

## Adams and Jefferson Reunited by Priestley

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Beginning in Leeds and continuing in Calne, Joseph Priestley researched and wrote about harmonizing the gospels. He stated, “The harmony of the four Gospels, or the reducing the history of our Savior, as delivered by the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to the order of time in which the events really happened, has been a favorite object with critics, even from the very early ages of Christianity.” Priestley first published essays in *The Theological Repository* (Issue 2 in 1770 and Issue 3 in 1771) and then expanded his writings into two books: *Harmony of the Evangelists, in Greek* (1777) and *A Harmony of the Evangelists in English* (1780).

Priestley published his analysis of his research in *Observations on the Harmony of the Evangelists* as a prefix to each of his books in Greek and English. Priestley used a “mechanical method” by cutting sections of the bible in Greek and then in English and ordering the sections chronologically on blank pages. He analyzed the inconsistencies and identical text between the Gospels that reflected copying and embellishment. Priestley was striving to prove the hypothesis that the duration of the public ministry of Jesus was but a year and perhaps a few months proposed by Nicholas Mann in *Of the True Years of the Birth and of the Death of Christ; two Chronological Dissertations* (1733).

In 1782 Priestley published *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, volume 4 of his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*. Priestley analyzed the beginning of the Gospel of John, in which Jesus is compared to the Greek word Logos, a form of divine intelligence operating throughout creation. He also discussed how the Logos or “Word” was associated with Solomon’s wisdom in Proverbs and Plato’s “emanations” from the divine mind. The controversial volume was widely read in England and in America by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

In a series of letters published in *The Sunbury and Northumberland Gazette* (1799) and then in book form Priestley argued that citizens should have the right to criticize the government for which he was threatened by deportation under the Alien and Sedition Act signed by President John Adams. Priestley’s *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland* influenced the 1800 election of Thomas Jefferson defeating John Adams.

In 1800 Thomas Jefferson promised Dr. Benjamin Rush a letter about Christianity. Dr. Rush was a physician and civic leader in Philadelphia who signed the Declaration of Independence. In 1802 Priestley published his *A General History of the Christian Church from the Fall of the Western Empire* dedicated to Thomas Jefferson. In 1803 Jefferson received Priestley’s *Socrates and Jesus Compared*. Jefferson used the idea of comparison in his own *Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus with others* which was sent to Dr. Rush as a discharge of his promise.

Like Priestley’s work, the *Syllabus* emphasized the contribution of Jesus’s human ethics. In 1804 Jefferson sent Priestley a copy of the *Syllabus* asking for his collaboration. Priestley accepted the challenge but died before working on it. Priestley’s son Joseph returned the copy of the *Syllabus* to Jefferson after the death of his father. In 1807 Priestley’s friend Thomas Cooper sent Jefferson a copy of Priestley’s *Memoirs* that had just been published by Cooper and Priestley’s son Joseph.

In 1811 Jefferson noted Rush’s concern over his deteriorated relationship with John Adams and thus began one of the great exchange of letters in American history. Religious works and Priestley were frequent topics

discussed in these letters. Jefferson wrote to John Adams several times in 1813 about eliminating the emanations, logos and Plato from Christianity. He mentions sending Adams a copy of Priestley's *The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophers Compared with Those of Revelation* (1804). In August he mentions sending Adams a copy of his *Syllabus* to be read by himself and Abigail and then returned, fearing that it might fall in the hands of critics. In the same year Jefferson wrote to Dr. Thomas Cooper about the frauds of the clergy and the importance of separation of church and state so the state didn't become part of the fraud.

Adams replied to Jefferson many times in 1813 about Priestley. In a letter of September 2, 1813 Adams says, "Considering all things, I admire Dr. Priestley's last Effort for which I am entirely indebted to you. But as I think it is extremely imperfect, I beg of you to pursue the investigation, according to your promise to Dr. Rush, and according to your *Syllabus*." In a letter from Monticello dated October 12, 1813, Jefferson responds, "We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus...There will be found remaining the most sublime and 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, and arranging, the matter which is evidently his, and which is as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill. The result is an 8 vo. [octavo] of 46 pages of pure and unsophisticated doctrines, such as were professed and acted on by the *unlettered* apostles, and Apostolic fathers, and the Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup>. century."

In a January 1816 letter to Charles Thomson, former secretary of the Continental Congress and author of his own *Synopsis of the Evangelists* (1815), Jefferson wrote "I too have made a wee little book, ...which I call the *Philosophy of Jesus* ...made by cutting the texts out of the book, and arranging them on the pages of a blank book, in a certain order of time or subject. If I had time I would add to my little book the Greek, Latin and French texts, in columns side by side." This wee book would be expanded by Jefferson to consider aspects of the life of Jesus and titled, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English*. In creating the wee book, now called the *Jefferson Bible*, he literally cut out the parts of the Gospels that he felt had been corruptions. A copy of this bible and bibles clipped to create it are now in the Smithsonian collection.

The correspondence between Jefferson and Adams continued for many years. As late as 1823, Jefferson wrote to John Adams about the Logos in the Gospel of John being mistranslated and misunderstood. In January 1825 John Adams wrote to Jefferson about the right of free inquiry and private judgment versus the punishments for "blasphemy" that obstructed improvements of the mind. In perhaps one of the great coincidences of American political affairs on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1826, 50 years after their Declaration of Independence had been adopted by the Continental Congress, Presidents Jefferson and Adams died just hours apart as friends reunited through their correspondence in part about the religious writings of Joseph Priestley.

#### **Sources for the letters of Adams, Jefferson and Rush**

Butterfield, L. H. (ed.) *Letters of Benjamin Rush*. Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1951.

Cappon, Lester J. (ed.) *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of America, 1984.

#### **Internet resources**

*Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov> .

*Jefferson Bible*, Smithsonian, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/JeffersonBible>.