

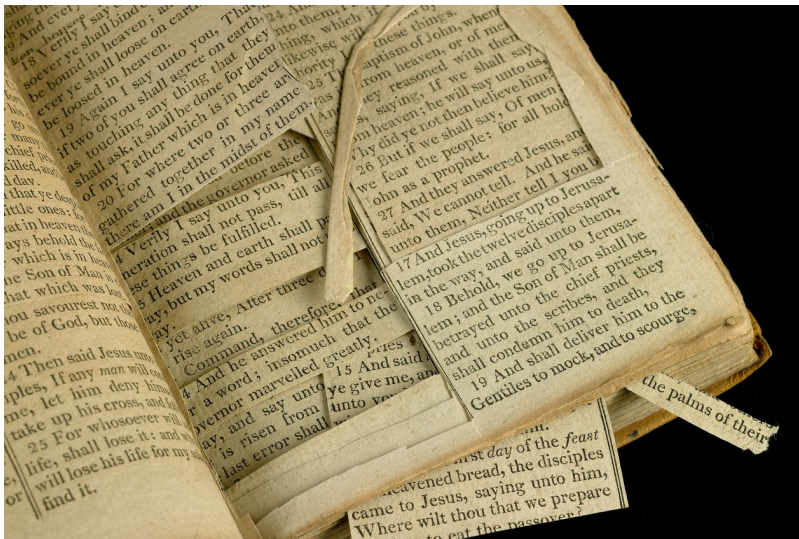
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BOOKSHELF

'The Jefferson Bible' Review: The Gospel, Sans Miracles

In excising the miracles from the Christian gospels, did Thomas Jefferson remove the very thing he needed most?



Source Bible used to create Thomas Jefferson's "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth."

PHOTO: HUGH TALMAN, COURTESY OF THE SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

By Crawford Gribben

Sept. 30, 2020 7:08 pm ET

However else he is known, Thomas Jefferson ought to be remembered as the great American prophet, the founder of a new nation and apostle of its faith. In "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," his scrapbook of New Testament excerpts, the third president offered a dramatic revision of Christian tradition. The New Testament presented "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man," he recognized, even if he hoped to sharpen those qualities by means of redaction. Recycling select passages from the Gospels, he included their ethical content but omitted any reference to the supernatural and presented the Messiah less as savior than as savant.

But Jefferson kept his project secret, worried that his freethinking devotional pastime could become a serious political liability and discussed it with only a handful of similarly

enlightened friends. He had little to be worried about. The nation that he and his philosophical friends created in their image needed this version of Jesus.

Peter Manseau knows the Jefferson Bible well. As a senior curator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, he has come to understand the scrapbook—literally—inside out. His outstanding biography of the text, the latest entry in Princeton's Lives of Great Religious Books series, pays careful attention to its status as private project, published book and political symbol.

Mr. Manseau's short but penetrating narrative begins with the book's composition. In a project first developed over many evenings in the White House, he shows us, Jefferson deconstructed sacred tradition by distinguishing (as he put it) "diamonds from dunghills" in Gospel accounts of the ministry of Christ. As his project developed, Jefferson took a penknife to English, French, Latin and Greek New Testaments, pasting about 1,000 verses into a scrapbook that by 1820, when he was nearing 80, he had bound in red leather, the reading of which seems to have constituted the scope of his private devotions. When he died in 1826, the scrapbook disappeared.

