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Note on Thomas Jefferson's Religious Beliefs

This document began as a note on Thomas Jefferson's quote from his letter to James Fishback on September 27, 1809. In the quote Jefferson states “The practice of morality being necessary for the well-being of society, he [God] has taken care to impress it's precepts so indelibly on our hearts that they shall not be effaced by the subtleties of our brain. [W]e all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus. [And] no where will they be found delivered in greater purity than in his discourses.” [1]

Since the note has developed into a short survey on what we know of Thomas Jefferson's religious beliefs, I thought I would place it here in the articles section for those who are interested.

The Jefferson quote above, in his letter to Fishback, points out Jefferson's own concurrence with the majority of Founding Fathers in the truth that God's Law and the words of Jesus are necessary for Good government. This truth was accepted widely by those who framed the United States Federal Government. Jefferson seems to acknowledge this by his use of "We all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus...."

We are not recommending Jefferson's views or understanding about Jesus where they contradict the straightforward understanding contained in the Old Testament prophesies or the New Testament - particularly his view that Jesus was not divine, and his view that there are mistakes within the historical Gospel accounts.

It should be noted, for honesty sake, that Thomas Jefferson claimed himself to be a Christian. He was known to be disciplined in applying the moral teachings of Jesus in his own life. Jefferson encouraged Jesus' word through public policy. For example, He made a treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians and committed the United States of America to provide $100 a year for a catholic Christian missionary for seven years (since the Kaskaskia identified themselves with catholicism), and $300 to build a church building. [2] In addition, he also continued the United States land grant "for the Society of the United Brethren, for propagating the Gospel among the Heathen." [2] Yet, Jefferson seems to deny the divinity of Jesus (see letter to Benjamin Rush quoted below). In addition, in regards to the accuracy of the Gospels, he follows an argument similar to that of the early higher critics of his time. Higher critics arrived at conclusions about the New Testament, which have since been shown to be incorrect beyond doubt, which among other things proposed late dates for the writing and transmission of the gospel accounts - placing them beyond the lives of the direct followers of Jesus. They also, in general, had a disregard for early history surrounding the New Testament and the early church in preference to their own theories. Whether Jefferson was influenced by the early higher critics or not, Jefferson did discount the accuracy of the

Gospels (and thus the inspiration of the Gospels). So, although Jefferson refers to himself as a Christian, it needs to be understood that these two beliefs of his are not consistent with what the Bible teaches, and therefore place him as having unorthodox beliefs - again according to the Bible. According to a quick survey of the Bible in regards to inspiration:

The Bible is inspired by God [2 Timothy 3: 16, 2 Peter 2:16-21]. Since God is unchanging in his nature and purpose, and since He is truth, the scriptures are inerrant and the highest authority [Numbers 23:19, Malachi 3:6, James 1:17, John 10:35]. Just as the Prophets of God were moved by the Holy Spirit to declare what God was revealing to them and God confirmed the messenger and His message [1 Peter 1:12, 2 Peter 2:20-21], and Just as Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and Power to confirm his identity and message as from God [Acts 10:38, John 14:11], so too Jesus' apostles (apostle meaning chosen to be sent) and disciples (disciple meaning follower) were taught by God in Jesus, commissioned by him, and had God's word revealed to them in order that they would preach the word of God, teach, and make disciples (or followers), and they were given power by God in Jesus' name through the Holy Spirit to confirm God's message - Jesus' words - as the word of God [John 15:20, John 14:26, John 16:13-15, (Luke 9:1-2, Luke 10:17), Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:47, John 20:21, Acts 1:8, John 15:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Acts 8:15].

In short, God gave his message to a messenger and then confirmed that the message was from God rather than the human being. This confirmation came by supernatural action and events that were beyond a human's capability to do. Moses, the Prophets, Jesus (confirming his identity as God and his message about forgiveness through belief and trust in him and his words), and Jesus' apostles and followers were each confirmed in their message given by God to them. This confirmation came by God intervening with miraculous events that were beyond a human's ability – confirming their message as being from a divine origin rather than from themselves.

See below for a survey on Jesus' claims to be divine.

In contrast to Jefferson's claims of errors in memory of the authors of the gospels and long periods of time before the teachings of Jesus were written down, it should be pointed out that the early history surrounding the New Testament, both inside the New Testament and by history outside, shows a pervasive transmission of Jesus' direct teaching (1) during Jesus' life, as well as (2) directly following Jesus' resurrection (3) through to the deaths of his immediate followers.

