



# **A Revolutionary and the Resurrection**

*Thomas Jefferson and the Divinity of Jesus Christ*

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In this essay, I will argue that the divinity of Jesus Christ can in fact be established through the character of his disciples and their subsequent actions in response to Christ's call. First, I argue that Christ's disciples were not "dupes and imposters" as charged by Thomas Jefferson; to the contrary, they were men of integrity and intelligence - shrewd, pragmatic men who risked everything to transform their lives into steadfast disciples and become the fathers and foundation of the Catholic Church. Second, I will show that the pre-Industrial Revolution Jefferson - a country-lawyer and gentleman farmer by profession - had considerably more in common with 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians than with 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans; as such, Jefferson's attacks on the "inferior" minds of New Testament authors can be applied to himself and are therefore self-defeating. The formalization of my argument is outlined in the following syllogism; my case centers as an attack on P6, that is, claiming that the disciples were complete dupes is not a viable option for our belief:

- (1) Jesus claimed to be God.
- (2) If Jesus claimed to be God, then his claim was either true or false.
- (3) If true, then he is God and is to be worshipped by his disciples [e.g. Simon the fisherman, Levi the tax-collector, and Saul the Pharisee].
- (4) If false, then Jesus' disciples either knew his claim was false, or they did not.
- (5) If they knew his claim was false, and followed Jesus anyway, then his disciples were complete imposters.
- (6) If they did not know his claim was false, then they were complete dupes.
- (7) Therefore, either Jesus is God and is to be worshipped, or else his disciples were imposters or dupes and Jesus is not God.

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The Louisiana Purchase Treaty was signed on April 30, 1803, when Napoleon Bonaparte - distracted with ambitions of European military conquest, and therefore in search of capital to fund his war with Great Britain - offered U.S. emissaries James Monroe and Robert Livingston the chance to buy 828,000 square miles of territory west of the Mississippi River for a price tag of \$15 million. President Thomas Jefferson, worried about his unconstitutional authorization to execute such a transaction, eventually acquiesced to his cabinet's views, and rationalized: "It is the case of a guardian, investing the money of his ward in purchasing an important adjacent territory; and saying to him when of age, I did this for your good."<sup>1</sup> At mere pennies per acre, the Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of America and would eventually encompass 15 states, roughly one-third of the nation.<sup>2</sup> To this day, it is considered one of the most consequential land acquisitions in the history of the world.

The new Louisiana Territory, a veritable wilderness, was as distant and mysterious to Americans of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as Mars is to Americans today. In other words, Jefferson - along with the upstart American populace - was unsure, precisely, what he had just purchased. Speculation and conjecture about the contents of the new property were rampant; some of the more outlandish, even absurd beliefs included fantastic stories of untamed lands teeming with Woolly Mammoths and mountain ranges composed entirely of solid rock salt.

While it is hard to conceive such irrational claims being taken seriously - who, after all, would be so foolish as to suggest prehistoric animals still roaming the earth? - we must remember that the relatively untrained minds of early 19<sup>th</sup> century America did not have access to the types of advanced thinking or highly specialized technologies we take for granted today. For example, Lewis and Clark - the explorers commissioned by Jefferson in 1804 to observe,

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<sup>1</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. "[Letter to John Breckinridge](#)", August 12, 1803.

<sup>2</sup> Louisiana Purchase Treaty (1803) [National Archives](#)

document, and inventory the new territory navigated the harsh and uncultivated continent - by way of raging rivers and remote mountain passes - armed with nothing more than a sextant, an instrument used to measure the distance between celestial bodies in order to establish latitude and longitude.<sup>3</sup> (Think of that the next time you casually type address coordinates into your mobile phone!)

