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**Natural Rights and Civil Religion in “Jefferson’s Bible”-Paper Presented at the CPSA  
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Thomas Jefferson is well-known as one of the greatest champions of Enlightenment philosophy in the American Founding period. His vision of a natural rights based democratic republic famously placed special emphasis on the importance of religious toleration and rational examination of all moral, political and scientific questions. What is less widely known, however, is Jefferson’s foray into the field of biblical criticism in the later part of his life. Central to Jefferson’s study of scriptural exegesis was the assumption that the Bible should be read in an historical and critical way just as one “would read Livy or Tacitus” (Sanford 1984: 108). It was in this modernist spirit that Jefferson made his own most unique contribution to biblical studies with the production of his “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English”. In this remarkable work, Jefferson compiled his own version of the gospel drawn from extracts literally cut and pasted from the four evangelists. While the actual words hold the acknowledged authority of scripture, the organizing *nous* behind this narrative is unquestionably Jefferson.

This paper will try to illuminate the relation between Jefferson the enlightenment apostle of political liberty, on the one hand, and Jefferson the biblical commentator and de facto religious teacher, on the other. I will argue that Jefferson’s version of the gospel signified his attempt to construct what he took to be a coherent narrative about the life of Jesus that would be consistent with his vision of a natural rights based democratic society. In the process, Jefferson limned the features of a democratized theology shorn of practically all of the mystical, metaphysical, and supernatural elements of the gospels that Jefferson believed contradicted human reason and sound morality. Jefferson suggests that this minimalist doctrine provides the ground for a tolerant version of Christianity that will support human sociability rather than enflame the socially destructive effects of religious sectarianism which he believed would prove fatal to republican government in America. Jefferson’s Jesus is an enlightenment figure par excellence, a political and social reformer who challenged, and was ultimately destroyed by, the reactionary forces of throne and altar, but whose personal example and ethical teaching remains an inspiration to modern democrats. Finally, we will see how Jefferson’s bible also retained important elements of divine judgment that provided cosmic support for justice, despite his tendency remove practically all other elements of the divine character of Jesus from his gospel. This one remaining feature of traditional Christianity became a key element of what amounted to Jefferson’s blue print for democratic civil religion in America.

### *Background to the Religious Question in Jefferson*

While Jefferson did not finish compiling the “Life and Morals of Jesus” until 1820 in the last decade of his long life, the question of the relation between politics and religion had been a feature of his intellectual career practically from the beginning of his public role in American life. His formulation for the religious grounding of natural rights in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence was a common, if deliberately ambiguous, feature of enlightenment thinking.<sup>1</sup> The equality of independent peoples to which the Americans aspire is vouchsafed both by the “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God”. How “Nature’s God” relates to, or compares with the biblical God is left deliberately unclear, but Jefferson’s construction serves the vital rhetorical purpose of allowing both secular-minded and more religiously inclined colonists to support the political project animating the *Declaration*. Likewise, the “Creator” God from whom human beings are endowed with “certain unalienable rights” is sufficiently devoid of theological substance to put the focus of this famous statement on the object of the rights, namely, “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” rather than the putative divine source of these rights.

Perhaps the ambiguity in Jefferson’s approach toward dealing with the relation between politics and religion is seen even more clearly in his reflections on American democracy in the period immediately following independence. Jefferson soon established himself as one of the most vocal advocates of toleration and the disestablishment of religion in the newly independent states. As early as 1776, Jefferson drafted a bill for religious freedom in Virginia which was defeated by fierce clerical opposition in the state (Conkin 1993: 22). It would be nearly a decade later, however, before the idea of a statute of religious freedom drafted by Jefferson would become the basis of the *Act for Establishing Religious Freedom* passed in 1786 due to the legislative efforts of Jefferson’s good friend James Madison. For Jefferson, the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Virginia was part of a larger project to modernize, and in essence democratize, Virginian society that included ending the practice of primogeniture, opening the western frontier for settlement, and establishing a public system of education (Rubinstein & Smith 2011: 14). In Jefferson’s view, established church hierarchies were one of the key pillars of aristocratic society and monarchical governments.

However, focussing solely on Jefferson’s deep commitment to religious toleration risks obscuring our sense of the underlying tension in his view of the relation between religion and republicanism. On the one hand, Jefferson the enlightenment scourge of intolerance could claim: “It does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg” (Jefferson 1999: 165). Yet this apparent acceptance of public atheism seems to undermine what Jefferson takes to be the moral foundations of a republican body politic. Indeed, Jefferson claimed to be convinced that a democratic people needed to believe that there was divine support for their rights: “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath (Jefferson 1999: 169)?” Clearly, then, Jefferson’s argument for toleration has to be understood in the context of his belief in the connection between religion and morality. It is with the purpose of uncovering this underlying connection that Jesus emerges as a central figure in our study of Jefferson’s political thought.

