

# Introduction

Jesus to me is somebody I can think about for security and confidence. Somebody I can revere in terms of bravery and in terms of courage and, because I consider the Christian religion so important, somebody I can totally rely on in my own mind.

No one reads the Bible more than me.

—President Donald J. Trump

Republican Jesus is the most powerful man in America. He died more than two thousand years ago, but even an insubstantial statement of praise directed toward him can win a presidential election in the United States today.

So, who is he?

Republican Jesus is a Christian, white, working-class carpenter who was born in Israel a long, long time ago. His mom wasn't ready to have a baby, but she was prolife and had a good, hard-working man by her side, so it turned out just fine. After legally immigrating to Egypt for a short time, Republican Jesus and his parents pulled themselves up by their sandal-straps in the rural heartland of northern Israel. By his early thirties, Republican Jesus had become an aspiring religious reformer with a clear

set of positions: the poor are already blessed, weapons protect people from weapons, free health care comes only in the form of miracles, and there's no sense in saving the earth, since God will destroy it soon anyway. Most of all, Republican Jesus opposed Big Government with all of its taxes and regulations. This struggle against Big Government ended in his crucifixion—a great irony since Republican Jesus was prolife but not opposed to capital punishment.

According to prominent Republican Christian influencers, including politicians, media pundits, and corporate lobbyists, Jesus's death and resurrection marked not the end, but the beginning, of a Christian crusade against Big Government. Appealing to the Bible as the constitution for their right-wing movement, these Republican influencers have duped millions of Christians into believing that their nefarious interpretations of the Bible not only are factual but are God's own Word. Politically conservative believers, as a result, hold their distinct political views in part because they think the Bible tells them so.

I'm not buying it. As a professional historian and university professor whose expertise is politics and economics in the world of Jesus and the gospel writers, I feel obliged to denounce the Republican Jesus as a tool designed and wielded for political gain. This Jesus has no place in the ancient world. He was manufactured by right-wing politicians and their corporate bedfellows in the midst of American cultural and political contests over the last century. Republican Jesus is by no means the only interpretation of Jesus's politics and ethics with currency in American culture, but it is by far the most consequential interpretation.

This book identifies and discredits the insidious, cherry-picked biblical interpretations that serve as the foundation for the Repub-

lican Jesus. Republican Christian influencers have created a gospel for themselves that is very unlike the ones written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is a gospel of limited government—a gospel that rejects government regulations benefiting the poor and marginalized—and it serves as the framework for most modern Republican interpretations of Jesus’s politics. According to this gospel, Jesus was clearly opposed to forms of government intervention ranging from taxation and welfare to universal health care and the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Republican Christian influencers interpret the biblical actions and sayings of Jesus through the lens of their Small Government politics and then claim the Bible is the basis of their Small Government politics. Through this faulty feedback loop, Republicans have discovered a “biblical” Jesus whose political opinions are the mirror image of their own.

### TOUGH QUESTIONS

I’ve wanted to write a book about the Republican Jesus for quite some time, but I finally felt compelled to start when a student at the Canadian university where I teach asked me—the proud American professor who delights in anecdotes about the Philly sports theodicy and Texan barbecue cults—why the Americans who seem to love Jesus the most are the ones who use him in the most hateful ways.

It was an unsettling question.

It happened as we were discussing the birth narratives about Jesus in the New Testament gospels of Matthew and Luke. An American student had already brought up Rev. Paula White-Cain’s claim that Jesus was not, in fact, a refugee but instead had traveled legally to Egypt with his family shortly after his birth—

as if it had been just a nice family vacation to Disney World instead of a life-or-death struggle to escape King Herod's violent "massacre of the innocents."