Yet, the knack for leveling criticism at the shortcomings of our ancestors - that is, condemning their relative simple-mindedness and lack of sophistication - is a pastime we share in common with our ancestors themselves. For example, in 1820 the very same Thomas Jefferson created a version of the bible titled “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth”. In it, Jefferson removed all references to the supernatural - including accounts of Christ’s miracles as documented by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - leaving only the “system of morality” offered by Jesus. Jefferson’s motivation for the creation of his bible was an intense disdain for these “most unlettered of men”. In an 1814 letter to John Adams, Jefferson claimed the New Testament to be the “fabric of inferior minds”; what could be culled out and properly attributed to Christ was “as to pick out diamonds from dunghills.”<sup>4</sup> And a few years later, to his friend William Short, Jefferson wrote: “Of this band of dupes and impostors, Paul was the great Coryphaeus, and first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus. These palpable interpolations and falsifications of his doctrines led me to try to sift them apart.”<sup>5</sup>

Down through the years, others have echoed Jefferson’s “moral teacher” creed, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson in his address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838: “Churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. Christianity became a Mythus, as the

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<sup>3</sup> State Historical Society of North Dakota. [“Geography - What Methods Did Lewis and Clark Use to Determine Their Geographic Position?”](#)

<sup>4</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. [“Letter to John Adams”](#), January 24, 1814.

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. [“Letter to William Short”](#), April 13, 1820.

poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before. He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.”<sup>6</sup>

Though it may seem ill-advised, and even un-American to argue against the likes of Thomas Jefferson, this paper intends to demonstrate that his censures and disapprovals present a cautionary tale for posterity: sharp criticisms levied against the “inferior minds” of ancestors , while seemingly logical and proper today, often dull significantly with the passage of time. To wit: the source of those wild claims of Woolly Mammoths and salt mountains inhabiting the Louisiana Territory is none other than Thomas Jefferson himself.<sup>7 8</sup> And it is Jefferson - the “Father of the Declaration of Independence”, a true Renaissance man, one of the greatest political minds in history, and a disciple of Enlightenment heroes Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton - who ends his bible before the Resurrection. To subscribe to Jefferson’s views is to accept that our faith is in vain.<sup>9</sup> And that is unacceptable.

Thomas Jefferson valued, above nearly all else, knowledge: “*I cannot live without books.*”<sup>10</sup> For example, the phrase *Ipsa scientia potential est* (knowledge itself is power) is attributed to Francis Bacon and appeared for the first time in writing in 1597;<sup>11</sup> Jefferson was a devotee of Bacon and borrowed the truncated expression “knowledge is power”<sup>12</sup> on several occasions, most notably in connection with the establishment of the University of Virginia. The

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<sup>6</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “[Harvard Divinity School Address](#)”, July 15, 1838.

<sup>7</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “[Instructions to Michaux](#)”, January 23, 1793.

<sup>8</sup> Jefferson Thomas. “[Description of Louisiana](#)”, November 14, 1803.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor 15:12-19.

<sup>10</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “[Letter to John Adams](#)”, June 10, 1815.

<sup>11</sup> Bacon, Sir Francis. *Meditationes sacrae*. 1597

<sup>12</sup> Mayo, Bernard. “Jefferson Himself: The Personal Narrative of a Many-Sided American”, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1942), 324.

basis for Jefferson's anti-supernatural conviction is his belief that the apostles were feeble minded dupes and therefore Jesus, while a "great moral teacher", is not the incarnate God. However, while Jesus of Nazareth, to Jefferson, was not God-incarnate, one thing was certain: he was intelligent. In 1820, Jefferson wrote: "I hold the precepts of Jesus as delivered by Himself, to be the most pure, benevolent and sublime which have ever been preached to man."<sup>13</sup>

Although Jesus Christ, to Jefferson, was not the Messiah sent to save and redeem mankind, he was unmistakably a son, a brother to his disciples, and importantly, the *revolutionary founder* of a church. Jefferson of course knew a thing or two about revolutionary founders - and importantly, about the toil and sacrifice required when engaged in the act of *founding*. Founders are creators, they are organizers; by definition, founders are leaders, confident in their ability to form and unite a scattering of individuals into a cohesive group. Founding the Church (like founding America) - that is, to usher in a completely new philosophy and governing model - was a mission of considerable - even unimaginable - proportions.<sup>14</sup>

Based on his own experience as a zealous founder of the United States of America - "*a little rebellion now and then is a good thing*"<sup>15</sup> - Jefferson was uniquely positioned to understand and appreciate the incredible task that Christ had shouldered. Specifically, Jefferson would have been mindful of the magnitude of Christ's undertaking; that is, if the mission of Christ's church was to be fulfilled, it would need to spread and grow geographically and remain durable and resilient to stand the test of time. (It has.) Most importantly, if Christ's church was to expand and flourish beyond 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea it would require unwavering followers to propel the church forward. (It did.) As a revolutionary founder two-thousand years ago, Christ would have

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<sup>13</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. "[Letter to Jared Sparks](#)", November 4, 1820.

