

The Jefferson Bible Hoax - Thomas Jefferson and the Miracles of Jesus

From the Founders Bible, by Historian David Barton

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus performed numerous miracles, and Matt 9 is an excellent example. In that chapter, Jesus heals a bedridden paralytic (vv. 1-7), raises Jarius's daughter from the dead (vv. 18-25), heals the woman with the issue of blood (vv. 20-22), gives sight to two blind men (vv. 27-31), casts out a demon (vv. 32-33), and travels the countryside "healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness" (v. 35).

According to modern writers, Founding Father Thomas Jefferson did not tolerate this aspect of Jesus' ministry and therefore personally prepared two New Testament works specifically excluding the supernatural aspects of Jesus' ministry-works which today they call "The Jefferson Bible." According to these critics:

"Hunched over his desk, penknife in hand, Thomas Jefferson sliced carefully at the pages of Holy Scripture, excising select passages and pasting them together to create a Bible more to his liking. The "Jefferson Bible." A book he could feel comfortable with. What didn't make it into the Jefferson Bible was anything that conflicted with his personal worldview. Hell? It can't be. The supernatural? Not even worth considering. God's wrath against sin? I don't think so. The very words of God regarded as leftover scraps." 1

"Jefferson... wrote his own Bible that excluded all references to miracles, wonders, signs, virgin birth, resurrection, the Godhead, and whatever else conflicted with his own religious thought." 2

"Jefferson... rejected the superstitions and mysticism of Christianity and even went so far as to edit the Gospels, removing the miracles and mysticism of Jesus." 3

"Thomas Jefferson... actually took scissors to the Gospels and cut out all references to anything supernatural." 4

Others make similar claims, 5 and regrettably many Christians today often repeat these claims without checking their accuracy, for significantly, each of the two works prepared by Jefferson, the so-called "Jefferson Bibles," included numerous passages on the miraculous aspects of Jesus' ministry.

Jefferson's first work on the Bible was finished in 1804, and he called it the Philosophy of Jesus... Being an Abridgement of the New Testament for the Use of the Indians. Jefferson prepared that work for missionaries to the Indians, to provide them an easy-to-read Bible text by which to introduce Indians to Jesus and Christianity. (For centuries, including today, abridgments of the Bible have been a significant and an accepted part of the Bible market, especially popular for use among the young and new learners. 6)

Jefferson's work was essentially the "red letters" of Jesus compiled into a short pithy work, and it included not only the passages from Matt 9 showing the miraculous resurrection of Jarius's daughter, the healing of the bleeding woman, and the healing of two blind men 7 but also...

"miracles such as the healing on the Sabbath in Luke 14:1-6, and the commission of Jesus to His disciples in Matt 10 to go and heal the sick and raise the dead. It includes Jesus' teaching about the resurrection of the dead, about His own second coming, about His role as judge of all men at the end of time, and about His place as Son of God and Lord of a heavenly kingdom. He is also shown forgiving the sins of men and women in a manner reserved for God alone." 8

Jefferson also included Mark 14:61-62 (Jesus saying that He is the Son of God); Matt 11:4-6 (Jesus healing the blind, lame, lepers, and the deaf, and the dead raised); Matt 10:28 (Jesus' teaching about Hell); Luke 15:7,10 (Jesus' teaching about Heaven and angels); and Matt 19:29 (Jesus' teaching on eternal life). Jefferson also incorporated numerous other passages referring to Heaven, Hell, the Resurrection, and other supernatural subjects (Matt 13:40-42; Luke 14:14; Matt 22:29-32; 25:31-34,41,46; 13:49-50, etc.). Clearly, this work definitely included the miraculous and supernatural; the modern charges about Jefferson and the Bible are patently false.

Jefferson's second work on the Bible was completed in 1820, and he called it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Significantly, Jefferson spent decades of his life studying the moral teachings of dozens of famous national teachers from across the centuries, including Ocellus, Timaeus, Pythagoras, Aristides, Cato, Socrates, Plato, Epicurus, Cicero, Xenophon, Seneca, Epictetus, Antoninus, and many others whose names are probably unknown to readers today. Jefferson read the moral teachings of each of these leaders and compared them against those of Jesus, finding Jesus' teachings to be far superior in every case.

