

'Most Blessed of the Patriarchs': Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination

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Thomas Jefferson has had a rough few years. Since DNA established beyond a reasonable doubt that he fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings, Jefferson has been pushed into the shadows and forced to watch as his political rivals John Adams and Alexander Hamilton enjoy the limelight. Today's students are more likely to think of Jefferson as a hypocrite and a rapist than as the father of American democracy. More so than either George Washington or James Madison – who were both slave-holding Revolutionaries – Jefferson has been tainted by his failure to separate himself from the nation's original sin. And yet Jefferson continues to fascinate the public and each year brings a deluge of new books about his life and legacy. For all the ink spent, however, 'the real Jefferson' remains somewhat of a mystery.

No two scholars are more familiar with the twists and turns of Jefferson's character than Peter S. Onuf and Annette Gordon-Reed, which is what makes their joint biography of the second president so intriguing. The duo recently teamed up to write "*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*": *Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of Imagination*. Although it will most assuredly not be the final word on the subject, the book stands out as one of the finest studies on Jefferson published in the last decade. Considering the authors' pedigrees – Onuf is the author of multiple books and widely recognized as the preeminent scholar on Jefferson, and Gordon-Reed earned the Pulitzer Prize for her study *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* [\(1\)](#) – this should not come as much of a surprise.

The strength of "*The Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*" comes from the fact that the authors make no attempt to either exonerate or condemn Jefferson. Instead they explain that their 'goal is not to critically assess how Jefferson made his way through the world and determine what his life might or should mean for us – what we think he *ought* to have been doing. We instead seek to understand what *Thomas Jefferson* thought he was doing in the world' (pp. xx). Passing judgement on Jefferson from the 21st century is easy. In some ways, he comes up short even when viewed by the standards of the 18th century. The real challenge, according to Onuf and Gordon-Reed, is making sense of how Jefferson understood Jefferson.

"*The Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*" is organized into three parts, each of which focuses on a particular

component of Jefferson's world-view. Part one, 'Patriarch', examines the 'influences that went into shaping Jefferson's life and continued to give meaning to his existence throughout the eighty-three years that he lived' (p. xxiv). Part two, 'Traveler', explores how Jefferson's experiences as a businessmen, diplomat and politician contributed to his worldview. In Part three, 'Enthusiast', the authors cover a range of topics including music, poetry, architecture and friendships. The unorthodox structure results in a disjointed narrative that is, at times, repetitive and not always clear. As a whole, however, the book presents a compelling portrait of how Jefferson viewed himself and, equally as importantly, how he wished to be viewed by others.

The Jefferson that emerges in "*The Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*" is very much a product of his time, but there are parts of his character that resonate today. Long before the days of Facebook or LinkedIn, Jefferson relied on media and his social network to develop and promote his own 'brand'. Like anyone who has ever cropped pictures of themselves before posting them online, the Jefferson presented to outside world was an idealized version of the real man. He saw himself as an enlightened 'republican patriarch' who benevolently looked after those under his care, and this is how most people encountered him. Jefferson downplayed or justified the parts of himself that did not fit with this character, such as the fact that he fathered children with one of his slaves. What modern audiences see as examples of hypocrisy are, therefore, instances where he failed to live-up to his idealized self.

For Onuf and Gordon-Reed, the key to understanding the illusive author of the Declaration of Independence begins with the home – both the physical space and the idea. Only one chapter is titled 'Home', but the authors repeatedly return to the importance Jefferson placed on the home and on domestic life. 'Home was', they write, 'a powerful idea for Thomas Jefferson, a fixed point in a sentimental geography formed from the melded associations of people places and events' (p. 27). While away, Jefferson's idealized view of his home provided comfort and served 'as a powerful counterweight to the strife and discord he found in political life' (p. 41). His attachment to home is interesting because, in reality, his domestic life was far from tranquil. His wife, Martha, was often sick and eventually died due to complications of child-birth in 1782. Of the six daughters he had with Martha, only two would live to become adults, and his relationship with those that did survive was rocky. As evidence of the strained relationship with his daughters, scholars often point out that while serving as foreign minister in France, Jefferson chose to leave his daughters in the care of nuns rather than let them live with him. While some commentators have condemned this move as 'yet another expression of his hypocrisy' because Jefferson regularly criticized Catholicism and preached about the importance of family life, Onuf and Gordon-Reed suggest that he may have been motivated more by a fear of the corruptive influences of Parisian life than a desire to be unencumbered by children (p. 117). Whatever his reasoning, the decision further alienated his daughters and made it even more difficult for him to realize his dream of a stable home.

Jefferson's relationship to home is further complicated by his mistress Sally Hemings and the children she bore him. Details of Jefferson and Hemings's relationship are sparse. Hemings, along with her children, certainly received preferential treatment and indications exist that Jefferson may have embraced Hemings as his 'substitute for a wife' (p. 127). Nevertheless, Onuf and Gordon-Reed contend that Hemings and her children did not fit Jefferson's understanding of an 'ideal republican family' (p. 131). A slave mistress was not part of his idealized self-image. As a result, he could never bring himself to acknowledge the relationship. Jefferson did not even free Hemings upon his death because it would have required him to explain, in writing, to the Virginia legislature why she deserved special treatment. As Onuf and Gordon-Reed explain, 'there was no chance that Jefferson would ever risk his legacy by preparing such a document' (p. 316).

