

Lenin's Gospels

Roland Boer

Renmin University of China, China; University of New Castle, Australia

roland.t.boer@gmail.com

Abstract

Lenin and the Gospels: This surprising conjunction is the focus of this article. Virtually unknown is the fact that Lenin was fond of citing, quoting, interpreting and appropriating in an innovative fashion the parables and sayings found in the mouth of Jesus. This study begins by analyzing the organizing parable of the tares and wheat in Lenin's crucial early text, *What Is To Be Done?* (1902). From there it moves to consider his wider engagements with the Gospels, again with an emphasis on parables and sayings such as the sower, the narrow gate and path, the lost shepherd and the good shepherd. Apart from exploring the permutations of Lenin's interpretations, a crucial question is why he should do so. The key lies in the earthy, agricultural nature of these preferred parables and the worldviews constructed by peasants and workers in revolutionary Russia.

Keywords

Lenin – Gospels – parables – organization – revolution – agriculture – peasants

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I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.

(MATT. 13.35)

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It is less well known than it should be that Lenin had a distinct fondness for the biblical Gospels. Indeed, a careful reading of Lenin's texts reveals a persistent preference for the parables and sayings that we find in Jesus' mouth, especially

those of an agricultural and earthy tenor. In order to examine the nature and function of these engagements, I begin with a detailed assessment of *What Is To Be Done?* (1902d),¹ where the key organizing parable is that of the wheat and tares (or weeds) from Matthew 13. Lenin draws upon this parable in order to rethink the organization of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). He does so in response to opponents, stressing the need for discernment, vigorous and open argument, and the dialectic of illegal and legal organization. I unpack the central role of this parable in Lenin's text, a parable he would cite on a number of occasions after the publication of *What Is To Be Done?*, in order to indicate the core of his argument.² Yet this exploration is only the first step of my analysis, for Lenin's engagement with the parable of the tares and the wheat is not an isolated occurrence. He goes on to draw upon other biblical parables and sayings, especially those of an agricultural nature with a focus on seeds, growing and harvesting. By considering these biblical engagements, I find that Lenin is a creative and innovative exegete, appropriating, redirecting and providing new angles on the Bible. All of which raises the question as to why he draws upon the Gospels, a question I seek to answer in the conclusion to my argument.

Tares and Wheat

Let us begin with the parable in question from Matt. 13.24–30:

Jesus compares the enigmatic 'kingdom of heaven' to a field sown with 'good seed' (καλὸν σπέρμα). Then other seed is sown, at night by an enemy. Not 'bad seed' (κακὸν σπέρμα), for they are designated as tares or weeds (ζιζάνια). The

- 1 *What Is To Be Done?* is usually understood to be a programmatic statement of Lenin's distinctive reinterpretation of the Marxist tradition for the sake of party reorganization under tsarist repression in Russia. Here we find, it is argued, that Lenin evinces a 'worry about workers', that they are not revolutionary enough. For that reason, the party needs a cadre of radical intellectuals, the vanguard, who would nudge and redirect the workers. Lars Lih's monumental *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? in Context* has successfully destroyed that 'text-book' position, showing that the book was a specific engagement in a specific debate, that Lenin was committed to Kautsky's 'Erfurtian program' of a merger between workers and intellectuals, and that Lenin shows an extraordinary enthusiasm for and confidence in worker radicalism (Lih 2008).
- 2 Of all the commentators, only Lih notices Lenin's biblical engagements, but he makes little of them. For instance, at the opening of his book he writes: 'And a sower went forth sowing seeds ... [t]his image from the Gospels unexpectedly turns up in *Chto delat?*' (Lih 2008: 3). But then Lih passes on without further remark.

punctum of the parable now follows: The person's slaves propose that they cut the weeds, since an enemy has sown them. No, the person replies; let them both grow together, and only then, at harvest, should they be separated and gathered, weeds first and then wheat. The former are destined for the fire, the latter for the barn. Crucially, the reason why the slaves must wait until harvest is not specified. Do the young shoots look similar, risking that the wheat will be pulled up with the weeds? Is it possible that those which look like weeds may turn out to be wheat? These questions – arising from the notorious gaps in the parable – will become important in Lenin's interpretation, but I wish to stress four other issues: the difference between tares and wheat; the tares' source ('the person's enemy' [αὐτοῦ ὁ ἐχθρὸς]); the parable's context; and Matthew's interpretation (Matt. 13.36–43).³

The first two are obvious but need to be kept in mind for Lenin's interpretation. The third, concerning context, requires further comment. The key is that the parable appears in a collection of agricultural parables. The preceding parable is that of the sower, who spreads seed over four kinds of ground – path, rocky ground, thorns and good soil, where it flourishes and yields one hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold (note these numbers). Following the parable of the tares, we encounter a series of brief parables, of the mustard seed, leaven, pearl in the field and net of fish. Each provides varying images of the kingdom of heaven – its unexpectedness, its challenges, its down side and its astonishing yields. However, the overwhelming focus is agricultural: Alongside the brief parable of the mustard seed, the two key parables (indicated both by length and interpretations offered) are those of the sower and the tares. They are resolutely agricultural and draw Lenin's attention.

