



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THOMAS JEFFERSON

Lecture Notes by Dr. Dale Bruner

In His “The Life & Morals of Jesus of Nazareth: Extracted from the Gospels” (1820) (The Extracted Jesus “Diamonds” Highlighted; the Apostles’ Omitted “Dunghill” Unhighlighted.)

Jefferson (from now on “TJ”) begins at Luke 2 with Jesus’ natural birth, his circumcision, & childhood visit of Jerusalem (omitting anything supernatural along the way: e.g., Mary’s Virginal Conception &, perhaps most notably, omitting the boy Jesus’ 12-year-old response when found in the Temple, “*Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?*”). **He moves in Luke 3 to John the Baptist’s preparation for Jesus** (omitting the Baptist’s signature sentence, “*Prepare the way of the Lord,*”); **he baptizes Jesus** (omitting the Father’s Affirming Heavenly Voice, “*This Is My Priceless Son*” & omitting the Spirit’s Dove-shaped Crowning there. TJ does not believe in the Trinity).

TJ then moves to the last half of John 2 (omitting *all of John chapter 1*: so there is no Prologue, where the *Divine Word* becomes *human flesh* & thus “*explains God*” (1:18); no Baptist Sermon proclaiming, “*Look, the Lamb of the God! The One taking away the sin of the world!*”; and he omits Jesus’ changing water into wine in the first half of John 2). **In John 2:12-16 Jesus begins his public ministry, “Cleansing the Temple,” driving out the money changers & merchandise**, but TJ omits Jesus’ reply, on being challenged to give credentials for his intrusion: “*Here: Destroy this Temple, & in three days I will raise it up again,*” which the hierarchy completely misunderstands but which the Apostle John explains (& TJ omits) thus: “*Jesus was speaking of the Temple of his body. After Jesus was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; & they believed ... Jesus.*” But TJ does not believe in Jesus’ Resurrection.

TJ then omits all of John chapters 3 to 6 (except for one brief geographical reference in 3:22), which means there is no chapter-3 New-Birth Sermon to Nicodemus (with Jesus’ regal “*God loved the world so much that he gave it His One-&-Only Son so that whoever is simply putting one’s trust in him would not self-destruct but have deep lasting Life*”); no chapter-4 Living-Water Sermon to the Samaritan Woman & all comparable outsiders; no chapter-5 explanation of Jesus’ Divinity by the Son’s Humble Submission to the Father; no chapter-6 Feeding of the 5000 (which is in all four Gospels & is omitted in all four by TJ), thus missing Jesus’ physical concern for a hungry world. **TJ then includes brief (non-miraculous) portions from John 7-12, particularly Jesus’ Gracious Meeting with the Woman Taken in Adultery in John 8**, but he omits Jesus saying in John 7, “*Whoever wills to do the will of God will know about my teaching, whether it comes from God or from me only*”; & he omits all of John 11 (Jesus’ Raising of Lazarus).

After Jesus’ Footwashing of the Disciples & a few accompanying remarks in chapter 13, TJ omits all of John 14-16, which is Jesus’ three-chapter intimate Farewell Address to his closest Disciples in the

Upper Room, & also omits Jesus' John-17 chapter-long Prayer for the Church's Unity by Faith in Him. **TJ has almost all of John 18-19, Jesus' Arrest, Trial, & Crucifixion**, though he omits (why?) Jesus' final words from the Cross, *"It is finished!"* **He records Jesus' Burial at the end of chapter 19—and ends all his selections from all of the Gospels with Jesus' Burial.** John 20 & 21 (& all the other Gospel Resurrections chapters) are omitted entirely from TJ's Gospel.

