwill tour” promoting the new government he now headed. The Touro congregation at the Sephardic synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, anticipating Washington’s arrival in their area, had expressed their pleasure at being included in “a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance — but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: — deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine” (avalon.law.yale.edu).

Washington responded that year with what has become one of the most famous of his letters— now called the “Touro Synagogue Letter”:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation.... It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support ... every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid [George Washington Papers, Library of Congress, Series 2 Letterbooks, Letterbook 39].

In fact, the George Washington who has been pictured in innumerable (and romanticized) etchings, sketchings, posters, and tourist trinkets as kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge quite likely did not exist. On February 1, 1800 (or forty-nine days after Washington’s death), Jefferson recorded in his private notes:

[Benjamin] Rush tells me that he had it from Asa Green that when the clergy addressed Genl. Washington on his departure from the govmt, it was observed in their consultation that he had never, on any occasion said a word to the public which showed a belief in the Xn religion and they thot they should so pen their address as to force him at length to declare publicly whether he was a Christian or not. They did so. However he observed the old fox was too cunning for them. He answered every article of their address particularly except that, which he passed over without notice. Rush observes he never did say a word on the subject in any of his public papers except in his valedictory letter to the Governors of the states when he resigned his commission in the army, wherein he speaks of the benign influence of the Christian religion. “I know that Gouverneur Morris, who pretended to be in his secrets & believed himself to be so, has often told me that Genl. Washington believed no more of that system [Christianity] than he himself did” [Jefferson in Bergh, ed., 433–434].

The import of Jefferson’s notes is supported by a pastor of the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia which the Washingtons attended during Washington’s presidency:

I can only state the following facts: that, as Pastor of the Episcopal Church, observing that, on Sacrament Sundays, George Washington, immediately after the desk and pulpit services, went out with the greater part of the congregation ... I considered it my duty, in a Sermon on Public Worship, to state the unhappy tendency of example, particularly of those in elevated stations, who uniformly turned their backs upon the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.... A few days after, in conversation ... with a Senator of the United States, he [the Senator] told me

he had dined the day before with the President, who, in the course of conversation at the table, said that ... he had received a very just rebuke from the pulpit for always leaving the church before the administration of the Sacrament; ... that he had never sufficiently considered the influence of his example, and that he would not again give cause for the repetition of the reproof; and that, as he had never been a communicant, were he to become one then, it would be imputed to an ostentatious display of religious zeal, arising altogether from his elevated station. Accordingly, he never afterwards came on the morning of sacrament Sunday, .... [James Abercrombie, qtd. in Sprague, 394].

Even the most religious and, by far, the most enthusiastically devout of the early presidents, Andrew Jackson, not only refused to support a movement to form a Christian (read Protestant) Party, he, perhaps more importantly, also refused to halt mail deliveries on Sunday. In response to a call by a supporter, the Evangelical minister Ezra Stiles Ely, to form a Christian (read Protestant) party, Jackson wrote to Ely: "Amongst the greatest blessings secured to us under our Constitution is the liberty of worshipping God as our conscience dictates" (Andrew Jackson to Ezra Stiles, qtd. in Haskell, 406; for Ely sermon see *The Reformer*, 7:135–137).

Jackson's point of view indicates that even the more religious of American political leaders were not so quick to call for religious obedience *supra* the Constitution or America's libertarian past. Congress simply refused to listen to those Protestants who wanted a stricter observance of the Sabbath. After more than a decade of petitions from evangelicals on the subject and with almost two full decades in which the voters could have made their preferences known, the Senate's "1829 Report on the Subject of Mails on the Sabbath" declared that the Senate was "a civil institution, wholly destitute of religious authority" and concluded that "the line cannot be too strongly drawn between church and state" (U.S. Senate Report, qtd. in Lambert, 2010; "Review of a report of the Committee, to whom was referred the several petitions on the subject of mails on the Sabbath; presented to the Senate of the United States, January 16, 1829, by the Hon. Mr. Johnson, of Kentucky, chairman of said committee").

There was, however, another side to American political life in the founding decades. While Minister Ely had little luck with his crusade against Sunday mail deliveries, the cultural magnet of religion grew ever more powerful.

