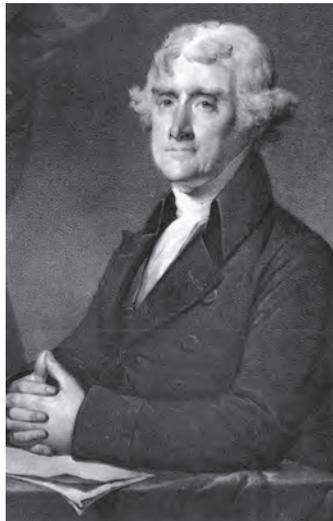




Cyrus Adler
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)



Thomas Jefferson
(Courtesy Library of Congress)

Resurrection and Life: Cyrus Adler and the Jefferson Bible

Greg Robinson

One outstanding product of the American Enlightenment is *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, Thomas Jefferson's compilation of extracts from the New Testament. The volume, popularly known as the "Jefferson Bible," portrays Jesus as a moral philosopher rather than in divine terms. Fearing that its rationalist analysis of scripture and its implicit attack on revealed religion would prove too controversial, Jefferson refused to publish the text during his lifetime; it did not appear in print until the 20th century when the federal government commissioned an edition. Yet by the century's end, the "wee-little book," as Jefferson called it,¹ ranked among the Virginian's most popular works. It appeared in numerous editions in different media and remained a subject for lectures, sermons, and academic debate. This paper explores the central but unknown "Jewish history" of the Jefferson Bible: its rediscovery by the pioneering American Jewish scholar Cyrus Adler, the connection between Jefferson's Bible study and Adler's own sense of Jewish universalism, and the controversies over Adler's participation and the use of public money in the work's publication.

An American Gospel

Thomas Jefferson was noted, both during his lifetime and beyond, as a great champion of religious freedom. In his proposed epitaph, he himself marked his greatest contributions—not mentioning his presidency—as the Declaration of Independence, the University of Virginia, and the 1786 Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. Because of his uncompromising stand in favor of religious tolerance and against state religion, Jefferson was attacked viciously by the bigots of his day. During the 1800 presidential campaign, mudslinging pro-Federalist clergy accused him of being an atheist and infidel. As a result, Jefferson refused to discuss his religious ideas in public.

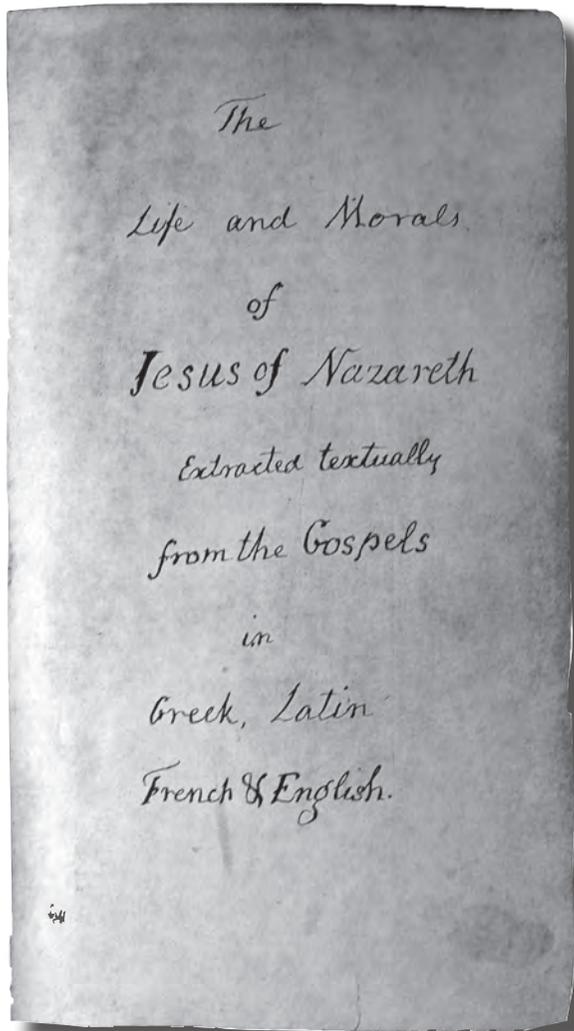
Yet he spent a good deal of time privately pondering the teachings of Jesus, which he referred to as "the most perfect system" of morality ever invented. In the 1790s, Jefferson read and was impressed by the works of the British radical philosopher and scientist Joseph Priestley, who argued that Christ's message had been "corrupted" by the early church. Following some prodding by his friend, the doctor and statesman Benjamin Rush, Jefferson set out to define and refine scripture to restore it to its original purity. During his first term as president, Jefferson wrote a letter to Rush explaining his religious views, in which he declared that he was a Christian—that is, a follower of "the genuine precepts of Jesus himself." He accompanied his letter with a "Syllabus," as he termed it,

comparing favorably the moral teachings of Jesus to those of the ancient Greeks and the Jews (of whom Jesus was nonetheless a representative).²