We had spent much of the class discussing how the story of the holy family going to Egypt, which appears only in the Gospel of Matthew, is historically problematic. It is, as I discuss in chapter 8, part of Matthew's artistic choice to portray Jesus as a New Moses. But even if it were historically reliable, the text itself refutes White-Cain's claim: it is a story of a persecuted family seeking refuge from a tyrant by crossing the border into a safer land. But the border was a border between Roman provinces (like a border between US states) and crossing it required no special documentation. Crossing that border would have involved paying tolls, but it wouldn't have involved scaling a wall, fording a river, or being separated from your family and thrown into a harsh detention center by enforcement officers.

White-Cain, a champion of the Prosperity Gospel and the chairwoman of President Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board, discussed Jesus in a way that pretended to be historical but made no sense of either the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew or the historical situation of Jews like Jesus and his disciples in the Roman Empire. It was the first time that I came up against a version of the Republican Jesus that I couldn't understand in any way other than as a hateful fiction spun to gain political traction. I couldn't recognize her interpretation of the Bible as anything other than fiction—not "alternative facts," but 100 percent fiction.

The best impromptu response that I could give the student who asked why Americans use Jesus in this way was that not *all* American Christians use Jesus in this way (just as, by the same token, conservative Christians in other countries have been

known to whip out their handy Jesus references when convenient too). But my student's question and our discussion of White-Cain's comments really got under my skin. How was it that conservatives like White-Cain had developed an understanding of Jesus that was so far removed from the original texts and historical contexts of the New Testament? Somehow, the Republican Jesus had taken on a life of his own.

I conceived this book as an attempt to answer my students' questions more fully—to explain how methodologically flawed and ideologically motivated Republican interpretations transformed the Jewish leader of an apocalyptic movement on the margins of the Roman Empire into the mouthpiece for modern phenomena like free-market capitalism, fetal personhood, gun rights, and the separation of church and state.

### HERMENEUTICS OF HATE

When I was a graduate student at Yale Divinity School, I worked as an assistant in the institution's world-renowned library of rare books and archives on American Christianity. For a historian-in-training with a Roman Catholic background, archival work in this library was an immersive introduction to the full range of Protestant thought, from the practical concerns of Christian missionaries in the so-called Third World to the hair-splitting debates of erudite theologians over the interpretation of the Bible (a discipline known as "hermeneutics").

I spent many coffee-fueled days organizing the yellowing personal papers of George Lindbeck, a Lutheran professor from Yale who is widely revered as one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. Lindbeck was one of the founders of an approach known as "postliberal theology." I came to

learn that the “liberal theology” this approach follows doesn’t refer to progressive God-talk with leftist politics and a hippie Jesus. It’s called “liberal,” from the Latin *liber* (free), because it bases Christian thought and practice in the Enlightenment notion of a freethinking individual: interpretation entails an autonomous freethinking modern interpreter determining the true meaning of biblical texts by reconstructing what ancient freethinking authors originally intended these texts to mean. It’s an approach to scripture that developed in the nineteenth century and added an important dimension to the role of the believer in the understanding of scripture.

The postliberal approach emerged as a response to this, asserting the significance of community, culture, and language in shaping the ways that individuals think. For postliberal theologians, every interpretation of the Bible is influenced by the doctrines and practices of a Christian community, which are in turn shaped by the history of biblical interpretation (this is sometimes called a “hermeneutic circle”). In other words, truth doesn’t come from the original meaning of texts but through the dynamic ways that Christians interpret these texts in light of their own communal contexts, language, culture, and experiences.

Both liberal and postliberal approaches reject the traditional position established during the Protestant Reformation that any given scriptural text has a single, clear, plain-sense meaning that was directly inspired by God.

Thumbing through Lindbeck’s letters, articles, and speeches, I became captivated by the field of hermeneutics. Derived from the Greek verb *hermēneuō*, which means both “translate” and “interpret,” hermeneutics is the study of the theory and methods of biblical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Its practitioners recognize that every understanding of a text is a conscious or unconscious

interpretation that brings with it certain presuppositions, or prejudices. Understanding—or finding meaning in—a text is thus a process in which interpreters integrate the text into their own predetermined way of seeing the world.