The development of Jefferson's religious thinking prior to compiling the "Life and Morals of Jesus" reveals a great deal about the background to his biblical studies. Brought up in the established Anglican Church in colonial Virginia, Jefferson turned to eighteenth-century freethinkers as a young adult. From Bolingbroke in particular, young Jefferson absorbed scathing criticism of the biblical tradition and admired Bolingbroke's judgment that ancient Greek and Roman philosophy was a far superior ethical teaching to that of Christianity (Sheridan 1983: 6, Conkin 1993: 23). Arguably this was Jefferson's own judgment of Christianity prior to his introduction to the work of prominent English radical Joseph Priestley. Priestley's voluminous *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, which Jefferson obtained in the mid-1790's, argued that the pure ethical teaching of Jesus had been corrupted by the influence of later doctrinaires such as St Paul and early church leaders who built up a massive ecclesiastical structure upon what was originally a very simple but powerful moral teaching (Priestley 1974: 20-46; Sheridan 1983: 14). His exposure to Priestley's work was probably the turning point in Jefferson's religious development for in Priestley he first found the Jesus as moral teacher and social reformer that would emerge in his own scriptural exegesis years later. With this introduction to Priestley's largely de-divinized and undogmatic Jesus, Jefferson imbibed the characterization of Jesus that would stay with him for the remainder of his life.

The new dispensation that characterized Jefferson's religious thought during his Presidency and post-political career perhaps first emerged in his "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus compared with those of Others" written in 1803 in response to a series of requests from his old revolutionary comrade Benjamin Rush. Rush, stung by Federalist charges in the 1800 election that his old friend was an atheist, pleaded with Jefferson to explain his feelings about Christianity. Jefferson reveals in the *Syllabus* that in any contest between the ancient pagans and the Jews, on the one hand, and Jesus of the Gospels on the other, as to the superior ethical and moral teaching, Jefferson unequivocally gave the advantage to Jesus. In contrast to the parochialism of the ancient pagans and the degraded ideas about God among the Jews, Jefferson claims to find in Jesus' teaching "a system of morals...the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by men" (Jefferson 2004: 39).<sup>2</sup> The *Syllabus* marks Jefferson's confidence in the moral progress of humanity, a belief reflected in his own enlightenment optimism about political, moral and religious advance. It also showed for the first time Jefferson's willingness to reflect deeply upon the significance of Jesus' life and career as a teacher, as opposed to Jesus the miraculous spokesman of a particular church or sect. In the months after writing the *Syllabus*, Jefferson began his first effort to construct an intellectual portrait of Jesus drawn from selections taken from the gospels but this work entitled "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth" was lost from historical record after Jefferson's death (Sheridan 1983: 27). Fortunately, nearly fifteen years after this earlier work Jefferson embarked upon making an expanded version of it that became the Jefferson Bible.

### *The 'Jefferson Bible'*

The *Jefferson Bible*, or the "Life and Morals of Jesus," was completed in 1820. While it seems to have been intended for Jefferson's own moral and religious edification, this hardly exhausts the possible interpretations of his motivations. The immediate impetus for creating the

*Jefferson Bible* was the revived correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams in the years after his retirement from politics. Adams, playing a role similar to Rush a decade earlier, called upon Jefferson to publish a comparative study of classical and Christian morality. While Jefferson demurred from this project, telling Adams that “we must leave therefore to others, younger and more learned than we are, to prepare this euthanasia for Platonic Christianity, and its restoration to the primitive simplicity of its founder,” he evidently was struck by the need for somebody to fashion an authentic account of Jesus’ life (Jefferson 1983: 353, Letter to Adams 12 October 1813). With the death of Joseph Priestley in 1804, there was no other obvious candidate for this task.

The actual text of the *Jefferson Bible* is eighty-five numbered leaves with Greek and Latin texts mounted on the left hand pages and French and English on the right hand page. Sections of scripture were literally cut out of their original and pasted onto the blank pages by Jefferson in a new arrangement. The table of the texts used and the title page are in Jefferson’s handwriting. There was also included two small maps of Palestine and Asia Minor in biblical times (Foote 1941: 63). Once compiled by Jefferson the manuscript was sent to the Richmond bookbinder Fredrick Mayo, who stitched them together in a red leather binding with gold trim. The resulting little book only 8 inches tall and less than 5 inches wide, became what would be known to posterity as the *Jefferson Bible*.

