

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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David Barton's Thomas Jefferson

In 2005 David Barton was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals. Presumably, this recognition resulted from the organization he leads, WallBuilders, a ministry committed to championing the proposition that America was founded as a Christian nation and that the separation of church and state as defined today is wrong. He also advocates conservative political views that reflect conservative Republicanism or those posited by the Libertarian movement in the United States. Barton graduated from Oral Roberts University in 1976 with a Bachelor's degree in religious education. He has been a pastor and a schoolteacher. He frequently appears on Glenn Beck's program; indeed, Beck has published some of his writings. A major church in Omaha, where I live, recently hosted him as a weekend conference speaker. The themes mentioned above constituted the substance of what he said at this Omaha church. Anyone who has taken the time to read his various books also recognizes these hallmark themes. He is saying what evangelicals (and some Republicans) want to hear: America was founded as a Christian nation and its early leaders were virtually all decidedly Christian. America is in trouble because it is departing from these Christian principles articulated by our Founders, and there is no wall of separation between the church and the state. All of these themes need to be addressed. Some can be defended; others cannot.

In this *Perspective*, I am interested in only one of David Barton's published books: *The Jefferson Lies: Exploding the Myths You've Always Believed about Thomas Jefferson* (2012). Each chapter addresses a "lie" that, in Barton's judgment, has been propagated by the left-wing academic elite, thereby distorting the history of Jefferson and his contribution to our nation's founding. For example:

- Lie #2—"Jefferson founded a secular university" (i.e., the University of Virginia). [Barton either does not know or he ignores that of his university, Jefferson said "a professor of theology should have no place [there]," or that he actively sought and hired "freethinkers" for the faculty of the University of Virginia.]
- Lie #3—"Jefferson wrote his own Bible and edited out things he didn't agree with" [This is one of Barton's weakest chapters.]
- Lie #4—Thomas Jefferson was a racist.
- Lie #6—Jefferson detested the clergy.

There are other chapters, but this sampling helps one understand what Barton is doing in his book. Each one of these chapters presents an argument about Jefferson based, normally, on select quotations from Jefferson or what others said about Jefferson. I am a Christian, and a published historian, who teaches history and have done so for over 35 years. My Ph.D. is in history, and my other three degrees are in history or historical theology. I am also an ordained

minister and have served in the administration (as Academic VP and as President for a total of 20 years) of a Christ-centered University. I take research and teaching very seriously. I believe it is wrong to distort evidence or be selective to prove a point that the evidence does not support. I believe very strongly that David Barton has done just this in his book on Thomas Jefferson. As Christians, if we are going to make an argument, it must be true and it must be supported by the evidence. What makes David Barton's situation even more significant is that many evangelicals like what he says because it fits with their Republican or Libertarian worldview. Even if he has distorted things, it does not seem to matter. Before the Lord, as evangelicals, we cannot misrepresent history to prove a preconceived point.

Among many others, there are three specific points I would like to make about Barton's book on Jefferson:

1. Barton argues that there is "absolutely no historical, factual or scientific evidence to tarnish the sexual morality of Jefferson." This is simply not true!! By his own admission, Jefferson acknowledged that in 1768, when he was still unmarried and in his twenties, he tried to seduce the wife of a very close friend (John Walker) who had asked him to look after her and their children. [See Jon Meacham, *Jefferson: The Art of Power*, pp. 40-43.] In 1788, while he was in Paris representing the United States, he fell in love with Maria Cosway. Jefferson admitted this and wrote copious love letters to her; these have been published and are readily available. Although Jefferson was a widower, Cosway was married! [See Meacham, pp. 199-204.]
2. In the chapter entitled "Thomas Jefferson Fathered Sally Hemings' Children" (Lie #1), Barton takes on the complicated relationship Jefferson had with his domestic slave Sally Hemings. This complex matter has always been a conundrum for historians. The circumstantial evidence of an ongoing sexual relationship between Hemings and Jefferson is compelling. But it is just that—circumstantial. There is also significant DNA evidence that links Jefferson's DNA to the children of Sally Hemings. But this DNA evidence cannot absolutely prove it was Jefferson who fathered her children; only that males of Jefferson's family did so, of which Thomas Jefferson is only one possibility. However, Barton brushes off too quickly the exhausting and compelling work of Annette Gordon Reed. She is a top-notch historian who has published several very important books on Jefferson and Hemings, and on the Hemings family at Monticello. It will not do to merely dismiss her research with essentially one quotation error that Reed made, which is essentially the main point of Barton's condescending treatment of her work. Her research deserves a significant and detailed rebuttal, not the glib few paragraphs Barton assigns to her books. This is not good scholarship on Barton's part and it only diminishes his argument. Several historians have raised some questions about Reed's conclusions, but all regard her as a top-notch historian. It does not help Barton's cause to so quickly brush off her conclusions or her research.
3. Most important is Barton's chapter on "Thomas Jefferson Was an Atheist and Not a Christian" (Lie #7). First of all, I know of no major practicing historian or major biographer of Jefferson (dead or alive), who has argued that Jefferson was an atheist. So, in that sense, Barton has just constructed a straw man! There is no evidence that Jefferson even claimed to be an atheist. The debate about Jefferson's faith is whether he was a Deist or a Unitarian.