<sup>14</sup> Skinner, Michael. "[Men of Virtue Rosary](#)", Gratia Reflections. "Loyalty". 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. "[Letter to James Madison](#)", January 30, 1787.

necessarily sought out disciples who were open to his vision: men who - like early American revolutionaries 250 years ago - were dedicated and intelligent, and (with proper leadership, counsel, and patience) would be willing to “pledge their lives”<sup>16</sup> to one another. In other words, men committed to modeling their lives after Christ. (They were.)

To summarize, we’ve now demonstrated:

- (1) Thomas Jefferson valued knowledge and believed Christ to be highly intelligent.
- (2) Jefferson, himself a revolutionary founder, understood the effort and consequence associated with the recruitment of promising disciples to lay the foundation for a new enterprise and propel it forward.
- (3) Therefore, the disciples selected by Christ could not have been the “dupes” supposed by Jefferson. To suggest otherwise would be to believe that Jesus of Nazareth - in Jefferson’s eyes the world’s greatest moral teacher, worthy of his very own “Jeffersonian” bible - would have chosen for his life’s most consequential enterprise a band of men incapable of carrying out the very mission for which they were recruited.

Three such men selected by Christ - Simon, the fisherman; Levi, the tax collector; and Saul, the Pharisee - while “unlettered” by Jefferson’s Enlightenment-era bias toward formal education, were highly intelligent, hard-working, tough, courageous, shrewd, and pragmatic. (Incidentally, these are the same qualities possessed by the New England fishermen, Philadelphia merchants, and Virginia scholars recruited to fight Great Britain during the American Revolution). Peter, Matthew, and Paul, as they would come to be known, were hand-picked by Christ - “*Follow me.*”<sup>17</sup> - and each played an essential role in the growth and development of the Church. While a deep and detailed analysis of the professional characteristics and

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<sup>16</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “[The Declaration of Independence](#)”, July 4, 1776.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 4:19; Mark 2:14

responsibilities of first-century Judeans is beyond the scope of this paper, we can still reasonably argue against Jefferson's claims that the apostles were feeble-minded; to the contrary, first-century Judean fishermen, tax-collectors, and Pharisees were anything but:

**PETER.** Galilean fisherman of the commercial variety would have been recognized as true craftsmen and professionals. Fishermen needed to be well-skilled at boating and marine navigation, and expert at the various techniques associated with fishing including the fabrication of nets and the maintenance of other forms of fishing tackle. They would have been skilled at the preparation of fish (e.g. salting, smoking, drying, pickling) and would have possessed necessary business skills - like negotiating and selling - in order to create sustainable growth and profitability. Importantly, they would have been chiseled veterans of the fishing trade, tough, hard-working, and shrewd - qualities indicative of perseverance and survival.<sup>18</sup>

**MATTHEW.** First-century Judea was a back-water territory on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. A first-century Judean tax-collector found himself at the brutal cross-roads of financial exchange between the Romans, who loathed the Jews of Galilee and Judea, and the Galileans and Judeans who equally despised their Roman occupiers. A tax-collector was despised for two key reasons: first, for operating as an agent of Imperial Rome, and second, for employing dishonest practices in the collection of taxes. The role of tax-collector was often akin to that of an extortionist - profiting through loan issuance at exorbitant interest rates and often employing violent, confiscatory tactics to collect payments. Necessarily, tax-collectors were clever, calculating, and callous - often surrounding themselves with the protection and 'muscle' needed to defend their financial interests.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tecarta Bible. [Galilean Fisherman](#)

<sup>19</sup> Watchtower Online Library. [How Tax Collectors Were Viewed in the First Century](#)



