



THE JEFFERSON  
BIBLE

THOMAS JEFFERSON

# **The Jefferson Bible - Life And Morals Of Jesus Of Nazareth**

**Thomas Jefferson**

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## The History of The Bible

Bible (Gr. βιβλία, books), the name applied by Chrysostom in the 4th century to the books of the Old and New Testaments, which had been called the "Scripture." The ancient plural has been transformed into a singular noun, in view of the recognized unity of the books of the Bible, which is thus called The Book by way of eminence. The Bible has two general divisions, the Old Testament and the New; the Greek διαθήκη meaning disposition by will, is used both in the Septuagint and in the Greek New Testament for the "covenant" or compact between God and man. The Old Testament was divided by the Jews into three parts, viz., the law, the prophets, and the sacred writings. The law comprised the five books of Moses. The prophets comprised the earlier prophets, so called - the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings; and the later prophets - three major, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and 12 minor, Hosea to Malachi. Under the sacred writings were included the poetical books, Psalms, Proverbs, Job; the "Five Rolls," Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther; also the books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. The number of the books and their grouping have varied in different versions.

Our English Bible gives 39. Jerome counted the same books so as to equal the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet; Judges and Ruth, the two books of Samuel, two of Kings, two of Chronicles and the 12 minor prophets making five books. The later Jews of Palestine counted these 24. As to their order, the Masoretic arrangement, which is that of our present Hebrew Bibles, is very ancient. The Greek-speaking Jews, however, varied from those of Palestine, and their arrangement is preserved in the Septuagint, which is followed in the Vulgate and in our English Bibles; an order



not according to chronological succession, but made with a view to grouping similar classes of composition together, the historical being placed first, the poetical next, and the prophetic last. The historical division opens in the book of Genesis with an account of the creation of all things, then takes up the history of the Hebrews as a matter of central interest, showing the separation of the family of Abraham from other nations and their prosperous settlement in Egypt. Exodus describes the escape of the Israelites from Egypt and their organization as a nation under the Mosaic law. Leviticus contains the more special laws of Israel, chiefly those relating to the public worship, festivals, and similar topics.

Numbers, with a supplement to the laws, narrates the weary march through the desert, and the opening of the contest for the land of Canaan. In Deuteronomy Moses, drawing near death, reminds the people of the experience they have gone through and the laws they have received, and exhorts them to obedience to God; then appoints a successor, and, taking a first and last look at the land not yet entered, dies. The book of Joshua describes the conquest and partition of Canaan, and the leader's farewell exhortation and death. In the next book, Judges, we read of anarchy and apostasy, and the consequent subjugation of the Israelites by their heathen neighbors, and the exploits of heroes raised up to deliver them. The books of Samuel give his history as prophet and judge, and the story of Saul and David. The books of Kings tell of David's death, the brilliant reign of Solomon, and the subsequent decline, the revolt of the ten tribes, the overthrow of the seceded kingdom of Israel and the fall of the kingdom of Judah into captivity, and the fate of the remnant left in Judea while their brethren were carried away captive. These books tell

also of those prophets who testified for God in the face of wicked kings and a degenerate people.

The Chronicles are a supplementary work, and are accompanied by the book of Ruth, an episode in the time of the judges, narrating with exquisite grace the marriage of Ruth the Moabitess and Boaz the great-grandfather of David. The Old Testament history closes in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which describe the return of the Jewish nation from exile and the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple worship. The book of Esther records events of the Persian captivity. - While the historical books show the development of those religious ideas which underlie the Hebrew national life, the prophetic books show these ideas inspiring the people in their conflicts with unbelief and apostasy, and animating the nation with bright hopes of the future. In all literature there are no books like these, in severe morality, high religious tone, sublime conception, grand diction, and rich imagery. Covering a great extent of time, these prophetic writings vary in style, but they show the struggles of the nation's heart and its foreign relations in a way that lights up the historical books. - The poetical books express the same ideas with the prophetic, but in a more quiet didactic and lyric form.

The didactic portion of them consists of the Proverbs, a collection of sententious maxims and wise discourses; Ecclesiastes, an eloquent wail over the transientness of earthly things; and the book of Job, a philosophical poem upon Providence, wonderfully rich in thought and diction, and full of the doctrine of resignation to the mysterious will of God. The Psalms are a collection of devotional lyrics. Lamentations are elegiac patriotic verses. The Song of Solomon is an amatory idyll, which has been explained by many scholars as an allegory. - The New Testament gives



the only original account of the origin and early spread of Christianity. It is composed of 27 books. Four contain the memoirs of Jesus; one (Acts) gives the actions of the apostles, especially of Peter and Paul; 21 are apostolical letters; and the collection closes with the Apocalypse. The Gospels of Matthew and John are held to be the work of the apostles whose names they bear. Mark was a disciple of Peter, and Luke a companion of Paul. The book of Acts is also ascribed to Luke. The Epistles are letters called forth by various exigencies, and contain incidental information, throwing much light upon the early constitution and spread of the Christian church, and the development of its doctrines.

