

**Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803,  
with Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the  
Doctrines of Jesus, with Copies; Partial Transcription  
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Leicester Ford.**

**SYLLABUS OF AN ESTIMATE OF THE MERIT OF THE DOCTRINES OF JESUS,  
COMPARED WITH THOSE OF OTHERS<sup>1</sup> j. mss.**

<sup>1</sup> This was drawn up for Benjamin Rush, and was sent him with the following letter:

“ Washington, Apr 21, 1803.

“ Dear Sir,—In some of the delightful conversations with you, in the evenings of 1798–99, and which served as an anodyne to the afflictions of the crisis through which our country was then laboring, the Christian religion was sometimes our topic; and I then promised you, that one day or other, I would give you my views of it. They are the result of a life of inquiry & reflection, and very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To 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 he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every *human* excellence; & believing he never claimed any other. At the short intervals since these conversations, when I could justifiably abstract my mind from public affairs, the subject has been under my contemplation. But the more I considered it, the more it expanded beyond the measure of either my time or information. In the moment of my late departure from Monticello, I received from Doctr Priestley, his

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little treatise of *Socrates & Jesus compared*. This being a section of the general view I had taken of the field it became a subject of reflection while on the road, and unoccupied otherwise. The result was, to arrange in my mind a syllabus, or outline of such an estimate of the comparative merits of Christianity, as I wished to see executed by some one of more leisure and information for the task, than myself. This I now send you, as the only discharge of my promise I can probably ever execute. And in confiding it to you, I know it will not be exposed to the malignant perversions of those who make every word from me a text for new misrepresentations & calumnies. I am moreover averse to the communication of my religious tenets to the public; because it would countenance the presumption of those who have endeavored to draw them before that tribunal, and to seduce public opinion to erect itself into that inquisition over the rights of conscience, which the laws have so justly proscribed. It behoves every man who values liberty of conscience for himself, to resist invasions of it in the case of others; or their case may, by change of circumstances, become his own. It behoves him, too, in his own case, to give no example of concession, betraying the common right of independent opinion, by answering questions of faith, which the laws have left between God & himself. Accept my affectionate salutations.”

To Priestley, Jefferson had already written:

“ Washington, Apr 9. 1803.

“ Dear Sir,—While on a short visit lately to Monticello, I received from you a copy of your comparative view of Socrates & Jesus, and I avail myself of the first moment of leisure after my return to acknowledge the pleasure I had in the perusal of it, and the desire it excited to see you take up the subject on a more extensive scale. In consequence of some conversation with Dr. Rush, in the year 1798–99, I had promised some day to write him a letter giving him my view of the Christian system. I have reflected often on it since, & even sketched the outlines in my own mind. I should first take a general view of the moral doctrines of the most remarkable of the antient philosophers, of whose ethics we

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have sufficient information to make an estimate, say of Pythagoras, Epicurus, Epictetus, Socrates, Cicero, Seneca, Antoninus. I should do justice to the branches of morality they have treated well; but point out the importance of those in which they are deficient. I should then take a view of the deism and ethics of the Jews, and show in what a degraded state they were, and the necessity they presented of a reformation. I should proceed to a view of the life, character, & doctrines of Jesus, who sensible of incorrectness of their ideas of the Deity, and of morality, endeavored to bring them to the principles of a pure deism, and juster notions of the attributes of God, to reform their moral doctrines to the standard of reason, justice & philanthropy, and to inculcate the belief of a future state, This view would purposely omit the question of his divinity, & even his inspiration. To do him justice, it would be necessary to remark the disadvantages his doctrines have to encounter, not having been committed to writing by himself, but by the most unlettered of men, by memory, long after they had heard them from him; when much was forgotten, much misunderstood, & presented in very paradoxical shapes. Yet such are the fragments remaining as to show a master workman, and that his system of morality was the most benevolent & sublime probably that has been ever taught, and consequently more perfect than those of any of the antient philosophers. His character & doctrines have received still greater injury from those who pretend to be his special disciples, and who have disfigured and sophisticated his actions & precepts, from views of personal interest, so as to induce the unthinking part of mankind to throw off the whole system in disgust, and to pass sentence as an impostor on the most innocent, the most benevolent, the most eloquent and sublime character that ever has been exhibited to man. This is the outline; but I have not the time, & still less the information which the subject needs. It will therefore rest with me in contemplation only. You are the person who of all others would do it best, and most promptly. You have all the materials at hand, and you put together with ease. I wish you could be induced to extend your late work to the whole subject. I have not heard particularly what is the state of your health; but as it has been equal to the journey to Philadelphia, perhaps it might encourage the curiosity you must feel to see for once this place, which nature has formed on a beautiful scale, and circumstances destine for a

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great one. As yet we are but a cluster of villages; we cannot offer you the learned society of Philadelphia; but you will have that of a few characters whom you esteem, & a bed & hearty welcome with one who will rejoice in every opportunity of testifying to you his high veneration & affectionate attachment.”

An undated memorandum in the Jefferson MSS. is evidently the draft of a note with which Jefferson transmitted copies to his friends:

“A promise to a friend some time ago, executed but lately, has placed my religious creed on paper. I am desirous it should be perused by three or four particular friends, with whom tho' I never desired to make a mystery of it, yet no occasion has happened to occur of explaining it to them. It is communicated for their personal satisfaction & to enable them to judge of the truth or falsehood of the libels published on that subject. When read, the return of the paper with this cover is asked.”