Two features of the *Jefferson Bible* immediately draw the reader’s attention. First, even a cursory reading of the text demonstrates Jefferson’s clear intention to remove all aspects of the gospels that represent what he took to be the corruption of Christianity. Gone from Jefferson’s arrangement is any suggestion of Jesus’ divinity or miraculous powers as Jefferson sought to excise all of the “Platonic” mysteries that had been used for centuries to confound and obscure the simple and powerful ethical teaching of Jesus. As Jefferson revealed to Jared Sparks in a letter written around the time that his revised bible was completed: “The metaphysical inanities of Athanasius, of Loyola, and of Calvin, are to my understanding, mere relapses into polytheism, differing from paganism only by being more unintelligible” (Conkin 1993: 44). To Jefferson, much of what Christianity had become in the hands of sectarians and theologians was mere “demonism,” and among the pernicious mystifications Jefferson sought to efface from his version of the gospel was any trace of the immaculate conception, miracles, resurrection, ascension, the Eucharistic corporeal presence, the trinity and the doctrine of original sin (Sheridan 1983: 42). Thus the first impression to which the reader must adjust one’s vision is that of a Jesus who is an inspired teacher, as well as political and social reformer, but who is also very much a man and is not the son of God as traditional Christianity maintained.

The second striking feature of Jefferson’s bible lies in the arrangement of the text itself. In presenting the scriptural text in a quadrilingual arrangement, Jefferson subtly rejected the more common approach to scriptural exegesis at the time which was the “Harmonies of the Four Evangelists” format. This approach used by Priestley among others involved arranging the texts of the gospels in parallel columns side by side. Rather than employ this format to highlight discrepancies and variations among the gospels, Jefferson “reproduced his own mosaic version in four different languages” (Sanford 1984: 109). Jefferson’s aim, then, was clearly to produce a single coherent narrative about the life and teaching of Jesus, the focus of which would be the exemplary character of his words and deeds. By narrowing the focus of the gospel narrative in

this way, Jefferson appears to accept the basic modernist (Spinozist) premise about scriptural authorship, which assumes that many of the authors and editors of the biblical text imposed their own prejudices, superstitions, and ignorance onto the scripture (Spinoza 2007: chap. 7). Indeed, Jefferson approached the gospels with a strong dose of skepticism about the text itself apparently convinced that the gospels do not present a complete system of ethics because Jesus died before he was able to write down his moral teaching. As such his teaching became garbled by his less well endowed disciples who wrote it down years later. The single coherent narrative that Jefferson tried to weave together out of the four discrete gospels was, we shall argue, part of Jefferson's political project to present Jesus as an heroic teacher, reformer and moralist perfectly suited to an enlightened democratic age.

### *Jesus as Teacher*

The hero of Jefferson's Bible is Jesus the exemplary teacher of ethics. This Jesus is radically de-mystified as Jefferson excises practically every mention of Christ's miracles or his prophetic mission. The teacher who emerges from the pages of Jefferson's reformed text eschews dogma. This Jesus is primarily concerned with morality, not articles of faith, and ethics replaces metaphysics at the core of belief. It is perhaps not surprising then that Jefferson relies mainly on the text of the gospels of Luke and Matthew that are the more historically elaborate accounts of Jesus' life, rather than John and Mark that are arguably more focussed on Jesus' miracles. The Jesus that emerges from the pages of Jefferson's bible is an inspired teacher whose message speaks to multiple audiences and whose deeds are meant to convey an exemplary moral character.

In order to appreciate the radical nature of Jefferson's de-mystified Jesus, it is good to recall what it is that Jefferson chose to omit from his account. In the first instance, we see Jefferson's decision to commence his narrative at Luke chapter 2 with the pronouncement "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed."<sup>3</sup> Gone is any suggestion of the miraculous birth recounted in Luke 1 and Matthew 1. Lacking angelic visitations and lengthy genealogies, Jefferson's Jesus is simply a precocious Jewish child born into a remote corner of the Roman Empire. The first actual story of Jesus' life that Jefferson chooses to highlight is his disobedience of his parents when he stayed behind in the synagogue in Jerusalem when he was 12 years old. Jefferson relates Luke's insistence on the young Jesus' intellectual powers: "And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and his answers" (52). Notably Jefferson omits any reference to Jesus' cheeky claim about seeing to his real "Father's business" in the temple, that is as the son of God rather than the son of Joseph (Lk 2:49). We also see this tendency to omit any reference to Jesus as the son of God in Jefferson's selections relating to John the Baptist. In Jefferson's Bible the entire direct relation of Jesus and John is contained in four verses and culminates in Matthew 3:13 "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptised of him" (53). Jefferson omits the famous exchange wherein John predicts the coming of the Messiah and his own unworthiness to tie the promised one's sandals (Mt 3:11). Likewise, Jefferson cuts out any reference to the miraculous nature of Jesus' baptism such as Matthew 3:16 where we are told of Jesus that "the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a

dove, and lighting upon him”. Shorn of its miraculous and prophetic quality, Jefferson’s account of Jesus’ baptism relies entirely on the logical connection between the idea of Jesus’ increase in “wisdom and stature” as a teacher (52) and his personal commitment to a life of preaching symbolized by his baptism. Jesus is the thinker as activist.