The Apocalypse is the only book in the New Testament of a strictly prophetic character. It was written shortly after the death of Nero, and strengthened the hearts of Christians against a threatening persecution by giving hope of the approaching kingdom of Christ. - For 1,000 years learned men have been studying the authenticity and arrangement of the constituent parts of the Bible. The history of this work will be found under the title Canon. Far greater study, however, has been given to the original text of Scripture. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament as we have it has already passed through many revisions. Of the primitive text we have little positive information. The books were first written on skins or linen cloth or papyrus, and preserved in rolls. The letter used was the old Hebrew character, which is found on the coins of the Maccabees, and was probably of Phoenician origin. There were no accents nor vowel points, the consonants only being written, and the vowel sounds supplied by the usage of the living speech; and the words were generally run together in a continuous line. Not until the Hebrew became a dead

language was its vowel system perfected, to take the place of the familiar usage which was passing away.

After the return from the Babylonish exile, the sacred books were subjected to a careful and critical examination. About the same time the written character of the ancient Hebrew was modified by the Aramaic chirography, until it took the square form, more nearly resembling the Palmyrene letters, which was adopted perhaps on account of its beauty. Simultaneously came another arrangement of the text, with a view to its public reading. Tradition had prescribed the manner in which the reader's voice should emphasize words and balance sentences, but it was long before that mode was declared by any written signs. The first step toward this was the separation of words from each other, and it was followed by the division into verses. This had been marked in poetry very early by lines or blank spaces measuring the rhythm. In prose it was introduced later for the convenience of the synagogue, and was established by the close of the period we are considering. Before this distribution into sentences, the necessity was felt of breaking up the text into sections of less or greater length.

In this division the book of the law consisted of (569 paragraphs or "pa-rashes," and these, in the absence of headings and running indices, were known and referred to by the subject that was most prominent in each; for example, parash "Balaam," parash "Bush," or "Deluge." The text, thus written and distributed, was most jealously guarded. In copying it nothing must be added, nothing taken away, nothing changed; letters, words, verses, sections were counted. Rules were made in regard to the way in which the MSS. were to be written; every letter that was larger or smaller, suspended or inverted, or otherwise

unusual in its form, even if accidentally so written, was to be needfully copied. Another division into larger parashes or sections, adapted to the public readings on the Sabbath, was introduced at a later time. The next period in the history of the Old Testament text is the Masoretic, commonly reckoned from the 6th to the 11th century. The word masora means a "collection of traditions/" and the main object of the laborers in this field was to gather up and arrange the critical material of an older time before the existing traditions should fade out.

But the Masorites did more than this; they aimed at completing what had been commenced before; they would fix the reading of the text in all its parts, and their scrupulous care did much to finish and perfect it. They collated MSS., noticed critical and orthographical difficulties, and ventured upon conjectures of their own. Their notes were at first written in separate books; afterward for convenience they were copied upon the margin of MSS. or even at the end of a book, a practice that led gradually to vast confusion. Attempts were even made to crowd the whole Masora upon the margin of MSS., and when the space was too small, as often it was, the annotations were appended to the text or omitted entirely. Since the completion of the Masoretic period the labors of scholars have been spent in elucidating and perpetuating the Masoretic text. The MSS. of the Pentateuch were very carefully revised, and some of them are very ancient. Of the other books no MSS. date back as far as the Masoretic period: four or five belong to the 12th century; some 50 belong to the 13th; and for the following centuries the number increases.

Eminent Jewish scholars of the middle ages devoted themselves to the task of purifying the sacred text by the

largest possible collation of MSS., and in their writings speak of famous copies now lost whose use they enjoyed. When the invention of printing had made easy the exact reproduction and extensive multiplication of copies, an attempt was made to compare carefully the best MSS. extant, to collate with them the Masora, and thus to bring out a true and pure Masoretic text; an undertaking too large to be accomplished at once, and therefore but imperfectly executed at that time. The books were produced singly. The earliest printed portion of the Hebrew Bible, the Psalter, was done in 1477, in small folio form, very carelessly, with many abbreviations, and not a few grave omissions. Later, about 1480, it was reprinted in 12mo, without date or place, and again in the same form with an index. The whole Pentateuch, with the points, the Chaldee paraphrase, and Rashi's commentary, was printed in 1482, in folio, at Bologna. In 1486 appeared in two folios, at Soncino, the prophets, early and later, with Kimchi's commentary.