As for the interpretation of the parable of the tares (Matt. 13.36–43), it is agreed by biblical critics to be an interpolation, yet it is very much part of the biblical tradition. In this interpolated interpretation, the parable gains an apocalyptic feel: The master becomes the 'Son of man' (the curious self-designator of Jesus), the enemy the devil (ὁ διάβολος), and the slaves become angels who gather the harvest at the close of the age, sending the tares to the 'furnace of fire' (τὴν κάμινον τοῦ πυρός) and the wheat to the 'kingdom of the Father'. Lenin is uninterested in this apocalyptic tone, save for one crucial item: 'the good seed (τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα) are the sons of the kingdom; the weeds (τὰ ζιζάνια)

3 My interest is in those items that engage Lenin. I do not seek to enter into the interminable debates over the finer points concerning the parable and its relation to Matthew's Gospel as a whole, although one may fruitfully consult the exhaustive commentaries of Luz and Allison for the states of play (Luz 2001; Allison 2000). Needless to say, their scope, wide as it is, does not include Lenin.

are the sons of the evil one' (Matt. 13.38). In lay terms, the weeds are one's opponents, while the wheat designates one's allies in the struggle.

Lenin's Homiletics

Lenin's interpretation of the parable in *What Is To Be Done?* is as follows:

It is precisely our campaign of exposure that will help us separate the tares from the wheat. What the tares are, we have already indicated. By the wheat we mean attracting the attention of ever larger numbers, including the most backward sections, of the workers to social and political questions, and freeing ourselves, the revolutionaries, from functions that are essentially legal (the distribution of legal books, mutual aid, etc.), the development of which will inevitably provide us with an increasing quantity of material for agitation. In this sense, we may, and should, say to the Zubatovs and the Ozerovs⁴: Keep at it, gentlemen, do your best! Whenever you place a trap in the path of the workers (either by way of direct provocation, or by the 'honest' demoralisation of the workers with the aid of 'Struve-ism'), we will see to it that you are exposed. But whenever you take a real step forward, though it be the most 'timid zigzag', we will say: Please continue! And the only step that can be a real step forward is a real, if small, extension of the workers' field of action. Every such step will be to our advantage and will help to hasten the advent of legal societies of the kind in which it will not be *agents provocateurs* who are detecting socialists, but socialists who are gaining adherents. In a word, our task is to fight the tares. It is not our business to grow wheat in flower-pots. By pulling up the tares, we clear the soil for the wheat. And while the Afanasy Ivanoviches and Pulkheria Ivanovnas⁵ are tending their flower-pot crops, we must prepare the reapers, not only to cut down the tares of today, but to reap the wheat of tomorrow (Lenin 1902d: 455–56).

4 Zubatov was the police chief, who attempted to divert workers from revolutionary activity with the Social Democrats by establishing legal, police-controlled unions. I. Kh. Ozerov (along with A.E. Worms) was a professor at the University of Moscow who became a spokesman for Zubatov's 'police socialism'.

5 A married couple from Gogol's short story, 'Old-World Landowners', in which Pulkheria Ivanovna tends her flowerpots to the exclusion of any concern with what is happening elsewhere on the estate, let alone the world beyond (Gogol 2008: 129–50).

Lenin's interpretation is close in spirit to the biblical parable yet has its own twists.⁶ The similarities first: The crucial issue is discernment, separating the tares from the wheat. Further, the tares must be pulled up or cut down, so that it becomes clear who is part of the wheat. And the task falls to the 'reapers', who come to scythe away the weeds for the sake of the wheat.

As for Lenin's creative engagement with the parable, he is interested more in its direct application. That is, he evinces a homiletic concern, one that is less interested in the slippery and untraceable original 'meaning' or 'intention' of the parable (which has drawn the immense but wasted energies of myriad biblical scholars). Instead, Lenin assumes that the parable speaks to the concerns of his day, to its immediate and very political relevance. We may call this his political homiletics.