It should also be pointed out that The New Testament passes the historical tests: internal (consistent within itself), external (consistent with external evidence outside the records of the New Testament), and bibliographical tests (consistency of manuscripts from current periods back as close to the events as we can get). In this last test, the New Testament is the most well attested document of ancient history. It was copied in four different geographical areas of the world that were isolated for the most part in contact from each other, in regards to Christianity, over the centuries. Our earliest copies go back to the first century itself (contested), and the early second century (uncontested).

The earliest uncontested manuscript being a fragment of John's Gospel (P52) dated to about 100-125 AD, no more than about 25 years after the apostle John's death (about 100 AD [3]). There are about 5,800 Greek (the language the New Testament was primarily written in) manuscript copies and fragments of the New Testament that are cataloged, and over 50,000 un-cataloged fragments just in the discovery of 1975 in St. George's Tower in Sinai. And yet when all these manuscripts are compared, they are consistent within themselves and offer no major changes. Bruce Metzger, one of the foremost experts on textual criticism of New Testament manuscripts, points out that if you were to take all the material differences in the comparison of manuscripts of the New Testament over the centuries, they would reduce to a half page of hand written text, and none of it would deal with Jesus' claims, life, death, or resurrection, or any major doctrine of Christianity.

To put this in context, the history of Thucydides was written somewhere around 460-400 BC, we have 9 copies of it, and the earliest copy is dated about 900 AD. Caesar's Gallic Wars were written around 58-50 BC, we have no more than 10 copies of it, and the earliest copy dates a thousand years after his life. The next best candidate of an ancient historical document in terms of strength of its authority is the Iliad. It has 643 manuscript copies. It was composed about 800 BC, and the earliest copies we have are from the second to third centuries AD and beyond. As Metzger puts it "The quantity of New Testament material is almost embarrassing in comparison with other works of antiquity." [4] Benjamin Warfield, who also dealt with textual criticism of the New Testament, said "If we compare the present state of the New Testament text with that of any other ancient writing, we must... declare it to be marvelously correct. Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied - a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy words.... The New Testament [is] unrivaled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use." [5] Frederic Kenyon, the former director of the British Museum and a foremost expert in Paleography of Greek Papyri, said "in no other case is the interval of time between the composition of the book and the date of the earliest manuscripts so short as in that of the New Testament." [6] Kenyon later concluded "The last foundation for any doubt that the scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed." [7] For further reference see Lee Strobel's interview with Dr. Bruce Metzger in Strobel, Lee, The Case For Christ, paperback edition (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 72-93.

With the disclaimer that the following books may or may not represent the views of Biblical Christian Solutions in Government, and may or may not coincide with a Biblical worldview as revealed in a straightforward reading of the Bible, the following books may be of interest in studying the manuscript evidence for the New Testament as well as its historicity.

For further reading on an introduction to the topic of the support for the New Testament historicity and manuscript evidence, you may want to see McDowell, Josh, and McDowell, Sean, More Than A Carpenter (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009).

For more than an introduction, but less than an overly technical presentation, of the information on the support for the account of the New Testament historicity (including manuscript evidence) see Strobel, Lee, The Case For Christ (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998).

For a technical introduction to textual criticism and the manuscript evidence for the New Testament, see Metzger, Bruce M., The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration, first, second or third editions. The fourth edition with contributions by Bart Ehrman cannot be suggested. By corruption Metzger is referring to restoring the New Testament in its original state without any human copyist errors. This is accomplished by comparing the many manuscripts to find human mistakes in copying, and then finding the most attested variant between the comparison of all the available manuscripts.

The end notes in each of these books supply more sources for those who wish to study the topic of New Testament manuscript evidence and historicity more in depth.

Jefferson's Letter to Benjamin Rush:

Jefferson believed in religious conscience for different sects of Christians, each answerable before God. The information from his claiming himself a Christian is found in his letter to Benjamin Rush on April 21, 1803, in which he states:

“They [Jefferson's views of Jesus] are the result of a life of enquiry [and] reflection, [and] very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. [T]o the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; [and] believing he never claimed any other.” [8]

In the same letter, Jefferson included a syllabus outlining his thoughts, in which he discusses the issue mentioned above concerning his view of the gospels. He states:

“On the contrary, all the learned of his [Jesus'] country, entrenched in its power [and] riches, were opposed to him, lest his laborers should undermine their advantages; [and] the committing to writing his life [and] doctrines, fell on the most unlettered [and] ignorant of men; who wrote too from memory, [and] not till long after the transactions had passed.” [8]

Toward the end he concludes the following concerning Jesus:

“His [Jesus] moral doctrines, relating to kindred [and] friends, were more pure [and] perfect than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more so than those of the Jews. [A]nd they went far

beyond both in inculcating universal philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids. [A] development of this head will evince [express] the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others.

