

## Lenin and the Biblical Parables

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Abstract: A careful reading of Lenin’s texts reveals a clear preference for the sayings and parables that we find in the mouth of Jesus in the Gospels. This article begins with a study of the famous *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), in which the key organising parable deployed by Lenin is the wheat and tares (or weeds) from Matthew 13. He draws upon this parable in order to rethink the organisation of the communist party (or Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, as it was then known), specifically in terms of the need for discernment, vigorous and open argument, and the dialectic of illegal and legal organisation. Yet this exploration is only the first step of my argument, for Lenin’s engagement with the parable of the tares and the wheat is not an isolated occurrence. He draws upon other biblical parables, especially those of an agricultural nature with a focus on seeds, growing and harvesting. Further, Lenin goes on to create a large number of his own parables, at times drawn from Russian folklore and literature, at times developed from an opponent’s writing, but mostly of his own creation. Not only does Lenin turn out to be a creative and innovative exegete (and ‘translator’), appropriating, redirecting and providing new angles on the biblical texts, but he also deploys the genre of parables throughout his writings. The article closes by asking why he does so.

Keywords: Lenin; Gospels; parables; Jesus

I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world (Matthew 13: 35).

Lenin and the biblical Gospels: is that not a strange conjunction, especially from one who was usually quite dismissive of religion, let alone Christian theology and the Bible? Nonetheless, a careful reading of Lenin’s famous text, *What Is To Be Done?* (1902),<sup>1</sup> reveals a

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<sup>1</sup> *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 re-organisation 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, which would nudge and redirect the workers. Lars Lih’s monumental *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is To Be Done? in Context* has successfully destroyed that ‘textbook’ 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 [2005]).

persistent and indeed structuring role of the Gospels in that text. More specifically, Lenin has a clear preference for the sayings and parables that we find in the mouth of Jesus. The key organising parable deployed by Lenin is that of the wheat and tares (or weeds) from Matthew 13. He draws upon this parable in order to rethink the organisation of the communist party (or Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, as it was then known), specifically in terms of the need for discernment, vigorous and open argument, and the dialectic of illegal and legal organisation. In the argument that follows, I unpick 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. Yet this exploration is only the first step of my argument, 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, especially those of an agricultural nature with a focus on seeds, growing and harvesting. Further, Lenin goes on to create a large number of his own parables, at times drawn from Russian folklore and literature, at times developed from an opponent's writing, but mostly of his own creation. Not only does Lenin turn out to be a creative and innovative exegete (and 'translator'), appropriating, redirecting and providing new angles on the biblical texts, but he also deploys the genre of parables throughout his writings.

## Tares and Wheat

Let us begin with the parable in question from Matthew 13: 24-30:

Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn".

Some preliminary comments: in this parable (not found in the other Gospels), Jesus likens the enigmatic 'kingdom of heaven' to a field sown with wheat – 'good seed' (*kalon sperma*) is the specific term. However, having sown the good seed, other seed is now sown, at night by an enemy. These are the tares or weeds (*xiζania*), although they are not specified as bad seeds (that

would have been *kakon sperma*). Now comes the key: the man's slaves suggest gathering in the weeds after the master has answered their question concerning the source of the weeds. Not so fast, he says; let the weeds and wheat grow up together and then only at harvest time may they be separated and gathered in turn, weeds first and then wheat. The former will then be consigned to the fire, while the latter can go into the barn. Many other features of the parable suggest further paths of investigation, such as the presence of agricultural slaves (*douloi*), the problematic suggestion that the manager of the kingdom of heaven is a slave owner whom the slaves call 'Lord' (*kurie*), and the precise reason why the master instructs the slaves to wait until harvest time. Is it because the young shoots look similar and that one may thereby pull out some of the wheat along with the weeds? May it be that some which look like weeds will turn out to be wheat? Or indeed that the weeds will assist the growth of the wheat? Commentators have of course speculated over these notorious gaps in the parable, but for our purposes the following issues are important. First, the distinction between the tares and the wheat; second, the source of the tares (his enemy – *antou o echros*); third, the context of the parable; fourth, the interpretation offered in Matthew 13; 36-43.

