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Jefferson Bible and the Christmas Story

Does the Jefferson Bible include the Christmas story?

Thomas Jefferson's Bible -- which more strictly speaking is our third president's redaction of the four Gospels -- begins with the birth of Jesus, to be sure, but it is considerably abbreviated compared to the New Testament. Only the "natural life" of Jesus is presented -- in the world of Thomas Jefferson, there are no angels, miracles, or voices from Heaven.



Thomas Jefferson Bible, 1820. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of American History.

The Jefferson Bible begins by extracting exclusively from Chapter Two of the Gospel of Luke:

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem (because he was of the house and lineage of David), to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS. And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom.[1]

In Jefferson's account, the first 120 verses in the Gospel of Luke are pared to 10.

Jefferson probably worked most intensively on his Bible in 1819-1820, when he was 76 or 77 years old and living in retirement at Montecello.[2] There was nothing mysterious about his method: he laid out the New Testament in four different languages -- Greek, Latin, French, and English -- and literally cut corresponding passages out of those volumes and pasted them into his own edition. Jefferson wrote that his life and morals of Jesus were "extracted textually from the Gospels." [3]



Jefferson had long been laying the groundwork for such a project. We know from the copious paper trail he left behind that he was studying Jesus' philosophy at one of the most stressful times of his life -- during his first term in the White House. Jefferson was ordering different editions of the Bible and annotating them. He later wrote to John Adams that this early project, which he titled *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, aimed to gather "diamonds in a dunghill." As he explained, "There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man." [4]

(Does this idea of the philosophy of Jesus remind us of something more recent? During the 2000 presidential campaign, then-Governor George W. Bush was asked by a reporter who his favorite *philosopher* was. Bush answered, "Jesus Christ.")

Precisely what was Jefferson's attitude toward Christ? In an 1820 letter to his good friend William Short, he wrote of his belief that Jesus was "a great Reformer of the Hebrew code of religion," and that "It is the innocence of His character, the purity and sublimity of His moral precepts, the eloquence of His inculcations, the beauty of the apologues in which He conveys them, that I so much admire." But, Jefferson hastened to add, "it is not to be understood that I am with Him in all His doctrines. I am a Materialist; he takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance towards forgiveness of sin; I require counterpoise of good works to redeem it..." [5]

So what prompted Jefferson to edit the Gospel accounts of Jesus? In the same letter to Short, he said: "Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Him by His biographers, I find many passages ... of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being. I separate, therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to Him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others of His disciples. Of this band of dupes and impostors, Paul was the great Coryphaeus, and first corruptor of the doctrines of Jesus. These palpable interpolations and falsifications of His doctrines, led me to try to sift them apart." [6]

This explains why Jefferson purged the New Testament of all supernatural words, actions, and events. His Jesus was strictly a man, not God. Good man of the Enlightenment that he was, Jefferson aimed to distill the teachings of Jesus to a universal moral code to which all reasonable human beings could assent.

Since 1904, it has been the custom of the U.S. Senate to present a copy of *The Jefferson Bible* to each freshman senator at the swearing in ceremony.

(Question from P. Roberts of Lexington, KY)

[1] Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, Introduction by Forrest Church, Afterword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 37-38.

[2] Forrest Church, "The Gospel According to Thomas Jefferson," in Jefferson, *Bible*, pp. 25-30.

[3] Facsimile of Jefferson's original, handwritten title page, in Jefferson, *Bible*, after p. 32.

[4] TJ to John Adams, October 13, 1813; quoted in Church, "Gospel," in Jefferson, *Bible*, p. 17.

[5] TJ to William Short, April 13, 1820; at <http://www.angelfire.com/co/JeffersonBible/jeffbsv1.html>

[6] TJ to Short; at <http://www.angelfire.com/co/JeffersonBible/jeffbsv1.html>