So much of what has historically come to define Jesus’ life and mission is removed from Jefferson’s Bible. Jesus never casts out any devils or heals the lame. One fascinating example of this new miracle-free Jesus can be seen in Jefferson’s use of John 9 in which Jesus rebuts the Pharisees’ claims that a blind man’s affliction is a result of sin. Jesus famously responded: “Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (81, J 9:3; cf. Gaustad 1995: 129). What Jefferson omits, of course, is Jesus’ even more famous deed whereby he heals the blind man with clay formed from his own spittle (J 9:6). Jefferson’s Jesus faces no trial and temptation by the devil in the desert and never even hints at any desire or capacity to feed the masses with a few loaves and fishes (MT 4, 14). Finally, Jefferson’s Jesus ends the narrative with a brutal but natural death with no prospect of resurrection: “There laid they Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed” (120).

In lieu of miracles, Jefferson’s Jesus demonstrates his goodness by virtue of the salutary and edificatory nature of his moral teaching. Throughout Jefferson’s version of the text, the reader is reminded that all of Jesus’ auditors (even his enemies) acknowledged that he “taught as one with authority” (e.g., 53, 63). Jefferson’s Jesus frequently invokes the maxim “Ask and ye shall receive” (L 11:7-13), by which he presents a vision of God as an approachable entity, apprehensible and accessible to human beings without the intermediation of clerics. The core of Jesus’ moral teaching in the Jefferson Bible is a selection of classic parables including the Good Samaritan, the adulteress story, the prodigal son, the servants in the vineyard and the Sermon on the Mount. The common thread running through these stories and homilies is the theme of forgiveness, humility and recognition of basic human equality. Jesus’ preaching of concern for others contains a frequently explicit repudiation of sectarian and partisan loyalties that efface one’s sense of our moral obligations to our fellow human beings.

Another important feature of Jesus’ teaching in Jefferson’s Bible is his profoundly anti-materialist thrust. In a text that was intended in part to reduce distracting and pointless repetition in the inherited gospels, we are struck by Jefferson’s choice to recount Jesus’ driving the money changers out of the Temple, not once but twice (53 J 2:14, 97 Mk 11:15). The reader is also treated to long extended treatments of the evils of covetousness taken from Matthew 6 and Luke 12 (60, 65-66; see also 93 Mt 19: 23-4). While it may be somewhat surprising to see an advocate of Lockean individual natural rights such as Jefferson rehearse the anti-materialist message of Jesus with such aplomb, it is useful to recall that Jefferson’s Jesus highlights the socially destructive effects of greed and selfishness. When Jesus teaches that “ye cannot serve God and Mammon,” the evangelist also insists that the Pharisees, the agents of established Judaism, “were covetous” (88, Lk16:13-14). The danger to which Jesus draws our attention, then, has to do with the oligarchic tendencies exemplified by the alliance of church and state. Wealth and privilege destroy the essence of religion, according to Jefferson’s Jesus, because they tend to replace the primacy of moral teaching with the emphasis on elaborate forms and rituals. Jefferson’s Jesus

reminds us that the ‘Our Father’ prayer was originally conceived as an alternative to the ostentatious displays of the Pharisees (59, MT 6:8-9).

Jefferson’s Jesus is a de-divinized figure whose significance derives from his authority as a teacher rather than as a miracle worker. In his teaching about forgiveness, humility, and the dangers of greed, Jesus advances an egalitarian philosophy and a deep concern for social harmony. Jefferson’s Jesus emerges as a teacher who defies sectarian divisions in the name of basic moral obligations. The anti-dogmatic character of Jefferson’s Jesus, for whom ethics replaces metaphysics as his primary religious motivation, indicates Jefferson’s rejection of supernatural claims which all too regularly become objects of faith that divide people into sects and factions. The Jesus of the Jefferson Bible provides a moral teaching that he hoped can be the basis of agreement on ethical principles that are available to natural reason, and require no unfounded belief in God’s suspension of the universal natural laws.