To Lincoln (April 26, 1803), he wrote:

“Mr. Lincoln is perfectly free to retain the copy of the syllabus & to make any use of it his discretion would approve, confident as Th: J. is that his discretion would not permit him to let it be copied lest it should get into print. In the latter case Th: J. would become the butt of every set of disquisitions which every priest would undertake to write on every tenet it expresses. Their object is not truth, but matter whereon to write against Th: J. and this synopsis would furnish matter for repeating in new forms all the volumes of divinity which are now mouldering on the shelves from which they should never more be taken. Th: J. would thank Mr. L. not to put his name on the paper in filing it away, lest in case of accident to Mr. L. it should get out.”

[April, 1803.]

In a comparative view of the Ethics of the enlightened nations of antiquity, of the Jews and of Jesus, no notice should be taken of the corruptions of reason among the ancients, to

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wit, the idolatry & superstition of the vulgar, nor of the corruptions of Christianity by the learned among its professors.

Let a just view be taken of the moral principles inculcated by the most esteemed of the sects of ancient philosophy, or of their individuals; particularly Pythagoras, Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, Antoninus.

I. Philosophers. 1. Their precepts related chiefly to ourselves, and the government of those passions which, unrestrained, would disturb our tranquillity of mind.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To explain, I will exhibit the heads of Seneca's & Cicero's philosophical works, the most extensive of any we have received from the ancients. Of 10. heads in Seneca, 7. relate to ourselves, to wit *de ira, consolatio, de tranquillitate, de constantia sapientis, de otio sapientis, de vita, beata, de brevitae vitæ*; 2 relate to others, *de clementia, de beneficiis*; & 1. relates to the government of the world, *de providentia*. Of 11 tenets of Cicero, 5 respect ourselves, viz. *de finibus, Tusculana, academica, paradoxa, de Senectute*; 1. *de officiis.*, partly to ourselves, partly to others; 1, *de amicitia*, relates to others; and 4. are on different subjects, to wit, *de natura deorum, de divinatione, de fato, and somnium Scipionis.*—T. J.

Jefferson later in life began the preparation of a work which he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* ( see Randall, III., 656), but as it was never carried beyond a mere synopsis, it is not included in this collection.

In this branch of philosophy they were really great.

2. In developing our duties to others, they were short and defective. They embraced, indeed, the circles of kindred & friends, and inculcated patriotism or the love of our country in the aggregate, as a primary obligation: toward our neighbors & countrymen they taught justice, but scarcely viewed them as within the circle of benevolence. Still less have they inculcated peace, charity & love to our fellow men, or embraced with benevolence the whole family of mankind.

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II. Jews. 1. Their system was Deism; that is, the belief of one only God. But their ideas of him & of his attributes were degrading & injurious.

2. Their Ethics were not only imperfect, but often irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason & morality, as they respect intercourse with those around us; & repulsive & anti-social, as respecting other nations. They needed reformation, therefore, in an eminent degree.

III. Jesus. In this state of things among the Jews Jesus appeared. His parentage was obscure; his condition poor; his education null; his natural endowments great; his life correct and innocent: he was meek, benevolent, patient, firm, disinterested, & of the sublimest eloquence.

The disadvantages under which his doctrines appear are remarkable.

1. Like Socrates & Epictetus, he wrote nothing himself.

2. But he had not, like them, a Xenophon or an Arrian to write for him. On the contrary, all the learned of his country, entrenched in its power and riches, were opposed to him, lest his labors should undermine their advantages; and the committing to writing his life & doctrines fell on the most unlettered & ignorant men; who wrote, too, from memory, & not till long after the transactions had passed.

3. According to the ordinary fate of those who attempt to enlighten and reform mankind, he fell an early victim to the jealousy & combination of the altar and the throne, at about 33. years of age, his reason having not yet attained the *maximum* of its energy, nor the course of his preaching, which was but of 3. years at most, presented occasions for developing a complete system of morals.

4. Hence the doctrines which he really delivered were defective as a whole, and fragments only of what he did deliver have come to us mutilated, misstated, & often unintelligible.

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5. They have been still more disfigured by the corruptions of schismatising followers, who have found an interest in sophisticating & perverting the simple doctrines he taught by engrafting on them the mysticisms of a Grecian sophist, frittering them into subtleties, & obscuring them with jargon, until they have caused good men to reject the whole in disgust, & to view Jesus himself as an impostor.

Notwithstanding these disadvantages, a system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.

The question of his being a member of the Godhead, or in direct communication with it, claimed for him by some of his followers, and denied by others is foreign to the present view, which is merely an estimate of the intrinsic merit of his doctrines.

1. He corrected the Deism of the Jews, confirming them in their belief of one only God, and giving them juster notions of his attributes and government.

2. His moral doctrines, relating to kindred & friends, were more pure & perfect than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more so than those of the Jews; and 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 the peculiar superiority of the system of Jesus over all others.

3. The precepts of philosophy, & of the Hebrew code, laid hold of actions only. He pushed his scrutinies into the heart of man; erected his tribunal in the region of his thoughts, and purified the waters at the fountain head.

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4. He taught, emphatically, the doctrines of a future state, which was either doubted, or disbelieved by the Jews; and wielded it with efficacy, as an important incentive, supplementary to the other motives to moral conduct.