



Thirteen Findings on the Bible

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To appreciate my thirteen findings on the Bible, set out below, it helps if you know a little of my background. After completing theological studies in Edinburgh in 1968 I went to work for the French Protestant Industrial Mission. There I earned my living, and received a first class political education to boot, as a migrant labourer working on the building sites which fringed Paris. After my expulsion from France in 1973 for ‘political activities unsuitable in a foreigner’, I went to Glasgow and worked as a porter-driver in Leverendale hospital while conducting grass-roots political activities in my spare time in Castlemilk, where I actually lived. My objective was to try and connect my understanding of the Bible with the aspirations of my workmates and neighbours. In struggling with the difficulties presented by this exercise I eventually had to admit that I did not know enough about the Bible to pursue the exercise. I had already come to the conclusion that the findings of scholars were of no use to me. They foolishly pretend that a disinterested view, preferably from above, is the best vantage point from which to judge the contents of the Bible but, of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Even before I came to experience life at the bottom I was convinced that you need firsthand knowledge of the problem the Bible addresses if you wish to appreciate the answer it furnishes.

So, twenty-seven years ago I regretfully took the decision to down tools and try to work things out for myself. This has meant reading a large number of scholarly works and, while accepting the justifiable findings noted therein, making large-scale adjustments for the way in which false ideological presuppositions lead scholars to draw false conclusions from them. I conducted this exercise by writing three books which recount my ideological voyage of discovery. The first *Painfully Clear: The Parables of Jesus* was written before I had fully come to appreciate twentieth-century scholarship’s key role in

obscuring what the Bible is on about, which explains why the book was eventually published without too much hassle.

However, in writing the second and third volumes, *Light Denied: A Challenge to Historians* and *God of the Marginals: The Biblical Ideology as Demonstrated by Jesus*, the scales were increasingly removed from my eyes. Consequently, in these works the ideological divergence between what I have come to see the Bible is on about and how scholars, for their part, have presented it is all too apparent. This may explain why no-one has yet agreed to publish them. At first I was rather depressed by this situation until it came to me that I had not written my books as a passport to scholarly debate but only in order to equip myself adequately for a dialogue with all and sundry. However, before returning to this, my life's work – which thanks to the web anyone can now find slowly unravelling before their eyes simply by typing bibleincartoons.com on their computer – I decided to confront scholars on their own turf at a meeting of the British New Testament Society in Exeter. I knew that instigating a dialogue at such a conference would not be easy since no one would know me from Adam. So, with Luther and his ninety-five theses in mind, I summarised the content of my three volumes in the thirteen findings which here follow and prepared myself to defend them.

The peculiar interest of these findings, in so far as they have any, is their brief yet panoramic vision. Almost all scholarly writings concentrate on specific aspects of the Bible so that one never gets a chance to debate the underlying presuppositions which their authors make about this text in coming to terms with it. You may not agree with my findings. You probably won't (... for the moment), but my challenge to everyone is to debate the Bible *at this level* for only in doing so will our hidden presuppositions about the texts become exposed, making it a straightforward exercise for others to test them.



Findings

1. *An ideology not a religion*

The Bible *is* in the main an ideological text¹ couched in religious language, not a religious text² carrying ideological overtones as

twentieth-century scholars almost universally supposed. Treating the Bible from the outset as a religious text, in my view, radically falsifies its meaning by wrongly implying that it is fundamentally concerned with supernatural interferences in human affairs. This is not to suggest that the Bible is unconcerned with religious matters. It is simply to say that its idiosyncratic, not to say unparalleled religious beliefs (as opposed to its religious forms of expression – myths and legends – which it shared with just about every society in the ancient Near East), stem from the ideological position it upholds and not the other way round.

2. *Revolutionary not ‘status quo’ interests*

The Hebrew Bible in the main presents a revolutionary *god-of-the-marginals* ideology standing fundamentally at odds with the Conservative, Liberal, Radical, Liberationist or Feminist perspectives which twentieth-century scholars vainly sought to impose on it. This Hebrew worldview is based on a simple understanding: that it is justifiably dehumanising for *anyone* to be excluded for *any reason* from the common benefits of civilisation. As a consequence, for the revolutionary biblical writers the only cardinal sin (a crime involving a crossing of the god of the marginals’ intrinsic will and thus meriting the death penalty) was to be in any way personally involved in trashing fellow human beings. Of course not all the texts in the Bible are equally revolutionary after this manner. As is true in any revolution, backsliding and revisionism took place in the Hebrew community and such phenomena can certainly be found in the biblical texts. The Bible therefore constitutes no pure revolutionary tradition but rather what might be called a revolution/revisionism unity.

