

The Gospels' Veiled Agenda

Revolution, Priesthood and The Holy Grail

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Notes

1. The Failed Revolution

The revolution failed before it even got started. Yet its consequences had an impact way beyond the rebels' wildest dreams. The revolution was supposed to overthrow the complacent leaders of a small, globally irrelevant religion. It didn't even manage to do that. But its aftermath changed the world.

And the funny thing is, that although the revolution failed and was scrubbed out of history, we can still find out all about it in the world's best known book. If we only understand what we are reading.

But because the world's best known book is the Bible, and because we are taught to approach the bible seeking religious truth and inspiration, we rarely consider that it is also a chronicle of its times, containing snippets of factual information that don't necessarily enhance the spiritual message, but that tell us a lot about the real world in which its heroes lived.

The revolution failed because the men who were its target called in the foreign power who ruled over the territory. They, wary of unrest amongst their subject population, savagely executed the two most prominent figures. We know the story but we don't appreciate the context.

We find the story of the rebellion in the four gospels, written by the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The rebellion is just one piece of historical information that they contain; information that the church has not always wished to see made public.

These four books constitute the core of the New Testament. They are the fundamental texts of Christianity, the classic histories of Jesus's life. Three of these, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known collectively as the synoptic gospels, because they provide a similar view of the life and teachings of Jesus. The fourth, the gospel of John is markedly different, as we shall see. There is so much uncertainty surrounding the gospel of John that even its name is in doubt; many scholars prefer to refer to it simply as the Fourth Gospel.

Nobody would deny the inspirational power of the gospels. But however powerful they are as religious texts, they are more than this. They also are historical documents; four separate accounts by four separate authors of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. Apart from being the basis of all Christian belief, they are the earliest records that exist of the life of Jesus. Woven into their religious teachings is valuable information about many aspects of day to day life in the province of Judea, the Roman occupiers' name for Israel, during the first half of the first century. That in itself is not controversial. But what may be disturbing to some is the significant, although not necessarily obvious, information about the true hopes and ambitions of Jesus and his followers. Aspirations that did not necessarily fit with Christianity as we have come to know it.

The gospels tell us about the revolution that failed, the quashed rebellion that changed the world. And in so doing they tell us much more as well; they speak of matters which were not necessarily welcomed by the architects of Christianity, subjects which, in their eyes, were better not spoken of. Subjects which, because of their controversial nature, appear in the gospels in coded form only. They may once have been more explicit but later editors concealed them. They leave the reader to work out what the Evangelists – as the gospel authors are known- were really trying to tell us. We can only fully understand this if we put the religious doctrines of Christianity on one side and approach the gospels with a critical and incisive eye.

Of course that is not so easy to do. We have been conditioned to read the gospels in a certain way, in the way that the founders of the Christian religion wanted them to be read. It is no secret that the architect of Christianity, Paul of Tarsus, radically shaped the popular image of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul, who lived at the same time as the authors of the gospels, had never met Jesus. For much of his life he was a bitter enemy of the emerging Christian religion. But he was converted, on the road to Damascus, and he spent the rest of his life travelling widely and spreading the new Christian message to non believers. He wrote many letters to communities across the Mediterranean and Middle East. Some of these letters, which were really small pamphlets, were lost. Some appear in the New Testament. Letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Thessalonians and Hebrews, amongst others. Paul emphasised the spiritual and religious aspects of Jesus's life and teachings which he believed, correctly, would appeal to the masses. He played down those aspects which he felt did not support the theology he wanted to promote, including much of the historical evidence. The image of Jesus as portrayed by Paul became the familiar one, and when we read the Evangelists' gospels we read them refracted through Paul's lens. We pay attention to the bits that present Jesus religiously, we don't really think about the bits which seem to have little spiritual connection. We see Jesus as Paul wanted us to see him. We do not see the other Jesus, Jesus the man, Jesus the Jew, Jesus the politician.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was particularly scathing about Paul, claimed in his work *The Antichrist* that 'God as Paul created him, is the negation of God'. Paul, as we shall see, even wrote the Holy Grail out of Christianity, believing that it was too dangerous to retain.