In this respect, the key issue in relation to the context of his interpretation of the parable is the tension between legal and illegal political activity. Should worker movements and trade unions be utterly legal and public, working within the existing, tsarist framework to make only achievable gains? Or should the communists also operate at an illegal level, beyond the law and the given coordinates in order to overthrow those very coordinates? Contrary to the Menshevik-derived interpretations of Lenin (followed by Luxemburg and Kautsky), Lenin urged a dialectical interaction between *both* legal *and* illegal forms (Lenin 1902b: 246; Lih 2008: 449; 2011: 100–110; Zinoviev 1973: 153–54). He was the last to reject the legal activity of worker organizations in favour of a small cadre of revolutionary intellectuals; instead, illegal and legal organization are part of the same movement, spreading the socialist message, organizing strikes (economic and political), training radical and 'purposive workers' (usually known in a poor translation from the Russian as 'professional revolutionaries'). The legal organizations were the means for a widespread movement, for the opportunity to agitate at a range far beyond that of the illegal movement. This is the classic 'merger' hypothesis first proposed by Kautsky's *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)*, a text to which Lenin and other communists were committed at the time (Kautsky 1910; see also Lenin 1905e: 474–81; Lenin 1905j: 29–31, 76; 1907b: 155).⁷ Thus, the socialist movement involved a merger between

6 For some strange reason, Lih feels that the presence of the parable adds to the opaqueness of the passage (Lih 2008: 402 n. 26).

7 A range of critics have made it clear that Lenin and the RSDLP were on the same footing as the other, Western social-democratic parties on the issue of the merger (Miliukov 1962: 244–45; Laue 1964; Donald 1993; Harding 2009: 1.161–89; Lih 2008, 2011). Le Blanc wavers between arguing that Lenin was committed to a vanguard and had little appreciation of workers, and arguing that Lenin did indeed take a merger position (Le Blanc 2006: 96–98, 144).

socialists and workers, as well as between illegal and legal forms of organization – all of these comprise the wheat.

Who are the tares? They argue for legal organizations *alone*. Here we find Zubatov and the legal unions under ‘police socialism’, as well as Vasilyev and the priests and the professors Ozerov and Worms who supported these movements. Not only did they try to ‘spy out the “fiery ones”’ in the legal unions, but also they used those unions to ‘plant their *agents provocateurs* in the illegal organizations’ (Lenin 1902d: 455). The Zubatov unions would soon pass as the workers saw through the attempt to divert revolutionary energy. In *What Is To Be Done?* a few other tares also appear, such as ‘economism’, the position that workers should restrict themselves to purely economic gains (better pay, shorter hours, improved conditions) and leave political agitation to the bourgeoisie, that there is no need for the fusion between workers and the revolutionary tradition since worker organizations (strike committees and legal organizations) were enough.⁸ By *What Is To Be Done?*, economism was a dead letter, widely disparaged among socialists. However, Lenin attempts to pin the label on two rival newspapers and their editors, *Rabochee Delo* (*The Workers’ Cause*) and *Rabochaya Mysl* (*Workers’ Thought*), both appearing spasmodically from 1897–1902. The former may have been resolutely economist, but not the latter. However, in the hothouse of the exiled Russian socialist movement, this struggle became crucial for ideological and organizational dominance in the fledgling social-democratic party. So Lenin attempts to discredit this tare, *Rabochaya Delo*, by attributing to it an economist position. In this he was spectacularly successful, largely due to the influence of his own journal, the consistent and tough *Iskra* with its talented editorial board – G.V. Plekahnov (the grandfather of Russian communism), L. Martov, P.B. Axelrod, A.N. Potresov and Vera I. Zasluchich.

Thus, in *What Is To Be Done?* the tares may be the Zubatov unions, economism and rival groups with their newspapers, while the wheat are those involved with *Iskra*. But let me return to the legal-illegal issue, for it had already appeared before the debates of *What Is To Be Done?* in the form of ‘legal Marxism’ and the illegal underground movement.⁹ And it would not disappear from

8 The economist position was proposed in the infamous *Credo* and *Profession de foi* (the titles are telling). See Harding 1983: 250–52; Lenin 1899b: 171–74; see also Lih 2008: 221–40; Harding 2009: 1.141–51; Lenin 1899c: 256; 1902c: 95–96; 1903a; 1902d: 361–67).

9 ‘Legal’ Marxism fostered kathedersocialism (professorial socialism) in Russia and was permitted by the tsarist authorities during the 1880s and 1890s due to legal Marxist criticism of *Narodnaya Volya* (the People’s Will). Lenin comments that before this ‘legal’ Marxism was closed down by the clumsy censors, ‘Marxist books were published one after another, Marxist journals and newspapers were founded, nearly everyone became a

the socialist movement; in fact, it became an even greater issue after the 1905 revolution, when the tsar gave some ground and permitted the formation of a parliament (Duma) through elections, between 1905 and 1917. Now the legal position became known as liquidationism – the argument that with some representative democracy and the recognition of the Social-Democratic Party (along with others on the left such as the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the peasant parties), the need for an illegal organization had passed, indeed that a purely legal organization would achieve far more. Between these years, and even after the February Revolution in 1917, Lenin and others waged a bitter battle against liquidationism until the Bolsheviks took power later in the year.