3. *A reactive not a proactive strategy*

The Bible in the main presents a Hebrew revolutionary plan for transforming the world (i.e. civilisation) quite different from Marx’s class-based revolutionary strategies. Marx described civilisation as advancing to successively higher stages of development by means of a revolutionary process in which the lower classes use their superiority in numbers to force through change. Marginals, however, being devoid of

such proactive strength are incapable of bringing about transformation in this manner. Their only hope is to stand up and demonstrate the iniquity of their situation and, by themselves living together in radical solidarity, to shame the world into behaving differently. The Bible spells out this very unusual reactive strategy in religious language, speaking of Israel's commitment, as Yahweh's faithful servant, *to performing as his light so as to lighten the Gentiles*.

4. *Softening of hearts not coercion*

Because normal, class-based revolutionaries rely on organised strength to push through change, the transformation process itself lies to a degree at least in their own hands. For marginal revolutionaries this is not the case because for them change means nothing less than that civilisation-folks' hearts are softened and this is something over which they have no direct control. As the Bible itself puts it, the softening of the Gentiles' hearts is Yahweh's business, not Israel's. It is a job which, along with the defence of the Hebrew community, constitutes his side of their covenant agreement. Such religious language needs unpacking these days, of course, but I think the gist is fairly obvious: the Hebrew community has to suffer, for the hearts of civilisation-folk will clearly not be softened solely by an exposure of their hypocrisy, however powerfully and convincingly this is carried out since, as we all know, those in power begin by hardening their hearts when the shameful truth about their behaviour is revealed.³ The only phenomenon that has a real chance of bringing about change, therefore, is the suffering of righteous marginals. Yet even the transforming effects of such suffering on civilisation are no foregone conclusion, as we all in our hearts know only too well.⁴

5. *A metacosmic not cosmic god*

Given that the adoption of the marginal Hebrew strategy does not offer the kind of guaranteed results⁵ which other revolutionary strategies do, the Hebrews, unlike other revolutionaries, had to live in hope sustained simply by their political conviction or faith. In the eyes of the rest of the world, of course, they appeared to be living in cloud-cuckoo land

since civilisation people are only too aware that, at the end of the day, human behaviour has to be controlled by force; by some kind of policing whether this be from the top down or from the bottom up. But the Hebrews knew from their own experience that, whereas their way of living was mind-blowingly creative and enriching, the way of the rest of the world constituted a living death. They summarised this situation, using the religious terms of the day, by declaring that the Gentiles' gods were nothing but idols. By this they did not mean to imply that the Gentile communities were weak or unsuccessful by the world's standards. That would have been foolish. All they were saying was that, to their way of thinking, the Gentile communities were altogether lacking in human freedom and the creativity which results from this freedom. They attempted to express this idea also in another way. Whereas the Gentiles described their gods as having needs and appetites which human beings as underlings had to satisfy, the Hebrews described their god Yahweh as one who operated entirely freely, having no wants the universe as a whole could gratify. You could say that whereas the Gentiles' gods were Darwinian, survival-of-the-fittest, *cosmic* deities who represented the actual forces all humans experience in the natural world and political order, Yahweh, as the god of the marginals, was a *metacosmic* deity who could only be envisaged as standing somehow behind and over-and-against all of this. To the Gentiles such an idea was a bit of self-justifying, atheistic madness. For the Hebrews themselves it constituted a bet they felt *obliged* to make for without it they could not live or have any future. It is this bet which I maintain constitutes the basis of the Hebrews' idiosyncratic and unparalleled religious beliefs, as mentioned above.

6. *Jesus the traditional revolutionary*

In the Christian Bible (the New Testament⁶) Jesus is presented as adopting a traditional (i.e. Mosaic) marginal (i.e. Hebrew) and hence 'revolutionary'⁷ standpoint⁸ as over against the conservative 'status quo' standpoint adopted by biblical revisionists.⁹ This being the case it is a great mistake to try to understand the so-called New Testament texts from our own Conservative, Liberal, Radical or even supposedly ideology-free Liberationist or Feminist perspectives. I believe Jesus'

strategy can only properly be understood by seeing him as consciously seeking to act in fundamental solidarity with those excluded, for one reason or another, from the benefits of civilisation.