Of the Synoptic Gospels, TJ prefers Matthew, particularly his account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), omitting only (because of the ascription of Deity to Jesus on Judgment Day?) the passage where Jesus warns, *"On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy ... cast out demons ... do many deeds of power in your name?,' & I will declare to them, 'I never knew you, depart from me, you evil-doers'"* (7:21-23). He omits all ten of Jesus' Miracles in Matt 8-9, & from Jesus' Sermon on Mission in Matt 10 he omits, particularly, Jesus saying *"Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven."* From chapter 11 he omits *"All things have been handed over to me by my Father; & no one knows the Son except the Father, & no one knows the Father except the Son & anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."* In chapter 12's Sabbath Controversy he eliminates only the last two verses: *"I tell you, something greater than the Temple is here. ... the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."* **He keeps most of Jesus' Sermon of Parables in Matt 13.** He omits most of chapters 15 & 16, perhaps most notably Peter's chapter-16 Confession of Jesus as the Messiah & Jesus' response: *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh & blood [human resources] did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven."* Matt 17 with Jesus' Transfiguration is skipped. **He keeps most of Matt 18**, except where Jesus promises, *"Amen I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am right there in their midst."* **He keeps most of Matt 19** except at its end where Jesus promises *"everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children of fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundred-fold, & inherit eternal life."* **He keeps most of Matt 20** but omits Jesus' reference to his Substitutionary Atonement: *"just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, & to give his life a ransom for many."* **He keeps most of Matt 21**, omitting only the ascriptions to Jesus of royalty & Messiahship. **In chapter 22 TJ keeps the 3 Questions--of the Pharisees, of the Sadducees, & of the Scribe to Jesus--**but omits *Jesus'* own climactic fourth & final Question *to Them*: *"The Messiah is the son of whom?"* he asks; to which they answer, *"Of David"*; Jesus responds, *"Then why did David call the Messiah 'Lord'"* [in Psalm 110:1, entitled "A Psalm of David"], when David wrote, *"The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand?,"* concluding, *"If David calls him Lord, how can he be just David's son?"* to which they are unable to reply. **He keeps almost all of Matt 23, where Jesus excoriates the Scribes, Pharisees, & Jerusalem**, omitting only Jesus' concluding verse of warning, *"I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" He keeps about half of Jesus' Sermon on the End of the World in Matt 24-25, excluding only the half that refers to Jesus' endtime Return.*

In the Passion Narrative (Matt 26-27) he keeps much, omitting only passages that suggest Jesus' Deity or Atoning Death (e.g., his Lord's Supper *"this is my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"*). He also omits the events immediately after Jesus' Death, particularly excising *"At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ... tombs were opened ... the centurion & those with him ... were terrified & said, 'Really, this man was God's Son!'"* Jesus' Resurrection is entirely omitted by TJ from all four Gospels (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; & John 20-21).

A concluding question (from Dale Bruner): In the classical Christian tradition, Jesus is both fully human AND fully divine. If God the Father actually sent his eternal Son to be the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth in order to show the world His love & will for it, we can be sure (can we not?) that He had great care *for his Son's 30-year career*. Is it not rational to believe, then, that God would take equally great care for *the written representation* of his Son to the world in the canonical Gospels *for the succeeding millennia*?

“DIAMONDS FROM THE DUNGHILL”

Jefferson's Philosophical Reasons for His Selection of Gospel Texts

(from *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*, “The Papers of Thomas Jefferson,” Second Series. Editor: Dickinson W. Adams. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983)

“Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. ... Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear” (TJ, p. 3).

“Inspired by the successes of the Scientific Revolution & weary of a long series of inconclusive religious wars & doctrinal disputes between Catholics & Protestants, enlightened thinkers scorned metaphysical & theological speculation as useless & concentrated instead on the rational investigation of nature & society, making their main goal the improvement of man's lot in this life rather than the preparation of souls for salvation in a life to come” (the editor, pp. 4-5). TJ wrote one of his nephews “that Jesus was only ‘a man, of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, & was punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman law’” (p. 7).

