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Excavating the Sacred

INTRODUCTION

Before he had been gripped by a desire to remake his country, young Thomas Jefferson was moved by a different kind of interest in the land of his birth: a hunger to uncover all that might be learned from the American earth. From an early age, he rarely minded getting his hands dirty. In addition to his brief stint as an official surveyor for Albemarle County, Virginia, and the many agricultural experiments performed with the help of enslaved labor at Monticello, Jefferson was known to undertake works of archaeological excavation, putting shovels and pickaxes to the service of science.

As he wrote in the one book he published during his lifetime, 1785's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson was fascinated by grass-covered mounds called barrows which, he noted, could be “found all over this country,” including in the rolling Piedmont landscape he had explored since childhood.¹

These are of different sizes, some of them constructed of earth, and some of loose stones. That they were repositories of the dead has been obvious to all; but on what particular occasion constructed was matter of doubt.

Entwined with legend, lore, and guesswork, theories concerning the purpose of the barrows proliferated throughout the middle of the eighteenth century. Accounts of battles fought in their vicinity inspired the belief among some that these mounds were accidental monuments to the war dead, covered over with soil on the spots where they fell. Others maintained that the custom of the local Monacan people called for periodically disinterring corpses from far-flung graves to be gathered and reburied ritually in a single location which had been sanctified for that purpose. Perhaps the most haunting explanation of the barrows was that they were “general sepulchres” for entire villages that no longer existed. According to a tradition “said to be handed down from the aboriginal Indians,” Jefferson wrote:

when they settled in a town, the first person who died was placed erect, and earth put about him, so as to cover and support him. . . . When another died, a narrow passage was dug to the first, the second reclined against him, and the cover of earth replaced, and so on.

Each mound was thus a reminder that all that remained of once thriving communities were their mortal remains, standing together as if in conversation just beneath the surface of a vibrant green hill.

“I wished to satisfy myself whether any, and which of these opinions were just,” Jefferson explained. And so he set off to the low grounds of the Rivana River, “opposite some hills, on which had been an Indian town.” There he encountered “a spheroidal form,” which he estimated had once been forty feet wide and twelve feet high. By the time Jefferson got to it, much of the mound had long been under

cultivation, and so had been reduced by the plough to around seven feet, just over the height of a tall man like Jefferson himself.

Eager to see what was inside this barrow, the young excavator went to work. His findings were as immediate as they were macabre.

I first dug superficially in several parts of it, and came to collections of human bones, at different depths, from six inches to three feet below the surface. These were lying in the utmost confusion, some vertical, some oblique, some horizontal, and directed to every point of the compass, entangled, and held together in clusters by the earth.

Jefferson's orderly mind was apparently offended by the jumble he had discovered, which could not have been further from the image of a carefully arranged convening of the dead.

Bones of the most distant parts were found together, as, for instance, the small bones of the foot in the hollow of a skull, many skulls would sometimes be in contact, lying on the face, on the side, on the back, top or bottom, so as on the whole to give the idea of bones emptied promiscuously from a bag or basket, and covered over with earth, without any attention to their order.

Along with "skulls," he catalogued "the bones of the arms, thighs, legs, feet, and hands." There were also jawbones, teeth, ribs, and vertebrae from the neck and the spine.

It was the skulls that most drew Jefferson's interest. Some were "so tender," he noted, that they fell apart at the touch, leaving him with a handful of teeth that were considerably smaller than others. At least one section of the mound

seemed to include children—a suspicion reinforced by the discoveries that followed: “a rib and a fragment of the under jaw of a person about half grown; another rib of an infant, and part of the jaw of a child, which had not yet cut its teeth.” These bones were white; all the others more the color of sand.

“The bones of infants being soft, they probably decay sooner,” Jefferson surmised, “which might be the cause so few were found here.” Though he had apparently gathered such bones in sufficient quantity that he remarked he was “particular in my attention” to them, as his work continued, the remains of children accounted for only a small fraction of the total number of skeletons in the barrow, which he supposed “might have been a thousand.”