Paul's great talent was to draw out of Jesus's life those events and teachings that would inspire the world. But in so doing he had to play down events recorded in the gospels that were concerned with Jesus's personal agenda. It wasn't that Paul disapproved of, or wanted to disguise, Jesus's human ambitions. But to focus attention on them when he was trying to teach a much more profound religious message would have muddied the waters. Every good marketeer knows- and Paul was probably the best marketeer ever- that you don't give your audience mixed messages. So the gospels contain all sorts of incongruous information that just doesn't fit with Pauline Christianity, that appears to be parenthetical and which can only be fully understood when read from a historical perspective, rather than a religious one.

The Evangelists and Paul all lived and worked at the same time. It is quite easy to date them because they are all aware of Jesus's crucifixion which took place round about the year 37, and none of them seem to be aware of the destruction of Jerusalem between the years 66-70. Jerusalem sits at the heart of the Jesus story- it is where he spent much of his life and where he died. The city and the temple were so important to them and the destruction of Jerusalem was an event of such magnitude for the Jewish nation to which Paul and the Evangelists belonged, that it is inconceivable that they would have not mentioned it in their writings if it had already taken place.

So the gospels and Paul's letters are all composed within a window of time that was less than 30 years. They all dealt with the same subject and there is little doubt that they influenced each other. Most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke's gospels were based on Mark's. The gospels, in the form that we have them, were written in Greek whilst their Jewish authors spoke Aramaic. So it is quite likely that these books, which were probably oral Aramaic compositions, went through a process of revision and editing by Greek speaking editors before they reached their final forms. And it is possible that part of the editing process included bringing some of the content of the gospels into line with Paul's thinking, since his approach was emerging as the dominant form of Christianity. It is even possible that the original gospels that the Evangelists

wrote, or dictated, may have been edited so much that very little remains of their final form. But the versions we have today still include enough of the controversial, factual information for us to appreciate that they contain more than meets the eye.

First century Jewish and Christian texts are very different from modern literature. Just as there is a way of appreciating Homer or Chaucer, so too is there a way of reading the genre that includes the gospels. So, to identify the factual information that interests us, and appreciate what the Evangelists were really trying to say we will have to understand more about the way they wrote as well as the issues that mattered to them. Issues which, as it turned out were not only irrelevant to Christianity as it finally emerged, but which actually threatened it.

It may appear obvious but we should be aware that the Evangelists did not set out to write a Bible. In fact they had never heard of such a thing. For although the books of the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament would have been well known to them, and these books were the revealed texts of the Jews, nobody considered them to be a Bible. No religious authority had yet declared them sacred. The concept of Bible was yet to be invented and there is no reason to believe that the Evangelists, or Paul for that matter had the intention of writing a 'Holy Book'. The gospels are chronicles of Jesus's life, and were probably never intended as anything else. Indeed the word Bible, deriving from the Greek word for a book is probably a late Christian invention. It was the Christian church, many centuries later which formally declared them the opening books of a canonical text, at a synod in Rome in 382 CE.

If the Evangelists weren't trying to write a bible but they were telling the story of Jesus, then to what purpose? When a biographer writes about a famous character they do so because they believe there will be an audience out there who finds the subject compelling or at least interesting. But clearly the gospel authors wanted their readers to do more than find Jesus interesting. They would have wanted their audience to revere and believe in Jesus. They were anxious that his teachings and his message would be heard. And they wanted the truth about his life to be known. All of which indicates that the gospels were intended to inspire, to educate and most of all to promote knowledge of Jesus as a spiritual and religious leader. Possibly even to declare him as Messiah, although there is some doubt as to whether the gospels actually do this, or just hint at the possibility.

Fighting in the Temple

But the mix of inspirational portrayal and historical fact leads to apparent contradictions. If the gospels are trying to promote Jesus as an inspirational, possibly messianic figure, then why do they tell us of the puzzling episode which occurs when Jesus is arrested? An episode which seems to contradict everything that Jesus and his disciples stood for. Although they seem to relate it almost in passing, we read that a fight took place, during which the apostle Peter cuts off the right ear of the high priest's servant, The passage stands out like a sore thumb. Fighting and violence seem to be the very antithesis of everything that the apostles believed, but there it is, in black and white, in every one of the four gospels. And although Jesus protests against the violence, the story passes without any explanation. Is there more here than is apparent at first sight?

