

Notes on Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity: A Study in Christian Origins* (1908)

The book is quite good. Despite his flaws and mistakes (both intellectual and political), Kautsky was a remarkable person and a serious scholar. –Of course there's a certain primitiveness, compared to present-day "sophistication," in his scholarship and writing, but there's also a directness, a bluntness, and a relative profundity and pithiness of thought. Intuitive insights, breadth of thinking, bold materialistic hypotheses suggested in passing. (But it's unfortunate he used the terminology of an ancient "proletariat" in his analysis of Christianity, since that made possible the willful misrepresentation of his work by later anti-Marxists. Not only was he perfectly aware that what he calls the Roman "proletariat" had very little in common with the modern industrial working class; he actually insisted on it. Nothing is more foreign to Marxism than a drawing of straightforward parallels between the present and the distant past.)

Interesting discussion of the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. The Zealots! I'm a fan of the Zealots. Rebels, insurrectionists, against the incredible oppression of the Romans, though they were inevitably defeated in 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed. "Not the entire Jewish population of Jerusalem continued for three years, until September, 70 A.D., to fight the hopeless battle against the superior army in the bravest, most obstinate and most brilliant manner, covering every inch of ground with corpses, before it yielded, exhausted by famine and disease, and was consumed in the burning ruins. The priests, the scribes, the merchants, had for the most part found safety early in the siege. It was the petty artisans and shopkeepers as well as the proletarians of Jerusalem who became the heroes of their nation, together with the proletarianized peasants of Galilee who had cut their way through to Jerusalem."

Judea in and after the time of Jesus was a land of misery and rebellion, so it isn't surprising that the early Christians were inspired in part by class hatred. You can even see this in the Gospel of Luke and the Epistle of James. With some justice, Kautsky says, "Few are the occasions on which the class hatred of the modern proletariat has assumed such fanatical forms as that of the Christian proletariat." By the time of the Gospel of Matthew, which was written decades after Luke's, the element of class hatred had to be minimized, since "wealthy and cultured persons had begun to seek contact with Christianity, and many a Christian propagandist began to feel the need of putting the Christian doctrine more amiably in order to attract these people." So whereas Luke says, e.g., "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled; blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh...but woe unto you that are rich: for ye have received your consolation; woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep,” the Sermon on the Mount takes a different form in Matthew. “Matthew has Jesus say: ‘Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the Kingdom of *Heaven*... Blessed are they who are hungry and thirsty *for justice*, for they shall have their fill.’” Ha! They’ll have their fill of justice. Ridiculous bowdlerization. Especially since “the Greek word translated by ‘have their fill’ was used mostly of animals, being applied to humans only in a contemptuous or ludicrous sense to designate a base mode of stuffing one’s belly. The fact that the word occurs in the Sermon on the Mount also is a suggestion of the proletarian origin of Christianity, the expression having probably been current in the circles from which it was drawn, to indicate a full appeasement of bodily hunger. But it becomes ridiculous when applied to the satisfaction of a hunger for justice.”

How likely is it that these points are made by any contemporary mainstream Biblical scholars?

There’s also some fascinating detective work in Kautsky’s rather persuasive argument that Jesus was actually a violent rebel, a Zealot. Arguments about the clumsy editing of the Gospels by later Christians who wanted to shape Jesus into a peaceful, politically submissive figure. The incredible contradictions of the New Testament are partly a result of this reshaping of Jesus.

Interesting analysis of the story of Christ’s passion. Kautsky’s dissection of it starts with the split between the original Jewish Christians and the pagan Christians. For many reasons there developed hostility between them, and the pagan Christians shed much of the Jewish background of Christianity. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the pagan (more “universalist”) version triumphed and the nationalistic Jewish version died out. But since there was now no provincial center of resistance to Rome (as Judea had been), and since the particularly rebellious Jewish Christianity disappeared, Christianity became ever more submissive, even servile, towards the Romans. (“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” etc.) Jesus had been crucified probably because he had tried to foment violent rebellion against Rome; that is, the fault lay with the Romans, not the Jews. But the pagan Christians wanted to be on good terms with Roman authorities, so they had to twist the story around and blame the Jews for Christ’s crucifixion, not the Romans. But why would the Jewish masses have any reason to want Jesus dead? He said he was the king of the Jews, which is to say their leader in the struggle for independence—which

the masses desperately wanted, because they hated their Roman masters. Jesus was on their side (even if he was not in fact a very successful or famous leader). For Pilate, though, the case was clear. “As a representative of the Roman power, he was merely doing his duty in having the rebel Jesus executed.”