When Jefferson’s work was done, the man occasionally called “the Father of American Archaeology” for this excavation announced his opinion that the mound was not the buried site of a battle, or a meticulously arranged sepulcher, but rather a cemetery formed across time and generations, with strata of remains that appeared more recent the closer to the surface they were found. He also knew that this formation was not a matter of ancient history, but of ongoing interest to those for whom the bones within were something more than specimens to be recorded in a naturalist’s notebook.²

“On whatever occasion they may have been made,” Jefferson wrote of the barrows, “they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians.” He had once seen a group of Monacans leave a high road and descend six miles into the forest to visit a mound, “without any instructions or enquiry,” most likely in remembrance of those buried there.

While he had cut into the mound with the same joyful spirit of inquiry he later applied to so many of his pursuits, the Monacans “staid about it some time, with expressions which were construed to be those of sorrow.”

* * *

It is an object lesson in changing attitudes concerning what makes something sacred that today the image of Jefferson rummaging through the bones of Native Americans would likely be regarded by many as an obvious desecration, while in his own day it would have been praised as a purely scientific endeavour. This should come as little surprise. Notions of what constitutes that which ought to be inviolable may alter significantly from one generation to the next, to say nothing of the changes that occur across centuries. Taking stock of how this is so can be a useful measure of a society’s transforming concerns. Traffic between the controversial and the commonplace runs in both directions, and the transit of each within the American context offers insight into who Americans were at the time of the nation’s founding, who they have been throughout its history, and who they are now.

Opinions have similarly changed concerning another dramatic act of excavation undertaken by Jefferson in Virginia, which likewise has struck some as a defilement and others merely as the work of a mind moved by reason alone. That would be, of course, the subject of this book: the hand-crafted, cut-and-paste, compressed version of the Gospels edited by Jefferson with a sharp blade and glue; a book he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* but is more commonly known as the Jefferson Bible.

Extricating biblical passages he found instructive and useful from those he did not, Jefferson dug into the scripture most of his countrymen took for granted as the word of God no less zealously than he had into the burial barrows near his home. Doing so was the enactment of his long planned intention to extract the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth—"a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man"—from the "dross of his biographers," which to Jefferson accounted for the majority of the New Testament's text.³ On more than one occasion, Jefferson referred to his desire to differentiate the words of Jesus from those of others claiming to speak for him in colorful language evoking both discovery and disdain.

"It is as easy to separate those parts," Jefferson wrote to John Adams in 1814, "as to pick out diamonds from dunghills."⁴

As bookends of his adulthood—the barrow digging occurring as a young man, and the Bible cutting in his dotage—these two acts of excavation have a surprising amount in common, and together say much about the third president and his times.

Each effort was methodical, meticulous, and seemingly unconcerned with conventional squeamishness, superstition, or notions of propriety. Each, in other words, might be seen as a practical application of the ideals of the Enlightenment. Each also was undertaken to correct misapprehensions of history. In the case of the barrows, Jefferson hoped to consider and discount local legends that obscured rather than revealed the American past. In the case of the Gospels, he hoped to show how true Christianity, too, had been hidden over time by misinformation. To Jefferson, the Jesus of history was buried as surely as bones of the Monacan dead, not by Virginia

dirt and stone but by the sedimentary layers of centuries-old religious tradition, which the founding iconoclast elsewhere dismissed summarily as the “abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus.”⁵

And yet, for Jefferson, only one of these excavations was an act suitable for putting before the public, and remarkably it was the one which found him poking at the skulls of children until they crumbled in his hands. News that he had devoted more than a decade of his life to plotting how he might dismantle the Bible, he suspected, would be a bridge too far—or, to use a more apt cliché, digging his own grave.

Though he was a man who took up his pen against empire and crown, Jefferson knew that taking a blade to the New Testament’s pages would lend credence to suspicions that he was an infidel, a heretic, or worse. His Bible redaction was a project which he had long considered, but had discussed with only a few trusted correspondents. Jefferson made no plans to publish it and consented to have an early outline printed only when given assurance that his name would be in no way associated with its publication. By some accounts he read from *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* nightly, and yet it seems he hoped virtually no one would know it existed. Perhaps the last monumental work of a monumental life, the Jefferson Bible is an ambivalent scripture that has taken on an outsized significance in a nation for which religious ambivalence is the one enduring creed.

