

The Heretical Gospel: The Jefferson Bible
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The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, one of the religious works composed by one of America's founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, is more commonly known as "*The Jefferson Bible*." Jefferson, whose religious views were deeply influenced by the 17th-18th century Enlightenment movement, wrote in a letter to Charles Thomson, "Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone". (Jefferson to Thomson, 1817) Nevertheless, based on his writings and other quotes, one can conclude Jefferson was a deist: someone who believes in the existence of a God, but does not believe such God intervenes in human lives. Jefferson cut excerpts from copies of the New Testament to form his heretical version of the Bible. His work was meant to present Jesus as a great moral philosopher, rather than the Son of God Christians portray him as. He rejects the orthodox Christian teachings, reduces the religion to mere philosophy, and promotes the idea of religious detachment.

The Christian doctrine teaches of a triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as affirmed in the Nicene Creed (325 AD). Christians believe that God came to the human world in the form of Jesus of Nazareth through the incarnation by the power of the Holy Spirit. They believe that Jesus lived a perfect and sinless life, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was resurrected on the third day, conquering death. Through the resurrection, He not only

defeated death but gave the opportunity to those who believe in Him to have eternal life with the Father in heaven. Through the sacrifice on the cross, Christians are now blameless and righteous before God, and the Gospels are used by Christians to imitate the life Jesus lived on Earth through a process of sanctification. The crucifixion is the central event in Christianity, reminding Christians of God's eternal love for his creation and a crucial part of God's redemptive plan for humanity. Without such sacrifice, there would be no atonement for sin, leaving humanity in a fallen state.

Reviewing the history of Thomas Jefferson, one would assume he was a devout Christian. Jefferson was born and raised into an Anglican family and baptized his children in an Anglican church. Even so, Jefferson in a letter to Benjamin Rush claimed to be a "Christian, in the only sense he [Jesus] wished any one to be". (Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 1803) Additionally, in a letter to John Adams, he writes, "When we take a view of the universe, in its parts general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design." (Jefferson to Adams, 1823) However, despite those misleading appearances, his beliefs are contrary to orthodox Christian teachings. Jefferson rejected the idea of Jesus as a divine being and one of the persons in the Trinity. He rather viewed Jesus as a moral philosopher whose reputation was later corrupted when Christians declared him to be the Son of God. He respected Jesus's teachings but rejected the idea that they needed to be aligned with the Christian faith. While his Anglican upbringing was the foundation for his moral beliefs, his later Enlightenment deistic views reshaped his understanding of God.

Jefferson sought to make a revised version of the New Testament that showed admiration for Jesus's teachings, while excluding any supernatural occurrences. By using a razor, Jefferson

meticulously cut excerpts from New Testament passages in Greek, Latin, French, and English texts—to assemble a new version of the Bible. While still keeping Jesus’s teachings intact, he removed the very essence of Christianity—the deity of Jesus. He held a skepticism towards Christian beliefs, and even wrote to John Adams, “The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.” (Jefferson to Adams, 1823) Jefferson used a very literal “cut and paste method” when it came to the construction of his Bible. The final product, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, was a New Testament that hid Jesus’s true divine nature. Many of the miracles recorded in the Gospels, such as turning water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead, and feeding the 5000 were purposely removed due to Jefferson’s lack of belief in such events. Notably, Jefferson removed the event that gave birth to Christianity: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This event is meant to be a sign of hope for Christians and used to affirm Jesus’s divinity. Jefferson, however, saw this event as a myth, or possibly later added on by early Christians. Events like the Sermon on the Mount were preserved, however, due to their ethical and moral teachings, reflecting Jefferson’s focus and leaning towards reason over faith.

Many Christians have found Jefferson’s version of the New Testament to be disrespectful and heretical. It undermines the true message of Christianity: that one can receive eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. By creating the “*Jefferson Bible*” he sought to deliver his version to suit his personal beliefs, one that aligned with his rational and skeptical mind. Jefferson, alongside his work, has been heavily critiqued by Christians. By stripping away the elements of Christianity due to his skepticism, he removed the fundamental aspects of Christianity. However,

one can also argue that this was a positive event for secularists. His views of separation of church and state, as well as his composition of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, have touched the hearts of deists and atheists alike. Although he rejected Christian dogmas, Jefferson saw value in Jesus's teaching. His rejection of religious dominance in politics reinforced his idea to keep religion and government separate. Jefferson's Bible became a symbol of religious freedom and a personal journey to one's faith. By setting an example by interpreting Christianity to align with his beliefs, he inspired others to pursue individual liberty outside of organized religion.

In conclusion, *The Jefferson Bible* has left a lasting impact on American History. It offers a revised teaching of Christianity, yet removes the very core belief. This book reflects Jefferson's skepticism toward supernatural events and his rational leanings. Secularists praise this book for becoming a symbol of personal faith and freedom of religion. However, it is important to acknowledge the heretical teachings this book brings through its contrast between true, orthodox Christianity and Jefferson's deistic beliefs.

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