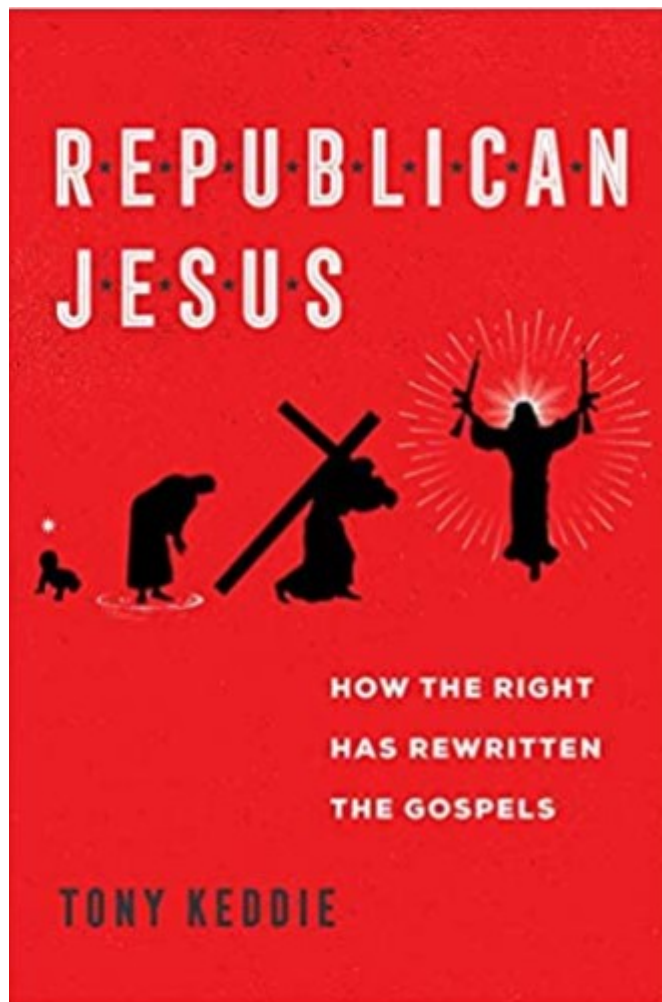


Deconstructing the Republican Jesus

Biblical scholar Tony Keddie shows how the conservative movement enlisted the Bible to help its cause.

by [Aaron Klink](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Republican Jesus

How the Right Has Rewritten the Gospels

by Tony Keddie

University of California Press

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Histories of the political, social, and economic origins of the Christian right in the United States are plentiful. However, outside of a handful of books focused on debates about creationism and the Creation Museum in Kentucky, few studies have examined the movement's use of scripture. Tony Keddie, a biblical scholar trained in the United States who now teaches in Canada, fills this gap by exploring the plausibility of some of the key scriptural interpretations Christian conservatives in the US put forth to justify their policy positions. His book aims to show how "Republican Christian influencers have created an anachronistic and internally contradictory story of Jesus tailored to address the concerns and anxieties of modern conservatives."

Keddie does not conceal his belief that the New Testament cannot responsibly be said to sanction most Republican political positions, and he seeks to undermine the authority of any such biblical interpretations. He begins where many academic studies of the Christian right do: showing that politically conservative economic positions were developed by individuals outside the church. After these positions were formulated, movement leaders sought to ground them in Christian theology to win support from economic non-elites, mostly through various churches. Over time, "right-wing politicians and their corporate bedfellows" developed what they called "scriptural" cases for policies on taxation, corporate regulation, health care, climate change, abortion, and immigration.

This argument—that such positions were developed to serve an economic agenda and only later were packaged within scriptural language to gain a wider base of support—is shared by many historians of American conservatism. Keddie knows that this view won't dissuade followers of the "Republican Jesus," who claim that they are not beholden to any political party but only to the text of scripture itself.

Who is the Republican Jesus? As Keddie writes on the first page of the book, he's "a Christian, white, working-class carpenter who was born in Israel a long, long time ago." His teenage mother was antiabortion, his parents immigrated legally to Egypt for a few years when he was a baby, and then they

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.

Keddie notes that most of the influencers who create and disseminate this version of Jesus are "wealthy, white, heterosexual men."

By way of example, Keddie examines *Killing Jesus*, the 2013 book coauthored by conservative media personality Bill O'Reilly and sports columnist Martin Dugard. The authors claim to be presenting historical facts, but Keddie shows that assertion to be patently false. *Killing Jesus* is full of historical errors, shoddy scholarship, and antisemitism. Reading the sources cited in its footnotes, one can only assume that the New Testament was written in English and there's no such thing as historical criticism. The *National Geographic* film adaptation of *Killing Jesus* that aired in 2015 during Holy Week, Keddie argues, served up its own form of Republican Jesus: one who blamed big government for the oppression of people of color and poor people.

Keddie focuses on three strategies that political conservatives use to bypass the Bible's historical context, which he argues must be considered when attempting to apply scripture to current realities.

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.

He calls this garble-omit-patch approach to hermeneutics "the GOP method." Although he is politically progressive, Keddie says he has no interest in creating a Democratic Jesus. He simply wants people to stop misreading the Bible for political purposes.

Claiming biblical support for conservative political positions on corporate regulation, immigration, and “family values” is only possible when making such distortions, Keddie argues. For example, many antiabortion advocates employ the story of John the Baptist leaping in the womb when his mother, Elizabeth, is visited by Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1:39–45). They interpret John’s leaping as biblical proof that fetuses have not only life but recognition capabilities, and thus they should be protected from the moment of conception.

Keddie notes that the text says nothing about John at the moment of conception; the story occurs when Elizabeth is six months pregnant (Luke 1:26). He also notes that the word *leap* is used by the prophet Malachi (whom Luke cites later in the chapter while describing John’s relationship with Jesus) to describe the status of those who would bear witness to the day that the Lord comes.

While this influential text probably does reflect its author’s view that a fetus is endowed with the Holy Spirit and becomes a living being and potential person during gestation, it requires only that this potential personhood begin by six months. Luke is not clearer about the point at which a fetus becomes a potential person because the author’s purpose here was not to comment on fetal personhood but to show that John the Baptist was a precursor to Jesus and not the Savior himself.

To read John’s gestational leaping as proof that life starts at conception isn’t just anachronistic, it misses the story’s theological point about Jesus’ identity.

Trained biblical scholars often disagree about fine points of scriptural interpretation. However, those contesting Keddie’s refutation of politically conservative exegesis will need to refute his careful, skilled, and persuasive use of critical methods, analysis of original languages, and exposition of historical context. In this engaging book, Keddie performs an important service by making biblical scholarship accessible to a broad audience while discussing contemporary political topics.