7. The fulfiller not perfector of the Law

In the Christian Bible the evangelists describe Jesus as choosing to work with a *reactive* strategy, which is to say the only persuasive way of operating that is open to marginals, who have no means of imposing their will on others. Jesus is not, therefore, described as adopting any kind of *proactive* approach in which reliance is placed on an ability to impose a political will on society in the name of a particular class or its god. Rather he is seen as calling on all Israelites living together in community to join him in fulfilling the Law by operating as Yahweh's (the god of the marginals') exposing and shaming light.¹⁰ This being the case it seems to me manifestly false to try and picture Jesus as aiming to ameliorate or perfect the Mosaic Law, as twentieth-century Christian scholars all too often maintained.

8. The shedder of light not indoctrinator of new principles or beliefs

In line with their understanding of his reactive strategy the evangelists portray Jesus as aiming to cast light on the situations confronting him by offering his interlocutors powerful illustrations in the form of emphatic similes,¹¹ tortured metaphors,¹² or striking complex-similes or parables. Consequently, in describing such encounters proactively as 'pronouncement' or 'conflict' stories it appears to me that twentieth-century scholars badly misunderstood the situation. Such encounters should have been understood rather as 'exposure' stories in which Jesus' interlocutors are described as finding themselves either lauded or, more usually, shamed by the verbal demonstrations Jesus put forward. For the very same reason it was wrong for twentieth-century scholars to interpret Jesus' parables and complex similes proactively by viewing them as allegories.¹³ Instead, they should have seen them as illustrative stories which, in the process of their preservation, had become detached from the subject matters they were designed to illustrate, thus making it necessary for the evangelists to reconstruct

them in order to make sense of them, sometimes, unfortunately, by reading their contents symbolically.

9. *The possessor of political not magical powers*

Given our modern analytical way of thinking and communicating we are inclined to read the gospels as portraying Jesus to be performing supernatural acts which, if we are believers we label as ‘miracles’, or as ‘magic’ if we are not. However, I find it impossible to believe the evangelists intended to portray Jesus as a magician. As I see it Jesus’ followers, astonished by what he proved capable of achieving when operating as the true servant of the god of the marginals, attempted to give some indication of his amazingly unusual, not to say out-of-this-world¹⁴ impact on people by employing the normal miracle-story technique of his day. In this the very real, down-to-earth power and dynamism of people’s political charisma was evoked (given the absence of any adequate language to communicate about such things directly) by telling of their magical acts.

10. *The exponent of radical solidarity not family-first*

The clash between Jesus’ marginal perspective and the normal civilisational viewpoint of his day is seen perhaps at its sharpest and most uncompromising in his extraordinary attitude to the family. Christians often try to make out that it was the Bible which placed the family at the centre of political concern but this was manifestly not the case, for almost all civilisations within the ancient Near East were just as insistent that family came first.¹⁵ This principle, which most civilisation folk over the ages have simply taken for granted, is only now beginning to be contested because so many marriages break up and it seems invidious to categorise children from broken families as necessarily underprivileged. The fact is, however, that given its exclusivist nature the family-first principle has always been experienced by marginals as an impediment to their salvation, their overriding need being *to be included*. It is quite natural therefore, if contrary to our own powerful civilisational prejudices, that Jesus went out of his way to reject the *family-first* principle in order to replace it with the rather different, and indeed to some extent contrary, principle

of *radical solidarity* or what the Bible calls loving the neighbour as you love yourself.

11. *The one who recommended a life without assurances*

Another noteworthy feature of Jesus' classical, marginal (non-civilisational) perspective was his insistence that those who agreed to join him in fulfilling the Mosaic covenant should seek to live their lives without any of the guarantees civilisation folk naturally seek to accrue. Acquiring guarantees – whether in the shape of stockpiles, money, social obligations due from underlings or paid-up insurances – renders a person proudly independent, whereas living without assurances, as marginals are obliged to do, makes one reliant simply on the goodwill and humanity of others.