This philosophical and theological discipline raises a dizzying set of questions about the meaning and authority of the Bible: Who is the source of the meaning of a biblical text—God, the original authors, church authorities, individual interpreters, communities of interpreters, or some combination of these? Were the biblical authors inspired by God, and if so, did God inspire the words they wrote or only their intentions in writing? Were the biblical authors infallible? Do biblical texts record history? Are translations of the authors' Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words into English and other languages able to convey the texts' original meanings, whether they are considered inspired or not? Can a biblical text have more than one meaning, and if so, is every meaning equally valid?

I didn't fully appreciate the ethical importance of reflecting on these questions about how we interpret texts until I began teaching the New Testament at a large public university in Texas, where Christian fundamentalism is such a mainstay that the state is sometimes declared the "buckle of the Bible Belt." Here I encountered students who were fierce defenders of the idea that the Bible is the inerrant or inspired word of God but were incapable of articulating their positions clearly, let alone defending their positions with any of the subtlety or consistency of theologians.

When exposed to evidence of contradictions and errors within the gospels, problematic translations of the ancient languages in English Bibles, or variant texts in our ancient Greek manuscripts of the gospels, some conservative students admira-

bly invested themselves in refining, reframing, or revising their positions on inerrancy or inspiration. Others retreated into robotic mantras: “The Bible is the Word of God, the Bible is the Word of God, the Bible is the Word of God . . .”

My first experiences presenting a historical approach to the New Testament to conservative students were as encouraging as they were frustrating. I was encouraged by those students who, like theologians engaged in hermeneutics, were inquisitive and eager to learn about historical, literary, and sociological approaches to the Bible that could complicate and enrich their understanding of biblical texts. But I was—and remain—frustrated with students whose deeply ingrained dogmatism is an impediment to learning or even arriving at a mutual understanding. Instead of engaging with the texts for themselves and entering into dialogue with their peers, some students stubbornly refuse to relinquish the “clear” meanings they have learned from their pastors and parents.

I believe religion, and especially religious texts, can serve as a powerful medium for engaging with the world. Though I am no longer a practicing Roman Catholic, I have no interest in using historical inquiry to diminish anyone else’s faith. I recognize that a biblical text may be valuably interpreted in many different ways that foster learning and compassion.

As a scholar of the humanities, however, I feel that I have a right and responsibility to apply my historical training to invalidate biblical interpretations that encourage marginalization and oppression. When a modern community fixes the meaning of a biblical text as a basis for discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, citizenship, or ability, I view this as a hermeneutic of hate. It is a hermeneutic because it is an individual or communal interpretation and, in many cases, not a plain-sense reading or historical fact, despite



claims to the contrary. There are many biblical texts, to be sure, that historical analysis should expose as endorsing hate, whether in the form of rape, conquest, slavery, genocide, or some other atrocity. What I call hermeneutics of hate encompass instances in which these “texts of terror,” as one feminist theologian famously called them, are interpreted as the authoritative basis for modern forms of hate as well as instances in which modern forms of hate are imposed onto biblical texts where they have no clear historical basis.<sup>2</sup>

These are hermeneutics *of hate* because they are used to classify certain humans as inferior to others. They are a class of oppressive language. As Toni Morrison observed in her visionary 1993 Nobel Prize lecture, “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence, does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Hate is part of an often-unconscious process of interpretation that integrates the text into a prejudicial worldview that fosters violence and limits knowledge.