During the Constitutional era, several states decided to rewrite their constitutions. Generally, this has been seen as a conservative reaction against state constitutions which were either perceived as too radical, too threatening to coastal elites, or simply too unworkable (or some combination thereof). The most important of the rewrites was almost certainly the one undertaken by Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania's 1776 Constitution had been the most radical

of the state Revolutionary era constitutions; in fact, it was known as the “Radical” Constitution. It had been put into place without ratification, without consultation with the populace, and without even much deliberation. When Pennsylvania wrote a new constitution in 1789–1790, its constitutional convention wrote the new constitution in a very deliberate fashion, debated it at considerable length, and enacted it only after a pause of a number of months in which delegates returned to their districts to sample their constituents’ opinions. Despite a period of furious debate over the provisions for the State Senate during December and early January, by late January the people of Pennsylvania seem to have found the process so unexceptional that they lost interest in it. Even the more radical newspapers in Pennsylvania stopped reporting on it by early February. The populace accepted its installation without murmur in September of 1790.

Yet, in the convention’s debates over religious qualifications for office-holding, something odd had occurred — something which suggests that the skepticism and deistic coloration of America’s leaders did not quite match what was occurring at lower political levels. A committee of distinguished state leaders had created the first draft of the new state constitution in December of 1789 and reported a bill of rights that had as its fourth section: “That no person who acknowledges the being of a God, and a future state of rewards and punishments shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office of trust or profit under this commonwealth” (Pennsylvania State Constitutional Convention, 1789–1790).

By European standards, this was remarkably liberal; it opened the door to political office not only to Christians, but to Jews and Moslems. Some delegates, nevertheless, felt that it was not sufficiently liberal. On February 3, one Philadelphia County delegate, William Robinson, Jr., moved to strike “and a future state of rewards” from the draft. Apparently before a vote on that motion could be held (parliamentary procedure being somewhat looser in the eighteenth century), he made a second motion to also strike “who acknowledges the being of a God, and a future state of rewards and punishments.” Robinson’s motion was defeated 13–47. Most of the votes in favor of Robinson’s motion came from (supposedly conservative) Federalists, while those who were later to be identified with “liberal” Jeffersonian agrarianism, and certainly with Jefferson, himself generally voted to keep the restrictions (Minutes of the Grand Committee, 84).

There was something of the future in this vote. Gordon Wood, in his *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, notes that by the 1820s even such a profoundly anti-Christian jurist as the New York chancellor, James Kent, found it necessary to recognize Christianity as being at the core of the body politic (Wood, 331). In the case of *New York v. Ruggles* (8 Johns. R. 290 N.Y.

1811), Kent found that Ruggles, in saying that “Jesus Christ was a bastard, and his mother must be a whore,” had threatened the basic tenets of ordered civilization:

We stand equally in need, now as formerly, of all the moral discipline, and of those principles of virtue, which help to bind society together. The people of this state, in common with the people of this country, profess the general doctrines of christianity, as the rule of their faith and practice; and to scandalize the author of these doctrines is not only, in a religious point of view, extremely impious, but, even in respect to the obligations due to society, is a gross violation of decency and good order.

Christianity had, by the mid-1800s, not become the religion of society; it had become society itself. Admittedly it was, by and large, a very accepting Christianity, one capable of tolerating wide variation. The general society neither disdained nor hindered skeptics such as the young Abraham Lincoln. Religious orthodoxy, admittedly a wide orthodoxy, had found a respect, if not a foothold, among the most religiously liberal. Even those who were not religious, could not ignore the ordering and stabilizing effects of Christianity.

The country may have treasured orthodoxy but it still tolerated attacks on that orthodoxy (assuming a certain level of civility). Jews might not be Christians, but they were tolerated so long as they did not stand in active opposition to the Christian orthodoxy. Skeptics could and did profess their disbelief, but they were left unchecked so as long as they did not attempt to savage the broad religious consensus. If one can have a profound but vaporous orthodoxy, then such can be said of the United States. In such a society, it is all but unremarkable, so far as a national history goes, that Jefferson created his own Bible (or, to be more correct, “Bibles”)—with scissors and with paste. The Bible appears, at the least, to be the third president’s own existential testimony to freedom of conscience. Historians have tended to treat the Jefferson Bible as no more than an intellectual exercise, a quaint tinkering, as it were, with Christianity by slicing out all the mysticism found in it. In a land, however, that held what may seem religiously oxymoronic—a land that possessed a profoundly vaporous orthodoxy—we should be alert that not all may be quite as it seems.