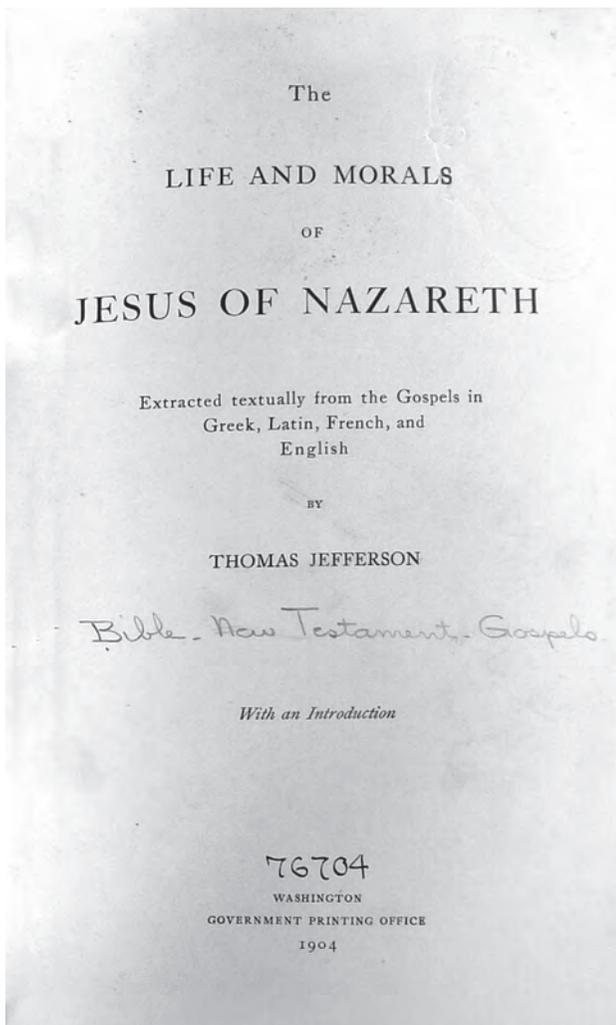
In the process, Jefferson decided to compile a version of the Gospels that included only what he considered the authentic ideas and teachings of Jesus. With rationalistic confidence, Jefferson took up his King James Bible, snipped out the parts that he believed were original and authentic, and pasted them onto the pages of a blank book in historical order. The rest he rejected. Fearing that his revision of the Bible would be discovered and used against him as evidence of irreverence or infidelity, he disguised his purpose under a racially paternalist fiction—he claimed on the title page of his compendium, which he dubbed “The Philosophy

of Jesus,” that the contents were a simplification of scripture designed to appeal to the “limited” understanding of American Indians and would serve as a model for Gospel translations into Indian languages.³

While Jefferson at first considered publishing the Bible studies, he evidently decided it was too dangerous politically. Instead, he laid his work aside and did not return to his biblical analysis until several years after leaving the White House. In 1812, Jefferson reconciled with his old friend and bitter political rival, John Adams, and the two took up their famous correspondence to “explain” themselves to each other. Adams informed Jefferson that one of Jefferson’s letters



Handwritten title page of Jefferson's work
(Courtesy Mercantile Library, Cincinnati, OH)



Title page of Jefferson's work
(Courtesy Mercantile Library, Cincinnati, OH)

diamonds from the dung hill”—“There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.”⁵ Inspired by the dialogue with Adams, Jefferson ordered a set of Bibles in different languages. He proceeded to paste extracts from the Greek text of the New Testament, along with Latin and French translations, alongside the English version, forming a biographical study of Jesus and a compendium of his teachings.⁶

Jefferson's Gospel contains no miraculous elements: no story of the annunciation, no virgin birth, no angels appearing to the shepherds. It ends

to Joseph Priestley, in which he had mentioned Rush's challenge to him to define his religion, had been published in the memoirs of a British Unitarian minister, Theophilus Lindsay. While initially Jefferson was stunned and horrified by the news of the unauthorized publication of his private correspondence, he became absorbed by Adams's request that he provide more details as to his beliefs.⁴ Jefferson declared to Adams that once the Gospel was edited down so that only the true words of Jesus were left—verses, he remarked, that could be separated from the supernatural elements others had added like “the

abruptly with the death and entombment of Jesus, and the Resurrection is nowhere mentioned. Instead, Jefferson highlights the Sermon on the Mount and the parables as a paragon of ethical conduct. In short, as Marilyn Mellowes puts it, Jefferson's Jesus, modeled on the humanitarian ideals of the Founding Fathers and other Enlightenment thinkers, bears a striking resemblance to Jefferson himself.⁷

Jefferson hoped at first to arrange for the book's anonymous publication. However, his fear of the consequences for his reputation should his authorship be discovered proved too great. In 1816, Jefferson secretly granted permission for a friend, Francis Van der Kemp, to publish his original "syllabus" in England, and it appeared, along with a letter to Rush, in a British Unitarian journal. To Jefferson's distress, the journal noted that the texts were the work of an eminent American revolutionary statesman. While this clue revealed his authorship to a few discerning readers, such as John Quincy Adams, Jefferson was not publicly exposed as the author. Nevertheless, the incident solidified his determination to keep the text to himself, and he ultimately abandoned all thought of publication. However, he remained attached to his work and frequently read through it before going to bed.⁸

Cyrus Adler

Jefferson's early biographer, Henry S. Randall, reported on Jefferson's biblical studies in the 1850s, and a small circle of scholars knew of them. However, the compilation itself remained concealed in the custody of Jefferson's family until the 1890s, when Dr. Cyrus Adler became interested in it.⁹ Adler (1863–1940), born in Arkansas during the Civil War, received his bachelor of arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1883 he joined the department of Semitics at Johns Hopkins University, where he received his doctorate at age twenty-four, in 1887. Not only was Adler the first person to receive a doctorate in Semitics from a U.S. university, but he was one of the first generation of Americans to be granted a doctorate—he received his degree just one year after his fellow student, Woodrow Wilson. So brilliant was Adler that after graduation, he was hired as an instructor by the Semitics department, and then in 1890 was named an associate professor.¹⁰ His principal goal, as he later described it, was to expand the field of Jewish studies. However, he was soon diverted from this by a larger mission. In 1892, on the recommendation of Dr. Samuel P. Langley, pioneer aviator and director of the Smithsonian Institution, Adler was hired by the establishment with the title of librarian (a position that did not mean desk staffer but chief of infrastructure and collections) and later rose to the position of assistant secretary.¹¹

During his time at the Smithsonian, Adler later noted, he gave up doing research on Jewish studies to establish an institution open to scholars of all races and religions. This was an exaggeration—throughout these years, Adler

undertook an active schedule of scholarly conferences, contributed articles on various topics, and most importantly played a major role in the foundation of a number of Jewish community institutions, including the Jewish Publication Society and the American Jewish Historical Society, of which he later served as president for two decades.¹² Still, he did spend considerable time during these years working on the Smithsonian's various projects. Moreover, as the first Jewish American to attain such a prominent place in the federal bureaucracy (his Smithsonian position was considered the equivalent of a sub-Cabinet post), Adler also assumed the demanding task of pleading the cause of Jews inside the federal government.