Then there is the occasion when Judas complains that one of Jesus's followers has poured an expensive perfume onto his feet. Judas argues that the perfume was worth a year's wages and wonders why Jesus didn't stop her. Jesus's reply doesn't fit with the image of a man who has no interest in material goods, which is how we perceive him today. "Leave her alone," Jesus

replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you but you will not always have me."

Or the famous incident when Jesus throws the money-changers out of the Temple. Contrary to church dogma, Jesus is unlikely to have been offended by their presence in the sacred court, in fact he does not even criticise them for being there:

Then Jesus went into the Temple and drove out those who bought and sold in the Temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And he said to them, 'It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.'

The implication, in church teachings, is that Jesus is purifying the Temple for prayer and divine service by ridding it of traders and traffickers whose base materialism had corrupted the holy place.

In fact the money changers and bird sellers were there legitimately. They were an essential part of the hustle and bustle of daily Temple life. There were various events in the life of every Israelite when they were obliged, or chose, to bring a sacrifice. These included recovery from sickness, thanksgiving for childbirth, the failure to perform a religious duty, the fulfilment of a vow or simply as a voluntary gesture. In addition people brought sacrifices at each festival, offered up the firstborn of their cattle and sheep, and in most years were expected to bring a tenth of their produce to Jerusalem for a festive meal.

Generally people did not bring animals or food all the way from their homes to Jerusalem, but travelled with their money and purchased the sacrifices on the spot. This explains what the dove sellers were doing in the Temple. A dove was the sacrifice brought by a poor person who could afford nothing else; in the days of the Roman occupation the vast majority of people were poor.

The money changers had a similar right to be there. They enabled people to bring the annual poll tax. Everybody was obliged to bring a silver half-shekel for the upkeep of the sanctuary; this was a ceremonial coin that was not necessarily in common currency. People would go to the money changer's table to exchange their everyday coins, which, unlike today's money were valued by weight, for ceremonial shekels. The second century Mishnah, effectively the Jewish legal constitution, derives case law from these principles:

In Jerusalem, money may be changed again, silver coins for other silver coins, copper coins for other copper coins, silver for copper, and copper back into fruit. Money found in the Temple is deemed to be common currency but if found (anywhere) in Jerusalem during the festival season it is deemed to be tithes.

We can only speculate at what the traders were doing which offended Jesus. There probably was cheating going on, the phrase 'den of thieves' certainly suggests so. But the point is not that Jesus was offended by the presence of traders in the Temple, it was their specific actions which disturbed him.

All these events, and many others, such as the soldiers gambling at the crucifixion, and Jesus's mystical transfiguration upon a mountain top contain evidence that there was a much more political side to Jesus than the image which Paul promoted. And as we begin to appreciate what Jesus was really trying to do we will coincidentally resolve other questions that remain troublesome when the gospels are read exclusively as religious literature. Questions that include

Jesus's view on whether he was the Messiah, the true identity of Barabbas and, astonishingly, discovering what the Holy Grail actually was and what it signified.

So, what was Jesus's real agenda, and what are the gospels really trying to tell us?

The Roman Occupation

Jesus, his disciples and the people they lived amongst were all Jews. They spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language not dissimilar to Hebrew. They had a proud history, their own, long established religion, and a tribal identity which distinguished them from the other nations and clans who lived in the first century Middle Eastern melting pot. But their land had been conquered by Rome, and the Roman empire ruled the region with a terrible hand.