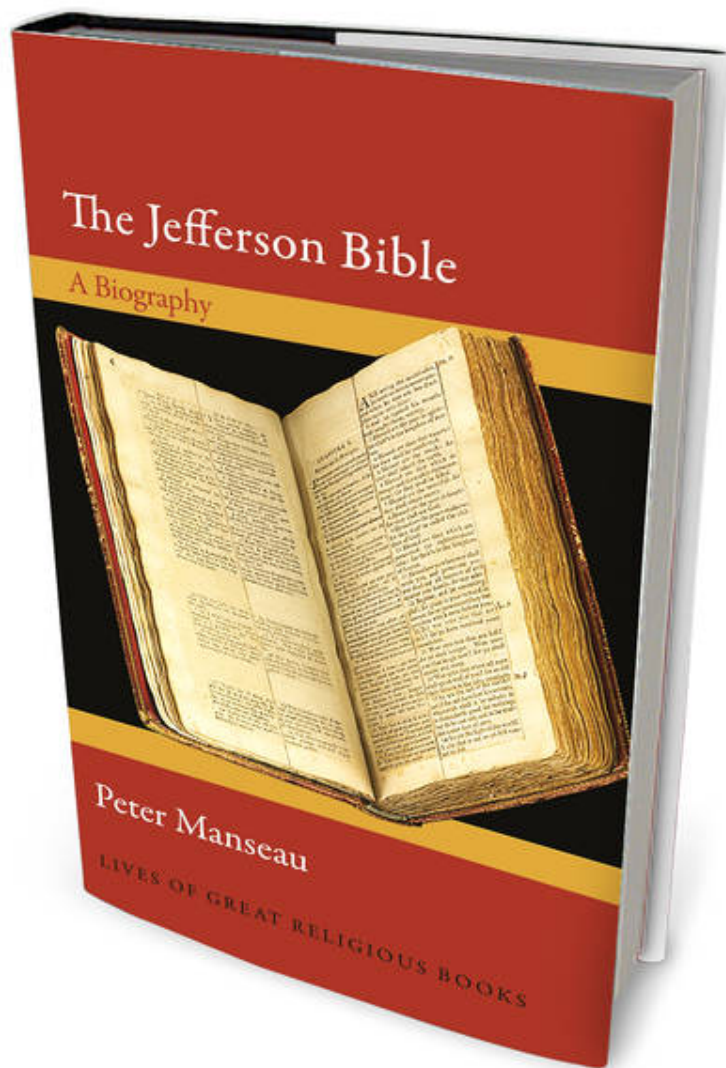


PHOTO: WSJ

THE JEFFERSON BIBLE

By Peter Manseau
Princeton, 221 pages, \$24.95

It was only in the late 19th century that “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth” was rediscovered and identified as an important American text. Jefferson’s Jesus—all morals and no miracles—became an ethical guide for everyman.

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The sudden celebration of his Bible was largely due to the work of Cyrus Adler, a Jew who became a professor of Semitic languages at Johns Hopkins University and who held a series of senior Smithsonian positions. During his doctoral studies, in the mid-1880s, Adler had stumbled across some of the editions of the New Testament that Jefferson had mutilated in order to populate his scrapbook. Jefferson's habit of textual criticism had been aggressive, and the New Testaments he had discarded after excerpting those saying of Jesus he believed to be authentic encouraged Adler to believe that the scrapbook itself might yet be recovered. Soon enough, it was. In 1895, after several years of searching, Adler found the scrapbook and bought it.

In 1895, at the Cotton States and International Exposition, in Atlanta, Adler mounted an exhibition of biblical materials that included Gothic and Anglo-Saxon editions of the Bible; Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, Geneva and King James translations; the "Eliot Indian Bible," a translation of the Geneva Bible into the Massachusett language; and, as a grand

finale, Jefferson's textual collage. For Adler, Jefferson's Bible was the American book—an ethical system supporting republican democracy that showed how religious communities could benefit from the separation of church and state.

Senior figures in Teddy Roosevelt's administration agreed. In 1904, Congress authorized the printing of 9,000 copies of the Jefferson Bible to the consternation of large numbers of Christian clergy, who understood its assault on traditional orthodoxies. The Jefferson Bible took on a life of its own when it became a printed artifact. While its symbolic status continued, its contents were quietly adapted as publishers reinstated in its life of Christ many of the supernatural elements that Jefferson had removed. Since 1904, Mr. Manseau demonstrates, Jefferson's Bible has existed in many forms and offered many meanings. It has been read in support of conservative reaction and progressive change, as a symbol of Christian exceptionalism and of humanity's many mistaken faiths. At once singular and multiple, faithful and heretical, the Jefferson Bible is a fitting symbol of the nation to which it belongs.

For Adler, of course, was right. Jefferson's Bible was an American book. Its project was to make Jesus politically useful, to represent Jesus as an idealized American man. But in turning the Gospels into a handbook of morals Jefferson failed as a religious teacher. For his Jesus is forever on the brink of doing something extraordinary—but never does. “Jefferson's Jesus stories are all set up with no pay off,” Mr. Manseau notes. “Time and again, Jesus indicates that he might be able to perform a miracle of some kind, and then does nothing. While this no doubt made him more acceptable in Enlightenment circles, one imagines it would have made Jesus far less popular in Galilee”—and less interesting, one might add, everywhere else.

But, though it is a great book in its way, Jefferson's Bible will do little to enhance the reputation of its editor. Just as Jefferson took apart his copies of the New Testament, so Smithsonian curators have taken apart his scrapbook in their ongoing conservation efforts. What they have found promises to reveal as much about Jefferson's body as his

soul. The DNA evidence supplied by the hairs they discovered in the disbound manuscript may settle the question, to the degree that there is still reasonable doubt, of his relationship with his slave Sally Hemings and of the paternity of her children.

In “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,” Jefferson stripped from the message of Jesus any discussion of repentance and forgiveness. But, Mr. Manseau reminds us, those might be the elements of Jesus’ teaching that the sage of Monticello needed most.

Mr. Gribben is a professor of history at Queen’s University Belfast.

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