

Dabney Carr, three years before that, in 1773. Jefferson did not leave for Europe until 1784, when he succeeded Benjamin Franklin as Minister to France. Jefferson was at Monticello when his wife died in 1782. According to his autobiography, when Congress proposed that he go to France a few months later, he gladly accepted the appointment because he needed a “*change of scene*.”²⁶ He did not end up going to France at this time, however. While he was waiting to sail from Baltimore, word was received from France that a provisional peace treaty with Great Britain had been signed, making his trip unnecessary.

Beliles, while blaming Jefferson’s “*questioning and analysis of orthodox Christianity*” on the French, at least gets the dates of the deaths of his wife, daughter, mother, and best friend right.

The following, from Beliles’s book, is what D. James Kennedy was attempting to copy: “Jefferson’s religious life underwent a critical change following the deaths of his wife, in 1782, and of his two year old daughter, in 1784. He also lost his best friend in 1773 and his mother in 1776, but his wife and daughter’s death left him completely devastated and emotionally despondent. This personal tragedy, coupled with the lack of congregational support and close pastoral advice that he was used to back home in America, begins a watershed period that perhaps determines the remainder of his religious life. There are very few references to attendance at church while in France.”

Another popular Jefferson story has to do with his proposal while on a committee to design a seal for the United States. This is another story that has some truth to it. Most religious right authors, however, turn it into a half-truth by including only part of Jefferson’s proposal, and leaving the proposal of John Adams, also on the committee, out of the story entirely.

According to William Federer, in his book *America’s God and Country*: “Shortly after the signing of the

26. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 1, (Washington D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 76.

Declaration of Independence, a committee was appointed to draft a seal for the newly united states which would express the spirit of the nation. Thomas Jefferson proposed:

The children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.”

According to David Barton, in his book *Original Intent*: “On the same day that Congress approved the Declaration, it appointed John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Ben Franklin to draft a seal to characterize the spirit of the new nation. Franklin proposed:

Moses lifting up his wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh in his chariot overwhelmed with the waters. This motto: ‘Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.’

Jefferson proposed:

The children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.”

According to James H. Hutson, Chief of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress, in the companion book to his *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* Exhibit: “That a deeply religious society should produce deeply religious leaders is no surprise, but the power of religion in revolutionary America was also displayed in the legislative activities of those described as theological liberals. Consider the actions of Franklin and Jefferson when they were appointed in July 1776 to a committee to devise a seal for the United States. Both men suggested a familiar Old Testament episode that was a transparent allegory for America’s ordeal, the account in the book of Exodus of God’s intervening to save the people of Israel by drowning

Pharaoh (George III) and his pursuing armies in the Red Sea. In the opinion of these two torchbearers of the Enlightenment, nothing less than the story of a biblical miracle would be an appropriate emblem for their confessing countrymen.”

All of the religious right American history authors leave the same two things out of this story. The first is that, while Jefferson did propose the children of Israel for the front of the seal, he proposed Hengist and Horsa for the back. Hengist and Horsa, according to Anglo-Saxon legend, were Germanic heathens hired as mercenaries to protect Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. These two brothers tricked and defeated the King who had hired them, stopping the spread of Christianity and keeping most of Britain pagan for the next few hundred years. Regardless of whether or not Hengist and Horsa were actual historical figures, it was during this period of time, as Jefferson pointed out on numerous occasions, that the common law was introduced in Britain, making it impossible for the common law to have been based on the Bible. The second omission is that John Adams, the most religious of the three committee members, did not propose a Bible story, but proposed Hercules surrounded by a few pagan goddesses. The following is from a letter from John to Abigail Adams. This letter from Adams is what David Barton, while leaving Adams out of his story completely, cites as his source.

I am put upon a committee to prepare a Device for a Golden Medal to commemorate the Surrender of Boston to the American Arms, and upon another to prepare Devices for a Great Seal for the confederated States. There is a Gentleman here of French Extraction, whose Name is Du simitiere, a Painter by Profession whose Designs are very ingenious, and his Drawings well executed. He has been applied to for his Advice. I waited on him yesterday, and saw his Sketches. For the Medal he proposes Liberty with her Spear and Pileus, leaning on General Washington. The British Fleet in Boston Harbour, with all their Sterns towards the Town, the American Troops, marching in. For the Seal he proposes. The Arms of the several Nations from whence America has been peopled, as Eng-

lish, Scotch, Irish, Dutch, German &c. each in a Shield. On one side of them Liberty, with her Pileus, on the other a Rifler, in his Uniform, with his Rifled Gun in one Hand, and his Tomahawk, in the other. This Dress and these Troops with this Kind of Armour, being peculiar to America—unless the Dress was known to the Romans. Dr. F[ranklin] shewed me, yesterday, a Book, containing an Account of the Dresses of all the Roman Soldiers, one of which, appeared exactly like it...

...Dr. F. proposes a Device for a Seal. Moses lifting up his Wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh, in his Chariot overwhelmed with the Waters. This Motto. Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.

Mr. Jefferson proposed. The Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night, and on the other Side Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon Chiefs, from whom We claim the Honour of being descended and whose Political Principles and Form of Government We have assumed.

I proposed the Choice of Hercules, as engraved by Gribeline in some Editions of Lord Shaftsbury's Works. The Hero resting on his Clubb. Virtue pointing to her rugged Mountain, on one Hand, and perswading him to ascend. Sloth, glancing at her flowery Paths of Pleasure, wantonly reclining on the Ground, displaying the Charms both of her Eloquence and Person, to seduce him into Vice. But this is too complicated a Group for a Seal or Medal, and it is not original.²⁷

Jefferson's 1776 proposal for the seal of the United States is also cited as a source for other claims, such the following.

According to Mark Beliles, in the introduction to his version of the *Jefferson Bible*: Jefferson "established religious mottos on coins, etc."

27. John Adams to Abigail Adams, August 14, 1776, Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 4, (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1979), 678-679.