It was a difficult period for Jews internationally. The Dreyfus Affair in France and the pogroms in Russia were only the most publicized expressions of antisemitism. Adler's resolve to retain his Orthodoxy, even while remaining "modern," was not without its own difficulties. In 1904, after many months of effort, he was granted a meeting with President Theodore Roosevelt to discuss the plight of the Jews internationally. However, the President's staff set the meeting for a Saturday. After great thought, Adler decided that he could not work on the Sabbath, even at the cost of canceling his much-prized meeting and alienating the White House. He thus called the President's secretary with his regrets. Fortunately, Roosevelt himself rapidly grasped the problem and called back personally a few minutes later to change the meeting date to a weekday.¹³

Adler's link to Jefferson dates back to 1886, when the young graduate student volunteered to catalogue the Hebraic book collection of Joshua I. Cohen, a Jewish bibliophile in Baltimore. While preparing the catalogue, Adler came upon two mutilated English copies of the New Testament, which were identified as part of Thomas Jefferson's collection. His curiosity piqued, Adler studied Randall's biography and found references in Jefferson's letters to his arrangement of the Gospels. When Adler discovered that the actual text was absent from the collection of Jefferson's complete writings, whose publication the federal government had arranged in 1873, he began the search for the unpublished manuscript of what he dubbed the "Jefferson Bible." He intensified the search after he joined the Smithsonian.

Why was Adler so interested in Jefferson's text? On first glance, the book has nothing to do with Judaic religion or philosophy (indeed, the New Testaments were omitted from Adler's catalogue of Cohen's Hebraic collection). Even if Jefferson did not argue for the divinity of Jesus, he nonetheless extolled Christian morality over that of Jews. In his "Syllabus," Jefferson deplored as "degraded" the moral doctrines of the Old Testament. In a letter to Ezra Stiles Ely, Jefferson commented, "I am not a Jew, and therefore do not adopt their theology, which supposes the God of infinite justice to punish the sins of the fathers upon their children; [while] the benevolent and sublime reformer of that religion has told us only that God is good and perfect, but has not defined him."¹⁴

On the other hand, Adler was both personally and professionally interested in biblical “higher criticism” and in scholarly controversies over biblical texts.¹⁵ He was impressed by the evidence of Jefferson’s great religious devotion, even within a work of theological criticism, and by his sense that Jefferson’s emphasis on the humanitarian teachings of Jesus closely resembled those of the Jewish Enlightenment. It is unclear whether Adler was aware at the time of Jefferson’s defense in his later years of religious toleration and the rights of the Jews.¹⁶ Still, he was surely pleased by Jefferson’s assertion, as his letter to Ely indicates, of Jesus’s own Jewish identity. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Jefferson removed from his New Testament all of the antisemitic passages found in the received version, notably those placing the blame for Jesus’s crucifixion on the Jews.

The Jefferson Resurrection

The existence of the Jefferson volume was not altogether unknown at the time that Adler started his research. Indeed, in 1890, then-Librarian of Congress Ainsworth R. Spofford had described the manuscript in connection with the report of Congress’s proposed purchase (which never took place) of a set of Jefferson manuscripts from Jefferson’s great-granddaughter, Sarah N. Randolph. After Adler learned of this, he made inquiries of Randolph, but she died shortly afterward. However, in 1895, following a tip from historian J. Franklin Jameson, Adler located the volume in the collection of another Mrs. Randolph, who was also a great-granddaughter of Jefferson.¹⁷ Adler secured a grant from Congress for the National Museum to purchase the volume for four hundred dollars. He soon set about making the text public. The work was first displayed at the famous Cotton States Exposition in 1895 in Atlanta (site of Booker T. Washington’s famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech the following year). There it was featured as part of an exhibition of biblical archaeology, comprising historic manuscripts and books of the Bible, alongside cases of Hebrew coins and an imitation of a high priest’s breastplate.¹⁸ After the exhibition the volume disappeared from public view—Adler was said to keep it personally under lock and key—but clearly its contents were publicly known. Responding to the attacks of ministers such as J.R. Holt, who had termed Jefferson “a notorious infidel,”¹⁹ in 1897 Rev. Charles H. Eaton delivered a sermon at New York’s Universalist Church of the Holy Paternity. Eaton referred to Jefferson’s compilation of the word of Jesus, plus other verses, as evidence of Jefferson’s “sincere and rational view of religion.”²⁰

In 1900, Iowa Representative John F. Lacey became interested in the book. After launching his own search for it in the Library of Congress, whose collections included Jefferson’s own library, he found the text at the Smithsonian. Lacey presented the volume, with a bit of extra drama, as a secret document. Deeply impressed by the text and its reverent spirit, he suggested publicly that it be reproduced by photolithography for general use. “Mr. Jefferson was a free

A Table
*of the Texts of this ~~book~~ ^{arrangement} from the Evan-
 gelists, and of the order of their arrangement.*