I need say little concerning the first two items, but the other two require some further comment. The parable appears in a collection of agricultural parables. The preceding parable is that of the sower with its four kinds of ground for the seed (path, rocky ground, thorns and good soil, where it flourishes) and the mention of yield of one hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold (Lenin will use these terms again and again). An interpolated interpretation follows, in which the four types of soil become different responses to the word of the kingdom. Following the parable of the tares, we encounter brief parables of the mustard seed and the leaven before the interpretation of the tares and wheat. Once again brief parables follow the interpretation, now on the pearl in the field and the net of fish. Each offers on the varying images of the kingdom of heaven – its unexpectedness, its challenges, its negative side and its stupendous yields. However, let us focus on the agricultural parables: apart from 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 (of the growing variety) and are both cited by Lenin.

As for the interpretation (Matthew 13: 36-43), despite the agreement by critics that it is an interpolation, it is part of the biblical tradition. Here the parable takes an apocalyptic turn: the master becomes the 'Son of man' (that curious self-designator of Jesus), the enemy becomes the devil (*diabolos*), the slaves become angels who gather the harvest at the close of the age, sending the tares to the 'furnace of fire' (*ten kaminon tou puros*) and the wheat to the 'kingdom of the

Father'. By and large, Lenin is uninterested in the apocalyptic tone of this interpretation, save for one crucial item: 'the good seed (*to kalon sperma*) are the sons of the kingdom; the weeds (*ta zizania*) are the sons of the evil one' (Matthew 13: 38). In lay terms: the weeds or tares, sown by the enemy, are one's opponents, while the wheat designates one's own, one's allies in the struggle. For Lenin, these opponents will become many over the years, including not merely the Zubatovs of the time of *WTTBD*, or even the Narodniks, Katheder-Socialists (professorial Marxists), Utopian Socialists, Bernsteinians, but later the Mensheviks, Ultimatumists, Otzovists, God-Builders, Liquidators, Conciliators (under Trotsky) and varieties on that standard label of 'opportunism', which Lenin defines as 'sacrificing the long-term and permanent interests of the proletariat for flashy and temporary interests' (Lenin 1906 [1963]-f: 54).<sup>2</sup>

## Lenin's Interpretation

Let us see how Lenin interprets the parable:

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 Ozerovs<sup>3</sup>: 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

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<sup>2</sup> (Lenin 1906 [1963]-f: 54). For a later summary that weaves together many of these trends, note the following: 'From the very beginning of the mass working-class movement in Russia, i.e., approximately for the past ten years, profound differences have existed among Social-Democrats on questions of tactics. As we know, it was differences of this kind that gave rise, in the late nineties, to the trend of Economism, which led to the split into an opportunist (*Rabocheye Dyelo*) wing and into a revolutionary (*old-Iskra*) wing of the Party. Russian Social-Democratic opportunism, however, differed from that of Western Europe in certain peculiar features. It strikingly reflected the point of view, or rather the absence of any independent point of view, of the intellectualist wing of the Party, which was carried away both by the current catchwords of Bernsteinism and by the forms and immediate results of the pure-and-simple labour movement. This infatuation led to wholesale treachery on the part of the legal Marxists, who went over to liberalism, and to the creation by Social-Democrats of the famous "tactics-as-process" theory, which firmly attached to our opportunists the label of "tail-enders". They trailed helplessly behind events, plunged from one extreme to another, and in all cases reduced the scope of activity of the revolutionary proletariat and its faith in its own strength, all of which was usually done on the pretext of raising the independent activity of the proletariat. Strange, but true. No one talked so much about the independent activity of the workers, and no one did so much by his propaganda to narrow, curtail, and diminish that activity as did the *Rabocheye Dyelo*-ists' (Lenin 1905 [1962]-m: 148). See also on Narodniks and Socialist-Revolutionaries (Lenin 1905 [1963]-l: 439)

<sup>3</sup> 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, as well as A.E. Worms, were professors at the University of Moscow who became spokesmen for Zubatov's 'police socialism'.

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 Ivanovnas<sup>4</sup> 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 1902 [1961]-j: 455-6).<sup>5</sup>

Immediately it becomes clear how Lenin’s interpretation is close in spirit to the biblical parable and yet has its own twists. The similarities first: the crucial issue is discernment, separating the tares from the wheat, the former appearing in a negative register as one’s opponents and the latter belonging to one’s own side. 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.