By all accounts the Roman occupation of Israel was one of the most brutal military occupations in history. Over the course of two centuries the Romans decimated the Jewish population, prohibited the practice of their religion, destroyed their Temple and enslaved them by the thousands. The Jews were a religious people, and they believed that whatever happened to them happened for a reason. In their minds they must have displeased God and the suffering that they were going through was evidently a punishment. Jewish texts of the first and second centuries are replete with theological debate seeking to understand the reasons for their suffering. The concept that suffering purifies, widely assumed to be a Christian innovation based on the Passion of Jesus, also finds expression in Jewish sources of the period. An early Jewish source explains the biblical verse: "Those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20,6) as:

These are the Jews who live in the land of Israel who risk their lives for the commandments. 'Why are you being taken out to be executed?' 'Because I circumcised my son.' 'Why are you being taken out to be burnt?' 'Because I read from the Torah.' 'Why are you being taken out to be crucified?' 'Because I ate the Passover bread.' 'Why are you being flogged?' 'Because I took the ritual palm branch.'

Other Jewish sources of the same period try to provide comfort by explaining the suffering theologically:

Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Yehuda said 'Beloved is suffering for God's name alights upon those who suffer for him. When Rabbi Eliezer fell sick four of his colleagues came to visit him came to visit him. (Each in turn lamented his impending departure from the world.) The fourth, Rabbi Akiva, said 'suffering is beloved'. Rabbi Eliezer (who had silently endured the tributes of the other three) said to them 'Sit me up so that I can hear the words of my pupil Akiva, who says that suffering is beloved.'

However comforting it may, or may not, have been for ordinary people to have their suffering justified in theological terms, in practice the Jews were desperate for someone, anyone, who would come along and save them. The historian Josephus, a Jewish military commander who defected to the Romans and became a citizen of that nation, names several individuals who briefly flourished as leaders and promised to restore national sovereignty to the people. These included the so-called Zealots, Judah the Galilean and his companion Zadok who urged people to stop paying tribute to Rome and to return to God. A certain Theudas encouraged people to take up their possessions and follow him to the Jordan river. Others who bore the promise of redemption included Menahem ben Judah and Simeon bar Giora, both leaders of a briefly successful revolt against Rome in 66 CE. There was no shortage of would be saviours. If, as some claim today, Jesus was plotting a rebellion against Rome one might expect that Josephus would

include him in his accounts of would be saviours. But Josephus, who is well aware of who Jesus was, does not include him in this context. And the gospels do not suggest that Jesus had military ambitions. Jesus's political stratagems were not directed against the Romans.

Apart from the physical trauma of occupation, the isolated Jewish community in the Holy Land was also under siege culturally. It was falling under the growing influence of Jewish Hellenists, cosmopolitans mainly from the Greek-Egyptian city of Alexandria, whose lifestyles were far more dissolute, and whose philosophy far more hedonistic than anything the nation had known for centuries. This internal clash of Jewish cultures, together with the loss of Israel's political independence, the personal suffering and ongoing armed struggles against the occupiers, precipitated a profound insecurity within the Jewish world. The land was in turmoil, politically, militarily, spiritually and emotionally. Judaism itself fragmented into different camps of which Pharisee, Sadducee, and Essene were just the best known. Meanwhile, other religions, Gnostics, Zoroastrian dualists, and Hellenist mystics all began to make their pitch to a lost generation, desperate for answers and for comfort.

Wandering Charismatics

Into a world of despair and suffering, a new class of freethinking and religious minded leaders emerged; men who could make sense of the suffering, and who would hold out a lamp in the darkness to those who followed behind. These men were itinerant preachers and miracle workers, independent souls who held no truck with the religious or political establishment of the day and who attracted a large personal following and a popular reputation. They gave hope to the despondent nation. They offered the promise of salvation. There were quite a few of them.

One was John the Baptist. John was a cousin, teacher, and erstwhile colleague of Jesus.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!' For he is the one spoken of through the prophet Isaiah, who said: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the lord; make his paths straight!' John himself had a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the vicinity of the Jordan were flocking to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.

Jewish sources also recount the exploits of other first-century, miracle working preachers with popular followings. Men such as Honi HaMa'agel said to be a direct descendant of Moses whose name means 'the drawer of circles'.