### *Jesus as Social and Political Reformer*

An important element of Jefferson’s efforts to de-mystify Jesus was his decision to omit practically any reference to Jesus’ prophetic mission or fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. In Jefferson’s Bible there is no mention of Jesus as the messiah born of the house of David and sent into the world to liberate the Jewish people. At times this omission is particularly striking. For example, while Jefferson includes most of John 7 in his bible, he pointedly omits the clutch of verses that comprise Jesus’ elucidation of the prophetic quality of his birth: “Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David” (J 7:41; cf. 80). The impact of the moral teaching belonging to Jefferson’s Jesus lay in the moral, religious, and political reality of the Jewish people at a particular point in their history, rather than as the putative fulfillment of centuries old prophetic writings. What we see in Jefferson’s Jesus is a champion of political and social reform who drew “great multitudes” to him by virtue of his teaching directed to encouraging social cooperation, and to the elimination of sectarian rivalry and prejudices (Mt 8, Mk 3:31). Jesus’ recurring battles with the Jewish religious authorities reflects Jefferson’s belief that the natural tendency of religion throughout history has been to create conflict among people. In many respects, Jesus is to the Pharisees what Jefferson saw himself or Priestley to be in relation to the agents of the established Christian churches in their own time. Jesus, then, stands as a progenitor of the enlightenment ideal to which Jefferson himself aspired.

As we have seen, the content of Jesus’ teaching in the Jefferson Bible was drawn from some of the most memorable events and parables in the four gospels. However, the more emphatically political aspect of Jesus’ career that is central to Jefferson’s compilation departs considerably from the traditional presentation of Jesus. Take for instance Jefferson’s use of the John the Baptist story. We have already observed that Jefferson excised anything in the relation between John and Jesus that could be construed as miraculous. What role, then, does John the Baptist play in Jefferson’s account? For Jefferson, John the Baptist represents a cautionary tale about the dangers confronting reformers who challenge established power and privilege. Indeed, Jefferson includes an extended discussion from the rarely used gospel of Mark detailing the death of John at the hands of Herod’s scheming wife and step-daughter (53-54, Mk 6:17-28). The role this story plays in Jefferson’s account is as a lesson to Jesus who exercised considerable

caution in his own ministry supposedly ever mindful of John's demise at the hands of powerful political and religious elites.

The particular form that Jesus' caution takes throughout the Jefferson Bible is directly connected to the status of Jerusalem in the larger narrative. This Jesus is defined in opposition to the center of Jewish religious power. This oppositional relation evolves throughout the text with Jesus' relative safety and security in Galilee contrasted sharply with the intrinsic danger and hostility of Judea. Specifically, Jerusalem is cast as the seductive but corrupt co-conspirator in Jesus' demise. At one crucial point in the story, Jesus rebuffs his disciples' advice to go into Judea with the claim that "My time is not yet full come. When he said these words unto them, he abode still in Galilee" (79, J 7:8-9). Beyond the relative security of Galilee was a world of Pharisee plots and conspiracies to entrap Jesus (55, Mt 12:14-15). This sense of Jerusalem as the center of a corrupt and vengeful clerical elite animates Jesus' predictions about the destruction of the Temple. These predictions are unusual in Jefferson's account for a number of reasons. First, Jefferson employs repeated references to the same basic prediction from two separate gospels in Matthew 24 and Luke 23 (104-05, 118). This kind of repetition is unusual in Jefferson's Bible one goal of which was precisely to eliminate distracting repetition. Second, Jesus' assertion that regarding the buildings of the Temple "There shall not be left here one stone upon another" (104, Mt 24:2), seems to contradict Jefferson's tendency to remove any of Jesus' prophetic pronouncements.

How then are we to interpret Jefferson's design regarding Jesus' relation to Jerusalem? The repetitiveness could simply signify the importance that Jefferson wished to convey about Jesus' animosity towards, and ultimate destruction at the hands of, the Jewish religious authorities. Moreover, we need not subscribe to the proposition that Jesus' foretelling of the destruction of the Temple is supernatural for given the context of corruption that Jefferson emphasizes in his text selection it is quite plausible that Jefferson's Jesus is not speaking as the son of God, but rather as an intelligent observer of events who is convinced of the dramatic moral decline of established Judaism in his time. Such also would be the thrust of Jefferson's decision to employ repeated references to Jesus' driving out of the money changers from the Temple as well. The Temple in Jerusalem, then, serves Jefferson as an allegory for the pernicious effects of centralized religious power per se.