Page	Texts	Summary
1.	Luke 2. 1-7	Joseph & Mary go to Bethlehem when Jesus is born.
	21-39	he is circumcised & named. & they return to Nazareth.
	40-52	48, 51, 52. at 12 years of age he accompanies his parents to Jerusalem and returns.
2.	L. 3. 1, 2. Mk. 1. 4. Mt. 3. 4, 5, 6.	John baptises in Jordan.
	Mt. 3. 13.	Jesus is baptised. L. 3. 23. at 30 years of age.
3.	J. 2. 12-16	drives the traders out of the temple.
	J. 3. 22. Mt. A. 12. Mk. 6. 17-28.	he goes ^{baptises his relatives} into Galilee on the death of J. M.
4.	Mt. 3. 21-22. Mk. 1. 21-22.	he teaches in the Synagogue.
5.	Mt. 12. 1-13. Mk. 2. 27. Mt. 12. 12, 13, 15.	explains the Sabbath.
	L. 6. 12-17.	call of his disciples.
6.	Mt. 5. 1-12. L. 6. 24, 25, 26. Mt. 5. 13-27. L. 6. 34, 35, 36. Mt. 6. 1-34, 7, 1.	
7.	L. 6. 20. Mt. 7. 2-12. 25, 26, 37. 7. 24-29.	the Sermon in the Mount.
	Mt. 8. 1. Mk. 6. 6. Mt. 11. 20, 29, 30.	exhorts.
16.	L. 7. 36-46.	a woman anointeth him.
17.	Mt. 8. 31-35. L. 12. 1-7. ¹³⁻¹⁵ _{7A} precepts	
18.	L. 12. 16-21.	parable of the rich man.
	L. 13. 1-5.	precepts.
20.	22-28, 34, 39.	precepts.
21.	L. 13. 6-9.	parable of the fig tree.
22.	L. 11. 37-46. 52, 53, 54.	precepts.
23.	Mt. 13. 1-9. Mk. A. 10. Mt. 13. 18-23.	parable of the Sower.
	Mt. A. 21, 22, 23. precepts. Mt. 13. 24-30, 36-52.	parable of the Tares.
29.	Mt. A. 26-34. L. 9. 57-62. L. 5. 27-29. Mk. 2. 15-17.	precepts
	L. 5. 36-39.	parable of new wine in old bottles.
28.	Mt. 13. 53-57.	a prophet hath no honor in his own country.
29.	Mt. 9. 36. Mk. 6. 7. Mt. 10. 5, 6, 9-18, 23, 26-31. Mt. 6. 19, 20. mission, exhortation, return.	
30, 31.	J. 7. 1. Mk. 7. 1-14. 24. Mt. 18. 1-4, 7-9, 12-17, 21-23.	precepts.
33.	Mt. 18. 23-35.	parable of the wicked servant.

Facsimile of handwritten page in *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*

(Courtesy Mercantile Library, Cincinnati, OH)

Jefferson's book had never been found and facetiously suggested that the Dillingworth spelling book be added as an appendix. Rep. Sereno E. Payne of New York, Republican floor leader, suggested sardonically that the House simply print the Four Gospels.²⁴ On 10 May, the House passed a concurrent resolution ordering that the Jefferson Bible be reproduced by photolithographic process and that nine thousand copies be made of the text, along with an introduction of not more than twenty-five pages by Adler. The copies were to be distributed free of charge: six thousand by the House and three thousand by the Senate.²⁵

thinker, but his clear and just mind appreciated the teachings of the founder of the Christian religion,"²¹ Lacey told journalists. "He has omitted everything of a miraculous nature, and has confined his clippings to the pure teachings of the man Jesus.... In a clear, lucid form, apart from all surroundings of the supernatural, appear the words and moral teachings of the Son of Man."²²

In January 1902, Lacey presented a bill to have Congress authorize the printing of copies of the Jefferson Bible.²³ When the resolution reached the floor of the House of Representatives, there were some barbed comments from the Republican opposition. Rep. Charles H. Grosvenor of Ohio stated that he wished

The Protest Campaign

The House's action brought immediate protest from various pulpits and in the national press. Critics among the clergy decried the publication as an official endorsement of Jefferson's attacks on Christ's divinity and on the literal truth of scripture; they pressed for the vote to be rescinded. The General Synod of the Reformed Church passed a resolution opposing any federal aid to publication.²⁶

The most virulent opposition was led by ministers from Philadelphia, Adler's former and future home. A Philadelphia Baptist minister, Rev. Dr. Kerr Boyce Tupper, claimed that the work was part of an attack on established religion.²⁷ "It would appear poor policy on the part of our government to lend hand and authority to the publication of a work such as before described. Ours is confessedly and conspicuously a Christian government, and Jefferson's Bible, if rightly represented, is essentially an unchristian work."²⁸ Rev. Dr. Henry McCook of Tabernacle Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia chimed in, "The most objectionable feature of the whole affair, in my mind, lies in the irreverent use of the word 'Bible' and the almost blasphemous presumption of so editing the writings of the apostles as to exclude therefrom all parts which Mr. Jefferson did not approve of."²⁹

The most committed opponent was Rev. Charles Nevin, a Presbyterian minister from Philadelphia. Nevin wrote a widely reprinted letter to the *Philadelphia Press* in which he cleverly ran together Christian faith and the First Amendment:

The publication proposed is said to advocate certain views, commonly called infidel views, as to the deity of Jesus of Nazareth, and the dissemination of these would be a direct, powerful and public attack upon the religion of Christians everywhere. No one could fairly object to the publication of Mr. Jefferson's bible by private enterprise, but every citizen should object to a national assault of this character upon any religious belief.³⁰

The controversy led the press to take sides, though their objections did not revolve around "heresy." The *Washington Post's* editors agreed with Nevin that the House action was a "mischievous precedent," but they did so because it represented a violation of Jefferson's own principle of separation of church and state to use public funds to publish religious material. It was not just Christians, the paper noted (perhaps also with an eye to Adler) but "every Jew, every infidel, every agnostic has a direct interest in this new departure."³¹ The *New York Tribune*, which also argued against aid to publication, made more practical objections. "Orthodoxy has little to fear from a compilation of the gospel narrative which simply omits the supernatural elements of the history of Jesus; the point is that such a work has nothing to do with Jefferson as a public man and thus it did not form part of his political writings."³² The *Chicago Tribune* pooh-poohed the entire controversy, noting that the book in

question was simply a compendium of New Testament verses. “We imagine that Jefferson’s belief or unbelief is not a matter in which the public is greatly interested at the present time.”³³

As the controversy spread, Adler himself became a target. First, Nevin and his colleague, Rev. Dr. Francis A. Horton, put together a committee that reported on the matter to the Presbyterian Ministers Association. Not only did Jefferson’s text, they claimed, lay aside “everything that appeared incredible” in the New Testament, such as the annunciation and the resurrection, but Jefferson stripped Jesus of his divinity and made him simply a moralist. Nevin crowned his charges by a (barely) veiled antisemitic attack on Adler: “An introduction of twenty-five pages is written by a prominent opponent of the Christian Church.”³⁴ The committee split on the motion. Moderates argued that there was nothing derogatory about Christianity in the work. Rev. John Peacock retorted that even if the book was harmless, it was written with a “150 page introduction” [*sic*] by a man “whose hostility to Christianity is notorious.”³⁵ The committee as a whole put off the issue, but the appearance of a formal protest remained.