12. *The reason for Jesus' death*

One interesting feature of the twentieth-century 'historical Jesus' debate was scholarship's inability to reach a satisfactory conclusion as to why Jesus was put to death; something which, given all we know, should be perfectly obvious. As a result the discussion of this matter went on and on without any sign of a resolution. This is all the more surprising given the fact that from a marginal point of view the reason why Jesus was put to death has always been perfectly clear. Very understandably the Jewish authorities could not bear the fact that Jesus' demonstration of what it meant to be Yahweh's faithful servant put them to shame in their own eyes, in the eyes of Israel and indeed in the eyes of the rest of the world. Consequently they either had to change their ways by effectively joining him – for most of them out of the question – or else they had to get rid of him, which, of course, is what they did, and what we too would have done if the truth be told.

13. *The resurrection: a concrete historical event*

Twentieth-century scholarship also experienced considerable difficulty in coming to terms with the resurrection – that miracle to end all miracles. For the most part, conservative scholars tried to find some place for it in their scheme of things as *an eschatological*

event: a happening which by its nature defies historical analysis and explanation. Liberal scholars, Radicals, Liberationists and Feminists on the other hand preferred to speak about the resurrection as little as possible. At best they treated it as a psychological phenomenon associated with sudden bereavement. At worst they explained it away as a fiction the Early Church had created in order to be able to converse about its own genesis, internal organisation and government. Such explanations, however, leave a great deal to be desired for in writing about a physically visible and tangible, risen Jesus, and a tomb that was empty the evangelists had gone out of their way to make it clear that what they were in fact talking about was *something extraordinary which had happened and which they believed had changed the course of human history*.¹⁶ It seems to me that only a marginal perspective makes it possible to understand the resurrection in such a manner: As the evangelists saw it, the concrete historical event which had changed everything and which had shown that God was finally fulfilling his covenant obligation (bringing in ‘salvation’ or ‘the kingdom’ as the Bible itself puts it) was the fact that, having witnessed the crucifixion and the hardness of heart which it had revealed in themselves, they now collectively were experiencing an amazing softening of their hearts *which as they saw it, could only conceivably be the work of the god of the marginals*. In other words what the crucifixion had made them realise was that instead of being faithful Israelites, as they had erroneously supposed to be the case, they had all proved themselves to be Gentiles with hearts of stone. Now this softening, which they quite naturally spoke about representationally in terms of resurrection, *was clearly taking place before their very eyes as an identifiable historical event* which not only vindicated Jesus but also made it foolish for them to go on trying to make a distinction between themselves as Jews and others as Gentiles. Whether they were right in thinking that the course of history had been changed by this so called ‘resurrection’ event is, of course, another matter. But that this is what they believed and what they talked about in terms of resurrection, should now be, to my mind, beyond dispute, other explanations having proved altogether wanting.

Readers interested in entering further into dialogue on the questions raised in this paper are invited by Andrew Parker to get in contact through email at: andyhparker@yahoo.com.

Notes

- ¹ I define an ideological text as one in which the writer's concern is to highlight the political ideas generated by social interest which indelibly colour an individual's or group's general perspective or worldview.
- ² I define a religious text as one in which the writer's concern is to highlight the belief that a supernatural power is capable of intervening in human affairs and may do so to benefit a chosen individual or group given the right approach.
- ³ See the plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus.
- ⁴ See Jesus' cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'
- ⁵ Guaranteed, that is, on condition that the revolution is rightly conducted.
- ⁶ This expression is rightly seen by Jews as objectionable, as is 'Old Testament' so I try not to use either.
- ⁷ The quotation marks indicate that the revolution in question was not a class phenomenon brought about by organising coercive force but rather a marginal phenomenon brought about by organising the non-coercive power of the weak.
- ⁸ The standpoint found, for example, in 'J', Amos, Deutero-Isaiah, Isaiah 56–66 and Zechariah 9–14.
- ⁹ E.g. in 'P', Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles.
- ¹⁰ I.e. the light to lighten the Gentiles.
- ¹¹ 'How much more then will ...'.
- ¹² E.g. a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle.
- ¹³ Whereas a parable is a reactive speech-form designed to cast light on a given situation, an allegory is a proactive speech-form designed to put forward a specific point of view.
- ¹⁴ Meaning 'not constrained by civilisational norms'.

- ¹⁵ The Spartans may have been an exception.
- ¹⁶ I take it as read that, like the miracle stories, the evangelists' stories about the resurrection have to be understood representationally rather than crudely. Another way of putting this is to say that you make fools of yourselves and the evangelists when you take their resurrection stories literally as all too many Christians do.