Now the creative engagement with the parable begins. Lenin’s concern is not the minutiae of biblical commentary, attempting to locate the slippery and ultimately untraceable original ‘meaning’ or ‘intention’ of the parable (a task that has wasted the immense energies of generations of biblical scholars). No, Lenin is interested in direct application. We may call this Lenin’s homiletical concern, which relies the assumption that the parable speaks to our concerns today, that it has immediate relevance. The task of interpretation is then to show how the text does address our concerns.

In this light, the crucial issue in the context of his interpretation of the parable is the relation between legal and illegal political activity. Should the worker movements and trade unions be strictly legal and public, working within the existing frameworks to achieve small gains? Or should the communist movement also have an illegal core, a secret network that seeks to dismantle those very frameworks themselves. Contrary to the standard interpretations of Lenin, he argued for *both* legal *and* illegal forms, indeed for a dialectical relation between them (Lenin

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<sup>4</sup> A married couple from Gogol’s short story, ‘Old-World Landownes’, 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.

<sup>5</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 455-6)

1902 [1961]-j: 452-67).<sup>6</sup> He was not one who eschewed the legal work of trade unions and worker organisations in favour of a small cadre of revolutionary intellectuals; instead, the illegal organisation would work closely with the legal forms, spreading the socialist message, organising strikes (both economic and political), training radical and ‘purposive workers’, ensuring that the legal organisations have a good number of underground members involved. The legal organisations thereby became the means for a widespread movement, for the opportunity to agitate at a level well beyond that of the illegal movement. This is the classic ‘merger’ hypothesis first put forward by Kautsky in his *Erfurt Program*, a text to which Lenin and other communists were committed. In this light, the socialist movement involved a merger between socialists and workers, as well as between illegal and legal forms of organisation. These are the wheat.

But who are the tares? In this text, they are the ones who argue for legal organisations *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 attempt to ‘spy out the “fiery ones”’ in the legal unions, but they also used those unions to ‘plant their *agents provocateurs* in the illegal organisations’ (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 455). The Zubatov unions would soon pass as the workers saw through the attempt to divert revolutionary energy. Yet in *WTTBD* a few other tares also appear. These include ‘economism’, the position that workers should restrict themselves to purely economic gains (better pay, shorter hours, improved conditions) and put aside political agitation as futile. Put forward in the infamous *Credo* and *Profession de foi* (the titles are telling), economism argued that the only realistic gains would be made within the existing framework of tsarist autocracy. By the time Lenin wrote *WTTBD*, economism was a dead letter, widely disparaged among socialists. However, Lenin attempted to pin the label on two rival newspapers and their editors, *Rabocheye Dyelo* (*The Workers’ Cause*) and *Rabochaya Mysl* (*Workers’ Thought*). Both were published by the Union of Social-Democrats Abroad, the former appearing irregularly, with twelve issues from 1899 to 1902 (published in Geneva and distributed in Russia), the latter in sixteen issues from 1897 to 1902 (from Berlin and St. Petersburg). *Rabocheye Mysl* may justly have been criticised as economist, but Lenin works overtime to pin the label on *Rabochaya Dyelo*. As Lih points out, the editors of this paper were very close to the position of the group in which Lenin was involved, which expressed its positions in *Iskra* (*The Spark*). However, in the hothouse of the exiled Russian socialist movement, this struggle became a crucial one for ideological and organisational dominance in the fledgling Social-Democratic party. And so Lenin attempts to discredit this tare, *Rabochaya Dyelo*, by attributing to it an economist position. Lenin’s effort at weeding out this tare was

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<sup>6</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 452-67)

spectacularly successful, not merely because of *WTTBD*, but also because *Iskra* produced more than fifty issues between 1900 and 1903, until the editorial board was dominated by Mensheviks with issue 52 in 1903 (under Plekhanov's direction). Apart from the regular appearance of *Iskra* and its wide distribution (via the famous suitcases with false bottoms), the secret to the paper's success was also due to the fact that it seemed to speak with one voice, the authors not putting their names to individual pieces, and that the editors together constituted the heavy intellectual and organisational artillery among the socialists. Apart from Lenin, it included G. V. Plekhanov (the grandfather of Russian communism), L. Martov, P.B. Axelrod, A.N. Potresov and Vera I. Zaslulich.