The account in the Gospel, on the other hand, is absurd. It was unheard of that an official of the emperor would ask the masses of the people what was to be done with the accused. Pilate thought Jesus was innocent and yet had him killed just because a dirty rabble demanded it?! “Matthew assigns a most ridiculous role to Pilate: a Roman judge, a representative of the Emperor Tiberius, lord of life and death, begs a popular gathering in Jerusalem to permit him to acquit a prisoner, and on their deciding negatively, replies: ‘Well, slay him, I am innocent of this blood!’ But no quality could more violently contradict that of the historical Pilate than the clemency suggested in the Gospels. Agrippa I, in a letter to Philo, calls Pilate ‘an inexorable and ruthlessly severe character,’ and accuses him of ‘corruption, bribery, violence, theft, manhandling, insults, *continuous executions without sentence*, endless and intolerable cruelties.’” The central government at Rome even had to recall him (in 36 A.D.) because of his ruthlessness! “And we are asked to believe that this man was exceptionally just and kind in the case of the proletarian seditionist Jesus, besides showing a degree of consideration for the wishes of the people that was of fatal outcome for the accused!”

Kautsky continues to expose the absurdities of the story in masterly fashion. His points are almost numberless, but here are just a few more:

The evangelists depict for us a mob that hates Jesus to such an extent that it would rather pardon a murderer than him; the reader will please remember, a *murderer*— [apparently] no more worthy object of clemency was available—and is not satisfied until Jesus is led off to crucifixion.

Remember that this is the same mob that only yesterday hailed him as a king with cries of hosanna, spread garments before his steps and greeted him jubilantly, without the slightest contradicting voice. And it was just this devotion on the part of the mob that constituted—according to the Gospels—the cause for the desire on the part of the aristocrats to take Jesus’s life, also preventing them from attempting to arrest him by daylight, making them choose the night instead. And now this same mob appears to be

just as unanimous in its wild, fanatical hatred against him, against the man who is accused of a crime that would make him worthy of the highest respect in the eyes of any Jewish patriot: the attempt to free the Jewish community from foreign rule.

And how did this astonishing mental transformation take place? Luke and John give no explanation, and Mark only says, “The high priests incited the multitude against Jesus.” (That’s basically what Matthew says too.) Somehow, with no motive at all, people were manipulated into violently hating the man they had practically worshiped the day before.

But, after these remarkable fictions invented by the evangelists to present the Jews as the most evil scum of humanity, the original, true story peeks through for a moment: “Jesus is derided and maltreated by the soldiers of the same Pilate who has just declared him innocent. Pilate now has his soldiers not only crucify Jesus, but first has him scourged and derided as King of the Jews; a crown of thorns is put on his head, a purple mantle folded about him, the soldiers bend the knee before him, and then they again beat him upon the head and spit on him. Finally they place upon his cross the inscription, ‘Jesus, King of the Jews.’” *These* things probably really happened, and were too deeply rooted in the oral history to be deleted by the writers of the Gospels. Here the Romans again appear as Jesus’s bitter enemies, “and the cause of their derision as well as of their hatred is his high treason, his claim to be King of the Jews, his effort to shake off the Roman yoke.”

Since the story of Christ’s passion has been of incalculable importance in causing Jew-hatred for two millennia, the original Christian writers who framed it in that way (during a time of universal hatred and persecution of the Jews—so their invention didn’t come out of nowhere, and was widely accepted) have a lot to answer for. Including the Holocaust.