Wild beasts are not more hostile to mankind than are most Christians \([plerique Christianorum]\) in their deadly hatred of one another.\(^1\)

G.E.M. de Ste. Croix belongs to a rare breed of classics-scholars who have offered Marxist readings of ancient history.\(^2\) However, I would like to claim Ste. Croix for another intermittent tradition, namely, materialist readings of the Bible. More specifically, it was the New Testament and early Christianity that continually drew his attention. Anyone who has read the anchor-like tome known as *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* will be struck by how often Ste. Croix refers to Christianity (whether in his own day or at its earliest moments), the Church, and the Bible. These references take the form of continual asides (often bracketed), as well as whole sections given over to women, property, slavery, Jesus of Nazareth, martyrdom, persecution, and the workings of church-councils.


\(^2\) See also Rose 1992, and Arthur and Konstan 1984, who provide a full bibliography up to the early 1980s. The whole notion of classics, defined in the traditional sense as dealing with ancient Greece, Rome, and perhaps ancient India, needs a strong challenge. Not only does it perpetuate the Enlightenment-classicist narrative whereby the ‘West’ may trace its origins from ancient Greece and Rome, but it also neglects the large number of other ancient cultures which have remained the domains of anthropologists, historians and so on.
Apart from offering a critical commentary on Ste. Croix’s treatments of early Christianity and the Bible, I am also keenly interested in usable insights he may have to offer. These insights, which should not be left to that eccentric corner of scholarship known as ‘classics’, emerge as much from my criticisms of Ste. Croix as for the points I can draw directly from his work. In order to dig out these insights, I have organised this close encounter with Ste. Croix in terms of the following topics. I begin with his zesty, politely bellicose and engaged style. Somewhat idiosyncratic, it soon makes one forget the forbidding number of pages in his great works. The style leads me into his complex encounters with theology, which he always opposes to history. Needless to say, theology usually comes off worse for the encounter, for Ste. Croix was a trenchant anti-clerical campaigner. However, in the meantime, Ste. Croix makes some valuable points towards a materialist reading of the Bible, especially the insight concerning the tension between *chora* and *polis* in the New Testament. The complexity of his engagement with theology has to take account of his biography, not least of which is his conservative Christian upbringing at the hands of a mother, who was a British Israelite.

On the other side of that great opposition between theology and history lies Ste. Croix’s avowed profession as a historian. Although I am fascinated by the way he makes the familiar territory of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds come alive, my interest here is with the contributions to ancient economic history. Much remains to be done on this score, especially in relation to the ancient Near-Eastern context of the Bible. Ste. Croix must be a major figure in any reconstruction, and that for the following reasons: he highlights the crucial roles of class-conflict; provides an extraordinarily useful correction to dominant assumptions concerning trade and commerce; and he shows that such reconstructions are inevitably politically engaged. If you are so engaged, then it pays to be explicit about it.

The texts in question are relatively few, although they are dense enough. I have already mentioned the book on class-struggle. Less useful for me is the other work published in his lifetime, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, as well as the posthumous collection on Athenian democracy. However,

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