Thus, in *WTTBD* the tares may be the Zubatov unions, economism and rival groups with their newspapers, while the wheat are those centred around *Iskra*. But let us return to the legal-illegal issue, for it would not disappear from the socialist movement, becoming an even more burning issue after the 1905 revolution, when the tsar gave significant ground and permitted the formation of limited parliaments through elections, the Duma (there were five Dumas between the 1905 and the 1917 revolutions). 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 organisation had passed, indeed that a purely legal organisation would achieve far more. Between these years, and even after 1917 (between the February and October revolutions), Lenin and others waged a bitter battle against liquidationism until the Bolsheviks took power in late 1917.

Yet, is this dialectic of legal and illegal organisations entirely foreign to the biblical parable? If we look at the context of the parable in Matthew 13, we find a constant refrain: parables are for the inner circle of disciples, who are given the deeper meaning of the parables, while those outside do not see, hear or understand (see Matthew 13: 10-17). And then Jesus quotes Psalm 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' (Matthew 13: 35). The catch with the parables of course is that their meaning remained open-ended and a little unclear even to the disciples. Even 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). Lenin seems to have captured this sense of the parable as well – or rather, the context in which he appropriated the parable made it relevant to his situation.

In light of this legal-illegal struggle, let us focus on another dimension of Lenin's interpretation of the parable of the tares. Note especially the following sentence: 'It is not our

business to grow wheat in flower-pots' (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 456). No longer do we have the field in which the seed is sown, but now a flower-pot. The pot becomes 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 of course be quite small. This is all a solely legal organisation may achieve. By contrast, an illegal organisation wished to smash the pot and open up the possibility of sowing 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 hundred-fold harvests, drawn now from the parable of the sower (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 472, 485; 1902 [1961]-d: 248; 1903 [1961]-e: 311-12).<sup>7</sup>

Two final items from Lenin's interpretation that go beyond the Gospel parable: first, the timing of the weeding out of the tares may take place 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', or one may 'cut down the tares of today' in order to 'reap the wheat of tomorrow' (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 456).<sup>8</sup> A further option is that 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 the need for a merger between legal and illegal organisations, Lenin argues that the growth of the tares may actually assist the growth of the wheat, with the hint that some tares may turn out to be wheat. Here we back with the spirit of the biblical parable, for one now waits for the final harvest in order to discern clearly which are the tares and which the wheat.

The importance of the parable of the tares in expressing a key element of Lenin's argument in *WTTBD* may be illustrated by the fact that Lenin cites precisely this passage in later works to state 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 organisation of revolutionary reapers (Lenin 1905 [1962]-m: 155-6).<sup>9</sup>

And again:

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<sup>7</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 472, 485; 1902 [1961]-d: 248; 1903 [1961]-e: 311-12). 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 topics for further study.

<sup>8</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 456)

<sup>9</sup> (Lenin 1905 [1962]-m: 155-6)



In the first place, it is necessary to reassert the truth about the attitude of the Social-Democrats towards the legal forms of the working-class movement. “The legalisation of non-socialist and non-political labour unions in Russia has begun,” we wrote in 1902 in *What Is To Be Done?* “Henceforth, we cannot but reckon with this tendency.” How shall we reckon with it? – the question is raised there and answered by a reference to the need of exposing, not only the Zubatov theories, but also all liberal harmony speeches about “class collaboration”. (In inviting the collaboration of the Social-Democrats, *Osvobodzheniye* fully acknowledges the first task, but ignores the second.) “Doing this,” the pamphlet goes on to say, “does not at all mean forgetting that in the long run the legalisation of the working-class movement will be to our advantage, and not to that of the Zubatovs.” In exposing Zubatovism and liberalism at legal meetings we are separating the tares from the wheat. “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, [215] etc.), the development of which will inevitably provide us with an increasing quantity of material for agitation”<sup>10</sup> (Lenin 1905 [1962]-d: 214-15).<sup>10</sup>

