

JESUS WITHOUT THE MIRACLES

Thomas Jefferson's Bible and the Gospel of Thomas

By Erik Reece

Back when the WHAT WOULD JESUS DO bracelets were appearing on the wrists of young people all around the country, I found myself in an argument with an old friend, a fellow Virginian who, like me, is the lapsed son of a Baptist preacher. We had both fallen pretty far, far enough to spend many nights together in the local Irish pub, putting away Guinness and commiserating about how the Church had crippled our spirits and misunderstood our complicated souls. The crux of our argument was over the bracelets' merit and utility. My friend saw them as just another example of hollow piety. For my part, I said it would indeed be a positive step if Christians actually began to follow the teachings of the founder.

Something similar was no doubt on the mind of another Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, when he took a pair of scissors to the King James Bible two hundred years ago. Jefferson cut out the virgin birth, all the miracles—including the most important one, the Resurrection—then pasted together what was left and called it *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth* (fifteen years later, in retirement at Monticello, he expanded the text, added French, Latin, and Greek translations, and called it *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*). In an 1819 letter to William Short, Jefferson recollected that the cut-and-paste job “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.” Jefferson mentioned *The Philosophy of Jesus* in a few other personal letters, but for the most part he kept the whole matter private, probably guessing that the established Church would see the compilation as one more example of his “atheism.” Nor did Jefferson care to give Federalist newspapers another reason to remind him of alleged sexual relations with his slave Sally Hemings, an entanglement certainly out of keeping with the philosophy of Jesus.

But Jefferson's severe redaction was probably a retaliatory act, as much as anything, against priests and ministers—“soothsayers and necromancers,” Jefferson called them—who had unleashed attacks on his character during the acrimonious presidential election of 1800. Jefferson believed that an au-

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thentic Christianity had long ago been hijacked by the Christian Church. The teachings of its founder had become so distorted as to make “one half of the world fools, and the other half hypocrites.” Jefferson would no doubt have agreed with Tolstoy that the Christian Church had supplanted the Sermon on the Mount with the Nicene Creed to create a system of beliefs that Jesus himself wouldn’t have recognized, much less laid claim to. “I abuse the priests, indeed,” Jefferson wrote to Charles Clay in 1815, “who have so much abused the pure and holy doctrines of their Master.” By stripping away the gospelers’ claim that Jesus was the divine son of God, and by stripping away the subsequent miracles they invented to prove it, Jefferson boasted that he had extracted the “diamonds from the dunghill” to reveal the true teaching of Jesus for what it was: “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”

Up until that point, Jefferson had claimed Epicurus as his patron-philosopher. Two thousand years earlier, Epicurus had taught that life would be much easier to endure if we stopped fearing God and death—about which we can know and do nothing—and followed instead a program of prudent self-sufficiency. “Everything easy to procure is natural,” Epicurus wrote, “while everything difficult to obtain is superfluous.” Such a philosophy certainly would have appealed to Jefferson’s agrarian vision for the new American nation. But after suffering the personal attacks of the 1800 campaign, Jefferson discovered that the philosophy of Epicurus didn’t go far enough. “Epictetus and Epicurus give laws for governing ourselves,” Jefferson wrote to William Short, “Jesus a supplement of the duties and charities we owe to others.” Jefferson no doubt felt that not a few people owed him some charity.

Jefferson’s tombstone at Monticello does not remind visitors that the deceased was once president of the United States. Rather it states that Jefferson authored the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. So it was fitting that in 1904 the Government Printing Office published 5,000 handsome, leather-bound copies of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* for the first time, one hundred years after Jefferson pasted it together.