Is this dialectic of legal and illegal organizations entirely foreign to the biblical parable? If we consider the context of the parable in Matthew 13, a constant refrain may be heard: Parables are for the inner circle of disciples, who are given their deeper meanings, while those outside do not see, hear or understand (see Matt. 13.10–17).¹⁰ Jesus even quotes Ps. 78.2 (attributing it to 'the prophet'): 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' (Matt. 13.35). Of course, the problem with the parables is that their meanings remained open-ended and stunningly opaque even to the disciples. The inner group struggled to understand, thereby becoming one with the outer, public (and thereby legal) group. Here too we find a dialectic between inner and outer, between legal and illegal (in Lenin's terms). At this deeper level, he seems to have captured this sense of the parable as well.

In light of this legal-illegal struggle, I would like to focus on another dimension of Lenin's interpretation. He writes: 'It is not our business to grow wheat in flower-pots' (Lenin 1902d: 456). The field in which the wheat is sown now becomes a flower-pot, designating the constraints of the existing political and economic order. One must water the plants, may constrain their growth by the size of the pot, move the pot to another location, and the harvest will be quite small. This is all a solely legal organization may achieve. By contrast, an illegal organization seeks to smash the pot and sow wheat in the whole field. Here one will still find tares, but once they are cleared, the wheat harvest will be far, far greater. Again and again, Lenin uses the image of thirty, sixty and

Marxist, Marxists were flattered, Marxists were courted, and the book publishers rejoiced at the extraordinary, ready sale of Marxist literature' (Lenin 1902d: 361).

10 For more than a century, this feature has been termed the 'messianic secret' since Wrede's 1901 publication (1987). Compare Lenin's continual urging of the need for revolutionary secrecy in *What Is To Be Done?* (Lenin 1902d: 452–67, 477–80).

hundred-fold harvests, drawn now from the parable of the sower (Lenin 1902d: 472, 485; 1902b: 248; 1903b: 311–12).¹¹

Two final items in Lenin's interpretation go beyond the Gospel parable. First, the time when one can weed the tares may happen at various moments. No need to wait for the final harvest, for one may either pull up the tares first in order to 'clear the soil for the wheat', tearing 'the evil up by the roots', or one may 'cut down the tares of today' in order to 'reap the wheat of tomorrow' (Lenin 1902d: 456; 1905l: 56). Here a sharp twist is given to the parable: In the parable itself, the puzzle and point lies in waiting until the final harvest; for Lenin, the act of removing the weeds may happen today. But just when we think he has turned this element of the parable on its head, he explores another option. The tares may actually assist the growth of the wheat. In the middle of Lenin's text, he urges the legal unions to continue their work. Why? In the spirit of a merger between legal and illegal organizations, he suggests that the growth of the tares may assist the growth of the wheat, with the hint that some tares may turn out to be or indeed become wheat. Now we are back with the spirit of the biblical parable, for one waits for the final harvest in order to discern clearly between tares and wheat.

This engagement with the parable was not a passing moment. The importance of the parable of the tares in expressing a key element of his argument in *What Is To Be Done?* may be illustrated by the fact that Lenin cites precisely this passage in later works to indicate the core of his argument. For example, in 1905 he writes:

It was the Ninth of January that proved again and again the importance of the task formulated in that pamphlet: '... we must prepare reapers, both to cut down the tares of today [paralyse today's corrupting influence of the Zubatov movement] and to reap the wheat of tomorrow' (give a revolutionary lead to the movement that has advanced a step with the aid of legalisation). The Simple Simons of the new Iskra, however, use the bountiful wheat harvest as a pretext for minimising the importance of a strong organization of revolutionary reapers (Lenin 1905b: 155–56; see also Lenin 1905a: 214–15).

11 The legal-illegal struggle opens out to some other crucial theo-political questions, especially in light of Lenin's favoured term, 'miracle', and thereby the nature of revolution, formal and absolute freedom, as well as democracy. These are the topics of other studies.

Beyond Biblical Tares

I would suggest that the parable of the tares may be seen as an organizing principle for the many struggles within the communist movement at the time. Lenin's opponents would become many over the years, including not merely the Zubatovs or economists of the time of *What Is To Be Done?*, or even the Narodniks, kathedersocialists (professorial Marxists), utopian socialists and Bernsteinians at around the same time; but also the ultimatumists, otzovists, God-builders, liquidators, conciliators (under Trotsky) and the significant thorns in his side – to borrow another biblical image – of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries.¹² All of these become various tares, to be identified, weeded out and perhaps turned into wheat.