Barton makes the quite absurd claim that Jefferson was “pro-Christian and pro-Jesus . . . that there was never a time when [Jefferson] was anti-Jesus or when he rejected Christianity.” In fact, Barton argues that for much of Jefferson’s life he was “nothing less than orthodox.” I know of no historian (several of which are Christians and some who are my friends) who would agree with Barton on this point. It is simply impossible to say that Jefferson was a Christian. It is difficult to even assign a label that describes Jefferson’s belief system or his theology. What do we know for certain about Jefferson’s beliefs?

- Jefferson respected and honored Jesus. He loved His ethical teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Jefferson read the New Testament in the original Greek, as did many of his generation. (They prodigiously studied Greek and Latin.) In fact, to focus on the ethical teachings of Jesus was one of the reasons he edited his own Bible shortly before he died. But Jefferson did not believe that Jesus was the Godman; he was rather vehement in his denial of Jesus’ deity.
- In 1788, Jefferson declined to become a child’s godfather because he thought doing so would have required him to affirm publicly a belief in the Trinity. Jefferson wrote in the letter declining this opportunity that he had the “difficulty of reconciling the ideas of Unity and Trinity, [and] have, from a very early part of my life.” [Quoted in Kidd]
- Near the end of his life, in 1821, Jefferson wrote in a letter: “No one sees with greater pleasure than myself the progress of reason in its advances towards rational Christianity. When we shall have done away the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since His day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines He inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily His disciples; and my opinion is that if nothing had ever been added to what flowed from His lips, the whole world would at this day been Christian.” [Letter to Timothy Pickering, 27 February 1821, written from Monticello]
- Jefferson admittedly read the works of Joseph Priestly, an early advocate of a new religious orientation called Unitarianism. Indeed, in an 1825 letter to the pastor of a Unitarian church in Portland, Maine, Jefferson wrote, “I must therefore be contended to be an Unitarian by myself, although I know there are many around me who would become so, if once they could hear the questions fairly stated.” [Letter to Dr. Benjamin Watterhouse, 1825] Barton correctly notes that, during Jefferson’s life, Unitarianism as a fully developed worldview was still in its infancy. But the early leaders of this movement (from 1804 to about 1850) questioned and denied the doctrine of the Trinity, the pre-existence of Christ, the inspiration of Scripture and the doctrine of miracles. Because to whom he was writing in 1825, Jefferson understood quite clearly that calling himself a Unitarian, however primitive its content as a worldview, meant he was not advocating orthodox Trinitarianism.

I could go on with this critique of Barton's book. As a Christian historian and Christian leader, I believe very strongly that we must be truthful and forthright about our beliefs. We must also be people of integrity and be scrupulous in how we present our case. In my judgment, David Barton has not done this. (Thomas Nelson has ceased its publication of Barton's book on Jefferson.) He needs to be called to task and evangelicals in the US must be much more discerning and careful in what is claimed about our Founders. It will not do to say that Thomas Jefferson was a Christian. He was a great man and we owe him much. Because he was the author of the Declaration, a major defender of religious liberty in Virginia, and a decisive leader at the Continental Congress in 1776, his legacy is well-preserved. But as Christians let's celebrate his contributions in founding this nation. But let's not distort the evidence to make him a Christian. Whatever the precise nature of his beliefs, Thomas Jefferson was not a Christian.

See Alan Pell Crawford in the *Wall Street Journal* (14-15 April 2012); Thomas Kidd in *World* (25 August and 8 September 2012). On Jefferson and Hemings, I would also encourage an honest reading of the works of Annette Gordon Reed.