To read the Gospel story—the “good news”—through Jefferson’s lens is instructive in a number of ways, the least of which is its representation of Jesus’ “life.” Many New Testament scholars agree that the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are pure myth. And no one has solved the mystery of the “missing years”—the two decades between when Jesus supposedly taught in the temple as a precocious child and when he came ambling along the Jordan river, asking to be baptized by the fiery zealot, John the Baptist. From then until his execution a few years later, Jesus’ life was a combination of walking, eating with followers and social outcasts, preaching, fishing a little, telling stories that no one seemed to understand, and offering largely unsolicited diatribes against the powers that be. That is to say, the life of Jesus—if unconventional—was nevertheless ordinary enough. Thousands of homeless men and women do pretty much the same thing every day in this country. But to find the *historic Jesus* within the fabulous accounts of the four Gospel writers is indeed an exercise of looking for diamonds in the compost heap.

Jefferson’s gospel could not solve that problem. Nor did it need to. The life of this itinerant preacher was much less important to Jefferson than what he taught. *Somebody*, after all, spoke the Sermon on the Mount, or on the plain, or wherever it was spoken, and *somebody* told fascinating parables that explained nothing and left everything up to “he who has ears.” What’s more, Jefferson’s objection to the version of Christianity taught in American churches was precisely that it did put so much more emphasis on Jesus’ life and, consequently, his sacrificial death. By excising the Resurrection and Jesus’ claims to divinity from his private gospel, Jefferson portrayed an ordinary man with an extraordinary, though improbable, message.

Indeed, reading Jefferson’s gospel one hundred years after its publication, it’s hard not to become depressed, as did the Rich Young Ruler, about how

nearly impossible Jesus' program would be to follow. To read the Gospel of Matthew or Luke is to be dazzled by one miracle after another. In that context, the actual teachings seem almost mundane. But to read Jefferson's version (what Beacon Press now publishes as *The Jefferson Bible*) is to face a relentless demand that we be much better people—inside and out—than most of us are. Which leads, as Jefferson must have suspected, to this unfortunate conclusion: the relevance of Christianity to most Americans—then and now—has far more to do with the promise of eternal salvation *from* this world than with any desire to practice the teachings of Jesus while we are here.

But Jefferson's gospel also leads to an impressive clarification of what those teachings are. One can make a list, and it need not be long.

- Be just; justice comes from virtue, which comes from the heart.
- Treat people the way we want them to treat us.
- Always work for peaceful resolutions, even to the point of returning violence with compassion.
- Consider valuable the things that have no material value.
- Do not judge others.
- Do not bear grudges.
- Be modest and unpretentious.
- Give out of true generosity, not because we expect to be repaid.

In all of his teachings, the Jesus that Jefferson recovers has one overarching theme—the *world's values are all upside down in relation to the kingdom of God*. Material riches do not constitute real wealth; those whom we think of as the most powerful, the *first* in the nation-state, are actually the *last* in the kingdom of God; being true to one's self is more important than being loyal to one's family; the Sabbath is for men, men are not for the Sabbath; those who think they know the most are the most ignorant; the natural economy followed by birds and lilies is superior to the economy based on Caesar's coinage or bankers who charge interest.

Above all, this Jesus cannot abide hypocrites. He has nothing but contempt for men who would kill a woman because of adultery when they themselves have thought about cheating on their wives, or for temple officials who tithe the mint and cumin but would do nothing to help a poor woman with a child. "Stop *talking* about righteousness," this Jesus is saying, "and be righteous." It sounds simple. But of course nothing could be more difficult, as Jefferson's own life illustrates.

In his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Jefferson urged readers to resist the factory life of large European cities and stay on the land. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue," Jefferson wrote in the famous chapter called "Manufactures." Farmers intuit the laws of God within the laws of nature, and so become virtuous, he reasoned. They are, by the nature of their work, resourceful, neighborly, independent. They are the elemental caretakers of the world. Nor do they succumb to the crude opinions of the masses. But the farmer is free-thinking and inquisitive. The manufacturer, by contrast, is a specialist, a cog, a wage slave. "Dependence," Jefferson concluded, "begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition." A manufacturer cannot be a citizen of a democracy, only a consumer within an oligarchy.