It once happened that people said to Honi Ha-Ma'agel: 'Pray for rain'. He said to them, bring your ovens indoors so that they do not spoil. He prayed but no rain came. He drew a circle, stood inside it and said 'Lord of the Universe, your children have turned to me, because I am like one of your own household. I swear by your name that I will not move from here until you have mercy upon your children.' Droplets of rain began to fall. He said: 'I did not ask you for this, but for rain that will fill pits, cisterns and caves. It began to rain in torrents. He said: 'I did not ask you for this, but for rain of favour and blessing, freely given.' It began to fall as he had ordained, until the people left the City of Jerusalem for the Temple, to shelter from the rain. They came and said to him: Just as you prayed for it to rain, now we beg you, pray for it to stop... Shimon ben Shetach said to him: If you were not Honi, I would excommunicate you. But what can I do, seeing that you

sin before God, and he does as you ask, like a child who disobeys his father and still gets his own way

Then there was Hanina ben Dosa. He was summoned by the inhabitants of a certain village where an Arod, a species of poisonous snake, had been killing local inhabitants. When he arrived in the village the snake had retreated to its hole in the ground. Hanina marched over and placed his bare foot over the snake's hole. The snake of course bit him. But Hanina was unharmed and the snake died. 'Woe to the person who meets an Arod. But woe to the Arod that meets Hanina ben Dosa.'

Hanina ben Dosa heals the sick, controls the rain through his prayers, and in short does everything a miracle worker is supposed to do. But although he performs miracles, this is not what he is best remembered for. After all, every ancient culture had miracle men, most of whom are soon forgotten. Hanina's miracles may be evidence of his quirkiness but on their own they are not enough to establish his reputation. What set him apart was his wisdom and learning. His aphorisms are still quoted today:

Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said, 'When one puts fear of wrongdoing ahead of wisdom, his wisdom will endure, but when he puts wisdom ahead of fear of wrongdoing, his wisdom will not endure. He would say, Anyone whose good deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom will endure. When his wisdom exceeds his good deeds, his wisdom will not endure.'

Honi also had a reputation as a scholar. He is said to have slept for seventy years. Upon waking he meets his grandson who, assuming him to be long dead, does not believe who he is. So Honi goes to the study house where he hears the scholars exclaiming that a certain matter of law had just been explained to them as clearly as if they had lived in the days of Honi Ha-Ma'agel, who when he went to the study house, would clarify all difficulties.

And Jesus who of course performed miracles and wonders also had a reputation as a scholar. On one occasion he became involved in a confrontation in which he displayed a detailed knowledge of Jewish law, and highlighted apparent inconsistencies in the regulations which prohibit healing on the Sabbath. It came about because he had been criticised for curing a paralysed man on the Sabbath. Jesus argued that since circumcision, which affects only one part of the body can be carried out on Sabbath, it is surely logical that the whole body can be treated on that day.

Moses gave you circumcision ... and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath ... are you angry with me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?

Jesus, John the Baptist, Honi, Hanina ben Dosa, and several other, lesser known characters in ancient Jewish literature each possessed an ability to perform supernatural acts. Their power was directly connected to their wisdom and learning. In fact the need to be learned is such an important element in miracle working that even sages whose primary reputation rests in their scholarship, rather than their wonder working, do on occasion perform miracles because of their scholarly prowess. Rava, a leading rabbinic authority in fourth-century Babylon creates a golem, a living humanoid made from clay. The legal authorities Shimon bar Yohai and his son Eleazar, who spend twelve years in a cave hiding from the Roman authorities, become so intense of spirit that their gaze sets fire to whatever they direct it upon. They are sent back to the cave for a further year, to calm down, after which they emerge with more manageable powers.

Although we have far more information about Jesus than any of the other esoteric sages it is clear that he fits the mould. Like them, he is not just a miracle worker, he is a scholar and sage. He even teaches in the Temple, the very heart of the Jewish religion.