Of course, the most dramatic feature of Jesus' reformist zeal had to do with his frequent battles with those representatives of established Judaism, the Pharisees and the scribes. These agents of privilege and sectarian pride constantly tested Jesus' prudence. They also, however, symbolized what Jefferson took to be the decline of Judaism into a form of pedantic legalism that simply empowers clerics. The two aspects of the Pharisees' world view that Jefferson's Jesus confronts are their distorted conception of good works and their proclivity to interfere with normal social intercourse for the sake of reinforcing sectarian prejudices. First with respect to works, we see Jefferson's Jesus regularly confronting the Pharisees about the deleterious social effects of their strict legalism. While Jefferson's de-divinized Jesus does not get into trouble for healing the lame on the Sabbath, Jefferson's Jesus nonetheless has many occasions in which he chides the Pharisees for callously countenancing human suffering rather than perform works on the Sabbath. As Jesus charges in an early pivotal exchange with the Pharisees: "What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath-day, will he



not lay hold of it, and lift it out? And he said unto them, The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” (55, Mt 12:11-12; Mk 2:27). Jesus’ humane interpretation of Mosaic Law meshes well with Jefferson’s larger aim to reduce religion primarily to the encouragement of good moral behaviour. Excessive legalism, in this view, not only empowers a juridical and clerical elite, it also provides fertile grounds for dispute and schism over an infinite variety of interpretive hues.

The idea that the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees is socially destructive is also redolent of the battles Jefferson’s Jesus has with them over seemingly innocuous social intercourse. No less than three of the episodes that Jefferson chooses to highlight the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees have to do with Jesus dining at the home of a Pharisee. In these stories taken from Matthew, Luke and Mark, Jesus is criticized by the Pharisees after accepting an invitation to dine with them, either because he did not wash himself properly or he allowed an ‘unclean’ woman to join in the meal (63-4 Mt 11, 68 L 11, 75-76 Mk 7). The portrait of the Pharisees that Jefferson constructs is that of a group of malevolent fanatics who are obsessed with bodily functions, and will try to find any excuse to interrupt normal social intercourse with their dogmatic fetishes. The central thrust of Jesus’ attack on the Pharisees is, of course, their hypocrisy: “Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (102-03 Mt 23:14). The Pharisees use religion as a means to hold power and to destroy their enemies. By confronting the Pharisees, Jesus strikes at the heart of the nexus of politico-religious power in established Judaism. His popularity with the multitudes no doubt reflects deeper dissatisfaction with the clerical elite among the broader population. Herein lies the populist appeal of Jefferson’s Jesus of whom his role as scourge of the proud and hypocritical is much more important than it is in the traditional gospels precisely because Jefferson’s Jesus makes no claim to a prophetic mission or miraculous powers.

Jefferson’s Jesus is a teacher with a social and political agenda that includes putting forth a moral vision to encourage sociability and a humane understanding of the salutary effects of good works. As such, this de-divinized Jesus cannot help but be in opposition to the established religious power embodied by the Temple in Jerusalem. On matters of belief it is hard to escape the impression that Jefferson’s Jesus is a champion of individual conscience. The fact that Jefferson felt that he had to omit any references to Jesus’ prophetic mission signifies that either the historical Jesus was not immune to superstition about the Messiah, or more likely in Jefferson’s view, that Jesus’ disciples who wrote the gospels definitely were not immune to superstitions and the allure of Platonic mystifications. That Jesus was ultimately a victim of clerical power is perhaps the most lasting legacy in Jefferson’s Bible wherein the person of the reformer is destroyed, but the moral example lives on in the enlightenment struggles of Jefferson’s own time.

### *Jesus’ Old Time Religion*

Jefferson’s Jesus is a politically savvy reformer whose eventual destruction at the hands of the established power of throne and altar is designed to encourage free thinking and excoriate the cynical hypocrisy of political and religious elites. Jesus’ humane, tolerant and non-dogmatic moral teaching contrasts favorably with the self-serving pedantic legalism of the Pharisees and

the scribes. However, in one crucial respect Jefferson's Jesus retains a very traditional aspect of Christian theology: namely, the conception of an Afterlife. This is striking because, on the one hand, Jefferson omits any reference to Jesus' resurrection, or indeed anything subsequent to his burial. In this respect, Jefferson follows Priestley's lead in viewing claims to Christ's divinity as an unfortunate accretion of later disciples. Yet, on the other hand, the prospect of reward and punishment in the Afterlife runs throughout Jefferson's account of Jesus. Jefferson selected practically every instance in all the four gospels when Jesus threatened eternal pain to evil doers and reward for the just. This aspect of the Jeffersonian Bible comports well with the sentiments expressed in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* where he pronounced that the people must feel that their liberties are "the gift of God," not to be violated "but with his wrath" (Jefferson 1999: 169). However, we will have to consider whether Jefferson's attempt to remove the divine nature of Jesus, while retaining a viable conception of the Afterlife, undermines the ultimate coherence of the theological underpinnings of Jefferson's Bible.