The parable of the tares is, however, only one of many engagements with the Gospels, even if it is among the most extensive. Within his interpretation of the parable, Lenin draws others into its orbit, especially the parable of the sower, but also sayings of sowing, new shoots and reaping (Matt. 6.26; 9.37–38; 13.31–32; 25.24; Mark 4.26–32; Luke 10.2; 12.24; 13.18–19; 19.21; John 4.31–38). The sower is of course the other major parable in Matthew 13 (with versions in Mark 4.3–20 and Luke 8.4–15), including – like the parable of the tares – an interpolated interpretation in an attempt to dispel the disciples' bewilderment. Elsewhere, Lenin's references to the sower are more allusive. He is occasionally interested in the seeds sown on thorny or rocky soil, or even on the pathway. Here we find references to 'rich harvests for the gendarmes', or to those who have 'sown distrust towards the firm and steadfast leaders' (Lenin 1902d: 458, 462). But the preferred soil is the fourth type, deep and rich, where the seed takes root and produces a harvest thirty, sixty and a hundredfold more than the seed sown – images of exceeding plenty for peasants at any time, whether that of the first century CE or during the revolutionary period of 1917. At that latter time, the soil was receptive indeed to the Bolshevik message (Lenin 1917c: 59), finally providing the extraordinary yields that Lenin mentions over and again (Lenin 1902d: 472, 485; 1902b: 249; 1903b: 311–12). The seed may not sprout immediately, but one should not worry, for he suggests that the

12 How does one make sense of all these splits, breakaways and conflicts? Lenin seeks to rationalize them by arguing both that such splits are a sign of the immaturity of the revolutionary movement (following Marx and Engels) and that they are all (or nearly all) connected by a blue thread, running all the way through from Narodism to Menshevism, liquidators and the Socialist-Revolutionaries (Lenin 1915a: 258–59; 1905b: 148; 1905c: 72–73; 1905d: 505; 1909b; 1909a; 1909d; 1909c; 1910: 208–14; 1912a; 1914c; 1914e; 1914d; 1915b: 331–35; 1914b; 1914a).

'extremely virile shoots' have not been uprooted but rather are hidden from the police and temporarily suppressed, their roots deep and strong in the good soil and waiting to shoot above the surface (Lenin 1902d: 461, 463–64, 487, 508). Eventually, the seed will sprout, pushing up green shoots from soil well fertilized by previous revolutions; the grain will ripen and the harvest will be gathered in the revolution (Lenin 1907f: 102; 1906b: 219–22; 1906a: 485). Now the allusions begin to overlap with other parables of sowing, new shoots and harvest, whether in terms of the harvesters being few, reaping the fruits of what one sows, or sowing the seed and bearing the fruit of detailed revolutionary organization (Lenin 1902d: 472; 1907h: 122; 1905f: 562; 1907g: 152; 1906a: 485; 1919: 426–31). Above all, the seeds of revolution are growing: 'It has been sown. It is growing. And it will bear its fruits – perhaps not tomorrow or the day after, but a little later; we cannot alter the objective conditions in which a new crisis is growing – but it will bear fruit' (Lenin 1908d: 288).

Now more and more parables begin to appear once Lenin's approach is identified. For instance, the parables of the good shepherd (John 10) and of the lost sheep (Matt. 18.12–13; Luke 15.3–7; see also Matt. 12.11) are often brought together. But Lenin provides his own interpretive twists, sharply reversing the valorization of the parable. Thus, the solitary sheep that runs away or is lost is not recalcitrant but becomes a true revolutionary compared to the ninety-nine that do not. Take intellectuals: Out of one hundred who begin as radical students, ninety-nine put aside their radicalism for the sake of comfortable positions in the establishment (Lenin 1912b: 274). Note carefully that the focus is no longer the shepherd who sets out bravely to rescue the lost sheep; no longer is the solitary sheep a lost or recalcitrant one (except perhaps in the eyes of the ninety-nine). The focus becomes the ninety-nine, for they are the wayward ones, while the one remains true to the revolutionary cause. So also with economic conditions that produce a revolutionary: 'If, out of a hundred persons who are subjected to that operation, one member of "society" grows hard, that will be a useful result' (Lenin 1911: 303). But what has befallen the shepherd? In light of the church's appropriation of the terminology of sheep-farming, in which priests become the 'pastors' and the congregation the sheep, in light of the landlords' deployment of the terminology of shepherds and sheep to describe their relations with peasants, and in light of the control of the early soviets after the February Revolution of 1917 by Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, Lenin is scathing. These 'shepherds' are all evil, for their only interest is to 'shear' the sheep, to lead these poor 'talking sheep' to 'slaughter'. But it will not always be so; the sheep will not forever line up dumbly to be ripped

off, for they are becoming politically conscious (Lenin 1907a: 268; 1917d: 192; 1917b: 224).¹³