Jesus was a hero for his times; he was exactly what people wanted. But because he was by no means the only itinerant charismatic to live in Roman Palestine, those who believed in him and wanted the world to know what he really stood for, would have an uphill struggle getting their message across, unless they could find a particularly effective way of presenting their story. To promulgate Jesus and to stress both his message and his personal, political agenda, the gospels themselves would need to be more inspirational than anything that had ever gone before. They would need to be couched in terms that struck a chord with the people the authors wanted to reach. They needed to speak directly to their audience and their audience needed to recognise them for what they were. And so, for us to understand how to read the gospels in order to extract and distil their historical information, we need to appreciate how the Evangelists went about their literary task, to recognise the literary techniques and cultural conventions that went into their composition.

When Hillary Clinton ran for the nomination to be the US Democratic candidate for President, her website emphasised the fact that she was a mother, that she “knows her scriptures”, that she had been one of America’s foremost advocates for children and families. The message that her supporters put out about her was designed to chime with those elements in the American population whom they most wanted to influence. In contrast, Rudy Giuliani, one of the Republican candidates, emphasised his promise to keep the American dream alive; and his record as a crime fighter. His campaign team targeted a different audience, and their message was framed in different terms.

Of course American presidential hopefuls have sophisticated marketing teams who work very hard to present their leaders in the most effective way. But the same phenomenon, of creating images by using terms that depend upon specific cultural awareness has always existed in literature. Fashionable patois, references to Hollywood figures, allusions to hip-hop or rock ‘n roll only have meaning to people who are familiar with certain aspects of contemporary Western culture. And when an author uses these phrases they do so expecting that their readers will, through a process of cultural resonance, become more engaged with what they are reading.

Similarly, when we take a piece of literature and investigate the cultural influences, inspiration, and sources that it contains we begin to see it in a different light. *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, is based upon two romantic tales using themes that were widely recognised in the sixteenth century. One tale, attributed to a certain Ser Giovanni of Florence, appears in *Il Pecorone*, an Italian collection of short stories. This story provides Shakespeare with the main outline of the plot of his play, as well as its principle characters. The pound of flesh motif on the other hand could have come from several sources, the most likely being Alexander Silvayn’s *The Orator*. The literary style of the play meanwhile, is a development of Shakespeare’s earlier comedies.

But the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* uses themes that were familiar to its audience, and can be deconstructed into a combination of earlier tales, takes nothing away from the majesty, grandeur, and sheer genius of the play. Indeed it enhances the work; a familiar story is recast in an even more striking format. At the same time, as they spot its sources and hear familiar material presented in a new way, an audience’s interest rises. They engage more fully. And a modern reader, who is able to deconstruct the literature into its component sources and

influences, learns far more about Shakespeare, about the people he wrote for, and about the times that they lived in, than a mere reading of the play itself ever could teach her.

We can apply the same reasoning to the way the gospels were composed. Their early popularity was because they contained themes which were already familiar and culturally reassuring to the readers for whom they were written. Almost certainly the audience for whom the gospel writers wrote were not as surprised as we might have imagined to read about events such as virgin birth, or resurrection. They may have come across things like this before; such ideas may have been part of their cultural make-up. Encountering familiar motifs may have enabled them to relate to Jesus much more easily. In much the same way that an apprehensive audience at the premiere of a Shakespeare play would have settled into it much more easily once they were reassured that they would see a powerful household lain low, a murder or two and quite likely a pure love turned to tragedy.

The gospel writers were Jews, and since they could write, it is reasonable to assume that they were educated men who were familiar with their own cultural heritage. They lived in a world of few books and no other media and the literature they did have was therefore hugely influential. Their bible, the Old Testament although they did not know it as such, was their literary, cultural, and religious framework. It contained their laws, history, poetry, and beliefs. It defined the way they thought, and influenced the way their society was structured. Even simple, uneducated peasants were familiar with its stories and the lives of its heroes, whilst the educated classes used it as virtually the sole authority for their legislation, economic structure, system of justice, and of course their religion.

Which is why the writers of the gospels chose to reflect the style and content of their existing, Jewish bible in their new works. To use the so-called Old Testament as a template and source book for the New. To cast their writings in the footprint of what had gone before and to incorporate echoes of the past in the new future they were creating. And so, for us to understand the New, to find out what the gospels are really telling us, and why, we need look further at its dependence upon the Old.