First, Jefferson composed not one but two “Jefferson Bibles.” In both instances, Jefferson simply took several bibles, cut from them various verses, and then pasted these verses onto pages that he later bound into what were essentially devotionals. Jefferson, probably a little disingenuously, stated that he compiled the first Bible during a few nights in the late winter of 1804. Using two bibles (which are still preserved) from which he cut the wanted

verses, Jefferson pasted them onto 46 octavo sheets. It is at this point that we step into the long strange journey that we name the “Jefferson Bible.” What happened to this first “Jefferson Bible” is unknown (D. Adams, ed., 45–53). Jefferson mentioned this first effort in several letters that are still extant. The key one, at least for our understanding, is a letter of April 25, 1816, to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp — a Dutch political radical and minister who had fled from Europe to escape imprisonment by the Prussians and an intellectual considered to be one of the most learned men in the United States (D. Adams, ed., 368–370; Schama). It is in this letter that Jefferson states that the first Jefferson Bible was “hastily done, however, being the work of one or two evenings only....”

While we know that Jefferson created his first Bible quickly, the reality is that it could not have been the work of only one or two evenings. The reader is invited to do the following: first, become very learned in Christian scripture, then create some type of index to guide your selection of verses (making certain that you literally have several hundred verses in your index — enough, in fact, to make a Gospel), now make selections so that you can form reasonable sentences and shape those sentences into reasonable paragraphs, all the while keeping in mind that your paragraphs must finally be formed into reasonable Biblical chapters. You must do all this before you begin your cutting. (In some instances, by the way, you will probably need to split verses in two to create better sentences.) You must, also, locate the verses you want using two different Bibles—you must use two different Bibles since cuts on one side of a page may accidentally delete verses on the other side of the page. Having performed this rather lengthy undertaking, cut your chosen verses out of the Bible, and paste them onto octavo sheets. You must use a glue pot or other gluing items available in 1804 (hence no glue sticks or whatever the present most modern gluing instrument is) and you must use the scissors or shears available in 1804. You will quickly find that even the indexing is not the work of one or two nights. While we do not have anything which tells us how long Jefferson spent on this first effort, it was clearly something on which he expended a great deal of energy. We know that he did it quickly, receiving the Bibles he used on or immediately after February 4, 1804 (although the mere ordering of the Bibles, and the fact that he had thought through the necessity to use two [!] Bibles suggests that Jefferson may have already had a draft index in hand), and having the resultant tome bound no later than March 10, 1804 (D. Adams, ed., 27, please note, in particular, footnote 83). This suggests a considerable amount of energy and concentration expended in a short period. This energy and concentration, in turn, suggests quite significant amounts of intentionality.

Jefferson’s second effort, in 1820, has been preserved and, as of this writ-

ing (January 2012), is in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The 1820 effort, if we are to judge by the excisions found in the two earlier Bibles and compare them to the 1820 “Jefferson Bible,” must have been very similar to the 1804 effort. This 1820 “Jefferson Bible” demonstrates that Jefferson exercised considerable meticulousness in delineating exactly what he believed to be believable. Moreover, Jefferson clearly tried to create a pleasing harmony among sentences. There are a number of places where Jefferson clipped out part of a verse and then joined it to another verse when no verse, in its entirety, quite fit what he wanted to say. For instance, on page 15 of the 1820 manuscript, Jefferson began with Matthew 7:26–29 and 8:1, followed by Mark 6:6, of which he used only the second half of the verse. The Mark snippet formed the bridge to verses pulled from Matthew (11:28–30) and then Luke (7:36–38). The analysis performed by Dickinson Adams of that manuscript indicates that Jefferson snipped individual verses into parts 46 times (D. Adams, ed., 51; see also Charles T. Cullen’s “Foreword” to D. Adams). The ability to use so many different verses to construct one column on one page makes it clear that Jefferson was in total control of his material—the King James Bible—and that he took considerable effort in the selection and joining of his verses. Jefferson, however, did not simply cut apart two or more King James Bibles. He also sliced into pieces Greek Bibles, French Bibles, and Latin Bibles; the 1820 Jefferson Bible is a columnar Bible with Greek, French, and Latin columns corresponding to the English versions (photographic reproduction, D. Adams, ed., 127–297). Anyone who has ever tried to align Greek translations precisely with English translations will realize what a strenuous intellectual undertaking such an effort would be. To do it not just for Greek verses but also for Latin and French verses and to have all them align would be an undertaking of staggering dimensions. It is, therefore, clear that the 1820 Jefferson Bible holds only what Jefferson, after much intellectual endeavor, intended it to hold.