* * *

But is it a great religious book?

Some might say it is hardly a book at all. Though the original is bound in fine red leather, and its published print

and electronic editions now number in the dozens, it is ultimately a collage. Jefferson wrote barely a word of its content, but rather gathered passages written by many others in four languages across two millennia. He reordered the passages with little regard for the intention with which they were first composed, repurposing them rather according to his own intuition and sensibilities. The Dadaists might have recognized it as a *découpé*. Had it come from the desk of William Burroughs a generation later, it would have been called a cut-up. Today, the most appropriate analogue for what Jefferson accomplished might be music sampling. Made up of sound-bites of scripture separated, shuffled, and stitched back together in a way that seeks to supplant rather than serve their original meaning, the Jefferson Bible is less a book than a remix.

And yet, simultaneously, it is many books. It is at once the single physical volume that Jefferson created, and which now resides in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, and it is the multiple volumes he used as raw material, most lost to history, two of which are similarly found in the museum, preserving perfectly the words he left behind. So, too, it is the many different editions of Jefferson's redaction, which cumulatively have sold hundreds of thousands of copies since its first publication more than a century ago. Each later edition might be seen as a book distinct from the others, and each draws selectively upon the larger corpus of Jeffersonian thought, quoting his piquant correspondence related to the project in order to frame Jefferson's gospel with epistles and apocrypha supportive of dramatically different interpretations of the primary text.

A critique one often hears regarding the common practice of referring to this work as “The Jefferson Bible” is that Jefferson had no intention of crafting a Bible of his own and would have objected to his redaction project being so named. Yet we can see here a distinction that must be made. Indeed, it is true that although Jefferson sought only to create a work he entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, a work appropriately called the Jefferson Bible no less certainly has been formed. Just as the Bible itself was not composed so much as collected, edited, and remade over time, so too the Jefferson Bible is not limited to the original text, but also includes what has become of it.

While the singular, cut-and-paste *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* remains static, the Jefferson Bible has been given new meanings with each generation, new arguments and understandings of what Jefferson did and why. If it is true that, as Jefferson said, “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” it seems that the same might be said of the Jefferson Bible and ink.⁶ The words of course remain the same (for the most part, as we shall see), but then one marker of religious books, great and otherwise, is that the words they contain are not always the point. As with other culturally important sacred tomes, the greatness of the Jefferson Bible can perhaps be found less in the text itself than in what it signifies. It is less a book to be read than to be talked about. In fact, as much of the published commentary about the Jefferson Bible suggests, some have talked at great length about it without apparently having read much of it at all.

As *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* marks the 200th anniversary of its completion in 2020, the Jefferson

Bible begins its third century as an unlikely spiritual and historical Rorschach test. Illuminating both the third president's religious views and changing public opinion on the place of religion in American life, it is a text that inspires more questions than it answers. Is the homespun 84-page volume evidence that the Founding Fathers actively engaged with scripture, using its lessons to help birth a Christian nation? Or does it prove, on the contrary, that the Framers of the Republic sought to root out the stubborn influence of faith, the better to foster a new secular order? Was it merely the strange retirement project of an idiosyncratic statesman, or did it represent a broader cultural shift in the young United States away from ecclesial authority and toward the ideals of the Enlightenment?

The Jefferson Bible has done all this and more. Completed six years before his death, it is a slim assemblage of roughly one thousand New Testament verses, in English, French, Greek, and Latin, each cut carefully by Jefferson's own hand and then pasted meticulously on blank paper to craft a condensed version of the Gospels. It is a uniquely American testament shorn, for the most part, of its miraculous and supernatural elements; a Bible in which the sage of Monticello could believe without qualifications.

With the ideas behind its composition first quickening in Jefferson during the early years of Independence, the book has a history parallel to that of the nation. Some seven decades after its composition, its rediscovery and popularization late in the nineteenth century by the U.S. National Museum made the Jefferson Bible part of American self-understanding in a way that can be claimed for few other books. The stories of its creation, publication, and the uses

to which it has been put—its birth, life, and afterlife—each occur within the context of a country and its people engaged in moments of transformation, as they were attempting to carve new identities from established traditions, much as Jefferson wielded his blade.

