

Alexandria Searls, Artist's Statement

January 2007

My inspiration for the photographs in "Thomas Jefferson and the Good Book" came from an exhibition in the University of Virginia's Rare Book Room in 1983. Called "Formerly in the Possession of... An Exhibition of Books from the Libraries of William Byrd II, Landon Carter, Thomas Jefferson, and Their Virginia Contemporaries," and curated by Mildred K. Abraham, this collection of books and artifacts included one of a pair of New Testaments that Thomas Jefferson had cut up with a razor.

I went to "Formerly in the Possession of..." as a reporter for a student magazine, and in the midst of taking notes I was astounded to find out that Thomas Jefferson had cut up the Bible. I was a believer in the sacredness of the text, and I also remembered the New Testament warning that anyone who changed even a word of Revelation would be damned. (Revelation 22:19: "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophesy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.") I figured that what applied to Revelation probably would apply to the entire Scripture, and though I was not convinced that God would be so punitive, I still took the threat seriously. Within the context of possible damnation I considered Jefferson's act to be extremely brave and something I would never have done myself. In 1804, while President, he had taken out what he had believed to be the uncorrupted message of Jesus, and he had rejected all passages involving miracles and the divinity of Christ. He then pasted the passages he had chosen into a blank book. He entitled the compilation "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth," which he would often read before going to sleep.

Six years later, having spent most of that time away, I returned to Charlottesville to pursue a Master's of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. As I attempted to write a book, I decided to embark on a photographic study of books as objects. The surfaces of books would give me clues about my own difficulties writing one. In the midst of this project, I remembered Jefferson's Bible. I did not remember it correctly. Somehow I recalled a blank book into which he had pasted the cut passages (it turned out that the actual blank book that became "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth" had been lost since the 1800's). But when I approached a Special Collections librarian she found for me the pair of New Testaments. I photographed them for the first time, amazed that I could touch something Thomas Jefferson had poured over and marked (though most of the writing in the Bibles are from Jefferson's descendants--they were fond of imitating his handwriting--there is also

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evidence of his editing on various fragments). With a Macro lens that was able to work close to the paper, I used the available light in the library to make my images.

The experience of photographing the Bibles was fascinating as it seemed that the remaining words were struggling to give meaning to the empty spaces that Jefferson left behind. The words on one page were now recombining with the words on the page underneath. Absence was presence. Text that was not whole, text that had been rejected, could still convey the sacred.

In the years that followed I returned to photograph the New Testaments twice, and each time there were new forms as the bindings became looser and the paper more aged. As I did research for the project I came to learn more about Jefferson's own perspective on his excisions. Though I had seen him as choosing between sacred texts, he had seen himself as separating the sacred from the profane. In a letter to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, on April 25, 1816, he wrote of his first experiment, "... I made, for my own satisfaction, an Extract from the Evangelists of the texts of his [Jesus's] morals, selecting those only whose style and spirit proved them genuine, and his own: and they are as distinguishable from the matter in which they are imbedded as diamonds in dunghills. A more precious morsel of ethics was never seen. It was too hastily done however, being the work of one or two evenings only, while I lived at Washington, overwhelmed with other business; and it is my intention to go over it again at more leisure. This shall be the work of the ensuing winter."

Jefferson did indeed make a second compilation out of other Bibles, which became "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," now known as Jefferson's Bible. The original compilation of "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" still exists and is currently on display at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.

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