The reality that Jefferson was in total control of his material allows us to examine, in detail, Jefferson’s intentions and, if we may dare to use the word “faith,” faith. Since Jefferson would have excised anything that he did not believe to have a strong potentiality of being true, we can determine, precisely, specific elements of Jefferson’s beliefs. An author will not include demons after such an earnest and demanding exercise unless he or she believes that the universe is likely arranged in such a way as to include demons. In short, while many have plumbed Jefferson’s letters to determine his belief system, the actual physical cuts—into a number of Bibles—more surely delineate what Jefferson believed than those letters written to audiences besides himself.

First and foremost, the Jefferson Bibles certainly indicate that he believed



that there was a God. There is nothing odd about this observation — Deists, by definition, believe in a God. But Jefferson quite apparently meant to refer to a “Christian God” — in distinct contradiction to a “Jewish God.” From Jefferson’s point of view, the Jews had somehow come to believe, correctly, Jefferson believed, that the arrangement of the universe included one and only one God. His letters, however, indicate that Jefferson believed that Jewish theology was simply incorrect — their one God was not the one that existed. In an 1819 letter to the evangelist Ezra Stiles, Jefferson wrote:

I am not a Jew; and therefore do not adopt their theology, which supposes that the god of infinite justice to punish the sins of the fathers upon their children, unto the 3d. and 4th. Generation; and the benevolent and sublime reformer of that religion [Jesus] has told us only that God is good and perfect, but has not defined Him. I am, therefore, of His theology ... [Thomas Jefferson to Ezra Stiles, June 25, 1819 in Henry Augustine Washington, ed., 125].

Although not quite adopting a Marcionite<sup>1</sup> position, Jefferson drew a sharp contrast between the Jewish conception of God and the Christian conception of God and believed that Jesus had come to teach the Jews that they had erred in their understanding of God. In a letter written in 1820, Jefferson was even blunter regarding the theology of the Jews: “The whole religion of the Jews, inculcated on him [sic] from his infancy, was founded on the belief of divine inspiration. The fumes of the most disordered imaginations were recorded in their religious code, as communications of the deity.... (Thomas Jefferson to William Short, August 4, 1820, in Washington, ed., 167).<sup>2</sup>

References to Jefferson’s God lead to Jefferson’s views on heaven. The 1820 manuscript is replete with both references to heaven and, what is more important, given the term’s connection with Jesus, the “kingdom of heaven.”<sup>3</sup> The exact phrase “kingdom of heaven” occurs 20 times in the manuscript. “Heaven” is referred to 49 times. There are numerous instances where the word “kingdom” is used alone — but clearly referring to the “kingdom of heaven.” Jefferson, moreover, includes three instances of Jesus referring to “my kingdom” while angels are explicitly referenced nine times. Jefferson, incidentally, included references to the “devil” three times and to “Hell” nine times. Strikingly, Jefferson included (from Matthew 13):

He that soweth the good seed is Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall set them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.... So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall

come forth, and sever the wicked from the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth [37–42, 49–50].

The “wicked one,” “the devil,” the apocalypse, angels, the sinners tossed into the “furnace of fire” and the angels “sever[ing] the wicked from the just” — the reality is that Jefferson placed these mystical elements into his own personal devotional; the Jefferson Bible was, after all, not *the* “Jefferson Bible” to him, but his own personal guide to his own personal religion — and one he kept to himself until his death.

The “textbook Jefferson,” the one who is credited with being a prime example of a Deist, is, to most who believe themselves aware of Jefferson’s beliefs, a person whose religious views were based on extremely rational approaches to religion — a sort of religion with all the energy of the mystical and the unknown drained away and only philosophy and reason left. Yet the above examples illustrate that, by the time he had advanced in years, Jefferson had become anything but a person whose religious model was based on a rational examination of the world and whose relationship with Christianity enclosed only its moral precepts. If we accept the idea that actions speak louder than words, Jefferson’s Bible states that Jefferson believed in — or at least accepted the strong possibility of — a wide range of items that twenty-first century members of Western culture would term either spiritual or superstitious.