As early as the 'Syllabus' written in 1803, Jefferson expressed his belief that one of the great advantages of Jesus' teaching over ancient paganism and Judaism was his articulation of an Afterlife. Jefferson compared Jesus' emphatic teaching about "the doctrine of a future state" with the more desultory thinking of the Jews on this matter who he claimed typically "either doubted or disbelieved" in the Afterlife (Jefferson 2004: 40). The Jesus of Jefferson's Bible is far from being a bloodless rationalist or a dry logician. He is at times a thundering preacher who clearly saw an important role for divine judgment to support morality. Jefferson's Jesus recounts with great aplomb the eternal rewards of the good and the torments of the wicked. While it may be true that Jefferson rejected the orthodox teaching on Hell constructed by centuries of doctrine, he nonetheless wanted to preserve a palpable sense of the idea of hellish punishments in his version of the gospels (Sheridan 1983: 40). Jesus repeatedly intones about those left behind on judgment day: "Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left" (91 L 17:36). Jefferson also retained the 'mini-Apocalypse' in Matthew 24-25 in which Jesus warns us that God will come to "divideth his sheep from the goats" (107 Mt 25:32). We are told that there will be a "day of Judgment" (62 Mt 12:35) and that evil doers shall be cast "into the furnace of the fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (71, Mt 13:50). In the midst of all this fire and brimstone Jefferson even allows his narrative to be infiltrated by mystical images of angels (71) and references to the "Son of Man...in his glory" (107); superstitions otherwise normally purged from his text.

How are to understand Jefferson's apparently atavistic use of divine judgment in a text largely devoid of mysticism? Clearly, Jefferson saw this aspect of the gospels as a vital element in his project to re-conceive religion as support for morality. Notably Jefferson's definition of wrong-doers who will be punished, as well as those who will be rewarded, is rooted in behaviour rather than belief. The hypocritical Pharisees, the usual targets of Jesus' admonitions, are threatened with eternal punishment because of what they do or fail to do with respect to the well being of others. They are not damned by for their beliefs. In part, the use of images of divine punishment is meant to convey the idea that righteousness is the narrow path and requires continual reaffirmation through good works. Jefferson's point also, however, seems to be similar to that of John Locke in the *Reasonableness of Christianity* who suggested that the basic hedonic calculation about fear of pain and hope for reward is a vital supplement to moral virtue for most people who lack the leisure or mental capacity for deep theological ponderings (Locke 1958: 64-

66). While the use of references to angels seems seriously out of step with Jefferson's enlightenment bent, at least he relegates angels to some future point of end-time and not as supernatural forces that interfere with, or suspend, the normal operation of nature.

Jefferson's attitude toward resurrection is also ambiguous in his gospel. On the one hand, he removed any suggestion that Christ rose from the dead. Yet Jesus' teaching on the Afterlife seems to depend on some idea of the immortality of soul. As one commentator observes: "The dominant Jewish religious groups including the Pharisees, had fully accepted and integrated the idea of a resurrection well before the birth of Jesus, and by then a few Hellenized Jews were already flirting with doctrines of immortality" (Conkin 1993: 39). But Jesus' teaching is hardly simply an echo of regnant ideas at the time. Indeed, even in the context of Jesus in the Jefferson Bible, the teacher's position on resurrection is complex. At one point, Jesus promises that those who are generous to the poor will be blessed "for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just" (84-5, L 14:14). However, for the most part Jefferson's Jesus rejects the idea of immortality. For example, in the parable in the punishment of the selfish rich man in the Afterlife, Jesus concludes by complaining of the callous wealthy: "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead" (89, L 16:31). This somewhat ironic use of the idea of resurrection is supplemented by Jesus' later reflections on it in his response to the Sadducees, who denied the possibility of resurrection, when he claimed: "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (101, Mt 22:39). What then are we to make of Jefferson's attitude toward the idea of resurrection?

The complicating factor in examining Jefferson's view of resurrection lies in trying to reconcile his materialism with the use of divine judgement in his gospel. The theological basis of Jefferson's Jesus' use of the Afterlife is belief in resurrection without immortality (Conkin 1993: 46). While this belief clearly breaks from orthodox Christian doctrine, there is a model for this kind of theology that combines materialism with the proposition of life after death through corporeal resurrection in the thought of Thomas Hobbes (Pangle & Pangle 1993: 318, n.11; Hobbes 1994: Parts 3 and 4). Jefferson's Hobbist Jesus rejected the immortality of soul as presumably incompatible with the laws of nature, but preserves the idea of divine judgment in the prospect of bodily resurrection. By this means, the miraculous powers of a providential God remain nonetheless intelligible within a broadly materialist framework. Eternal life would then be construed as a principle of faith obviously beyond reason but not necessarily in contradiction to reason. Regardless of whether Jefferson's corporeal theology ultimately was coherent, we can say with some confidence that he believed the inclusion of divine judgment in his Bible was necessary to support the ethical and moral teachings of Jesus. The fear that this vestigial belief in the Afterlife could become a permanent source of superstition would presumably be one of the challenges Jefferson hoped would be successfully confronted by encouraging scientific investigation and religious freedom in democratic society.