During Jefferson's first term as president, as he was dealing with national issues affected by morality, he began expressing his desire to prepare a work highlighting the incomparable moral teachings of Jesus. He began that work after retiring from the presidency and by 1820 had finished it, compiling fifty of Jesus' moral teachings from the Latin, Greek, French, and English Bibles, placing them side-by-side for ease of study. (Jefferson could read the Bible in seven languages: Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and English. 9)

Today's critics claim that this work is also the "Jefferson Bible" from which he excluded the supernatural. But as was true of the 1804 work, the 1820 work also contained numerous passages on the miraculous and the supernatural; and even though this latter work focused solely on morality, it nevertheless included Jesus' teachings about:

- Healing on the Sabbath (Matt 12:10-12; John 7:23)
- Hell (Matt 5:29-30; 10:28; 13:37-42,50; 18:8-9; 23:33; 25:46; Luke 12:4-5; 16:23)
- Heaven (Matt 19:16-26; 25:31-34; Luke 12:33; 15:7; 16:22-30; John 18:36-37)
- Angels (Matt 13:39,41,49; 22:30; Luke 15:10)
- The Devil (Matt 13:39)
- Eternal Life (Matt 19:16; 25:46; Luke 10:25-28)
- The Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13)
- Resurrection of the Dead (Matt 22:28-30; Luke 14:14)
- The Second Coming of Christ (Matt 24:20-44; 25:31-34)

For generations, America benefited from Jefferson's compilation of Jesus' moral teachings. In fact, in 1902, Congress reprinted 9,000 copies of Jefferson's "Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" at government expense, 10 and for the next fifty years, a copy of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* was given to every senator and representative at his or her swearing in. 11

The modern claims about Jefferson and the Bible are erroneous. There actually is no "Jefferson Bible," and Jefferson would have strenuously objected to either of his works being characterized as a "Bible." They were solely what he had titled them: the first was an abridgment of the Gospels for the use of the Indians, and the second was a compilation of the moral teachings of Jesus; and in both cases, Jefferson included multiple references to the supernatural and the miraculous.

Regrettably, most of today's scholars and writers ignore not only the content in and the specific purpose of each of Jefferson's two works, but they also disregard the well-documented historical facts that

Jefferson: (1) financially contributed to societies to distribute the full Bible, 12 (2) owned a number of complete Bibles that he personally used and regularly studied, 13 (3) financially supported the printing of new editions of the whole Bible, 14 (4) was a member of the Virginia Bible Society, 15 (5) gave unedited Bibles to family members, 16 and (6) openly used the full Bible in educational institutions he helped start or direct, including Washington's public schools and the University of Virginia. 17

So what is the origin of the modern charge that Jefferson hated the Bible and therefore made his own? A contemporary researcher who investigated these claims concluded:

“ Unfortunately, all those who have published the "Jefferson Bible" since 1903 have been almost universally either Unitarian or rationalist and secular in their approach, and their introductions to the book have... misrepresented Jefferson's motivations and beliefs to conform to their own theological assumptions or agendas.” 18

As you read through the New Testament and note the frequent miracles performed by Jesus, you can safely reject the claims of today's ill-informed or mal-intentioned writers and scholars that Jefferson excluded such passages. Both of his works are still available today, and reading either of them will quickly disprove modern revisionist claims.

Long ago, Jefferson told his close evangelical friend and fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence, Dr. Benjamin Rush: "My views... [are] very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions." 19 That declaration remains unchanged today.

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Footnotes:

1 Craig Cabaniss, Bob Kauflin, Dave Harvey, and Jeff Purswell, Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World, ed. C. J. Mahaney (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 15.

2 Professor Robert S. Alley, "The Real Jefferson on Religion," secularhumanism.org (at http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/alley_18_4.html) (accessed on February 8, 2011).

3 Jim Walker, "Thomas Jefferson on Christianity & Religion," nobeliefs.com (at <http://www.nobeliefs.com/jefferson.htm>) (accessed on May 23, 2011).

4 Don Landis, "Jonah and the Great Fish," Answers in Genesis, September 5, 2006 (at <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v1/n1/great-fish>).