Four years later, Hamilton submitted to Congress his *Report on Manufactures*, in which he dismissed Jefferson's agrarian vision in favor of developing industry, division of labor, child labor, protective tariffs, and prohibitions on many imported manufactured goods. Today, fewer than 1 percent of Americans work on farms, and many of those are huge, industrial farms that generate massive amounts of toxic by-products. That Jefferson's self-reliant farmer is so unrecognizable to us today is evidence enough, should we need any, that we have inherited Hamilton's America, not Jefferson's.

The difference between Jefferson and Hamilton is the difference between a version of Christianity based on Jesus' life and death and Resurrec-

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tion, and one based on his teachings. Or to put it another way, it is a difference between where one locates *basileia tou theou*—the kingdom of God. Is it, as Luke's gospel says, "in the midst of you" (17:21), or is it, as John's gospel claimed, a reward saved for the sweet hereafter? To live by Jesus' teachings would be to live virtuously as stewards of the land; it would be to create an economy based on compassion, cooperation, and conservation; it would be to preserve the Creation as the kingdom of God. Jefferson was proposing a country of countrysides, a pastorate in which we would want to

live; Hamilton was giving us a nation of factories from which we would want—perhaps in the end need—to be saved.

“Thomas” is the Aramaic word for *twin*. That Thomas Jefferson's version of Christianity actually found a twin gospel—one that included no miracles, no claims of divinity, but only the teachings of Jesus—hidden beneath an Egyptian cliff, and that this ancient gospel was also recorded by a man known as Thomas, makes for a remarkable story.

Sometime near the end of the nineteenth century, two British archaeologists, Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, were searching through an ancient trash heap along the Nile River, at a site known as Oxyrhynchus, when they found three small papyrus leaves. One of the fragments read, "These are the [] sayings [] the living Jesus spoke [] also called Thomas []." New Testament scholars had long known that there once existed a Gospel of Thomas because in the third century Hippolytus denounced such a text in his *Refutation of All Heresies*. And because Thomas's gospel ran afoul of the early Church bishops, particularly Irenaeus, most copies of it were likely destroyed.

In 1945, 150 miles upstream near another river town called Nag Hammadi, an Egyptian farmer named Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman was guiding his camel beneath the nitrogen-rich cliffs that line the Nile, collecting fertilizer for his fields. As he dug at the base of one cliff, Muhammad 'Ali found a sealed jug, obviously ancient. Fearing a jinn but hoping for gold, he broke the jar open with his mattock. He found neither. What fell out were twelve books (codices), made from papyrus and bound in leather. Figuring the manuscripts might be worth something, Muhammad 'Ali gathered them up in his turban and carried them home. According to New Testament scholar James M. Robinson, who has pieced this whole story together, Muhammad 'Ali's mother used some of the leaves from the books to ignite their outdoor clay oven. Muhammad 'Ali traded others for oranges and cigarettes.

Meanwhile, shortly after the discovery, Muhammad 'Ali and his brothers hacked to death a man they claimed had killed their father six months earlier. But when local police started poking around, asking about the murder, Muhammad 'Ali didn't want to answer any further questions about the codices. Since the manuscripts were written in Coptic, an Egyptian variant of Greek, he hid one at the house of a Coptic priest. The priest, in turn, sent it to Cairo by way of his brother-in-law to ascertain its value on the antiquities market. But someone tipped off Egyptian authorities, who then threatened to take the brother-in-law into custody and told him he could return home only if he sold the codex to the Coptic Museum, which he promptly did.

Here a one-eyed bandit named Bahij 'Ali enters the story. Cairo's leading antiquities dealer, Cypriot Phocion J. Tano, had retained Bahij 'Ali to acquire as many of the codices as possible. But again, the Egyptian government heard about Tano's acquisitions and pressed him to entrust the manuscripts to the Coptic Museum for "safe keeping." Tano spent much of the 1950s trying unsuccessfully to get the codices back.

In 1952 the French scholar Henri-Charles Puech realized that a tractate in Codex II contained sayings that matched the Oxyrhynchus fragments. Less than sixty years after Grenfell and Hunt uncovered hard evidence that a Gospel of Thomas did at one time exist, Puech was able to conclude that the entire text had been found.