## Beyond Biblical Tares

So much for the biblical parable of the tares. Lenin would also deploy other biblical parables in his work, such as the parable of the sower, which I have already mentioned. Here the allusions are many, to good soil, new shoots, deep roots, rich harvests (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 458, 461-4, 472, 485, 487, 508; 1902 [1961]-d: 248; 1903 [1961]-e: 312).<sup>11</sup> Other Gospel parables and stories (which I do not have time here to discuss) include the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 462),<sup>12</sup> the wide and easy gate versus the narrow gate and the hard way of Matthew 7:13-14 (Lenin 1902 [1961]-a: 126-7; 1905 [1963]-p: 241-2),<sup>13</sup> the Great Banquet from Luke 14 (Lenin 1905 [1963]-m: 237-8),<sup>14</sup> Patches on Old Garments (Lenin 1905 [1963]-j: 297),<sup>15</sup> the

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<sup>10</sup> (Lenin 1905 [1962]-d: 214-15). See also (Lenin 1907 [1963]-i: 102; 1907 [1963]-k: 122; 1908 [1963]-f: 288)

<sup>11</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 458, 461-4, 472, 485, 487, 508; 1902 [1961]-d: 248; 1903 [1961]-e: 312)

<sup>12</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 462)

<sup>13</sup> (Lenin 1902 [1961]-a: 126-7; 1905 [1963]-p: 241-2)

<sup>14</sup> (Lenin 1905 [1963]-m: 237-8)

<sup>15</sup> (Lenin 1905 [1963]-j: 297)

Prodigal Son (Lenin 1907 [1962]-j: 456),<sup>16</sup> the Shepherd and the Sheep from John 10 (Lenin 1907 [1962]-c: 268),<sup>17</sup> and the One Hundred Sheep (Lenin 1911 [1963]-c: 303; 1912 [1964]-a: 274).<sup>18</sup>

Apart from myriad quotations of Gospel sayings,<sup>19</sup> references to Judas and the Pharisees,<sup>20</sup> I have also been able to identify a long list parables created by Lenin himself. These include the parables of the Chains and Flowers (borrowing from Marx) (Lenin 1894 [1960]-b: 236; 1905 [1962]-a: 318), the Lion and His Prey (Lenin 1897 [1960]-c: 313), the Metaphysical Philosopher (Lenin 1897 [1960]-b: 453), the Moss (Lenin 1899 [1960]: 250-1), the Locomotive (Lenin 1901 [1961]-c: 278), the Bricklayer (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 501-2, 505), the Scaffolding (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 502-3, 508-9), Spitting in the Well (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 503), The Blacksmith (Lenin 1902 [1961]-j: 508), the Orchestra (Lenin 1902 [1961]-d: 248; 1903 [1961]-c: 177), the Forest Fire (Lenin 1902 [1961]-b: 272-3), the Lottery (Lenin 1903 [1961]-f: 393-4), the Door (Lenin 1903 [1961]-f: 418-19), the Prison (Lenin 1903 [1961]-b: 515), the Broken Pot (Lenin 1903 [1961]-d: 81; 1904 [1961]-a: 254), the Wall (Lenin 1904 [1961]-b), the Cloth (Lenin 1904 [1961]-a: 208), the Battle for the Forts (Lenin 1904 [1961]-a: 370-1, fn), the Gale (Lenin 1904 [1961]-a: 410-11), the Mud and the Fog (Lenin 1904 [1961]-c: 455), the Love Affair (Lenin 1905 [1962]-b: 240, 241, 242), the Army (Lenin 1905 [1962]-c: 311-12), the Cart (Lenin 1905 [1962]-k: 414), Catching a Fly (Lenin 1905 [1963]-o: 64; 1905 [1963]-e: 184-5), the Bear (Lenin 1905 [1963]-o: 108-9), the Stinking Sewer (Lenin 1905 [1963]-k: 192), the Torrent (Lenin 1905 [1963]-c: 202; 1906 [1963]-b: 122), Fanning the Flames (Lenin 1905 [1963]-h: 258-9), the Ladder (Lenin 1905 [1963]-j: 295-6, 298), Awakening (Lenin 1905 [1963]-d), the Chicken Coop (Lenin 1905 [1963]-i: 377-8), the Fox and the Hen-Coop (Lenin 1912 [1964]-c: 352), the Barometer and the Storm (Lenin 1905 [1963]-a: 392; 1907 [1962]-g: 116), the Hand (Lenin 1905 [1963]-a: 392-3), the Sweetheart (Lenin 1905 [1963]-n: 416), the Cog and the Screw (Lenin 1905 [1964]-a: 45-6),

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<sup>16</sup> (Lenin 1907 [1962]-j: 456)