Meanwhile, the Preachers’ Meeting of the Methodist Episcopal Church itself appointed a committee, under the direction of Rev. Frank G. Porter, to report on the Jefferson Bible. In June 1902, the committee approved (with three dissenting votes) a resolution opposing official publication of the work. The Methodist committee justified this decision by an argument that fell midway between the conservative Christian groups and the newspapers: The work was of a religious nature, and “Congress should order nothing published at the expense of the government which partakes of a controversial religious character.” (Of course, the reason it was controversial was precisely the conservative opposition!) In any case, the resolution continued, government publication was unnecessary, inasmuch as private firms could do the work. As in the case of Nevin, the major objection was that “the introduction, written by Dr. Cyrus Adler, is not to be submitted to Congress.”³⁶ The Methodist committee did not make clear what it suspected Adler of planning in his introduction, yet it is difficult to believe that the members’ suspicion of him was not also informed by antisemitism.

Under pressure from the assorted clergy, on 21 May 1902 Lacey attempted to secure the unanimous consent of the House to withdraw the resolution, stating that private publishing firms had opened negotiations with the National Museum, but his motion failed, as did a new resolution introduced the following day. Representative Joel Heatwole, chair of the House printing committee, leaped to defend the resolution to publish. Not only did he claim that the book simply completed the government’s collection of Jefferson’s writings, but he praised the “reverent spirit” of the book. “The effect of it is most excellent, and is one of the most convincing proofs of the Christian religion...No one that examines this little volume, whether he be saint or sinner, will rise from his perusal without having a loftier idea of the teachings of the savior.” Heatwole

added that there were repeated requests for copies throughout the country, both by clergy and by admirers of Jefferson.³⁷

Adler and the Introduction

Curiously, within a few weeks of the resolution's passage, a publisher in St. Louis, N.D. Thompson, brought out a first edition of the Jefferson Bible for sale. This edition, which was widely (and mistakenly) believed to be official, was a pirate copy of sorts. It was based on a list that had been made of the volume's table of contents many years previously, while it was still in the possession of Jefferson's grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph.³⁸ It included Jefferson's "syllabus" and the letter to Rush but neither Adler's introduction nor the biblical texts in other languages. It received a few reviews but little attention. Conversely, work on the congressionally mandated edition was not even begun for another eighteen months, because of technological difficulties in arranging the process of photolithographic reproduction. (The original congressional resolution seems to have been altered so that the public printer could appoint a specialized private firm.) The Scientific Engraving Company of New York finally received the order. Work began in February 1904.³⁹ Adler entrusted the precious document to an assistant, who was dispatched to take it personally to New York and keep it in his possession through the reproduction process. The J. Mans engraving company of Chicago then undertook the printing of the volume, using the previously produced plates.

Meanwhile, Adler undertook the writing of his introduction. Cognizant of the danger of attacks on the work (and on him as a Jew), he prepared a brief introduction that was deliberately limited to explaining the text's history and provenance, without any analysis of its contents. He asked his friend Mendes Cohen, and also John Lacey, to advise him on the wording. After reading the draft, Lacey advised Adler (disingenuously, given Lacey's own avowed religious purpose) to further disclaim any religious purpose by adding that the government had already printed all of the other Jefferson works in its possession and that "There has been much demand that this compilation also be published so as to make his works complete."⁴⁰ In any case, as an authorized biography of Adler later put it—albeit with hyperbole—"Doctor Adler's Introduction proved to be a masterpiece of scholarly objectivity; it afforded no ground for controversy, and the opposition vanished completely."⁴¹

It was true that the Jewish identity of the volume's producer passed all but unnoticed. However, Adler was well aware of the delicacy of his mission and the pressures on him. Revealingly, he saved in his files a copy of an article from a Jewish periodical that praised the author's discretion (even as it deplored publication):

I have described the introduction written for this volume by Dr. Adler as admirable. Such it is not less for what he leaves unsaid than for what he has said. He has restricted himself to a description of the manner in which the volume was conceived and executed. No word is dropped that can wound the sensibilities of the most devout Christian. This is not the affair of government in this country and every Jew should be on the alert to safeguard against such acts of unwisdom. It would have been well if one of the Jewish members of Congress had raised his voice against the publication of this volume.⁴²

Adler sought to remain discreet about his contribution. Several months after the government-sponsored publication of the photolithographic copies, the printers undertook a subsequent run of copies at the order of the *Washington Post*, to be sold to its readers. When Adler discovered that the publisher had featured his name in a visible place on the title page of the new edition, he was aghast and demanded peremptorily that it be removed before any further copies were printed. The publisher was somewhat bemused by the request, protesting that since Adler had written the introduction his name should be included, but he finally complied. “You are really too modest. However, you undoubtedly know best.”⁴³ In his posthumously published memoirs, Adler made a joke of his vehement insistence: “On the title-page of the first edition appeared the following: *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*,’ Compiled by Thomas Jefferson, with an introduction by Cyrus Adler. In later editions I had my name removed, as I felt that Jesus and Thomas Jefferson were sufficient names for one title-page.”⁴⁴

To further publicize the book, Adler drafted an additional article, which appeared in the January 1905 edition of the *Cosmopolitan*. (Adler tried unsuccessfully to place it in *McClure’s* and *The Century*.) In it he presented a capsule version of his story in the official introduction of the bible’s discovery. However, freed from official constraint, he included some textual analysis of the Jefferson work, of the kind that he had deliberately omitted from his earlier work. In his appreciation, Adler called Jefferson a founder of “empirical New Testament criticism” and posited Jefferson’s Gospel compilation as a forerunner to the theories of later scholars about the existence of an original synoptic Gospel.⁴⁵