3. The precepts of philosophy, [and] of the Hebrew code, laid hold of actions only. [H]e [Jesus] pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man; erected his tribunal [court] in the region of his thoughts, and purified the waters at the fountain head." [8]

While we can not agree with Jefferson that either the Bible, or other historical records from followers of Jesus, ever brought into doubt Jesus' claim to divinity, we do agree with him that government will not last or work correctly without God's law and word - since God is the foundation of, and created the institution of, government. This is what the majority of other Founding Fathers to the United States Government also realized, and is one reason they encouraged God's law and Jesus' words in education, public life, and society in general.

To show that Jefferson was mistaken in his understanding that Jesus did not claim to be God, we offer a short survey below of Jesus' statements about his divinity from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and also from the book of Acts. The following list is no where near exhaustive. The list does not touch on the prophesies that Jesus fulfilled from the Old Testament Law and Prophets that are attached to his circumstances rather than his claims. The prophesies referred to are those in the Old Testament which were given hundreds of years before through to about three thousand years before Jesus was born into the world [as God's word taking on human flesh]. It should be understood that this survey is only a quickly drawn up list, rather than a definitive survey.

Survey of Jesus' words and actions about his divinity:

Num	Bible Verse	Description
1.	Matthew 7:29	[claiming authority belonging to God to declare God's mind in his own name "I say to you"– such as in Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, etc.]
2.	Matthew 9:1-8	[also Mark 2:1-12, and Luke 5:17-26 – only God can forgive sin: Psalm 103:2-4, Isaiah 43:25]
3.	Matthew 12:1-8	[also Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5 – Jesus declares himself LORD of the sabbath which is a position that Genesis 2:2-3, Exodus 20:8, and Numbers 15:32-36 makes clear belongs

Num	Bible Verse	Description
		only to God]
4.	Matthew 12:15-21, Matthew 16:27	[Psalm 75:7, and 94:2, state that God is the Judge and that he brings justice in the end]
5.	Matthew 14:33, Matthew 28:17, Luke 24:52	[accepts worship which belongs to God alone Exodus 20:2-5]
6.	Matthew 8:20, Matthew 9:6, Matthew 12:8, Matthew 20:18, Matthew 24:27, Matthew 25:31, Matthew 26:45, etc.	[Jesus claims the title “Son of Man” which though also applied to the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, it is clear from the book of Daniel 7:9-14 that there would be one “Son Of Man” who would come and be given “... authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:14 (NIV)].
7.	Matthew 14:33, Matthew 26:63, John 10:36-38, John 11:4, John 11:27, John 19:7	[Jesus takes the title “Son of God,” a title that the Jewish people recognized as equating Jesus with God as seen in John 10:30-38 and John 19:7]
8.	Matthew 22:41-46	[also in Mark 12:35-37 and Luke 20:41-44 – pointing out from Psalm 110 that the reference was ultimately to God not to David's son (in Greek the word is “kurios” and “kuriw” variants of the same word both referring to God as master). In essence he was saying that David was prophesying about him and recognized him as God. The two references to Lord, being references to God, does not mean that David believed there was more than one God. David himself affirms throughout the Psalms that God is one, as it states in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Two examples would be his statements

Num	Bible Verse	Description
		in 1 Samuel 17:45-46, and Psalm 100:3. This phenomenon of God being one and yet discussing matters with his Spirit, Word, or Wisdom is not inconsistent with other areas of the Old Testament, such as Genesis 1:26, and Proverbs 8:22-31. In this case, Jesus is saying that though the Messiah – the anointed one who would save from sin (Isaiah 53:12) – was to come from David's line, he would be known not only as the son of David, but as God. Thus, in this passage Jesus would be claiming the title of God in which the Father puts all things under his feet]
9.	Matthew 28:18-20	[in verse 19 Jesus places himself in a list along side God's two other personages, Father and Spirit, claiming himself to be God]
10.	Luke 4:16-21	[in fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1-8]
11.	Luke 19:44	[As Jesus approached Jerusalem toward his death. Jesus wept over Jerusalem for their stubborn refusal to accept him and the punishment that would soon come to them. He then said, "They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." Luke 19:44b (NIV). In this verse he refers to his situation and refers to himself as God who had come to them and they did not recognize it.]
12.	John 4:42	[After hearing Jesus they recognize him as savior in fulfillment of Isaiah 43:11 which says "I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior." Isaiah 43:11 (NIV). The Hebrew word for LORD here in Isaiah is Yahweh, and is the sacred name for God.]
13.	John 6:45	[After hearing Jesus claim to be the Bread of Life that came down