It was not just Hemings who was left out of Jefferson's idealized home. Despite the fact that Monticello relied on the forced labor of dozens of African Americans, 'Jefferson's slaves disappeared from his sentimental vision of home' (p. 314). In his younger years, Jefferson aggressively condemned slavery and famously warned in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that whites would suffer God's wrath for their cruelty. As he grew older, however, Jefferson became increasingly comfortable with the idea that slavery would be dealt

with by future generations and settled into his role as patriarch. The authors suggest that, somewhat paradoxically, Jefferson's relationship with Hemings may have actually factored into his acceptance of slavery. Onuf and Gordon-Reed argue that Jefferson's ability to convince Hemings to leave France, where she could have easily secured her freedom, and return to Virginia, actually contributed to Jefferson's ambivalence when it came to ending slavery. The relationship, they write, 'taught him how effectively he could manage himself as a slave owner with the enslaved people closest to him on a daily basis' and 'helped him become much more comfortable' with slavery (p. 132).

The importance of home in Jefferson's life helps explain his near obsession with Monticello, his mountaintop retreat in Virginia. Onuf and Gordon-Reed see the house, which Jefferson constantly redesigned, as the physical manifestation of how he viewed himself. 'Jefferson', they write, 'put his entire self into his home, psychologically as well as financially' (p. 312). He carefully curated every aspect of the house. In contrast to many of his neighbors who sought to project their wealth and stature by placing their homes where everyone could see them, Jefferson designed Monticello far removed from prying eyes. Visitors making the pilgrimage would begin their ascent in the wilderness and, as they slowly made their ascent, 'the progress of civilization came into view, from distant mountains to the villages of Charlottesville and Milton and culminating in Jefferson's Monticello' (p. 240). The trek was designed to reflect the stages of human development and man's gradual triumph over nature. The fact that Jefferson placed himself at the end of this road of civilization is telling.

Although he had a reputation for being shy, Jefferson developed a 'powerful sense of self-worth' during his life and he saw himself as standing at the top of centuries of human development (p. 101). Monticello was meant to reflect, and celebrate, his greatness. In designing the house, however, Jefferson 'eschewed the hierarchical organization of great aristocratic homes. With the status of visitor signified by progressive access, through a succession of rooms, to the semi-sacred person of the great man himself' (p. 249). By contrast, Monticello's architecture carried a 'leveling message' and guests would be treated as members of the family (p. 248). Jefferson sought to impress in other ways. Instead of awing visitors with ornate columns and rituals, he used his wit, humor, intelligence and refined manners to earn the admiration of his guest. In this way, the Sage of Monticello presented himself as a member of the 'natural' aristocracy deserving of the 'deference of equals' (p. 262).

Jefferson lived a very public life but he also treasured his privacy and kept parts of himself hidden. One most interesting sections in "*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*" is Onuf and Gordon-Reed's discussion of Jefferson's religious convictions. During the election of 1800, Jefferson's opponents accused him of trying to subvert the republic by undermining Christianity, and he is generally remembered as someone hostile to organized religion. There is some truth to this view. Jefferson did, after all, condemn what he saw as superstition and accused members of the clergy of corruption. He also continued to express support for the French Revolution even after learning of the violent campaign to purge the country of Catholicism. But Jefferson also spent some of his final years pouring over religious texts and preparing his 'Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth', better known as *The Jefferson Bible*. The *Jefferson Bible* told the story of Jesus stripped of any references to miracles or supernatural forces. The Jesus Jefferson portrayed was a philosopher and moral leader and not the son of God. While some people may see this approach as an attack on the foundational tenants of the Christian faith, Onuf and Gordon-Reed contend that the *Jefferson Bible* was the product of a 'genuine spiritual quest' (p. 274) and point to the increasingly important role religion played in his twilight years. Jefferson, they argue, was never an atheist and even considered 'himself to be a Christian by his own definition' (p. 275). For Jefferson, faith was a matter of individual conscience. The separation of church and state was not about securing 'freedom from religion'. Instead, it 'enabled enlightened, self-governing republicans to pursue their own quest for religious truths' (p. 275). Faith and reason could, he believed, work together to create a deeper and more meaningful sense of God.

In the end, perhaps what makes Jefferson so intriguing is that he is, in many ways, the embodiment of America – a man who preached the importance of equality and natural rights, but who struggled to fully live up to them. Jefferson's failures did not, however, lead him to abandon the principles outlined in the

Declaration of Independence. Instead, Jefferson looked to the future. A child of the Enlightenment, Jefferson had boundless faith that future generations would be able to improve upon the foundation he, and his fellow revolutionaries, had built. This view does not mean he thought progress could be taken for granted, and he dedicated much of his life to establishing institutions and practices that would help later generations reach their potential. As Onuf and Gordon-Reed note, however, Jefferson's belief in progress and the idea of 'generational sovereignty', most famously expressed in his statement that 'the earth belongs in usufruct to the living', also provided him with a convenient excuse for not doing more in his lifetime to address the injustices of slavery. He had, in his mind, done enough and the question of slavery was best left for the next generation. Whether or not you agree with him on this point will likely dictate how you feel about Jefferson overall – he was either someone who fought for equality and democracy, or he was a hypocrite and a coward who chose his own comfort over the freedom of his slaves.

Overall, "*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*" is not for the uninitiated and should not be the starting point for anyone looking to learn about Jefferson's life. The book assumes that the reader is already familiar with the details of Jefferson's life and spends very little time discussing what he actually accomplished. It is, however, a fascinating look into the psyche of one of America's most enigmatic figures and will surely influence how future scholars think about Jefferson.

Notes

1. Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York, NY, 2008).

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