If the Jefferson Bible is not a demystified and desiccated collection of biblical verses, then what was it? More than anything else, it is a variation (albeit with a considerable twist) of a Gospel harmony; that is, an attempt to create a text that takes the four gospels, removes (in Jefferson’s case quite literally) contradictions and obscurities to create a harmonious single gospel. The idea dates back at least to Justin Martyr (103–165 C.E.) who created (or, maybe, had access to) a harmony or harmonies of the Mark, Matthew, and Luke traditions.<sup>4</sup> Justin’s harmony has been lost, if it ever existed in one single written form, but Justin’s follower, Tatian (died c. 190), created a written gospel harmony using all four Gospel traditions. Copies, although at least somewhat incomplete, of Tatian’s harmony, the Diatessaron, have been preserved in a number of manuscripts and, although we cannot know, at the most granular level, Tatian’s precise ordering of passages from the different gospel traditions, the different manuscripts indicate that Jefferson and Tatian followed very much the same method of composition.<sup>5</sup> Tatian and Jefferson both linked passages from different gospels by using short passages from other gospels. Several centuries after Tatian, the idea of creating a harmony among the different gospels probably reached its peak in an exhaustive, and even daunting, treatise by St. Augustine who wrote to repel attacks by non-Christians on the texts of the Christian scriptures. Augustine wrote his har-

mony in response to non-Christians who used the many differences between the Gospels as demonstrating that not even Christians knew the truth about their narrative.<sup>6</sup> In short, the idea of a harmony, which is what Jefferson's Bible is, lies well within the Christian tradition.

While some ancient writers continued the tradition of Justin Martyr and Tatian, there were few, if any, attempts to write harmonies during the Western Middle Ages. At the beginning of the modern era, the tradition revived. Charles Cullen came to the conclusion that Jefferson followed, in rough fashion, a harmony in Greek of the Gospels, prepared by William Newcome, who was probably bishop of Dromore (Ireland) when he compiled his particular harmony. Certainly Bishop Newcome's book was in Jefferson's library when Jefferson died and it seems reasonable to suppose that Newcome's version had at least some influence on Jefferson's arrangement of data (D. Adams, ed., 37).

Nevertheless, Jefferson's harmony was not the harmony of Tatian or St. Augustine or Bishop Newcome or anyone else. They wrote their harmonies from the point of view that "received" Christianity, the "old-time religion," as it were, was correct and that harmonies were needed mostly for reasons of simplification or, in Augustine's case, defense of what had become "mainstream Christianity"—their attempt was to include, not exclude. Jefferson, on the other hand, built his harmony on his belief that the Gospels had to be harmonized through paring the text(s)—through exclusion rather than inclusion. Having determined for himself that the Gospels were corrupt, he sought to remove their impurities through an exclusive harmony. Jefferson, moreover, clearly believed that he was the one that had the intellectual ability to remove such corruptions, creating a new harmony. Certainly Jefferson was not shy about his abilities to discern the sayings of the "true Jesus": "[Jesus's words are] as distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill" and "It is as easy to separate [out the words of Jesus] as to pick out diamonds from dunghills" (Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813; Jefferson to Adams, January 24, 1814; D. Adams, ed., 352; Broden, ed.). Anything which implied that Jesus was, in some mystic way, united with God, had been, Jefferson reasoned, entered in error and therefore had to be excluded. Certainly such a mix of the rational and the mystical was revolutionary; no one had ever thought to "demythologize" Jesus while keeping the rest of the Christian framework of myth<sup>7</sup> and spirituality. Despite his acceptance of a Christian God and almost all the Christian framework of the spiritual world, the political revolutionary had become a religious revolutionary.

The Jefferson Bible and Jefferson's letters indicate that Jefferson believed that Jesus had set out to create a religious-cultural revolution. Jefferson saw Jesus as reacting (rebellng against, if you will) the base, corrupt, amoral, and

intolerant rigidities that Jefferson believed had become part of Jewish society — much as Jefferson had when he listed, in the Declaration of Independence, the base, corrupt, amoral and intolerant rigidities that the British government had fallen into. Moreover, he believed Jesus had a vision of society that was far superior to those of his fellow Jews and much more closely aligned with, the thoughts of the original creator of the world — again much as Jefferson saw the American Revolution as aligning America with the ideals of that original creator (“that all men are created equal ... that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights...”). Jefferson’s Bible and his letters express his belief that he, Thomas Jefferson, could rescue Jesus from still another set of base, corrupt, amoral, and intolerant authorities who had seized Jesus’s message (in essence his constitution) and used it to further their own ignorant or selfish ends.