This complex parable provides more resources for Lenin, particularly the key statement: 'So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep"' (John 10.7). In an earlier piece from 1903, Lenin elaborates on the image of the door, constructing his own parable with a revolutionary feel (Lenin 1903c: 418–19). Once again he speaks of the peasants, focussing on the demand from the Social-Democrats for peasant committees which would restrict economic bondage (after the abolition of serfdom in 1861) and restore cut-off lands appropriated by the landlords. This demand is not the final word, not a barrier, but a door through which all peasants must pass to full emancipation. Now the door takes on multiple senses: It may be the existing order that needs to be smashed, the threshold to revolution, if not that of revolution itself. Like the entrance to the sheepfold, that door is a passage to full rights and real liberty. No longer should only peasants pass through it, for they are the first among many, which includes workers. The problem is that some cannot see the door (Narodniks and Socialist-Revolutionaries), so all their strivings for socialism are blind – in contrast to the Social-Democrats, who 'point so insistently to this first and nearest door' (Lenin 1903c: 419). The key image has been transmuted once again. It has become multiple, the first of many doors through which peasants and workers will need to pass on the road to socialism. But the shepherd too has changed roles, for he is no longer a guard at the door, not the door itself. Instead, the Social-Democrats have become shepherds, identifying the door through which the sheep must pass. And the sheepfold on the other side of the door(s) has become socialism.

Arguably, this interpretation is even more creative than that of the first parable I considered above (the tares and wheat), for now Lenin has used a parable as a basis for his own creative act. Other parables appear more briefly, a citation perhaps or an allusion, but they show the spread of Lenin's biblical engagement. Close in spirit to the lost sheep are the 'prodigal sons of "society"', that is the Menshevik representatives in the Duma, who have split from the Bolsheviks and whom the bourgeois press now expects to return to their own benches, having been emancipated 'from "revolutionary illusions"' (Lenin 1907c: 456). Or Lenin may cite items from parables or stories closely related to those of seed and sheep, such as the crumbs under the table in the story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7.24–30; she is the Canaanite woman in Matt. 15.21–28). Now the crumbs become food for the students who have 'crumbs of

13 In the struggles with the God-Builders and Otzovists, he also calls them 'bad shepherds', now within the Bolshevik flock (Lenin 1909f: 86).

the socialist ideas' fed as they are on scraps of knowledge (Lenin 1902d: 462). In stark contrast to that meagre diet, Lenin may refer to the Great Banquet of Luke 14, to which all the homeless, starving and oppressed, from the highways and the byways, are invited: 'They [the committees] will consist of peasants, paupers, intellectuals, prostitutes (a worker recently asked us in a letter why not carry on agitation among the prostitutes), soldiers, teachers, workers ... we must attract to it, enlighten, and organize all who labour and are exploited, as stated in our programme – all without exception: handicraftsmen, paupers, beggars, servants, tramps, prostitutes' (Lenin 1905i: 237–38).

The remaining references move a little away from the direct agricultural focus of those I have discussed thus far, but they remain so indirectly. A key instance is the wide and easy way over against the narrow gate and the hard way of Matt. 7.13–14. The easy way may be the bourgeois-democratic revolution of Germany, which was soon crushed (despite some provisional revolutionary governments) and saw power restored to the Prussian emperor. By contrast, the narrow, difficult way becomes the French revolution of 1789, in which workers and peasants led for a time, resulting in the republic and a new form of freedom (Lenin 1905k: 241–42). So also in the Russian context, in which this second road will be difficult, upon which one may be waylaid by the bourgeoisie (as in France). It thereby requires perseverance:

Don't let the 'unusual' appearance of this road frighten you, don't be put out by the fact that in many places you will find no beaten track at all, and that you will have to crawl along the edges of precipices, break your way through thickets, and leap across chasms. Don't complain of the poor road: these complaints will be futile whining, for you should have known in advance that you would be moving, not along a highway that has been graded and levelled by all the forces of social progress, but along paths through out-of-the-way places and back-alleys which do have a way out, but from which you, we or anyone else will never find a direct, simple, and easy way out (Lenin 1902a: 126–27).¹⁴

14 The same text is also quoted in Lenin's notes for a reply to Plekhanov and Axelrod (Lenin 1902e: 56–57). The road would become a central metaphor in Lenin's later works, for example in pieces such as 'On to the Straight Road' (Lenin 1908c), 'On the Beaten Track!' (Lenin 1908b) and 'On the Road' (Lenin 1909e).