The New Life of the Jefferson Bible

The official version of the Jefferson Bible appeared in fall 1904. It soon proved the most popular book the government ever published. Citizens across the country bombarded their members of congress with thousands of requests for copies. Since each representative had only a few dozen to give away, many elected to reserve theirs for members of the clergy,⁴⁶ although others donated copies to libraries and fraternities. The astounding demand for the edition—hundreds of copies were said to have been stolen before reaching their destined recipients—gave rise to a rash of humorous tales.⁴⁷ A joint resolution was

introduced in December for production of ten thousand more copies, but it does not seem to have been enacted, though more likely for financial reasons than because of criticism of the original publication.⁴⁸ Adler later claimed that by 1940 the original edition had become rare.⁴⁹

In any case, such was the public reverence for Jefferson, and the popularity of his Gospel compilation, that once the large edition was produced there were no further public strictures about separation of church and state. As Henry Jackson wrote in a commentary to a popular reprint edition, “That a document whose subject is freedom should have been published by the United States Government is altogether fitting in view of its direct bearing on America’s experiment in democracy.”⁵⁰ Indeed, a tradition became established for a copy of the Jefferson Bible to be distributed free to each new member of Congress, albeit under formally private sponsorship—a tradition halted in the 1960s amid constitutional concerns, then resumed in the 1990s.⁵¹ The book’s appearance likewise shifted the terms of debate on Jefferson’s religion. Significantly, in 1905, two distinguished laymen, James F. Rusling and James M. Turner, had a spirited debate in the pages of the *Methodist Review* over whether Jefferson could be called a Christian. Rusling claimed that Jefferson’s statement that he was a follower of Christ and his doctrines made him a Christian. Turner countered that without the recognition of the divinity of Christ there was no possible way to justify the label, yet he credited Jefferson with a Christian spirit. Similarly, *Washington Post* columnist William Spear placed Jefferson alongside Thomas Huxley and John Stuart Mill as unbelievers who “rejected Christianity but recognized the moral grandeur of the Bible.”⁵²

As the years passed, the Jefferson Bible became widely accepted as a guide to scripture as well as a monument of Americans’ constitutional faith.⁵³ During the 1920s, writers cited Jefferson as an authority in support of science against creationism, yet they also praised the Jefferson Bible as an argument against atheism.⁵⁴ In the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt publicly cited the Jefferson Bible in a speech on the Bible and ordered a copy placed in the cornerstone of the new Jefferson memorial.⁵⁵ Historian Henry Steele Commager praised it as the most eloquent expression of Jefferson’s deeply religious character.⁵⁶ In the 1960s, the flamboyant minister and politician Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. claimed that his own religious beliefs were based entirely on the Jefferson Bible.⁵⁷ A decade later, inmates at New York prisons brought suit to receive the book after it was censored by wardens.⁵⁸ The work also touched non-Americans. An English friend sent a copy of the Jefferson Bible to Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King during World War II, and King warmly praised it as “accord- ing” with his “feelings and desires.”⁵⁹

In the last generation, the Jefferson Bible has appeared in a dozen editions. Reprint volumes with new introductory analyses—even a commercial cassette tape version—have continued to appear over recent decades. In the

process, the work has become a centerpiece of debate over the religious faith of the Founding Fathers, the role of religion in public life, and the nature of “separation of church and state”—a phrase coined and powerfully expressed by Jefferson himself. In mass-market magazines, on radio shows, and across Internet sites, interpreters have clashed over the meaning of Jefferson’s religious writings. Conservatives such as Norman Vincent Peale and Michael Novak have pointed to the Jefferson Bible as confirmation of the transcendent influence of Christ’s teachings, and commentators from Martin Marty to David Limbaugh use Jefferson to support the central importance of Christian morality in public life.⁶⁰ Liberal theologians and writers such as F. Forrester Church and Brooke Allen, fearful of efforts by fundamentalist Christians to claim America as a Christian country, have responded that the Jefferson Bible is an affirmation of a civic faith that reflects passionate opposition to religious dogmatism.⁶¹ The controversy over the book’s first publication tells us how far conservatives have come since 1900 in accepting (or co-opting) Jefferson’s religious message, yet the nature of the initial attacks also suggests conservative Christians’ general lack of interest in promoting separation of church and state, even when it works to their advantage. Finally, the persistent debate demonstrates the continuing relevance of Jefferson’s ideas to believers (and unbelievers) of all creeds.

Conclusion

In November 1905, Samuel Langley, Adler’s chief and patron at the Smithsonian, suffered a paralytic stroke, and he died in February 1906. That same year, President Theodore Roosevelt named Oscar Straus secretary of commerce, making him the first Jewish cabinet member. With these twin events, Adler’s tenure in Washington became less essential and more precarious. In 1908, he resigned from the Smithsonian and returned to Philadelphia to head Dropsie College, a Jewish institution of higher learning. He remained primarily involved with Jewish communal institutions for the rest of his life. In 1915, he was named president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. During the 1930s, he served as president of the American Jewish Committee, where he struggled in the face of the Nazi threat to unite the competing strands of the community.⁶²

In a very different way, Adler’s participation in bringing to public notice the Jefferson Bible also united competing strands. In this case, however, it was the strands of his own varied interests: library research, history, biblical scholarship, work at the Smithsonian—and also (albeit in muted form) political advocacy. That is, even as his discovery of Jefferson’s manuscript offered Adler a rare opportunity to pursue a scholarly mission, it was consistent with his larger goal of helping Jews internationally. Jefferson’s version of Christian doctrine, and his identification of Jesus as Jewish, offered a shield against biblical sanction for antisemitism. Meanwhile, Jefferson’s humanitarian emphasis offered a

means for Adler and his fellow Jews to express their own ideals without giving up their religious faith (an Orthodox one, in Adler's case).⁶³

In pursuit of his multivalent mission, Adler thus not only secured the volume for the government but actively joined in arranging a publicly supported distribution of copies. In the face of conservative Christian opposition to the publication, however, Adler recognized that he was especially vulnerable as a Jewish scholar and that he would have to tread carefully. He remained publicly silent throughout the various public debates over the nature and meaning of the text. With the approval of his associates, he deliberately kept a low profile in the tax-supported production of the book. He intentionally omitted any significant analysis in his congressionally mandated introduction, and even then he insisted that his name not be featured on the title page. At the same time, he sought to promote and elucidate the project by publishing a popular article in a mainstream magazine. By his careful activism, he helped create an enduring contribution to American religious and intellectual life.