This biography of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* will explore not just how and why the text was edited and arranged by Jefferson, but also the many ways in which it has been presented, discussed, and reframed over time. The aim here is to reconsider the text within the various contexts that have contributed to its enduring allure while also providing a close reading of the Jefferson Bible itself.

Since it became widely known to the public in the 1890s, there have been more than two dozen printed editions of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. The first official publication, the 1904 production of the US Government Printing Office, is a photographic facsimile of the original, with a brief introduction by Cyrus Adler, Librarian of the Smithsonian, Director of the U.S. National Museum's Division of Religion, and the man most responsible for bringing the book to light.⁷ While its publication was first planned for distribution only to members of Congress, variant editions for other interested readers appeared almost immediately—indeed, even before the official publication.⁸ It was, after all, exceedingly easy to follow Jefferson's edits to create new renditions of the same redacted texts. By the 1920s there were five editions in circulation, both as cheap pocket-sized books and as collectors' items, in formats ranging from photo-plates, to typeset text, to an entirely new translation. Two decades later, a popular commercial edition edited and introduced by the New York

publishing executive and self-help writer Douglas Lurton (author of *The Power of Positive Living: Everyday Psychology for Getting What You Want Out of Life*) packaged the book as a simplified telling of “the most exquisite story ever written.”⁹ A generation after that, several editions viewed the text through the lens of the political turmoil of the 1960s and 70s, before it received its first and still unsurpassed scholarly treatment when it was prepared for inclusion in Princeton University Press’s *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* series. After the death of two editors, Dickinson Adams in 1977 and Julian Boyd in 1980, *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels* finally saw publication in 1983.¹⁰ Throughout this same period, a number of Unitarian Universalist ministers (and the American Unitarian Association-founded Beacon Press) claimed the book as their own with introductions connecting Jefferson’s work with U.U. doctrine and history; this marked the most persuasive of efforts by religious and non-religious groups to conscript the Jefferson Bible into a cause.¹¹ Most recently, in furtherance of the Smithsonian Institution’s mission of the “increase and diffusion of knowledge,” in 2011 my colleagues at the National Museum of American History produced a full-color facsimile edition to commemorate the book’s newly completed conservation and exhibition at the museum. It is this edition to which I will refer when quoting directly from *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.¹²

There has been a new Jefferson Bible for every generation since its discovery. The shared assumption of each of these editions has been that the significance of the book is found mainly in the text itself and the man who created it.

But, in fact, the Jefferson Bible is not one text but many; it has no single author but a cast of editors, publishers, champions, and critics who together made a twentieth-century publishing phenomenon out of a nineteenth-century assemblage of materials that trace their origin to the first century. It is a book whose relevance has been continually questioned, refashioned, and renewed, much like the man who first made it.

From the point of view of American religious history, the story of the Jefferson Bible's reception may be more important than its inception. It continues to speak about religion's role in our national mythology, and it always finds something new to say.

As with Jefferson's barrows, the meaning of the Jefferson Bible—as a cut-up text, as a cultural artifact, as a relic of the founding fathers, as a publishing mainstay—requires some excavation. It is often covered over with, as Jefferson said of Jesus's words in the New Testament, the “dross of his biographers,” which now measure centuries deep. The goal of this biography of the book is to dig into its history in a way that has not been attempted before, with the aims both of taking a close look at what lies beneath while also examining the layers of meaning that have created the current impression of Jefferson and his Bible.

The chapters that follow are for the most part chronological, tracing the conception, birth, life, and afterlife of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Yet adherence to chronology will not be strict. Jefferson's blade was a time machine of sorts, a tool for revisiting the ancient past for the purpose of providing a corrective to centuries of tradition.

The scrapbook he made is, among all its other meanings, a record of that journey. Though this book is not nearly so ambitious, it too hopes to point toward multiple historical moments simultaneously, all pivoting around the instant when the knife first met the page.

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