Num	Bible Verse	Description
		from heaven, the people grumbled. Jesus quoted to them Isaiah 54:13 saying "It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.'" John 6:45a (NIV). Though he follows by acknowledging that those who listen to the Father come to Jesus, the implications are that Jesus is applying the prophesy to himself.]
14.	John 8:42-59	[claiming the divine title 'I AM' from Exodus 3:14 “God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.” '” in John 8:58 Jesus refers to himself with this Title]
15.	John 10:27-33	[Direct Claim]
16.	John 14:6-10, John 14:23-24	[Direct Claim]
17.	John 17:21-24	[Jesus being one with the Father and being before creation is expounded in passages such as Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (the word of God given through “the Prophet” in verse 19), Isaiah 9:6 (Jesus as God), and Proverbs 8 (God's Wisdom as compared to God's Word in John 1 – both being eternal and having the same attributes of: being with the Father and all things being created through them), etc.. Each of these preceding passages (with the exception of John 1) are before Jesus was born on earth. In addition to these, there are John 1, Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 2:8-10, Hebrews 1 each from the New Testament expounding Jesus as being God.]
18.	John 18:36-37	[Jesus as King of God's Kingdom, people, and all things - a title belonging to God which Old Testament passages such as Judges 8:23, 1 Samuel 8:7 point out.]
19.	John 20:26-31	[Jesus' does not correct the apostle Thomas' declaration in

Num	Bible Verse	Description
		verse 28. Thomas says to Jesus "My Lord and my God!". Not only does Jesus not correct Thomas, but Jesus encourages the declaration by saying "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."]
20.	John 12:47, John 1:29, John 3:14-15, Luke 18:31-33, Luke 22:42, Luke 22:47-48, Luke 22:66-24:53	[Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice paying our sin in fulfillment of Isaiah 52:13-53:12.]
21.	Acts 1:4-8	[Jesus appointing his close followers as witnesses in fulfillment of Isaiah 43:3-13 – which states only God forgives and he will appoint witnesses to show that he is the savior and one true God and there is no other. (The book of Acts being written by Luke)]

Please note: the above quick survey only takes into account the claims of Jesus – either by his words or by his actions. Even then, it is only a glimpse, since there are so many more references. It does not take into account the many prophesies that Jesus fulfilled such as:

Isaiah 7:14 pointing out that Immanuel – a word meaning “God with us” - will be born of a virgin as a supernatural sign. It was fulfilled in Jesus' birth as pointed out by Matthew in Matthew 1:22-23.

The survey does not take into account the angelic signs such as the angel Gabriel's message to Mary equating the attributes of Jesus to the prophesy in Daniel 7:9-14 of the 'Son of Man' :

“... he [Jesus] will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” Luke 1:33.

This survey does not take into account the many other New Testament passages inside or outside the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John expounding Jesus' divinity as God.

This survey does not take into account early historical records of followers of Jesus after the records of the New Testament, who acknowledge Jesus as God, from teachings of Jesus passed down to them by his apostles, such as:

Ignatius of Antioch (AD 110) in his letter to the Ephesians,

Justin Martyr (AD 100-165),

Irenaeus (AD 177), etc.

Finally, this survey does not take into account historical writings from non-Christians, who acknowledged that Christians during their time recognized that Jesus was divine, such as:

Lucian of Samosata (AD 170),

Celsus (AD 177),

Pliny the Younger (AD 112) [who persecuted Christians because they believed Jesus to be God], etc..

End Notes:

[1] Quoted from: Photographic facsimile of Thomas Jefferson's letter to James Fishback on September 27, 1809. From *Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress* collection.

[2] Rehnquist, William, Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Dissenting, *Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U.S. 38 (1985)*, [472 U.S. 38, 103], and [472 U.S. 38, 114][Footnote 5].

[3] Jerome, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, edited by Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry, translated by Richardson, Ernest C., reprint of 1892 edition by Christian Literature Publishing (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004), Series 2, Vol. 3, 365.

[4] Strobel, Lee, The Case For Christ, paperback edition (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 78.

[5] Strobel, Lee, The Case For Christ, paperback edition (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 91: originally quoted from Warfield, Benjamin, Introduction to Textual Criticism of the New Testament (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 12-13.

[6] Strobel, Lee, The Case For Christ, paperback edition (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 82: originally quoted from Kenyon, Frederic, Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 5.

[7] Strobel, Lee, The Case For Christ, paperback edition (Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 82: originally quoted from Kenyon, Frederic, The Bible and Archaeology (New York: Harper, 1940), 288.

[8] Quoted from: Photographic facsimile of Thomas Jefferson's letter to Benjamin Rush on April 21, 1803. From *Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress* collection.

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