In Jefferson's *Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, Compared with Those of Others* [1803] “he reduced the authentic doctrines of Jesus to three essential points. First, this ‘benevolent & sublime reformer’ ... confirmed the monotheism of the Jews while correcting their erroneous notions ... Next, he preached a system of morality that was far superior to those of the ancients & the Jews ... Finally, he taught the doctrine of a life in the hereafter in order to encourage virtuous conduct in the here & now.’ Aside from these three points, Jefferson virtually stated that every other doctrine ascribed to Jesus was in reality a corruption of his original message that had resulted either from the unintentional misrepresentations of the Evangelists [the Gospel writers], who recorded his teachings long after his death, or from the machinations of his ‘schismatizing followers’ who deliberately perverted his simple precepts to serve their own ends” (the editor, p. 24)

From *Jefferson's Letters*, his following remarks were most notable. “For I have sworn upon the altar of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man” (p. 320, To Benjamin Rush, IX.23.1800). “[T]he Christian religion when divested of the rags in which [Jesus' men] have [e]nveloped it, & brought to the original purity & simplicity of [its] benevolent institutor, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, & the freest expansions of the human mind” (p. 325, To Moses Robinson, III.23.1801). “To do [Jesus] justice it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines have to encounter, not having been committed to writing by himself, but by the most unlettered of men, by memory, long after they had heard them from him; when much was forgotten, much misunderstood, & presented in very paradoxical shapes” (p. 328, To Joseph Priestly, IV.9.1803). In TJ's “*Syllabus*” (1803) he said: “the ... writing [of Jesus'] life & doctrines, fell on the most unlettered & ignorant of men: who wrote

too from memory, & not till long after the transactions had passed. ... Hence the doctrines which he really delivered were defective as a whole. And fragments only of what he did deliver have come to us, mutilated, misstated, & often unintelligible" (p. 333). Of his own extracts, TJ wrote: "We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the Amphibologisms [utter obscurities] into which they have been led by forgetting often, or not understanding, what [words] had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, & expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime & benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, & arranging, the matter which is evidently his, & which is as easily distinguishable [from what is not his] as diamonds in a dunghill (p. 352, To John Adams, X.12.1813). Of Calvinism TJ wrote, "My fundamental principle would be the reverse of Calvin's, that we are to be saved by our good works which are within our power, & not by our faith which is not within our power" (p. 386, To Thomas B. Parker, IV.15.1819). "Abstracting what is really [of Jesus] from the rubbish in which it is buried, [is] easily distinguished by [its] luster from the dross of his biographers, & [is] as separable from that as the diamond from the dung hill, we have the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man" (p. 388, To William Short, X.31.1819). "But while this Syllabus [that I wrote] is meant to place the character of Jesus in [its] true & high light, it is not to be understood that I am with him in all his doctrines. I am a Materialist; he takes the side of spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance towards forgiveness of sin, I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it ... Among the sayings & discourses imputed to him by his biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, & of the most lovely benevolence: & others again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism, & imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being. I separate therefore the gold from the dross; restore to him the former, & leave the latter to the stupidity of some, & roguery of others of his disciples. Of this band of dupes & impostors, Paul was the great Coryphaeus [songleader], & first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus" (pp. 391f., To William Short, IV.13.1820). "We find in the writings of [Jesus'] biographers matters of two distinct descriptions. First a ground work of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticisms, & fabrications. Intermixed with these again are sublime ideas of the supreme being ... with an eloquence & persuasiveness which have not been surpassed. These could not be inventions of the groveling authors who relate them. They are far beyond the powers of their feeble minds" (p. 396, To William Short, VIII.4.1820).

I (Dale) prefer Rousseau's estimate of the New Testament Gospel in his *Emile*: "The [G]ospel contains marks of truth so great, so striking, so perfectly inimitable, that the inventor of them would be more extraordinary than the hero." I would like to apply Jay Leno's three sentences of solidarity at the Writers' Strike, when he stood beside them & said: "I've been working with these guys for thirty years. Without them I'm not funny. I'm a dead man." Jesus could have said of his own "Writers," comparably: "I've been working with these guys for over three years. Without them I'm not history. I'm a myth."
