

The Dr. Gene Scott Bible Collection

STATION 30: The English Bible in America



View of Station

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*This Station features
the following among
others:*

THE JEFFERSON BIBLE

by Thomas Jefferson

The so-called "Jefferson Bible," more accurately titled "**The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth**," now belongs to the United States National Museum (a.k.a. the Smithsonian) at Washington, D.C., having been obtained by purchase in 1895. The spine of the original, as well as this printed copy, bears the imprint, "Morals of Jesus." Like the Aitken Bible (on display at Station 47), which was authorized by an Act of Congress, the publication of this work (which remained in "manuscript" form at Jefferson's death) was sanctioned by the U.S. Government in that it was printed by the Government Printing Office at Washington in 1904! The book is a collotyped photographic facsimile of every page (including the final blank ones) of Jefferson's manuscript, and is bound in a manner identical to the original. Only 9,000 examples were printed, barely enough for the major libraries of America. Note the pages show four parallel columns of Jefferson's selected texts from the four Gospels, in (left to right) Greek, Latin, French and English. This true **polyglot** edition was the supreme religious work by the man who was instrumental in giving us our First Amendment rights, and reflects the years of thought and struggle he devoted to finding Jesus for himself. of this book, Jefferson said himself: "**A more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen; it is a document in proof that I am a Christian, that is real to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus.**"

Jefferson & His Bible

His Own Example of Religious Freedom

In October 1992, the University of Virginia commemorated the 250th anniversary of the birth of its founder, Thomas Jefferson. The opening event was a conference on "Jefferson's Legacies." From that conference came a book, with the same title, edited by Peter S. Onuf, in which the first chapter, by Paul S. Conkin, presents "The Religious Pilgrimage of Thomas Jefferson".

After tracing Jefferson's early religious training by Anglican clerics, through his rejection of the miraculous and the mystical in college and his early political years of critical agnosticism, it shows the honing of Jefferson's deep convictions on the absolute rights of

independent religious belief, and his abhorrence of either State or institutionalized church dominance.

Through the influence of Joseph Priestley, Jefferson matriculated through reliance on Epicurean and Stoic philosophic morality and psychological sustenance, which carried him through devastating personal tragedies, to his final views that the historic Jesus offered a broader, more universal and more interior and heart-felt morality than any other person on the stage of history.

He did not become a "traditional Christian;" with Priestley's influence, he became a supporter of Unitarianism, and thus is viewed by them as a seminal religious hero. But he became "hooked" on Jesus. He came to the personal view (supported by an amazing grasp of church history) that the pure, simple and sublime moral teachings of Jesus were buried within the claims of excess baggage, the claims of Divine authority, the miracles and the mysticisms added by superstitious authors.

In the words of Paul K. Conkin, "Without a shadow of a doubt, Jefferson believed that by a very careful reading, he could distinguish the true teachings of Jesus, the wheat from the chaff, the diamonds in the dunghill of abstractions. When he did this he found what he believed to be the most enlightened system of ethics ever developed."

He said on one occasion (July 26, 1818), ***"Our saviour did not come into the world to save metaphysicians only. His doctrines are levelled to the simplest understanding and it is only by banishing Hierophantic mysteries and Scholastic subtleties, which they have nick-named Christianity, and getting back to the plain and unsophisticated precepts of Christ, that we become real Christians."***

In a confession shared with Jared

Sparks (November 4, 1820), he made the following statement: ***"I hold the precepts of Jesus, as delivered by himself, to be the***

***most pure,
benevolent, and
sublime which have
ever been preached to
man. I adhere to the
principles of the
first age; and
consider all
subsequent
innovations as
corruptions of his
religion, having no
foundation in what
came from him. The
metaphysical
insanities of
Athanasius, of
Loyola, and of
Calvin, are to my
understanding, mere
relapses into
polytheism, differing
from paganism only by
being more
unintelligible. The
religion of Jesus is
founded on the Unity
of God, and this
principle chiefly,
gave it triumph over
the rabble of heathen
gods then
acknowledged. Thinking
men of all nations
rallied readily to
the doctrine of only
one god, and embraced
it with the pure
morals which Jesus
inculcated. If the
freedom of religion,
guaranteed to us by
law in theory, can
ever rise in practice
under the overbearing
inquisition of public
opinion, truth will***

prevail over fanaticism, and the genuine doctrines of Jesus, so long perverted by his pseudo-priests, will again be restored to their original purity. This reformation will advance with the other improvements of the human mind but too late for me to witness it."