**PAUL.** Pharisees were a “politico-religious faction among the adherents of Judaism” and were recognized as the “most rigid defenders of the Jewish religion and traditions”.<sup>20</sup> They at once represented political power, legal authority, and religious tradition (imagine your local congressman, district attorney, and bishop rolled into one). At the time of Jesus, the Ten Commandments had been protracted into 613 *Mitzvoth* (rules), and the Pharisees governed the Jewish people according to a strict interpretation of Mosaic Law. Jesus openly criticized the Pharisees for their self-righteousness and spiritual blindness, and as such, was viewed as a threat to their power and authority. The notion that a carpenter from Nazareth was the Messiah as prophesied in the Torah was preposterous to the Pharisees. As such, the Pharisees continually plotted to force Jesus into compromising situations, to brand him as deceptive and imposturous, and therefore discredit him in front of his growing throng of followers.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the demonstrable professional characteristics of the above men, it is of further significance to remember that each man risked everything - literally staking their “Lives, Fortunes, and sacred Honor”<sup>22</sup> to follow Christ. To believe Jefferson’s claims, therefore, you must believe that Peter, Matthew, and Paul were not smart, shrewd, and tough men, but rather fools, chumps, and pushovers incapable of discerning truth from fantasy. Given what we know about their professional duties, and their subsequent martyrdom for Christ and his Church, this strikes me as highly unlikely.

Although Thomas Jefferson lived only 200 years ago, his death in 1826 preceded the height of the Industrial Revolution and many of the world’s greatest technological advances: the mass production of steel, the expansion of rail transportation, the introduction of the telegraph,

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<sup>20</sup> Catholic Answers. [Pharisees](#)

<sup>21</sup> Skinner, Michael. “[Men of Virtue Rosary](#)”, Gratia Reflections. “Courage”. 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “[The Declaration of Independence](#)”, July 4, 1776.

and the advent of the electric lightbulb are just a few examples of innovations that transformed the world in ways Jefferson could have only imagined. Furthermore, we know that Jefferson enthusiastically supported the theories of his Enlightenment hero Isaac Newton, whom he considered “one of the greatest men to have ever lived.”<sup>23</sup> As such, Jefferson would have based his understanding of the universe on Newton’s 17<sup>th</sup> century work in astronomy and physics. To demonstrate the relative inferiority of Jefferson’s thinking, we can point out that Newton’s theories were challenged and refuted directly by Albert Einstein’s 1915 theory of general relativity.<sup>24</sup> In other words, everything known up to that point about gravity and the universe - including Jefferson’s beliefs - was turned on its head.

Likewise, Jefferson’s own experiences with transportation, communication, and agriculture would have had very little - if anything - in common with his 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century American descendants. In these same areas however, Jefferson would have had much in common with 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians; for instance, Jefferson could have carried on a conversation about transportation with any of Christ’s disciples. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as in the 1<sup>st</sup>, if you wanted to get somewhere your options were threefold: walking, by horseback, or via a boat, all of which are well-documented in the Gospels. Jefferson’s attacks on the “inferior” minds of New Testament authors can be applied to himself and are therefore self-defeating:

- (1) According to Jefferson, inferior 1<sup>st</sup> century minds cannot be trusted or taken seriously.
- (2) Jefferson’s own 19<sup>th</sup> century mind (when compared to 21<sup>st</sup> century standards) is inferior.
- (3) Therefore, Jefferson’s claims (of the inferiority of the disciples) are to be discounted.

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<sup>23</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. “[Letter to John Trumbull](#)”, February 15, 1789.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, Kiona N. “[The Solar Eclipse that Proved Albert Einstein Right](#)”, Forbes, August 19, 2017.

Thomas Jefferson is to be lauded for his contributions to freedom and democracy which are certain to stand the test of time. The Declaration of Independence is one of the most consequential documents ever written and has served as an inspiration for freedom-loving peoples throughout history. As the newly elected President, and with the nation hanging on the precipice of Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."<sup>25</sup> And on July 4, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky tweeted: "I wish the friendly people of America peace and prosperity. I appreciate the leadership assistance of the United States in Ukraine's defending of common values - Freedom, Democracy and Independence."<sup>26</sup>

Jefferson's views on the divinity of Christ, and his contempt for the Apostles, however, do not likewise stand the test of time. Contrary to Jefferson's well-documented beliefs, Christ's disciples were not simple-minded fools, and Jefferson himself is guilty of the same inferior thinking with which he charged the likes of Peter, Matthew, and Paul. Therefore, we have sufficiently shown that the assertions that the disciples were duped by Christ is not a viable argument against the divinity of Christ.

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<sup>25</sup> Lincoln, Abraham. "[Address in Independence Hall](#)", February 22, 1861.

<sup>26</sup> Zelensky, Volodymyr. "[Independence Day Message to America](#)", July 4, 2022.