Conclusion

Jesus, the disciples, the sower, the harvester, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the travellers on the road, guests at the wedding banquet, shepherds, sheep ... Lenin's texts are liberally sprinkled with biblical parables and characters. At odd moments he finds this biblical register a 'strange, a preposterous terminology' (Lenin 1908a: 130)¹⁵ when he encounters it in others (here Feuerbach), but it does not seem to have stopped its systematic usage in his own works. Yet a question remains: Why the Bible?

At one level, this pattern of biblical citation from and interpretation of the Gospels may be attributed to education, or be seen as part of a general cultural awareness in which the Bible was a key cultural artefact. If so, then the Bible is on par with the continual references to literature. The fact that Lenin occasionally weaves such references into his Gospel interpretations strengthens this impression. As noted earlier, in the interpretation of the parable of the tares and the wheat we find that he also refers to Gogol's short story, 'The Old World Landowners', where Pulkheria Ivanovna tends her flowerpots to the exclusion of any other concern (Lenin 1902d: 455–56; Gogol 2008: 129–50). He also liberally sprinkles his text with references to 'the man in the muffler' (or 'the man in a case'), a man lacking all initiative and creative thinking, drawn from Chekhov's story of the same name, to Gogol's *Dead Souls*, to Saltykov-Shchedrin's *History of a Town* and *The Golovlyov Family*, to Goethe's *Faust* and so on (Lenin 1907d: 22; 1907g: 152; 1907e: 333; 1905m: 65; 1904a: 196; 1904b: 500; 1917a: 45; Gogol 1997; Saltykov-Shchedrin 2001, 2000; Goethe 2000).¹⁶

Some limited truth may be found in this position, but we need to ask: Why these biblical texts and not others? How does he interpret them? Why does he interpret and use them in the way he does? In many respects, this article has sought to answer these questions. In *What Is To Be Done?* the key issues turn out to be party organization, the legal-illegal dialectic, and the struggles with opponents in the Social-Democratic movement, but beyond that text they all

15 The text in question quotes Feuerbach: "How banal," wrote Feuerbach, "to deny that sensation is the evangel, the gospel (*Verkündigung*) of an objective saviour." [Feuerbach, *Sämtliche Werke*, X. Band, 1866, S. 194–95.] A strange, a preposterous terminology, as you see ...' (Lenin 1908a: 130; see also Lenin 1897: 386; 1899a: 317 n.). Yet Lenin was not averse to declaring a position of his own as the 'gospel truth!' (Lenin 1905g: 542).

16 The story by Chekhov may be found at <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ac/jr/189.htm>. A multitude of further examples may be identified with any reading of Lenin's works. Krupskaya mentions that, contrary to a rumour that Lenin had never read a novel in his life, she found he was 'fond of the classics which he knew intimately' and that he knew Tolstoy, Turgenyev, Chernyshevsky and others very well (Krupskaya 1960: 40).

relate in some way to political struggle and the revolutionary movement. All of these biblical interpretations and references provide down-to-earth touchstones that enable him to identify the core of his argument and then advance it – all in a language easily understood.

The greatest concentration of Lenin's engagement with the Bible is with the Gospels, especially the parables and sayings of Jesus with a distinctly earthy and often agricultural focus. To be sure, he also deploys parables and sayings such as the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Prodigal Son, the Great Banquet, Patches on Old Garments and the Two Ways, but his clear preference is parables and sayings of the land and its farmers. Why these parables, concerning sowing and reaping, animals and husbandry? I suggest that an insight may be gained from his persistent interest in matters agricultural, not least of which was his concern for the revolutionary involvement of the millions of peasants. From his first works through until his last pieces, he was vitally interested in the economics of agriculture, peasants and the implications for communism.¹⁷ Often these interests are interlaced directly with citations and allusions to the parables and sayings of Jesus, as we find, for instance, in 'To the Rural Poor' (Lenin 1903c).

These specific interests in agriculture and the overlaps with the biblical material, however, suggest a deeper reason. Lenin shared Ernst Bloch's insight: The mass of peasants were vital for the revolution, but their worldview was framed in terms of biblical stories and characters. These narratives also partook of a creative mix of agricultural-cum-ecclesial rituals, avid interest in the lives of saints and a panoply of spirits and demons. But even these were laced and framed in biblical language. That is, the agricultural parables we find in the Bible spoke to peasants and those with a peasant background in ways that no other stories were able. Here two objections may be raised. First, was the Bible really so prevalent among Russian peasants, many of whom were illiterate? In other words, is this not more of a Protestant perspective rather than an