According to Paul Conkin, Jefferson "once ruefully, or perhaps gladly, lamented his church included only himself." In his late years, he made it his project with scissors and paste to compile from the four Gospels what he took to be the central teachings of Jesus. All lifted directly from the English ("Authorized" or "King James") Bible, he pasted together the verses he felt were ***"the wheat from the chaff."***

Jefferson used, for this effort, the 5-volume "Scott's Annotated Bible" to which he had been a subscriber when the first American edition was published in 1804-9 (an example of it is shown at Station 28).

Jefferson was not satisfied with this effort, and for years planned to expand it. He did so after his retirement, probably after 1820, and called the final product, **"The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth."** As Jefferson was a life-long linguist, proficient in both Greek and Latin, he expanded for this effort his scissors and paste technique to include the Greek, Latin and French version as well as the English (which in this case was drawn from a New Testament published by Jacob Johnson & Co. at Philadelphia in 1804).

He secreted the "manuscript" until after his death in 1826. It has subsequently become famous, often referred to as "The Bible of Thomas Jefferson." A copy of this "Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" is displayed here, showing his personal special polyglot version, in four columns of his excised text: Greek, then Latin, then French, then English, side by side.

Without the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, which he championed, and the freedom of religion which he stamped on this nation, such a product - in another age, under a different system of government - would have resulted in both the book and Jefferson being burned. Thank God for Thomas Jefferson, and his vision of religious freedom.

"THE JEFFERSON BIBLE," also known as "THE MORALS OF JESUS"

That Jefferson had in mind the preparation of such a book, and that he actually prepared it, has been known to students of his letters and writings, and especial attention was drawn to the fact in "The Life and Times of Thomas Jefferson," by Henry S. Randall, published in three volumes, New York, 1903.

It was, moreover, brought to the attention of the Government very definitely in the form of a report (Fifty-first Congress, First Session, Senate Report 1365), presented June 14, 1890, by Senator Evarts of the Committee on Library, and ordered printed. This report was with reference to a bill relative to the proposed purchase of the manuscript papers and correspondence of Thomas Jefferson, which does not appear to have been followed by favorable action. In it the following description is given of the book in question, which was written by Mr. Ainsworth R. Spofford, then Librarian of Congress:

"The Morals and Life of Jesus of Nazareth,' extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French and English. Title and very full index in his own hand. Texts were cut by him out of printed copies of Greek, Latin, French and English Testaments and pasted in this book of blank pages, which was handsomely bound in red morocco, ornamented in gilt, and titled on the back in gilt letters, 'The Morals of Jesus.' His original idea was to have the life and teachings of the Saviour, told in similar excerpts,

prepared for the Indians, thinking this simple form would suit them best. But, abandoning this, the formal execution of his plan took the shape above described, which was for his individual use. He used the four languages that he might have the texts in them side by side, convenient for comparison. In the book he pasted a map of the ancient world and the Holy Land, with which he studied the New Testament."

The genesis of Jefferson's idea is made clear in a series of quotations and paraphrases from Jefferson's letters and biographies. On April 9, 1803, he wrote from Washington to Dr. Priestley, referring to Priestley's comparative view of Socrates and Jesus, that in a conversation with Dr. Rush in the years 1798 and 1799 he had promised some day to write a letter giving his view of the Christian system. This letter he had as yet only sketched out in his mind. It was evident that he considered the Gospels as having much extraneous matter and that by careful pruning there could be selected out those sayings which were absolutely the words of Jesus himself. After discussing the injustice done by these later additions, he says to Priestley, ***"you are the person who of all others would do it best and most promptly. You have all the materials at hand, and you put together with ease. I wish you could be induced to extend your late work to the whole subject."***

In a letter of ten days later, April 19, 1803, to Edward Dowse, he writes that he considers ***"the moral precepts of Jesus as more***

pure, correct and sublime than those of the ancient philosophers."