<sup>17</sup> (Lenin 1907 [1962]-c: 268)

<sup>18</sup> (Lenin 1911 [1963]-c: 303; 1912 [1964]-a: 274)

<sup>19</sup> (Lenin 1894 [1960]-a: 434; 1897 [1960]-a: 159; 1901 [1960]: 395; 1901 [1961]-c: 291; 1902 [1961]-j: 425, 433, 468, 505; 1902 [1961]-h: 201-2; 1902 [1961]-g: 211; 1902 [1961]-c: 94; 1902 [1961]-e: 281; 1903 [1961]-a: 306; 1903 [1961]-f: 391; 1895 [1960]: 243-4; 1912 [1963]-b: 101; 1904 [1961]-a: 404; 1905 [1962]-l: 37; 1905 [1962]-b: 239, 243; 1905 [1962]-i: 288; 1905 [1962]-e: 338; 1905 [1962]-f: 528; 1905 [1962]-j: 542; 1905 [1962]-h: 562; 1905 [1963]-q: 160; 1905 [1963]-i: 378; 1905 [1963]-g: 400; 1905 [1963]-f: 450; 1905 [1963]-b: 463; 1905 [1964]-b: 36; 1906 [1962]-e: 215; 1906 [1962]-a: 505; 1906 [1963]-d: 180; 1906 [1963]-c: 201; 1906 [1964]-c: 388; 1907 [1962]-i: 172; 1907 [1962]-c: 283; 1907 [1962]-d: 316-17; 1907 [1962]-a: 325; 1907 [1963]-e: 379; 1907 [1963]-f: 388; 1907 [1963]-j: 152; 1907 [1963]-b: 385; 1908 [1962]: 20; 1908 [1963]-d: 46) (Lenin 1908 [1963]-e: 217; 1908 [1963]-b: 228; 1908 [1963]-f: 302; 1908 [1963]-a: 305; 1909 [1963]-b: 51-2; 1909 [1963]-e: 86; 1909 [1963]-a: 129-30; 1910 [1963]: 289; 1911 [1963]-e: 72; 1911 [1963]-d: 223; 1911 [1963]-c: 300; 1912 [1963]-e: 142; 1912 [1963]-a: 178; 1913 [1963]-c: 224; 1913 [1963]-e: 262)

<sup>20</sup> (Lenin 1894 [1960]-b: 199; 1901 [1960]: 406; 1901 [1961]-a: 237; 1902 [1961]-i: 79; 1902 [1961]-f: 252; 1906 [1962]-e: 215; 1906 [1962]-c: 488-9; 1906 [1963]-e: 38-9; 1906 [1964]-b: 252; 1907 [1962]-b: 342-4; 1907 [1963]-d: 508; 1907 [1963]-h: 481; 1911 [1963]-b: 45; 1894 [1960]-a: 415; 1901 [1961]-b: 44; 1902 [1961]-j: 381, fn; 1905 [1962]-g: 302-3)(CW 11: 415) (Lenin 1906 [1964]-a: 415; 1907 [1963]-c: 413; 1907 [1963]-g: 52; 1908 [1962]: 185; 1908 [1963]-c: 182)

the Crust of Bread (Lenin 1905 [1964]-c: 79), the Mustard (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 203), the Sated Beast (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 219), Worms and Resurrection (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 219-22), the Swan, Crab and Pike (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 221), the Lion (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 234), the Whirlwind (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 239-44, 247-63; 1906 [1962]-b: 480; 1907 [1962]-h: 98-9), the Fresh Breeze (Lenin 1906 [1962]-c: 486), the Locomotive and the Dray Horse (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 252-3), the Torturer (Lenin 1906 [1962]-e: 245-7), the Painting (Lenin 1906 [1962]-d: 356), the Bird in the Snare (Lenin 1906 [1962]-b: 472), the Tide (Lenin 1906 [1962]-b: 480), Bandages (Lenin 1906 [1963]-a: 136), the Unripe Apple (Lenin 1906 [1964]-b: 356), the Museum (Lenin 1907 [1962]-f: 424-5), the Transmission Belt (Lenin 1907 [1962]-e: 155), Cleaning the Yard (Lenin 1907 [1962]-c: 282-3), the Bear Skin (Lenin 1907 [1962]-c: 287), the Hen and Ducklings (Lenin 1907 [1962]-a: 329), the Mud (Lenin 1907 [1963]-e: 380), the Married Woman (Lenin 1907 [1963]-e: 381-2), the Horse and Oats (Lenin 1907 [1963]-a: 22, 27, 28), the Waters, Earth and the Whale (Lenin 1908 [1962]: 93), the Cart in the Ditch (Lenin 1909 [1963]-c: 344), the Bit of String (CW 16: 20-2) (Lenin 1909 [1963]-d: 20-2), Cards on the Table (Lenin 1912 [1963]-c). the Mass of Sparks (Lenin 1912 [1963]-d: 108-9), Abscesses (Lenin 1911 [1963]-a: 344-53), the Disease (Lenin 1912 [1964]-b: 432-4), the Wolves and the Sheep (Lenin 1913 [1963]-b: 572), Shearing the Sheep (CW 19: 107) (Lenin 1913 [1963]-a: 107), Getting at the Root of Things (Lenin 1913 [1963]-d: 346), and the Train and the Wheelbarrow (Lenin 1913 [1964]: 377-8).