Republican influencers’ hermeneutics of hate are a particular cause of alarm when they are deployed to produce harmful laws that legitimate discriminatory politics. By interrogating the flawed logic of those Christians who articulate hermeneutics of hate, I join forces not only with progressive Christians but also with a growing number of Christians from traditionally conservative churches who are speaking out against abuses of the Bible by Republican influencers. These influencers, it is worth noting, are overwhelmingly those who enjoy privilege in our society—namely, wealthy, white, heterosexual men.<sup>4</sup>

Republican influencers, who disseminate their discriminatory biblical interpretations to Christian voters through television, the internet, and the pulpit, use three strategies in particular: they *garble* the text by mistranslating or limiting the meaning

of its words (whether in the ancient languages or English translation); they *omit* relevant parts of the text by extracting a verse from its literary context and sometimes cutting out sections of verses; and they *patch* this cut-up text together with other cut-up texts into the framework of a carefully designed quilt that's backed by ignorance, stuffed with hatred, and sewn with self-interest. When Republican influencers interpret the Bible in this way, they manipulate the ancient texts to promote modern Republican political positions. For this reason, I like to call their garble-omit-patch approach the "GOP method." To be clear, many religious leaders and writers have taken similarly misleading and ahistorical approaches to scripture—even the gospel writers treat the Hebrew scriptures in this way—so this method should be understood as an approach that Republican influencers often use but did not invent.

This GOP approach involves concealing the circular process of interpretation by "prooftexting" biblical verses—that is, by citing these texts as the authoritative proof of the exact modern values and behaviors that influence how these texts are understood. To be sure, some conservative intellectuals do pay careful attention to the original language, literary context, and historical context of a given text and develop complicated arguments to support their interpretations, but the method I've described remains prevalent among contemporary Republican influencers.

I present this book as a challenge to politically conservative Christians to recognize that hermeneutics of hate are by-products of distinctly modern, American political discourses that adherents are complicit in reproducing. It doesn't have to be this way. If conservatives can make the choice to reject ancient institutions like slavery and polygyny, which are explicitly endorsed by some

biblical texts, then surely they can forsake harmful interpretations that aren't even warranted by the texts themselves.

### BEYOND THE BATTLE OF THE VERSES

In one of the most memorable scenes in Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing*, the Catholic Democratic president Josiah Bartlett holds an audience captive while he indicts Dr. Jenna Jacobs, a conservative pundit who uses the Bible to condemn homosexuality. The president's monologue, though fictional, is a brilliant example of how many progressive Christians respond—or would love to respond—to Republican hermeneutics of hate.

President Bartlett, skillfully acted by Martin Sheen, addresses Jacobs with the cool conviction of someone who knows he's getting the last word: "I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn.... What would a good price for her be?"

Then the President really takes her to task. "While thinking about that, can I ask another?" he continued. "My chief of staff Leo McGarry insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean (Leviticus 11:7). If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing gar-

ments made from two different threads? Think about those questions, would you?”<sup>5</sup>

The president’s point is that the Bible was written in an ancient world that maintained many customs that we would consider appalling in modern democratic societies. Therefore, he implies, it can’t be interpreted literally as a guide to modern ethics. When conservatives treat the Bible this way, they are necessarily being selective, picking and choosing which scripturally mandated behaviors they wish to keep and which they wish to discard. They are drawing their interpretations from a history of practice in order to establish what they understand to be meaningful and consistent hermeneutics.

President Bartlett modeled two methods that liberals regularly use to criticize conservative interpretations: *disputing the relevance* of these ancient writings to modern ethics and *identifying inconsistencies* in Republican treatments of the Bible.

A third common method is *deflection*. A debate between a Republican Christian and a Democratic Christian over the Bible is very likely to devolve into a Battle of the Verses. Take, for example, a debate that emerged during a House Committee on Agriculture session in 2013 over proposed cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In response to long-standing Republican appeals to 2 Thessalonians 3:10 as proof of God’s directive that “anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” a Democratic representative cited Jesus’s command to care for “the least of these” in Matthew 25:40, which prompted a Republican to return with Matthew 26:11, “For you always have the poor with you.”<sup>6</sup>

It makes sense that progressive Christians who take the Bible seriously would decide to respond in kind to Republican proof-texting, especially in a heated debate. But this reproduces a problematic usage of texts while leaving Republican interpreta-

tions intact. A Battle of the Verses is a one-upmanship contest with no winners.

