

# “MOST BLESSED OF THE PATRIARCHS”

Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination

A groundbreaking work of history that explicates Thomas Jefferson's vision of himself, the American Revolution, Christianity, slavery, and race.

Thomas Jefferson is often portrayed as a hopelessly enigmatic figure—a riddle—a man so riven with contradictions that he is almost impossible to know. Lauded as the most articulate voice of American freedom and equality, even as he held people—including his own family—in bondage, Jefferson is variably described as a hypocrite, an atheist, or a simple-minded proponent of limited government who expected all Americans to be farmers forever.

Now, Annette Gordon-Reed teams up with America's leading Jefferson scholar, Peter S. Onuf, to present an absorbing and revealing character study that dispels the many clichés that have accrued over the years about our third president. Challenging the widely prevalent belief that Jefferson remains so opaque as to be unknowable, the authors—through their careful analysis, painstaking research, and vivid prose—create a portrait of Jefferson, as he might have painted himself, one “comprised of equal parts sun and shadow” (Jane Kamensky).

Tracing Jefferson's philosophical development from youth to old age, the authors explore what they call the “empire” of Jefferson's imagination—an expansive state of mind born of his origins in a slave society, his intellectual influences, and the vaulting ambition that propelled him into public life as a modern avatar of the Enlightenment who, at the same time, likened himself to a figure of old—“the most blessed of the patriarchs.” Indeed, Jefferson saw himself as a “patriarch,” not just to his country and mountain-like home at Monticello but also to his family, the white half that he loved so publicly, as well as to the black side that he claimed to love, a contradiction of extraordinary historical magnitude.

Divided into three sections, “*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*” reveals a striking personal dimension to his life. Part I, “Patriarch,” explores Jefferson's origins in Virginia; Part II, “Traveller,” covers his five-year sojourn to Paris; and Part III, “Enthusiast,” delves insightfully into the Virginian's views on Christianity, slavery, and race. We see not just his ideas and vision of America but come to know him in an almost familial way, such as through the importance of music in his life.

“*Most Blessed of the Patriarchs*” fundamentally challenges much of what we've come to accept about Jefferson, neither hypocrite nor saint, atheist nor fundamentalist. Gordon-Reed and Onuf, through a close reading of Jefferson's own words, reintroduce us all to our most influential founding father: a man more gifted than most, but complicated in just the ways we all are.

## Recorded Books • Unabridged Running Time: 14.5 hours

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by Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860)

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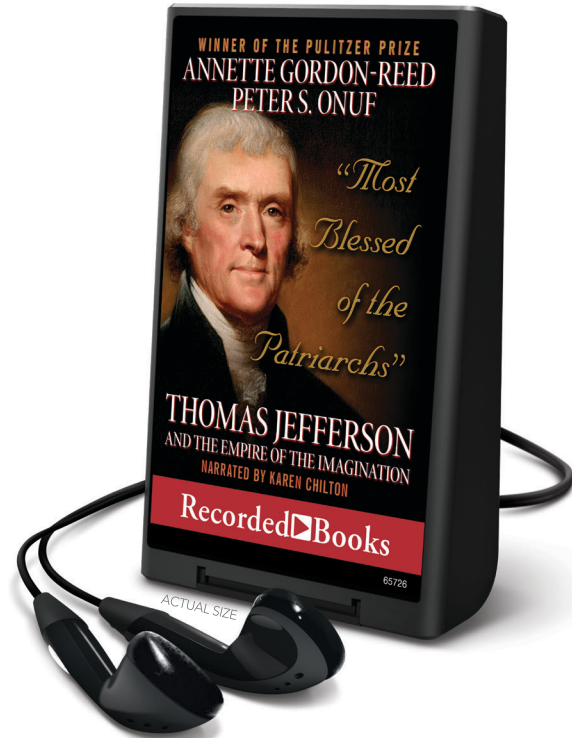
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