The function of a list such as this is not merely for reference, nor indeed do I expect the reader to go through them in detail. Rather, the list shows how pervasive is Lenin's practice of speaking in parables. In other words, his interpretation of the parable of the tares and the wheat is not an isolated occurrence; Lenin had a distinct liking for both Gospel parables and for constructing his own, earthy and often agricultural images.

## Conclusion

Yet a few questions remain. To begin with, why does Lenin use parables, especially those with a distinctly agricultural focus? I would 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, written in the few moments he had available in the midst of the tasks of government, he was vitally interested in the economics of agriculture and the implications for communism. Beyond this, however, he also seems to have shared Ernst Bloch's insight: the mass of peasants were vital for the revolution, but their worldview was framed in terms of the Bible. That is, the agricultural parables we find in the Bible spoke to peasants in way that no other stories were able. Lenin

seems to have felt a pressing need to take those parables and show their radical potential, if not to construct many of his own parables.

Second: why the struggle with tares? Was Lenin, as the standard interpretations would have it, a sectarian who sought to destroy all who disagreed with him? Not at all; apart from a constant tension in his work between sectarian and ecumenist concerns, between a desire for clarity of position over against opponents and a wish for a united front, Lenin was known to work closely together on a day-to-day basis precisely with those he attacked in print. A couple of examples make this abundantly clear: despite his attacks on Trotsky, Lenin and Trotsky were the two pillars of the early Bolshevik government in the RSFSR (later the USSR); and the intriguing God-Builder, Lunacharsky, whom Lenin attacked remorselessly, was appointed commissar for Education and the Arts in 1917. Even more, Lenin argued again and again that party struggles lend a party strength and vitality. He was always keen to have these struggles out in the open, to engage in them enthusiastically.

The third question pushes further, for it touches on the unremitting theme of organisation. Time and again, Lenin was engaged in all levels of organisation – for congresses, structure, political campaigns, war (after the revolution) and economic reorganisation after the ‘civil’ war. And organisation is central in *WTTBD*, especially in the fourth chapter in which the parable of the tares and wheat appears, and then again in the final chapter concerning the role of a party newspaper. As we have seen, in that fourth chapter, the key issue is the dialectical relation between the secret, underground organisation (operating in terms of *konspiratsiia*, the ‘fine art of not getting arrested’ (Lih 2008 [2005]: 447)<sup>21</sup>) and the public, legal organisation. Precisely at this point Lenin draws most deeply upon the Gospel parables. The implication: the Gospel stories become resources for revolutionary organisation; here Lenin finds a place where the issues that face the socialists echo those of the circles of disciples and the need to spread the ‘good news’ (what Kautsky would openly call the *euangelion*, the good news of socialism). In short, the Gospels provide excellent templates for the organisation of militant revolutionary activity.

All of which leads to the final question: what happens to the Gospels themselves in the process of such interpretation and translation? Those stories and parables themselves become radicalised.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>21</sup> (Lih 2008 [2005]: 447)

<sup>22</sup> 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, 1997), since Lenin himself finds Jesus’ sayings much more useful for revolutionary organisation.

social life. Or it is the case that Lenin's interpretations reveal a dimension of the parables that is intrinsic to them?

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