This book is a call to action for political moderates and progressives, whether Christian or not, to tackle Republican hermeneutics of hate head-on by restoring conservatives' isolated proof-texts to their historical and literary contexts. In the face of the current epidemic of malignant misinformation, it is vital that we call out irresponsible invocations of texts for what they garble, omit, and patch together. More often than not, a contextualized proof-text does not appear to discriminate in the same ways as its contemporary Republican interpretation, although sometimes it is no less morally disturbing.

#### A HISTORICAL RECKONING

I am committed to deciphering what the New Testament and other ancient sources can tell us about who Jesus was or might have been, as well as why each gospel writer told Jesus's story the way he did. This approach, known as "historical criticism" or the "historical-critical method," is one of the predominant methods of interpretation used today by Bible scholars of all backgrounds and religious affiliations. *Critical* here implies disciplined investigation, as in *critical thinking*, not *critical* in the sense of being disparaging.

Like liberal theology, the historical approach anchors the meaning of texts to their original contexts. As one leading historical critic explains, the historical focus "appeals to criteria of language and history that are not derived from or beholden to modern faith commitments and ideologies, and this gives it at least a qualified objectivity in assessing issues in dispute."<sup>7</sup> *Qualified* is an important word here because it acknowledges, following the lead of postliberal theologians and postmodernists in

general, that every interpretation is biased to some degree by the interpreter's identity, language, culture, and experiences.

It's impossible to read a text without imposing some of our own expectations onto it. I suspect that my privileged position as a white, cisgender man has shaped my understanding of these texts in ways that I will never fully understand. Nevertheless, I am confident that historical methods and some awareness of the hermeneutical process help to prevent the most egregious misuses of the Bible. When I consider Jesus's position on a political issue, I interpret every source text as part of its broader literary and historical contexts. How, I ask, does this passage fit with the theological and literary themes of the book from which it came? How do other texts written in the same time and place use this language or approach this issue? If the Jesus that is found turns out to be totally unique in an ancient context but perfectly aligned with a modern political perspective, there's a good chance that this Jesus is a modern political fantasy.

Throughout this book, I interpret Jesus and the earliest stories about him as products of a distinctive, if geographically and chronologically varied, ancient Mediterranean context. I call this context "the New Testament world."

Our earliest stories about Jesus's life and teachings, the gospels, derive from Jewish and mixed Jewish-Gentile communities before there was a religion known as Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The title *Christian* didn't come into use until the late first or early second centuries CE.<sup>9</sup> Before this time, there were people whom we may simply call "followers of Jesus" or "Christ followers," and some of them identified more closely with Judaism than others. There were no standardized doctrines or creeds. There was no Trinity or Original Sin or even a clear idea of exactly how divine

Jesus was. There was no organized church and no standard and authoritative version of the New Testament.

A major challenge for historians using the New Testament gospels as sources for the life and teachings of Jesus is that these books were written more than a generation after Jesus's death.<sup>10</sup> Certain clues in each of the canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—reveal that they were composed after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. As the tragic climax of the First Jewish Revolt against Rome, which began in 66 CE, the Temple destruction had social and religious consequences for Jews and followers of Jesus across the empire.<sup>11</sup> Responding to these repercussions, the authors of the New Testament gospels carefully crafted Jesus's story so as to distinguish Jesus and his followers from the Jewish rebels involved in the First Revolt. Jesus was a Judean who was crucified by the Romans as a criminal, the gospel writers conceded, but he was by no means one of those seditious revolutionaries!

The First Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple were so consequential as stimuli for the formation of group boundaries between followers of Jesus and other Jewish groups that I would wager that Christianity would look very different today had these traumatic events never transpired. Regardless, it is important to recognize that these events became the prism through which the gospel writers interpreted the meaning of Jesus's words, actions, and death.

How well do you remember the words, actions, and assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., or Bobby Kennedy? Chances are that, if you were even alive at the time, you remember the highlights but not the details, and you have come to understand their speeches and actions as they've been interpreted since that time—as removed from their original historical contexts. Now