In Jefferson’s mind, Jesus and Jefferson and his Bible expressed a resistance against three tyrannies. First, Jefferson believed that the Jewish culture of the Second Temple period and more recent Jewish cultures were corrupt and horribly misshapen.

The reformation of ... [Jewish] blasphemous attributes, and substitution of those more worthy, pure and sublime, seems to have been the chief object of Jesus in his discourses [sic] to the Jews ... [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823, in Washington, ed., 283].

The deism and ethics of the [Second Temple] Jews ... shew in what a degraded state they were and the necessity they presented of a reformation [which would be provided by Jesus] [Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803, in D. Adams, ed., 327–329].

But the greatest of all the Reformers of the depraved religion of his own country, was Jesus of Nazareth [Thomas Jefferson to William Short, October 31, 1819, in Washington, ed., 139].

Jews:

1. Their system was Deism; that is, the belief of one only god. But their ideas of him and of his attributes were degrading and injurious.

2. Their Ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound doctrines of reason and morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us; and repulsive and anti-social, as respecting other nations. They needed reformation, therefore, in an eminent degree [Thomas Jefferson, syllabus sent to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in D. Adams, ed., 331–334].

[Quoting William Enfield’s *History of Philosophy*] “Ethics were so little studied among the Jews, that, in their whole compilation called the Talmud, there is only one treatise concerning moral subjects. [A long list of objections to Jewish maxims then follows.] What a wretched depravity of sentiment and manners must have prevailed before such corrupt maxims could have obtained credit [i.e., in pre-Talmudic Judaism, including Second Temple Judaism]! It is impossible to

collect from these writings a consistent series of moral Doctrine.” It was the reformation of this “wretched depravity” of morals which Jesus undertook [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in Baden, ed.; Enfield, p. 409, 1792].

This list of quotes could be multiplied. Jefferson clearly saw Jews as being ethically flawed in the most desperate of manners and Jesus as being the person who attempted to rescue his people from their degradation. Jefferson, with his massive erudition, apparently took common points of view, loosely held by most of those who lived in Western civilization, and burnished them to sharp tines on which to impale Judaism and Jews.

Second, Jefferson saw Christianity, as it had come to exist in its organized persona, as being great, but evil, and oppressive.

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ levelled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw in the mysticisms of Plato, materials with which they might build up an artificial system which might ... admit everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power, and pre-eminence [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814, in Baden, ed.].

[Speaking of a bill before the English Parliament to allow anti-Trinitarians religious freedom and the opposition of the English church leaders to the bill] This constitutes the craft, the power and the profit of the priests. Sweep away their gossamer fabrics of fictitious religion, and they would catch no more flies [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 22, 1813, in Baden, ed.).

On theological subjects, as mangled by our Pseudo-Christians.... It is the mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus [Thomas Jefferson to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, July 30, 1816, in D. Adams, ed., 374–375].

[Toleration] does not satisfy the priesthood. They must have a ... declared assent all their ... absurdities.... The artificial structures they have built on the purest of all moral systems [i.e., that of Jesus], for the purpose of deriving from it pence and power...” [Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Bayard Smith or B. Harrison Smith, August 16, 1816, in Washington, ed., 28].

Third, Jefferson simply dismissed, more or less as knaves and fools, the writers of the Gospels and other early Christian writers.

To do [Jesus] justice it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines have to encounter, not having committed [his doctrines] to writing himself, but [having his writings committed to print] by the most unlettered of men, by memory, long after they heard them from him; when much was forgotten, must misunderstood, and presented in very paradoxical shapes [Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestley, April 9, 1803, in D. Adams, ed., 327–329].

[Referring to the Bible] I separate ... the gold from the dross; restore to [Jesus]

the former, and leave to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others of his disciples. Of this band of dupes and imposters, Paul was the great Coryphaeus [leader of the chorus], and first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus [Thomas Jefferson to William Short, April 13, 1820, in Washington, ed., 156].

We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the Amphibologisms [in this instance, probably meaning dogmatic, if unfounded and ill-conceived, statements] into which they have been led by forgetting often, or not understanding what had fallen from [Jesus], by giving their misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they did not understand themselves [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 12, 1813, in Baden, ed.].

No historical fact is better established than that of the doctrine of one god, pure and uncompounded, was that of the early ages of Christianity; and was among the most efficacious doctrines which gave it triumph over the polytheism of the antients.... Nor was the unity of the supreme being ousted from the Christian creed by the force of reason, but by the sword of civil government wielded at the will of the fanatic Athanasius<sup>8</sup> [Thomas Jefferson to James Smith, December 8, 1822, in Washington, ed., 269].