Under the date of April 21, 1803, Jefferson wrote to Dr. Benjamin Rush, sending him the syllabus of an estimate of the merits of the doctrines of Jesus compared with those of others. This is the communication to which he had referred in his letter to Dr. Priestley. In the letter accompanying the syllabus he tells Dr. Rush that he is sending this for his own eyes, simply in performance of his promise, and indicates its confidential character in the following words: "***And in***

confiding it to you, I know it will not be exposed to the malignant perversions of those who make every word from me a text for new misrepresentations and calumnies. I am, moreover, averse to the communication of my religious tenets to the public, because it would countenance the presumption of those who have endeavoured to draw them before that tribunal, and to seduce public opinion to erect itself into that inquest over the rights of conscience, which the laws have so justly proscribed. It behooves every man who values liberty of conscience for himself to resist invasions of it in the case of others, or their case may, by change of circumstances, become his own."

On January 29, 1804, Jefferson wrote to Priestley from Washington that he was rejoiced to hear that Priestley had undertaken to compare the moral doctrines of Jesus with those of the ancient philosophers. He writes, ***"I think you cannot avoid giving, as preliminary to the comparison, a digest of his moral doctrines, extracted in his own words from the Evangelists, and leaving out everything relative to his personal history and character. It would be short and precious. With a view to do this for my own satisfaction, I had sent to Philadelphia to get two testaments (Greek) of the same edition, and two English, with a design to cut out the morsels of morality, and paste them on the leaves of a book, in the manner you describe as having been pursued in forming your Harmony. But I shall now get the thing done by better hands."***

This is the first definite statement of Jefferson's purpose to prepare such a book, which he apparently at the time abandoned in the hope that Priestley would take it up. In the year 1808 Jefferson was greatly interested in the translation of the Septuagint made by Charles Thomson, the Secretary of the first Continental Congress, and wrote several communications to Thomson on the subject. In 1813 John Adams began a voluminous correspondence with Jefferson on religious subjects, the letters following each other very closely. Adams had access to a number of Priestley's letters written to various persons and in a communication dated at Quincy, July 22, 1813, he reminds Jefferson of his intention of preparing the work which he (Jefferson) had handed over to Priestley. He writes: ***"I hope you will***

***still perform your
promise to Dr. Rush.
If Priestley had
lived, I should
certainly have
corresponded with him.***

On August 9, John Adams again writes to Jefferson, sending further extracts of letters of Priestley and saying that he did so because ***"I wish it may stimulate you to pursue your own plan which you promised to Dr. Rush."***

In a letter to Adams written from Monticello, October 12, 1813, Jefferson gives a description of the volume as follows: ***"We must reduce our volume to the simple Evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the amphiboligisms into which they had been led, by forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and***

arranging the matter which is evidently his and which is as easily distinguished as diamonds in a dung-hill. The result is an octavo of forty-six pages."

It would appear from this that Jefferson made two such books, one a volume of forty-six pages which he later enlarged to the book which is here given.

Under the date of January 29, 1815, Jefferson wrote from Monticello to Charles Clay:

"Probably you have heard me say I had taken the four Evangelists, had cut out from them every text they had recorded of the moral precepts of Jesus, and arranged them in a certain order, and although they appeared but as fragments, yet fragments of the most sublime edifice of morality which had ever been exhibited to man."

In this letter, however, Jefferson disclaims any intention of publishing this little compilation, saying: ***"I not only write nothing on religion, but rarely permit myself to speak on it."***

Again, in a letter to Charles Thomson, written from Monticello, under the date of January 9, 1816, he says: ***"I, too, have made a wee little book from the same materials, which I call the Philosophy of Jesus; it is a paradigm of his doctrines, made by***

***cutting the texts
out of the book, and
arranging them on the
pages of a blank
book, in a certain
order of time or
subject. A more
beautiful or precious
morsel of ethics I
have never seen; it
is a document in
proof that I am a
real Christian, that
is to say, a disciple
of the doctrines of
Jesus."***

Later in the letter Jefferson makes a statement which indicates that he is not describing the volume now in the National Museum, but the preliminary one of 46 pages, for he adds: ***"If I had time I***

***would add to my
little book the
Greek, Latin and
French texts, in
columns side by side."***

In a letter dated April 25, 1816, written from Poplar Forest, near Lynchburg, addressed to Mr. Fr. Adr. Vanderkemp, Jefferson gives further details as to how he made this preliminary volume. After telling his correspondent that he was very cautious about not having the syllabus, which he had prepared, get out in connection with his name, being unwilling to draw on himself ***"a swarm of***

***insects, whose buzz
is more disquieting
than their bite,"***
***"I made, for my own
satisfaction, an
extract from the
Evangelists of the
text of His morals,
selecting those only
whose style and
spirit proved them
genuine, and his own.
* * * It was too
hastily done,
however, being the***

he writes:

work of one or two evenings only, while I lived at Washington, overwhelmed with other business, and it is my intention to go over it again at more leisure. This shall be the work of the ensuing winter. I gave it the title of 'The Philosophy of Jesus Extracted from the Text of the Evangelists.'"

