

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,

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

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

miraculous. With the eternal. And perhaps pedestaling 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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