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Notes

¹The phrase comes from Jefferson's 9 January 1816 letter to Charles Thomson, extracted in O.I. Roche, ed., *The Jefferson Bible: with the Annotated Commentaries on Religion of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1964), 325. See also discussion in Edward Boykin, ed., *The Wisdom of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1941), 219.

²Henry Wilder Foote, "Introduction," in Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 13–17.

³The story of the Jefferson Bible's creation has been comprehensively explored by various scholars. See, for example, Dickinson W. Adams, "Foreword," in *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels: "The Philosophy of Jesus" and "The Life and Morals of Jesus,"* ed. Dickinson W. Adams and Ruth W. Lester (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Eric Reese, *An American Gospel: On Family, History, and the Kingdom of God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009); and Eric Reese, "Jesus Without the Miracles: Thomas Jefferson's Bible and the Gospel of Thomas," *Harper's* (December 2005): 33–41.

⁴F. Forrester Church, "The Gospel According to Thomas Jefferson," in Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 23–25.

⁵Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 13 October 1813, found in Roche, ed., *The Jefferson Bible*, 326.

⁶If Jefferson's aforementioned 9 January 1816 letter to Charles Thomson, in which he said he would be pleased to add copies of the Latin and Greek texts as well, "If I had time," is to be believed, presumably the addition of these pages followed after the initial presentation. See Douglas E. Lurtton, "Foreword," in Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Wilfred Funk, 1940), viii.

⁷Marilyn Mellows, "Thomas Jefferson and his Bible," "Frontline," PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/jefferson.html> (accessed 17 September 2009).

⁸See Adams's Introduction in *Jefferson's Extracts*, 38.

⁹For general information on Adler, see Ira Robinson, *Translating a Tradition: Studies in American Jewish History* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2008); Gayle Meyer Coolick, "The Public Career of Cyrus Adler," doctoral dissertation (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 1981).

¹⁰Louis Finklestein, "Preface," in Ira Robinson, ed. *Cyrus Adler: Selected Letters*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), xix.

¹¹On Adler and Langley, see James Tobin, *To Conquer the Air: The Wright Brothers and the Great Race for Flight* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

¹²Ira Robinson, "The Invention of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81 (1992): 309–320, reprinted in *Translating a Tradition*, 2–15. See also Jonathan D. Sarna, "Cyrus Adler and the Development of American Jewish Culture: The 'Scholar-Doer' as a Jewish Communal Leader," *American Jewish History* 78 (1989): 382–394.

¹³Finklestein, "Preface," in *Cyrus Adler*, vol. 1, xviii.

¹⁴Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Ezra Stiles Ely, 25 June 1819, in Adams and Lester, *Jefferson's Extracts*, 386–387.

¹⁵On Adler and biblical "higher criticism," plus his interest in popular fora, see Ira Robinson, "Cyrus Adler and the American: A Moment in the Intellectual History of American Jewry," in *Translating a Tradition*, 16–30.

¹⁶In an 1820 letter to Dr. Jacob de la Motta, Jefferson wrote that he was delighted to see American Jews assuming full social rights. In a letter to Joseph Marx, he added his regret "at seeing a sect, the parent and basis of all those of Christendom, singled out for persecution and oppression." See Jewish Virtual Library, "Jefferson and the Jews," www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/jeffjews.html (accessed 16 July 2010). See also Max J. Kohler, "Unpublished Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Some American Jews," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 20 (1911): 11–30.

¹⁷Cyrus Adler, "Introduction," in Thomas Jefferson's *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 2.

¹⁸"Huge Display This," *Atlanta Constitution* (23 August 1895): 9.

¹⁹J.R. Holt, "Contributions," *Christian Observer* (27 November 1895): 16.

²⁰"Words from the Pulpit," *New York Times* (29 March 1897): 3.

²¹"Jefferson's Bible Found," *Chicago Tribune* (20 May 1900): 46.

²²"Jefferson's Bible," *Los Angeles Times* (9 October 1900): 14.

²³"Talks With and About Members," *Washington Post* (22 January 1902): 3.

²⁴"Bible of Jefferson," *Baltimore Sun* (31 March 1904): 13.

²⁵"Fifty-Seventh Congress," *Los Angeles Times* (11 May 1902): 4.

²⁶"Against Revision of Faith," *Washington Post* (28 May 1902): 10.

²⁷This was not the first occasion on which Jefferson's platform of religious tolerance was denounced as a front for opponents of the church. In 1868, during debate over disestablishment of the Irish (Protestant) Church, Charles N. Newdegate, a Tory MP, asserted that as part of a popish cabal, the Catholic Founding Father Charles Carroll had influenced Jefferson, "a disciple of Voltaire," to block Washington's desire for an established church in America. "Protestant

demonstration at the Crystal Palace,” *London Times* (18 August 1868): 7. Two years later, Beresford Hope claimed (equally absurdly) that Jefferson, as a disciple of the French revolution, had single-handedly prevented all recognition of the Christian religion or the Supreme Being in the U.S. Constitution. The American people, he explained, subsequently felt the disgrace of Jefferson’s actions but were unable to remedy them due to the influence of the Irish Catholic vote. *London Times* (15 June 1870): 7.

²⁸“Jefferson’s Bible. Rev. Tupper Says Government Should Not Publish It,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (19 May 1902): 6, cited in Chris Rodda, “Borat ‘Star’ Co-Sponsors House Resolution 888,” “Talk to Action,” <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2008/2/14/32153/7264> (accessed 16 September 2009). Perhaps because of Jefferson’s southern background and support of religious nonconformity, there was less criticism among Southern Baptists, today the most visible sect of religious conservatives.