Vanderkemp was undertaking a publication and desired to use Jefferson's syllabus and extract, which Jefferson agrees to, with the following condition: "***I***

ask only one condition, that no possibility shall be admitted of my name being even intimated with the publication."

October 31, 1819, he writes from Monticello to William Short, speaking of the extract from the Evangelists and desire to see a proper one made: "***The***

last I attempted too hastily some twelve or fifteen years ago. It was the work of two or three nights only, at Washington, after getting through the evening task of reading the letters and papers of the day."

This concludes the references in Jefferson's writings that bear directly upon the little volume in question. They are brief extracts from a collection made from all sources, published and manuscript.

Randall, in his life of Jefferson, already quoted, volume 3, page 451, says: "***It was in the winter***

of 1816-17, it is believed, that Mr. Jefferson carried out the design last expressed. In a handsome morocco-bound volume, labeled on the back, 'Morals of Jesus,' he placed the parallel texts in four languages. The first collection of English texts, mentioned in the letter to Thomson, is not preserved in Mr. Jefferson's family, but his grandson, Mr. George Wythe Randolph, has obtained for us a list of its contents. That, in different languages, is in the possession of his oldest grandson, Colonel Thomas Jefferson Randolph."

Randall gives a list of the passages of both volumes in his appendix, and adds, ***"It is remarkable that neither of these collections were known to Mr. Jefferson's grandchildren until after his death. They then learned from a letter addressed to a friend that he was in the habit of reading nightly from them before going to bed."***

It would appear from the letter to Short that Randall's deduction as to the date of this

larger compilation is not warranted and that it was actually made in 1819 or subsequent to that year, although it is true that in the letter to Vanderkemp (April 25, 1816) he speaks of the larger compilation as being the work of the ensuing winter.

In Appendix No. XXX to Randall's work, he gives the list of the contents of the first compilation of forty-six pages as well as the list of the contents of the present book. These are not exactly identical. It is interesting to note the title of the first compilation, which reads as follows: ***"The Philosophy***

***of Jesus of Nazareth
- Extracted from the
account of his life
and doctrines as
given by Matthew,
Mark, Luke and John.
Being an abridgment
of the New Testament
for the use of the
Indians, unembarrassed
with matters of fact
or faith beyond the
level of their
comprehensions."***

The National Government had purchased Mr. Jefferson's papers and had published an edition of his writings. Considerable interest was expressed in the so-called Bible after it came into the possession of the United States National Museum (commonly known as the Smithsonian), and it was in consequence of this interest that the present compilation is published.

It is printed in pursuance to the following concurrent resolution adopted by the Fifty-seventh Congress, first session:

***"That there be
printed and bound, by
photo-lithographic
process, with an
introduction of not
to exceed twenty-five
pages, to be prepared
by Dr. Cyrus Adler,
Librarian of the
Smithsonian
Institution, for the
use of Congress,
9,000 copies of
Thomas Jefferson's
Morals of Jesus of***

Nazareth, as the same appears in the National Museum; 3,000 copies for the use of the Senate and 6,000 copies for the use of the House."

Also shown at this Station are two "Fonetik" Bibles, a "Hieroglyphic" Bible, and the famous 1800 Macklin Bible in 6 volumes, the largest Bible ever printed.

Don't miss some of the "gems" of the American Bible shown elsewhere in the Cathedral, such as the "Bay Psalm Book" shown at

[Station 45](#),

the Eliot "Indian Bible" at

[Station 46](#)

and the Aitken "Bible of the Revolution" at

[Station 47](#).

STATION LOCATION MAP

Below is a floor plan map of the Cathedral in 3 sections, one for each level. The first section is the Lower Level, the second is the Foyer Level, and the third is the Mezzanine Level. This station is a Wall Case on the Mezzanine level, at the red #30.



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