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Dunham Bible Museum

“The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth”, book by Thomas Jefferson

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The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth: Reshaping the Narrative of the Christian Savior

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Bound by Moroccan goatskin leather, yet not bound by time, is ex-president Thomas Jefferson's attempt to reconcile the mystery of religion and the rightness of reason. The book is small, measuring 8.3 inches by 5.2 inches, and is 1.3 inches thick. Its contents are written on handmade woven paper, with iron gall ink. Originally written for his own purposes, Jefferson's "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" was printed and shared among the US congress, and eventually, the public. It was published in 1904, acting as an adequate, non-offensive moral standard for the republic to adhere to. The copy contained in the Dunham Bible museum is a copy of the original one, which has been placed in the care of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Compiled of the four gospels that were written in four different languages - English, French, Latin, and Greek - this book contains what Jefferson considered the most important moral teachings of Jesus. Having cut and pasted it by hand, Jefferson's invested efforts to "demythologize" Christianity reveal his appreciation for moral philosophy while he also grapples with his uneasiness toward the spiritual and supernatural side of religion (Wilson and McColley).

To understand Jefferson and his work, we must first explore the social, political and religious environment of the time. Jefferson (1743-1826) was born and raised during the -Enlightenment era (1685-1815), a time commonly referred to as the "age of reason". This period marked the close of the religious reformation. It conceived an intellectual and philosophical movement, where science, politics, and philosophy were embraced and cultivated by reason. The Enlightenment proposed that the old ideas of the past needed to be examined under the light of reason to reevaluate their usefulness and relevance. Many, including Jefferson, sought "to

establish humanity's moral duties and determine the role of the religion promoting them” (Rubenstein and Smith).

There were several big thinkers of the time who provoked questions and whose ideas helped shape the mindset of the newly enlightened society. English deist Viscount Bolingbroke was held in high esteem by Jefferson. Bolingbroke believed that the true, unmarred gospel got lost in man's religious endeavors, with many people choosing to handle the word of God as though it necessitates man's edits (Haimo). As though it lacked a wholeness in a way that man could somehow mitigate with his own deficient traditions and ideas.

Understanding the context of Jefferson's time period offers a clearer understanding of who he was as a both person and president. Jefferson's authorship of “The Jefferson Bible” took place when he was 77 years old, but his thirst for moral philosophy was his ultimate pursuit decades prior. As a president, he fought for religious freedom, rejecting the previous ideas of a “God ordained King” and having an official state church. This concept of how the government and church sought to “restrict free inquiry and control belief” was an abominable manipulation he referred to as “priestcraft” (Jefferson). Notice how similarly the word sounds to “witchcraft”. Throughout his political career, his own convictions concerning his religious orientation advised him to keep his spiritual life private and personal, one that should only involve himself and his Creator (Bloch). He even went as far as passing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786, claiming that “[neither] orthodoxy nor disbelief [poses] a threat to society” (Jefferson). Such a remark only outraged the public, ironically causing them to perceive him to be hostile toward religion and religious establishments.

As a person, Jefferson was a private man, and was said to have evaded even the questions of his grandchildren when they asked about his faith. However, Jefferson's hunger and passion

for ethics, philosophy and religion was thriving. He even claimed to go to bed only after “reading a half an hour to an hour’s worth of something moral” (Jefferson). His library included volumes of moral teachings from classical philosophers, thinkers, and multiple versions of the Bible. His insistence on the privacy of religion clarifies why the “Jefferson Bible” was created solely for his own use. This endeavor took him over a decade to create, and was created by literally cutting and pasting the Bible onto his own paper, forming the very manifestation of what he would consider “demythologized Christianity” (Wilson and McColley). One that was unmarred by the miraculous and the overly spiritual, one that was free of the unreasonable. Jefferson used Bibles that were written in Greek, French, Latin, and English. Each page of his own creation contained text from two of those languages.

Because Jefferson’s Bible was written solely for his own consumption, one can conclude that the content reveals what he prized the most about the gospels. Since the enlightenment advised that anything outside of the bounds of human reason be rejected, it makes sense why miracles like the virgin birth are missing from this text. However, what *is* there speaks volumes about what the former president admired most about Jesus’ life. By beginning with Jesus’ childhood, it appears that the former president wanted to create something chronological. He makes sure to include key aspects such as Jesus’ baptism, his removal of the vendors from the temple, and especially The Sermon on the Mount. So what does this reveal about Jefferson’s regard for Jesus’ teachings? Perhaps the way that Jesus seamlessly lives up to the moral standard that he propagated throughout his lifetime. The way that he taught love for others and for God, and shunned the toxic religiosity of those around him. In his cutting and pasting, Jefferson molds a Jesus in what he (Jefferson) considers to be the most primitive, precise version of the God-man (Burstein). He forms a collage of ethics that act as a guide for how he wants to live, one that

guides his own character and decision making while not overstepping the bounds of reason. This book, for Jefferson, paints the picture of a life that mankind can and should pursue.

As inspiring as Jefferson's story is, it is important to address how the story ends. In his Bible, it is evident that his thought process was more chronological than thematic. He begins with Jesus' life and ends with his death. But in the context of the Christian faith, Jesus' life does not end in death. In fact, his life's end lasts a mere three days before he resurrected. It is through this resurrection that Christians believe we are adopted into sonship, becoming heirs of Christ. This message is essential, and the Christian understanding of this particular miracle is rooted in every other miracle Jesus performed. Miracles which are completely omitted from the text Jefferson constructed. This begs the question of Jesus' own intentions behind his teachings and lifestyle. Was his only intention to provide the blueprint of a religion and a few good quotes? Can his morality stand alone, acting as its own foundation for right living? Does Jefferson's choice to remove the "myths" dilute the bigger picture? The Christian understanding of those questions reveals that Jesus' morality is completely inseparable from his spirituality and divinity. The standards he held (and holds) his followers to are not just to serve as guides for being good people on earth. In fact, he asserts that there "is none good but God" (Mark 10:18). Arguably, Jesus' purpose for living as he did was to offer a life of abundance, one that had been restored to everlasting. One with no end. Meaning, if his own life ended, and if that end was the end indefinitely, each of his moral teachings become no greater than those of Ghandi or Socrates. The reason why even Jefferson addresses the superiority of Jesus' example is not merely because of Christ's wisdom, though he had it in abundance. The quality of the cloth from which his words have been cut is superb, woven with the threads of spirituality and divinity. With the

miraculous. With the eternal. And perhaps pedestalizing a single piece of this mysterious puzzle is more vain than it is brilliant.

The Jefferson Bible, although written for the former president's private use, reveals so much about Jefferson as both president and person. In all of his efforts, Jefferson's Bible is a manifestation of his own journey to personal discovery and search for divine moral truth. A literal piece of the past, this is a book that can be used to understand past thinkers, while also provoking our own introspection. We are to learn from the past after all. Perhaps viewing a literal manifestation of cutting and pasting scripture will cause us to wonder about how we all figuratively cut and paste the Word in an effort to construct a god made in our own image; after our own likeness.

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