²⁹“Thomas Jefferson’s Bible,” *Washington Post* (21 May 1902): 6. For commentary, positive and negative, from small-town journals, see Rodda, “Borat ‘Star’.”

³⁰“A Mistake,” *Washington Post* (18 May 1902): 18.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²“A Bad Precedent,” *New York Tribune* (21 May 1902): 8. The *New York Mail* later made similar comments, stating that the government had no business publishing Jefferson’s “strange and evidently superfluous compilation.” “According to Jefferson,” *Washington Post* (6 July 1904): 6.

³³“Jefferson and the New Testament,” *Chicago Tribune* (2 August 1902): 8.

³⁴“Jefferson’s Bible,” *New York Times* (3 June 1902): 3

³⁵“Ministers Oppose Publication of Jefferson’s Bible,” *New York Times* (8 June 1902): 29.

³⁶“Ministers Oppose It,” *Baltimore Sun* (10 June 1902): 8.

³⁷“Thomas Jefferson’s Bible,” *Washington Post* (21 May 1902): 6.

³⁸Anonymous, “Preface,” in Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (St. Louis, Chicago and New York: N.D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1902), 3.

³⁹“Thomas Jefferson’s Bible,” *New York Times* (11 June 1904): BR3; “Jefferson Bible Reprint,” *New York Times* (17 June 1904): 7

⁴⁰Letter from John Lacey to Cyrus Adler, 4 March 1904, Cyrus Adler papers, *P-16 Correspondence—Jefferson Bible, Box 4, American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), New York (henceforth Adler papers). Lacey added in a handwritten postscript, “I think you have handled it very deftly.”

⁴¹Abraham Neuman, “Cyrus Adler: A Biographical Sketch,” *American Jewish Year Book* 42 (1941): 99.

⁴²“The Bible of Thomas Jefferson,” *Jewish Comment* 20, no. 21 (3 March 1905): 1–2. Ironically, the editor of the journal had been one of the first to express interest in publicizing the Jefferson Bible through a magazine article. Letter from L.H. Levine to Cyrus Adler, 9 September 1900, Adler papers.

⁴³Letters from Alfred Bersbach to Cyrus Adler, 28 February, 10 March, 17 March 1905, Adler papers.

⁴⁴Cyrus Adler, *I Have Considered the Days* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1941), 58.

⁴⁵Cyrus Adler, “The Jefferson Bible,” *Cosmopolitan* 38, no. 2 (January 1905): 380. In the same vein, a book reviewer had previously claimed Jefferson as a forerunner of French rationalist philosopher Ernest Renan. “The Jefferson Bible,” *New York Times* (2 August 1902): BR13.

⁴⁶“Capitol Chat; Talks with Members,” *Washington Post* (13 December 1904, 19 December 1904): 5–6.

⁴⁷Ibid; “Capitol Chat,” *Washington Post* (13 January 1905, 8 February 1905): 8.

⁴⁸“Plates of Jefferson Bible,” *Baltimore Sun* (5 January 1905): 9.

⁴⁹Adler, *I Have Considered*, 59.

⁵⁰Henry E. Jackson, *The Thomas Jefferson Bible* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 11. Another popular reprint was the 1951 Beacon Press edition, with an exegesis by Henry Wilder Foote.

⁵¹F. Forrester Church, “Preface,” in *The Jefferson Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), viii.

⁵²William Spear, “Moral Value of the Bible,” *Washington Post* (20 March 1905): 9.

⁵³In 1914, the *Washington Post* facetiously suggested that Congress order a new edition printed in order to recall Jefferson’s political creed in favor of state’s rights over federal encroachment. “Steadily Encroaching,” *Washington Post* (22 May 1914): 6.

⁵⁴See, for example, “Eye Witness, ‘Best Sellers of the Ages,’” *Chicago Tribune* (8 December 1921): F14; Thomas F. Ford, “Adams and Jefferson Again,” *Los Angeles Times* (20 January 1924): 33.

⁵⁵“Roosevelt Extols Power of Bible,” *New York Times* (7 October 1935): 4; “New Jefferson Memorial,” *New York Times* (29 November 1936): XX10.

⁵⁶Henry S. Commager, “He Opened all Eyes to the Rights of Man,” *New York Times* (9 April 1944): SM18.

⁵⁷Louis Cassels and Arnold Sawislak, “Zestful Powell Says His Power Upsets Whites,” *Chicago Defender* (15 May 1964): 33.

⁵⁸Ruth C. Niemiller, “The Last Word: Prisoners in, Books Out,” *New York Times* (12 December 1971): BR4.

⁵⁹Mackenzie King diary, 2 March 1944, National Library of Canada, Ottawa, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/king/001059-130-e.html> (accessed 3 January 2011).

⁶⁰Michael Novak, “Faith in Search of Votes,” *New York Times* (19 December 1999): WK13; David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals are Waging War Against Christians* (Chicago: Regnery, 2003).

⁶¹Church, “The Gospel,” 25–26. Brooke Allen, “Our Godless Constitution,” *The Nation* (6 February 2005): 14–20.

⁶²David G. Dalin, “Cyrus Adler, non-Zionism, and the Zionist movement: A Study in Contradictions,” *AJS Review* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 55–87.

⁶³Adler’s use of a giant of the Enlightenment to promote tolerance against antisemitism compares in interesting ways to a contemporaneous work of literature by a Jewish author—Léon Blum’s historical pastiche *Nouvelle Conversations de Goethe avec Eckermann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937 [1901]). In those essays, published amid the uproar of the Dreyfus case and a climate of overt antisemitism in France, the future socialist prime minister of France, then a young lawyer/littérateur, uses the Enlightenment hero Goethe as a mouthpiece for his own rather romantic ideas about Jews as a people united by a transcendent ethic of universal justice: “Whom the Gospels call a Saint, the Bible calls a just man.”