Radical Interpretations of the Bible: Methods, Meaning, and Aims

MICHAEL J. SANDFORD

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

michaelsandford@hotmail.co.uk

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The following essays are radical in two ways. Firstly, these essays are radically interested in the biblical text, for they are rooted (*radix*) in the biblical text.¹ It will become apparent that the sense in which these essays are interested in the biblical text is slightly different from the way in which some biblical scholars are interested in the text. Although, these essays are concerned with the ancient world in which the texts were written (ancient “context” being a preoccupation of much of the field of biblical studies), these essays are also very much interested in the reader, the readers’ world, and what the reader does with the text. Concern for the text and its meaning, however, remain fundamental. Secondly, these essays are radical in the sense in which they locate and argue for alternative and unconventional meanings in the texts. Informed by a variety of contemporary critical methodologies, these essays ask unorthodox questions of the texts, which yield challenging and provocative results. These essays provide suggestions and make claims which have the potential to reconfigure radically certain long-established perspectives within the field.

In the context in which I write, radicalism is often associated with passion, groundlessness, and poor judgement. For this reason, radicalism is associated with threat, and is sometimes only engaged in order that it can be eradicated. These essays present interpretations which are bound

1. For a discussion of the term “radical” see Caroline Blyth’s response.

to provoke, to challenge, and to disrupt. They do this in a manner, however, which ought to be taken seriously; for while these papers are radical, they are far from groundless. Readers will find in these pages careful and detailed work, and a mastery of both historical criticism and contemporary critical reading methods. In these papers readers will find a disciplined commitment to the text and its importance, married with the vital and refreshing insights that are presented by a range of contemporary methodologies and interpretive tools. For this reason, these essays present interpretations which deserve to be engaged. The responses from Caroline Blyth and Marika Rose begin to take the pieces in interesting new directions, and I hope they will not be the last to engage with the papers in this way.

One could feel tempted to say that Sandford, Myles, and Wan offer anarchist, Marxist, and postcolonial arguments respectively. After all, the central idea of Sandford's article, luxury communism, is most popular today amongst anarchists; undergirding Myles' article is the Marxist critique of religion as "opiate"; and central to Wan's article is a concern with the way in which constructs of time reflect the interests of "empire." However, none of these papers are strictly concerned with adhering to a single, clearly-defined methodology. These papers share an overlapping concern with power relations—whether that is employer and employee, dictator and subject, or emperor and indigene—and none of the papers draw on a single, distinctive interpretative method or tradition in order to do so. Each paper is methodologically eclectic in this respect.

One more unifying dimension of this collection particularly stands out to me: these papers all identify power dynamics at work in places that many fail to see. For Sandford, it is the ostensibly banal realm of waged labour, both in the text and the world today. For Myles, it is the brand of "subversion" which rather than truly challenging conventions, normalises and even reinscribes them. For Wan, it is the often unthinking way in which we talk about time, and its inescapably political implications. Each of these papers causes us to look at particular texts—for example, Jesus calling the disciples; the wedding at Cana; the opening lines of 1 Peter—in a new light. Each paper picks out important political dimensions in these texts in such a way that one will find it hard to believe that they never saw them before.

In short, the collection runs as follows. Sandford's paper begins with an introduction to the ideological lens through which he reads the gospels: contemporary anti-work politics. He looks at recent scholarly treatments of Jesus' relationship to work and, applying his new lens, reads

Jesus as a “luxury communist” whose behaviour flies in the face of the Protestant work ethic. Myles applies a Libertarian Marxist lens to the Gospel of John. He probes recent scholarship that has positioned John’s gospel as “subversive” arguing that John is in fact a reactionary text that not only re-inscribes hierarchies of power, but normalises a “fascist-like” authoritarianism. Wan’s text is 1 Peter. After demonstrating the importance of the calendar in Roman imperial thought, Wan argues that 1 Peter radically “reconfigures” time around the “Christ event that gives time its shape.” Wan goes on to show how constructions of time in our own time function politically, as he demonstrates that “[t]here is, plainly, nothing ‘common’ about ‘the Common Era’.” These articles are followed by two short responses. Caroline Blyth examines the meaning of “radical,” and situates the papers within the discourse of biblical studies. Finally, Marika Rose notes the two-facedness of the Bible that is so apparent in these pieces, and echoes Deleuze’s call to “look for new weapons”; these pieces, Rose suggests, “seem like good places to look.”