5 See, for example, Steve Waldman, Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America (New York: Random House, 2008), p. 72; Stephen J. Nichols, Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to the Passion of the Christ (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 55; Rev. Peter Edward Lanzillotta, "Insights from Jefferson's Bible," interfaithservicesofthelowcountry.com, June 28, 2010 (at <http://interfaithservicesofthelowcountry.com/for-july-4th-insights-into-jeffersons-bible/>); Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States, ed. George H. Shriver & Bill J. Leonard (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 238; Dictionary of Christianity in America, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 590, s.v. "Thomas Jefferson"; Winford Claiborne, "Revised Version of Christianity," gospelhour.net (at <http://www.gospelhour.net/2211.html>) (accessed February 8, 2011); "American Enlightenment," Wikipedia.com (at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Enlightenment) (accessed May 23, 2011); Mark A. Noll, George M. Marsden, Nathan O. Hatch, The Search for Christian America (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), p. 75; "An Interview with Mikey Weinstein of Military Religious Freedom Foundation," Pagan + Politics, February 26, 2010 (at http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=360240177811).

6 See, for example, Michael Hinton, The 100-Minute Bible (Canterbury: The 100-Minute Press, 2007); Lee Cantelon, The Words: Jesus of Nazareth (Grand Rapids: Credo House Publishers, 2007); Phillip Law, The Abridged Bible-from Adam to Apocalypse (London: Continuum, 2006); and many others. Such works have been part of the American religious landscape for generations, including, J. Talboys Wheeler, A Popular Abridgement of New Testament History, for Schools, Families, and General Reading (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co., 1854); Henricus Oort, Isaac Hooykaas, Abraham Kuenen, Philip Henry Wicksted, The Bible for Learners (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1898), Vol. I; Caroline Maxwell, The History of the Holy Bible; an Abridgment of the Old and New Testament (London: Harvey and Darton, 1827); Roy B. Chamberlain, The Dartmouth Bible (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965); Paul Roche, The Bible's Greatest Stories (New York: Signet Classic, 2001).

7 Charles B. Sanford, The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1984), p. 189.

8 Thomas Jefferson, Jefferson's "Bible": The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, ed. Judd Patton (Grove City, PA: American Book Distributors, 1996), p. xiv, summarizing the 1983 Dickinson W. Adams, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, which was a reconstruction of Jefferson's Philosophy of Jesus.

- 9 Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), Vol. XIX, p. 246, to Joseph Delaplaine on April 12, 1817. See also Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: The Road to Glory, 1743 to 1776* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1943), pp. 106-109.
- 10 *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French, and English*, ed. Thomas Jefferson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), p. 19.
- 11 Jefferson, *Jefferson's "Bible": The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, p. xv, Introduction.
- 12 Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), Vol. XIV, p. 81, to Samuel Greenhow on January 31, 1814.
- 13 "Thomas Jefferson and the Bible: Publications He Owned," Thomas Jefferson Foundation, January 2007 (at <http://www.monticello.org/library/exhibits/images/biblepublications.pdf>).
- 14 *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: Together with the Apocrypha; Translated out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations, Diligently Compared and Revised* (Philadelphia: John Thomason & Abraham Small, 1798), Vol. I, "Subscribers' Names" in the beginning; and Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putman and Sons, 1905), Vol. XI, p. 6, to Charles Thomson on January 11, 1808.
- 15 William Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John H. Rice* (Philadelphia: J. Whetham, 1835), p. 127, from Rev. John H. Rice to William Maxwell on April 10, 1816.
- 16 Ellen Coolidge, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Sarah N. Randolph (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1871), p. 345, Ellen Coolidge to Henry S. Randall.
- 17 Concerning Washington, D.C., public schools, see *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (Washington: Columbia Historical Society, 1895), Vol. I, pp. 122-123 (that Jefferson was "the chief author of the first plan of public education adopted for the city of Washington") and p. 127 (that the students learned to read from the Bible). Concerning his use of the Bible at University of Virginia, see Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), Vol. XIX, p. 415, Board of Visitors, Minutes, October 7, 1822; Thomas Jefferson, "Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia," August 4, 1818 [The Rockfish Gap Report], from The University of Virginia (at <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefRock.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1>).
- 18 Jefferson, *Jefferson's "Bible": The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, p. xv, Introduction.
- 19 Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), Vol. X, p. 380, to Benjamin Rush on April 21, 1803.