17 Apart from letters and telegrams, Lenin wrote more than thirty works on agriculture, ranging from book-length studies to brief newspaper articles, including the famous 'decree on land' after the October Revolution (Lenin 1917e: 257–61). The earliest work is *New Economic Developments in Peasant Life* from 1893; the last is 'How We Should Reorganize the Peasants' and Workers' Inspection (Recommendation to the Twelfth Party Congress)', written just before the third stroke that completely incapacitated him in early 1923 (Lenin 1893, 1923). Worthy of note also are his massive work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Lenin 1899a) and the agricultural notebooks (Lenin 1910–1916). For contemporary works that vividly depict the desperate and oppressive conditions of rural life in Russia and the massive changes underway, see Alexinsky's *Modern Russia* (Alexinsky 1913: 114–61) and Walling's *Russia's Message* (Walling 1908: 166–91).

Orthodox one? In reply, it is worth noting that Lenin's mother was of German, Lutheran background, and she had a significant influence on his education.¹⁸ Further, Orthodoxy is known for attempting to steer a path between the 'extremes' of Roman Catholicism and Calvinism. To that end, one may consult the *Catechesis* by Metropolitan Philaret (Drozdov), which was *the* textbook in the Russian imperial schools of Lenin's time, used in the instruction of 'The Law of God' (Lenin indicates that he was familiar with Philaret's work [1901f: 294; 1903c: 422]). Here biblical texts, especially crucial ones that determined the differences between the three traditions, were discussed. Philaret's direct source is the so-called 'Declaration of the Faith by the Eastern Patriarchs' (known in English as the 'Answers of the Orthodox Patriarchs to the Non-Jurors', from 1723). This text was itself a repetition of the earlier seventeenth century effort to mediate between Roman Catholicism and Calvinism, specifically at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 where Calvinism was discussed and 'refuted' at length. Lenin would have been instructed in this catechism at school. Most tellingly, however, the construction of a biblical worldview does not require a Protestant-like attention to the Bible, for the stories and characters had made their way into a very creative peasant production. They typically drew upon pre-Christian traditions, Orthodox rituals and biblical stories to create their own universe (Walling 1908: 153–56, 231–32) – a creativity that would be manifested in the veneration of Lenin after his death.

Second, it may be objected that Lenin's primary concern was workers. In reply, I would point out that many workers had themselves made a recent transition from the countryside, often with troubled ties to their peasant origins. Some made the transition more completely than others, while a large number maintained their religious practices and connections to the village (Smith 2008: 83–87).¹⁹ Even for those who made a more radical break, the language of the Bible determined the quotidian terminology of everyday life in a way that Henri Lefebvre was to identify so well (Lefebvre 1991: 226). It is not for nothing that Lenin preferred precisely those biblical stories and sayings with an earthy,

18 It is worth noting that the socialists made a distinct effort to make contact with the 'sects', including Protestant groups. Early in their work, they published a newspaper called *Among Sectarians* under the editorship of Bonch-Bruевич (six issues of what was called eventually *Dawn* were in fact published) and agitated for freedom of religious expression in response to their continued repression (Lenin 1901: 291–94; 1902d: 414; 1903c: 347–48; Lenin 1903d: 402; 1905h: 448).

19 An excellent first-hand account of such a process may be found in Kanatchikov's autobiography, where he traces in both painful and exhilarating detail how he makes the transition from his religious peasant worldview to a radical socialist one, all the while bearing within himself full knowledge of that world he felt he had left behind (Kanatchikov 1986).

agricultural bent. Yet we may push even deeper, for anyone who reads Lenin attentively begins to notice a feature that struck his contemporaries, namely, the concrete, unpretentious and down-to-earth nature of the language he uses. The political obstacles to a university appointment may have helped in this matter, as also his origins in the countryside, but in the very fibres of his language, the turns of phrase and vocabulary, we encounter that uncouthness of which I have been speaking. At this level, the oft-disregarded earthiness of the Bible (Boer 2012), peasant and working-class language and the everyday life of agriculture and labour meet.

All of which leads me to ask, what happens to the Gospels themselves in the process of such interpretation? Those stories and parables themselves become radicalized.²⁰ The men and women who gather with Jesus in the Gospels begin to look more and more like radicals, the teachings become stringent economic and political critiques, the message becomes a revolutionary one of *metanoia*, of transforming the very coordinates of economic and social life – on this score, Lenin's reading overlaps with that of Pasolini's film, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Or is it the case that Lenin's interpretations reveal a dimension of the parables that is ambivalently intrinsic to them?

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20 On this count, Badiou is wrong with his analogy between Lenin and Paul. Badiou suggests that Lenin is to Marx as Paul is to Jesus (Badiou 2003), yet Lenin himself finds Jesus' sayings much more useful for revolutionary organization.

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