The whole Hagiographa was printed in Naples in 1487. The entire Hebrew Bible was first printed at Soncino in 1488. It was made partly from MSS. neither very old, probably, nor very good, and partly from editions of separate books already published. It contained many errors. Only nine copies of this edition are extant. This was strictly followed by the Gerson edition printed at Brescia in 1494, from which Luther made his translation. It was the parent of the first rabbinical Bible of Bomberg, 1517 and 1518, and of Bomberg's manual editions from 1518 to 1521; of the editions of Robert Stephens (4to, 1539-'44), and of Sebastian Minister's (Basel, 2 vols. 4to, 1536). The next independent edition prepared from a fresh comparison of MSS. was the famous Complutensian Polyglot (Complutum, i. e., Alcala de Henares), the work of Cardinal Ximenes,

assisted by the most eminent biblical scholars in Spain. No expense was spared to procure Hebrew MSS. from different countries. The Vatican and other libraries lent their treasures; and 14 years of preparatory labors were spent before the first volume was issued (1522). The text of the Complutensian Bible agrees closely with that of Bomberg's first edition of 1518. The third great original edition is the second of Bomberg's rabbinical Bible, printed in folio at Venice, 1525-'6. This embodies the labors of Rabbi Jacob ben Cha-jim, who revised the Masora word by word, arranged it, made an index, and availed himself systematically of its whole apparatus.

It was reprinted several times in the 16th and 17th centuries. After these three independent editions, all that follow contain a mixed text. The Antwerp Polyglot, published 1569-'72, at the expense of King Philip II. of Spain, and therefore called the royal Polyglot, was composed from the Complutensian and Bomberg's. Besides the texts in five volumes, four containing the Old and one the New Testament, three other volumes gave a valuable apparatus, critical, philological, antiquarian. The various editions of Plantin followed the Antwerp Polyglot, as did those of Christian Reineccius. It was the basis also of the Paris Polyglot (10 vols, folio, 1645), which gave the text in Hebrew, Samaritan, Chaldee, Syriac, Arabic, Greek, and Latin, containing for the first time in print the Samaritan Pentateuch. It was repeated again in the London Polyglot (6 vols, folio, 1657). Elias Hutter, in his first edition published at Hamburg in 1587, and three times reprinted, used the copies of Venice, Antwerp, and Paris. In 1611 the manual edition of Buxtorf was printed. Buxtorf undertook to improve upon Bomberg's Bible, and as far as he could conformed to the Masora, for whose text he had the highest respect, regarding it as the only perfect one.

The next important edition for which the oldest and best MSS. were collated was that of Joseph Athias, printed at Amsterdam, 1661 and 1667. Among the later editions that have followed this, the most noted from their new collation of MSS., careful selection of readings, and thorough correction of points, are those of Jablonski, Berlin, 1699; Van der Hooght, Amsterdam, 1705; J. H. Michaelis, Halle, 1720; Houbigant, Paris, 1753; Simon, Halle, 1752, 1767; Kennicott, Oxford, 1776, 1780; August Halm, 1831; and G. Theile, 1849. Besides these editions, which aim at bringing the Masoretic text near its perfection, critical helps are found in the Masora contained in the rabbinical Bibles of Bomberg and Buxtorf, and the various readings which are found in all the best editions. The toil and treasure expended upon this long series of editions, each of which was a triumph in its time, have not been wasted. The result on the whole is a text of these ancient and venerable books, not indeed perfect in every point and particle, but more excellent than might have been expected, a text that nearly corresponds with that of the books which constituted the oldest Hebrew canon. - The task of purifying the Greek of the New Testament and bringing it to the perfection of our latest and best editions was much less difficult, yet a work of no small magnitude.

Not a fragment from the hand of an evangelist or an apostle survived the early generations that used, the original MSS. and wore them out. The early Christians did not feel the importance of laying them sacredly aside. The greater their value, the more extensive was their circulation, and the briefer consequently their existence. The books of the New Testament were written after the custom of the time upon papyrus, or upon parchment, finer and more durable, which was beginning to take its place,

and were in the roll form. The writing itself, done with a reed and ink, was in uncial or large letters, and ran in continuous lines, with no spaces between the words, no capitals or stops. The heading of the books, "According to Matthew," "According to Luke," etc, was added later. Some epistles had their address marked upon them, but in others it was inferred from the contents. The title "catholic" ("general" in our English Bibles) was given to certain epistles in the 4th century. As copies of these ancient books multiplied, they naturally varied more or less from the originals and from each other; the copyists confounding similar letters or words, substituting a synonym for a given term, introducing something from a parallel passage or marginal gloss, or making other alterations unintentional or even intentional, as the copyist tried to harmonize seeming discrepancies or to explain what seemed obscure.

These variations, small and great, number not less than 120,000; yet they are mostly variations of spelling or inflection, often impossible to express in a translation. There are not more than 1,600 or 2,000 places where the true reading is at all in doubt, while the doubtful readings which affect the sense are much fewer still, and those of any dogmatic importance can be easily numbered. The MSS. of the New Testament have been classified according to certain literary or geographical affinities. They were divided into the eastern and the western, or according to another description, into an Alexandrine and a Latin, an Asiatic and a Byzantine text. The Alexandrine type of the Greek text was in use among the oriental Jewish Christians who used the Greek version of the Old Testament. The Latin type is found not only in the Latin copies, but in the Greek copies which the Latins used. These groups were not wholly distinct from one another, and it is difficult to fix