The Jefferson Bible, thus, was not the simple product of a deist eliminating whatever seemed mystical, but the outpouring of something far stronger — An almost fanatical dedication to the “pure doctrines” of Jesus of Nazareth; a repudiation and distaste for all things Judaic; a hatred of the clergy that carried back over 1700 years; and a belief that Jesus’s near followers had either not understood what Jesus said or that they had forgotten or that they corrupted Jesus’s sayings for their own vain and selfish ends.

We need here to take a step back. Jefferson had been the leader of the anti-authoritarian faction in the American Revolution. Whatever his relationship with his slaves, he believed in, if not constant revolution, at least punctuated revolution. He was, after all, the American leader who said that the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants” (Thomas Jefferson to Colonel [William S.] Smith, November 13, 1787 in Randolph, ed., 268); that “no society can make a perpetual constitution.... The earth belongs always to the living generation” (Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, September 6, 1789 in Smith, ed., 30); that “the spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it to be *always* [emphasis mine] kept alive” (Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, February 22, 1787, in Golden and Golden, 60).

Revolutionary leaders, of course, have never been noted for their restraint and moderation. In 1921, Trotsky told the All-Russian Congress of Peasant Deputies, in defense of acts of terrorism and repression, that “we shall not enter the kingdom of socialism in white gloves on a polished floor” (Johnson, 77). As Maximilian Robespierre said to the French Convention in 1794: “Ter-

ror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue. It is not so much a special principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most urgent needs" (Halsall). Or, as Oliver Cromwell is believed to have noted upon the execution of Charles I: "cruel necessity" (Morrill and Baker, 36).

Faced with his countrymen "descending" into ecstatic and emotional and "simplistic" religion Jefferson did what was unthinkable in his day and age. To rescue Jesus, to defy the Jews (at least of the Talmudic era and before), to defy the clergy, and even to defy Jesus's early followers, he took a pair of scissors and physically cut several Bibles into pieces—and he did so not once, but twice. Compared to ordering massacres and terror and executions, this might seem child's play—but those reading this should think how comfortable even secular academics would feel if someone were to hand them scissors and paste and tell them to begin cutting into their own heritage's sacred texts. Even someone without religion, here at the beginning of the 21st century, might feel a hitch, a pause, a moment of hesitation before cutting into a Bible, into the Torah, into the Qur'an. Had the general populace—and all but a few of his revolutionary colleagues—known that he was doing so, it can be surmised that his activities would have taken them aback. With 1804 being an election year, one can imagine that common knowledge of his first attempt would have revived the Federalist Party.

And yet he did undertake the revolutionary effort of taking the Christ out of Jesus and out of Christianity while leaving the other unseen or spiritual entities in. At least at this distance, the early twenty-first century, it appears that Jefferson believed that he had struck a blow for his fellow revolutionary, Jesus.

Trotsky, of course, died with an ice pick in his head as delivered by one of Stalin's henchmen. Robespierre made his own trip through the valley of the Terror and then to the scaffolding of the guillotine. Cromwell died in 1658 in his own bed. Within less than three years, though, his remains were dug up by a restored royalty, his body beheaded with the head stuck on a pike outside Westminster Hall (where it rotted beneath the sky and the birds until 1685), and his headless body hung in chains in London. (His head, in fact, was not taken to its final resting place at Cambridge until 1960.)

Jefferson died in bed, surrounded by his family, and beloved by his country which, seventeen years before Cromwell's head finally found a home (in a manner of speaking), opened a beautiful monument to him, surrounded by blossoming trees and near a quietly flowing river, in its capital city. As indicated above, Jefferson was a man who, by United States standards, was a Nixonian politician—stealing, libeling, and harassing in his pursuit of political power. But Jefferson attacked Bibles in what most Americans would have

contended then and would contend now as supremely sacrilegious actions. While Watergate was sufficiently harmful to Nixon's image and reputation in and of itself, the reader is left to imagine what would have been made of the 37th president — the charges of megalomania — if Nixon had been discovered hacking apart Bibles and rearranging the verses to fit his fantasies late at night in the secrecy of the family quarters. Yet Jefferson, to the end, conducted revolution by other means and his reputation has lived to tell the tale.