### *Conclusion*

Jefferson's Bible is clearly an Enlightenment project devised by one of the most important American minds of his generation. Jefferson took upon himself the task of giving greater coherence to a text that he saw as radically deficient. While he felt that the spirit of

Jesus' ethical system was "the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man" (Jefferson 2004: 39), Jefferson believed that the garbled form in which it has been passed down through history by the church authorities had entrenched superstition, ignorance and error. As such, Jefferson's editorial plan sought to purge all of the irrational and mystical elements of the text and preserve as much as possible of the pure and simple moral teaching of Jesus. Clearly, even though Jefferson rejected the idea of supernatural revelation, he saw great value in the diversity of religious views that freedom to examine Jesus' words and deeds, unadorned with later accretions, would entail (Sheridan 1983: 9). In this way, freedom of individual conscience could be made compatible with an authoritative text that is not simply in the service of a church hierarchy.

The social and political teaching of Jefferson's Bible offers a scriptural text to support the principle of toleration. However, the putative coherence of the Jefferson Bible reflects the unity of Jefferson's thought rather than what he believed about the canonical text produced by the councils of the early church. That toleration had never been the official teaching of Christianity led in Jefferson's view to the inescapable conclusion that the Bible as it has been transmitted to modernity is clearly incapable of supporting a free and democratic society. Yet even as he refashioned the gospels to place renewed importance on socially constructive morality rather than deeply divisive doctrinal positions, Jefferson also revealed his sense of the limits to Enlightenment philosophy by retaining a muscular dose of divine judgment bearing eternal rewards and punishments. Here too the case of the public affirmation of belief in the Afterlife had almost solely to do with the salutary effects this belief had on moral behaviour.

The cynosure of the new religious dispensation contained in Jefferson's Bible is, of course, the life of Jesus. The individual that Jefferson crafts through his editorial process is in many respects an exemplary modern democrat. Jefferson's Jesus challenges established political and religious elites, even as he excoriates the narrow-minded and sectarian Pharisees who seek to employ religion as a means to advance their own social and political agenda. This is a Jesus who speaks to several different audiences on multiple levels through parables, homilies, and Socratic-style exchanges with his clerical and political opponents. This de-divinized Jesus is, of course, a staple of the Unitarian strand of American Protestantism. Jefferson's admiration for Unitarianism was well known (Onuf 2009: 27-9). In a letter written to a friend in the last few years of his life, Jefferson famously predicted: "I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States" (Letter to James Smith 8 December 1822 quoted in Sheridan 1983: 36) While there is no clear evidence to suggest that Jefferson intended his Bible for anything but his own private use, there is also nothing that forecloses the possibility that he may have seen a role for his Bible in the future growth of Unitarianism in the early American Republic. Indeed, as we have seen there is a good deal of evidence indicating that Jefferson always hoped that a skillful writer such as Joseph Priestley would be able to refashion the gospels in a manner consistent with the spirit of enlightenment. In this light, it is perhaps not beyond the realm of possibility that Jefferson may have hoped that his Bible could become a model for an Unitarian scripture that could be mass produced and distributed among the public, but especially among the educated young men in the seminaries and universities such as Jefferson's beloved UVA who would be the next generation of future leaders of the democracy. In this way, Jefferson, who was never one to hide his light under a bushel, may have reserved to himself the enormous task of replacing the venerable, but radically

defective council –created New Testament produced in a backward and barbaric epoch with his own more compact, rational and socially beneficial offering designed for a new democratic age.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the use of both theological and more secular arguments for natural law in Locke (1988: *Second Treatise*, sections 6-12) and Grotius (1925, prolegomena, section 11).

<sup>2</sup> I agree in large part with the observation of Sheldon (2000: 82) that Jefferson believed the superiority of Jesus' authentic moral teaching lay in what he took to be the fact that Jesus' ethics are better suited to human beings' social nature than either pagan philosophy or Judaism.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from the Jefferson Bible are taken from Jefferson 2004. Hereafter in notes and text just see page number and possibly biblical chapter and verse in parenthesis.