On reflection, Jefferson did not live in a land where cold-blooded executions such as accompanied the French and Russian revolutions and the English civil war were likely to occur. While spies and, occasionally, collaborators, were executed during the American Revolution, and summary justice often meted out to pro-British guerillas, the massacres of groups according to status or association did not occur and, so far as we know, the thought of which did not occur. With the Jefferson Bible, Jefferson emerges as both the most radical of the American revolutionaries and the most violent; but that the violence was done with paste and scissors suggests how far America had departed from the continent which produced Trotskies, Robespierres, and Cromwells.

## Notes

1. Any number of authors may be consulted to explain the position of Marcion on the Jewish God. Marcion, was an influential Christian (held as a heretic by those who formed what would eventually become the mainstream of Christianity) who believed that the vengeful and apparently blood-thirsty God of the Hebrew Scriptures could not possibly be the God to whom Jesus had directed his followers. I suggest Helmut Koester; *Introduction to the New Testament: History and Literature of Early Christianity*, Vol. 2 (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1982), 324–334.

2. Was Jefferson an anti-Semite? There are 41 references to “Jews” in the correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams that began late in their lives. Although none of the references may be considered to be positive references to “Jews,” a goodly number are neutral, but the majority, are negative, even sneering. None are racial in the sense of seeing Jews as physically inheriting a deficiency. It might be more appropriate to say that Jefferson saw Jews as people who had been corrupted by Judaism. I performed this analysis through a word search for “Jew” and Judaism in the Kindle edition of “Ye will say I am no Christian”: The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values, ed. Bruce Broden (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006).

3. The debate over the phrase “kingdom of heaven” or “kingdom of God” has been a long and rich one. The phrase is certainly one of the key phrases Jesus used—some would contend that it is the key phrase in Jesus's teachings.

4. The question of the harmonies relating to Justin Martyr is another rich field for scholarly disagreement. I refer the reader to Kroeger, 342–343. However, see also Oskar Skarsaune, “Justin and His Bible,” *Justin Martyr and his Worlds*, ed. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

5. Our knowledge of the Diatessaron is imperfect since such evidence as we have on it is based on Syriac, Greek copies, and Arabic fragments which are manifestly flawed. Still, the reconstructions of Tatian's work allows us to see a compositional consistency which suggests that Tatian's manner of arranging his material must have been close to Jefferson's manner—although with quite different results and without the glue and scissors. A good discussion of the difficulties in disentangling the threads of the Diatessaron is found in a reprint of a 1904 University of Chicago dissertation, A.A. Hobson, *The Diatessaron of Tatian and the Synoptic Problem*[:] Being an investigation of the



Diatessaron for the Light which it throws upon the solution of the problems of the origin of the synoptic gospels ([www.forgottenbooks.org](http://www.forgottenbooks.org)).

6. "Its great object is to vindicate the Gospel against the critical assaults of the heathen. Paganism, having tried persecution as its first weapon, and seen it fail, attempted next to discredit the new faith by slandering its doctrine, impeaching its history, and attacking with special persistency the veracity of the Gospel writers. In this it was aided by some of Augustin's heretical antagonists, who endeavored at times to establish a conspicuous inconsistency between the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian, and at times to prove the several sections of the New Testament to be at variance with each other. Many alleged that the original Gospels had received considerable additions of a spurious character. And it was a favorite method of argumentation, adopted both by heathen and by Manichæan adversaries, to urge that the evangelical historians contradicted each other. Thus, in the present treatise (i. 7), Augustin speaks of this matter of the discrepancies between the Evangelists as the palmary argument wielded by his opponents. Hence, as elsewhere he sought to demonstrate the congruity of the Old Testament with the New, he set himself here to exonerate Christianity from the charge of any defect of harmony, whether in the facts recorded or in the order of their narration, between its four fundamental historical documents" (Augustine of Hippo, in Schaff ed.).

7. By using "myth" I do not mean to imply "falsehood" or "fantasy." I here am using "myth" in all its mystical, cosmological, sociological and pedagogical senses. See Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

8. Athanasius (c. 296–378 C.E.), Bishop of Alexandria, was the great proponent of Trinitarianism during the time when Christianity was becoming the recognized religion of the Roman Empire. Although it is very unlikely that Athanasius was the writer of the Athanasian Creed used by most Christian churches, the Creed's content strongly reflects Athanasius's unrelenting Trinitarianism.

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